

# Imitating Servant Leaders

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[ 0 : 00 ] I know many of you probably realized this already as parents, but humans are good imitators. And often we do it without realizing it.

And sadly, sometimes we imitate not just good examples, but bad ones as well. Just take a look at this video and you'll see exactly what I mean. It's an ad by TAC.

Thank you.

Thank you.

I'm going to drive properly because otherwise I'm going to start driving like you one day. Now, we know that that's true, isn't it? Kids do imitate their parents, but I think it's true generally as well.

[ 1 : 41 ] We all imitate each other. Well, this morning we're going to look at imitation in the context of the church and its leaders. And in some way, it's a continuation from last week where we saw how leaders helped us to grow by what they taught us.

This week, on the other hand, we'll see them influence us by their examples. So the big point in this passage is actually found in verse 16. If you look there with me, Paul says, Therefore, I urge you to imitate me.

But before he gets there, he actually deals with two other ways, the wrong ways, to look at God's leaders. So in point one, from verses one to five, Paul teaches that because God's leaders are accountable to God alone, we're not to judge them.

So let's look at verse one where Paul writes, Now, those of you here last week may recall that I said that God's leaders are servants of the church as well.

Paul had said in verse 21 of chapter three, All things are yours, including leaders. But I don't think that's what Paul means here. That we are then to be seeing leaders at being at the back and core of church members.

[ 3 : 11 ] Instead, leaders are first and foremost servants of God and of Christ, entrusted with the mysteries of God, the wisdom of the cross of Christ. And so Paul and Apollos are answerable to God for that trust, and not to God's people, the church, even though they might serve them.

It's rather like parenting, isn't it? Every day, I'm mindful, very mindful, that I'm serving my children. I cook for them. I drive them to and from school.

I do a lot more besides. And yet, my girls know I'm not answerable to them. Otherwise, we'll be having French fries and ice cream every day for dinner. I know that my job is not primarily to gain their approval.

Rather, that my job is actually to gain God's approval, to whom I have to give an account one day. Well, Paul says the same thing here in verse three. He says, I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court.

Christian leadership isn't a popularity contest. Paul even goes on to say, Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.

[ 4 : 24 ] It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart.

At that time, each will receive their praise from God. Now, Paul is not saying here that then leaders are impervious to correction or that they can do no wrong.

Paul is saying that even though he has not formed a final view of himself, whether good or bad, and it's not to say that he hasn't been reflecting on his own conduct either because otherwise he wouldn't be able to say that his conscience is clear.

Yet, in spite of all that, he knows that he's not in the clear. It's only the Lord Jesus who will give him that final verdict. when he comes again. And when that time comes, Paul knows that it's not just our deeds which will be judged, but our hidden motives as well.

So no one gets away with it because we may be doing everything right on the outside. We may even preach the gospel faithfully. But if it's done with pride and selfish ambition, then these will be exposed by God.

[ 5 : 38 ] No one can hide. Now, some of you may also recall that I did say last week that it's important to assess and choose our leaders wisely.

But again, I think that's a different thing to what Paul is warning against here in not to judge your leaders. You see, the Corinthians were judging their leaders for their own selfish benefit. You know, who's the one that's more eloquent? Who's the one with the greater pulling power? Well, you know, we're going to follow that one because it suits us. Paul is warning against that kind of selfish judging.

The one that thinks about advancing your own position. And so to the extent that we do assess our leaders, then the questions that we should be asking instead should be, are they doing what God has entrusted them to do?

Are they being faithful? Are they serving God to please Him only and not to please themselves? These are the questions that we need to ask of our leaders if we do ask them because they are questions that point to how well they're serving the church generally rather than how well they're serving us as individuals.

[ 6 : 46 ] But even so, I think we still need to be on our guard because we need to check our motives. Because unlike God, we can't see into the hearts of others.

We can't tell what people's true motives are. Of course, the good thing is that even though we can't tell, God can. And we'll all be answerable to God one day.

Those who deserve His praise, Paul says, will get it. So those who don't, will have to answer to Him for it. So point one, we're not to judge our leaders because they're accountable to God.

But second, we're also not to boast in our leaders because they're simply gracious gifts from God. Here, Paul warns them not to be puffed up in following one leader over another.

So Paul continues in verse 6, Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, do not go beyond what is written.

[ 7 : 45 ] Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. Now, the saying that Paul uses here, do not go beyond what is written, probably means something like stick to the text, don't go and add your own stuff to it.

Paul is using this common saying, probably known to them, and applying it to the Bible. And specifically, if you've looked at the last three chapters, you will see that he's applying it to the verses that he's already mentioned from the Old Testament.

So if you look on the slide here, you will see that five times, if we get the slide up, five times, Paul has been quoting from the Old Testament in the first three chapters.

These, then, are the verses that he's telling the Corinthians not to go beyond. So if you look at the table, the first reference in each row is to the chapter and verse in Corinthians.

But the reference in the bracket is from the Old Testament. And you'll see from the second one, that was our reading from Jeremiah chapter 9 today, where we were told not to boast in anything, but to give credit to the Lord.

[ 8 : 52 ] And so Paul is now applying all these verses to himself and Apollos. He's saying that when it comes to leaders, they must stop thinking like the world. They must stop boasting about them, because that's foolish.

And why? Because God's the only one, God's the one that blesses us with all things. Again, it's a message that's similar to last week.

But Paul feels like he needs to reiterate it. Verse 7, he asks three rhetorical questions to press home his point. So he says, For who makes you different from anyone else?

What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? Paul's saying that if the Corinthians really understood the gospel, then they realized that they were no different to others.

That all they have, including their leaders, are gracious gifts from God. And so they have nothing to boast about. Now, I don't think at HTD, we've got a problem with boasting about leaders.

[ 9 : 59 ] I certainly haven't heard anyone boasting about me recently. Vijay, has there been any problem with people boasting about you? No? That's good. That's really good. Still, we need to be

careful, don't we?

Because some of us might be following, I don't know, preachers on the internet, and we start to pit one against the other when we talk to others. And because we love our church, we may be tempted to boast about it.

Or even start comparing it with others. Other churches, that is. And thinking how much better we are compared to them. I had a lady, when I mentioned this at 745, she came up to me afterwards and go, oh, but I always say our church is so good because they teach the Bible so well, and I love the people in there.

I'm not talking about that kind of comments. I'm really saying, what is in our hearts when we're saying these things? Are we boasting and saying we're better than others, looking down on others, when we say these things about our church?

Of course, if we love our church, we thank God for it, don't we? So that's not what I'm saying, but it's when we start comparing, and thinking that, ha, somehow we deserve to have a better church.

[11:05] That's the problem. Because to the extent that God has blessed us as a church and kept us faithful to Him, then we should be thankful, shouldn't we? Rather than boastful.

Because if we start boasting, then that would be pride. That would be going beyond what God has written, as Paul says. So if we're not to judge our leaders, point one, and we're not to boast about them, then what are we to do with our leaders?

Why has God given them to us? Well, last week we learned that we had leaders because they were given to us to teach us the gospel. This week, in my third point, Paul says that God has given us leaders because they are public examples of humility for our imitation.

Now, as I read verse 8 and onwards, you will note the sarcasm in Paul's voice. And that's because he's trying to point out the irony of it all. Because even as the Corinthians were boasting about them, Paul and Apollos, thinking how rich and wise they were because they were following them, Paul says that the very ones they were boasting in were the exact opposite.

They were lowly, unassuming apostles. And if only the Corinthians knew their true situation, they would actually be an embarrassment to invite to their dinner parties.

[12:26] So, verse 8. Already you have all you want. Already you have become rich. You have begun to reign, and that without us. How I wish that you really had begun to reign, so that we might also reign with you.

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings.

We are fools for Christ. But you? You are so wise in Christ. We are weak. But you are strong. You are honored. We are dishonored.

To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty. We are in rags. We are brutally treated. We are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless.

When we are persecuted, we endure it. When we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world, right up to this moment.

[13:33] And so here they were, Paul is saying, living it up in their lavish lifestyles, and bragging about the famous apostles they were following, when if anyone were to ask them, oh, who is this Paul and who is this Apollos?

They would actually have to point to the right, to the back of the line, to identify them. Now many of you would know the movie Gladiator, Russell Crowe. Do you remember who were the people at the back of the line, at the end of the procession?

It was the prisoners, wasn't it? Bloodied and tortured captives, about to be sent into the arena, to be killed for sport. Either to fight each other, or to be mauled by the lions.

It's what some of the Christian martyrs actually suffered. Well, this is where Paul finds himself and Apollos, right down the back. Fools for Christ, weak, dishonored, and in poverty.

They were working with their hands, meaning they were doing demeaning work, which the rich and the powerful didn't do in those days. They were treated like the scum of the earth, when all the while, up the front, the Corinthians were living it up.

[14:40] What an irony. What a contrast. But if you ask, who truly are the rich and wise, who do you think it is?

Is it the Corinthians? No. The truly rich and the truly wise are Paul and Apollos, aren't they? Which is why, despite their hardship, they're able to bless when cursed, endure when persecuted.

They were kind, even when slandered. But the other thing to notice is, do you know who has put them there? Look at verse 9. It's actually God.

God is the one that has made them scum of the earth. And so you have to ask, why would God do that? Well, again, in chapter 1 and verse 27 and 28, we've looked at that before.

I've got the verse back on the slide. God has done that because He chooses the weak and despised things of this world to shame the strong and wise. And so you see, the apostles didn't just have to proclaim the cross.

[15:47] They have to carry it too in their lives. Just as Jesus did in order to display publicly the true wisdom of the cross. Now I would be the first to admit that compared to Paul, my life as a Christian leader is really easy by comparison.

I certainly don't feel like I'm being treated as scum. And yet Paul's principle, I think, still stands. Because we are to embrace the life of a servant leader.

We don't just simply have to preach the cross. We have to take it up daily too. And we do it as pastors not because we have to, but actually because we truly believe what we preach.

And so here's an invitation, an open invitation to each of you. If any of you think I'm not doing this, then you have my permission to come and talk to me. I'm sure Vijay would say the same as well.

As Paul would say, it's not that I care to be judged by you or by that I'm innocent either. But the reason I ask this is because God intends for our ways, our way of life as leaders, to be an example for the church.

[17:02] God's church needs faithful, humble servant leaders. You see, Paul didn't draw attention to his own life like he does here with these verses in order to show off. That's not his intention.

Rather, he did it for the sake of the Corinthians. He wanted his way of life to serve as an example so that they too will become servant-hearted disciples of Jesus.

And then together, for the church, to have a cross-shaped culture. And we see just how determined Paul is in the final verses of the chapter. So, in verses 14, Paul gives the reason for his passion and, you know, even his anger at them as well.

He says, it was not to shame them but to warn them for he loves them like a spiritual father. He has their best interest at heart. Further, he will send Timothy to them because Timothy is a good example to them.

He's the son who imitated Paul and is found faithful in the Lord. And when Timothy comes, he will remind them of Paul's way of life in Christ.

[18:08] Paul's teaching in both word and in example. You see, Timothy will be someone in Corinth that they can now imitate because I suspect that up to now they've only had bad examples in that city.

They were following the ways of the world rather than of God. That's why, sadly, some have become arrogant as Paul says and even bold in that because they think Paul isn't returning. But Paul would have them know in verse 20 that the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. That it's not simply just about saying the right things, mouthing the right beliefs, but they had to walk the talk as well.

They had to live out the gospel, the way of the cross. That was where God's true power lay when the Spirit works in power to change us to live that way. And Paul says that if he should come, his way of life will demonstrate that power beyond doubt.

And so he urges them, repent now, change, or face a harsher discipline when he comes. Now one of my daughters is fond of cupcakes.

[19:20] And because of her allergies, we've found only one store in Melbourne that can supply her egg and dairy free. But what it means with her allergies is that normally when she goes to parties, she can't have the birthday cake that's there.

And so often she would bring her own cupcakes so that she would have at least something to eat with and celebrate with. Well, some time ago that exact thing happened. she brought along two of her own cupcakes to a party.

And having had one, she was about to start on the other when a little girl came along slightly younger than her and eyed her second cupcake and hoping that she would have it.

Now as you can imagine, my daughter was not keen to give it up. But the cruel father that I was, I told her that she had to. I said, no, darling, that's the generous thing to do.

Now in the end, she did do it purely out of obedience to me. But then what happened, and you have to imagine the look on her face when it did, what happened was that this girl then, without really even thanking her, just thought she could have it, took one bite of this cupcake and then decided she didn't want it after all.

[ 20 : 34 ] And then just left it on the plate to waste. Now for me to see my daughter's face at that moment was really sort of heartbreaking. And I know I made her do it, so it's partly my fault.

But as I thought about it afterwards, I was actually quite thankful for that moment. Because it turned out to be an important learning moment for her. It was hard for her, but she was learning to be a servant.

And in learning that, she was actually growing in maturity. And I think that's often how it is with us as Christians as well. You see, when we first come to Christ, we're like children, aren't we?

And rightly so. We become empty-handed, saved by grace, you know, all, you know, because we believe in Jesus, all the riches are ours in Christ. Every spiritual blessing or every spiritual cupcake is ours.

And yet, if we are to mature in Christ, then we also need to make that transition, don't we? merely from just receiving all the time as children, as children do, and then starting to give as well, to take up the cross, to live, to serve others, to be selfless.

[ 21 : 49 ] And if you recall, early in chapter 3, Paul had lamented that the Christians in Corinth were still infants in Christ. And I think it has something to do with this point, that they had all this wisdom and Bible knowledge, they were proud of it, and yet, they were still behaving like children, immature, only thinking about themselves and what, you know, others would do for them instead of the other way around.

They hadn't learned how to lay down their lives, to take up the cross, to follow Jesus. Now again, it's really encouraging that when I look around HTD, this is definitely not the case.

I believe we do have a certain servant-hearted culture in our church. Whether it's people helping with the morning tea or helping another during the week or helping with Sunday school, we have a lot of people that serve and don't want to get credit for it, but they do it just because they love Jesus and they love others.

And for those of you doing this, some of you may not consider yourselves to be leaders of the church. Like you don't have this official title that says servant of the church. But the reality is you are a leader.

You are a leader because you're doing things and you're living as someone worthy of imitation. And that's the type of leader God wants. People worthy of imitation because they are servant leaders.

[ 23 : 17 ] And the truth is those who are younger in faith, younger than you are, when they see you do that, they will actually be encouraged to follow in your example. You will be like Timothy to them.

reminding them what the way of life is in Christ Jesus. And I have to say that as pastors, that is the most encouraging thing we can see when you are practicing what the Bible teaches you.

So friends, if you're already doing that, then please, can I encourage you to keep doing it. Thank you for doing it. And for the rest of us, when we see others doing these things, then please, let us imitate them as well.

So that all of us from Andrew up there as the vicar, all the way down to the youngest in our midst, we can become a church where everyone is a servant of Christ, faithful to the gospel that God has entrusted to us.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for giving us examples of Jesus and Paul to follow. Help us not to judge or boast in our leaders, but continue to raise up leaders in our midst who are servants willing to carry our crosses daily.

[ 24 : 30 ] Help us to imitate their example and live the way of Christ. We pray and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Remember turning on theying na cit ■