

Imitation of Christ Whatever the Difficulties

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[0 : 00] Now, before we turn to Scripture, let's just bow our heads in prayer. O Lord, we give you thanks for these words that speak so eloquently to us of Jesus, our conquering King.

And we thank you that he is the one who, through the truth, goes forward conquering and to conquer.

And we bless you, O Lord, today for the way that your truth has pierced our hearts like arrows. And we've been convicted of sin and of righteousness and of judgment.

We thank you for the convicting power of your truth when the Holy Spirit applies it. And he humbles us and makes us realize that there is salvation in no one other than Jesus.

And we pray, O Lord, today that we may know in our own hearts and minds that we are those that have been brought under his sway, the sway of Christ.

[1 : 23] And that we may profit withal from the Scriptures as we study them together. But we pray, O Lord, as is fitting for those in authority in the nations.

There is so much going on. There are so many crises on every hand. And we pray, O Lord, that you will give wisdom to those who have been appointed to high office.

That they may not abuse their power and influence. But that they may seek to be concerned, genuinely so, for the mass of humanity struggling in the storms of life.

We pray, O Lord, today as our thoughts are perhaps towards the subject of mothers.

And we pray that you would remember today the situations in the world particularly where, in your own mysterious providence, devastation has hit.

[2 : 32] We think about the situation in Chile and the islands of the seas. We think on situations like the subcontinent of Africa and so many parts of it, where mothers have lost sons and daughters and are grieving on that account.

And there seems to be no comfort for them. O Lord, our God, we pray today that in your own wonderful way you would provide comfort for them and an understanding of what you are doing through your own precious word.

O grant that your own people may be a means of supporting such and of helping them. We think about the situation in Haiti too.

We are very conscious of what is coming to them by way of seasonal rains. And we pray, O Lord, that you will remember that situation in mercy and be at work to turn minds and hearts to do something that they can easily do so that secure dwellings may be built and that mothers and children may be spared.

O Lord our God, you appoint the times and the seasons and we just pray that you will act. Act in a way that will help these poor folks.

[4 : 08] But we remember too, O Lord, the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan and to an extent Iraq. And we feel heavy in our hearts as we think about wives who have become widows and mothers who have lost sons and daughters.

O Lord our God, we just pray that at such a time you may be found and may be found as the God of all comfort who lifts up the downcast, who heals the brokenhearted and who knows how to support and sustain those who are devastated in their own souls.

O Lord, we pray now as we turn to your holy word that you may have a word for us, a word that you know we need to direct us along life's way, a word that will focus us more and more upon the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose only worthy name we pray.

Amen. We're going to turn then to 1 Thessalonians and continue our study there in 1 Thessalonians and chapter 1.

And we may just remind ourselves of where we've come from at the beginning there, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[5 : 59] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of our God and Father, knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and with much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy in the Holy Spirit.

Particularly verse 6 then, And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit.

Now, I want us to think about this in terms of imitation of Christ. Imitation of Christ. The word that we read there in the English, and you became followers, it is really imitators.

[7 : 23] That's the word that's behind it. You wouldn't perhaps know it, but that's what it is. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. So I want to think about the subject of imitation of Christ, whatever the difficulties.

Whatever the difficulties. He goes on, you see, to say, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit.

The all too popular presentation of the gospel in the 21st century lacks depth, and it lacks accuracy, and therefore the whole truth on what becoming a Christian is actually about.

It is presented in a way that suggests that come to Jesus and all your troubles are over. Come to Jesus and you'll get rich and make a lot of contacts, and so on.

It's a very lacking in-depth approach to things. And it is popular, it's attractive, because it promises something that it may deliver, but it will not deliver it if people really and truly become Christians in the biblical sense.

[8 : 48] Now, of course, it's true, and we've seen it, there must be a glad acceptance of Christ and his saving work. We must simply rest by faith alone on all that he is and all that he has done, and indeed continues to do.

But the walk is a difficult walk. And somebody said, it's easy to talk the talk, it's difficult to walk the walk.

And there's a good deal of truth in that. It's easy to talk the talk about the Christian way that we have a general nodding acquaintance with it, but the walk is difficult.

And Jesus made no bones about it, the walk is difficult. It's costly. Now, by this I don't mean that it costs in terms of giving our funds, giving generously to Christ's cause.

So that's an important part of the walk. It's a necessary part of the walk. And in some areas in the church, there's a big stress on our giving to the Lord's work.

[9 : 58] I'm not saying that we shouldn't see that as important. But when the Bible talks about costliness of following, that's not where the focus is.

No, what we mean is that walking by faith in Christ involves us often enduring hardships for Christ and often enough persecution for Christ.

And in the earlier verses of this passage that we've looked at, Paul had referred, you remember, to the wonderful change in the lives of these Thessalonians who believed the gospel.

We spent a sermon on verse 5 how that they didn't receive it simply in word only, but in the power and in the Holy Spirit and with much assurance to them.

Their lives were changed and the quality of the change soon became evident. We've looked at that too. Paul could remember their work of faith, the genuine nature of their faith and how it outworked in their lives, their tireless living labor and their stickability, their ongoing patience of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[11 : 16] We've looked at that. He saw clearly there was a change there that was marked. So much so that he could say, knowing, beloved brethren, verse 4, your election by God.

There was this wonderful change. It was evident. But here in this passage, Paul takes up another side of Christian life. And that is this whole business of enduring hardship.

Costly suffering in following the Lord Jesus Christ. And we want to reflect on this for a wee while and see it as part of imitation of Christ.

And hopefully, we'll not at all be put off from following him, but rather strengthened in our commitment to him. I want us to think about three things.

First of all, the Thessalonians' imitation of the missionaries. Paul can say, and you became followers, literally imitators, of us.

[12:24] You became imitators of us. Now, some have felt that Paul was a bit arrogant here in saying, you became followers of us.

Literally imitators, I say. You became imitators of us. Of me, Paul, and of Silas and Timothy. Surely, they say, Paul was simply a man.

He was a good man. He was an exceptionally fine man in his service for Christ. But he was only a man. He was a man at best. And Paul, the apostle, would be the first to agree with that.

And yet he still says, you became imitators of us. The very Paul who says, you became imitators of us, says, I am a wretched man.

O wretched man that I am. Romans 7. The same Paul said in 1 Timothy 1, verse 15, that he was a chief of sinners.

[13:31] Least of all the saints, he calls himself to the Corinthians. I am less, he says, than the least of all the saints.

And he develops that in 1 Timothy 1, of course. So Paul had a very healthy view of himself, what he was in himself considered.

And he gloried in what Christ had made him. And yet that same Paul, who knew what he was in himself, a wretched man, the chief of sinners and so on, could say, you became followers of us.

You became literally imitators. of us. Now it's interesting, and we'll just do this briefly, but it's interesting in 1 Corinthians 4, verse 16.

He says to the Corinthians, I beseech you to be imitators of me. Same word is used in the English followers. Literally imitators.

[14:33] I beseech you, he says, to become imitators of me. And then in 1 Corinthians 11, and from verse 1, be imitators of me as I am of Christ.

And you see there, we're getting a bit closer to why he can say, you became imitators of us in this verse. The missionaries then were more than ready to have the Thessalonians walk, the Christian walk, even as these missionaries walked.

because their doctrine and practice went hand in hand, and they were handed down by the apostles and their successors.

This doctrine that they brought was worked out in their lives, and so doctrine and practice were handed down. And Paul can say of him and his fellow missionaries, you became imitators of us. There's a real sense, you see, in which we can say that for Paul and Silas and Timothy, their doctrine and their practice of that doctrine were so intertwined that they could commend their lives as models for these Thessalonians, and that's what being said.

[16:00] Because their lives were Christ-centered, and how they lived out the doctrine was in keeping with Christ's teaching. And we need to beware, therefore, of imbibing, of taking on board traditions which are not apostolic.

Because they may be approved by generations among us, but not approved as apostolic practice. We need to be careful that we appeal to the way we do things as if it had the apostolic stamp upon it. The oft-repeated phrase, we've always done it this way, doesn't mean that the apostles did it that way, and we have to always remember that when we're defending some way of doing things or other, as if it had the stamp of the apostolic authority.

We can all too easily, for example, imitate godly people in their own sinful practices, and be out of keeping with the apostolic way of doing things.

We can easily be sacked into a pattern of doing things that maybe godly people did in their own fallenness and weakness, and the pattern that we're modeling our life on is wrong.

[17:37] We may find that people that we looked up to, maybe at the moment, I hope you are doing this by the way, you may be thinking about godly people you've known in the past, and you looked up to, and you know, as you recall, maybe they had a lack of forgiveness about them.

If you crossed them, that was you. That's not really godliness, that's not apostolic, that hasn't got the stamp of approval. You may have had people who were a bit superior in their piety, as if others were a long way behind them.

That hasn't the stamp of the apostles on it. That's not real godliness, that's a short-sightedness, a failing in this one or that one. Or being fault-finding.

The easiest thing in the world, even for godly people, is to find faults with others, and not in themselves. So what I'm saying is, we can take on board patterns, we can model ourselves, we can become imitators of those that we've looked up to, without perhaps realizing that they were defective in this area or that of their Christian life.

You see what I'm saying? And therefore, when we realize that that's what we've fallen into, we've got to sort it. But what Paul is saying here has to do with consistency, with biblical consistency, with aligning our lives with the teaching of Jesus himself.

[19 : 25] And this he can say, you became imitators of us. You became imitators of us. We want to have our lives ruled and directed and molded by the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

And so we consider in the second place Thessalonians imitation of Christ. You became imitators of us, he says, and of the Lord.

So that in fact, underlying the words of Paul, you became imitators of us, is this great and glorious truth, that he and these other missionaries were imitators of Christ.

They were committed to modeling their lives on Christ. They were committed to a healthy Christ-likeness.

Now, before we go a bit further on into this, let me say that there were areas of the life of Christ on earth which are simply beyond us.

[20 : 43] we can't begin to think about imitating them. They're out of bounds, so to speak, for us. His whole work as our redeemer, his taking up of our sins and sorrows, his whole work in all its aspects, his covenant headship, his being our representative, being our high priest, and so on, these areas are out of bounds.

We can't imitate him in these ways at all. But you see, there are areas that are of necessity to be affecting our lives, and we are to mold our lives around, we are to imitate him.

Now, what I'm going to do here is I'm going to distinguish between what we might easily say we should imitate him in, and what specifically Paul has in mind in this context.

The subject, the imitation of Christ, is a huge subject, and it looks at all aspects of human life, the best of human life, the Lord's holy life on earth.

But we're going to confine ourselves deliberately by the context that's here. And I want us to do it in the context that Paul gives us.

[22 : 15] You became imitators of us and of the Lord. Here's what qualifies it. Having received the word in much affliction with joy in the Holy Spirit.

And what I want us to notice first is here, in terms of the imitation of Christ, is drawing upon the Holy Spirit's ministry.

He talks about them receiving the word in much affliction. We'll look at that in a moment. But he says, with joy in the Holy Spirit, of the Holy Spirit means the Holy Spirit's joy that he imparts.

And this is significant for us, you see. Because Christ himself, the Son of God as man, drew upon the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

His ministry in this word was truly a ministry in the Spirit. When he read in the synagogue in Nazareth, you remember Luke records it in chapter 4, and he read the scroll, and he read from Isaiah 61, verse 1 following, the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, the Spirit of the Lord God, because the Lord God has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, and so on.

[23 : 43] And he told them that this day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. In a real sense, and you understand me, that I'm talking here in terms of his true manhood, taking nothing away from his essential and true Godhood, but in a sense he was truly a man of the Spirit.

Isaiah tells us in the prophecy, chapter 11, verse 1 following, that he would be endued with the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel, of might, all references to the ministry of the Spirit in the life of the Savior.

In the knowledge of the Lord, in reverence for the Lord. His ministry was carried out then by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And how much more therefore ought that to be true of you and me? We want to be imitators of him in this way, that we rely on the Spirit of God to work in us and to develop us in the life of faith so that we can be imitators of the Lord Jesus Christ, drawing upon the resources we need to keep in step with him.

And I think in Galatians 5, where Paul is talking about if you live in the Spirit, he says, then walk in the Spirit. Keep in step with him.

[25 : 30] This is the way to imitate Christ. Keep in step with the Spirit. Be under his control. Be imitators of Christ in this.

And in a way, just before we leave this first point within the imitation of Christ, if you think about the Lord Jesus Christ in his need to pray, you've got a similar way of looking at his need of the Spirit. It was part of his need as man, as the mediator, as our Savior. you. And what I'm saying is I'm arguing from the greater to the lesser.

If he needed that ministry of the Spirit, an indispensable ministry as man, and he did. If he needed to pray, and he certainly prayed, and we dare not say he didn't need to pray, or we're in trouble. How much more we, is what I'm saying. And so, what we're putting forward here first, since it's in the context, is we need to draw upon the ministry of the Spirit of God, and be imitators of Paul and the other missionaries who did this, and supremely of our Lord himself who did this.

[27 : 05] And the second thing within this is in love of the truth of God. this is a neglected area, Jesus' own view of the truth of God.

We tend to forget in a way that we forget because he's the Son of God, he's the eternal Son of God who became man, and we tend to forget about how we viewed the scriptures as man.

And how, and I say this reverently, and with understanding, how these scriptures molded his thinking, how he was under that word of God all the time, constantly interacting with it.

He regarded the Hebrew scriptures as the very word of God, that was the word of God they had until his own record was put together in the gospels and the later on the epistles through the apostles themselves.

But you see, his regard for the Hebrew scriptures was the very word of God, written down by men, yes, but men moved by the Spirit of God, so that the scriptures were the rule of faith and life.

[28 : 29] And Jesus himself, you see, who came to fulfill those very scriptures, scriptures, was under those very scriptures.

In a sense, the lawmaker put himself under that law as man, and he worked out his whole life under that. I came not, he said, to destroy the law and the prophets, which was the accusation of the Jewish leadership of the time.

I came not to destroy them, but to fulfill them. He came to fulfill them and to give us an understanding of what was abiding and what was due to pass away.

I think of a feeling it was an American Dutch scholar, Gerhardus Voss, who said, we have to think about the law and the prophets very much like the scaffolding on a building that's been erected. And when the time comes that the building's complete, the scaffolding's taken away. And Jesus brought about an understanding for us of what should remain and what should be taken away.

[29 : 53] This is one of the practical angles that I personally have a difficulty with the whole view that some areas of the church have that the temple in Jerusalem should be rebuilt.

It's part of the scaffolding. It served its purpose, as did the priesthood, as did the sacrifices. The scaffolding's away.

The truth has come. But you see, all the moral and spiritual principles of the law and the prophets are there for us, and all the unfulfilled prophecies are there for us.

But for Jesus, it was paramount. The scripture cannot be broken. How often when he was challenged by his enemies, he opened up to them the real meaning of scripture and confounded them.

And what we're saying therefore is we cannot really imitate Christ apart from receiving the truth in him and adhering to his teaching and the apostolic doctrines that were unpacked from that teaching.

[31 : 17] And that's why we come back again and again within the teaching ministry of the church. We come back to the basics. It's always good to remind ourselves of the basics.

We shouldn't be embarrassed to talk about the fall of man. The fall brought ruin on man. That's the first basic. Man is ruined by the fall.

Man needs to be regenerated by the Spirit of God. He needs to come to repentance. He needs the remission of sins. These are the basics.

Douglas Macmillan, the late Douglas Macmillan was great for the four hours, wasn't he? And we need to remember them.

That we receive the remission of sins through faith in Christ alone. And so what we need to do is we need to be students of the Bible.

[32 : 18] Our Bible shouldn't be gathering dust on yon shelf forever. Our Bibles, and if we can't read them anymore, we should use the wonderful facilities we have, the Bible and CD and so on.

There are things we can do to be students of the Bible. Why? Because our Lord as man was an excellent student of the Word.

be imitators of us, says Paul, and of the Lord. Oh yes, he was a student of it.

Did not the teachers, the doctors of the law, when he was a wee lad of twelve or thirteen, marvel at his knowledge, when he sat with them at the temple discussing these great doctrines of the Bible, of the Old Testament?

My dear friends, let us be imitators of Christ in this. Let us be students of the Word, that the Word of God will dwell richly in our hearts.

[33 : 37] And then lastly, Thessalonians imitated Christ through much tribulation.

Having received the Word, in much affliction, the word there is tribulation, with joy in the Holy Spirit. And what we might call this is rule one for imitating the Lord, and that is being under the persecuting spirit of an unbelieving world.

Jesus, our Lord, told the disciples, not like the modern evangelists, many of them anyway, will tell people, come to Jesus and all your problems are solved.

Jesus, our Lord, said, in this world you shall have tribulation. That's the word there. Affliction, much affliction. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

He told them to expect difficulty. He told them that they had to recognize it as a problem area that would be with them all the way, that the religious world and the secular world would be against them.

[35 : 03] there was no way of avoiding it. He said himself, didn't he, in John 15, John records it in verse 25, that they hated me without a cause.

And if they hated me, they'll hate you. And you see, dear friends, the more closely we live the life of faith in Christ, the more we are imitators of Christ, the logic of it is, the more the world, the unbelieving world, will hate us, they'll see us as a problem.

Earlier on in the gospel, Jesus was accused of doing his work by Beelzebub, the prince of devils.

And he said to his disciples, they'll say the same about you. just accept it. That's the way it'll be.

What happens to your master will happen to you.

The more closely you live in imitation of me, he said, the more the persecuting spirit will be manifest against you. And the fact of the matter is, if you think about it, what we've read already in Acts 17, about the gospel coming to the Thessalonians, first of all, there was opposition.

[36 : 38] The Jewish, unbelieving Jewish authorities rose up against them and they gathered some of the rough and temple, the rough local roughnecks from the city center and used them against the work of the gospel and the apostles.

Remember, they went to Jason's house, they took him out and rough treated him. The spirit of unbelieving world responds like this against the gospel.

And often the Lord's cause has it hard for long enough before at length the Lord allows it to prevail.

Paul himself, I remind you, had to leave Thessalonica because of the persecuting spirit that was abroad.

He had to leave it. And it was coming at the Jewish believers from the unbelieving Jews. It was coming to the Gentile Christians from unbelieving Gentiles.

And it was important therefore for them to understand early on. And it's important for us here today to understand it that all who live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution of one form or another.

[38 : 08] It may just be in the workplace, it may just be folk out to get you, to rubbish you, to make a fool of you, or it may be just in the local community to sideline you.

No, we don't want to hear their opinion. Sometimes, and folk will know it, sometimes when Christ comes into a family and this one believes and the rest don't, there's problems.

Jesus said that there are times when your enemies will be in your own household. We've got to take these things on board and recognize them. And if you recall, when we read in the book of Acts chapter 5, in a broader sense, the household of the Jewish community was against the apostles.

We read there in Acts chapter 5 how the authorities, first they had imprisoned them, the Lord set them free, they went into the temple to preach, and they were dragged back to the authorities. And Gamaliel's wisdom prevailed, but it didn't prevent these apostles getting a beating before they were let free.

[39 : 33] Did you notice that? Verses 40 and 41 of Acts 5, they were beaten, and then they were let go, and we have these words that they counted it an honor to suffer for his name.

That's how they viewed it. They counted it an honor to suffer for the name of Jesus. And my dear friend, my dear adherent friend, don't let anything keep you back.

Don't let the fear of what others may say or do keep you back from honoring Christ. We have to be out and out for him, not letting any influence so keep us back.

These disciples got a beating because they wouldn't stop speaking about Jesus, and they rejoiced, counting it an honor to suffer for his name.

They weren't masochists. They weren't glittons for punishment. They counted it an honor to suffer for the name of Christ.

[41 : 02] And it was Peter, as an older man, he told the apostolic church, and through that apostolic church, us all down through the generations, to ourselves here today, 1 Peter, in chapter 4, he told them how to react when they suffer for Jesus' sake.

He said, rejoice as to the extent that you suffer as a Christian, or if you are insulted, because of the name of Christ, he says, you are blessed, for the spirit of grace and of God rests upon you.

1 Peter 4, verse 14. We finish it with the Savior's words, in the beatitude.

Chapter 5, verses 11 and 12, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. We receive salvation freely from him, and we'll receive the reward freely too.

[42 : 35] But this is what he tells us when we are persecuted for his sake, and falsely accused and insulted for his sake. Rejoice and be glad.

My dear friends, the imitation of Christ has what we might call a negative side, but it is an important and necessary negative side.

Paul says you became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the world in much tribulation with joy in the Holy Spirit.

Amen.