

A New Look at Heroism [author recorded]

(5 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. We Trivialize The Lives of Those We Admire

There seems to be a tendency when one is close to those who are considered great to copy the trivial details of their lives. It is said that Alexander the Great had one shoulder slightly higher than the other, and that he carried his head a bit to one side. Evidently, his generals began to tilt their heads to one side and carry one shoulder higher than the other. One piece of Islamic literature records that Muhammad ate watermelons, but no one knew whether or not he spat out the seeds or swallowed them. One scholar wrote that it was better not to eat watermelons at all in case you did the wrong thing with the seeds. I do not offer this as typical of Islam. It does, however, point to a broader human inclination to trivialize the lives of those we admire instead of letting them challenge us more deeply. The imitation of Christ as taught in the New Testament has nothing to do with this kind of imitation. [Page 143]

2. Imitate Jesus' Quality of Life

The focus of the imitation of Christ in the New Testament is that *we are to imitate Jesus' quality of life*. This is specifically described in the New Testament teaching that we are to imitate the heroic virtues we see in Jesus' life, like humility, love, willingness to suffer unjustly, forgiveness, courage, servanthood. Our motivation for following them is gratitude, having been forgiven and accepted by him when we did not deserve it. We are called not to imitate just anything in the life of Christ but to imitate the way he treated us. We are those for whom he suffered and was humiliated, whom he loved, forgave, and came to serve. [Page 143]

3. Christ Is a Unique and Revolutionary Hero

... if we imitate Christ truly as hero, he is also our brother by adoption. He has laid down his life for us. He also walks beside us through life, not as a remote hero on a faraway hill but as one who has promised to help us imitate him and to never abandon us even to the end of the earth. What a contrast to most modern heroes! Our top cast of public heroes don't know the names of the vast majority of those who adore them. How could they? Many want to know as few as possible of their fans and admirers, and as little as possible about those few. Think of the Rolling Stones in concert scorning the whole business by spitting on the screaming, adoring, hero-worshipping-and horrified-crowd. Think then of the contrast to Jesus Christ, who was willing to endure being spat on and scorned for the sake of those whom he had come to save (and being spat on was only the beginning). In Christ we have a unique and revolutionary hero. [Page 146]

4. True Humility

We see [true humility] illustrated in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). A younger son demanded his inheritance, left the country, and squandered it so completely that he was reduced to near starvation. He then changed his mind, returned, apologized to his father, and was welcomed home with great celebrations. His change of mind had everything to do with humility. What was his choice? He could have tried to keep up the self-deceiving illusion that he was both self-sufficient and innocent, hanging on to that mirage out of pride, and into the teeth of his own poverty and hunger. The other choice was to simply admit what he had done and ask forgiveness from the one he had wronged. Jesus described the choice not as self-flagellation, groveling, or cringing, but that he simply "came to himself." It is as if he finally woke up after a long sleep in the dreams of his vanity. [Page 154]

5. God Deals with Reputation, Success, etc.

If we seriously follow the God of the Bible, it means that we trust this God with the matter of our own glory. We must let God deal with our personal reputation, success, and heroic status. Our job is not to establish our own glory on earth, but it is to obey God, wherever that might lead. God is to be our primary audience. He will give true glory where it is due, but he has told us that the first will be last and the last first. That is to say, our human means of keeping score of success is likely to be badly skewed, even upside down.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of a Christlike person, "Often there is little to distinguish him from the rest. Nor does he attach importance to distinguishing himself, but only to distinguishing Christ for the sake of his brethren." [Page 161]