

Christian Role Models

Written by author K. Scott Schaeffer

During my post-college years, the college and career class at my church had the pleasure of getting to know Joe (that's not his real name, but I made it up for the sake of identity protection). Joe introduced a good bit of levity to the group. That's not to say the group was boring, but sometimes Christians can get a little too serious too often. I thought Joe was a breath of fresh air. He was fun. He made it an extra pleasure to be a part of the college and career class.

Then, one day, we received bad news from someone who knew Joe well: Joe would not be returning to the group. Joe chose to leave, because he had sin in his life that he had hidden from us, and he didn't want to put up a front anymore. He wasn't the good Christian that many of us assumed he was.

I was terribly disappointed to hear the news. I didn't care if Joe had sin in his life. I liked the guy, just as I liked my non-Christian friends and family who led sinful lives, too. Had I found out about Joe's sin, I would have continued to like him, even if it was a sin I didn't commit.

However, not all Christians would have responded the same way to Joe's sin. Many would have rejected him. In fact, in those days, I had more than a few Christians reject me for behavior that the Bible permitted, but that they opposed. I didn't dare reveal my anti-biblical behavior (my sins) to Christians. Doing so would have been social suicide. I wasn't in the Bible belt long before realizing that letting it all hang out around Christians was the fast track to having no Christian friends.

The sad fact is that most Christians hide their sin, much like I had to. The danger in this is that a guy like Joe will attend a church, see all of what *appear* to be perfect Christians around him, compare his sinful behavior to their perfect appearance, and leave the church out of a feeling that He doesn't belong and can never measure up to their standards.

When we hide our sin, we create a false image of Christianity, and we scare those who are honest with themselves away from the church. If this is the outcome of hiding our sin, then why do we do it? We do it because we misinterpret a couple Bible verses that we think instruct us to be Christian role models. The first of these verses is **Matthew 5:14-16**, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven [NRSV].”

While at first glance, this verse seems to call us to being role models, it never tells us to hide our sin. It only tells us to allow others to see our good works, so that God may be praised. Without God’s influence in our lives, many of our good works wouldn’t happen. When people see how active we are in doing good works, however, they’ll know a special motivation is responsible. They then learn what that motivation is when they get to know us and find that we are Christians. These verses are about bringing glory to God. They’re not about setting ourselves up as mini-Jesus’s who appear perfect before others.

The second verse that we misinterpret is this one: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes [**Matthew 18:6-7**, NRSV].”

Again, many of us assume that this verse requires us to be role models who hide our sin so that others won’t see our sin and be tempted to commit it. However, if we examine the words of this quote closely, we see that we are not to “put” a stumbling block before others. The word “put” implies a deliberate action. We rarely put something somewhere unintentionally.

The people of whom Jesus speaks are those who try to lead others to sin, such as the womanizer or temptress, or the guys who mock the man who refuses to be a womanizer or a drunk. These people find satisfaction in leading others to sin. We

Christian who've lived outside the Christian cocoon have been subject to these stumbling block erectors since childhood.

To stretch these verses to cover sins that we commit but don't promote is to force us Christians to be deceptive—something the Bible prohibits repeatedly. When we are deceptive, we build our relationships upon this deception which, in turn, is a frail foundation. Christian friendships with frail foundations fall apart. Many of us walk away from these relationships disillusioned and longing for more genuine ones.

Where do we find genuine relationships? They're often easier to cultivate with non-Christians, because honest non-Christians tend to be themselves and let it all hang out (of course, dishonest non-Christians outnumber the honest ones, so we must be careful). They're less judgmental, too. They tend to tolerate other peoples' sins better than Christians do. Therefore, many Christians venture away from the church and fulfill their relationship needs elsewhere.

When we fail to make friends in the church, it's impossible to remain plugged-in to it. A lack of Christian friendships keeps us from doing good in the world through the church, and it keeps us from learning other people's views of the Bible, which are often helpful, even if we disagree with them.

The term *role model* never appears in the Bible. And the Bible only contains one role model: Jesus. All other figures in the Bible are never presented to us as role models. In fact, the Bible is quick to reveal the sins of its greatest heroes, from Peter's lack of faith and his denial of Jesus to King David's adultery and murder of the woman's husband. Were God concerned that these people would be bad role models, He would have hidden their sins from us, or He would have chosen somebody less sinful to do His will.

In Matthew 23:8, Jesus tells us not to elevate people to role model or religious leadership status when He says, "But do not be called Rabbi, for One is your teacher, and you are all brothers (NASB)." How amazing it is that Jesus tells this multitude (which includes His twelve disciples) that they are all on the same level – no one ranks above the other? Jesus opposed the role model concept as much as anyone possibly could.

So, why then, do we force the label of role model on pastors, performers, politicians, and fellow Christians? We do it so we can judge others. When a politician, pastor, or performer sins, we render their careers worthless (because we judge the person who sinned to be worthless) with the claim that they are bad role models and, therefore, must step down from their high-profile positions. Of course, this judgmentalism is the equivalent of taking our seat on God's throne and pronouncing judgment that only He can render. When we pass judgment in this way, we make Satan proud.

God never asks His people to be role models. Rather, He wants us to be honest and be ourselves. If we all did so, we would become less judgmental by gaining a better understanding of just how sinful we all are, and we would build the genuine, lasting relationships necessary for the body of Christ to carry out God's will.

(To learn more, visit www.biblicalfreedom.com and pick up a copy of *Biblical Freedom from Religious Oppression* by K. Scott Schaeffer)