

# Examples

M. W. Bassford, 7-8-12

At the most recent Joliet men's study, I was asked to teach several unfamiliar hymns from our new hymnal. One of the hymns I chose was #725, "We Sing for All the Unsung Saints". The first verse of the hymn reads:

*We sing for all the unsung saints,  
That countless, nameless throng,  
Who kept the faith and passed it on,  
With hope steadfast and strong,  
Through all the daily griefs and joys  
No chronicles record,  
Forgetful of their lack of fame,  
But mindful of the Lord.*

Like good hymns do, this one really got me to thinking. Every one of us who is a Christian is a Christian because of God's word, of course, but I suspect that it is also true that every one of us owes our faith to the example of some godly person. Maybe it was a parent who led us to the Lord, maybe a grandparent or other family member, or maybe even a friend. 99 percent of those people are not going to show up in the history books, but they made a difference to us.

This morning, then, we're going to talk about how we can be one of those unsung saints who makes a difference to those who come after us. We're going to consider how to be an influence for Christ through our examples.

## What Examples Teach

In the first segment of this study, let's spend some time looking at some of the things that examples teach. Sadly, it's just as easy for us to be negative examples as positive examples, but we're going to focus on the positive side today. First, as we've already mentioned briefly, examples teach us **FAITH**. Paul brings this point up with respect to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:5. Paul knew the faith that Lois and Eunice had, and simply because they were that kind of women, he knew that they would raise Timothy up to be a man who shared that faith too. This example of faith is essential to the development of faith in anyone. In Romans 1, Paul observes that the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. We have to have faith to proclaim the gospel in the first place, but we must also display our faith in the way that we live before the proclamation becomes effective. We have our faith because of the faith we saw in others, and if we're doing our job, others will have faith because of the faith they see in us.

The faith that we show to others isn't made up of noisy proclamations that Jesus is the Christ. Instead, it is displayed through our example of **OBEDIENCE**. Paul cites the example of his own obedience in Philippians 3:16. Notice, friends, the use of the word "pattern" in this passage. Paul believed that his walk with God constituted a pattern, a coherent set of examples and instructions that others could follow to produce the same godly result in their lives. This is the pattern that God has spelled out for us in His word. It concerns what we must do when we come together in the assembly, but it also tells us what sort of spiritual lives we should lead every day. Obviously, not every particular of our lives is going to line up with the lives of early Christians. It's not possible for me to talk about Jesus in the marketplace at Philippi or with the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill. Likewise, I'm quite certain that none of the apostles ever logged on to Facebook. That's not the question. The question is whether our speech on Facebook reveals Christ in us in the same way that Paul's words in the Philippi marketplace did. The question is whether we can point to the pattern of our lives, like Paul did so many times, and say to others, "You know what kind of person I am. You know what kind of life I lead. This is why you need to listen." If our obedience doesn't line up with our faith, we're nothing more than hypocrites.

We see Paul making just such an argument on the basis of the pattern of his life when it came to the importance of **LABOR**. Let's read together from 2 Thessalonians 3:8-9. Thankfully, we don't have the same problems with lazy people in the church that the Thessalonian church did. I don't know of a single person here who tries to get by by sponging off of other Christians. However, none of this diminishes the importance of the example of hard work, especially for our children. Like most people here, I was blessed with the example of a hardworking father. Even though he retired when I was 10, before that, I can still remember him going off to work every day, taking frequent business trips, and faithfully doing everything he could to provide for his family. Even after he retired, he was never idle, and every time I'm tempted to slack off in my work, I remind myself that I need to be the kind of man my father can be proud of.

However, the example of our hard work must not end with the secular work that we do. As hard as my father worked for his family, he worked every bit as hard for the Lord. Every time the church or the brethren had a need, he stepped up and filled it. For example, for years, my parents invited the college students of their congregation over to their house every week to eat Sunday dinner. I suspect that for just about all of them, it was the best meal they ate all week.

My goodness, but some of those kids could eat! That example of hospitality, though, is an example that I remember, and it's an example that those students remember. When my mother passed, some of those kids, who had since graduated and gone elsewhere, drove for hours to be at the funeral. When we work for the Lord, we make an impact on others.

Of course, a burst of hard work here and there doesn't mean anything unless we also supply an example of **PERSISTENCE**. James mentions such an example in James 5:10-11. I suppose it's inevitable that my father gets a lot of talk time in a sermon about examples, but one of the most important things that I learned from watching him is that no matter what happens, you have to keep your word. It could be a promise made to God; it could be a promise made to another man. Doesn't matter. If you said it, you do it. The times I can remember him being the angriest with me were when I made a commitment and didn't keep it. He was right. The church already has enough starters in it. It doesn't need more people who come up with big plans, look to others to do the hard work, and lose interest after a week or two. The church needs finishers. It needs people who will stay committed to the work of serving God and others, day after day, year after year, regardless of circumstances. We can rest when we're dead. Until then, we need to work, and we need to teach our children and our brethren to follow in our footsteps so that they carry on the work even after we're gone.

Finally, we should look to teach **JOY** by our examples. Paul praises the Thessalonian church for this in 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7. Notice, friends, that this is joy that the Thessalonians display even as they're suffering persecution and death. It's easy for us to be joyful people when everything in our lives is going right. Nobody needs an example to do that. It's a lot harder, though, to be an example of joy when Christ is the only thing in our lives that's going right. This doesn't mean that our response to the tragedies of life must be denial. God expects Christians to grieve when they lose those dear to them. However, He also expects us to reply to those tragedies with a "Yes, but": "YES, I'm suffering from this serious illness, BUT I still have Jesus, and having Jesus is what matters." The joy of the Christian does not deny pain and heartache. It merely puts them in perspective. When we display this joy despite circumstances that would crush others, that's when our families notice, that's when our co-workers and friends notice, and that's when we glorify God.

## The Example of Jesus

Even though our examples are and will always be inadequate to glorify God fully, we do have the example of the One who perfected our failure. In preparation for the Lord's Supper, we're going to ponder the example of Jesus. The first aspect of His example that we must consider is His example of **LOVE**. Jesus discusses the force of this example in John 15:12. Since we consolidated our Sunday services, I've noticed a great difference in the way that I preach, and one of the big differences is the way that I continually return to the love of Jesus. Every couple of weeks, a passage that says basically the same thing as this one appears on the screen. I don't think that repetition is a problem. I think it's valuable and even necessary. When we consider all the various commandments, it's easy to overlook the forest for the trees, and when it comes to the Bible, the forest is love. For literally everything that we do, the backdrop is that Jesus loved us, and we are to obey Him because our obedience imitates His love for God and for man. God's word tells us what to do. The love of Jesus tells us how to do it and why to do it. Only as we make His love our own can we become like Him.

This overarching love of Jesus was the driving force behind His example of **HUMILITY**. Paul illustrates this well in Philippians 2:5, 8. Sometimes, I think we get the idea that humility is the same thing as insecurity, that we are humble when we don't think much of ourselves and don't like ourselves very much. That certainly wasn't true of Jesus. He never forgot that He was the Lord of heaven and earth. What made Jesus humble was that He didn't insist on the position and honors to which His nature entitled Him. What made Jesus humble was that He was willing to leave all of that behind for others. What made Jesus humble was that He was willing even to be crucified if that was what others needed. Those things aren't the actions of the insecure person. Insecure people lash out at those who oppose or criticize them, because deep down inside, they're afraid that their opponents are right. Insecure people aren't willing to give themselves for others, because they don't think they have enough of themselves to give. Humility, then, is when we know where we stand as children of the King and allow God to free us from worry about ourselves.

Because of His humility, Jesus was also able to set an example for us of **SERVICE**. Nowhere do we see this put better than in Jesus' own words in John 13:14-15. This is where the proof of our love appears. Sure, we can wander around insisting loudly how much we love our congregation and how much we love our brethren, but unless we are willing to take our actual time and our actual energy and our actual money and devote those things to loving one another, all the love talk is just talk. We see what Jesus did for us. What does Jesus see when He considers what we do for one another? It is possible to serve without love. However, it's impossible to love without service.

Even though we don't care for the thought, God also intends for us to take Jesus as our example in the area of **SUFFERING**. This is clear from the language of 1 Peter 2:21. This is the passage that preachers use to assert that we should imitate Jesus generally, but specifically, it teaches that we are supposed to imitate Jesus in the way that He suffered. This was a big deal to early Christians. The whole book of 1 Peter is fundamentally about suffering, and nearly every book of the New Testament has at least something to say about it. In fact, it's no exaggeration to say that remaining godly through suffering is one of the main themes of the gospel. And yet, this core belief of the first-century church is not one

that Christians today are eager to embrace. Our culture is allergic to suffering. Americans don't want to talk about it, they don't want to think about it, and they certainly don't consider it a way to find favor with God! As a result, we tend to gloss over those dozens of passages that tell us to take Christ as our example in suffering.

And yet, despite all these cultural aspirations, suffering is still very much with us. Our bodies suffer from the effects of sickness and old age, and our souls suffer from the cruelties of evil men. Who here has not been hurt by a vicious boss, or a friend who doesn't act like one, or a loved one who doesn't return our love? When we read suffering out of the Bible, that doesn't eliminate suffering from our lives. It only leaves us unprepared for suffering when it comes.

When we suffer, then, we must learn to look to Christ. He was insulted, He was humiliated, He was tortured and killed, but He never fought back, and He never even hated. That's not the behavior of a weakling. That's the behavior of a man whose will to do right was so strong that nothing could break it. That's the behavior of a man who loved above all else. He died the death of a criminal, but He died like a king. He left the record of His suffering behind to teach us how.

Finally, Jesus is our example of **GLORY**. Paul explains this in the context of baptism in Romans 6:4-5. When Jesus suffered so meekly and died so painfully, it wasn't the end of Him. Instead, because of His faithfulness, God exalted Him to the right hand of His throne in heaven and gave Him even more power and more glory than He gave up to come to earth. That's the reason why Jesus could suffer. He could look ahead to the joy He was going to experience and despise the shame that He was enduring now. In this, He set an example for us, so that we could look forward to glory too. That's what will help us get through good days and bad days alike: the understanding that we will be with Him.

The way that Jesus thought is utterly alien to the world. People 2000 years ago thought He was crazy for living this way, and people today think we're crazy when we imitate Him. However, this is the path that we are called to walk. As challenging as it is, we wouldn't have a hope of success without Jesus and His sacrifice. With Him, the path is difficult but doable. Where do we stand? How do we measure up to Christ's example? Let's think about this as we partake.

## How to Be an Example

Obviously, we all have benefited from the righteous examples of others. How, then, can we work to be an example to others? If we want our example to have a positive effect, we must **GIVE TO GOD FIRST**. This is evident in Paul's description of the Macedonian churches in 2 Corinthians 8:3-5. Even though this comment occurs in the context of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, what Paul is talking about giving first isn't money. Instead, he says that the Macedonians gave themselves to God first. If we want to influence our families, our friends, our classmates, and our co-workers for good, they must see that we too belong to God first. In theory, every Christian belongs to God first. After all, that's what we committed to when we obeyed the gospel. In reality, we're all too industrious about carving out little enclaves from our lives that belong to us and not God. If we want to check on the presence of enclaves in our lives, it's easy. All we have to do is ask how complicated our lives are. If we truly belong to God first, we will seek Him first in every decision that we make, and those decisions will be simple to make. The Christlike life is not an easy life, but it is a simple one. However, if we're constantly caught up in these moral dilemmas, and we're never quite sure what we should do, that's a sign that we are listening to other influences besides Christ. For me, it's always so confusing to talk to people like that, and if we're like that, we will confuse others. However, the example of a God-first life is clear.

Second, we must **LIVE RIGHTEOUSLY**. Peter describes the effect of the righteous example in 1 Peter 2:12. Sometimes, we think it's some new thing when we encounter people who are prejudiced against Christians, but in reality, anti-Christian prejudice has existed since the very beginning of the faith. We get accused of being hypocrites, but so did Peter and other first-century disciples. On one level, we can't change that. There are certainly people who profess to be religious who are hypocrites. There are certainly people who worship every week at church buildings that say "Church of Christ" out front who are hypocrites. There may well be people in this assembly this morning who are hypocrites. I can't change that, Peter couldn't change that, and even Jesus Himself couldn't change that. I can't control the lives that my brethren choose to live, but I can control my life. I can live a life of faith, humbly seeking God's will while relying on His grace, that will show those who know me that I am what I claim to be, and that Jesus is who I claim He is. This godly sincerity is important in our dealings with everyone, but it is essential as we look to train our children. I might be able to hide from all of you, but I won't be able to hide from Zoë and Mark. If I'm a hypocrite, they'll know, and they'll make their decisions about serving God accordingly. We must be righteous to save our own souls and the souls of our children.

Third, we must **BE PRODUCTIVE**. Jesus expresses this eloquently in Matthew 5:16. It's not enough for us to avoid hypocrisy. If we want to be good examples, we must be leaving a record of good works that anybody who knows us can see. This is something that I saw and can still see in the life of my father. I saw him show up for services every time the doors were opened. I saw him mow the church lawn every week. I saw him studying every week for years with one of his friends from work. I saw him and my mother open their home to others on a regular basis. After he retired, I saw him spend 40 or 50 hours preparing for every adult Bible class he taught. Above all, I saw him studying the Bible for no more pressing reason than that he loved the word. Even now, when we talk on the phone, we spend most of the time talking about the Scripture. To this day, I see his good works, and I glorify God. Is that what people see when they look

at us? Is that the kind of example that we're setting for our children? Or, instead, are we doing such a good job of hiding our faith that not even those closest to us can tell it's there? Let's let our light shine instead.

Fourth, if we want to be good examples, we must learn how to **BE QUIET**. I mean this in the sense that Peter uses the word in 1 Peter 3:3-4. This isn't a quietness of voice. Otherwise, I would be in terrible trouble! Instead, it's a quietness of spirit, and it's a quietness that every Christian should possess, male and female alike. We are able to come to this quietness when we learn to hide our lives in Christ, when we give everything that we have and are over to His care, and we trust Him to take care of it. To the extent that we succeed in doing this, the things in life that used to bother us so much don't bother us anymore. The boss is a jerk? Well, the day will come when he won't be my boss anymore, and regardless of what he does in the meantime, Jesus is still in control. We don't have to get upset, because He'll handle it. When we learn to think in this way, and when we react to the trials of life in this way, it will be obvious to everyone around us, and the way that our hope frees us from anger and worry will be a big neon sign pointing others to Jesus.

Finally, perhaps the most important thing we can do to be a good example is to **BE CONSISTENT**. Paul points to his own consistency in 2 Corinthians 10:11. No matter where he was, Paul was the same servant of God. Once again, this is something that will be most obvious to our loved ones. When we come to the assembly and make comments in Bible class and visit with one another after services are over, there's a certain way that we act. We know it's not appropriate to blast the Bible-class teacher with rage or withering sarcasm. We know that it's not appropriate to stand in the foyer and gossip about the brother or sister who might be right behind us. However, is that nice, polite church way of acting the way that we really are, or is it something that we take off once we change out of our church clothes? Is it a relief for us to come home so that we can get into a nice blistering argument with our spouse, so that all the ugliness of character that we conceal from our brethren can become evident in our dealings with our families? Don't think that our kids are too dumb to pick up on that. Gracious, godly conduct isn't just for assemblies. It's for all the time.