

Text: 1 Cor 4.9-21
St Stephen's

Nov 8/9, 2008
Sat/Sun

Imitate Me

Paul is dealing with arrogance in the church, and he is having a hard time. We see him speaking to it in vs 8:

*Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich!
Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!*

1 Co 4:8

They have wrapped their arms around a distortion of the truth, and you could sum it up in the little word, "**Already**".

What they know is that 'already' they have been forgiven, 'already' they have been reborn, 'already' they have been given the Spirit.

And what **they added to it** was the belief that that 'already' heaven had arrived, that 'already' they were ruling like kings and queens, that 'already' they were beyond the reach of suffering and sin and shortfall in their lives on earth.

Modern versions of this have been called the **Prosperity Gospel**, which teach that the OT promises of health, wealth and prosperity are available to all believers here and now, if you will just believe and give to their ministries. Some **bumper stickers** for this kind of preaching are "*Name it and claim it*", and "*Blab it and grab it*."

But what if you ask God for healing and it doesn't happen – or it you ask God for a financial blessing and it doesn't come? Well, it is because you don't have **enough faith**, we are told.

Go back with me to **the word, 'Already'**. The better for Paul's gospel is "**Already – but Not Yet**". Say that with me...

"Already" the kingdom has broken in, but 'Not Yet' is it complete.

"Already" our redemption has begun – but "Not Yet" has it been fulfilled.

Another way of saying this is that **we live between** the first coming of Jesus and the second coming. We will come back to this “Already, but Not Yet” theme again and again in the chapters ahead – but we are introduced to it here.

Look **how Paul responds** to them. He does **two things**.

First, he runs **an intervention** on them. In vv 9-13 he lays it out in a series of **contrasts** between their lives and his. It is hard to miss his irony, and at the same time his broken heart over what they had become... Let me read it to you again...

I sometimes think God has put us apostles on display, like prisoners of war at the end of a victor's parade, condemned to die. We have become a spectacle to the entire world—to people and angels alike.

1 Cor 4.9

Our dedication to Christ makes us look like fools, but you claim to be so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are so powerful! You are honored, but we are ridiculed. Even now we go hungry and thirsty, and we don't have enough clothes to keep warm. We are often beaten and have no home.

1 Cor 4.10-11

We work wearily with our own hands to earn our living. We bless those who curse us. We are patient with those who abuse us. We appeal gently when evil things are said about us. Yet we are treated like the world's garbage, like everybody's trash—right up to the present moment.

1 Co 4:12-13

What is Paul saying? Well, you can't miss the difference between the shape of their lives. His is shaped like the cross. Theirs is shaped like some kind of victory parade. And their victory parade isn't real. It doesn't work with the way life really is. That is the problem with their theology, with the 'name it and claim it' theology. It pretends. And it doesn't deal with life the way God gives it to us. But the cross does. It can deal with everything, most powerfully with us – with our pride and

our arrogance and our boasting. The old hymn writers had it right; **the cross comes before the crown**. The sufferings and brokenness of this world are a part of life until the Lord returns – or until we go home.

Then Paul moves to his **second strategy**; he stands alongside them and shows them the way. He sets an example and invites them...

I urge you to imitate me.

1 Co 4:16

What he meant by that, of course, was come and **live a cross shaped life like I live a cross shaped life**.

in the way I suffer for Christ – **live like me**

in the way I bless when cursed –

in the way I live light and give much -

in the way I show patience under hardship –

in the way I work hard to lighten the load on others –

in the way I make the cross my way of life -

The power of Paul's example was not lost on them. It never is, is it?

Using the influence of your life was one of **the choice methods of Jesus**

he appointed twelve of them and called them his apostles. They were to be with him, and he would send them out to preach...

Mk 3:14

And you remember **how Jesus would lead people to be his disciples?** What was his invitation again and again? *Follow me!* Come along and follow me. Learn from me how to live the life I am giving you. **And that life always had the shape of the cross.**

Paul picked up that method of making disciples, and invited people in church after church to "*be imitators of me as I am of Christ*".

What was wonderful was that **the message** he preached and **the way he lived matched**. The gospel can do that **when the cross is at the center**. You know about **the gap** between what you say and how you

live. That gap never goes away in this life – remember the “Already but not yet – but the cross has the power to **close the gap**, to make it very small. It has the power to so deeply affect who you are that the way you live and the words you speak match up.

What is behind this is the idea that the Christian faith is **not just taught**, but **caught** by the influence of other Christians.

The truth is that **your words are filled full – or emptied** – by your manner of life. When your words match your life match God’s gospel – people are influenced for years and years. **Your life will speak.**

When I was just married to Becca, we came to Trinity because of the influence of **Bishop Stanway**. He was a remarkable man, and Australian who had labored in East Africa for 40 years during the East African revival. Under his oversight, they opened a new church every week during the decades of his ministry in Tanzania.

When he came to start Trinity **he invested** in a number of us. I was **in his house** a couple times a week for about 18 months, and several times went on local mission trips with him. I would play chess with him and we would talk – or I would come by with something I was concerned about. I knew how he lived. Simply. Warmly. There was always a warm welcome from Alf and Marjorie, usually with cookies and tea.

I **never** saw him get **angry**. Not once. I **never saw him say ‘no’** to his wife. Not once. Fool that I was, I remember once complaining about my good wife. He simply said, “Geoff, be as patient with her as God has been with you.” I long ago forgot what I was complaining about, but I never forgot his words to me.

I saw him **pray often**. He would be early at prayer every morning (Gavin seeing if he could beat him to prayer). I watched him again and again **lay down his well-earned rights** to a reasonable retirement back in Australia to invest in a new generation of leaders. Even through the onset of the **Parkinson’s** which eventually took his life, he stayed with us. I never heard him complain. He had said to us, “*What God allows, I*

accept." He introduced me to a cross shaped life.

This was 30 years ago. I have forgotten so many things over these 30 years, but Bishop Stanway's words and life **still stay with me**. Still speak. Still give me strength and guidance and courage.

That is the influence of the life of a man who could well have said, 'Imitate me as I imitate Christ.' – of a man **whose words and manner of life matched** the words and manner of life of the Apostle, and of the Lord who invited us to learn from him and follow him.

There is a **great need** among us for men and women who are able to say, in all humility, 'follow me as I follow Christ'. We desperately need to recover the vocation and calling to **spiritual eldership**. But often we are **frozen, paralyzed** by underlying anxieties or fears from rising to this level of maturity...

One fear is of the gospel call to **holiness**. We don't often hear it, and we less often understand it. The call to holiness is always and only a call to **Christlikeness**. Christlikeness in **character** and heart and mind, Christlikeness in **devotion** to God and **compassion** for suffering people, Christlikeness in word and in deed. There is no greater need in the world (or for your children), in my judgment, than for more – many, many more – men and women who are like Jesus Christ, for men and women of deep sanctity, of real holiness, and of consistency of life – whose lives and words match - and match their Lord's.

Christlikeness is the **seedbed** out of which real spiritual eldership grows. I wonder if some of you might be hearing **a fresh and clear call to a holy life**. Perhaps God is speaking to you this weekend. It would be good to say 'yes' to that call. Really good.

Another fear is the haunting shadow of our failures.

There is I think one thing that trips many of us up. We know our failures. We are painfully aware of our faults. And so we end up saying – "I am **not a role model!** Do what I say, but not what I do!!"

Well, it **is true** that **you will not live a life without failure, without struggle**. Remember that we live in the middle times, the “Already – but not yet” season of life. For many of us we think that this makes us unable to model a vibrant spiritual life for others. That is **not true**.

Your **example in a season of failure** is probably your most powerful example of all. There is nothing a son or daughter – or a spouse – or a friend in Christ will remember longer than your willingness to be honest and humble about your own failures, and to simply **say your apologies and ask for forgiveness**. They will remember that.

One last concern: “I don’t know anyone who could mentor me, who could be a model for me.”

Maybe. But I am convinced that God gives us what we need, who we need, when we are ready. He really will. And in the meantime here is what you do. Look at the people around you and ask again and again **what there is** about them **that shows you something of Christ**. You will begin to see things in almost everyone you meet. And **imitate them**. And study Paul’s life, and imitate him. And above all, study Jesus’ life – and imitate him, follow him.

What you have received from Christ through his cross is the greatest treasure to be found in the world; embrace it deeply, live it passionately, and pass it on to those around you.