

The Importance Of Genuine Imitation

Series: Mission Accomplished

by Stephen Zeisler

The television industry accomplished something unusual this week. Along with showing us the brilliant and sensitive drama of the lives of Laverne and Shirley, it called attention to two of the most influential Americans in recent history. The life of Martin Luther King, Jr. was dramatized over a period of three nights, and Muhammad Ali lost the heavyweight championship of the world. I don't think there is any question that these two men have had an heroic influence on the world around them-- especially the non-- white people in the world.

Now Christians ought to understand something about hero worship, about the impact of men and women of stature on the world. We probably should understand that process better than anyone else, because we know the God who made us so that we would respond to truth incarnate. When God intended to communicate the most important message, the greatest word ever uttered, he did so by making that word come alive in a baby. Hebrews says, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son." (Heb. 1:1-2) When the Lord wants to make truth come alive and grip us, challenge us and affect us in our hearts, he pours it into the life of a person. When a conviction or a message is lived out in a life, it has power that mere discussion can never have.

Now the process of hero worship, of having our lives affected by those who are committed to something, is what we began to learn about last week in the book of 1 Thessalonians. You recall in verses 7 and 8 of the first chapter that these Thessalonian Christians had become "an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth." This hero church, this remarkable assembly of Christians, had had an impact on the whole known world, for Christ's sake. Their own city had been penetrated by the gospel so that a multitude of men and women from every strata of society had come to know Christ. And not only were many led to Christ, but the security of the enemies of the cross was threatened, so that they felt that their whole society, their whole world, was being overturned by the message of Jesus Christ.

This morning we are going to peel another layer away from this phenomenon and try to learn what it was that made these people so dramatic in their impact. How was it that the gospel was communicated to them in such a way that they believed it fervently and changed the world around them? We find that the reason the Thessalonian church was so magnificent was that they had learned by the lives of Paul and his associates what it meant to be sold out to Jesus Christ.

. . . just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, . . . (1 Thess. 1:5-6)

The Thessalonians had models who, in turn, produced the kind of faith that made them models for somebody else. This process of having the Lord communicate himself by living in a human being, by the life and witness and words of a living person, is something that God is absolutely committed to in scripture. We frequently talk about the discipling process in Christian growth and that is exactly what this is, learning from those who are more grown up in the faith than us by their example, and then our turning around and becoming a witness, an example or pattern, to someone else. So chapter 1 speaks of the Thessalonian example.

The second chapter is the introduction to the apostle and his friends, whose lives affected the Thessalonian church.

For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, but after we

had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.

Now right away I think we can see how the imitation process, the discipling process, is at work here. Verse 6 of chapter 1 says that the Thessalonians "received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit." That is, when they were faced with enemies, with antagonism, with hatred and violence, they responded by trusting the Spirit, and joy, freedom and confidence was theirs as a result. Paul says, "When we came to you, our pattern was the same. We had been jailed and beaten in Philippi; we came to you and suffered opposition in Thessalonica, and yet we continued with confidence and boldness to preach the gospel." I think that if you were to try to boil down the Biblical message, and you had to pick one thing as evidence of whether or not God is at work in an individual, it would probably be this: How does he react when the pressure is on? How does he bear up when he is opposed and hated, when he is set upon? If God is at work in our lives there is boldness and joy and confidence when we are under trial. Now that may be the mark of maturity that indicates that God is at work in us. It was true in the Thessalonians; it was true in their mentors (Paul and his friends), that they were undaunted by opposition. We need to be models, but we need to be mature enough to handle problems in our lives and antagonism towards us with a sense of confidence and joy in the Spirit. If we respond in this fashion, then we are in shape to disciple others; we are in shape to lead and serve as models.

Now the question that ought to occur at this point, it seems to me, is "How does that happen? How do I get some of it? Where do I buy this commodity, this boldness? How do I come by this joy in tribulation?" And we are told where this comes from. We are told what made Paul and his associates bold in the midst of antagonism.

There is a formula that is repeated twice in the following verses. Two things stand out that made Paul and his friends bold in opposition. First, we are told that they were clear and unshakable in their confidence in the message they had. Second, the thing that motivated them to go out into the world on a mission was the desire to give rather than to receive. I think Paul is suggesting here that if these two things are true of us-- if we are certain of our message, and are motivated to give-- then we will be the kind of people who can bear up under opposition.

In verses 3 and 4 Paul lays out this formula the first time:

For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts.

It should be clear to you, I think, that if I lose confidence in the Word, if I begin to think that the Biblical message is filled with error or impurity, then there is no way I'm going to lay my life on the line for it. If deep down I have unanswered questions as to whether or not this whole thing is even true, I surely won't be joyful in trial because of my commitment to the gospel.

One of Satan's most important accomplishments in this generation is that he has taken away from thousands upon thousands of Christians their confidence in the Biblical message. I have seen it happen so many times with Christian students who come to school knowing the Lord and desiring to serve him. They encounter a religious studies class that is based on the premise that the Bible is full of errors, that any time a statement that leads to the conclusion that anything more than man's power and man's understanding is at work, that is a misstatement and a myth. And the student who believes that the book is error-- filled, that the gospel is uncertain, is in no position to proclaim it boldly when he is suffering.

Nor, Paul says, is his exhortation impure. Again, I have known students who have taken social science courses where the conviction, essentially, is that religion in any form, especially Christian religion, is debilitating, ugly, hurtful and cruel; that the world has been hung up by its religious pretensions and the desire to please a God who can never be pleased, and, therefore, the guilt, the frustration, the lack of fulfillment that is so present among us is the direct fault of religious people. Now Christian students who hear this begin to think that their message is somehow impure, that it is hurtful to people, and as a result they lose confidence in it.

The third thing Paul says is that his message does not come from deceit, or treachery. Again, we imagine our student entering a history class and hearing all the hurtful, negative, deceitful, violent things that have been done in the name of Christ. There is no sense of balance, no declaration of how free our world has become because of the gospel. There is no analysis such as Francis Schaeffer has produced in his film and book, "How Shall We Then Live?" that gives the gospel a place of honor in history; that says, essentially, that all the beauty and understanding that have been characteristic of our culture stem from our knowledge of God. That thinking is not encountered very often in history courses in the modern university. As a result, students are left with feeling, "Yeah, the people of Jesus have been treacherous and hurtful and cruel to the world. They have enslaved otherwise innocent people in the name of Christ." That is a great tool in Satan's hands.

But Paul counters that kind of thinking in verse 4. He doesn't answer it point by point. He doesn't say, "You say these sixteen things are in error? Well, here's how I answer these objections." What he does is change the entire point of view, and it is very important to see that he does that, because Christian apologetics often really only attempt to get us to the point where we can say to the world, "Well, what I believe is just as good as what you believe. The Christian gospel has answers that are equally as valuable as your answers, therefore, I shouldn't feel bad about believing it." But that is woefully short of what God intended. It isn't just as good as what anybody else believes, it is the truth that has set free sinners who have been in darkness and hurt and pain all their lives. It is the only message that brings light into a dark world. So it is not "just as good" as anything else. That's what Paul insists on here. He says we have been approved by God to be entrusted with a treasure, essentially. That is his point. It's not that it will hold water, as it were; this is the answer that the world is crying for. And we-- not everybody-- but we, in a special way, have been commissioned by God to participate in the salvation of the world. It's an honor. It's something that we ought to be utterly thankful that we had the chance to get in on.

The frame of mind here is rather like something that happened to me the first year I played varsity football in high school. We were to play our arch rivals who had been league champions the year before, and I was to play on the line across from a guy who had also been an all-- star that year. As we watched the films in preparation for the big game, I kept observing him decapitate the opposition! He was one of the key players who made his team go. As the week went on I thought, "Well, if I can just not embarrass myself; if I can just go out there and not do something so utterly foolish that I am completely undone in front of the whole crowd . . ." I knew that my own skills were error-filled and impure and deceitful, and all I was trying to do was get out of the situation alive! That was my attitude.

The coach came to me in the middle of the week and said, "Zeisler, we could have played anybody in the position you're playing, but we chose you. We think you're the man who can handle this situation for us. We're going to win the game, and we're going to win big. It's going to be a tremendous occasion for this school and this team, and you have an opportunity to have glory and honor accrue to you, because you have been given a special assignment." I began thinking, "Yeah, that's right. They could have." (He was lying. We didn't have anybody else, but it changed my whole mentality.) "Yeah, it's an honor for me to be here. We're going to win this game. My picture will be in the paper, and I'll have done something worthwhile by taking on the all-- star." (I had a dozen people come up to me after the 8:30 service asking, "Who won the game?" Since I didn't tell them, it's only fair that I don't tell you. I'll tell you what happened next week.)

But this is how Paul contradicts this thinking. He says, "We have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts. "

Now, the same formula is repeated in verses 5 and 6, where Paul tells us all the things that were not true about his motives. He has solidified us as to our message, as to the certain veracity and value of the gospel. We need to be confident in that area. Now he's going to move to our motive, and he's going to explain first, what our motive ought not to be, and second, what it ought to be.

For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed-- God is witness-- nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.

Paul points out three things their motive did not consist of: flattery, greed, and glory-- seeking. In each of these things you find a desire to get something. But you will never be joyful in tribulation if the thing that has motivated you to Christian ministry is a desire to get something. For the minute the opposition hits, the minute tribulation strikes, the whole "getting" motive says, "I'm gone from here. I'm down the road. I'll go somewhere else where I'll be taken care of." We will never stand firm if we insist on receiving from those we minister to. We need to be givers, we need to be committed to giving. But flattery says to the world around, "I want to receive your approval. I want you to like me. "

The Pharisees in Jesus' time were great flatterers. One of the tenets of their faith was that if you were rich and successful it was because God liked you, and if you were poor and miserable it was because you were a sinner. Now if you want the approval of the rich people in the world, that is a terrific doctrine. If you want to be flattered, if you want to be liked by the wealthy and powerful people in the world, all you have to do is tell them they're that way because they are blessed of God.

Greed as a motive desires to receive money from the world around. We think of hucksters and charlatans who have sold blessings, who have sold God's favor, who have promised to pray for those who send thirty bucks. These people say, "I'm such a spiritual giant, my prayers will really do you a lot of good." This is the mentality that says, "I can control what God is going to do in this world, and if you will give me money, I'll let a little of it drop on you." That kind of ministry is motivated by greed, but Paul says here that he never came with a motive for greed.

The third thing that is described here is that those who insist on receiving, the glory-- seekers, want to receive the respect and the obedience of the world around them. Again, you can probably think of men and women who have used the name of Christ to build empires for themselves, who have insisted that they are the only source of wisdom and knowledge, the only source of honor. The people who say, "I will never seek to produce growth and maturity in the people out there because I want them eternally dependent on me. I'm the only one who gets up in front, I'm the only one who speaks, and people do what I say. I use the word of God and his truth to accomplish that, to wring this kind of obedience and respect and this how to wing mentality from the people around me." Paul says, "None of these things were ever true of us. We never came to get from you; we came to give."

He describes the giving process, beginning with verse 7:

But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you Into His own kingdom and glory.

We came to give, Paul says, and the way he describes that is by giving us a picture of the parents of a child. We are all aware that the role of being a parent is to give something away. Babies don't do much in return. They don't add to the family income, they don't offer insightful analyses on solving problems. All they do is receive. So Paul uses the figure, in verse 7, "the gentleness and tenderness of a nursing mother," and, in verse 11, the "exhorting, encouraging and imploring of a father." It is in this manner we came to give to you, he says.

Now these are really important figures. They not only say something about the ministry, they also say something about parenting. The role of a mother in this figure is to care for, to nourish, to support, to bind up the hurts and calm the fears of the child. Tenderness, gentleness, support, love- babies need this beyond question. But so do those who are young in Christ. If we are serving as a model in this respect, we need to be people who are there to bind up hurts, to calm fears, and to put our arms around people; not to reject and be cold and harsh and hateful when someone stumbles, but to be there to hold them close and communicate to

them the tender, gentle love of the Lord.

But the ministry of the model Paul gives also needs to partake of the role of a father. I think what he suggests about the father here is that he is the one who sets direction, who guides and implores his child to grow up, to reach for goals that he hasn't reached before, not to be content to stay a child, immature, weal' and uncertain, but to grow to the point where he can make his own decisions and charge off on his own. That is what the father should do. He should exhort, encourage and implore by his statements, and then by his example (verse 10) to get the child to try out new ventures and to grow up. That's where Paul finally ends up (verse 12), "so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." The child is finally at the point where he is walking on his own. The two, taken together, comprise the commitment to give that ought to be true of Christian models, of Christian disciplers, and Christian leaders. "We never came to get something. We came to give something." That is probably stated most cogently in verse 8: "Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel but also our own lives, because you have become very dear to us."

Christian leaders will be bold in opposition and joyful in tribulation when these two foundations are in place. They will have these characteristics when they are confident of their message, when they feel honored to be entrusted with the treasure of the gospel to share with the world around them, when it is positively exciting for them, when they are certain in their hearts that the message of the love of Christ is the thing that the world needs, as it needs nothing else. And second, when they are certain about their motives. If they don't get anything back, they're undaunted; if they don't get taken care of and patted on the back, if they don't get reimbursed they don't feel threatened because the whole idea is to give something away. Therefore, they're not shaken when tribulation and opposition strike.

And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what It really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

These verses emphasize once again the belief of the Thessalonians and their steadfastness in the mist of opposition. We are back to that word again.

We have talked about the commitment of God to use lives, truth incarnate, to change the world. The maturity that qualifies you to be a model, to be effective in his service, is qualified by your willingness to stand firm, to be bold, to be joyful when you're hurting. Finally, the way to achieve that is by a certain "concerning God's message. and a motive to give ourselves away.

I mentioned at the beginning that Muhammad Ali is one of the most influential men in recent history. (My understanding is that his influence leaves a lot to be desired.) When we were in Jerusalem a couple of years ago, I remember standing in a poor Arab section of the city trying to communicate with some little eight-- year-- old boys who didn't speak any English. They didn't know a lot about their Islamic religious beliefs and they didn't know a lot about the struggles the world was engaged in, but they had a sense of confidence in themselves and in their culture. They had a sense of pride in who they were and in their religion that came through when they tried to communicate with us white, well--to-- do Americans. The only thing they knew to say in talking about themselves was to punch the air and point to their chests, and say, "Ali." Eight- year-old children, all around the world, have been influenced by the life of Muhammad Ali.

As I read of this Thessalonian ministry, the thing that comes back to me again and again is to wonder that if that city could be transformed in a period of weeks, what would it be like in this community if we had the kind of models, the kind of heroes, the same kind of examples? Do we consider it a positive honor to be able to speak for Christ's sake? Do we feel that we have been entrusted with a treasure and are we committed to giving

something away" And are we undaunted when we don't get anything in return?

Lord Jesus, thank you for the model of these men who have lived before us. We recognize that their pattern continues today, that we are learning from them still, as did the people in their own time. We long to be made certain, Lord, of the message that we have to give, and we long to be motivated to give. We know that those things can only happen by your Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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