

# Imitation

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

- [ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, again, let me welcome you. As I said at the beginning of the service, as we know, this is Father's Day. And while the focus that we're going to take tonight isn't explicitly about Father's Day, I have been reflecting this week on my dad and on my two boys.
- And for those of us who are parents, we know that one of the most exciting and entertaining but also most terrifying realities of having kids is that they have an incredible desire and capacity to imitate you.
- To imitate things that you want them to imitate. To imitate things that you hope they don't imitate. We had an experience earlier this week. My wife's out of town, not related to this experience.
- Don't tell her that I told you this. But we had an experience earlier this week where we're in the living room, kids are playing, you know, for the moment, everything's quiet, no fights are happening, no screaming.
- We have a six-year-old and a three-year-old. We hear the three-year-old's voice from the other room just go, bow-chicka-bow-bow. Just clear as day.
- [ 1 : 1 1 ] And I sort of sit bolt upright and I look at, did I just hear, did he just do that? And I turn to ask Laura, where in the world did he hear that? And I turn and she's not looking at the door, she's looking at me.
- And she's giving me the death stare. She's going. And I thought, and it's possible that I maybe did that one time.
- Maybe once. But that's all it took. And steel trap three-year-old just went, bam, and got it. And he's now doing it regularly.
- And has no idea of the context. And I still am not 100% sure that I did it. But what you see here is this incredible capacity to imitate.
- And then the three-year-old wants to imitate the six-year-old. When I'm doing things like shaving, our six-year-old will stand there and he'll pretend in the mirror to shave. It's fascinating. It's heartbreaking.
- [ 2 : 0 8 ] It's funny. It's terrifying. The role of imitation is not only something that happens with kids. We see this in our own lives. How did you learn to speak?
- Nobody sat you down as a two-year-old and taught you grammar. You learn to speak by imitating the people around you, your family. Look at the way you dress.
- Look at our haircuts. Look at our shoes. Look at the way we present ourselves. Look at what we wear to work. We didn't wake up one day and make all of this up.
- Ex nihilo, right? Fashion is 5% innovation, 95% imitation. Right?
- Culture is largely imitation. Trends are simply kind of imitation gone wild. As Christians, we talk a lot about personal growth.
- [ 3 : 0 7 ] We talk a lot about personal formation. We talk a lot about discipleship. But frankly, a lot of that conversation happens in a very individualistic way. When we think about growing in our faith, we think about reading books.

We think about sort of going to conferences. We think about personally learning, listening to sermons. We think about personal growth as in me, myself, and I in a vacuum. And it can be highly individualistic.

I think to a certain extent, that's because in the West, we've largely forgotten the incredibly important role that imitation plays in formation.

And that's partly because our whole educational system in the U.S. is based in the Greek approach to education, which largely overlooks the role of imitation.

Now, by contrast, the Greek approach to education is based in the idea of imitation. So some contrasts. The Greek approach to education focused on content.

[ 4 : 10 ] But the Hebrew approach focused on relationship. Right? The Greek teachers tried to shape their students' minds. Hebrew teachers tried to shape their students' heart and character.

Right? So Greek students were to learn what their teachers know. Hebrew students were to become what their teachers were. The setting for Greek education was the classroom.

The setting for Hebrew education was a family. Paul, the Apostle Paul, being Jewish, understands that as we are all called to be like Christ, that part of what that requires is that we have examples to imitate.

And that's what he's talking about in Philippians chapter 2. He begins talking about it in verse 19. It runs all the way through the end of chapter 3. It's a big section in the middle of the letter about the place of imitation in the Christian life.

Now, this makes some Christians nervous, especially those of us who come from a theologically reformed background. There's a lot of emphasis on the fact that Jesus gave his life and did for us what we can't do for ourselves.

[ 5 : 29 ] That our only hope, that our entire salvation in life is based in grace, not works. And so when we start talking about imitation, it's easy to get nervous.

But it's hard to deny that when we look at a section in the Bible like this section in Philippians, this is what Paul is saying. And he's saying no more or no less than this.

That there are different people who reflect different aspects of Christ in ways that we can imitate. Nobody's perfect. We're all sinners. We're all broken.

We're all saved by grace. And yet, there are qualities and aspects in people's lives that reveal to us realities that point us to Christ. And so Paul here is turning our attention and putting forward a couple of people and saying these are people that you should seek to imitate.

Timothy and Epaphroditus. So what we're going to do tonight is just to spend a few minutes as we look at what Paul says about Timothy and Epaphroditus, we're going to consider what kinds of people should we look to in this way.

[ 6 : 37 ] If you just look around the room, those of you who are part of this community, if you think about the people who are in your life, who are the people that we should be looking to and trying to imitate?

What are the qualities that we should look for? So we're going to look at a few of these really quickly, a few qualities that we see in Timothy and Epaphroditus, qualities that we should look for as we're discerning who to imitate.

So let's pray for the Lord to lead us in this. Lord, we pray that you would use these printed words and use your servants here, Lord.

Lord, somehow you promised that through broken sinners and through your written word, that your voice can come through clearly, that we can actually hear you speaking to us.

And Lord, I need that. We all need that to hear the words of our Father. So Lord, we pray for that and we pray it on behalf of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. So the first quality that we see as we begin to read this section of Philippians is this, is that as we're looking around, as you're trying to figure out, who are the people that I should look to, the first quality is this, we should imitate people who put Christ first.

[ 7 : 57 ] In verse 21, Paul says, they all, meaning most other people, seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth.

So what's he saying? Most people, Christians included, they tend to really be about their own interests. And yet here's Timothy, this unique individual who actually lives in a way, he has proven through his life that he is living for Christ first and foremost.

Imitate that. See, there are a lot of great people in D.C. One of the things I love about D.C. is the quality of people that you're around, people who genuinely care, people who care about things like justice, ending oppression, equality, people who are fighting battles and trying to make the world a better place.

D.C. draws people like that. And it's one of the great things about living here. But the thing is that we need to recognize along with that is that doing good, the kind of good that Christians are called to do in the world, that that's also trending right now.

In other words, we stand to gain a lot of social capital when we do these kinds of good things. And the reason I bring this up is to make this point. It's very possible to do good, but for reasons that are ultimately promoting self-interest.

[ 9 : 18 ] Right? The motives can be varied. So Paul would say when you're looking for someone to imitate, don't just look for people doing good, inspiring things.

Thankfully in D.C. we have a lot of that. But if you're looking for somebody to imitate, don't just look for that. He says look for the people who seek the interests of Jesus Christ over their own.

Which begs the question, how do you know? Well, these are the kind of people who will hold fast to their faith, even if it costs them social capital.

People who will do it even if it's unpopular. Jesus was the most wildly unpopular person on the planet the day of his execution.

So it's people like that. He says imitate people who understand what it means to have a broken and contrite heart over their sin. Which also means they understand what real grace is.

[ 10 : 19 ] They understand grace. How do you know if somebody understands grace? Because they're patient. Because they're slow to anger. Because they're kind and gentle and quick to forgive.

Because they're willing to engage in conflict. They're willing to seek reconciliation. Why? Because they've been forgiven. They've been reconciled. Imitate people like that. And thirdly, people who are seeking to put Christ first have the same view of Scripture that Jesus had.

Which is somewhat rare. I mean, we live in a culture where either disregarding or entirely deconstructing Scripture has the appearance of sophistication. If you want to appear sophisticated, that's the approach you take.

But Paul would say imitate people who have the courage to engage Scripture thoughtfully. Using their minds. But ultimately then to put their lives under it.

That at some point they want to conform their lives to it. They want to obey Jesus through his word. Paul would say look for those qualities in the people that you seek to imitate.

[ 11 : 26 ] You know, we talked about people who, you know, how our haircuts and our clothes and our shoes and language, all that comes through imitation. Think about for a second, think about your worldview.

Where did your worldview come from? Did you wake up one day and develop it all? Just sort of come up with it? Where did it come from? You know, your values, your ethics, your morals, your understanding and assumptions about human purpose and identity.

Where did all that come from? The New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote an article a couple years back. I love this line from the article. He says, For generations people have been told, think for yourself.

Come up with your own independent worldview. Unless your name is Nietzsche, that's probably a bad idea. Very few people have the genius or time to come up with a comprehensive and rigorous worldview.

It's very true. So what do we do? Well, we take the shortcut. I mean, if we're honest, we imitate. We look to the social elites.

[ 12 : 35 ] We look to the elite journalists. We look to places like the New York Times. We look to the pundits, the thought leaders. And we assume that if we imitate their worldview, that that will reliably place us on the correct side of issues.

So we imitate. And Paul would say, be very, very, very careful who you imitate. It's not about being on the left. It's not about being on the right. And this happens at both polls.

Find somebody. Find people who have Christ at the very center of their worldview. People who have built a worldview around that. People who are seeking Christ's interests first.

That they have no agenda other than his agenda. You'll never have a better friend than a friend who is seeking to live a life in imitation of Christ.

You will never have a better friend. There will never be a better influence on you. So this is the first thing. Imitate people who are living in ways where they're seeking by God's grace to put Christ at the center of their life.

[ 13 : 44 ] The second thing flows out of this. We should imitate people who put others before themselves. Who put others before themselves. I know this sounds like, oh yeah, I've been to church.

Of course I need to care about other people more than I do and blah, blah, blah. But I really think that we don't understand what this really means. And I think the whole concept of humility kind of gets a bad rap. I think it kind of gets misunderstood.

A lot of times I think humility, we think of humility as being self-deprecating. We think of humility as kind of being down on yourself. Kind of downplaying your gifts and downplaying your strengths and downplaying all that.

That's not humility. You can be a humble person and still be confident in how God has wired you and what your strengths are and what you're good at. You can and you should be.

Humility is not low self-esteem. It's low self-preoccupation. Humility is low self-preoccupation.

[ 14 : 41 ] You can be confident in those things, but frankly you just don't think about yourself very much. And this is what we see exemplified in Timothy and Epaphroditus. In verse 20 it says, Paul says, For I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.

In other words, he's not just thinking about you when other people are around. He's thinking about you when nobody's watching. Epaphroditus, same thing. Verse 26, For he's been longing for you all.

And listen to this. He has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. So Epaphroditus is a Philippiian. He's been given money and resources to go from Philippi to Rome where Paul is under house arrest.

And he's giving Paul kind of what was lacking. In other words, money and supplies that he needed. The church had sent a big donation. And he gets there and then he gets sick. And he gets really sick.

And he almost dies. And yet what Paul is saying about Epaphroditus is this. In all of that, his primary concern wasn't his illness.

[ 15 : 44 ] It was the fact that his friends and family back home heard that he was sick. And he was more worried that they would be anxious than he was about his own condition. This is just a reflection of what Paul says is ultimately true about Jesus.

He says this earlier in chapter 2. He says, Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. You know literally that phrase, thing to be grasped, you know what that literally means?

He didn't count equality with God a title to be asserted. Right? So we use the word entitlement. Asserting your title.

He says Jesus didn't do that. There was no hint of entitlement. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. So what Paul is saying is this.

Look for the humble servants. Look for those people who have no hint of entitlement. Beware of the proud. For those of you who are here, you're not Christians, you may not know this.

[ 16 : 51 ] But I'll let you in on something about the kind of Christian world. The Christian world is full of pseudo-celebrities. Thinkers and writers and speakers. And the Christian world is full of conferences that pay the bills of the pseudo-celebrities.

And you can spend your entire career getting on a plane and going from one conference to the next. Speaking and speaking and speaking. And some of these people crank out books faster than McDonald's can make cheeseburgers.

And I'm not knocking those people and I'm not knocking that world. And I have a lot of friends who are part of that world. And some of these conferences I love to go to.

But we need to keep in mind as we're thinking about imitation that that is not what we should be imitating. That's not the kind of thing that Paul would encourage us to look for. Imitate the person who shows up two hours before church to set up by himself.

That's who you should be imitating. Imitate the people who will, more often than not, give up their Saturday to help somebody move. Right? Imitate the people who miss the service to go downstairs and teach our kids.

[ 18 : 04 ] Don't necessarily imitate the people up front. Imitate the people who stay an hour after we all go home to clean up the trash. Imitate the person who's quietly passing between the pews making sure that we got all our bulletins.

Those are the kind of people that we should imitate. Beware of people who are entitled. Beware of people who say things like, well, I would never worship a God who. Or people who tend to define their faith by what they do for God rather than what God has done for them.

Beware of those things Paul would say. The good news is Advent is full of such people. Advent is full of the kind of people who will stay an hour after cleaning up. Advent is full of the kind of people who will show up to help you move at a moment's notice.

And here's the thing. Honestly, if more of us imitated those people, we would never have to ask for volunteers because there would be no deficit. We tend to always get sign-ups for the up front stuff.

It's the downstairs, out of the way, behind the scenes stuff that we struggle to get sign-ups for. So here's what Paul is saying. Imitate people who put Christ first and thereby imitate people who put others before themselves.

- [ 19 : 19 ] Two qualities that go hand in hand. The third aspect of this, three out of four. The third aspect is this. We should look for people whose faith has been tested. Whose faith has been tested.

Listen, from time to time we have people come to faith at Advent. It's a wonderful thing. There's nothing more exciting than that. To see somebody, they're sort of going along and God breaks into their life.

And they read and they learn about Jesus. And they learn about the gospel of grace. And they encounter that love and it becomes real. And they come alive. And they're asking a zillion questions.

And they're hungry and they want to read everything they can get their hands on. And they're signing up for everything. And, you know, this is amazing and it's inspiring. And we love to see this happen. So be inspired by that.

But don't imitate those people. Why? Because we should look for people whose faith has been tempered by the good times and the bad. People who have weathered dry spells and dry seasons.

- [ 20 : 18 ] People who have had times of wondering, where is God in all this? Both men fit this description. Timothy, if you know anything about Timothy, He had started new churches with Paul. He had seen people come to Christ.

He had witnessed lives being transformed. But also, you may not know about this. This is about Timothy. Timothy dealt with chronic illness. Chronic stomach pain.

Right? Timothy had been disrespected. And falsely accused. And subverted. And opposed. Not by people outside the church. By people inside the church. People had tried to undermine him.

People had tried to discredit him because of his youth. But in all of this, he'd stayed faithful in his walk with Christ. Epaphroditus, same thing.

Respected member of the Philippian church. Possibly there's reason to think he might have been even financially well off. And yet he comes close to death trying to bring aid to Paul for the sake of the gospel.

- [ 21 : 17 ] And yet both men remain faithful and loyal and steadfast through it all. So when you're looking for people around, you know, the kind of people that you want to be in a triad with.

The kind of people that you want to prioritize spending time with. The kind of people that you want to learn from. Look for people whose faith has cost them something. Look for people who have been through grief and loss.

Look for the people who struggle with chronic pain. Who struggle with chronic illness. Look for the people who have followed Jesus through conflict.

And forgiveness. And reconciliation. Look for people who have been confronted in their sin. And admitted that they were wrong. Look for people who have been through it. Look for people who have wept and suffered.

And still held on to their faith. People like this have deep wisdom to offer. And it's not born in them. It's the kind of wisdom that comes from hardship that leads you.

- [ 22 : 15 ] That necessitates that you drive the roots of your life deeper into God's grace. Look for people with deep roots. That can most often only come through trial.

People who have been through the fire. So this is the third thing. We should imitate people whose faith has been tested. Prosperity will test you. Adversity will test you.

Look for people who have been faithful in both. And then the last quality is this. We should imitate people who prioritize relationships. One of the best things about this passage.

Look at how Paul refers to these two men. What does he call Epaphroditus in verse 25? Fellow brother. Fellow worker. Fellow soldier.

You know what he's saying there? We have a deep connection. This is a man with whom I'm in a common spiritual family.

[ 23 : 17 ] We have common work that we do together. Common priorities that we pursue together. And we have faced common dangers together. Right?

In other words, Epaphroditus is the guy I want by my side in all of that. And when he's talking about Epaphroditus' near-death experience, he says it would have brought him sorrow upon sorrow.

He has a deep love and a deep affection for this man born through sharing life experiences together. And then Timothy even more so. Oh, I love Paul's relationship to Timothy.

I love it. If you look throughout the New Testament, you can learn a lot about Timothy's life. Right? He's from Lystra. So that means he's a Galatian.

We know that Timothy's mother and grandmother were Jewish. And on Paul's first missionary journey, he went through Lystra, preached the gospel. Timothy and his mother and grandmother were there.

[ 24 : 14 ] They heard the gospel preached. They responded. They became followers of Jesus. They became a part of this church plant there. We know that Timothy's mom and grandmother raised him knowing the Old Testament scriptures from a very young age.

So we know a lot about Timothy. But if you search the entire Bible, there's one glaring absence. His dad.

There's only one scant mention of Timothy's dad. And it just says his father was a Greek. Which in the context means wasn't a believer, wasn't a part of the church, and probably wasn't in his life.

So for all intents and purposes, Timothy was functionally fatherless. And you know, you can only speculate about some of this stuff, but Paul makes a reference in one of his letters to Timothy about when they laid hands on Timothy.

You know, Timothy weeping. And you know, I remember reading that and just thinking, you know, it's only speculative, but you wonder, could some of that been because his father wasn't there?

[ 25 : 31 ] I don't know. I know that I really wanted my dad there when I was ordained. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Timothy when Paul comes back two years later?

Church has been planted. It's going. Paul comes back to check on it. Paul and Timothy reconnect. And as Paul's heading out, he comes to see Timothy and he says, Timothy, I want you to come with me.

Can you imagine the exhilaration of that? It's the beginning of this beautiful relationship. When Paul goes on to establish churches like the ones at Philippi or Thessalonica or Berea, Timothy's right there with him.

Right? Paul spends three hard years teaching the gospel in Ephesus and Timothy is right there with him. Right? Paul's imprisoned in Rome and Timothy is right there with him, serving him, caring for him, loving one another.

It's beautiful because if you know anything about Paul, Paul never had a son. He wasn't married. Timothy never had a father. And yet in Christ, they become father and son and they have a more beautiful, more loving and more shared life relationship than many biological fathers and their children.

[ 26 : 50 ] And it's so powerful to me because I think how many of us have stories that are like Timothy in one way or another? You know, either our father passed away or our parents got divorced and we never knew our father.

Family, things were alienated. We come from a broken home. Or maybe your dad was there and maybe your parents, maybe their marriage was intact. But maybe he was emotionally distant. And so you were functionally fatherless.

You know, if we had time, there are innumerable statistics about the impact of fatherlessness. The correlations between imprisonment and behavioral problems and likelihood to commit violent rapes and early teen pregnancies.

And you just go down the list of the correlations between those and people who come from fatherless homes. It's ridiculous when you look at the numbers. The fact is, though, all of us, to some extent, even if you have a great relationship with your dad, even if you come from an intact, healthy family, all of us bring into adulthood wounds from our families.

Even the great families, even the healthy families. But all of us come into adulthood with certain emotional wounds needing to be reparented. In other words, needing to have emotionally corrective experiences.

[ 28 : 18 ] So how amazing is it that the church is a spiritual family? You only have one mother and one father, but it's possible in Christ to have many spiritual mothers and many spiritual fathers.

The church is the only place there is that I know of where you can come with no family and you can leave with a family that spans the globe. And I say that because we love to imagine here what would it look like and what would life be like if we really took that seriously here in this church.

If we really recognize the potential of what it means to have spiritual mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and sons and daughters to really live as a spiritual family.

I bring all this up because this is only possible to the extent to which we prioritize and invest in relationships.

One of the biggest challenges to relationship in D.C. is that we are all so busy. And I've said it a thousand times, I would love to do that, but I just don't have time.

[ 29 : 24 ] But Paul would say don't imitate the people who work 80 hours a week trying to make partner by 30. Looks great on a resume. Don't imitate it. He would say this, imitate the people who know how to balance doing good work and being available to their friends and family.

Imitate people who strike that delicate balance. Who are able to be there. Because here's the reason for that. Most of us are young now.

You're not always going to be young. And one day we're all going to be old. God willing we'll still be alive. And when we're sitting around and we're 85 and we're looking back on our life.

I guarantee you not a single person in this room is going to say, man I really wish I had worked more. But you know the chief regret among people who are aging.

Is that they didn't spend more time with their friends and their family. So Paul would say imitate those people who are doing that. Who are getting the work done they need to get done. And yet they're prioritizing and investing in relationships.

[ 30 : 33 ] We should be looking for opportunities not only to have spiritual mothers and fathers. But also to become spiritual mothers and fathers. So these are the four qualities that we should look for in those we seek to imitate.



And the reason is this. Because all of these things that we see. We see these qualities imperfectly in other people. We see them perfectly exemplified in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who put his mission to restore the world through his own death.

Central to his life. Jesus is the one who is continually putting others before himself. Because he was willing to give up everything for the sake of humanity.

Humanity. We talk about imitating people whose faith has been tested. Nobody was tested more than Jesus. Read about his time in the Garden of Gethsemane. Begging is there any way father.

Is there any way that this can happen without me having to go through this death. And yet at the end of the day he says. Not my will but thy will be done. That is a tested faith.

[ 31 : 36 ] And then lastly Jesus prioritized his relationship with his heavenly father. And with us. And we know that simply because he gave up everything else. For the sake of his father.

And us. So as we imitate these qualities in others. What we're really doing is imitating Christ. In one another. So just three final challenges to leave you with.

Sort of three encouragements I want to give you. First. Look for people who will have this kind of influence on you. Recognize the power of imitation to form you.

And be intentional about the people that you allow to influence you. I'm not saying only be friends with people like this. We need all kinds of friends from all different places. But when you're deciding who you want to influence you.

Who you want to become like. Be very intentional about that. Number two. We should seek to become the kind of people other people want to imitate.

[ 32 : 39 ] Especially those of us in leadership. We should seek to set an example for one another. This is something we don't often talk about in the church. But I think about some of the people who have had the most profound influence on me.

Some of them knew it. Some of them it was kind of formal relationships. But many times it was not. There are people who have deeply spiritually impacted me. And I never. They never knew it. I sometimes only have realized it later.

There's one guy that I consider to be a kind of spiritual father. He's only a few years older than I am. But he's wise. His faith has been tested. He does put others first to the best of his ability.

He seeks to live for Christ alone. And these qualities have rubbed off on me. They have influenced and shaped me. And I think that's a guy I respect. That's a guy I want to be like.

We need those pace setters in our lives. And then the third thing is this. And this is just a challenge to hopefully spark your heart and your imagination. I've been praying for a while now. That as we grow in our ability to impact the community.

[ 33 : 41 ] That our church would gain a heart from mentoring. And I just want to lay that out. Because I know some of you are doing this. And some of you aren't doing it. But you're already thinking about it. And some of you are passionate about this issue.

And then there are some of you who have a lot to offer and a lot to give. You just don't know it. But do you know the fatherlessness in D.C. is an epidemic.

And right here, right around us. There are programs and ways that we could get involved mentoring. Just spending time. You know it's not. You don't have to. You know there's no. It's literally just life on life.

Spending some fraction of your time with a person intentionally. This is low hanging fruit, friends. So if you're doing this. If you're interested in doing it.

If you have a heart for that. I would love to know that. Because I would love to see this become one of the main ways that we serve in the city. Mentoring. So as we talk about this. As we talk about our fathers.

[ 34 : 35 ] As we talk about what it means to be spiritual mothers and fathers. Now let's come together and pray to our Heavenly Father. Lord, we do thank you and praise you. That through your Son, Jesus. We all have one Heavenly Father.

And that is you. Which means that we're all part of one great family. And we pray that our church would become more and more a spiritual family. I pray for more spiritual fathers.

More spiritual mothers. More brothers and sisters. And sons and daughters. I pray that you would knit us together in the gospel. And not only for those of us here. But for all in this community. Who would benefit.

Who would desire such a family. I pray that we could be that for all of those people. In your power and grace, Lord. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.