

The Gospel of “Role-Modeling” According to Barkley & Tebow

Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good (1 John 3:11).

Former NBA great Charles Barkley, perhaps the only man to slam Shaquille O’Neal to the floor, once said, “I’m not a role model. Just because I dunk a basketball doesn’t mean I should raise your kids.” Many critics, assailing his remark as being irresponsible and evasive, reasoned that professional athletes, whose fans include many impressionable children, have obligations to be positive influences in society. In retrospect, it was a good thing Barkley said that since he later made headlines for running sizable gambling debts and drunken driving.

Certainly we need role models, especially children. One Christian author wrote: “Our world is desperately in need of models worth following. Authentic heroes. People of integrity, whose lives inspire us to do better, to climb higher, to stand taller.” Presently, no athlete fits that bill better than Tim Tebow, the quarterback for Denver Broncos. He thanks Jesus after every victory, has committed to chastity until marriage, and helps the poor, such as building a hospital in the Philippines. Tebow says that for him, the goal of playing football “is to be a great role model that parents can look at their son and say, ‘That’s someone who is trying to do it the right way. . . . He is trying to honor God and do the right thing.’” That’s great and I’m so blessed and challenged to hear that but, if the Bible says anything at all, it is that sooner or later the so-called the heroes of faith will disappoint their fans.

The case in point is the aforementioned author, a leading Bible expositor in America who, after talking about the need for true heroes, pointed to King David as being such a man. One example he gave to vouch for his character is the time when he crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of the robe worn by the sleeping King Saul, a man on a mission to kill David. Afterwards, David, so conscience-stricken by his action, lamented, saying, "The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, or lift my hand against him . . . (1 Sam 24:6^a). I wonder whether David himself would have felt comfortable with such a flattery or with the idea of becoming a role model for people living in the 21st century. A man who committed murder, adultery and evasion of responsibility that resulted in the death of 70,000 people (2 Sam. 24:12-17) would probably have said, “No, not me.”

It was said earlier that our heroes in the Bible often disappoint us. To that extent, Eugene Peterson offered a refreshingly candid view on David. He wrote: “The narrator refuses to idealize or glamorize him to show that God’s sovereignty works through just such a mixed bag of human failures and sin. . . . The entire biblical story never lets us forget that it is a God’s story of our salvation, not a collection of moral achievements for use as a moral handbook. This is the narrative of what God does to save us, not what we do to please him.” What does this mean? The life of David is intended for us to get excited about God, who continued to love and use him despite of him! If David were to say anything to today’s evangelicals enamored with him or any

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other human heroes, even Tebow, he might have said: “Please, I am neither your hero nor your role model, only Jesus is.”

I am sure Tebow would agree with that sentiment as well because he understands, as he said in the aforementioned quote (which I purposely left out), “[I’m] not perfect but everyday [I’m] trying to get better, [I’m] trying to honor God.” Barkley is no hero, not necessarily because of his weak moments on and off the court (for, we all have them and Tebow might as well), but his declaration is to free him so that he could live any way he desired. Tebow’s declaration, on the other hand, is to limit his freedom so that he does not do whatever he pleases in order to please his hero, the one whom he calls “my Lord Jesus Christ.” It’s a good thing trying to be a hero to the discouraged and deprived people “just as [we] also *imitate* Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1^b NKJ). Inasmuch as salty food creates thirst for water, our lives must create a thirst for Jesus Christ who, like an offensive tackle throwing his body to create a path for his running back, gave up his body to save us. So how is your life? Is anyone seeing Christ through your life? Or have you given that up for more freedom to please yourself? Something to think about for the New Year!

Further Reflection

1. Based on 1 Cor. 4:16, 6:12, 2 Cor. 11:1, Heb. 14:7 and 3 John 1:11, what is it that we are supposed to imitate from others?
2. Some call Hebrews 11 as the “Hall of Faith” but notice the woman mentioned in Hebrews 11:31 and the first 4 people cited in verse 32 (Judges 4:4-9; 6:36-39; 11:29-31, 34-39; 16:1, 15-21). In the spiritual sense, are these guys really at the level of Michael Jordan and Babe Ruth? What do you think the author of Hebrews is really trying to say about God and men?
3. Everyone is asking this question: why do some sports fans and the media hate Tim Tebow? Perhaps the following verses show why: John 3:20; 15:18, 24-25; 17:14.

Bible Reading

The book of Proverbs is chosen so that we can live wiser in 2012 while the book of Judges is selected because we will be studying it in the Family Group in the first semester of 2012.

Monday: Proverbs 1 & Judges 1

Tuesday: Proverbs 2 & Judges 2

