

## “Take My Example for Your Guide”

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Individuality may be our cultural ideal, but if we take a tour through scripture, we see that individuality is not what God created us for. Yes, we Americans including myself, love to think of ourselves as unique individuals, but Ecclesiastes 1:9 tells us “What has been will be again; there is nothing new under the sun.”

According to scripture, being completely unique isn't even a possibility. Individuality is a myth. Rather, you and I are creatures of conformity; we are inherently imitators of the world around us.

From the beginning, imitation is how we learn to be human. We learn to speak by imitating our parents. We learn to walk by watching our older siblings and other family members. We create our own identity by imitating our teenage friends in middle school and high school. We become part of a particular clique or a fraternity or a sorority or a work group in our first job. Sometimes we mimic people in our profession who we've put on a pedestal. And of course, whether we'll admit to it or not, after 30 or 40 or 50 years of marriage, we imitate our spouse to some degree.

When our grandparents or parents had a strong work ethic, or a great, loving spirit toward their spouse and kids or a strong faith fueled by faithful church attendance – it is good that we imitate them because they have been good examples for us. On the other hand, if our ancestors were lazy, abusive, and of little or no faith, we try not to imitate them.

We are what we imitate. Each of us is a mosaic of influences resembling many people in our past and present. We conform to the image of others, we follow the examples of others, and others, right now, are imitating you and me. Think about it.

I point this out because I think it brings great weight to the words of Paul in our reading from his letter to the Philippians. In this letter and in other letters, Paul gives a loving but firm command. Paul writes in verse 17, “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.”

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

In 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7, “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecutions you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you become an example to all the believers.”

In II Thessalonians 3:7-9, “For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was in order to give you an example to imitate.”

Paul commends imitation as the way to go as long as we are imitating the right people. It’s all about the people we hang out with. What Paul is telling the Philippians, Thessalonians, Corinthians, and us is simply this: You’re going to follow someone’s example, imitate someone’s actions when it comes to living a Christian life. So Paul says, “Since you’re going to imitate somebody, go ahead and imitate me as I imitate Jesus. Follow me as I follow Jesus.”

In fact, Paul goes even further when he tells us to “observe those who live according to the example you have in us.” We should keep our eyes locked on people, observing people, who are living Christ-focused servant-hood lifestyles. Why? So that like a child absorbing every move from his or her mom, we might learn how to live by observing the examples of faithful people. Imitation is key to the Christian life.

The first obvious question is, “Who are you imitating?” From whom are you learning what it means to live as a follower of Jesus in this messed up world? Is it your spouse who always seems to be five steps ahead of you spiritually? Do you have a friend whose faith feels more mature? Are you soaking up the wisdom of fellow members in a Bible study group, support group, Via de Cristo group, cottage group, Sunday School group, or whatever group? Are you following the example of a faith-filled parent or grandparent?

Most of you have heard my story of growing up with a faith-filled grandfather who gifted me with the example of working hard, studying the scriptures, praying often, and expecting much. As I grow older, I find myself becoming more and more like him. Grandpa was never a patient man but he was a hardworking, faithful man.

The first question is, “Who are you imitating?” The second question is, “Who is imitating you?” If you have children and grandchildren, this one is easy to answer. But your sphere of influence probably extends beyond your home. Who in your life knows you’re a Christian and thereby, whose understanding of Christianity is influenced by your words, your actions, and your attitude? Who is learning from you? Whose eyes are fixed on you and your

example? That can be a scary one to wrestle with.

Our 8<sup>th</sup> grade confirmands wrote their faith statements earlier this month. They always write about who has influenced their faith. Who has been an example for them to follow? They are thankful for parents and grandparents, Sunday School and confirmation teachers, or just people who will take the time to talk to them and interact with them.

Who are you imitating? Who is imitating you?

The scriptures tell us that as we imitate the likes of Paul, as we learn from the faith and life of our baptized brothers and sisters around us, the end result isn't a bunch of Christian clones, but a community of people who resemble Christ. In his earthly ministry, Jesus not only assumed the role of our Savior by taking our sin as his own on the cross and defeating the power of death in his resurrection, but in his living and breathing, in his walking and talking, in his healing and loving and perfect commandment – keeping, he also became our example.

Jesus Christ exemplified for the world what it means to be fully human; to be right with God, to be filled with the Holy Spirit and completely connected with the everyday rhythms and flow of life in our created world. Jesus is the example that guides us.

Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that all those who are baptized into his name are not only forgiven of sins, right with the Father, and filled with the Spirit, but also have embarked on a life long journey of being “conformed to the image” of Jesus. As baptized followers of Christ, we try to slowly but surely start acting like him, loving like him, forgiving like him, teaching like him, and even resembling him.

All of this begins to happen when we begin to imitate one another. Whether it be a parent or grandparent, a pastor or teacher, a friend or co-worker, by imitating one another in the faith, we begin to resemble and reflect the person of our faith, Jesus Christ.

We are creatures of conformity. We are inherent imitators. The question is not if your life will resemble someone else's but whose life yours will resemble. Knowing this, let's embrace the instruction found in 3 John 11: "Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good."

Whose footsteps are you following in today? What's coming from those who are walking in your footsteps? We won't always like what we see in front of us or behind us. We won't always like what we see inside of us.

But take heart! Because you're a Lutheran Christian, we believe that we are saved by God's grace through our faith in Jesus Christ – also words of Paul.

So if you don't like what's in front of you or inside you or behind you, simply look to the cross of our Savior and example – Jesus Christ. He has graciously forgiven you and me already. Now we need to go out from here and do the same.

Then may the peace of God . . .

#799 - Come, Follow Me, The Savior Spake