

Ordinary Men Used of God - the Power of the Gospel and Christian Friendships.

Our problem is that we tend to glamorize or make the men of biblical times greater than life. I don't know who to blame for this but it happens. The fact is that God has determined to use ordinary men. Remember last weeks lesson and our portion from 1 Corinthians?

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 1 Cor. 1:26, NIV

Ordinary men - not remarkable men - not men who had remarkable achievements before they met Jesus. Let's take a look at some men who fit this description who were used of God and see if we can be encouraged in our own Christian walk.

Mark, friend of Peter and cousin of Barnabas.

Mark was probably converted under the ministry of Peter. Peter calls him "my son" in his epistle (1 Peter 5:13). There is really nothing of special note about Mark except that the Holy Spirit enabled him to write one of the Gospels. Remarkable. Here is a man who *should* have been completely left out of historical note who was chosen to write one of the Gospels - through God's sovereignty and Mark's association with notable leaders in the church we know of this unremarkable man centuries later.

Association with other Christians count. The more we associate ourselves with other Christian folks the more we are built up in our relationship with the Lord. Friendships are important in our spiritual development. Jesus set the tone in the final hours of His earthly relationship with His disciples when He called them His friends.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. [14] Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. [15] Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. (NIV).

Mark's spiritual development seems to have been centered around this idea. During Peter's imprisonment, the disciples were meeting in Mark's mother's house and praying for Peter.¹ Peter, himself, figured it was all over for him when an angel appeared and led him out through the prison barricades to freedom. He thought he was dreaming. This amazing event must have had an indelible impression on Mark. It may be that after this, Mark and Peter became even more closely associated with each other.

Mark's account of Jesus' earthly ministry is the result of his close association with Peter. Mark became a point of disagreement between Barnabas and Paul. It seems that for whatever reason Mark left Barnabas and Paul on their only missionary trip and when Paul wanted to retrace their journey and see how the new believers were doing he balked at the idea of taking Mark along because of his departure (the original text has the

¹ Acts 12:1 - 17.

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sense of deserting the missionary team). Barnabas insisted on giving Mark a second chance but Paul dug his heels in and refused. The result was that the team that was appointed by the Holy Spirit broke up and Paul chose Silas for his next missions trip and Barnabas, the encourager, took his cousin Mark and sailed to Cyprus.² I think it is important to make this point. In spite of apparent shortcomings - Paul's obstinance - Mark's lack of fortitude - God used these men for the spreading of the Gospel. This should be an encouragement for us "ordinary" folks who have our shortcomings and do not lead remarkable lives in the sense of great missionary adventures - rather, we spend our lives in a very uneventful way apparently not involved in any great spiritual enterprise - God can use our ordinary lives in quite extraordinary ways for Him.

Timothy, Paul's Son in the Lord.

The very first mention of Timothy was that he was a disciple of Christ.³ Timothy was thrust into Christian service much more so than Mark. He was from a mixed marriage in that his mother was a Jewess - a believer and his father was a Greek - an unbeliever. This was a common situation in the early church. Sometimes this was a very disruptive situation in Christian homes as recorded in 1 Cor 7. Other times a sort of compromise was worked out between the couples and that family had the potential of being an effective witness for Christ. This was Timothy's background but it did not deter him from his commitment to spreading the Gospel. Timothy was discipled by Paul and in this relationship Paul became quite attached to him - so much so that he called Timothy his son.⁴

Apparently, Timothy had some personal problems - perhaps being thrust in such a demanding situation - Timothy was Paul's problem-solver and was put into some difficult situations - at any rate, Timothy's young age seemed to be a problem but Paul encouraged Timothy to "hang tough" and be a good example to his critics.⁵ He did so - so much so that Paul says of him that he "slaved" with him much as a son would "slave" with his father.⁶ This indicated not only a close relationship between Paul and Timothy but that Timothy, because of this enduring relationship, was becoming more and more like his spiritual father, Paul. This is like Paul saying that Timothy was a "chip off the old block" as us New Englanders are prone to say.

² Compare Acts 13:2 with 15:40.

³ Act 16:1.

⁴ 1 Tim 1:2, 18.

⁵ 1 Tim. 4:12 Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

⁶ Philip. 2:22 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.

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Final Comments about friendships in the Lord.

Jesus no longer physically meets men in this age - but then, it never was just the meeting of our Lord that was the issue. It always has been the power of the Gospel *and* the influence of those who preach it. Jesus was, of course, the Son of God and His affecting men has been a great testimony of the Gospel's power and His personal influence on those He has met. The same is true today except sinners come into association with believers in Christ and are thus affected.

Jesus set the tone of friendships and associations being an important factor in Christian development in His final hours with His disciples. When He called His disciples His Friends He was speaking to us also. Friendships and close associations with others are an important means of not only drawing sinners to the Lord but important in discipling each other into spiritual maturity. Jesus is not saying that we should become unduly lax in our attitude towards the Lordship of Christ. He *is* saying that "a personal relationship" with the Lord is just that - personal. That means that we must emulate what went on in the early church - we need to understand the importance of our friendships with other believers regardless of whatever imperfections we may have. I have already pointed out in my recent email devotional that there is a balance between fostering friendships based on a mutual love for the Lord and obedience to His Word and having the mind of a servant towards each other. On one hand we are to consider the Lord our Friend - on the other hand we are to consider ourselves His Bond-servant.

Please allow me to quote from my email devotional:

"So our relationship with our Lord is a very special one - that of a Bondservant (a willing and loving one) and that of a friend - forever! What a wonderful relationship we have with our Lord!

But it doesn't stop there. We are to foster friendship among each other - not based on our mutual love for golf or astronomy or appreciation for antiques. We certainly should not base these friendships on personality compatibility either. No. We should base our friendships on our mutual love for our Lord and His Word - with the emphasis on our mutual obedience to His word. This is the true basis of discipleship. Paul emulated this approach with Timothy - Barnabas with Mark. Of Paul and Timothy we read in Paul's personal letter to Timothy:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, [2] To Timothy my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord...[18] Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, 1 Tim. 1:1-2 (NIV).

This father / son friendship was certainly a very personal relationship but it resulted in a wonderful exercise in discipleship! What a marvelous way to share our struggles, our hopes, our desires in Christ - Discipleship through Friendships. Programs may help lift the believer to a new plane of awareness regarding his responsibilities - awareness

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that living the Christian life is more than a confession of faith - but dynamic discipleship comes when we befriend each other and share our distresses, our hopes, our victories in Him with each other on the basis of friendships.

Remember the disagreement that Paul and Barnabas had over Mark when they were going to go back and visit the churches where they had previously preached? Paul didn't want to take Mark along with the trip because Mark had left them but Barnabas "stuck up" for Mark - Barnabas and Paul parted ways because of this disagreement, but as a result of this friendship between Barnabas and Mark, Mark was affirmed as a disciple of Christ and later Paul admits that Mark was a valuable as a fellow laborer in the Lord:

Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. 2 Tim. 4:11, (NIV).

Friendships are a powerful means of true discipleship! Without those friendships between Paul and Timothy - Barnabas and Mark we would be missing some very important portions of the New Testament - **we cannot imagine the power of friendships based on mutual love for our Lord and love for His Word!** We need to foster friendships, again, not based on mutual interests or personalities but based on our love for our Lord and His Word. A good way to start these friendships is to avoid the "Hi - how're you doing" while not slowing our pace as we walk past a brother or sister in Christ. Another way is to start developing a genuine interest in others. Still another way is to develop a "Prayer Buddy" relationship with others and keep asking how *specific* issues are doing in our friends' lives. Powerful stuff this discipleship through Friendships is."

Ordinary men bringing the Gospel to other ordinary men - the power of the Gospel is God's power. The friendships that come out of that supernatural relationship - with the Lord and with each other is the stuff that will turn the world upside down as was testified to of the early church.⁷

⁷ Acts 17:6 And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also;