

A Lifestyle of Imitation...



“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”

1 Thessalonians 1:6

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Topic: How do we imitate Christ.
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Imitators Of Christ

THE TEXTBOOK EXAMPLE AND LIFECYCLE OF CHRISTIAN EVANGELIZATION
Becoming the Gospel

Port Allegany Free Methodist Church
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^{NIV} 1 Thessalonians 1: 2-10

² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

What it says...

Verse 3

1. Work of faith
2. Labor of love
3. Steadfastness of hope in Jesus Christ

Verse 4-5

1. God has affirmed (chosen) them
2. The Gospel came not with *just* word, but with **POWER**
3. "Power" evidenced by the Holy Spirit with *full conviction*
4. The teachers lived accountably before the new converts for their sake

Verse 6

1. Converts imitated their teachers
2. The teachers were imitators of Christ
3. The converts received the word in "much" affliction
4. In the midst of affliction there was the joy of God's Holy Spirit

Verse 7

1. The new converts became examples (poster children) for believers in the surrounding area
2. The new converts were encouragement to fellow believers

Verse 8

1. The Word of God spread beyond the borders of the immediate areas
2. The intense faith and belief of the converts rippled beyond their closest neighbors
3. The news of the converts of Thessalonica was not just here say

Verse 9

1. The cycle of God's kingdom message perpetuates when it is received with conviction
2. True repentance and whole-hearted service to God causes people to take notice

vs 1:5 Power, Holy Spirit, Conviction...

- How then do we live?
- What is the message and testimony of our lives?
- Are we living the gospel?
- Have we become the gospel?
- Are we living as the subjects of God's kingdom?
- Have we received the message of Jesus' good news with conviction and power?

vs 1:6 Imitation? What/Who are we imitating...???

- How then do we live?
- Who do we imitate?
- Who imitates us?
 - Relatives
 - Children
 - Neighbors
 - Co-workers
- What do they imitate?

Imitation is how human beings learn and grow. Everything depends on whom or what we choose to imitate. The converts at Thessalonica got it right; they imitated Paul and his group (who were imitating the Lord Jesus Christ).

vs 1:7-9 Propagation through Perpetuation...

- How then do we live?
- Are we perpetuating the message?
- Does propagation come through our serving?
- Are we exhibiting enthusiasm and joy
- Do we reach out to the "least of these?"
- Have we realized our spiritual gifts
- Are we using our gifts as worship to God?

Passion and Devotion—

Francis de Sales, a Jesuit priest in the 16th-17th centuries, wrote "*there is only one true devotion, but there are many that are false and empty. If you are unable to recognize which kind is true, you can easily be deceived and led astray by following one that is offensive and superstitious.*"

I think it is our passion and sincere desire to grow in the ways of Jesus that help us to mature and become what God desires most in us; and what He desires most is for us to become fully transformed into the image of His son Jesus. Half-baked Christians do not produce the results nor bring joy like the converts of Thessalonica.

Speaking again of a writing from Francis de Sales who was truly a master of the metaphor; in his writing, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, he draws comparison to several species of birds relating them to the Christian life.

“Ostriches never fly; hens fly in a clumsy fashion, near the ground and only once in a while, but eagles, doves, and swallows fly aloft, swiftly and frequently. In like manner, sinners in no way fly up toward God but make their whole course here upon the earth and for the earth. Good people who have not as yet attained to devotion fly toward God by their good works but do so infrequently, slowly, and awkwardly.

Devout souls ascend to God more frequently, promptly, and with lofty heights. In short, devotion is simply that spiritual agility by which charity works in us or by aid of which we work quickly and lovingly. Just as it is the function of charity to enable us to observe all God’s commandments in general and without exception, so it is the part of devotion to enable us to observe them more quickly and diligently.”

1 Thes 1:3

“We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The choices of words are very interesting to me:

- Work and Faith
- Labor and Love
- Inspired Endurance

...all built on a foundation of Hope in Jesus Christ

What is it that we should take away from this word today? For me, I have been considering this passage since reading it in my daily devotions almost two months ago. I want unbounded passion for Jesus to permeate every facet of my life. I want zeal, determination, steadfastness, endurance, consistency, and integrity as I follow Jesus to be the hallmarks of my faith. I want the same intensity and conviction of the Holy Spirit that I witnessed in my heart on the day of my conversion to be what I wake up with and start each day. I want the praises and joy of my Lord on my lips, in my mind, and ringing in my heart with each step and breath I take in my day. Impossible you say? Maybe; for ostriches and chickens, but not for doves, swallows and eagles.

God wants you to be an eagle. He wants everyone to see you soar. The Thessalonians soared, and because they soared, the Gospel...the Good News of Jesus Christ spread throughout Europe. When you "soar for Jesus" people take notice, and God is glorified. Consider where you might be able to "fly" best. Is it in professional ministry? Is it in foreign missions? Perhaps God wants you to fly in your own backyard...

Reference Shane Claiborne and "Irresistible Revolution"

Are we finding our "Calcutta?" (Story of Shane and Mother Teresa)

We all have our own "Calcutta." Our Calcutta is the place God calls us to shine; reflecting His Glory. The first step in finding this place of shining is to embrace God's message and promise with conviction and power in the Holy Spirit.

We don't have to go out of our way to find Calcutta or "fly" like Eagles...

SUMMARY

Life-cycle of a healthy Christian:

- Holy Spirit gave full assurance the message preached was truth
- How the disciples lived among the people gave further evidence of the proof and truth of the gospel message.
- Converts rec'd the message of truth with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of severe suffering it brought to them.
- The new converts imitated their teachers.
- The new converts became examples (themselves) to all Christians.
- The word of God continues to propagate and spread as a result of all of the above.

Be inspired by the Thessalonian converts today. Be all God desires you to be in His kingdom.

Part II – Continuing the application...

Last week when I spoke with you, I shared a message and example of what I referred to as the “Lifecycle of Christian Evangelism.” During that message, we looked at the first letter to the Thessalonians where Paul spoke of how the Gospel message came to the converts not just in word, but in **power**. We read that Paul and his fellow missionaries lived a life of accountability and conviction, modeling what it meant to “follow Christ” before the Thessalonian converts. Following this “word of power” and lifestyle imitation of Christ, the Thessalonians were encouraged to do likewise; that is to believe the word, live the word, and imitate the life of Jesus as they had witnessed through the lives of Paul and his fellow missionaries. The result of these events and lifestyle change was the cycle repeating itself across the immediate borders of Thessalonica and beyond. So, in these few verses (1 Thessalonians 1:2-10) we are able to see a classic example of “working” evangelism.

The key points in this example were:

- The message came to the Thessalonians in truth, power, and conviction.
- The message was “lived” in the lives of those bringing it. There was no hypocrisy; Paul and Co. walked the talk and practiced what they preached.
- The new converts received the message with joy and became disciples of Christ by imitating their teachers.
- The message of God and its life transforming power spreads and grows in the life of others as this cycle continues to repeat.

We spent some time highlighting these key points and emphasized the importance of “imitating Christ” and taking responsibility for being accountable to those persons in our circles of influence to whom we are representing the Christian message. Did anyone give thought to these points this week? Were there moments where you considered your words or actions and changed the way you were going to present yourself for the sake of the Gospel and how you might represent your faith in Jesus? Assuming a “yes” answer, as a result of this change, were you presented with the opportunity to further share the message of Christ?

It is my belief that most (if not all) of us would find the points in last week's message inarguable. That is to say, we agree the points of the message are true. However, I also believe that simply because we can agree something is true, does not guarantee that we will not have difficulty incorporating it into the fabric of our lives. Another way of saying this is; just because I believe it, does not mean it works for me. This is what I'd like to talk about with you today. Building out from our message last week I hope to answer the question, "how do we go about maintaining continuity and consistency in our message of Jesus as we go about our daily lives?"

Paul wrote in his letter, "*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.*"¹ Our Biblical narrative is not comprehensive in sharing the details of the affliction encountered by the Thessalonian converts, but I think it may be safe to assume that "much affliction" carries with it the inferred understanding that their *affliction* was not minor...it was probably fairly severe and not a good thing. We may or may not be in the same place or situation as the Thessalonian Christians, but I am sure the affliction, persecution, tests, and trials that we face individually are very real to us. So, again, my question is how do we maintain joy and steadfastness in the testimony of our faith? I think the answer can be found in the words of Paul as he wrote to the Thessalonians; "You became imitators of us and of the Lord..."

When I think of becoming an ***imitator of the Lord***, my first thoughts are more likely to be, "No way...impossible...can't do it." However, there are a number of considerations that merit our attention. The first consideration is can it be done; can we imitate Jesus? Jesus had supreme and absolute confidence that we could follow him in truth, obedience, unity, and love. Follow along with me as I share a few examples; you may want to write these down.

1. ^{NIV} **John 14:**

⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." ⁸ Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." ⁹ Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even

¹ 1 Thess 1:6, 7

after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. ¹² I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. ¹⁵ "If you love me, you will obey what I command. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-- ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

2. ^{ESV} John 15:

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

3. ^{ESV} John 17:

¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. ²⁰ "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

4. ^{NLT} 1 John 2:

⁴ If someone claims, "I know God," but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. ⁵ But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. ⁶ Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did.

So, **consideration number one** is clearly that Jesus thinks we can imitate him. In fact, not only does he believe we can live as he did, he expects us to do so.

This brings us to our second consideration. How did Jesus do it? What was his foundation? My thoughts go back to when Jesus was questioned about what he believed were the greatest commandments. Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."² This is the foundation by which everything else in our existence builds out from. Jesus said it was so in his own life; "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does."³ Jesus sought to please his Father God; Jesus was one with the Father, and Jesus loved the Father with all his heart, soul, and strength. Jesus truly had the Mind of God. You will remember when Peter rebuked Jesus for prophesying his own death what Jesus' response to him was; "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."⁴ Jesus had his mind solely on the will and plan of God. We can see this played through all of Jesus' life and particularly in the climax of his prayer in Gethsemane where he prayed on three occasions for the cup of his sacrificial death to pass from him. Yet, we are told, he ended his prayer on each of those occasions with the words, "nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will..."⁵ I would imagine this is most often the place where we get hung up. I think it is rare that we continuously, and without fail, can always speak and follow through with the words, "*Father, not as I will, but as you will.*"

Consideration number two, then, is thinking with the mind of Christ. Being unified in purpose and mission with God and giving Him glory. How is it done? The foundation begins with loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Then, choose to consider each decision with the words of Jesus, "not my will, but Your's be done" ringing in my ears and in my heart.

² Matthew 22:37

³ John 5:19 [NLT]

⁴ Mark 8:33 [ESV]

⁵ Matthew 26:39 [ESV]

Finally, I would like to consider one more thought. We have considered “can we do it” and “how do we do it.” Let us now ask the question, “What does it look like?” I mean, practically speaking, how do we imitate Jesus in our world today? I propose that we imitate Jesus in our world today the same way he instructed his followers to do in their day. What was that?

I think we can get a very good picture of Jesus’ practical expectations from his words.

Jesus taught:

“God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted. God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth. God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied. God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy. God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God. God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God. God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers.”⁶

What is the picture that Jesus is painting; how is he “dressing his disciples?” He says his sheep...

- Realize their need for him
- Live humble lives
- Long for justice
- Show mercy
- Have pure hearts
- Labor for peace
- Are mocked and persecuted

Did Jesus lead by example? Yes. There are countless examples from the Gospel writings and the Church Epistles that we could associate with each of these points. And, we are called to imitate Jesus. Do you love those who despise you? Jesus did. Do you forgive persons who do not ask for or deserve forgiveness? Jesus did. Do you give to those that do not have? Jesus did. Do you go out of your way to include those who are excluded? Jesus did. Are you willing to give someone another chance when you’ve already given them a hundred other chances? Jesus did.

⁶ Matthew 5:3-11

I don't think it is necessary for me to give you specific examples concerning these instructions. All you need do is turn to almost any book in the New Testament scriptures to find a detailed application. The challenge to us is to incorporate this teaching and way of thinking into the "daily-ness" that is our lives. Jesus said; "I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink. I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me." Then we say; "Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?" And Jesus answers us, "when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me."⁷

So our third and final consideration this morning, "what does it look like," I leave the answer for that question to you. What does it mean to imitate Jesus and what does it look like? Honestly, I think lack we the courage to want to answer that question. It's easier to look at the pictures portrayed in the Biblical account rather than observe the truth in our own backyard. If we look outside our doors with the eyes and heart of Jesus, we are liable to be called to action. There are hungry, thirsty, lonely, and sick people everywhere. These afflictions span the entire gamut of emotional, physical, and spiritual application as well. In the middle of the chaos of this world, how do you imitate Jesus?

RECAP – SUMMARIZE (3) POINTS

- 1. Jesus believes, expects and empowers us to live as he lived.**
 - 2. Unity of mind and spirit with God was Jesus' foundation of power; and that is, truly loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.**
 - 3. Denial of self and becoming the servant of all (submission, obedience, self-sacrifice, and service).**
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Paul wrote in his letter, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord." Because of the Thessalonians, the gospel message spread like wildfire throughout Macedonia and Europe. Have you received the message of Jesus with authority and conviction? Are you an imitator of Jesus? He expects you to be and has made provision for you to be empowered to "walk as he walked." Will you decide today to consciously choose to be an imitator of Jesus?

⁷ Matthew 25:42-45