

Introduction

In this book, we are going to consider some character examples of individuals we can read about in the New Testament.

Usually when we consider examples like this, we focus on some “great” Christians – men like Peter, Paul, John, and others. We certainly have much to learn from men like these who were leaders and diligent workers in the early church. Lessons about their character and example are important for us today.

Yet do we sometimes feel “inferior” to these “great” Christians? After all, we were not personally selected by Jesus; nor have we spent a few years learning from the Lord in person, received a special commission to go into all the world as His ambassadors, or been directly guided by the Holy Spirit in order to perfect our remembering and teaching of God’s word. In those

ways, we are not like them; we are just “regular” Christians.

However, the New Testament does include examples of “regular” Christians – disciples like Dorcas, Tychicus, and Antipas – who were not apostles and in most cases would not be considered leaders in the church; yet what they did was significant. The Holy Spirit included them in the record of Scripture for a reason. They were “regular” Christians who serve as examples for “regular” Christians like us today.

We will be considering twelve examples in this series. These examples will fall into four categories:

- 1. Regular Christians who used their talents**

– In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), Jesus described three servants who were given a different number of “*talents*” to use for their master while he was away. These “*talents*” were sums of money that the servants were to manage and increase on their master’s behalf. As this parable is about the Lord’s kingdom, the application extends beyond just money management. For us, “*talents*” may be those things we possess that can be used in the Lord’s service – our abilities, time, opportunities, as well as our money or resources.

From the parable and the examples in the New Testament, we can see that we do not need to be a “five talent” Christian to be active in the Lord’s service; we simply need to use what we have to serve the Lord and continue to grow in these things.

2. **Regular Christians who encouraged their brethren** – Christians are expected to encourage one another – not occasionally, but consistently and regularly. *“Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin”* (Hebrews 3:12-13). As the Hebrew writer explained, this encouragement is to help us from falling away, keep us from developing an unbelieving heart, and prevent us from being hardened by sin. This can happen to any one of us; therefore, we all need to be encouraging and be encouraged. Each one of us has the ability to be an encouragement to others. We can see this in the examples we will notice in this series. We need to look for ways that we can be an encouragement to our brethren as we strive to reach our goal.

3. **Regular Christians who endured hardship**
– When Paul and Barnabas returned to the churches where they had labored previously, they were *“strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God’”* (Acts 14:22). We will go through *“many tribulations”* in our effort to reach our eternal reward. Like the brethren whom Paul and Barnabas visited, we need to be strengthened in spirit, encouraged to continue, and always remain faithful. While it is important for brethren to encourage one another (previous point), this is about what we must do ourselves. The tribulations we go through are meant to discourage us and distract us from continuing to serve the Lord. Yet we must remain faithful and endure these hardships. In the Scriptures, we can read of *“regular”* Christians who did this.
4. **Regular Christians who fell away** – Paul warned the brethren in Corinth: *“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall”* (1 Corinthians 10:12). In that context, he used the example of the Israelites and explained to the brethren that God chose them and led them out of Egypt (1

Corinthians 10:1-4); yet they disobeyed God and were punished (1 Corinthians 10:5-10). He wrote, *“Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction”* (1 Corinthians 10:11). It is possible for us to begin serving the Lord, then fall away. There are examples of Christians in the first century who did this. We must learn from their examples.

I hope this series of lessons will be helpful to all of us “regular” Christians as we strive to faithfully serve the Lord.

1

Dorcas

Dorcas was one who used her abilities to help others. However, we are not introduced to her in the Scriptures until after she passed away.

“Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated in Greek is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, ‘Do not delay in coming to us.’ So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments

that Dorcas used to make while she was with them. But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, 'Tabitha, arise.' And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive" (Acts 9:36-41).

When Peter arrived to the place where Dorcas' body had been laid, he was shown the garments that she had made while she was alive (Acts 9:39). Luke noted that it was the widows who did this, suggesting that she may have been making these garments for them. Regardless of who received these garments from Dorcas, the text implies that she made these for others as part of the "*deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did*" (Acts 9:36). This was how she was remembered, indicating that it was something that she did *consistently*.

This description of Dorcas is reminiscent of the virtuous woman from the book of Proverbs. That woman was described as one who "*looks for wool and flax and works with her hands in delight*" (Proverbs 31:13). "*She makes coverings for herself*" and "*makes linen garments*" (Proverbs 31:22, 24), all while "*[extending] her hand to the poor*" and "*[stretching] out her hands to the needy*" (Proverbs 31:20). Dorcas was like this; she was

busy making clothing while being engaged in good deeds to help those in need around her.

When it comes to helping others, we often think of *money* – especially giving money to the needy. This is certainly one way to offer assistance (cf. Acts 3:1-5). However, there are other ways we can help. The following are a few examples:

- Like Dorcas, we may be able to make clothes. Though this skill is not as common today as it was during Bible times, it can still be done and the garments produced can be a real help to those who receive them. But besides clothes, nearly anything that can be made with our hands could be used to help someone in need.
- Perhaps we can cook and are able to provide a meal to someone who is sick, caring for a loved one, mourning a family member's passing, or facing financial hardship.
- Maybe we have the ability to watch someone's children while they care for a sick family member or have to work extra hours to get through a period of financial hardship. People in our society regularly pay for child care and babysitters. To be able to do this at no cost for someone who does not have the means to pay for it is an enormous help,

especially when the help is coming from brothers and sisters in Christ.

- Some have the skills, tools, and knowledge to be able to make repairs around the house or to a vehicle. This ability can be used to help others as well when they are not able to make necessary repairs themselves and would have difficulty paying a professional to do it.

The list above is certainly not exhaustive. We need to ask ourselves: What are we, as individuals, able to do? What are we good at? Each of us have abilities that we can use to help others. Some abilities are more obviously helpful than others; but if we look for ways we can help, we will find opportunities to use these skills that we have for good.

Dorcas had a talent for making clothes. We do not know if she was more skilled at this than everyone else because the Scriptures do not tell us that. Yet whether she was the most skilled or not is irrelevant. We do not need to look for what we can do *better* than everyone else; we just need to look for what we can do and then use those abilities to do good to those around us.

Questions on Lesson 1: Dorcas

1. How did the disciples remember Dorcas after she passed away?
2. What parallels exist between Dorcas and the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31?
3. Besides providing financial assistance, what are some ways in which we may be able to provide help to others?
4. Should we limit our help to those areas in which we feel especially gifted? Why or why not?

2

Philemon

Philemon was one who used his possessions to help others. We can read about this man in the short letter written to him by the apostle Paul.

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker...and to the church in your house” (Philemon 1-2).

“At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you” (Philemon 22).

Philemon was a wealthy Christian living in the area of Colossae/Laodicea. We know at least one slave who belonged to him – Onesimus – as the letter was written to explain how Paul converted Onesimus and was now

sending him back to Philemon.¹ Paul began the letter by acknowledging the fact that Philemon was not only able but was also willing to host the local church in his house (Philemon 2) – a common practice in the first century. He also anticipated Philemon’s willingness to extend hospitality to Paul while he was traveling and provide for him a place to stay. In fact, as we think about Philemon using his possessions, we can even include Paul’s expectation that Philemon would be willing to send his servant Onesimus back to the apostle so that he might “*minister to [him] in [his] imprisonment for the gospel*” (Philemon 13). All of this demonstrated Philemon’s willingness to use what he possessed to help others.

This is what Paul said the rich were to do. He told Timothy, “*Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share*” (1 Timothy 6:17-18). While we may not think of ourselves as being rich,

¹ It might seem strange to us that a Christian would have slaves in the first century. However, we should not immediately equate this with the abhorrent practice of slavery in this country’s history. The New Testament even contains instructions to masters to treat their slaves well (Ephesians 6:9). Considering how Paul held Philemon in such high esteem, we can safely conclude that he was a master who would “*grant to [his] slaves justice and fairness, knowing that [he] too [had] a Master in heaven*” (Colossians 4:1).

most of us are rich compared with the majority of people who live throughout the world. Therefore, this instruction is for us as well. Having a willingness to share as Paul described is only possible when we put our hope and trust in God more than in our possessions.

There are different ways in which we can use our money or possessions to help others or to do good. Consider the following:

- We can provide hospitality – *“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it”* (Hebrews 13:2). This is what Paul expected of Philemon. Christians are to be willing to use their possessions – especially their homes in this case – to be hospitable (Romans 12:13).
- We can give to the needy – *“He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need”* (Ephesians 4:28). While it is good and necessary to work to provide for ourselves and our families (2 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:8), Paul explained that we should also be working so that we will have something to give to someone in need.

- We can save for the future – *“A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children, and the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous”* (Proverbs 13:22). Paul also talked about this idea, but described it as parents saving up for their children (2 Corinthians 12:14). The point is that there is a real benefit in saving for the future – not just for ourselves, but for others as well.
- We can give to the church – *“On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come”* (1 Corinthians 16:2). One of the responsibilities that Christians have is to give to the church of which they are members. Since this is done *“according to what a person has”* (2 Corinthians 8:12), those who are wealthier will generally be able to give more.
- We can support those who preach – *“The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him”* (Galatians 6:6). We typically think of this as a work of churches (2 Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 4:15-16), yet this passage shows that individuals with the means to do so can help support those who preach the gospel.

Since God *“richly supplies us with all things to enjoy,”* we are to be *“rich in good works...generous and ready to*

share" (1 Timothy 6:17-18). We should be mindful of the blessings we have received from the Lord and be looking for ways in which we can use these blessings to help others.

Philemon was a wealthy man, but we do not see any indication that he was guilty of having "*the love of money*" (1 Timothy 6:10) or that he tried to "*serve God and wealth*" (Matthew 6:24). Instead, he was willing to use what he had to help others. However much or little we have compared with those around us, we can find ways to use our possessions to help others; but we must be willing to do so.

Questions on Lesson 2: Philemon

1. What can we know about Philemon based upon his relationship with Onesimus?
2. What did Paul tell Timothy to instruct the rich to do?
3. What are some ways in which we can use wealth to help others?
4. How wealthy do we need to be before we can provide financial help to others?

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