

The apostle Paul says here in Philippians, chapter 3: "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me and live according to the example you have in us. "

It sounds like the apostle Paul may be a little full of himself because he is asking others to imitate him; he wants the people to do as he does. That would be like me saying to you that you must do what I do because I am better than you and know how it should be done.

How can anyone make a statement like that? Can you imagine a person saying, "I am the be-all and end-all, the very model of humanity? So here's how to get through life; just do as I do!" That is a pretty bold statement for anyone to make.

As you read on in the letter, you'll see Paul's goal is far more humble. After all, there are times when the only thing we can possibly do is to imitate another person.

Have you ever taken golf or tennis lessons? It's hard to learn anything at all of the proper technique without first observing very closely how the pro swings the club or the racket. And which one of us has ever learned how to swim, without first observing a swim teacher demonstrating the crawl or the breaststroke? Sometimes imitation is simply about learning, in the simplest and most efficient way possible.

Imitating someone can help us to learn, but the word "imitation" is not always highly valued in everyday life. When I walk into a grocery store and see two bottles of vanilla extract on the shelf - one that's labeled "pure" and the other "imitation," I know I had better reach for the "pure vanilla" because if I come home with anything labeled "imitation" Pastor Heidi will have me headed back to the store faster than I can give the Benediction. If there is a choice between something that is pure and something that is an imitation, most of us will choose the one that is pure. But this understanding of imitation is not what Paul is talking about.

When Paul talks about imitation, he is telling the people to do as he does; to imitate his actions, his words, his life so that they could learn from him about what it meant to live in God. Understanding the circumstances of this letter can shed light on Paul's comments.

Philippi has an interesting history. It received its name from its founder, Philip, the father of Alexander the Great. And then in 42 BC, Antony and Octavian who later became Emperor Augustus, defeated and killed Brutus and Cassius, the murderers of Julius Caesar. After they defeated Brutus and Cassius, Antony and Octavian turned Philippi into a Roman colony. As a result, the people of Philippi had to do most things in the Roman way. Not only did they wear Roman dress, but their whole economy and law were based on a Roman Pattern.

Paul was telling the people of Philippi to imitate him and how he lived in God's love as opposed to how they were living under Roman rule. What better way to learn how to live as a disciple of Christ than to watch what a Christian does and says.

There's a true story of an older couple visiting an enormously successful church in Los Angeles. Between services, they peeked into one of the Sunday school classrooms and saw the pastor's wife picking up used coffee cups from the table and the floor before the next class came in. Immediately, the couple decided that this was going to be their church home because there was clearly no pretense about "rank and privilege" in that house of worship. People served God because it was the right thing to do and not because they were assured of a pat on the back, or a plaque on the door.

There's another story of a small church in Georgia that can't afford a janitor, and so everyone pitches in when it comes to cutting the grass and cleaning the bathrooms, even former president Jimmy Carter and his wife. To me, it doesn't matter if you liked President Carter or not. The point is that even the former President took his turn in serving in his church community and was an example for others to follow.

I believe that in both of these instances, the people followed the **imitation** that Paul lived for all of us. But Paul isn't the one who first left this example because it was Jesus who lived a **pure** life of servanthood, who dedicated his whole life to reaching out and helping people in the name of God.

As Christ's disciples, we are called to that same livelihood. We are called to a life of service, helping people here in our communities as well as overseas. We are called to share the good news with all people in a pure imitation of the One true Christ.