
Imitation & Example

Philippians 3:2-4:1¹

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Introduction

I was laying on my belly on our bedroom floor, propped up on my elbows with pen in one hand and Bible in the other. I was underlining, annotating, making stars and checkmarks as I read along in Philippians 3:2-4:1. I was preparing for this very sermon. My three-year old son, Reuben, walks into the room with the tiny little New Testament that this church presented to him at his dedication, goes to my desk and gets a pen, and lays down on his belly nose to nose with me. He opens his Bible and begins to do his version of making notes in his own Bible... think long arcs up and down, up and down, up and down the page with his pink pen. Regardless of the limitations of his age, Reuben is attempting to do what every child attempts to do – imitate his parent.

Your teenagers, whom I am privileged to spend a good deal time with, are at times so much like their parents. Hearing Jamison Vaughan produce a high pitch scream at the top of his lungs all the way down a tubing hill reminded me precisely of his dad. And what adult here has not laughed – or perhaps winced – as they caught themselves behaving in a manner reminiscent of their own parent. My two sons, even though they do not share my gene pool, will grow up to be incredibly shaped by who I am and how I live.

The shaping power of example is escaped by few, if any. Science tells us that the impact of loving adults in a child's life is by far the greatest predictor of a positive outcome. Because parents are most often the adults who are consistently present over a large portion of the child's formative years, the impact of their influence, for good or for bad, is immeasurable. And so it is said, *the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world*. An overstatement, perhaps, but it does bring us into the right frame of mind for this evening's message: Imitation & Example.

A key question that I want you to ponder this evening is this: Are you able to say to your child (young or old), "Imitate me... Follow me as I follow Christ... Do as I say *AND* do as I do." Is your example worthy of imitation? Are you a "model-citizen" of Christ's kingdom or are you a model citizen of the world's kingdom, living for all that the world values while blithely using the Christian name. Are you a "model-citizen" of Christ's kingdom or are you a model citizen of that strange American hybridization known as the cultural "Christian" – conforming to the shell of a kind of "Christian" *living* but experiencing no true inner transformation – a modern day moralist, legalist?

Our topic tonight – the third installment in our January Family Enrichment series on Parenting for Relationships is the role of Imitation and Example in the Christian home [Let's Pray].

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Imitation and Example

Let's begin tonight by reading together the passage we will be focusing on. Turn your Bibles to Philippians 3. We'll be starting in verse 2. [READ]

Imitation and example. It is a two-part equation. Imitators are following examples. Examples are leading imitators. If we are going to effectively live out our lives as believers, we must embrace both roles simultaneously. And just so the connection to our series is clear – this imitation – example dynamic requires the substance of relationship. As believers, we are to understand that a normative part of relationships between believers involves both imitating and setting examples. Our children, therefore, need to be taught this New Testament way of living out our transformation in community.

Our context is still the letter to the Philippians. Recall that as Pastor Dale showed us, a major theme of this letter is the believer's *citizenship* – not of Rome, but of heaven, of God's kingdom. Therefore, as we think about imitation and example, make sure you keep the context front and center. We are not merely talking about teaching a child by example how to shoot a basketball, shoot a gun, or bake a cake, we are talking about a gospel-fueled reality that plays a role in actively shaping God's people for his glory and their good. Imitation and example are fundamental aspects of Christian living that are necessary to our life in Christ. Therefore, Paul says, *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us... our citizenship is in heaven... stand firm thus in the Lord...* (v.17, 20, 21)

The Call to Imitation – Be Like Paul

I'm 39. That means when I was in high school and college, the great MJ reigned. Michael Jordan was the greatest player basketball had ever seen... and if you grew up in the same era, you probably still think he is. In 1992 Gatorade put out a great commercial that popularized the phrase Be Like Mike. In this commercial you see Michael Jordan with kids, Michael Jordan in competition, Michael Jordan off the court, Michael Jordan with tongue out, Michael Jordan in general... and anyone that had anything to do with basketball was trying to be like Mike. This same kind of general call for imitation is one of several ways we can understand Paul's call in verse 17 to join in imitating him.

We know this because we see this call to imitation restated various in contexts and in various ways throughout the New Testament. Listen as I share a number of the passages which explicitly or implicitly call us to Be Like Paul (and Peter and elders!):

1 Corinthians 11:1 - *Be imitators of me [Paul], as I am of Christ.*

1 Corinthians 4:16 - *I urge you then, be imitators of me.*

Philippians 4:9 – *What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.*

1 Thessalonians 1:6 – *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.*

2 Thessalonians 3:9 – *It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.*

1 Peter 5:3 - *...not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*

Even though the numerous calls in the New Testament to imitate are clear, believers often shy away from these kind of bold, seemingly self-centering, declarations. It is a rare day when you hear a pastor stand in a pulpit and say, “Imitate me!” It is, perhaps, increasingly rare to hear a parent say this. And while there may be several explanations for this, it is at least in part due to our strange ideas about tolerance and multiculturalism. “I have no right to set forth my way of living and thinking as *the* way of living and thinking...” yet this is exactly what Paul does. And just so you don’t fool yourself into thinking that, “Of course Paul could say that, he was an apostle!” Note that in verse 17 he adds *and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us...* effectively broadening the call to all those who faithfully follow Paul as he follows Christ.

Many Christian parents have become bashful in their own homes, voicing two objections: First, in this day and age is it really my role to tell my child to be like me? Will I not potentially squelch their personality? Discourage the natural expression of their inner person? Shouldn’t I allow my child to be who they truly are without imposing my ideas about life on them? Now before some of you sneer at this kind of parent – keep in mind that many of these very parents were raised in the homes of Christian parents who were sinfully heavy-handed, demanding, stifling, and perhaps even abusive. Too often Christian parents’ anger and control problems have been hidden behind the facade of godly parenting creating a pendulum swing their childrens’ parenting – but that is a different sermon. While letting your child emerge like a delicate flower in an alpine prairie can sound quite noble, modern, and even sophisticated at first – it never ends well.

Second, some parents may earnestly wonder about the value of their own example. Why should my child imitate me? I can hardly get my own life straightened out. What answers do I have? My child witnesses my hypocrisy every day. If you have never wondered this, you should take a moment to seriously consider why. If you have wondered this, good for you. It is a question that moves a person toward the gospel.

So how do we think biblically about these kinds of questions. Well, the all-sufficient Word does not leave us empty-handed. First, in the Bible, as we have already demonstrated, there is clear precedent for the dynamic of example and imitation in the Christian life – and therefore the Christian home. Second, because we have this precedent, parents are empowered to say to their children, “Be like me! Imitate me!” But isn’t that self-aggrandizing crazy talk that will make your child more likely to be rebellious in his teen years, have major depression as a young adult, and an identity crisis when he is middle-aged? No. It is not. Why? Because all of Paul’s, and Peter’s, calls to imitation either implicitly or explicitly carry with them one very significant qualifier – you can see it really clearly in 1 Corinthians 11:1, *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.* Parents are not called to make their children little versions of themselves, or even their preferred selves. They are called to woo their children, to train their children, to instruct their children according to gospel of the living Christ.

Ah... that starts us thinking about the other side of the equation. This isn’t just about imitation, it is also about example. But we will get there in a moment. In summary, those primari-

ly responsible for a child's spiritual development ought to be saying, "Be like me... as I strive to be like Christ."

What about that other question? I'm a hypocrite or just plainly a bad example. To be clear, a parent should not call a child to an ungodly example in themselves. However... take a cue from Paul – a man who openly confessed that he was the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15) and gave sufficient proof as to both his past sins and his current struggles. Beloved, at an appropriate level, confess your sins to your child. Allow them to see you run to your Jesus for the comfort of the gospel. For every bad example you set, there is the opportunity for you to counter it with the example of how a believer earnestly and humbly seeks forgiveness and mercy. As to hypocrisy in particular... hypocrisy can only be hypocrisy when one's sin is coupled with pride and arrogance. Be the kind of Christian parent who admits and biblically deals with their sin in humility. No home will ever be sin free, but it can be increasingly humble.

So practically speaking – what does the call to imitation sound like in the home?

At Theo's age, my 18 month old, it sounds like this: Theo, don't say "eh" when you want Mommy to get you a drink. Use your words. Repeat after me: "Mommy – drink – please." This is how you treat Mommy as an image-bearer and not an animal.

For an elementary age child it may sound like, "Son, watch closely how I treat your mom. See how I open her doors? See how I carry bags of soil to the garden? See how I comfort her when she stubs her toe? See how I go to work every day to provide for her needs and yours? This is how a Christian man leads, protects, and provides for the women in his life in a way that pleases God. Every year that you get older, you should be doing more and more of these things you see me doing for your mom.

With your teens in the youth group it might sound like, "Son, I can see that as you are getting older and you have more freedoms to make independent choices, your heart is being revealed. You don't desire to be with God's people under God's Word. The path you are going down will lead you away from God and his goodness. Listen, your mother and I have been where you are at and we have, by God's grace, chosen to follow after him. Let me assure you, we have no regrets. In fact, we can't imagine being more fulfilled in life than we presently are. Son, let me strongly encourage you to follow our pattern as we try hard to follow Jesus. These are the paths of the righteous and the lead to peace and joy."

Neither Dogs Nor Enemies

So that is the imitation half of the equation – but what about the example half? How does that play out? In Philippians 3, I believe there are a number of specific applications given the context – we are going to focus on just two. The first one has to do with Paul setting himself forth as the "anti-example." In other words, don't be like *that* but be like *me*. And as you will see, Paul is not simply talking about unsavory behaviors. He is talking about beliefs, attitudes, and desires. The call to imitation is rich, deep, and wholistic, hence **keep your eyes on...**

Paul's call to imitate himself (and others like him) is sandwiched between warnings about dogs and enemies. You can find the dogs in verse 2 and the enemies in verse 18. In verse 2, Paul is speaking of the Judaizers – those who trusted in their own righteousness, their own duties, their own practices, their own way of life, to gain their position before God. Their confidence was in their personalized version of religion. In this sense, they were legalists attempting to please God through their own brand of moralism.

In verses 18 and 19 you will find the enemies, the enemies of the cross of Christ. It is not completely clear if these are the same people as the Judaizers mentioned in verse 2 or a different group. They are described somewhat differently as not even pretending to be religious – rather, they are worldly, *their god is their belly and they glory in their shame with minds set on earthly things*. These are those who, perhaps, have thrown off any restraint, any concern for even a moral life. There is no pretense. In practical experience, these individuals were often once the moralists and have finally rejected the pretense religion as their disillusionment with an empty system of rules continually fails to supply joy and peace.

Paul's call to imitate himself is over and against both of these groups. Both of these groups still exist today. Both of these groups will compete for the attention of your children. Both of these groups will seek to build relationships with your children. It is through the fabric of the relationship you (and other adults) have with your children that you will call them to an example that counters the effects of the moralists and those who whose god is their belly.

Look around – maybe even in your home. It is not hard to find a moralist who desperately needs to be confronted with the example of genuine faith. At the Chapel this kind of moralism among youth is of described as “cultural Christianity” or the idea that a certain way of good and upright living is the faith itself. Its tenets have remained fairly stable over the past half a century or more. Don't drink, don't dance – or at least don't dance to popular music, don't watch certain kinds of movies, don't play certain kinds of video games, don't say certain words, don't hang out with certain kinds of kids, don't wear certain types of clothes. Do go to church, do go to youth group, do go to Christian school, do listen to Christian music, do read Christian novels, do be a republican, do treat the poor, the divorced, the uneducated, and the unsuccessful as those who have gotten what they have earned (just as you have gotten what you have earned), and the list could go on and on. Now to be clear, most of these things are not problematic in and of themselves and in some cases may be an expression of biblical wisdom. However, when these become the substance, the righteousness, the source of salvation, the explanation of faith, there is a huge problem. Paul says, *...[we] worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh... not having a righteousness of [our] own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith*.

The most concerning thing about this state of affairs is that without close inspection, it can easily pass for the real thing. This is why so many of the New Testament epistles pronounce warnings against the Judaizers, the legalists and moralists, because one can easily be fooled. Your children keep all “the rules” that have come to be equated with the “religious” person. In other words, you have really *nice* kids, really *good* kids, kids who *keep their nose clean*, and *stay out of trouble*. But inwardly, there is no transformation, no dependence on Christ,

no overwhelming sense that there good is far from good enough. This kind of morality is far more dangerous than immorality... because it can pass.

However, a parent is often in a position to make a closer examination. They are also in the position to call their youth to an example that is deeply different than this kind of cultural Christianity. For youth who have become moralists, there is often thinly veiled thread of pride and arrogance that pulls through almost every aspect of their lives. A quickness to judge those unlike themselves on standards that may start out as biblical but quickly drift into the self-made rules that are rigidly applied to others but very loosely applied to themselves. Humility, as Pastor Mark described it last week, is often in short supply. There is not the kind of sweetness and joy which can only come from heart that understands it was utterly hopeless and lost in sin and has been miraculously saved through horrendous sacrifice of another. They are not quick to forgive but hold grudges and keep ledgers. They believe that people simply engaging in pious overstatement when they say, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." The whole idea that they could be "as bad as that person" is completely foreign... They continually, in their heads, are thinking about themselves. They very deeply hide their sin, may be wholly invested in an elaborate self-deceits that to others are patent-ly irrational and self-serving, they go to very great lengths to ensure that they can maintain other's perception of them as righteous – and so they must, they are trusting in their own work for salvation and any threat to their house of cards will bring down their entire religious system. Unfortunately, the older a child gets with this false religious system in place, the more sophisticated and engrained it becomes.

This is not the only example that Paul is seeking to counter. There are also those who dismiss religion altogether. They *glory in their shame, their God is their belly*. Again, for Chapel youth, the exposure to this way of living, and therefore the temptation, may not happen until after high school. First year in college, first time spending lots of hours outside the home, first time becoming heavily involved in a job, first time other priorities begin to challenge church attendance, first time seeing how the other side lives... They may be a little crass, a little crude, a little inappropriate – but they are so funny, so carefree, and they are so, much, fun. And one of them even thinks I'm pretty – or handsome... Are they really *enemies of the cross*? Is it really true that their *end is destruction*? They just seem like people having a good time and what is wrong with that? Little step by little step a young adult may inch toward them until they begin to look an awful lot like one of them. Soon, they become preoccupied by earthly things – whether it be success and the American Dream or fun and the party lifestyle or strength and personal performance... etc. They develop an appetite for it and go hard after it and before long, you will see and hear it, glorying in what our God says is shameful – personal pride in a large income, personal pride the number of drinks consumed, personal pride in the perfectly cut torso.

So nestled in between these two groups of people is Paul's anti-example. He says, *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears...* Paul sets his own personal example, and the examples of those who are like him, as the alternative to these other ways of living, these other ways of believing. And he does so with passion and ardour. "Follow me!" he says, or you will... will what? Make messes of your life?

Be unsuccessful? Embarrass the family? No. The stakes are far higher than all of these. Follow me or become enemies of the cross doomed for destruction. You see, the value of this example, in Paul's estimation, could not be higher.

Paul's example is not a passive, diluted, weak, or half-hearted – it is one marked by a clear sense of what is true, who is true, and what is worth giving everything up for. In verses 12-17 Paul uses the picture of the runner to communicate the – if you will allow me improper use of the English language – the “utterness” of what he is setting forth. Listen to the tenor of Paul's language here *Not that I have already obtained... I press on to make it my own... forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize...* All that Paul is referring here to is in the end, wrapped up in the person of Jesus. Paul is clear about what his example sets forth, whose kingdom it represents. He puts himself forth as the model citizen of heaven – *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...* Paul's example is not of the kingdom of self, like the moralists. He is not of the kingdom of the world like those whose god is their belly. Paul ardently and consciously runs for heaven and its King, Lord Jesus.

Dear parent, grandparent, older sibling, more mature single person, dear pastor, ministry leader, counselor, deacon or deaconess – how are you running? For whom are you running? Could I guess your citizenship by looking at you? All of us see runners, joggers, and walkers, all the time, so much so that I would venture to say they hardly catch our notice. But if you were to see a guy going down the side walk at full tilt, giving it all he has got, crashing through bushes, dodging strollers, chancing crosswalks, eyes fixed forward, you are going to notice and you are probably going to do one of two things – if not both. You are going to look to see what he is running from, but even more importantly you are going to look to see where he is running to – or even better, *who*, is he running to. You see, people who run like Paul draw attention. Are you running in a way that causes those who are in relationship with you, particularly those for whom you have the responsibility of spiritual oversight, to look to see, what are you running from? Where are you running to? Are you able to say, *join in imitating me*? Run like I run. Escape the moralists, dodge those whose belly is their God, own your citizenship, and RUN.

Just so you don't mistake my preaching as a call to some kind of radical-ism that promotes solely radical acts as a method of achieving a purpose, precisely at the moment I was writing this very part of this sermon, yesterday morning at 7:30 AM... We had a very busy Saturday ahead of us and I had gotten up early to try to finish writing this sermon, the house is quiet, there are no distractions... except I hear my son coughing, and hacking, and coughing, and hacking, and coughing and... a pause, a sound like liquid hitting a hard surface... and sure enough all over the carpet, my son, calmly announces, “I puked.” Key moment. How will I run? What am I running for? How will I view the puke? As a distraction to the run? An obstacle to the run? Or as a test in the midst of the run? What will my example reveal about my run? This is where the action is. What will I say to my child? My wife? My self? How authentic is my faith? Does it change the way I clean up puke in the carpet?... I digress!

Rubbish and Gain

This brings us to our last point – we have discussed the role of imitation in Christian relationships, seen Paul’s anti-example and those examples he is calling us to reject, and we’ve tried to appreciate the intensity of Paul’s expression of his citizenship. So lastly, let’s think about what this passage teaches us the inner workings, the clockworks if you will, for Paul’s example? Why this intense rejection of dogs and enemies, this strain *toward the goal for the prize of the upward call*?

Central to this passage, and central to Paul’s example, is his assignment of ultimate value to the Person of Jesus Christ. Let’s read verses 7-11 again. [READ]. With that fresh in your mind, hear how Jesus “showed” those he spoke to an aspect of the same thing: *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then, in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.* (Matthew 13: 44-46).

Take note that neither Paul, nor Jesus, is simply asserting the incomparable worth of Jesus. The worth of knowing Jesus, in this passage, is tied directly to the righteousness that he provides to his children – that is, our justification. Jesus does for us what no amount of our own good work could ever do – no matter how many rules and laws we keep. The holiness of God will never be satisfied with what we offer up! We must have a savior. And it is the happiest Christian who has, consequently, given up all pretense of having a righteousness of his own and thereby clings humbly and tenaciously to the person of Jesus. It is this reality, and only this reality, in the Christian’s life that will keep him or her from becoming a moralist, legalist dog or an enemy of the cross whose god is their belly...

Oh dear parents, and all of you who are responsible in any way for the spiritual development of a child, this is where your example in life becomes so profoundly important. In your parenting, what is your example communicating? That “being good” is the most important thing? Or that you can never be good and that Jesus is the only one who can save you from your own badness? Do your children hear you speak about your sin, and their sin, in a way that exalts the gospel and its hero, Jesus Christ? Or do they come to understand sin as something that must be overcome through good ole’ American try-harderism and a healthy dose of keeping up appearances? Do your children see in you genuine dependence on Christ? Do they hear you calling them to this same dependence?

I cannot speak for you, but for Beth and I, our greatest concern regarding rearing children has never been whether or not they would be obedient, respectful, pro-social, and civil members of society. Our greatest concern has always been that they would be all these things (at least until they leave our home) yet have no deep desire to *count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*. Given our backgrounds and the slices of culture that comprise our lives presently, this is the real danger for our children. It is a damning danger. More dangerous, I would argue, than outright immorality, because they might fool themselves into thinking they are okay – tidy, well-mannered, socially appropriate, outwardly successful, and going to hell.

Because the danger of moralism is so prominent here at the Chapel, I want to close tonight by reading an extended passage from a book that is, in my opinion, the best book we have on parenting on our bookshelves here at the Chapel. It is my real hope that I will whet your appetite and that moms and dads will get a copy and read through it together in the near future - regardless of the age of your children. The book is titled *Give Them Grace*² – and quite simply, it is a wisdom application of the gospel to the everyday work of rearing children. In the passages I have selected, the author is discussing the errors that Christian parents often make in unwittingly encouraging moralism and legalism their children.

The passage that we'll pick up in the author has just finished discussing the superficiality of many of today's youth when it comes to faith. [READ] pp. 19, 20, 21, 35, 36, 58 if time.

Comment. Pray.

² Fitzpatrick, E. M. & Thompson, J. (2011). *Give Them Grace*. Crossway, Wheaton, IL.