

**CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: BUILDING A CHURCH THAT HONORS GOD AND LOVES PEOPLE
BY IMITATING JESUS
1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1**

INTRODUCTION

All of us imitate those whom we admire or respect or depend upon. Sometimes we do this without thinking and sometimes we do it quite intentionally. When I was a child, many of the games I played with my siblings and my friends were quite consciously based upon imitating TV characters. I was often the sergeant commanding his platoon based on a character in the TV show “Combat.” At other times I was “Mighty Mouse” in imitation of the cartoon character of the same name as I rescued damsels in distress from the evil cats, played by my buddies. My brothers and I have often discussed that the way we hunt deer is in imitation of how our Dad hunted deer. My children have often told me that I sound and act exactly like their grandfather. I have imitated my dad without even knowing it.

Imitation comes natural to us. God knows this about us and thus, in his word, he regularly exhorts us to think about who we mimic. You will notice that the last verse of our text this morning is an example of this regular feature of the Bible. It is a direct command from the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth and to us that we are to consciously imitate him as he imitates Jesus. Obviously, Paul’s ultimate concern is that we be like Jesus, not like him. There are two questions that we must ask if we are going to understand and then obey this command to imitate Jesus by imitating Paul. First, why does Paul want the church to imitate him as he imitates Jesus? Paul, in 10:31-33 describes how he is living and at the end says that the reason he lives his way is “so that they may be saved.” So the reason to be like Jesus, at least in this passage, is so that some group of people will be saved. What this means is that everyone who wants to be like Jesus cares about other people being saved and everyone who cares about others being saved wants to be like Jesus. I presume that most of the people in this room would say that they want to be like Jesus. So I ask you, do you also care about whether or not other people go to heaven or to hell? If you do not care about whether or not other people go to hell then you do not really want to be like Jesus. Jesus came into this world to save sinners and therefore all who want to be like him care about the salvation of sinners and evaluate their conduct in light of their desire for others to be saved.

What group of people does Paul want to be saved? If you look at v. 32 Paul commands us not to put a stumbling block in the path of Jews, Greeks or the church of God and then he talks about his example of seeking to please all people so that many people will be saved. Therefore, the many people whom Paul wants to be saved through his imitation of Jesus are people from among these three categories: Jews, Gentiles and the church of God. Every human being on the face of planet earth is a member of one of these categories. Therefore, the concern of every person who wants to be like Jesus is that they and the churches of which they are members conduct themselves in such a manner that some people from every category of human existence are brought into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. This is not merely a generalized concern for the whole world but for people within the communities within which we each live. You cannot cause a person you do not have a relationship with to stumble. You cannot please people you do not know. These verses are the conclusion to a discussion that Paul began in 8:1. Throughout these chapters Paul is describing how our conduct affects those with whom we live, both Christian and non-Christian. The underlying assumption is that we live in families and neighborhoods and community associations and jobs in which we have daily contact with other human beings and how we conduct ourselves is going to make a difference in the eternal destiny of those with whom we live.

So in this passage the reason that you and I should imitate Jesus is so that people from within the families and communities in which we live can be saved. But the second question and the one that will occupy the rest of our time together is this: What does it mean to imitate Jesus? We are not left to our own devices to figure out what that means as these four verses answer that question. We have in these four verses two statements that summarize for Paul and thus for us what it means to imitate Jesus. Please note: It is the presumption of this passage that if you will imitate Jesus then God will save people through you.

MAIN POINT

God will save people through the church or the Christian that imitates Christ by...

I. Living for the glory of God (v. 31)

To begin with we need to define what we mean by doing something “for the glory of God”. This phrase means two things. First it means that we are motivated to do what we do because of the glory of God. His greatness, his majesty, his beauty motivates us to do what we do. Second, it means that we do what we do in order that his glory might be seen. “To glorify” doesn’t mean that we make God glorious but that we show that he is glorious. You and I live for the glory of other people all the time. I am impressed with my wife. I view her as glorious. I delight in her wisdom and her creativity and her humor and her managing of our home and her beauty. Therefore, I regularly thank her for what she does in our home, I complement her artistic achievements, I tell her how pretty she is and I spend time with her and talk with her. In addition I want others to admire her and so I talk about her respectfully and enthusiastically. I call attention to her creative work. So you see there are actions I take because I am motivated by the knowledge of her glory and some of those actions show the various ways that she is glorious.

The first thing to observe about this amazing command that whatever we do we are to do for the glory of God is this: there is not a set of activities or behaviors that automatically bring glory to God. Paul doesn’t make a list of religious or moral activities that automatically glorify God. Coming to church, reading your Bible, praying, shoveling out your neighbor’s driveway, preaching a sermon may or may not bring glory to God, may or may not be done because you are impressed with God. There is no activity, no job, no relationship that always, without exception shows off the greatness of God. There is nothing more God-honoring about being a pastor or about reading the Bible to your children than about washing dishes or being a teacher or being a retail clerk or mowing your lawn or watching TV. If whatever you do has the potential to be for the glory of God then all you do, including all your religious and moral behaviors can also be for the dishonor of God.

I think everyone in this room has an incredibly difficult time believing what I just said. Two weeks ago I did very few religious activities. I read my Bible a few times and I came to church and sat in the congregation last Sunday. I spent my time taking care of Jared, doing laundry, helping Jane clean the house to prepare to host the 30 members of my family on New Year’s Eve, and watching football and basketball on TV. Quite honestly I felt sort of funny about me and God at the end of the week. I didn’t feel like I had done anything of significance for God. I have no doubt that my insecure feelings are related to the fact that I think my “pastoral duties” are more important than the rest of my life and that God likes me better when I do these religious things than when I do not do them. Both of these things are a lie. God loves me because of what Jesus has done, not because of what I do or don’t do and whether what I do is for the glory of God is not determined by the activity itself but by something else.

Therefore, there are no inconsequential activities or behaviors. Everything you do all the way down to the most mundane and earthly things, like eating and drinking can be done in such a way that the greatness, the majesty, the grandeur of the God who made everything and who rules everything is made manifest. You can do everything you do because you are impressed with God or because you are impressed with something else. So what determines whether something I do, including the mundane parts of my life is done “for the glory of God?” Thankfully, we are not left our own devices to figure this out. The immediate context of this verse gives us some very important direction.

First, we do things for the glory of God when we act in accord with God’s word, when what we do is regulated by his word. This means two things. First of all it means there are activities and behaviors that can never be done for the glory of God because God says they always dishonor him. If you look back to 10:6-10 you will see a list of activities that always dishonor God. Idolatry, sexual immorality, drunkenness, testing God and grumbling about God’s provision always dishonor God because he says so. So when Paul says, “whatever you do,” the “whatever” does not include sinful thoughts, words or actions. Mickey Cohen was a prominent mob boss in Los Angeles in the 1950’s and 60’s. In the 1960’s one of the members of his gang became a Christian

and left his life of crime behind but was able to continue to be friends with Mickey. Through this friend and over a long period of time Mickey was exposed to the gospel and eventually made a profession of faith in Christ and appeared to be leaving his life of crime behind. However, eventually he returned to his gangster ways. When his distressed friend told him that he should not be involved with his old lifestyle as he was a Christian Mickey replied, “You never told me that I had to give up my career. You never told me I had to give up my friends. There are Christian movie stars, Christian athletes, Christian businessmen. So what’s the matter with being a Christian gangster?”

We laugh at such foolishness and yet we do the same thing. You cannot gossip to the glory of God, you cannot curse your children to the glory of God, you cannot steal from work to the glory of God, you cannot look at pornography to the glory of God, you cannot set your heart on making a million dollars by the time you’re thirty to the glory of God. So living for the glory of God requires that I call sinful those things that God calls sinful. I live for the glory of God when I resist my sin and then when I fail to resist I confess my sins to God and call upon his power to help me to change. You will not imitate Christ and you will not be used by God to bring salvation to anyone if you do not do this.

But not only must we treat as sinful those things God says are sinful but also we must not treat as sinful things that God does not call sinful. In the immediately preceding verses to this one Paul is defending the appropriateness of buying and eating whatever is sold in the marketplace of Corinth without giving any thought as to whether or not the meat comes from animals that were first offered in sacrifice to pagan gods. There are people in the Corinthian church, mostly those of Jewish descent, who are teaching that God cares about what you eat and that he cares with whom you eat. Look at vv. 25-27 and 29b and 30. Paul says that you should buy and eat whatever is being sold in the marketplace without asking any questions about where the meat came from. The reason he is so liberal in his thinking is because of what God says in Psalm 24:1, the whole earth and all the creation pleasures that fill it come from and belong to the Lord. Therefore, whether or not a piece of meat has been offered to a false god has no impact on its value as food. Second, if an unbelieving friend invites you to dinner and you want to go, do not hesitate to do so and when you get there do not hesitate to eat what is set in front of you. Ask no questions; just enjoy this gift from God. You cannot eat or drink to the glory of God if you believe what you eat or drink or who you eat with affects your standing with God. So if you are going to be like Jesus and thus be used by God to bring salvation to others you must not treat as sinful things that God does not call sinful because this dishonors God.

The second thing this immediate context tells us about doing what we do for the glory of God is seen in v. 30. We give thanks to God for all the pleasures he gives us in this world. We are doing what we do for the glory of God when we are grateful people. When we give thanks for everything and in every circumstance we demonstrate that God’s goodness is motivating us and we manifest his glory by acknowledging that this pleasure, this provision is directly a gift from him. Thus we acknowledge and draw attention to God’s sovereign power over his whole creation and his infinite goodness to his creation. There is a joyful contentment that the people of God exhibit in our gratitude to God for all things in our life.

Gratitude and contentment are difficult virtues to cultivate in our consumer, complaining culture. We breathe an environment that says “I deserve it, because I earned it or because I am worth it.” We live in an environment that screams at us that we need more if we are going to be happy. The biblical view is the opposite. All is gift. You and I deserve nothing. We have nothing that has not been given to us. Ecclesiastes 5: 19 says, “... when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work, this is a gift of God” God not only gives us everything, but also the ability to enjoy what he has given. So we are to thank God for everything and for the ability to enjoy what he has given. This content gratitude brings glory to God and is how Jesus lived and will be used by God to save others. Grateful, content people are attractive people; especially as we live in these difficult economic times. Anxious, ungrateful, complaining people are repellant to others.

God will save people through the church or the Christian that imitates Christ by...

- *Living for the glory of God*

- *And by...*

II. Living for the good of others (vv. 32-33)

Paul would without doubt say that one of the most necessary things that determines whether or not an action is for the glory of God is by determining if it is for the good of others. So there really is nothing more to say about imitating Jesus than to say that we do all we do for the glory of God. However, I think it is helpful to consider this under a second heading just to highlight what it means. Paul states the principle negatively in v. 32 and then positively in v. 33. If you live for the good of others then there are things you avoid doing because you recognize that some words or actions will put stumbling blocks in the way of other people and then there are things you do in order to please them.

Obviously the good that Paul is seeking for the "many" is their salvation. He is not seeking for them good marriages, good mental health, good jobs, etc. So as Paul thinks about what he is going to do and what he is not going to do he is always thinking about how his behavior is going to influence others in regards to the gospel because, as he says in Romans 1:16 it is this gospel alone that is God's power for the salvation of everyone who believes. When Paul thinks of the gospel and salvation he is not thinking about getting a person to pray a prayer to ask Jesus to come into his or her heart. His aim is that people be captivated by the love and power of Christ; that people trust Jesus alone to save them from their sins. He has in mind a lifelong process that begins with conversion, with a turning from sin to Christ and goes on until the death of the person or the return of Christ. He knows Christians and churches can be either a help or a hindrance in that process. Again, what we each do personally and what we do as a church will impact people's eternal destiny.

How could Paul or how can you and I be a stumbling block to Jewish and Gentile non-Christians? How can we be a stumbling block to other Christians? What is it we are to avoid? First of all, there's a paradox here. In I Cor. 1: 22-23 and Romans 9:32-33 Paul says the gospel is offensive. The gospel itself causes people to stumble. Jews and Greeks do stumble over Christ. Jewish people can't handle a crucified Messiah and non-Jewish people say, "What good is a dead Savior? What can a person who was killed 2000 years ago do for me today?" So he's not saying, "don't share the gospel with people because they might get mad at you and reject the gospel." Another thing he's not saying is don't offend non-believers who want you to join in their sin with them. I Peter 2:3-4 says, "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation and they heap abuse on you." So if your non-Christian friends want you to get drunk with them or watch pornography or steal from your employer or make fun of another person don't go along even if it makes them mad. Also, he's not saying not to offend legalists in the church. Look at v. 30. Paul was eating meat that had been sacrificed in pagan temples and Jewish Christians were saying you can't be a Christian and do that. Paul says, I will eat this meat when it furthers the work of Christ and I will abstain when it doesn't. Eating or not eating has no effect on my relationship with God and if it makes you mad that I eat this meat, I don't care.

Then what does he mean? There is lots of misunderstanding on this point. Please listen to what I'm going to say. First of all, causing a person to stumble is to cause them to fall off the road of salvation. It is to turn them aside from Christ. You are not making someone stumble when they judge you for being a bad Christian by doing something they think is wrong but that God does not forbid. I'm going to give you three ways you can cause people to stumble and then give some examples. 1) To cause someone to stumble is to cause them to believe by your words or actions that to be a Christian requires an attitude or a belief or an action that being a Christian does not require. 2) You cause a person to stumble when you communicate by word or action that a certain behavior or belief is not necessary to be a Christian when it is necessary. 3) Finally, you cause a person to stumble when you, by word or action, lead him to engage in a behavior that he believes to be sinful. That is, when you lead a person to sin against their own conscience.

Here are some examples: 1) To communicate by word or action that to be a Christian you have to dress like me or have the same hairstyle I do. 2) To communicate by word or action that to be a Christian you can't be a Democrat or you can't be a Republican. 3) To communicate by word or action that to be a Christian you will have to change what you eat. 4) To say to person sexually involved with a person to whom they are not married that he or she can be a Christian without breaking off that relationship. 5) To tell someone that she is for sure going to heaven because she asked Jesus into her heart, even though she has no interest in being involved in the church or learning what the Scriptures teach. 6) To communicate by word or action that you can be a Christian and continue to hold a grudge against your sibling. 7) To put pressure by word or action on a professing Christian who believes it is a sin for him to drink wine to have a glass of wine.

The positive side of the command in v. 33 is we must live to please everybody in every way. Again, there is a paradox here. In 1 Thess. 2:3-4 Paul says, "We are not trying to please men". But here he says, "I'm trying to please everybody in every way". What does he mean? Paul never hesitates to preach the gospel and do all that God commands him to do. It doesn't matter if people don't like it, he still does it. People tell him to not preach the gospel and he still preaches the gospel, even though he ends up in jail or getting beat up for doing so. Legalistic Christians tell him not to eat meat sacrificed to idols and he eats meat sacrificed to idols. He doesn't stop obeying God because he's afraid of what people will think about him or do to him. But, he also accommodates himself to the customs and preferences of those to whom he is seeking to share the gospel. He states the principal quite clearly in 9:20-22. When he is with Jewish people he lives and eats like a Jewish person. When he is with non-Jewish people he lives and eats like a Gentile. You can see why Paul was forever being accused of being a hypocrite and a false teacher. The things that are so important to religious people he kept waffling on and yet the things that people say are a matter of personal opinion he kept insisting that everyone believe just like him. Paul worked to be like the people he was sharing the gospel with without giving into the pressure to be liked by them. It was accommodation without compromise.

There are several questions we must continually ask ourselves: 1) Are we putting up false barriers to the gospel through our behavior and teaching? 2) Are we working to please others by accommodating ourselves to the values and customs of others that are not contrary to biblical standards? 3) Are we being hospitable in our church and in our home? That is, are we warmly welcoming other people into our church and into our lives? 4) Are we careful to not criticize the customs and style of dress and values and politics of others that are biblically neutral? 5) Are we faithfully proclaiming all of God's truth and seeking to live by it or are we avoiding certain parts of the Bible because we know that it will be particularly offensive to the people in our community? 6) Are we seeking ways to develop friendships with non-Christians? In think v. 27 is very instructive in this regard. Paul assumes that people in the church will have non-Christian friends who want to invite them over for dinner. Do you have any non-Christian friends who want to invite you over for dinner? 7) Do we think about and evaluate how our words and actions influence those around us or do we just live the way we want and ignore the impact we have on others?

God wants all of us to imitate Jesus so that he might save many other people through us. We all live in a community made up of a wide diversity of Christians and non-Christians. We encounter these people in our homes, our neighborhoods, our schools, local businesses, our church, our workplaces and as we encounter each one we must thoughtfully consider how our words and our actions are impacting their eternal salvation. We are either helping or hindering them in the process of salvation. May God enable us to so imitate Christ that many are brought safely into God's eternal kingdom from a broad cross section of our community through us.

God will save people through the church or the Christian that imitates Christ by...

- *Living for the glory of God*
- *Living for the good of others*

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