

January 14, 2007

“What Does It Mean to Have a Hero?”
Philippians 3:17

FCF: Confusion as to the place of heroes in our lives

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because God has graciously provided heroes for us,
(magnet) we should gladly receive them as the good gifts they are.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

I saw a column in the paper last week with some very practical post-holiday tips on the theme of “What to Do with a Bad Gift.” Start with saying something neutral along the lines of, “*I don’t know what to say. Thanks for thinking of me.*” Then follow up with a question, “*Where on earth did you find this?*” and listen closely in case you want to return it. And, if that fails, there’s always the hope of re-gifting. Just be careful who it is.

The idea behind the column was sometimes you don’t know what to do with what you’ve been given. Now, to some degree, we face the same dilemma regarding our topic this morning. What does it mean to have a hero? It sounds like a good thing but what do we make of it? More and more, it seems we really don’t know what to do with even the notion of having heroes. What does it mean to have a hero? What does the Bible say?

SCRIPTURE READING: [Philippians 3:12-4:1](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Let me build off this theme of gifts. Last month was the season of giving gifts. The weeks following – the season of expressing thanks. Well, what then has God given? And for what should we give thanks? Among many things, we need to recognize He has given us heroes. And such gifts are worthy of thanks and praise to the Giver.

But before we go any further, we should be clear as to what we mean in terms of definitions. What is a “hero?” It is not necessarily a talented person – someone who has a skill and can do something well. A hero may have such a talent but may not. Nor is a hero necessarily a celebrity – someone who is well known for being well known, the rich, famous, and publicized. Fame has no tie to heroism. A hero is someone admired for certain qualities, someone we rightly long to emulate. There is a moral character excellent and worthy of our aspiration. Now, recognize the governing assumptions – that there are moral qualities truly excellent and inherently worthy of aspiring towards. That is to say, to speak of heroism implies an objective standard of the heroic.

But heroes have fallen on hard times. Cynicism runs rampant and deep. We are told we should “see through” the virtues deemed heroic in the past and the heroes as well. For, while they may have had valid goals, their motives, if seen in the proper light, were insincere and their character flawed. Possibly. Maybe more than we know. But the heroic is real nonetheless. Which begs a question. Could our insistence in tearing down the hero be driven by an impulse of self-protection? Mark Twain shrewdly said ([READ quote](#)), “*Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.*”

Now, all that said, the Christian is still left in a dilemma. Acknowledging the reality of the heroic, how do we admire the hero? We’re told to worship and serve God alone. What place does the hero serve? Getting back to our text, what does Paul mean when he says we are to imitate him? What does it mean and what are we to do with this? Back to where we started – God is the One who has graciously provided heroes for us. And, with that in mind, we should gladly receive them as the good gifts they are.

This way of looking at the issue breaks down into two components.

I. NOT THE WORSHIP OF MAN

The first being this – having a hero ought not to entail the worship of the hero.

A) No Mere Man Is Worthy of Such Adoration

Having a hero ought not to entail the worship of the hero for no mere man is worthy of such adoration. This is a crucial point we dare not lose sight of.

1. The folly of worshipping the creature

For there is great folly in the worship of a creature, in giving one of us what is due to Christ alone. We get a reminder of that in an exchange between the Apostle John and an angel in Revelation 19 (**READ Revelation 19:9-10**). It's folly to worship the creature.

2. The danger of worshipping a sinner

It's also dangerous to worship a sinner. Remember Paul's warnings of the false teachers in Philippi. What is one of the reasons for this call to imitation? (**READ Philippians 3:17-19**). It's dangerous to worship, to give unconditional allegiance, to a sinner.

Such is what we see in Paul's words on false teachers. And himself. Many chafe at the very notion of someone, even Paul, saying such seemingly pretentious things such as "imitate me." But they do so without considering the man himself. There is no hint of self-righteousness here. After all, what has he said? (**READ Philippians 3:12-13a**).

The point is this. The grounds for the call to follow Paul's example (and others) is in part the reality that there are other models. The assumption is that we will imitate someone. The question then is who it will be. Paul is calling for some thought, some reflection.

B) Christ Alone Is Worthy of Such Adoration

Who will it be? No mere man is worthy of such adoration. Christ alone. Christ alone. Think of the words of John the Baptist to his followers (**READ Matthew 3:11**).

1. Who He is

Who is John speaking of? The Hero, the greatest of all, come for us (**READ Hebrews 12:1-2a**). This word translated "founder" – *archegos* – is rich in its connotations – the leader, the pioneer, the ideal, the hero. The goddess Athena was the "archegos" of the city of Athens – said to be the founder of the city, representing all the virtues of the city. So too is Jesus our "archegos" – the originator, our ideal, our model – our Hero.

2. What He has done

And what has this Hero done? (**READ Hebrews 12:2**) For the joy of the reconciliation His death would accomplish, He deemed the shame He would endure – heinous though it was – a small thing. He "despised" it. All for us. In fact, earlier we are told He is not ashamed to call us His brothers. He joyfully accepts us, willingly identifies with us. You get something much the same in Paul's words in Philippians 3 (**READ Philippians 3:12**).

Application:

What do we do with this, this need to see no mere man as worthy of our adoration but Christ alone? The reality is that any other will disappoint. Any other hero will let us down in what they say and in what they do. We all know what it means to be let down by someone we had lifted up. And that's inevitable. To put anyone on a pillar is to run the risk of seeing them crash in a million pieces. The challenge then is what we will do when those we had "lifted up" have "let us down." To still love but not lift so high. To pray but not to presume. And to examine ourselves lest we fall in the same way or worse.

For man will disappoint. I don't care who we're talking about. But Christ never will. These things take us to grounded expectations of the people we admire. And the greatest of anticipation of the God we worship. That's part of what it should mean to have a hero. That's part of what it means to receive them as God's good gift to us.

II. BUT WONDER TOWARDS THEIR GOD

But all that said, we still have the good and necessary role of heroes. I mentioned Hebrews 12. Those beautiful words come immediately after Hebrews 11 – the “faith hall of fame.” The original audience had started well but was feeling the temptation to turn back. The life of faith was showing itself to be hard, harder than they had known before. And so the author turns their attention to earlier heroes of courage and endurance, saying in essence, *“What you’re going through isn’t novel. This is what following Christ demands. He proved Himself faithful then. He will prove Himself faithful to you now.”* Dick Keyes sums it up well in his book, True Heroism (READ quote):

The heroic virtues of Christ (are) the measure of excellence. Does that mean that it is a mistake to even see other people as heroic? No, but it is worth thinking carefully about how to do it. We can look to Jesus and also emulate other heroic people who are closer to us in space, time, and circumstance. But we must see them in our peripheral vision. We can imitate Christ indirectly by imitating Christlikeness in other people. It is Jesus’ qualities of character that are still the center of our vision. We will never find a person, past or present, who is heroic in the same sense as Jesus was. But we will find ‘partial’ heroes who live out elements of Christlikeness in marvelous and inspiring but nonetheless imperfect ways. In this way, contemporary, past, or fictional figures can become indirect but powerful ways to imitate Christ. This possibility opens the Christian life to enormous imaginative input.

Good words. Let’s go further, thinking through what it means to have “partial heroes.”

A) Not Imitating Their Lives

Surprising though it sounds, we are not to imitate their lives.

1. Examination helpful

Examine their lives, yes. Sometimes, the further back the better. It protects us against what C. S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery.” We have more blind spots than we would dare consider and those biographies have a way of blowing fresh air into our sails.

2. Mimicking is not

Examination is helpful. Mimicking is not. When Paul calls his readers to imitate him, he is not saying they should take up tentmaking, copy his mannerisms, become Roman citizens or traveling missionaries, get the same education, and wear his brand of sandal.

B) But Imitating Their Faith

Paul is calling for not an imitation of his life but an imitation of his faith. This comes out all the more clearly in another passage (READ 1 Corinthians 11:1).

1. Limiting

Paul is not putting himself forward as the human ideal. He is saying quite clearly (and a careful reading of the whole of Philippians would bear this out as well), *“Insofar as I am Christlike, imitate me. When and if you see anything in me that is like Christ, take note of it, watch carefully, and make it your own.”* There are clear limits as to this imitation.

2. Limitless

That said, its application is limitless. *“Insofar – in whatever areas, to whatever degree, with whatever cost – you see this in me, you do it as well.”* A limited limitlessness.

Recognizing both the glory of our heroes and their shame, we are to imitate not their lives but their faith. And in doing so, to let the glory of their God shine through.

Illustration:

I really appreciate John Piper’s words here (READ quote):

The glory of God, however dimly, is mirrored in the flawed lives of his faithful servants. God means for us to consider their lives and peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the glory of their God.

You realize how great His glory must be for it to be reflected off the dull surface of our lives, to shine through the murkiness of our ways and yet for it still to be seen and admired. That is, ultimately, no testimony to human glory but to God's!

Application:

Listen, we have a great need for such heroes, a great need. As I was studying through the parallel texts in the New Testament this week, the other contexts in which you see this command to imitation, two themes kept coming out. First, the difficulty of what is often called “the cruciform life” – a life of sacrifice, of suffering for others and for Christ. Second, the reality of other models out there to follow, siren songs wooing us off course. You put those two things together and it becomes abundantly clear why we need such heroes, such visual aids, such living admonitions to show us how it's done.

If nothing else, that again demonstrates the need to read biographies of the saints of the past and to be teachable. Not wasting time with the so called “insights” and drivel of cynics (what insights could they have to give?) but open-minded writing that is honest and fair. The things I have seen already with just a little bit of such study – the courage of Luther and Bonhoeffer, the tenacity of Calvin and Wilberforce, the humility of Murray and Schaeffer. You get to know such men and come to love God more through them.

And such heroes can be found in other places as well. Sometimes in fictional works. Sometimes in our own lives. God has a wonderful way of intersecting our paths with these figures in just the right way at just the right time and we are changed for it. Not that He is all of a sudden somehow made greater but that He becomes greater in our eyes. And that's a good thing. That's a really good thing. We should be glad for that.

CONCLUSION:

God has graciously provided such heroes for us and so we should gladly receive them as the good gifts they are – not worshipping them in any way but being filled with wonder all the more towards the One who has given them to us. Note I said He has “graciously” provided heroes to us. And indeed He has. There is power in story. Think of it. It's late at night and you're trying to work on some less-than-thrilling task such as filling out your tax forms or balancing your checkbook. You begin to nod off and finally give up and say to yourself, “*Forget it. I'm going to bed.*” But suppose you had been foolish enough to leave a good novel by the bed and you pick it up just to read a few pages before going to sleep. Perhaps an hour later you're now alert and might even be thinking of reading yet one more chapter, just to see what happens. Physiological changes have taken place – your blood pressure and heart rate rise. Why? How could this happen? A story has engaged your imagination and fired your weary mind and body.

The point is that heroes are like that – powerful stories. And God knows that. He created us with a longing for such stories, a chord within that resonates at the vibration of moral excellence. God created us with that in mind and has provided these “partial heroes,” these “visual aids,” these “living admonitions” to spur us on – to encourage us such that we might grow in our imitation of Christ by our imitation of Christlikeness in others. Look around you. See who He has provided – historical figures in the past and present, fictional figures in surprising places. Look around you. His provision is so good and great. May we grow in our delight in His provision. And even more in the Provider.

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