

# Follow the Best

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[ 0 : 00 ] I would suggest that today in our congregation there are lots of ways we could divide everyone up.! The world's very good at dividing people up into groups and camps and all sorts of characteristics.

But today there are essentially three different kinds of people here today. There will be some who are not yet disciples of Jesus.

There will be some who are not yet disciples of Jesus. There will be those as well who are disciples but who urgently need examples to follow.

There are disciples who need to be formed and who need examples to follow. And then there are also, although there's probably some overlap between this group, there are also those who are disciples and who are worthy examples to follow.

And in a sense, that's really the path of the Christian life. It's a path from coming to faith, so having no faith and belief in Jesus, but coming to be a disciple and then growing through that path of discipleship, the road of the journey of faith, you could say, as you go on with your lives.

[ 1 : 21 ] And you aspire to growth and maturity. And that is what all of us should be aspiring to. And I just want to note, just one simple note of caution before we get too far into this passage today.

The verse I want to really draw your attention to is verse 17. Paul writes, Brothers, the word that's used in Greek there, it means family members really, although it is formerly brothers and sisters, join in imitating me and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

And I suppose really I just want to ask the question, who are you following today? What are you looking for in the role models in your life? The thing we need to kind of dispense with just at the beginning is that there are some people who would say, the only example I need is Jesus.

And we'd almost cut ourselves off from looking and observing other Christians and walking in fellowship within the church. It's really necessary for us to have more than that.

We need living examples. We need flesh and blood examples that we can go to, that we can talk to, that we can listen to, that we can observe, that we can see.

[ 2 : 37 ] And these examples are not the ones on whom we rest and rely for salvation, but they are examples that we follow for growth and for how we proceed in running the race that is before us.

It's an acknowledgement, in fact. If you deny this, in fact, in a sense you deny this. It's an acknowledgement of the Holy Spirit's work. The Holy Spirit works in the lives of individuals.

And the work of the Holy Spirit is in bringing people to maturity. The work of the Holy Spirit is actually glorifying Christ Jesus in molding us and shaping us in our lives to be more like Jesus ourselves.

And so as you go through your Christian life, there will be many people around you who are worthy examples because they are the fruit and work of the Holy Spirit because they evidence that work in their lives.

And so before you rush off to say, well, I don't need any examples except Jesus. I'll stick just to the Bible. Thank you very much. I urge you to consider what the Bible actually says in saying that there are examples.

[ 3 : 46 ] And Paul, interestingly, sets himself up as an example. Join in imitating me as well as those who walk according to the example you've seen in us.

So the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in people's lives means there are people that we can follow as examples. I would say as well, just as an aside before we get into this, that perhaps these are characteristics that we should look for as a congregation in a pastor.

As we think to the vacancy in our congregation just now, there's maybe some characteristics that have eluded us. Perhaps we haven't considered. And there are things that we should really look for in those who have spiritual responsibility for the flock of God.

I've got five points today. And in order to make them a bit easier to follow, we're going to use an acrostic. I'm not normally a fan of this. I don't often do this. I know I've done it twice recently, but still.

The word that we're going to think about today is grace. Because that's Paul's theme. He finishes his letters with an appeal for the grace of God, and he greets in the peace and the grace of God to the disciples in verse 2 of chapter 1.

[ 5 : 05 ] First of all, then, the first characteristic of good examples is the characteristic of gaining Christ's righteousness. We should follow those who understand justification.

Now, that's a big word. It's a theological word. But it means simply the means by which we gain righteousness to stand with confidence in the presence of God.

And there are lots of ways that people think about this. Paul, before he came to faith in Jesus, had a peculiar way of thinking about justification.

He thought you were made righteous by your actions. And so he rattles off all of the things that he thought made him righteous. He was a good Jew. He had been circumcised when he was eight days old.

He was a good Jew. He followed the lineage of his people. So he knew which tribe he belonged to. He knew where he came from. He knew his roots. More than that, he said, concerning the law, I was a Pharisee.

[ 6 : 15 ] So the Pharisees could boldly say that they had identified a very discrete number of definite laws from the word of God that if they followed them, then they could say, hand on heart, I am following the law of God, and I am righteous.

And Paul could say that his way of gaining righteousness was by being good enough. And the world, in fact, is full of such people.

Everyone thinks they can be good enough by measuring up to some particular standard. Plenty of people actually think they've been good enough measuring up to the standard of God's word.

But the best examples to follow are those who are justified not by works, but who are justified, as Paul says, by faith.

That is, people who have come and put their trust for salvation, their trust for righteousness to stand in God's presence, in the person of Jesus.

[ 7 : 25 ] They've trusted Jesus, on the one hand, to take away their sin, for Jesus to deal with their sin at the cross, to take away their guilt and shame by him bearing the price and penalty of their sin at the cross.

And equally, they have a sense of righteousness, not because of what they have done, but because they cling to the merit of Jesus, that Jesus is their righteousness.

That Jesus is the one who makes me worthy to stand before my God. The way I often think about it is in terms of a football strip. If you play for a football club or a team, you don't want to look disorganized.

And so you wear the team colors. And when someone moves from one team to another in a transfer window, the strip that they wear changes.

And the heritage that they step into and that they rely on changes. So when you go to play for Rangers or Celtic, you don't carry on wearing the team colors from your old club.

[ 8 : 35 ] You wear the new team colors. And their heritage, their badge, their fame is yours. And people would say it's an honor to wear these team colors.

And it's the same for us as Christians. That even as we think about our righteousness, if we think about what we do to gain acceptance from God, the greatest honor that we can show to Jesus is by saying we rely on his colors to take us there.

And so today, I would say if you're not yet a believer, if you're in that first category, then simply this, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Trust in him. Just come to him in prayer. The words can be faltering, but the sentiment is what matters.

And say, Lord, I can't do this myself. I cannot measure up. I need Jesus to be my righteousness. I need to trust in him.

[ 9 : 44 ] If you need examples, it's important that you look to those who will set an example of how you rightly stand with God. If you're a young Christian today, this is something you need to really reflect on more and more as you go on.

There's lots of things as young Christians we can get kind of bogged down in about the practice, about how we do things, what we do, the things we invest our energies in and so on. All of that's important.

But the thing that will lead to your growth as a Christian and the thing that will actually deepen your usefulness is the foundation of Christ in your life. And Christ becomes more and more of a foundation in your life the more you recognize the example in others who've gone before you who have made Christ the foundation in their lives.

And I look at the people who I look up to, the people who I admire as Christians, are the ones who, with great humility, recognize Jesus as their Savior.

And for those who are at that stage in their walk, remember always, this is a reminder to us, because even as old Christians, sometimes we can lapse in this, we can get it wrong.

[ 10 : 56 ] Remember where we stand. Gain Christ's righteousness. So that's our G, grace. Secondly, we are running towards the prize. Follow those who are pressing on to the prize.

That's what Paul says in verse 14. I press on towards the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Maturity in life often means slowing down, doesn't it? You know, we look at older people and we see them slowing a bit as they get on.

Maturity in the Christian life means running more. Maturity in the Christian life is almost the inverse. In fact, that's why the Bible is full of this imagery of rejuvenation, revitalization.

A healthy Christian and a healthy church is a church that runs. A church that runs forward towards Jesus, towards the finish line, towards the goal, towards the prize.

[ 12 : 11 ] And maturity like that means movement. It means being spiritually hungry for the experience of knowing Christ and being close to Him and in fellowship with Him.

And so I would today urge those of you who are not yet saved, those who haven't yet come to that place of faith. One of the misconceptions that people often have is that they think the Christian life is a sort of static thing.

You get the kuram and then that's you, you're there and your life's over and that's it. And I think actually it's flawed because being a disciple means following.

The word actually means a follower. Someone who goes in the footsteps of their master. And our master, Jesus, was on a journey. As Paul says, He went to the cross.

It was a journey that took Him to that destination. And now He is in heaven and He is seated at the right hand of God and high. And one day He will return to judge the living and the dead. But for us as followers of Jesus, we need to be on a similar trajectory, a journey.

[ 13 : 25 ] And sometimes that journey, as we'll see it, involves suffering. But it's still a progress. It's a progression. It's an advance, a movement. And so I would encourage you today, if you're not yet a believer, not to be duped into thinking that there is no ongoing progress and change in the Christian life.

The Christian life is inherently a journey. For those of you who are young Christians and those of you who need examples to follow, there is nothing as inspiring as someone who has gone before you and has a great example of their goals being achieved.

By that I mean their spiritual goals. Like people who've actually walked through their lives and who have said, this area of my life is a sinful thing that I need to deal with.

And so I'm going to deal with it. It might be a character issue. It might be an addiction. It might be a habitual sin.

But who've said, by the grace of God and by the Spirit's working in me, I'm going to address this. And you as a young Christian, you look at, and I remember being like this myself as a young Christian, thinking, that is quite incredible.

[ 14 : 54 ] That there were examples in my life of people who had the humility to say, God took me through. And they were good examples to follow. Instead, though, the danger is that we see as our examples lethargic people.

Spiritually lethargic Christians. And you see that in lots of different ways. You see it, for example, in a formulaic prayer life. Where prayer is almost like a professional wrestler.

I don't know if you've ever watched, I don't know, it's WWE, I think it's called now, World Wide Wrestling Entertainment. And it is entertainment. It's a show. I was telling my kids the other day about one of the characters who was in that when I was younger.

It was The Rock. And The Rock would, you know, he had a great charisma. And when he arrived on stage, he'd always introduce himself in a certain way, reminding people about who he was.

And then he would have a fight with another wrestler. And the fight would actually, when you watch it, it's quite impressive to see. But it's actually very well scripted.

[16:14] And the whole fight kind of goes in the same motion. And then what you slowly realize as you get a bit more savvy to it is you realize they're actually performing. And so this night they're in Los Angeles.

And then maybe a couple of days later they're going to be somewhere down in Texas. And then maybe somewhere, a few days later, they're going to be somewhere maybe in the Midwest. And they're going to move around the country in different places.

And every night the show is pretty much the same. And so you've got this really impressive looking kind of fight happening on stage in the wrestling ring.

But you realize the whole thing is an act and really scripted. And the truth actually is that sometimes our prayer life can be like that. It can look really impressive.

It can look like it's full of biblical language and it can look like it's full of very audible goals and aims and phrases and things in prayer.

[17:17] But actually it's become formulaic, routine. Because the next time you hear that person praying it's exactly the same prayer. And there's no vitality to it.

There's no change to it. There's no life to it. And the walk with God is a walk that is constantly changing. Our walk with God is evolving because the things that are going on in our lives are changing and evolving and the things we have to pray for are changing and evolving all the time. And because the sin that we recognize in our own lives is something that's changing. So this is another one where lethargy can set in. We get lax in putting to death the sin that is within us. And we slow down with it.

Or we get sloppy in our witness. Don't we know that there's plenty examples of that? And so set as examples those who are running towards the prize.

Those who are pursuing it with all their might. Secondly thirdly sorry grace A. We would accept suffering with Christ.

[18:32] This is a strange one because Paul says something very profound in this chapter. He talks about the suffering of Jesus and he says he wants to share in that. He says in verse 10 that I may know Jesus and share in his sufferings and becoming like him in his death.

And this is a very strange one. I've often wondered in fact does Paul write these things because he himself was perhaps an eyewitness to the death of Jesus.

He was an eyewitness to the death of Stephen just a short few months later. And I've often wondered was he an eyewitness to the death of Jesus. But there's something about the death of Jesus that sticks with Paul and that's important to him.

Not simply for the means of his salvation. Paul's very clear on this. we get saved by the death of Jesus because he takes our sin upon himself and our punishment and he dies for us.

But when Paul says I want to become like Jesus in his death he's not talking about bearing other people's sin. We can't do that. We're not making up somehow a little bit extra to take people over the line where Jesus maybe doesn't manage to take them themselves.

[19:42] But instead he's talking about the manner of the death of Jesus. the humility with which he went to that death. The humility in obeying the father's call. He'll have been told by the other disciples about the garden of Gethsemane.

About the prayer of Jesus the night before he was betrayed when he prayed and said father if it's possible that this cup would pass from me but not my will but yours be done. That reconciliation with the father's purposes in his life that took him to the cross.

God is a strange thing for us to acknowledge but that God uses suffering in the lives of Christians to shape and mold and transform their character.

It's these times where you're lying in hospital that God often uses to chip away so often the flaws in our own heart where we don't trust him.

The bits in our hearts that say I want to hold on to my own autonomy. I want to hold on to my own rights. I want to hold on to my own self. God's saying no what you need to learn is to trust me. [ 20 : 52 ] You trust him in the midst of suffering. You trust him with Jesus going through the suffering. Not you trust him so that he takes the suffering away but you trust him so that the suffering is used for God's purposes in the unfolding of your life and drawing you closer to himself.

Now that suffering can take many forms. I mentioned Lyman in hospital. That's often physical. But it can take many forms. It can be psychological. There can be an emotional, mental suffering and struggle in our lives.

God's teaching us through that. It can be relational. There can be tense, difficult seasons in your life where you're at pain because something in your marriage is just not working or because something in your relationship with your boss or your colleagues isn't working or because something in your relationship with your children isn't working.

There's a pain associated with that. We come to God in all of these situations. We rely on him. We trust in him. We set an example, therefore, to others of how you walk with Christ, sharing in Christ's sufferings as you go through these experiences.

And I would say that today to those of you who are not yet believers. The Christian life is not one where suffering is going to be removed from you. The Christian life is not one where God says, well, that's it, there's no pain for you now, nothing difficult in your path, you'll just be carried to heaven on angels' wings.

[ 22 : 29 ] And that's not the reality. But the reality is that in that suffering, Christ is with you. The Holy Spirit empowers you.

And the Father's love towards you remains clear and steadfast. And so we need examples in our lives, not of the comfortable Christian, because that's likely someone who's not garnering much attention from the evil one anyway, but of Christians who have gone through suffering and who have the humility not to become bitter and cynical by these experiences, but who have been made more Christ-like.

And so follow the example of those who have accepted suffering with Christ. So gain Christ's righteousness, run towards the prize, accept suffering. Fourthly, follow citizens of heaven.

Paul again is very clear on this. In this passage, he explains that our citizenship is in heaven, not in this world, and from it we await a Savior, Christ Jesus the Lord. Philippians 3 verse 20.

What he means there is that we are people who live not for this world. The Christian is someone who does not live for this world.

[ 23 : 53 ] The Christian is someone who lives for Christ, lives for Jesus. And Jesus is in heaven. Jesus is enthroned in glory today. And so we need Christians who will pursue that future.

That future expression of citizenship. Christians who will cross the channel. It's a strange way of putting it.

It's topical though. There's people who want to come to this country because they think this country is a place where they will be safe, where they will be respected, where they'll find hope.

They want to be citizens of this country. And that's what we need in Christians. You know, Christians who want to experience the citizenship of heaven.

Who want to experience the assurance and the blessing of God on their lives and who will overflow therefore in showing the citizenship of heaven in how they live right now.

[ 25 : 11 ] I think sometimes what that means is, especially if you want to be an example to younger Christians, simply this. Do not set the example of saying the old days were better.

They probably weren't. The reason I say that is because the world has always had its own appeal. The world had its own appeal when you were young.

It has its appeal today. It will have its appeal tomorrow. And the Christian of any age will struggle against these things and will need to battle through to understand their citizenship in that context.

And the struggles today for young Christians are different to the struggles you had as a young Christian 50 years ago. But it wasn't easier 50 years ago. It's probably just the same.

people who are not who yearn for better days of the past, but for people who are today trained as citizens of heaven and who recognize what their role in the world is, what they're doing in this place as ambassadors of Jesus, citizens from that other place.

[ 26 : 30 ] families. Finally, if you want examples to look for, and examples that you will follow after, look for those who will encourage you and love you.

That's what Paul says at the end of this section. Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord. Find examples of people who are going to build you up. There are plenty of people in the world who will tear you down. There are plenty of people in the world who will be nothing but critical. There are plenty of people in the world who will express that criticism in all sorts of different ways, and sometimes it's entirely justified.

But there's not enough people who will love you. If you're an older Christian, love and long for young Christians to do better than you.

If you're an old Christian, remember the world that the young Christian of today is going into is a world that's very different to the world you grew up in. It's a world where now we've decriminalized abortion to birth.

[ 27 : 50 ] It's a world where now we've approved or are about to approve a law allowing assisted suicide in our health service. It's a world where the biblical norms that shaped your life 50 years ago are gone.

And the great privilege that belongs to older Christians today is to love young Christians, to love them and to encourage them in the day they're in, to encourage them in the battles of this moment, to encourage them in learning how to witness in this moment, to encourage them in new things. Perhaps it's using social media, perhaps it's using different sets of gifts, but whatever it is, it's using all to the glory of God. And so find people who will love you and encourage you in using these things.

Quite simply today, I would leave you with this question. are you looking for the best example in how you live as a Christian? Are you looking for people who will show you how justification works? Are you looking for people who will show you how to gain God's favor and righteousness to stand before? are you looking for people who will also run towards the prize, racing towards the upward call of God in Christ Jesus?

[ 29 : 39 ] People who along the way accept that suffering is going to be a feature of that life, but who do so as citizens of heaven and long to encourage those with them.

let's pray to God just now. Heavenly Father, as we look upon our church, as we look on our congregation, I pray, Lord, that you would fill our church with people who express these characteristics.

We need mature Christians who are going to be worthy examples to the young, who are going to set an example in how to thrive and flourish as Christians in all of these different ways.

And so, Lord, I pray that you would continue to raise up men and women who are worthy examples to us. And those of us who are younger, may you fill us with a desire to know that walk better, fill us with a desire to follow in that example and in these footsteps.

And we ask and pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. We're going to sing in conclusion, sing psalms, psalm 73a, page 95.

[ 31 : 02 ] We're going to sing the last three stanzas of the psalm. The tune is eventide, verse 23 onwards, yet I remain with you continually. By my right hand you hold me as my guide.

You'll lead me with your counsel to the end and take me into glory to abide. That is the prize, the goal of the Christian life and that we are moving towards.

Let's stand to sing, Yet I Remain With You Continually. Yet I remain with you continually by my right hand you hold me as my guide.

You'll lead me with your counsel to the end and take me into glory to the you in heaven will have I but you alone on earth there's no walk else whom I adore.

love. Although my heart may feel and pleasure growing, God is my strength and portion evermore.

[ 32 : 58 ] those who are far from you will be gathered of those who are unfaithful you need brought more.

But I'll draw near and shelter in my goal.

Near Thee, O Lord, I will be and praise for him.

Now the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and always. Amen. Amen.

Thankyou,