

Role models. Mentors. Father figures. Big brothers. Call them what you will, I think you know the type of person I'm talking about. Just about everybody had somebody in their life that filled this role.

Someone we looked up to. Someone who shaped who we are as individuals. Someone who had characteristics that we looked at and said, "Yes, I want to form my identity around what I see in them."

And that's a good thing. That's how values are passed down from one generation to the next. If we didn't have these sorts of big brothers, we'd all have to learn hard lessons from scratch. If we didn't have mentors and role models and father figures, we wouldn't have goals and ideals to guide us in life.

Everyone needs a big brother to look up to. And that's an important part of the message St Paul has for the Philippians in our lesson today. Because Paul knows that the Philippians look up to him as a mentor and role model. And he's happy to be that big brother for them. Guiding them in the faith.

Unfortunately, though, St Paul can't be with them all the time. He can't even be with them most of the time. In fact, there's a very good chance St Paul will never see them again.

Because Paul has been arrested. He's writing this letter from prison. And, at some point, he will travel to Rome and have a trial before the emperor himself. A trial with a very uncertain outcome. Especially when the emperor hearing your case is a cruel lunatic with a hatred for Christians named Nero.

There's a very good chance that Paul is going to his death. And he wants to leave these Philippians, who look up to him so much, with instructions for how they should live. He wants to give them one last piece of their identity. So that even if he's gone, and even if they're hurting because of his absence, they can know that the things they learned from their big brother Paul were not in vain.

And he starts off by giving them a lot of instructions. Instructions about unity and humility and generosity. But then Paul stops. And I think he realizes at that point that he's gotten a little ahead of himself. If he's going to give exhortations like these, he needs to lay the right foundation first. And that foundation is found in Jesus Christ.

Because if Paul is the Philippians' mentor and role model, then Jesus is Paul's mentor and role model. And the Philippians'. And ours as well. We look up to Christ in many ways. As our Lord and Savior and God and King.

But we also look up to him as our brother. Quite literally, actually. Christ is the first born Son of God. We are all children of God. That makes us the little brothers and sisters of Christ. He is our big brother. We look up to him and we see our identity. Our goals and our ideals lived out in his life.

And so when Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God. And the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. And then we see him love His Father with such unwavering obedience that he would go to the cross. And we see him love His with such unflinching compassion that he would die for us.

When we see Jesus empty Himself and take the form, the identity, of a servant. And humble Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. Even death on a cross. And then be exalted for doing so. Exalted to the very highest place in heaven.

What does that tell us? What can we learn from Christ our brother about our priorities? Our identity? Our goals and ideals? How does that shape us?

Well, first, I think it tells us that obedience is about more than just staying out of trouble. Paul suggests as much in verse 12. *"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."*

Essentially, he's saying, "I'm not going to be there looking over your shoulder. But that doesn't mean you should stop obeying my instructions, or obeying God's Word."

Why? Well, because obedience isn't just about avoiding punishment. Sometimes it's about working out your own salvation. Sometimes it's about figuring out who you are in Christ Jesus through that obedience.

Loving God His Father and loving His neighbor were a way of life for Jesus. And they're a way of life for us. We figure out who we are in God's eyes when we're obedient. Because God has created every person for a purpose. And that purpose has been revealed to us in His Law.

And that Law says first to love the Lord your God. Which is something we can't do on our own. It's a gift of the Spirit. Given to us by Christ through Baptism and the Word.

That's our starting point. Nothing else matters unless the greatest commandment has been fulfilled. No purpose in our life will be ever complete without the love of God in our hearts. And thanks be to God, we've been given that love by grace through faith.

So there we have it. The meaning of life: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. But there's a second commandment. Because while loving the Lord your God is the eternal meaning for your life, there's a secondary meaning for this mortal life: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Which is important. Because if we're only concerned with our love for God, that can easily lead us to be rather selfish. It's just me and God and no one else matters.... except they do. How we treat others is a direct reflection of and expression of our love for God.

There's a reason why Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that "*these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*" The greatest of these is love because while faith and hope can turn us inward to our devotion to God, love turns us outward to our neighbor. Love led Jesus to the cross for us. Love led Paul to the Philippians for their salvation. And love leads us to our neighbor for their good.

And so the meaning of life is not just to love the Lord your God. It is also, as Paul tells us, to love and comfort one another. To be united in our faith. To be humble. To be generous and helpful and compassionate to those around us.

But we don't do it for our own interest. It's not so that we can make ourselves feel better. It's because our neighbor needs us to be better people.

Our neighbors – our friends and family and communities and nation and world – they need us to be more like Christ. To be His hands and feet. Willing to sacrifice for their good. They need us to be children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked generation. They need us to shine like lights in the world. They need us to share words of life with them.

Because if we don't, no one else will. If we as the Church do not stand without blemish in a crooked generation, then how will they ever know that there is a Savior without blemish who went to the cross to save a crooked generation? If we don't shine like lights, how will they ever see anything but darkness? If we don't share words of life, how will they ever know anything but death?

The meaning of life is to love the Lord your God. We learn that from our big brother Paul and our bigger brother Jesus Christ. But we also learn that we carry out that meaning and we take on a little of their identity when we love our neighbor as ourselves.

When we look to the interests of others, we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. When God works in us to do His will and to work for His good pleasure, then even if we are poured out like a drink offering, we are glad and rejoice with all the saints in glory. Amen.