

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Choose Your Examples Carefully

Philippians 3:17-4:1

This year's return to school will be like no other. Here in our county, face coverings will be required, coupled with other procedures and guidelines to address COVID-19. All the practices that have become such a regular part of our daily lives—masks, social distancing, hand washing, cleaning and disinfecting—will be part of the 2021-2022 educational experience. Everything from meals to recess to volunteers to field trips will be shaped by the realities of the ongoing pandemic. In so many ways, learning will look and feel different.

Here in the life of the church, we already have some experience with this. After all, this space where we gather is also a place of learning. Sadly, for the past year and a half, we've watched our classrooms sit idle. With the closing of our day care ministry, and the suspension of Sunday School and Children's Church, rooms that were normally filled with activity, conversation, and instruction have been empty and quiet. We've missed out on opportunities to learn more about the Scriptures and the way of Christ for our lives.

Thankfully we've begun the process of preparing to reopen our Sunday School program in October. Plus, we need to keep in mind that learning the way of Christ takes many forms. What we're doing right now is one of them. Through the act of preaching, we're listening for the word of God for our lives. We're receiving Christ's instruction. We're being attentive to the Lord's teaching. True, we have to be careful not to turn this sanctuary into a classroom. A sermon's purpose isn't primarily to transmit information *about* Christ. A sermon's purpose is to help us hear *from* Christ, and to bring about transformation into the likeness of Christ. But that doesn't mean that the sanctuary can't be a place of learning. It always has been and always will be a place where we open up the Scriptures and grow in the knowledge of the Lord.

But what if you didn't have a copy of the Scriptures, particularly the New Testament? What if you didn't have a sanctuary equipped for multimedia presentations? What if you didn't have the luxury of dedicated educational space, or multiple copies of your Sunday School curriculum? What if you didn't have snack time, craft time, or recreation time? What if you didn't have a laptop to take notes with or an iPhone to download your teacher's lecture? How would you learn about Jesus and his pattern for your life?

Imagine yourself without these kinds of things, and you get at least some sense of what it was like to be part of those early communities of Christians where the gospel was being proclaimed and transmitted. In their context, learning the way of Jesus wasn't primarily about relaxing in a pew and watching a PowerPoint, or sitting behind a desk and taking notes on what the teacher was saying. True, there was instruction, in contexts and formats that we could relate to. There was delivery of content through stories. There were gatherings where Scripture was taught, memorized, and explained. But there was another element that we tend to overlook. That is, there was great emphasis on the need for students to follow the example set by their instructors.

In other words, one of the best ways to learn was by imitating your teacher. Jesus himself is a prime example of this approach. There were plenty of times when he taught others, particularly his disciples, in a more traditional sense. He taught them in the synagogue, on a mountainside, in a boat, or in a private home. He gave them instruction about the kingdom of God, the will of God, and the work of God. But when he called people to follow him, that also meant accompanying him, being with him, watching him, imitating him. It meant paying attention to how he carried out his ministry, how he related to people, how he handled various situations. And most of all, it meant following his example and having his own path take shape in his followers. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Luke 9:23). You see, true disciples wouldn't simply master a body of knowledge. They would actually resemble their teacher.

But what if you were a believer in the early church, and you had never met Jesus, never been with him, never had the opportunity to literally follow him? How would you learn about him? How could you imitate him? Certainly, as we've noted, through preaching, and teaching, and worship. But also by following the example of Christlike leaders in the congregation.

In today's Scripture passage from Philippians, Paul doesn't hesitate to tell his hearers, "Imitate me. Follow my example." Now at first, that kind of statement might strike us as pretty bold. Isn't Paul exposing himself to charges of self-righteousness or hypocrisy? There's a story about a rather pompous-looking deacon who was trying to impress upon a class of boys the importance of living the Christian life. "Why do people call me a Christian?" the man asked. After a moment's pause, one youngster said, "Maybe it's because they don't know you." What if someone in the church at Philippi came back at Paul with accusations that he wasn't always Christlike in every way? What would that do to Paul's declaration, "Follow my example"?

Imagine that I or one of our deacons, or perhaps a committee chairperson or a Sunday School teacher, stood before you and said, "If you want to know how to live the Christian life, then just imitate me. Follow my example." You might interpret that kind of statement as sort of self-glorifying. After all, we're supposed to walk humbly before the Lord and before others. Granted, the example we provide for others is important, but do we really need to announce it? Aren't we supposed to lift up Christ, not ourselves? Aren't we supposed to magnify Christ, not ourselves?

Actually, Paul's goal is to draw attention to Christ, not himself. As over-the-top as Paul's statement may sound, his driving motivation is to help his Christian brothers and sisters model their lives after the life of the Lord. He wants them to be conformed to the likeness of Christ. And one of the major ways Paul can point them to the shape of Christ's life is by pointing to the shape of his own life. Insofar as his own life reflects Jesus, most of all Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul wants his fellow believers to imitate him. You see, in addition to hearing the gospel from him, Paul wants them to see the gospel in him. And not only in him but in others who are genuinely following Jesus. In our text, Paul says, "Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you" (3:17).

"Take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you." However much we're aware of it or think about it, a lot of who you are and what you do is shaped by the examples around you. Your identity and your behavior aren't just determined by what you read, what you listen to, what you learn, where you go, what you eat, or what you watch. They're also determined by whom you watch, by the patterns of life you see in others, and how you emulate them. Lord Chesterfield once wrote, "We are, in truth, more than half

what we are by imitation. The great point is to choose good models and to study them with care.”

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow once worked on a project trying to discover why certain people give of themselves and why other people don't. Why are some people selfish and others aren't? Wuthnow said at first, he thought he was going to find that unselfish people came from good families. But in reality, some of the most selfish people in the world come from good families, and some of the most generous people in the world come from terrible family situations. What Wuthnow ultimately found was that people who give of themselves have themselves experienced someone giving to them, and that experience becomes a story that continually shapes how they give their lives to others.¹

Paul urges the Philippians to watch his life, and the lives of others in their fellowship, who faithfully exhibit the self-giving, self-emptying way of Christ. They need these positive role models in order to counter the negative role models that are also present in their fellowship. In fact, Paul specifically warns about those in their community of disciples who live as “enemies of the cross.” Apparently these are folks who think that freedom in Christ means license to disregard the importance of the body, and therefore to pursue a life of self-indulgence and self-gratification, a route that leads to their destruction. By contrast, Paul and others have tried to give the Philippians good examples of lives that accurately picture the pattern of Jesus Christ, who “humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (2:8). This is the way that leads to vindication, resurrection, and exaltation.

“Follow my example,” says Paul. “Imitate me.” Think about how many things you've learned in life by watching others do them, especially when it comes to Christian life and ministry. A lot of what I know about being a pastor I learned in seminary. But a lot I also learned by watching the pastors who served our church as I was growing up. Learning about pastoral care through a classroom textbook was an important blessing. But some of what I learned about pastoral visitation came from my mother, who had a special place in her heart for people who lived in nursing homes. The compassion she felt and practiced toward these folks left an enduring mark on my ministry.

When it comes to following the way of Christ, who are your role models? Who have you learned from? Who are you imitating? Who are you copying? Remember to choose your examples carefully, for they're a critical part of your Christian education. And to flip that around, what kind of pattern are you giving others to follow? For those who want to meet Jesus and know Jesus, how much does your life reveal him? How much does your life help them encounter the crucified Lord? As one of our hymns says, “Your life's a book before their eyes, / They're reading it through and through; / Say, does it point them to the skies, / Do others see Jesus in you?”

If others are copying your lifestyle, your concern for the lost, your commitment to justice, your love for others, your attitude toward the poor, your patterns of consumption, your commitment to service, your sense of humility, your practice of forgiveness, and your pursuit of reconciliation, what will their lives look like? If they pattern their lives after yours, how much will their lives look like Christ? One of the reasons God has given us the church is to put us in a community of people where there are cross-shaped role models, lives that reflect Christ and are worth copying. And part of your purpose is to be that kind of life to others, a life worthy of imitation.

¹ Thomas G. Long, “Preaching from the Present toward the Future.” A lecture at Duke Divinity School, October 12, 2004.