

Impersonating the Savior

Grey Matters – Part VIII

Romans 15:1-3 & 8

Introduction

Forbes Magazine recently reported, “It’s no secret that Tiger Woods is a marketer’s dream.”

Tiger has been able to successfully create a household awareness of the Nike brand.ⁱ

More than likely, if you see a picture of this golf professional, or watch Tiger play in a televised match, he will be wearing a hat with the Nike symbol on it – and a shirt, and shoes, and gloves – and his golf bag and golf balls will also bear the brand.

Nike could not be happier. In fact, they are so happy about this that they are willing to pay Woods an estimated 105 million dollars just to wear their brand.

I would be willing to wear their stuff for half that amount, wouldn’t you?!

The strategy behind a brand is to find some way to make the product or service memorable, identifiable.

So a cow, standing on its hind legs, has captured the imagination of millions of people, as it holds a placard with a message, begging the public to “eat more” – what? – “chicken”. Since they launched what they call the “cow-campaign,” its brand awareness has grown to 81 percent and Chick-fil-A sales have gone from 500 million to 1.7 billion – thanks to a cow.

Five years ago, hardly any of us would have known what AFLAC was. Then, their marketing agency had the courage to tell corporate headquarters that their company name sounded like a duck.

AFLAC’s CEO told the agency, “I don’t care what you do, as long as you get people to know the name of this company.”ⁱⁱ

The *Wall Street Journal* article went on to report that this once obscure company is now a household name, and business is booming – thanks to the duck.

In advertising agencies, this is called the power of the brand. Something or someone, representing a product or service, identifies the public with that product or service. As a result, when people see that person, symbol, animal, or sign, or hear that song or sound, they immediately think of the product.

Who would imagine – when people see that cow, they think of chicken; when people hear that duck, they think of insurance?!

The trouble comes when our actions do not reflect the product we are supposed to represent.

The Boston Globe ran a brief piece of ironic humor when it reported on the annual meeting of The American Heart Association – now joined by 300,000 doctors, nurses, and researchers. Many of these professionals attended the annual meeting in Atlanta to discuss one of the key issues, which was fat-filled fast food. This includes such foods as: bacon cheeseburgers, double quarter-pounders, and super sized French fries. In other words, it includes all of the stuff you will eat for lunch today.

I am being paid by McDonald’s to say that!

When one cardiologist was interviewed about where he had been eating lunch during the convention – which happened to be fast food – and asked if he was setting a bad example, he responded,

“Not really . . . I made sure I took off my name tag before I went in.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Tiger Woods is considered to be, from head to toe, a Nike man. From head to toe, he sells for the kingdom of Nike – and the richest endorsement deal in sports history is on the line.

The apostle Paul has told believers that we are to be, in a very real sense, advertisements for the kingdom of God.

We also are to be clothed, Paul wrote to the Colossians,

. . . as those who have been chosen of God, . . . put on . . . compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; (Colossians 3:12)

He wrote to Titus that we are to robe our lives as we,

. . . adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect. . . . [which instructs] us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly . . . (Titus 2:10 & 12)

Paul also instructed that we are to, as if it were clothing,

. . . put on the new self . . . in holiness of the truth. (Ephesians 4:24)

These are the brands of the kingdom of heaven.

How valuable are we as the advertising agency of heaven? How well do we wear the brand of the Beloved?

F. B. Meyer wrote, over a hundred years ago, *We ought to be Christians in large type [or font] so that it is not necessary for others to have to use their spectacles in order to detect our character . . . the message of our lives should resemble the big advertisements which can be easily read on the billboards by all who pass by.*^{iv}

Paul Gilbert put this challenge into poetry when he wrote,

*You are writing a gospel,
A chapter each day,
By the deeds that you do,
By the words that you say;
Men read what you write,
Whether faithless or true,
Say – what is the gospel according to you?*^v

One of the best ways to reveal the gospel is to reveal the character of God.

In Romans chapter 13, Paul challenged the believer to,

. . . put on the Lord Jesus Christ . . . (Romans 13:14)

We are to wear the identifiable brand of His character.

How do we do that?

One of the best ways to advertise for Jesus Christ is to follow John’s instruction in his third letter, where he wrote,

Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. . . . (III John 11a)

Do not copy evil; do not impersonate evil people, but good.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

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

He even went so far as to write to the Ephesians, in chapter 5, verse 1,

Therefore be imitators of God . . .

Imagine that – be imitators of Paul . . . be imitators of Christ – which means you are actually imitating God. In other words,

- if you want to represent the kingdom, imitate the King;
- if you want to advertise for the glory of God, wear the brand of godly behavior;
- if you want to promote the excellencies of Christ, develop the character of Christ.

Even though impersonating our Lord is something we will never perfect, it is our pursuit.

If there is ever a difficult time to model Christ, it is in regard to treating another person right – even when you are convinced they are wrong.

Within this context, how are we to act like Christ; how are we to imitate Christ; what are the brands of the beloved?

Before we dive into Romans chapter 15, I want you to know that even though we have begun a new chapter, the context is still regarding grey matters. Thus far, in regards to the treatment of one another, as well as to the determination of what is right or wrong in our own lives when the Bible is unclear or inconclusive, we have discovered:

- the principle of protection;

- the principle of reputation;
- the principle of edification;
- the principle of consideration.

Today, we will discover the principle of imitation.

The Principle of Imitation

At least four qualities of Christ's character will surface for us to imitate, as we study the principle of imitation in Romans 15 today. Let us take a look at these.

1. First, we are to imitate the quality of supportiveness.

Look at Romans 15:1a.

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength . . .

Circle the word "ought" in your text. This is not a suggestion – it is an indication of what truly strong believers do.

In other words, "We who are mature in our faith – what we *ought* to do is bear the weaker ones along."

Ray Stedman writes, in regard to the stronger believer helping the weaker believer along, without forcing opinions or changes upon them that they are not ready to assimilate, the following:

We can compare this to crossing a swinging bridge over a mountain stream. Some people can run across a bridge like that even though it does not have any handrails. They are not concerned about the swaying of the bridge, or the danger of falling into the torrent below. But others are very uncertain on such a bridge. They shake and tremble; they inch along. They may even get down on their hands and knees and crawl across the bridge. [Bear with them]. It is like that with these moral questions of [grey areas]. It would be cruel for someone who had the freedom to cross boldly to take the arm of someone who was timid and force him to run across. He might even lose his balance and fall off the bridge.^{vi}

So, bearing one another's burdens is another way of saying "bearing with them".

The word "bear" or "βασταζω" means, "to carry; to endure".

This is more than saying, "Wow, that weaker brother sure has a problem," or, "Ha! Get a load of that weaker brother."

This is saying, "How can I help my weaker brother along?"

This is what the strong believer ought to do. And in so doing, they will exercise true maturity in Christian liberty.

A lady in our church came up to me last Sunday and said, "Do you know what I've memorized about this issue of Christian liberty and freedom?"

I said, "No, what?"

She said this, which I asked her to email to me, *Freedom is not the liberty to do what you want, but the liberty to do what you ought. And it is true freedom when what you want to do is what you ought to do.*

Paul said as much to the Galatians when he wrote,

Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2)

In other words, "Bear one another's burdens and impersonate the Savior!"

Watch the Savior:

- patiently instruct Peter after he stumbles and falls;
- carefully instruct James and John after their ambitious hearts are revealed;
- condescend to Thomas when he doubted;
- even with Judas at the table – if you take note of the timing of events, you discover that Judas was seated at the table with his thirty pieces of silver in his pouch – Jesus still called him "friend."^{vii}
- in His words from the cross, . . . ***Father, forgive them . . . (Luke 23:34)***

The tense of the verb indicates that Jesus Christ uttered these words, not once, but over and over and over again – "Father, forgive them . . . Father, forgive them . . . Father, forgive them . . .".

- after His resurrection as He enters the upper room and says His first words to His faithless and weak disciples, which were not some well deserved rebuke, but, to their shock I am sure, were the words,

... *Peace be with you. (John 20:19)*

Do you want to impersonate the Savior? Do you want to be a walking advertisement for the kingdom of heaven? Imitate this quality of supportiveness.

This is just the beginning. Imitate not only the quality of supportiveness, but let me give a second quality to imitate.

2. Secondly, we are to imitate the quality of selflessness.

Notice Romans 15:1b-2.

... and not just please ourselves. Each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.

Do you know the lyrics to this song?

Oh what a beautiful morning,

Oh what a beautiful day,

I've got a beautiful feeling,

Everything's going . . . my way.

This is our kind of song, isn't it?! It is a beautiful day – because it is going my way.

I received this email from a number of people over the last several months. You may have gotten the same email.

An elderly man in Phoenix called his son in New York and said, "I hate to ruin your day, but I have to tell you that your mother and I are splitting up. It's been 45 years and we're through."

"Pop, what are you talking about?" his son asked. He could not believe it!

His father said, "It's true, we're sick of each other, and I'm sick of talking about it, so you can call your sister in Chicago and tell her. Talk to you later."

Frantic, the son called his sister who just erupted on the phone, "There's no way this is going to happen . . . I'll take care of this!"

She called Phoenix immediately, and shouted, "You are not doing anything until I get there. I'm calling my brother back, and we'll both be there tomorrow. Until then, don't do a thing!"

The old man hung up the phone and turned to his wife with a grin, "Okay, they'll be here tomorrow for Thanksgiving and they're buying their own tickets. Now, what are we going to do about Christmas?"

Can't you just hear this guy singing, "... Oh what a beautiful day . . . Everything's going my way . . ."

I am sure someone made that story up.

You might circle one word that appears three times in these verses – it is the word "please".

In the original language, "please" translates the verb "aresko (ἀρεσκω)," which means, "to render service to; to endeavor to please someone else instead of yourself".^{viiiix}

Notice the word appears again in Romans 15:3a.

For even Christ did not please Himself . . .

Paul wrote to the Philippians the stunning description of Christ's selfless determination to come to this planet.

... although He existed in the form of God [the very nature of God], did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped [hung on to], but emptied Himself [literally, emptied His hands of divine rights and privileges] . . . (Philippians 2:6-7a)

Do you think Jesus Christ pleased Himself when He came into this world? He was born of a peasant couple who barely eked out an existence in carpentry. It is as if the Triune God held a meeting and made sure they did everything possible to prove that Christ's coming was in no way pleasant, much less pleasing to Himself.

Christ was born in a dug out cavern, surrounded by the stench of a barnyard. He was born without the help of a physician or a midwife; born to an unwed girl who would never live down the accusation of immorality. He was born to an adopted father, who, as one early church leader said, was a maker of wooden plows.

The only peak behind the curtain was an angelic chorus who alerted the shepherds of His birth. These shepherds then came to testify, ironically so, for they were in a profession considered unclean by the Jewish leaders and were unable to testify in a Jewish court.

All of this shouts – Jesus Christ did not please Himself!

While we might say we would like to be like Christ, none of us would ever say we would like to be born like that – and grow up like that – and endure that. The selfless Savior did.

If you would like to impersonate the Savior, imitate the quality of supportiveness and selflessness. Along that same line, let me give a closer look at another quality to imitate.

3. Thirdly, we are to imitate the quality of sacrifice.

Note Romans 15:3b.

... but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on Me."

This is fascinating! At this point, Paul drops in a quote from Psalm 69, one of the great Messianic Psalms; that is, a Psalm filled with prophetic statements that Christ will fulfill. Psalm 69 tells us:

- the King will be hated without just cause by His enemies (verse 4);
- He will be rejected by the literal biological sons of His mother (verse 8);
- He will experience the deepest agony any soul could endure – and with much weeping (verse 10);
- He will be made fun of by the people (verse 11);
- He will be criticized by the leaders (verse 12a);
- He will be the subject of perverse songs and mockery by His ungodly world (verse 12b).

Is this true? Did our Lord experience all of these reproaches?

- **Was Christ hated without just cause by His enemies?**

The very first time Christ opened His mouth to preach in a synagogue, the entire audience arose in rage and led Him out to throw Him off a cliff – He miraculously escaped.

Study the hatred of the people and leaders of Israel and it will defy all logic.

When Christ cast out demons, the leaders accused Him of being in league with the devil.

- **Was Christ rejected by the biological sons of His mother, as David wrote?**

We know from Mark's gospel that Mary and Joseph had at least six children, and maybe more. The names of four sons and the mention of two daughters are recorded in Mark 6:3.

We also know that Jesus' brothers thought He had lost His mind. John 7:5 records,

For not even His brothers were believing in Him.

- **Did David's prophecy come true that the King would experience the deepest agony**

any soul could endure – and with much weeping?

Who could doubt the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus underwent such agony of soul that the capillaries underneath His skin burst and His sweat was mixed with blood.

The tenses of the verbs in John's gospel indicate that Jesus did not just kneel and pray, but fell to His knees and prayed and then, got up and staggered and fell again to His knees and prayed, and repeated this over and over again.

No one has experienced agony of soul like Him.

- **Will He be made fun of by the people, as David sang in his 69th song in verse 11?**

There is no other person that I know of whose name has become a curse word. I have never heard anyone say, "Oh, Confucius . . . Oh, Mohammed . . . Well, Buddha."

- **Will Christ be criticized by the leaders of His nation?**

Without question.

- **Will the Lord become the subject of perverse songs and mockery by His ungodly world?**

The people mocked Christ, even as He was dying. No matter how much you might hate someone, can you imagine the depth of hatred that would mock and curse someone who was in the midst of dying a horrible death?

Luke recorded,

... And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself" . . . The soldiers also mocked Him, . . . saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." (Luke 23:35-37)

Why is there mockery of Christ? Why, to this day, are there movies, plays, songs, and comedians that love to make fun of Christ?

One of the best selling novels of our day, *The Da Vinci Code*, mocks the claim of Christ's deity by saying that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and raised a family in France. This claim neither true nor new. It is the repackaging of an old lie, drunk with arrogant pride that loves to mock the symbol of all that is Holy and pure.

I found it fascinating to read Donald Grey Barnhouse's commentary on this Romans text. He told of the Metropolitan Opera in New York City performing a ballet called, "The Sin of Jesus Christ".

One of the dancers, representing Jesus Christ, was on a cross, and Mary Magdalene danced sensuously before Him. An evil character portraying Satan danced with Mary until Jesus came down from the cross and wooed her back to Him and away from His rival. The reviews in the leading newspapers and magazines critiqued the music and the dancing, but there was not a word about the blasphemy of this production.

By the way, this was performed in 1959.^x

The world hated the Savior then, and it hates Him today.

Do you want to get angry and lash out at the world's blasphemy? Do we riot in the streets and take the lives of hostages for such blasphemy against our true and living Lord?

No, the world is blinded by the god of this world. Would you get angry at a blind man if he stepped on your foot?

The truth is, the hatred of Christ fulfills the prophecy of scripture.

Before Jesus ever touched the planet through human birth and form, He had already been named by the prophet Isaiah as a man of sorrows,

He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; . . . He was despised . . . oppressed . . . afflicted . . . a lamb that is led to slaughter . . . (Isaiah 53:3 & 7)

The willingness of Christ to please the Father, despite the misunderstanding, ridicule, slander, persecution, hatred, mockery, cruelty, brutality, and death, is only one more thing Paul is bringing before the strong, in Romans 15, who dare to be like Christ!

Is it any wonder that so few would ever say, "I will be willing to impersonate the Savior . . . I am willing to impersonate the Suffering Sacrifice."?

However, is that not what Paul has called us to, as he writes in Romans 12:1,

. . . I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice . . .

In other words, to say:

- I will share His grief . . .;
- I will respond to my sorrows like Him . . .;
- I will bear the slander and misunderstanding of others . . .;
- I will embrace the cross.

For those who will be the strong ones – bearing the burdens of the weak ones – striving for the unity of the body and the edification of the believer:

- imitate the quality of supportiveness;
- imitate the quality of selflessness;
- imitate the quality of sacrifice.

Let me give one final quality to imitate.

4. Fourthly, we are to imitate the quality of servant-hood.

Look at Romans 15:8a.

For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God . . .

We could expect Paul to write, "I say that Christ has become the sovereign to the Jews on behalf of the truth of God," or, "I say that Christ has become the Lord; the Master; the King who reigns . . .".

However, Paul writes, "I say that Christ has become the servant . . ."

What is really shocking to first century ears is Paul's connection of servant and Christ. Christ is the Messianic title of sovereignty – the Messiah comes to reign; to throw off oppressors and mount the throne of David.

Christ and servant are not connections, they are contradictions to the human mind and spirit.

Oh, but Christ came,

. . . taking the form of a bond-servant, . . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:7-8)

Do you want to impersonate the Savior? Sign up to play the servant.

You might say, "Well, I think I'm already there. I think I'm doing pretty well in the category, but how can you tell?"

You will not know be able to tell if you have a servant's spirit until someone treats you like one. Then you will know!

Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators, was visiting Taiwan on one of his overseas trips. During the visit, he hiked with a Taiwanese pastor back into one of the mountain villages to meet with some of the national Christians. The trails were wet and their shoes became caked with mud. Later, someone asked this Taiwanese pastor what he remembered most about Dawson Trotman. Without hesitation the man replied, "The morning after we arrived at the

village, I arose from bed to get dressed and discovered that the Christian leader from America had arisen before me and removed the mud from my boots . . . what I remember most about him is this – Dawson Trotman cleaned my shoes.^{xi}

Conclusion

Paul writes so clearly that none of us can miss it in Romans 15:1-3 and 8,

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.

Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.

For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on Me.”

For I say that Christ has become a servant . . .

This is the principle of imitation. It is so rare that if anyone practices it around you, you will more than likely never forget it!

This is the way to make your way through the fog of life – and help other Christians find their way too.

I recently read a story that I have tracked down and verified. It was actually first put into print a few years ago by a rabbi.

In Brooklyn, New York, Chush is a school that caters to learning disabled children. It was formally known as The Jewish Center for Special Education. Some children remain in this school for their entire school career, while others can be mainstreamed into conventional schools.

At a fund raising dinner for the school, the father of one of the mentally disabled children delivered a speech that would never be forgotten by all who attended. After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he cried out, “Where is the perfection in my son Shaya? Everything God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is the character of God?”

The audience was shocked by the question and pained by the father's anguish. “I believe,” the father answered, “that when God brings a child like this into the world, the character that He seeks is in the way people treat my child.”

He then told the following story. One afternoon, Shaya and his father walked past a park where some

boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, “Do you think they will let me play?”

Shaya's father knew that his son was not at all athletic and that most boys would not want him on their team. But Shaya's father understood that if his son was chosen to play, it would give him a comfortable sense of belonging.

Shaya's father approached one of the boys in the field and asked if Shaya could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said, “We are losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning.”

Shaya and his father were thrilled. Shaya was told to put on a glove and go out to play short center field. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs, but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again and now, with two outs and the bases loaded, with the potential winning run on base, Shaya was scheduled to be up. Would the team actually let Shaya bat at this juncture and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly, Shaya was given the bat. Everyone knew that it was all but impossible because Shaya did not even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it.

However, as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shaya should at least be able to make contact. The first pitch came in and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. One of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya, and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher waiting for the next pitch. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shaya. As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung at the bat and together, they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher.

The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shaya would have been out and that would have ended the game. Instead, the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field, far beyond the reach of the first baseman.

Everyone started yelling, “Shaya, run to first. Run to first.”

Never in his life had Shaya run to first. He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second

baseman who would tag out Shaya, who was still running. But the right fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions were, so he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head. Everyone yelled, "Run to second. Run to second."

Shaya ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases towards home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third."

As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya, run home."

Shaya ran home, stepped on home plate, and all eighteen boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero – as if he had just hit a "grand slam" and won the game for his team.

"That day," Shaya's father said softly with tears rolling down his face, "those boys revealed the character of God."^{xii}

No matter who the audience is, when a person impersonates the spirit of sacrifice and selflessness and supportiveness and servant-hood, no one ever forgets.

As far as the apostle Paul is concerned, there is no better way to make it through the fog of life than to surrender to this principle of imitation.

Impersonating the Savior is a way of saying with Paul,

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings . . . (Philippians 3:10a)

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/26/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ <http://www.Forbes.com>, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Suzanne Vranica, The Wall Street Journal (Dec. 2, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Boston Globe (Nov. 10, 1993).

^{iv} F. B. Meyer, "Our Daily Walk," Christianity Today vol. 33, no. 10.

^v Nelson's Complete Book of Stories (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 275.

^{vi} Woodrow Kroll, Romans: Righteousness in Christ (AMG Publishers, 2002), p. 224.

^{vii} John Phillips, Exploring Romans (Moody Press, 1969), p. 243.

^{viii} W. E. Vines, Expository Dictionary (Thomas Nelson, 1997), p. 860.

^{ix} Ralph Earle, Word Meanings (Baker, 1974), p. 211.

^x Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans: Volume 4 (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 40.

^{xi} Jerry Bridges, "Loving by Serving," Discipleship Journal, (May/June 1985).

^{xii} Rabbi Paysach Krohn, "God's Perfection," <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.