

Imitating Servant Leaders

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[0 : 0 0] Well, friends, I don't know whether you realize this, but I'm sure you do, that humans are actually good imitators. And often we do it without realizing it. And sadly, sometimes we imitate not just good examples, but bad examples as well.

So here's a short little video from the TAC to show you what I mean. Thank you.

Thank you.

Dad, you better drive properly. Otherwise, one day I would be driving just like you. Well, it's true that kids imitate their parents, but I think it's true generally as well, isn't it?

And this morning we're going to be looking at imitation in the context of the church and its leaders. Now, in some ways, this is a continuation from last week where we saw how leaders helped us to grow by what they taught us.

[1 : 5 6] This week, on the other hand, we'll see them influence us by their examples. So the big point in this passage is actually in verse 16. If you look there with me, it says, Therefore, I urge you to imitate me.

But before Paul gets there, he first deals with two wrong ways to deal with God's leaders. So point one and verse one to five, Paul teaches that because God's servant leaders are accountable to God alone, we're not to judge them.

So reading from verse one, Paul writes, This then is how you ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.

Now, it's required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. Now, if you're here last week, you might recall that I said God's leaders are servants of the church too.

So last week, verse 21, chapter 3, Paul had said, All things are yours, including the leaders. But this doesn't mean that Paul thinks that leaders are at the back and call of church members.

[3 : 0 8] Instead, leaders are firstly 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, even though they might serve them.

It's rather like parenting. Every day, I am mindful that I'm serving my children. I cook for them. I drive them from school and lots beside.

And yet, my girls know that I'm not answerable to them. Otherwise, we'll be having french fries and ice cream for dinner every day. And I know that my job isn't primarily to gain their approval, but the approval of God, to whom I must give an account one day.

Well, it's the same here with Paul. For in verse 3, he says, I care very little if I'm judged by you or by any human court. Christian leadership isn't a popularity contest.

Paul now even goes on to say, Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time.

[4 : 25] Wait until the Lord comes. Now, Paul's not saying here then that leaders are impervious to correction or that they can do no wrong.

But Paul's saying that even if he has not formed a final view about himself, one way or another, and of course, he's been reflecting on his own conduct. Otherwise, he wouldn't be saying, My conscience is clear.

He knows, however, that that doesn't put him in the clear. Because it's only the Lord Jesus who will give him that final verdict when he finally comes. And when that time comes, Paul says, it's not only their deeds that will be judged, but our motives as well, whatever is hidden in our hearts.

So no one's going to get away with it. Because even if everything may look good outwardly, we do all the right things, even if I preach the gospel faithfully, yet if I've done anything out of pride and selfish ambition, then these will be exposed by God.

Now again, some of you may recall last week that I said it was important to assess and choose our leaders wisely. But I think that's different to what Paul is saying here about not judging leaders.

[5 : 49] You see, the Corinthians were judging their leaders for their own sake, to see who was better for them, who was more eloquent, who had the greater pulling power. And they were then going to follow that leader because it suited their own agenda and their own positions.

Now to the extent that we do assess our leaders today, then the sorts of questions that we should ask are, are they doing what God has entrusted to them? Are they being faithful to God alone?

These are the questions that we ask because we're thinking, how are the leaders serving the church and not serving us individually? But even so, when we do that, we still need to be careful with our own motives.

Because unlike God, we can't see into the hearts of others, can we? We can't really tell what their true motives are. The good thing, of course, is that even though we can't, God can.

And one day, we'll all be answerable to God. Those who deserve His praise will get it, Paul says. And those who don't will have to answer for themselves.

[7 : 00] So point one, we're not to judge our leaders because they are accountable to God. But point two, 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 in verse six, Paul says, 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. Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one over against the other.

Now, the saying that Paul uses here, Do not go beyond what is written, I think probably means something like, Stick to the text. Do not add your own stuff to it. And Paul is using this saying, which I think was common knowledge, and applying it to the Bible.

And more specifically, if you look at the first three chapters that we've looked at, he's applying it to the verses in the Old Testament that he's already mentioned. So I've got a slide up here, and if you look, there are five instances where Paul quotes the Old Testament by saying before it, It is written.

[8 : 09] These then are the verses he's telling the Corinthians not to go beyond. So look at the table a bit closely. The first reference in each row is the chapter and verse in Corinthians, while the reference in the bracket is actually the Old Testament verse that he uses.

And you will see from the second one that that was our reading from Jeremiah chapter 9, where we learn not to boast in anything because all credit belongs to the Lord.

So Paul is now applying these verses to himself and Apollos. He's saying, When it comes to leaders, they must stop thinking like the world. They must stop boasting about them because that's foolishness.

Why? Because God's the one who blesses us with all things. Now it's a message that I already said last week, but Paul now here reiterates it again with three rhetorical questions.

So in verse 7, he asks, For who makes you different from anyone else? What did you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

[9 : 19] And so what Paul is saying is that if the Corinthians really understood the gospel, they would realize that they're actually no different to anyone else. That all they have, including their leaders, are gracious gifts from God.

So there's nothing for them to boast about. Now, I think fortunately here at HTD, we're not guilty about boasting about our leaders. I haven't heard anyone boast about me.

Andrew, have you had that similar problem? No? No boasting. Jeff? No? Okay, that's good. That's really good. But I think we still need to be careful, don't we? Because some of us may be following preachers on the internet and we can sometimes start boasting about one over the other.

And because we love our church, we might be tempted to boast about it and start comparing it with others and thinking how much better we are compared to them. Now, when I mentioned this at 745, a lady came up to me afterwards and said, oh, but I love my church so much, I keep wanting to tell others how good we are in terms of studying and loving God's Word.

Now, I'm not talking about that. God knows our hearts, but I'm talking about having this superiority complex just because we think our church is better. Now, to the extent that God has blessed us as a church and kept us faithful to Him, then our response should not be of one of boasting but being thankful to God, isn't it?

[10 : 45] For His grace towards us. It's not a holier-than-thou attitude, not about boasting how biblically literate we are compared to others, how much better leaders we have.

No, it's about thanking God for giving us all these gifts so that we can grow as a church. So, we're not to judge our leaders nor to boast about them.

So, the question then is what are we to do with our leaders? Why has God given them to us? Well, last week we learned that we were given leaders to teach us the gospel.

This week, in Paul's third point today, Paul says that God has given us leaders because they are public examples of humility for our imitation.

Now, as I start reading from verse 8 onwards, you will detect Paul's sarcasm here. Here's the irony of it all because even as the Corinthians were boasting about Paul and Apollos and thinking how rich and wise they were compared to others, the very ones they were boasting in were exactly the opposite.

[11 : 51] They were lowly and unassuming apostles. And if these Corinthians knew of their true situation, which they may have some inkling of, then actually they would be an embarrassment to even mention at their dinner parties.

So listen with me from 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 also might 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 are so wise in Christ.

We are weak, but you are strong. We are honored. You are honored. We are dishonored. To this very hour, we go hungry and thirsty.

[12 : 55] 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 this world, right up to this moment.

So here they are, Paul is saying, living it up in their lavish lifestyles and bragging about the famous apostles that were falling. when if anyone were to ask them, who is this Paul, who is this Apollos, they would actually have to point to the back of the line to show them who they are following.

Now if you recall that movie where Russell Crowe was in it, Gladiator, do you remember who the people were at the back of the procession? They were prisoners, weren't they?

They were the bloodied and tortured captives that were about to be sent into the arena to be killed for sport, either by fighting each other or being mauled by the lions.

[14 : 02] And in fact, the Christian martyrs, some of them did exactly that with the Roman empress. Well, this is where Paul finds himself and Apollos, right down the back.

Fools for Christ, weak, dishonored, and in poverty. poverty. The phrase there, to work with their hands, is actually hard and demeaning labor. And the rich and the powerful in the days, they didn't do any work.

So Paul was being treated like the scum of the earth, when all the while, up the front, the Corinthians were living it up. But of course, if you think about it, who is the one that's truly rich?

Who is the one that's truly wise? It's Paul and Apollos, isn't it? despite their circumstances. Which is why, despite their hardship, they were able to bless, Paul says, when cursed.

They were able to endure when persecuted. And they were kind even when slandered. But if you look at verse 9, do you notice who is the one that's put them there?

[15 : 14] It's actually God. God has made Christ's apostles scum of the earth. And so we have to ask, why would God do that? Well, if you've been following the series, chapter 1 and verse 27 and 28, Paul has already said, and I put it back on the slide, God chooses the weak and the despised things of this world to shame the strong and wise.

That's why God did it. You see, the apostles didn't just have to proclaim the cross, they had to carry it as well in their lives, just as Jesus did, so as to display 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 like scum at all.

And yet, Paul's principle still stands for us, doesn't it? Because we are to embrace the life of a servant leader, not simply just preaching the cross, but taking it up daily as well.

And we do it, not because we have to, but because we truly believe in what we're preaching. So here's an open invitation to each of you.

[16 : 35] If ever you think I'm not doing this, then you have my permission to come and raise it with me. Now, as Paul would say, it's not because I care to be judged by you, it's not because I think I'm innocent either, but the reason I ask is because God intends for our way of life as leaders to be an example for the church.

The church needs faithful, humble, and servant leaders. You see, Paul wasn't drawing attention to his life by these verses in order to show off.

That's not his purpose. Rather, he was doing it for the sake of the church. He wanted his way of life to serve as an example, to form servant-hearted disciples in the Corinthians.

And by that, then, to establish a church which was shaped by the cross. And in our final verses, we see just how determined Paul was.

So from verses 14, Paul begins to give the reason for his passion and his anger even. He says, it's not to shame them, but to warn them, for he loves them like a spiritual father.

[17 : 49] He has their best interests at heart, he says. Further, in verse 17, he says, he'll send Timothy to them, because he is a good example for them. Timothy was the son that imitated Paul, and was found to be faithful in the Lord.

And when Timothy comes, he will remind them of Paul's way of life in Christ, Paul's teaching, in every church everywhere, so that both in word and example, he will be someone that the Corinthians can imitate.

And boy, do they need good examples, because I think up to now, they've just been following the bad examples of the world, rather than of God. That's why some of them have become arrogant, as Paul says, boldly even, because they think Paul is not returning.

But Paul would have them know in verse 20, that the kingdom of God is not a matter of mere talk, but of power. That is, it's not just simply about mouthing off the right beliefs, but actually they had to walk the talk as well.

That was what the true power of God is, the work of God's spirit in their lives. And if Paul should come, his way of life would show that power beyond doubt.

[19 : 08] And so he urges them to repent now, to change their ways, or they would face an even harsher discipline from Paul when he finally gets there. Now one of my daughters is fond of cupcakes.

And because of her allergies, there's really only one place in Melbourne, one store, where she can get the kinds which are egg-free and dairy-free. And so normally when she goes to a party, she can't have the cake that's being served there.

And so what she would normally do is bring a few of these cupcakes for herself to have. And so that's exactly what happened some time ago. She brought her own two cupcakes to a party.

And having had one, she was really looking forward to having the second when a little girl, slightly younger than her, eyed her second cupcake and hoped that she could have it as well.

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. That was the generous thing to do.

[20 : 14] Now in the end, she did it purely out of obedience for me. Now you have to imagine the face here, but what then happened was that this girl, without really even thanking her for it, took one bite of the cupcake and then decided that she didn't want it after all.

And she just left it on the plate to go to waste. Now for me to see her face was actually heartbreaking. And I know I was the one that made her do it, but it was hard to see her face.

And yet, even as I reflected on it since, I have to admit that I was actually thankful for this incident because I think it turned out to be an important learning moment for her.

It was hard for her, but she was learning what it means to be a servant, to think of others before herself. And by doing that, she was actually growing in maturity.

And I think that's how often it is with us as Christians as well. You know, when we first come to Christ, we're like children, aren't we? And rightly so. We become empty-handed and we know that we're saved by grace and that all of sudden, through faith, all these riches in Christ, every spiritual blessing is ours, in Christ Jesus.

[21 : 35] And that is right, isn't it? We have every spiritual cupcake, as it were, in Christ. And yet, if we are to mature in Christ, then we also need to make that transition, don't we?

Merely just receiving like a child, to giving as well, to taking up our cross, to follow Jesus, to serve others in being selfless. Jesus.

You may recall in chapter 3, that Paul lamented that the Christians were still infants in Christ. They had all this wisdom and Bible knowledge, and yet they were proud.

And I think they were stuck on this very point, that they were still behaving like children. They had not made that transition to know that although they were blessed, they needed to start serving others and be servants to others.

they needed to take up their cross and follow Jesus. Now again, as I look at our church at HTD, I know that this is not the case.

[22 : 34] I look around and everywhere I see a servant-hearted culture in this church. Whether it's those who are serving in another congregation, not their own, those who stay back to help with Sunday school, or those in the kitchen helping with funerals, or morning tea, or the men on Wednesday mornings doing work around the church and helping at Keywood Street, I see here many, many people serving others without taking the limelight, without complaining, they are being Christ-like.

Now, some of you doing that may not consider yourselves as leaders because you don't have that official role or title at church. But let me say this, the reality is when you do that, you are actually a leader because you're people worthy of imitation.

You're people that model the way of life in Christ. And the truth is, as those who are younger or younger in faith see you do that, they will be encouraged to follow you.

You'll be like Timothy to them, reminding them of the way of life in Christ Jesus. And I have to say that as pastors, that's the best kind of encouragement we can have when we see you practicing what the Bible teaches.

So if that is you, then please keep doing that. You are doing God's work. And for those of us that see others doing these things, then let me encourage you then as well to imitate them so that together all of us, from Andrew as the vicar, right down to the youngest in our midst, we can become a church full of servants for Christ, faithful to the gospel that God has entrusted to us, not just by words, but with our actions as well.

[24 : 23] Well, let me pray that God will help us to do that. Father, thank you for giving us the 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, and help us to imitate the example and live the way of Christ.

We pray this in his name. Amen.