

Walk According to Paul's Example

Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. (Philippians 3:17-19)

I was taught to follow Jesus—to be His disciple. As a man, Jesus exemplified love and humility, which Paul attributed to Him and are emphasized throughout his letters. However, although there are principles of His teaching that we can pattern our walk after (that are also applied in Paul's letters), there are many commands and features of His ministry that we cannot, and are not to, follow. For example, we are not to teach the gospel of the imminence of Israel's promised kingdom, obey the Law of Moses, or repent and be baptized for the remission of our sins. Nor do we have the power to heal the sick, cast out demons, speak in tongues, or raise the dead as Jesus commanded His disciples to do (Matthew 10:8; Mark 16:17-18). The Apostle Paul, on the other hand, exhorted the brethren—fellow members of the body of Christ—to imitate or follow him *as he followed Christ*.

Be imitators [followers] of me [Paul], just as I also am of Christ. (I Corinthians 11:1)

Additional notes/background:

How did Paul follow Christ? I discuss it in my study **Follow Paul** on our website, part of which I plan to incorporate into my proposed book. A brief summary of that study, along with added perspective, is provided below.

Paul's exhortation is not commonly taught or is misunderstood in our Christian churches. As an example, during one Sunday service many years ago, the pastor of the church of which I was a member told us not to pay much attention to Paul (i.e., his letters) because he was the most arrogant person in the Bible. He based his exhortation on verses where Paul referred to *my gospel*, which he did (see Romans 2:16; 16:25; II Timothy 2:8) and where he claimed that we should follow him, which he also did (besides the two references listed above, see also Philippians 4:9; I Corinthians 4:15-16; I Thessalonians 1:6; 4:1; II Thessalonians 2:13-15; 3:7-9; I Timothy 1:16; II Timothy 1:13; 2:2). Brethren, this viewpoint is not uncommon (though not always expressed so directly) and is a very sad commentary on our Christian churches today. The distinctiveness and importance of Paul's apostleship and message are not taught in our denominational churches and similar independent churches and, therefore, are unknown to most believers.

Paul was formerly the prominent Pharisee named Saul (Philippians 3:2-6) who had the full authority from Judea's high priest to destroy the movement and the people who followed Jesus (also known as *the Way*—Acts 9:1-2; 22:3-5). He was very successful in his zealous effort, all done in the name of God, beginning with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:51 – 8:3; 26:10-11; Galatians 1:13-14). In fact, He was the chief of sinners—God's leading enemy (Acts 9:1-6; I Timothy 1:12-16). Saul, however, was chosen by God (according to His eternal plan—Galatians 1:15-17) and Christ to be the apostle of the Gentiles (Acts 9:15-16; Romans 11:13; Galatians 1:1; I Corinthians 1:1). Our Lord, from His glorified position in heaven, through multiple revelations taught him *the mystery* that had been kept secret in God since before the

foundation of the earth (Romans 16:25-27; I Corinthians 2:6-13; see also Ephesians 3:1-12; I Corinthians 11:23-27; II Corinthians 12:1-4; Galatians 1:11-12).¹

The revelation of the mystery to Paul, and to us through his letters, signified the interruption of God's prophetic plan concerning Israel and its future kingdom. It revealed the manifold wisdom of God—His plan from the beginning centered on the work that Christ accomplished at the cross—that provided a way for Gentiles to be saved apart from the blessings of Israel. Paul's ministry ushered in the dispensation (administration) of the grace of God (Ephesians 3:1-12; Acts 20:24). God interrupted His prophetic plan, which is the subject of the rest of the Bible, by temporarily blinding Israel and setting aside its promises until this dispensation of grace is completed (Romans 10:1-4; 11:25-29; II Corinthians 3:12-16). This dispensation will end with the rapture of the church that is the body of Christ (believers today), which is also exclusively revealed as part of the mystery (I Thessalonians 4:13-17; I Corinthians 15:51-53).

Paul was the chosen dispenser or steward of God's mystery and gospel of grace just as Moses was chosen to dispense God's Law to the people of Israel. Therefore, when Paul spoke of his gospel and exhorted believers to follow his example, he was doing so with the authority of God and our Lord Jesus Christ—he was not boasting in himself (I Corinthians 1:26-31; 15:1-10; I Timothy 1:12-16). Furthermore, because of the magnitude and greatness of the revelations of Christ to Paul, God gave Paul some type of *thorn in the flesh* to constantly remind Paul not to exalt himself and to fully depend on the grace of God in all things (II Corinthians 12:1-10). To describe Paul as arrogant, therefore, is to deny his position and authority, and also denies that his letters were and are the word of God.

For I [Paul] would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11-12)

For this reason we [Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy] also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, 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. (I Thessalonians 2:13)

If we imitate or follow Paul as he followed Christ, our lives will be pleasing to God and we will know the inner peace that comes from God (I Thessalonians 4:1; Philippians 4:6-9). So, how did Paul follow Christ? We need to examine Scripture to find out. Characteristics of Paul's actions and attitude (i.e., his walk) that we should follow or imitate include the following examples:

- Content, regardless of circumstances (Philippians 4:11-12)
- Dependent on God (Philippians 4:13; II Corinthians 12:9-10)
- Rejoiced (Philippians 2:17-18; Romans 16:19)
- Thankful to God (Philippians 1:3; Romans 1:8; II Corinthians 9:15) and thankful for fellow believers (Romans 16:1-16; I Corinthians 1:4)
- Encouraged brethren to be unified in faith (I Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 1:27; 2:1-2)
- Behaved properly toward believers (I Thessalonians 2:10-12)
- Good conduct toward the world—did not give nonbelievers cause to blaspheme God (II Corinthians 1:12)

¹ See my study **The Mystery (God's Secret Plan)** for an examination of the mystery that was revealed to Paul.

- Worked so as to not be a burden to others (I Thessalonians 2:9)
- Prayed for fellow brethren (Philippians 1:2-5, 9-11; Romans 1:9-12; Ephesians 3:14-19)
- Did the right thing despite the consequences (Acts 20:22-24; II Corinthians 11:23-27)
- Did all things for the Lord and the sake of the gospel rather than for men or to seek their approval (I Corinthians 9:23; Galatians 1:10)
- Showed compassion toward others (Philippians 2:25-28; Romans 9:1-3)
- Humble (Acts 14:11-15; Ephesians 3:8; Philippians 3:7-8; I Corinthians 2:1-5)
- Conformed himself (was not offensive) to those he preached to (I Corinthians 9:19-23; 10:31-33)
- Self-disciplined (I Corinthians 9:26-27; Acts 24:16)
- Eager to serve God (Romans 1:15), was a faithful servant of Christ (I Corinthians 4:1-2), and was unashamed of the word of God (Romans 1:16-17)
- Stood for the truth (Acts 26:24-25; Romans 9:1; I Timothy 2:7)
- Warned fellow believers about false teaching (Philippians 3:18-19; I Timothy 6:20-21; II Timothy 4:1-4)
- Shared the gospel despite his circumstances, such as during imprisonment (Philippians 1:12-13; Acts 16:25-32)

Paul was an ambassador for Christ, as are all children of God—we are Christ’s representatives on earth. If we follow Paul as he followed Christ, then we, too, will be good ambassadors of Christ, faithfully representing Him in our daily lives.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg [*implore*] you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He [*God*] made Him [*Christ*] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him [*Christ*]. (II Corinthians 5:20-21)

Paul not only asked believers to follow his example, he told the Philippian brethren to observe those who walk accordingly (Philippians 3:17). Therefore, we should live in a manner that is an example to others (I Timothy 4:12). To the Thessalonian brethren, who suffered severe persecution because of their faith (I Thessalonians 2:13-15; II Thessalonians 1:3-5), Paul said:

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (I Thessalonians 1:6-7)

Being a good example does not require perfection because no one is perfect. Paul admitted to his own struggles of not doing what he should do and doing what he should not do (Romans 7:15 – 8:1). However, if we desire or endeavor to live according to the Spirit and walk worthy of, or as befitting, our calling to salvation (Galatians 5:22-25; Colossians 1:9-12; I Thessalonians 2:10-12), then sin will not have control over us (Romans 6:12-14) and we will be able to be good representatives of Christ and good examples to others.

Therefore I [*Paul*], the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling [*salvation*] with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)