Not WWJD, but WDJD

A sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Philippians 4:1-9

You likely know what WWJD stands for: What Would Jesus Do?

That question exploded in the 1990's as a way of offering a quick moral compass for Christians in everyday situations. If he were in my place, what would Jesus do?

The question comes from a book written 100 years earlier, *In His Steps,* by Charles Sheldon. Christians want to know: How do we follow "in his steps"?

In Luke 10:1-11 it says: "The Lord appointed them to go out two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come." Based on that, a Christian group called "Two by Twos," formed to follow "in his steps."

In the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, there are those who say "in his steps" means monasticism, that is, living in poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Here in our Philippians text for today, Paul is answering the question: How are we to live? What are we to do?

In Romans 2:15 it says there is something in us that alerts us to what is good and what is bad, a different but similar idea to our idea of conscience.

In Romans 14 Paul discusses what foods to eat, what days to observe, and says that you must not trouble your neighbor with these views. It is very much like a longer passage in 1 Corinthians 8-10 about conscience. You must not offend the conscience of somebody else, but Paul also writes (paraphrase): "You must not let your conscience be dominated by another conscience either" (1 Corinthians 10:29).

In Philippians 4:9, he says: "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do." This is like Philippians 3:17: "Brethren, join in imitating me." That way of thinking is found in many other places in Paul. In 1 Corinthians 4:16-17: "Be imitators of me. I have sent to you Timothy to remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach them everywhere in every church." Then in 1 Cor 11:1 he writes: "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ." Similarly in a passage that is coming in 1 Thessalonians 1:6: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord."

How are we to imitate him? He was a tentmaker, who spread the gospel around the eastern Mediterranean? What does it mean to imitate him?

Paul was not only a tentmaker; he was also a list maker. We have one of his lists in our Philippians text (4:8):

> "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is holy, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

This is like the list he makes in Galatians 5:22-23 where he talks about the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – nine of them altogether.

We think about them as well as the list in Phil 4:8 and ask: "How do we live?" How does that work? It says how we should live.

The problem is twofold. When we try, as Luther points out, we end up either in spiritual pride or despair. We think: "I'm doing it." And that's, of course, hypocrisy because we don't and we can't. When we don't do it, we despair.

In fact, the question: "How do we live?" is the devil's own question. It's the wrong question. It misleads us.

The real question is: What are we living for?

We can see that as we look at the whole New Testament, but in this case, we are looking at writings of Paul. There are several points to keep in mind.

First of all, remember that Paul thinks the end of the world is coming within his generation (1 Corinthians 15:51-52, 1 Thessalonians 4:15, and in 1 Corinthians 7:20-39) and in view of the approaching end, he says: "Stay in the state you are. If you are married or not married, don't worry about it. If you're a slave, don't try to be free. Be content." He himself says: "I'm not married; I don't have time for that because the end is near."

It's not just Paul who says the end is near. The same thing is found in the four gospels (Matt 10:23 and Mark 9:1). Five times in the New Testament, in the Gospels, in Paul, and in the Book of Revelation it says the end will come like a thief in the night (Matt 24:43, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 2 Peter 3:10, Rev. 3:3, 16:15).

You may say: "Paul and others were wrong about that, but so what? What does that have to do with us?"

Even though they were wrong about the timing, they were right about this: Nobody knows when the end comes for one individually or the whole world at large. Therefore, be ready.

The second point that Paul makes is: “In the time we have, what should we do?”

When we study the travels of Paul, we see him running around the Eastern part of the Mediterranean and then in Romans 15:24 he writes (paraphrase): “I’m on my way to Spain.” We don’t know that he made it, but he was trying to get there. Why? Because the important thing is to get the gospel out.

Note, too, what he doesn’t do. He doesn’t set up a mini kingdom of God on earth. He even says: “Pay your taxes and pay the dues that are due for border customs” (Romans 13:1-17). Obey the rulers and the rules.

He’s concerned to keep chaos down so the gospel can be preached. Not that he goes along with abuses of the time, but he follows more or less the kinds of practices he found among the Jewish people.

For example, there were other cultures that practiced infanticide, but the Jewish people did not. They also established boundaries protecting the family. As a result, their culture and their people thrived.

Our situation is similar. We need boundaries and order to keep chaos at bay so we can get the gospel out.

What then about “imitation” and following “in his steps”? There are also texts like Ephesians 5:1, which says: “Be imitators of God.” 1 Peter 1:16: “Be holy as I am holy.” What does that mean?

The idea of having models for life was very common in that day. There was Plutarch who wrote a whole series of biographies of famous Greeks and Romans to show how a person’s character was shaped by virtues and vices.

In an ancient book we don’t use because it’s in the Apocrypha, called Sirach, chapters 44-50 start out: “Let us now remember famous men,” and these models are lifted up. We find something like that in Hebrews 11 and 12.

A similar thing is true about listening to one’s conscience. The great Roman Catholic thinker Thomas Aquinas said one has to live according to conscience, but conscience is not an independent authority or a source of revelation. Rather, conscience is only an authority when it is formed by the church.

All of this gives us a different perspective on Paul's lists, the one here in Philippians 4 and others (Romans 1:29-31; Galatians 5:19-21; 22-23). When we look at these lists, we think: "Isn't he clever? Aren't these remarkable?"

Until you study the time. There have been some scholarly studies that show lists like these were very popular in that time. They were found everywhere, and Paul took them and put them in his letters as a way of saying how we can live so we can keep the chaos down, so we can get the gospel out.

The same is true for the advice-for-living material in Colossians 3:18-4:1and Ephesians 5:21-6:9: Wives obey your husbands, husbands love your wives, children obey your parents, slaves obey your masters, or words to that effect. This was not some invention, some new moral teaching, by early Christians.

These materials are gathered as a way of saying this is how we can get along, keep the chaos down, so that we can do what is most important: What are we living for? To get the gospel out.

There are three conclusions from this:

First, all the moral and ethical material in the New Testament is common in the culture of the time. Not only "Love your neighbor," but also "Love your enemies" (Matt 5:44) is found outside of the New Testament.

Second, not only does our salvation not depend on works, but there are no "Christian works." All works are just works. Faith gives freedom for works, that is, free to think and to do in this time and place, knowing that all works are limited and broken, as are we, too.

The best guide for living we have is Paul in Romans 13:10, where he says that "love your neighbor" means: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor." In other words, minimize harm and protect life so the next generation can grow and flourish.

Third, as we look at how Paul works and how the New Testament works, we live by faith and not by sight. How God is working is not basically open to us in the world and even in us ourselves. He is working in his way, and we let him run the universe.

Finally, we remember that the big question is not WWJD but it's WDJD – What Did Jesus Do? That's what it's about.

In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul answers this question and says of God: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness (the holiness) of God.”

That’s what it’s about, and that gives us perspective for the week ahead and all the days of our lives. As Paul writes:

> “None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Romans 14:8-9).

Amen