

The Power and Complexity of Exemplary Living

A sermon based on 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 and Matthew 22:15-22

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I like things simple. Ask me to follow an abstract line of thought, and after a few twists and turns I quickly lose my way. In my mind a thread of thought quickly frays. The phrase, “too clever by a half” frequently springs to my mind, though there is seldom need for the fraction to climb that high! I think that my simple-mindedness springs in part from the fact that I’m a visual person. For example, if you try to teach me a new game by explaining it to me, I’m lost and not a little frustrated—but show me how to play it, and I’m a quick study... ..well, quicker!

I’m not unappreciative of nuances and subtlety, but I don’t fully understand G.K. Chesterton’s observation that human beings “rush toward complexity, but yearn toward simplicity.” It’s not so much a yearning on my part as a necessity, so as to make things mentally manageable.

A church member once told her minister, “Pastor, your sermons have meant so much to my husband since he lost his mind!” No one has ever said that to me, but several years ago, during one of my ministerial reviews, one of you wrote something to the effect that my sermons are so simple “just about any idiot” can understand them. I take that as a compliment! Simplicity has served me well.

It may be but a prairie penchant for plainness, but, as someone once sang, “It doesn’t take a weatherman to tell which way the wind blows!” (Bob Dylan) Or, to translate it into the language of Ottawa, “To tell which way the wind blows does not require an expensive panel of climatologists!” It may be simple of me, but I prefer the word, “death,” to the euphemism, “negative patient care outcome”. I prefer the word, “pain,” to the word, “discomfort,” especially if it hurts, and hurts a lot! And I prefer that a government announce “new taxes” rather than a “revenue enhancement program”.

It’s not just that I’m impatient with the use of jargon that appears intelligent but is in fact unintelligible, or with individuals who have an uncanny knack to over-complicate things. I’m a simple person. I have also sunk my roots in a religious tradition that values simplicity. The Mennonite religious tradition never embraced simplicity as enthusiastically as did the Shakers—perhaps we were holding out for 20th century gadgetry—but our tradition is one in which for centuries care and cumber were kept to a minimum. The early Anabaptists preferred a simple discipleship—a straightforward following after Jesus—to the complex encumbrances and ecclesiastical entanglements of church tradition. They preferred the straightforward narrative of Jesus’ life, as told in the Gospels, to the Hellenistic sophistry of the Apostle Paul. They preferred the example of Jesus to elaborate theological reflections about Jesus.

It’s misleading to call them a simple people. The cultivation of simplicity isn’t always simple, but the simple appeal and power of example is one that echoes through the centuries. Contemporary expressions like “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one” or

“You can’t talk the talk if you don’t walk the walk” or “Practise what you preach” may sound like cliches, but underneath these trite one-liners is a yearning for integrity, a longing for a genuine expression of Christian faith.

The Thessalonian Tribute to Exemplary Living

The Scriptures often use the language of example. Paul, though he could embellish a philosophical argument with the best of the Hellenists, often uses the language of example himself. “Be imitators of me,” he says more than once to the Corinthians. (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1) “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” (11:1) “Be imitators of God,” he tells the Ephesians (Ephesians 5:1). Similar language is used in his letter to the Philippians (3:17). In Hebrews we are told to become imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” (6:12; see also 13:7) In John we are told, “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good.” (3 John 1:11)

The Greek word for “imitate” is “mimeomai,” from which, no doubt, we derive the word, “mime”. It means to mimic behaviour or to follow the example of another person. This may sound a mite simple to those of you who are beneficiaries of a more sophisticated educational system, but imitation of a master is a pedagogical tradition that has served many cultures well.

In his letters to the Thessalonians Paul uses the language of example at least four times (1:6; 2:14; 2:3:7 & 9), and in the passage read to us by Ghenette, Paul pays a glowing tribute to the exemplary living of the Thessalonians. Paul praises the struggling church at Thessalonica for at least three things: for their “work of faith,” for their “labour of love,” and for their “steadfastness of hope in...Jesus Christ.” (1 Thessalonians 1:3) In these things they have become, Paul says, examples for other churches. “You became imitators of us and of the Lord,” Paul tells them, “for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy ... so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7)

The exemplary living of the Thessalonians was contagious. “The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you,” writes Paul—“...sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known....” (1 Thessalonians 1:8) Their example was a powerful one, that “sounded forth,” or as other translations render it, their example “rang out” (NEB), or “echoed resoundingly” (NAB). The idea is that their example is as loud and clear as the sound of a trumpet!

A Complicated Question, A Simple Answer

I rejoice with Paul that the example of the Thessalonians was so clear and so clarion a witness that people were impressed all up and down the Adriatic coast. It is true that the witness of one example is often much more compelling than the witness of a dozen convoluted arguments, but what do you do when approached in an argumentative fashion? Then the power of example becomes more complex.

Jesus had such an encounter. The encounter was deemed sufficiently important that it’s found in all three synoptic Gospels, but it was, by all appearances, a simple encounter. Several people approached Jesus and asked him, in effect, “Teacher, we’ve been impressed with your sincerity, your grasp of the truth, and your independence of thought, so we’d like to know what you think: ‘Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’” (Matthew 22:17) Simple question... or was it? We know it was not, because Matthew

introduces this encounter with the words, “Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him....” (22:15) I like the King James rendering of this verse, which reads, “Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk.”

The Pharisees took some Herodians along with them, and even if we didn’t have the benefit of Matthew’s editorial introduction, we’d know there was trouble brewing, for the Pharisees and Herodians hardly ever hung out together! The only thing they had in common was their fear of Jesus’ growing popularity.

For another thing, the flattering preface to their question was too complimentary by a half, and for another thing, the two groups were looking for quite different answers to this question. The Pharisees were strict Jews who hated the taxation imposed by the Romans; if Jesus answered the question by saying that taxation to Caesar should be paid, they would immediately accuse him of being a traitor, and he would lose favour with the people. The Herodians, on the other hand, were a group of Jews that profited from Roman taxation; if Jesus came out against Roman taxation, they would report him to the Roman authorities as a traitor to Rome!

A simple answer in this case could prove disastrous, though Jesus managed to manoeuvre through the political landmines without stepping on one. He asked for a coin. “Show me the coin used for the tax,” Jesus told them (Matthew 22:19), which they did. They brought him a denarius, a Roman coin. It was a brilliant move, for with its appearance the entrappers became the entrapped!

A typical Roman coin of this era was stamped with the image of the reigning emperor’s head on one side, while the flip side was inscribed with the ruler’s title and divine status, something like “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus.” The painstaking precision of Pharisaic obedience to the Law forbade them from handling, much less dealing with, Roman coinage, for it represented a violation of the law against “graven images”. (Exodus 20:4)

The emperor’s likeness on the coin provided Jesus with an opportunity to put his questioners on the defensive. Pointing to the coin, Jesus asked them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” “The emperor’s,” they answered, whereupon he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:20-21) And they went away “amazed,” Matthew tells us.

If this strange tag-team of Pharisees and Herodians had hoped to entangle Jesus in his own words, they quickly became entangled in their own. The very fact that they would have Roman coinage on them earned them the name of “hypocrites” (Matthew 22:18). If they had hoped to force Jesus into a choice between alienating the crowds—who despised the heavy hand of Roman rule—or publicly proclaiming a treasonous point of view, they failed on both counts. In fact, they had to retreat quickly, lest the crowds ask them the same question!

The Pharisees, accustomed to splitting hairs, seemed to delight in devising questions to trick Jesus. The tax question is just one of a series recorded in Matthew. (Matthew 22:23-28, 34-39, and 41-45). The question may have been simply phrased, but it hid layers of intrigue and chicanery. Jesus’ reply to their contrived and tricky question, however, was a simple one—a simple answer, but also a clever one. Simplicity and ingenuity are not mutually exclusive.

Jesus' brief reply begs the question, however. He didn't really answer the question of paying taxes; he simply put the burden of choice on those who asked the question. Jesus eluded their trap by telling them, "Give to the state—Caesar—what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." It sounds like a one-liner—brief and ambiguous—though that has hardly kept generations of Christian thinkers and rulers from trying to base their doctrines of church and state on it.

Simple Answers, But Not Intelligent Ones

The relationship of God and Caesar—church and state—is a thorny issue, and while I prefer things simple, on this issue simplicity has not always served us well. In the first few centuries, Christians discovered a lot of conflicts between the claims of God and the claims of Caesar. The downside of that approach was that those who took the conflicts seriously were inevitably killed! A few centuries later the emperor Constantine imposed a simple solution on the problem. Somewhere in Constantine's imperial mind he got the idea that Christ had helped him kill and conquer some of his enemies. He was sufficiently grateful after a decisive victory that when he marched his victorious army home, he marched them not across a bridge, but right through the river that the bridge spanned! When they emerged on the opposite bank, he said to his troops: "You fellows have been baptized! Now you are all Christians. Now the empire is Christian." (October, 312)

And so, with one royal decision, the compelling power of example was replaced by the coercive power of politics. For Constantine, church equalled state, and state equalled church. A simple solution, though all it did was blur the differences between church and state, and led to some bizarre results. It wasn't long, for example, when being a Christian was required by those who served in Constantine's armed forces! Only those who claimed loyalty to the Prince of Peace were deemed fit to kill others! It was a simple approach, though not a very intelligent one, and through the centuries there were dissident voices among believers—our own among them—that begged to differ. We may be simple, but we're not stupid.

Stupidity notwithstanding, it wasn't until more than a millennium later that the Roman Empire came to an effective end and the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) brought Constantinian confusion to an end. Unfortunately, it replaced it with another simple solution by designating economic, social, and political questions the sole concern of the state, and spiritual and religious matters the sole duty of religion.

Westphalia replaced the power of example with the power of tidiness. Things were tidily separated into two distinct realms: one secular, and the other sacred—one realm ruled by the Prince of Darkness, and the other ruled by the Prince of Peace. It would be nice if things were that tidy, but it's a little like asking all of you who are parents to line up on my left, and all of you who are fathers to line up on my right. In the affairs of God and Caesar, church and state, there are some overlapping areas, some gray areas. No state is without its spiritual pretensions, and no Christianity worth its salt does not have social, political, and economic implications.

Ironically, the doctrine of the separation of church and state resulted in an inversion of what Matthew, or Jesus, for that matter, may have intended with his lesson of the Roman coin. As the domain of the state expanded, the domain over which we conceded God's sway shrank," until in the public mind political "godlets" loomed much larger than the One who is sovereign over all nations. Any modern social analysis places church

and faith as but two minor elements in the entire scheme of things, while any theological analysis places the state as but one minor element—and a transitory one at that—in the Divine scheme of things.

One could go on and on outlining the various nuances in the relationship of church and state—God and Caesar—but I wonder if simplicity might not serve us well again in looking at the encounter in Matthew 22. Perhaps Jesus was paying far less attention to the power of Caesar than we would like to think. Jesus told his prospective entrappers, “Give...to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:21) He may have been suggesting that we should have far less concern with what is Caesar’s than with what is God’s. It didn’t take a Ph.D. in Pharasaic Studies to know that all of life is a gift from God. Just as the little penny which bore Caesar’s image belongs to Caesar, so, using the same logic, Jesus is saying that all which bears God’s image and inscription is God’s. Thus, “what belongs to God” is none other than one’s entire self. The coin Jesus counsels giving to Caesar is pitifully insignificant in comparison to what one owes to God—one’s whole being!

The Powerful Imprint of Christ’s Image

When one commits one’s whole being to God, we are back to the simple but compelling power of example. Edmund Burke, who wrote very sophisticated philosophical works, said, however, “Example is the school of humankind, and they will learn at no other.” Albert Schweitzer, a learned man in several fields of endeavour, said, “Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing.”

Alexander White, one of Scotland’s greatest preachers, once noticed that a famous scientist was attending his services. White resolved that he would do all in his power to win this illustrious fellow to membership in the church, and so, for several weeks White preached sermons that would appeal to a scientific mind. Imagine the preacher’s delight when the scientist declared his intention to join the congregation.

White asked him what had convinced him that this was something he should do, hoping against hope that the distinguished new member would mention his sermons. Alas, the preacher was destined to eat a generous portion of the humble pie to which many of us have grown accustomed, for the man never mentioned his erudite sermons. Instead, he told how an elderly woman spoke to him on the steps of the church one Sunday, asking him, quite simply, “Are you a Christian?” He replied, “I am thinking about it.” “Oh,” she said “do come further in than that. Jesus means the world to me.” Reported this towering intellect, “As I looked at her radiant face with its shining eyes, I knew that she had a secret which I didn’t have, and I wanted it with all my heart.”

Someone has said, “A mediocre teacher tells, a good teacher explains, a superior teacher demonstrates, but the great teacher inspires.” When Benjamin Franklin wanted to install street lighting in Philadelphia, he knew the leaders of the city would balk at the expense. Instead of trying to persuade them, he simply hung a beautiful lantern in front of his own house. People carefully making their way along the streets at night would come out of the dark into the well-lit area in front of Franklin’s house and think, “What a great idea!” Soon others began placing lights in front of their homes, and before long the entire city awoke to the value of street lighting. Franklin had achieved what he wanted through example without a word being spoken.

I like things simple, and for that reason Jesus' use of the Roman coin is a simple image that appeals to me. With one great stroke of the coining press, the imprint on a coin is marked on the metal forever. The imprint is virtually indelible, and after that, one glance is sufficient—the imprint leaves no doubt as to the of the coin's origin, realm, and value. Just like a coin bears the imprint of its maker, so too we, as Christians, have been stamped with the likeness of Christ.

I heard of a Christian teacher who was employed in Japan—I don't know in what era—but he was hired on the understanding that he was not to utter a word about his faith or on the subject of Christianity. He agreed to it, honoured it, and never spoke a word about his faith. So attractive was his character and so shining his example, however, that forty of his students, unknown to him, met in a grove and signed a secret covenant to accept his faith. Twenty-five of them went on to Christian schools and became leaders in Japan's Christian community.

We have been stamped with the likeness of Christ. May it be our prayer that the imprint of Christ upon us is sufficiently deep that no one ever mistakes us for anything else.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.