

## “The Power of Imitation”

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

July 28, 2019

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### Imitation Imitation or Real Imitation?

I have an untested theory about imitation. Many of you have seen the old TV game show, Match Game, that ran in the 70s and 80s. I’m going to ask you to complete a sentence for me, in the style of Match Game. Your sentence is, “Imitation is....” How many of you said “the sincerest form of flattery”? That phrase - “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery” - was originally coined by an English clergyman about 200 years ago.<sup>1</sup> If I were coming up with a catch-phrase about imitation that would stick around for a couple hundred years, I would have gone another direction. “Imitation is inevitable.” Whether or not we are conscious of it, we are all constantly imitating and being imitated. The real questions we need to ask are “Who am I imitating?” and “Who is imitating me?”

I realized this week that I have a love-hate relationship with the word imitation, and there is an incredibly boring grammatical explanation for it. There are some areas where I want nothing to do with “imitation.” When I’m at the store, if my grocery budget allows, I’d much rather have real crab meat than imitation crab. In the baking aisle, I’ll pick up pure vanilla rather than imitation vanilla. I used to watch the TV show Frasier, which has been off the air almost 15 years now. In one episode, Frasier’s dad Martin tells him that he brought home some mock apple pie. He tells his son excitedly, “It’s called ‘mock’ because they use crackers instead of apples!” Frasier, whose entire character is built around being snobby and elitist, answers sarcastically, “Good - nothing spoils an apple pie like apples!” I’m with Frasier on this one. If I’m eating a pie, I want real apples, not crackers. The reason I don’t buy “name-brand” watches or purses from sidewalk vendors when I travel is that I know they’re imitations. Even in my relationships and interactions, I know there’s a difference between real conversation and small talk. In all these cases, I don’t want some cheap imitation; I want the real thing! Real food, real goods, real engagement.

This is where we need to draw a distinction between the two possible uses of the word imitation. When imitation is an adjective (i.e., imitation crab, imitation Rolex), common sense has shown us that it’s something that is like the real thing, but not quite as good. When imitation is a noun (as in Thomas a Kempis’ classic, *The Imitation of Christ*, or the phrase “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery”), it means something entirely different. This is my incredibly boring grammatical explanation for my mixed feelings about imitation. Imitation as an adjective is bad; imitation as a noun is good. For the purposes of all we’ll talk about today, I’m using imitation as a noun.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Caleb\\_Colton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Caleb_Colton)

## The Design of Imitation

From the outset, God designed us to be imitators. Genesis 1:27 tells us, “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Our very design, our fundamental nature, copies the design and nature of God. Of course, we’re not gods. Individually and collectively, we have chosen all kinds of things that make us poor imitations and poor reflections of God. But our essential character remains — we are a people who are formed as copies and made to imitate.

You don’t need to look any further than a healthy baby to see this in action. Have you ever held a baby in your lap, and made silly faces or noises? Have you ever turned on some music and started dancing with a baby? Provided the child is meeting his developmental milestones, babies from an early age will make those silly faces back at you, try to repeat your noises, and will sway and dance with you. Babies haven’t been taught to imitate; they know it instinctively. A baby isn’t trying to flatter you; he’s trying to learn how to survive in the world. By imitation, we learn how to relate to ourselves and others, to engage the world around us, and to grow. One of the most terrifying lessons I’ve learned in life is that children are always watching and listening, ready to imitate whatever they see or hear.

Imitation is precisely how every one of us learned to talk, to walk, to bathe or dress ourselves, and to do any number of other tasks that now seem second-nature. Most of the cooking that I know how to do came from watching my mom and then repeating how she measured and chopped and mixed things. I learned how to do projects around the house by watching my dad and imitating the way he held tools. I learned multi-tasking and a strong work ethic and a bit of stubborn determination from watching my family and imitating them. Friday afternoon, I performed a baptism (more on that in a minute). I learned to baptise by watching other people perform the sacrament; the order of service I used was unique to that event, but it was also very heavily imitated from an order of service that Pastor Bob shared with me. When I prayed at the baptism, and again later at dinner, I heard echoes of some of the people who have been spiritual mentors to me.

Earlier this week, I taught a lesson to our summer confirmation class that had everything in the world to do with imitation. We talked about how for the first 6 months of the year, we as a church relive the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Our corporate worship imitates this cycle every year — we anticipate through Advent, celebrate his birth at Christmas, relive his life and relearn his teachings, reflect and repent during Lent, mourn his death, celebrate his resurrection at Easter, and remember the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. Every year, we do the same thing, not because we lack creativity, but because that repetition is a gift God has given us. We reenact and relive over and over and over again. In other words, we gather together to imitate the life of Jesus.

Our sacraments are similar. Jesus didn’t just have a Last Supper with his disciples. He told them to keep gathering and breaking bread and sharing the cup. Jesus tells his followers, “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Paul will extend the instructions even farther, explaining that, “whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). In our imitation of

Jesus' actions, we live out our faith. Baptism is much the same. Scripture shows us the model of Jesus being baptized. The very last words of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew are instructions to imitate him: "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)

I mentioned that on Friday, I had the joy of baptizing one of our Corinth kids, 7-year-old Austin Boyce. When I met with Austin and her parents to talk about baptism, I asked Austin to tell me about why she wanted to be baptized. Her story began with the phrase, "A few years ago, I saw my brother get baptized..." As her story unfolded, it involved her own journey of coming to understand what sin is and that Jesus died for her sins. But it had its roots in imitation. "I saw my brother do this..." and in time, as she learned more about what she had seen, she wanted to do it too.

The Apostle Paul knows about imitation when it comes to the faith. For Paul, the question is not "Are you imitating someone?" That's a foregone conclusion. The only answer is "Yes, of course!" None of live in a vacuum; we're all imitating someone or something every day of our lives. The question Paul prefers is "*Who* are you imitating?"

### **The Models of Imitation**

The trouble that the Apostle Paul is having with the Corinthians is, to a large degree, a problem of imitation. In this letter, he spends just nine verses saying hello to them (1:1-9) before diving into the problem of division within the church. Some of the believers at Corinth say that they follow Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas (1:12; 3:4). The source of the division seems to be that some of the possible leaders the people had gifts that were considered more valuable by their culture. Those who appear to be wise or who are eloquent speakers embodied the values of the world they lived in. It's not inherently bad to be wise or well-spoken; there's a great deal of value for the church when it has people who are wise and eloquent speaking on its behalf. What Paul objects to is that the Corinthians are using these gifts of God as the litmus test of the leaders' validity or value.

This leads Paul to an extended discussion of wisdom and foolishness. His basic point, as we discussed last week<sup>2</sup>, is that the things that may seem desirable about a person have nothing to do with why God called them. Later in this letter, Paul will continue to develop the idea that God gives people a variety of gifts. Though these gifts are different, there are not "good" gifts and "bad" gifts. The division among the Corinthians is that they are evaluating their leaders, all of whom have been sent by God, and deciding that only some of them are worth imitating. What immediately precedes today's passage is Paul's declaration, "So then, no more boasting about human leaders!" (3:21) In the context of this letter, boasting has to do with being "puffed up" - another phrase Paul uses - and favoring one leader above others. Paul is going to set up a pretty simple model for the Corinthians, over against the competing leaders they're clambering after. They are to imitate him because he imitating Christ. Let's look at the model of imitation he sets up.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://corinthtoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Scandal.pdf>

**You should imitate someone who is a faithful servant (1-5).** First, Paul uses the model of a servant left in charge of something. Just like Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), Paul is saying that a good servant proves faithful and trustworthy. Back in 1:9, Paul told the Corinthians that God is faithful. Now he's setting himself up as a model of godliness by also being faithful with the things that have been entrusted to him. Specifically, he points out that he has been faithful with the proclamation of the gospel. He knows that the situation in Corinth is contentious, and there is a lot of judging going on between rival factions. Paul makes it clear that he doesn't think he has done anything wrong, but that doesn't mean he's blameless. Ultimately, it is God who will decide whether or not he has been faithful.

The Corinthians were focused on making judgements about which leaders were better or worse, and they were basing it on superficial matters. Paul is rejecting the whole model, and reminding them that their judgements are imperfect, short-sighted, and shallow. The Lord, he says, will make complete judgements at the appropriate time; all this judging business is not something for the Corinthians to get distracted with. He's not telling them to disengage from leaders or society. He's telling them to have a proper view of their judgements and the judgements of others.

**You should imitate someone who is a good steward of gifts (6-7).** The gist of these verses is simple: every good thing anyone in Corinth has is a gift from God. God gives different gifts, but there isn't a hierarchy of gifts. Paul will return to this theme in much more detail later in this letter (1 Corinthians 12-14). Here, he's reminding them that whatever admirable skills they see in themselves or one another, they need to remember that they are the gifts of God, not the results of their efforts. To boast of gifts makes about as much sense as boasting about your height, or the country you were born in, or who your parents are — they may be great things, but you weren't responsible for determining any of them. And if you weren't responsible for causing it, you shouldn't be bragging about it as though you were. Paul won't tolerate someone who wants to pretend to be God by claiming to be the source of these gifts. Paul cares only that the gifts be used correctly and for the betterment of the community. In this way, the goal isn't to be the source of the gifts, but the steward of the gifts.

**You should imitate someone who is a fool for Christ (8-13).** Through these verses, Paul lets out some scathing sarcasm. I have to admit, there's a part of me that loves when I come across passages like this in the Bible. I don't think that sarcasm and irony are the right way to communicate in all (or most) situations, but I love these little glimpses into the fact that the people in the Bible were real people. People who aren't just righteous models of godliness, but who would have been sassy, who would have rolled their eyes, and who would have scoffed at foolishness. In this section, he hearkens back to a lot of what we talked about last week. He's pointing out that what the Corinthians think is important is really foolishness when stacked up against God's view of the world.

Once again, Paul is turning the world they know upside down, saying that they may think they're satisfied, rich, powerful, wise, strong, and honored. In reality, they're not. But moreover, those aren't the things they should be going after. Instead of chasing after status, Paul brings up the familiar refrain of living in dire circumstances. But more than that, he adds here: "When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we

endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly.” (12-13) These are some very specific examples of very counter-cultural ways to behave. In Paul’s day and in ours, people want to preserve their reputation. When cursed or persecuted or slandered, it’s perfectly normal to feel the impulse to resist, to defend yourself, and even to strike back. Nobody likes to be a fool, but if the options are to be wise and esteemed in the eyes of the world or look like a fool for being like Jesus, there’s no choice. We should be fools.

**You should imitate someone who is *like a parent* (14-17).** Paul backs off his sarcastic tirade and gives a nod to the honor-shame framework of his world. He tells the Corinthians he isn’t trying to shame them, which in turn means he isn’t trying to build himself up. He’s trying to get their attention. He’s aware that there are a lot of people who are trying to influence them. Paul likens them to “guardians.” In the ancient world, the guardian was responsible for making sure young children got an education and learned to conduct themselves appropriately. In modern terms, they’re a little like a babysitter or a nanny. The guardian keeps rules for the sake of keeping rules, because it’s a part of the job. A parent, on the other hand, makes and enforces rules because they want their children to turn into decent adults someday. Parents correct and redirect and rebuke, but they don’t want to tear their children down. Their interventions have the long-term in view, and they are trying to bring out the best in their children. This is mature, responsible behavior that is worthy of imitation.

**You should imitate someone who *relies on the power of God* (18-21).** The final thing Paul warns the Corinthians about in this passage is the people who are “all talk.” Remember that the core issue we looked at last week, and which Paul addresses again in this chapter, are those who use smooth talking and convincing arguments and worldly wisdom and eloquent words to draw the Corinthians away from Paul’s teachings. Instead of the power of Christ and his resurrection, they rely on flashy rhetoric. Paul rejects this when he tells them, “the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power” (20). Indirectly, he sets up a choice — you can either rely on the effectiveness of your work, or you can rely on the power of God. Instead of putting their leaders up against each other and imitating the values and ways of the world around them, the Corinthians should follow Christ and the ways of God. In doing so, they should seek to imitate those like Paul who are faithful servants, good stewards of the gifts of God, who are willing to be fools for Christ, who relate to them with the love of a parent, and who rely solely on the power of God.

### **Imitating and Imitated**

Let’s return to our original questions. Who are you imitating? Who is imitating you? Whether you’re conscious of it or not, you’re imitating someone or something in all areas of your life. Some research came out a few years ago saying that the average American is exposed to about 3,000 advertisements per day. You are given over 20,000 messages a week about who you are, who you should be, and what should matter to you. That kind of exposure does something to us! This is one area in which I think we have it a lot harder than people in Paul’s world. They may have had more physical danger and more difficult lives, but we are pulled in a lot more directions, thanks to our easy access to technology. If we can easily access the world through technology, the world can just as easily access us. When it comes to imitation, if we’re not making a

deliberate choice about who to imitate, we will by default choose one or some of those 20,000 other examples.

If you haven't made a conscious decision to imitate someone in terms of your spiritual life, now might be a good time to think about that. Consider the people you know. Who is more established in their faith than you? Who has life experiences that has given them wisdom and insight? Who do you know who is a faithful servant of the gospel? Who is being a good steward of the gifts that God has given them? Who is passionately following Christ, even if their priorities or actions look foolish to the rest of the world? Who might God use to nurture and correct you, like a parent with a child? Who is living life by the power of God, rather than in their own strength? In short, who is living in a way that looks like Jesus?

Now, I know some of you have some objections. "Nobody is perfect." "I don't need help to connect to God." You're right. We're walking a very fine line here. It's a distinctly 21st century Protestant American view to believe that we're just as good or better on our own than in the community of other believers. For the past 500 years, we've been proclaiming the priesthood of believers. You don't need a mediator to get to God. I'm not saying you need a mediator. I'm saying you could benefit from a good role model. I'm not saying you need someone to imitate. I'm saying that no matter what you do, you are *already* imitating someone. Since you're bound to imitate someone, you may as well make a deliberate choice about what sort of person you want to imitate.

If you need help finding someone who can be a good role model for you in the faith, let me know. We have men's and women's mentoring programs, all sorts of small groups, and I'd love to help you get connected with any of them. But let me offer a quick word of caution. We don't have any perfect people around here. Choosing another human to imitate inevitably brings the risk of disappointment and disillusionment, as you realize that that person is sinful, just like you. But community is a gift of God. In these relationships, you'll begin to find an environment where we help one another be more like Christ. We won't do it perfectly, but we will do it together.

This brings me to my final word of caution. Just like you're watching and imitating other people, people are watching and imitating you. It could be your kids or grandkids, your spouse, your friends, your colleagues, your neighbors, or even complete strangers who cross your path. When they watch you, what model will they have to imitate? Will it be a model who is faithful or unfaithful? A good steward or a careless user? A person who is all-in for Jesus, or a person who is committed to worldly status and power? A loving parent or a harsh disciplinarian? A person who relies on their own power, or one who depends on the power of God? When people imitate you, will they end up looking more like Jesus, or more like the world?

The people you imitate aren't going to be perfect and get it all right. The people who imitate you will soon realize that you won't be a perfect model either. Even we as your pastors won't be perfect models. But by God's grace, we're going to keep trying to be people worth imitating, and we invite you to do the same. Because whether you're aware of it or not, you're imitating someone, and someone is imitating you. There's a lot of power in imitation. Let's decide together to use that power wisely as we seek to imitate Christ. Amen.