

That Annoying Good Example

19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. 20 I have no one else like him who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. 21 For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. (Phil 2:19-22)

Mark Twain once remarked that there are few things more trying than the annoyance of a good example. I smile at that line because it touches too close to home. I came to faith the year before applying to law school and my first year was an eye-opening experience. The aggressive secular mindset that permeates modern legal education seemed intent on overwhelming my fledgling faith like a tidal wave crashing over a dingy paddling to the shore. During that year, I developed friendships with three Christian guys, all from the same undergraduate institution, the one my son subsequently attended. I grew to admire their mature faith. They were intellectually, emotionally, and socially honest and real people, struggling just as I was, but with a perspective that I tried to emulate and, sad to admit, came to envy. During that year, my governing attitude waxed and waned between learning from them and being annoyed with them. My better side thanked God for providing them as good examples as I struggled through a difficult period. But my friends' qualities set off another side to me. This side secretly picked at them, searched eagerly for their foibles, and pounced when it found them. And then I would recoil at my own delight and question the depths of the cancerous pride that drove such an ugly attitude.

In his day, I imagine that Timothy was an annoying good example. In the verses quoted above, Paul distills how this version of ministerial right stuff looked like in shoe leather. Timothy had a genuine, unselfish interest in the welfare of others (2:20). No one in Paul's inner circle shared so completely the apostle's deep concern for the Philippians as did Timothy. He was one in heart and soul with the apostle when it came to the ministry.

Timothy's character was proven (2:22). He was not after attention and strokes but served as a bondservant alongside his mentor. He did what was needed and proved himself dependable in the practical details of ministry. He learned patient obedience at a youthful age, grew into the responsibilities God gave him, and proved himself faithful to the end. Tradition records that Timothy served ably and loyally as a pastor of pastors at Ephesus and died heroically in the persecution of the Emperor Domitian in the 90s AD.

My aspirant side respects this and yearns to imitate it. It wants to be a devoted disciple and take on the good traits that Timothy exhibited so well. If the example comes from the Bible or another age, I am okay with that. However, a good example being nearby is a different matter. Another side of me views modern-day Timothys as vexing. The Bible honestly records Timothy's flaws: he was timid (2 Tim 1:7), wet behind the ears (1 Tim 4:12), and frail and sickly (1 Tim 5:23). My other side yearns to go to work on his modern successors and find the dirt. Rest assured it will discover their foibles and supplement its initial findings regularly.

The Word challenges me here! What will I do with the annoying good example? Struggling with the two attitudes in me that the good example arouses, I stand at a crossroads: one-way is the pathway to quality Christian fellowship, the other the highway of relational charades. Will I take the high road, focus on others' positive traits, encourage them in these, and exhort myself with them as well? This spirit will yield the kind of body-life God intended. Or will I pander my pride, dig for (or listen to) dirt on others, take secret delight in finding it (or worse yet, passing it along in gossip), excuse my spiritual slovenliness by other people's real or imagined flaws, and even see myself superior because of this sorry scenario?

My son was recently invited to a prospective students' gathering at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Annoying Good Example # 1 from my law school days. It is a small world! God is so good and patient with me. When I do not get things right the first time around, He supplies supplemental lessons. In re-acquaintance, I can enjoy my old friends in a fellowship untainted by my small-minded pettiness. Father, teach me to aspire, and then train me to live up to the better instincts You supply.