

7. Examples

Since God reigns (Isa. 52:7), we are concerned with the examples God provides in His revelation. When we build something, we often look at patterns or models. We like to see examples of what something should look like. Examples give us a model or picture, showing us what God likes or doesn't like. In our efforts to be conformed to the image of Christ, we need to pay special attention to the Exemplar, Jesus Christ, and to what He authorizes through His chosen apostles (see 1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17). While much can be said about the nature of examples, let's consider some basic principles and check our attitudes about examples.

Basics on Examples

Some ask, "When is an example binding?" That may be the wrong question to start with. Let's ask, "What is God intending to show us?" Instead of a list of "rules," let's think about these principles:

Without any indication from God (general or specific), we should not presume to know God's will. His silence is not an open invitation to do whatever we wish. A positive example shows that God approves of something; He is not silent. He has shown what He likes and we should try to follow it if possible. The fact that He has shown us something means that we may then act in that same way, insofar as we are able, with God's approval. However, if there is no further information given about that issue, then we should act based on what He has shown rather than what He has not shown. The question is, what does the example show us to do or not do?

Examples illustrate how we may act with God's approval, and those examples give us freedom to so act. For instance, God shows approval, through an example, of His disciples coming together on the first day of the week to partake of the Lord's supper (Acts 20:7). By following this example, we can know God is pleased. In this way, God shows us what He wants by giving examples of how to please Him. How do we know we are on the right track here? First, because the Lord tells us that we are to consider what the apostles show us through their examples (Phil. 3:17; 4:9). Second, if the apostles were acting upon the authority of God, then what they do by God's approval is significant. They spoke by God's authority, and we are told to listen to them as we would Christ (John 13:20; John 16:13; Gal. 4:14; 1 Cor. 14:37).

We may not have all recorded statements of what God said, but when an action was done with God's approval through the apostles, then God already authorized it. They weren't just making things up as they go. When we imitate what we are shown, we know we are acting upon God's

authority because positive examples illustrate actions that are permitted and desired by God.

Simplifying Examples

We are to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind (Mark 12:30). When we see examples of God's people doing what pleases Him, should we not desire to follow their examples? If we ask, "But is that example binding?" aren't we really asking, "Do we have to?" Wouldn't those who love God want to follow an example that God saw fit to show us? Let's ask instead, "What does this show us about what God desires?" By God's grace we have an example of something that He likes. The Scriptures aren't huge, so when an example shows God's approval, wouldn't those who love Him want to take special note? If we are able, and if our circumstances are comparable, wouldn't we want to follow what God, in His grace, found important enough to include in His message?

Which God-pleasing example would we not want to follow? Is there a specific case of His disciples acting with His approval that we would look at and say, "No, we don't want to do that"? If we are able, and our situation is comparable, should we look at something that pleases Him, argue it is not necessary, then ignore it? What should be our attitude toward such examples?

Are there details in examples that are not necessary? We recognize, in normal communication, that not every detail is as significant as another. For instance, if I show someone how I want a task to be accomplished on a computer, and in the process of this I sit in a chair with my feet crossed, am I necessarily suggesting that the person I am showing must sit in the chair in the same position, or is the intended example focused on the computer task? As in all communication, we need common sense as we infer significance and discern between the purpose of the example and the incidental details in the telling of the event.

In Acts 20, when the disciples came together on the first day of the week to break bread (the Lord's Supper), was the focus of this on their meeting in an upper room, or is the intended focus on their meeting to break bread? Where they met is incidental. What they met for is integral, and we need to see that difference. We need common sense, keeping passages in context and recognizing the difference between an incidental of telling what happened and core issues that led to the disciples acting as they did in the first place. Are we capable of drawing reasonable conclusions about these? We do that in our normal communication. Are we not capable here?

God chose to include examples of His people acting for a reason. Those who love Him ought to look at those examples and, as much as within their abilities, and where the circumstances compare, follow them. Why ask, "Do I have to?" (i.e., "Is it binding?") When God has, in His

wisdom, provided a look into the actions that He likes, those who love Him should want to do the same. That's a foundational starting point from which the particular examples can be examined. From there we can consider how comparable the examples are to our circumstances. If our circumstances are not very comparable (e.g., specific issues with miraculous gifts), then we may have little application to make of that specific case. No example can be followed when there is no comparable situation to which we can apply it. If it is comparable, then in what ways? What is the context of the example and how does it fit with our context? Is it an example of individual or group action? What is the core issue of the example? What are the incidentals? What shall we take away from it? How may we apply it? These are the types of questions we want to consider.

Acts 20:7 as an Example

The disciples gathered together on the first day of the week in order to “break bread.” This shows both timing and purpose, and context implies more than just a common meal intended. Acts 2:42 shows that disciples “were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” This was not just an ordinary meal or secular gathering.

Elsewhere Paul refers to the Lord’s Supper in this way: “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Partaking of the “one bread” and “the bread which we break” refer to the sharing in the body of Christ in this special meal. We know that God desires for Christians to partake of the Lord’s Supper, since the Lord commanded it (Matt. 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Both biblically and historically, we know that disciples met on the first day of the week for this purpose. Paul and his company stayed seven days at Troas in order to do this (cf. also Acts 21:4; 28:14). That the first day of the week was the common meeting day is seen also in passages like 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, where the instructions presuppose that they met on this day regularly. The first day of the week makes sense since it was both the day that Christ rose from the dead and the day of Pentecost on which the Holy Spirit came with power in order to usher in the new era of the church. Acts 2:42 implies that they began breaking bread in this way on that Pentecost, and continued regularly doing so. “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

We see “first day of the week” significance in both what we are told and shown. We know nothing of other days that disciples met to partake of the Lord’s Supper because we have no other information given to us about it. Jesus gave instructions on the Passover, but He said He would later partake of it in His kingdom, which takes us again to the day of Pentecost. The only example

we have when disciples came together to take the Lord's Supper is on the first day of the week. This is what God shows us, and this is what the Christians, with God's approval, did in the first century. Can we agree on this and practice it? Should we do more than that?

Conclusion

Examples are an important part of Scripture. Through them, God shows us what He likes or doesn't like. If we are able, and if our circumstances are comparable, then we ought to follow these examples. Further, we ought to act based upon what we know from what we are told and shown, not on what we don't know due to what God hasn't revealed. Loving God, will we choose to act on what we see God showing us and teach others the same?

Discussion Questions

1. Why is a pattern significant when we want to know how to do something?
 2. How do examples illustrate what God likes or doesn't like?
 3. Why is asking, "Is that example binding?" probably not the best question to ask as a starting point? What kind of attitude might that reveal?
 4. How can we know that God is pleased when we follow particular examples in Scripture?
 5. What should our starting attitude be as we consider any given example, and why?
 6. Why is it important to consider whether the context of an example is comparable to our circumstances today?
 7. Why is an example, like the one found in Acts 20:7, important to us now?
 8. What indicators do we have that the first day of the week is a day God wants disciples meeting?
-

3. The Example of Jesus

For a time, the question many were asking is, “What would Jesus do?” This can be an important question, if we recognize what Jesus did, in fact, do.

How does the example of Jesus help us understand the importance of following God’s authority? “Your God reigns” is, again, one of the basic messages of the kingdom of God (Isa. 52:7). Christians need to know the foundation on which they are building their spiritual lives. This foundation is grounded in God Himself. Jesus is our king, and the Holy Spirit has given us an inspired message to follow. The message is more than just words on a printed page. The message—the word—is living and active, sharp and piercing, judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12). Jesus, as the Word (John 1:1), provides for us a living example to follow in His steps. If we will understand biblical authority, then we need to be dedicated to Jesus and His example.

Following the Example of Jesus

In calling ourselves disciples of Christ, we are saying that we will follow Jesus. If the pattern of Jesus was to ensure His pleasing God in all things, then what should we do? Since Jesus is our example, then we need to ask a fundamental question: what was Jesus’ attitude toward Scripture? Should we not, as His disciples, seek to have the same attitude toward Scripture that He showed?

Jesus’ attitude is seen when, in His response to the temptations, He stated, “It is written...” (Luke 4; Matt. 4). In response to the first, he quoted from Deuteronomy 8: “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” Moses had recounted Israel’s time in the wilderness, where the test was whether or not they would keep God’s commandments. They failed, but Jesus succeeded. Note here that there is complete recognition on Jesus’ part that God’s word must be the determining factor in following God. Man lives on what God says. If we care about eternal life, we will care deeply about God’s word.

Further, Jesus taught, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (John 6:63). The situation prompted Peter to say, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life” (vs. 68). Jesus saw that what was “written” as God’s word had the authority of God stamped on it. He viewed the Scriptures as having God’s authority. What Scripture says, God says. Do we follow Him in this attitude?

The next question is as important: what was Jesus' attitude toward respecting God's commands? That Jesus never sinned (Heb. 4:15-16; 2 Cor. 5:21) and never took the liberty to do whatever He wanted apart from the Father's will speaks volumes. He said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work" (John 4:34). He also stated, "As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 5:30). Since Jesus dedicated Himself completely to do God's will, and never took on His own initiative apart from the Father's will, then should we not seek to follow His example in this? If we are self-seeking, we are not following Christ. Breaching God's authority is a result of not seeking His will before ours, and of taking our own initiative apart from what God has revealed. In doing this, we are not following the example of Jesus, and therefore are not acting as His disciples.

Jesus never distinguished between His authority and the authority of written Scripture. To follow Jesus is to listen to His word (see John 12:48; Heb. 1:1-3). What will true disciples of Christ seek to do (John 8:31)? What kind of attitude toward Scripture and God's commands will they seek to have (1 Pet. 5:5; Jas. 4:6-8; Phil. 2:5)?

Whose Will am I Seeking?

Everyone listens to some authority, whether self-generated or from others. Rejection of authority isn't rejection of all authority whatsoever; it is trading one authority for another, and trading one pattern for another. This is why we need constant reminding that the essence of the gospel is to proclaim, "Your God reigns!" (Isa. 52:7) This is the foundation for the announcement of peace, good news of happiness, and salvation. Christ is King.

The kingdom is about God's rule. It is about His will being done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). This is at the heart of authority. To say that we don't need authority is to say that we don't really need the rule of the King. To emphasize the kingdom is to emphasize that God rules and has all authority. We cannot preach the kingdom and not preach the rule of the King. Further, God's authority and God's will are inseparable. To say, "Not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39), is to bow to His authority. Again, if this was Jesus' attitude on earth, how much more should it be ours—we who are not God and do not have any inherent authority on our own? If God's will is important to us at all, then we want to know how He communicates that will to us.

Knowing God's will is vital, particularly since our attitude should be to please God in all that we do. Read carefully the following passages with these two questions in mind: 1) What is the common idea in these passages?, and 2) How do these passages inform us about the kind of attitude we ought to have toward God's will?

- “Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work’” (John 4:34).
- “I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 5:30).
- “And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him” (John 8:29).
- “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord, ’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter” (Matt. 7:21).
- “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Heb. 11:6).
- “...and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:8).
- “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please” (Gal. 5:17).
- “Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him” (2 Cor. 5:9).
- “No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier” (2 Tim. 2:4).
- “So that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects” (Col. 1:10).
- “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve” (Col. 3:23-24).

Think again about the message of these passages, for they give us one of the keys to understanding authority issues. The question is simply this: am I wanting to do God’s will or my own? Authority issues are about attitudes. Are we trying to please ourselves or God? Are we enthroning ourselves as kings or do we submit to His rule as King? If I deny self, then it will never be about what I want, what feels good to me, what sounds good to me, or what satisfies me in the

area of good works. It will be about what God wants as expressed by Him in His revelation. If that's not what it's about, then I haven't denied myself. I have merely used God's name as a rubber stamp upon my will.

When confronted with a question about authority and practice, is our reaction to think something like, "I would never accept that," or "There's no way I would believe that," or "But it's what I want to do anyway," instead of asking, "What does the Lord desire?" If so, then we are showing that we think our will is more important than God's. We must not decide practice and belief based on our desires. Instead, we must be ready to accept the Lord's will, no matter how disagreeable or different it may be from our will. Perhaps one of the reasons we struggle so much with God's authority is that we don't like to be told what to do. Even in admitting to God's authority, if we aren't careful, we may still be doing what we want under the guise of calling it God's will. Self-will can be quite deceptive that way. Yet God's authority is all-encompassing. We either accept it in humility, regardless of the consequences for our desires, or we forego it in favor of our desires. Commitment to Jesus Christ is, necessarily, a commitment to His authority wherein we seek His will and not our own.

Conclusion

Are we seeking to follow the example of Jesus in His respect for Scripture? Are we seeking God's will or ours? When we answer these questions, we will know a great deal about our view of biblical discipleship. How are we doing in following the example and will of Jesus Christ?

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to be disciples of Jesus?
2. How should discipleship be shown in our approach to Scripture?
3. How did Jesus respond to His temptations, and why is this important for understanding His view of Scripture?
4. How is the word of God tied to eternal life?
5. Why should we keep "Your God reigns" before us as we think about authority?
6. How does pleasing God contrast with being "in the flesh" in the cited passages?

7. In what ways are authority issues about attitudes?

8. Why do we sometimes struggle with authority?