

Imitate Spiritual Heroes

My spiritual heroes surround me when I'm writing. They sit on the bookcases on either side of the woodstove. The faces of some of them smile at me from various places on the walls or from nooks at the empty ends of bookshelves. The busts of four look down upon me like Mount Rushmore from a shelf near my computer. Some would think this spiritually harmful and that it puts my eyes on men instead of Christ.

But the Bible tells us to have spiritual heroes. "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." we're commanded in Hebrews 13:7 (NIV).

All we know of the "leaders" of these Hebrew Christians is found in this text. The words describing their activities are all in the past tense, so these leaders may have died, perhaps even been martyred. They were not to be forgotten, however, and their lives and faith were to be imitated. But the instruction of this passage applies to us as well. Like these Jewish Christians, we should seek godly, truth-speaking heroes too.

The verse tells us first that we should "remember" them. So photos, sculpture, and souvenirs can help. However, this doesn't mean just to remember their features or mannerisms, but to recall things like their love for Christ, their devotion to prayer, and their passion for the gospel and the things of God. One way to do this is to read or listen to biographies of these spiritual heroes.

We should also "consider the outcome of their way of life." The Puritan theologian John Owen says that the New Testament Greek word translated *consider* means "a repeated, reiterated contemplation of the matter, with its causes and circumstances."¹ Again, the most practical way to think about all these things is to read the accounts of the lives of our spiritual heroes. As we read we should recognize that these are sinful men and women, yet people through whom God worked.

Third, we're told to "imitate their faith." To quote Owen again, "A bare remembrance of them is of little or no use. But to remember them in what they did and taught, so as to follow them . . . , this is a duty of no small advantage to us."² One of the advantages of imitating spiritual heroes is the guidance God sometimes gives us through "what they did and taught." They may, for example, show us a pattern for a more simple and effective spiritual life.

Of course, we shouldn't be foolish enough to think that any of our heroes is right about everything. The best of men are men at best. Only one hero is perfect and unchangeable, and He's mentioned in the very next verse: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). The right heroes will point us to Him.

Having the right heroes also helps protect us from spiritual and theological error. As the following verse warns, "Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines" (verse 9). All human heroes will lead us into error if we follow them uncritically and

without discernment. But to have no heroes for fear of being spiritually polluted is to overreact. The right heroes are right almost all the time. By speaking the Word of God to us, sharing insights we haven't been given, using analogies and illustrations we haven't considered, formulating truth in ways that make things clear to us—the right heroes will protect us from far more error than they may give us.

Some advocate choosing one spiritual hero, living with him through his biography and books, and making him a spiritual mentor for months or even years. Others prefer a broad range of heroes to an intimate knowledge of only one. Whichever path you choose, find spiritual heroes worthy of remembering, considering, and imitating. And may the Lord speak to you through them to help you simplify and enrich your spiritual life.

¹ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. VII, ed. W.H. Goold (1855; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1980), p. 425

² Owen, p. 421.

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