

The Law of Imitation

1 Thessalonians 1:6

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Disclaimer: The following are Dr. Jeff Stott's sermon notes and manuscript. They have not been carefully proofed for spelling or grammar. All Scripture quotes are from the New International Version unless noted.

When it comes to developing into a mature and strong believer several things come into play.

- You will need to learn how to study the Bible and apply it to your life.
- You will need to learn how to pray. Discovering how to talk to God and listen to Him.
- You will need to learn how to worship privately and publicly.
- You will need to learn how to treat people as a representative of Christ.
- You will need to learn how to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.
- You will also need other believers in your life to give you an example of how this looks and how the Christian life is lived out. You will need other believers who you can imitate spiritually.

Your spiritual growth requires imitation. The law of imitation says, "If I am to develop as a believer then I need to follow others who have already developed more than me as a believer." The law of imitation teaches you the fundamentals in order for you to succeed in various situations as a Christian.

This law of imitation is a universal law that God created. He designed us to learn by imitating others. For example, a basketball player watches others play basketball, learns their moves, practices it daily, and eventually masters the move. This is also

true with cooking. A person who wants to learn to cook learns best by watching and helping someone who already knows how to cook. This is true in construction, mechanics, driving, music, and education. The best way to learn and grow is to find someone who is doing it better than you and imitate them. It's the law of imitation.

In 1 Thessalonians we are introduced to the law of imitation, but it is applied to your spiritual growth. We are going to see that God wants you to imitate other believers so you can learn how to pray more effectively, love your families more deeply, and glorify God more faithfully. So let's take a look at this [read 1 Thess. 1:2-7].

Verse 6 begins by saying, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord." Notice the word "became." To *become* something means to "turn into" something, "develop into" something, and "to grow to be" something. The context of verse 6 is Paul explaining some proofs and evidence of their salvation. In verse 5 Paul begins explaining to them how he knows and is convinced they are chosen by God and are saved. He knows they are saved because the Gospel came with inherent power that changed their life, it came with the convincing and convicting work of the Holy Spirit, and along with a deep conviction that drove their life. As a result Paul says, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord." So when someone is saved a transformation begins to take place. They *become* something, they begin turning into something. So let's think about this for a moment.

Salvation is a transition. We change, convert, and shift from one way to another. In what ways does that happen?

- **We transition positionally.** The Bible teaches that when a person is saved they are moved from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. They are moved from spiritual death to spiritual life. They change from being unforgiven to forgiven. They change lanes from traveling down the broad road that leads to destruction to the narrow road that leads to life. Positionally you change. You "become" something different positionally. This happens at the moment you are saved.

- **We transition practically.** Because of the positional change you begin to think differently, value differently, and approach life differently. The way you live out your life begins to change. You are more concerned about honoring God through how you treat people, how you speak, how you react, what you represent, and you begin to be more concerned about your character. How you live life means something to you. So salvation includes both a *positional* change and a *practical* change.

This “practical change” is what Paul is talking about when he says, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord.” You became something different and are becoming something different. The word “became” (ginomai, aorist tense) indicates a completed action in the past that has continuous impact today. The word “became” is a change word and a transition word. As Christians we have been changed and we are constantly changing as we grow spiritually.

How does the practical side of that change and transition take place? How do we learn to live out the positional change in our practical life of everyday living? This is where the law of imitation is important. Let me give you several principles regarding the law of imitation.

1. Imitation is part of your transformation

Number one, Christian imitation is part of your transformation. Paul says, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord” (1 Thess. 1:6). He praises them for this, because it is a good thing. Imitating others is part of the process of helping you to grow. Let’s take a look at some other examples in the Bible.

- In talking to some new believers who were not living the way they should, Paul pleads with them in 1 Corinthians 4:16 by saying, “Therefore I urge you to imitate me.” Then he goes on to say, “For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.” He says to them, you need to imitate my way of life. Positionally

they have already changed, but practically they were having difficulty in living out this new way of living in Christ. So Paul says imitate my way of living.

- In Hebrews 6 the writer is concerned the Christians approach to ministry and living out their faith is becoming apathetic and lazy. So he says in Hebrews 6:12, “We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” He says imitate and follow those who have trusted God and were patient in ministry and eventually received what God had promised.
- Then later in Hebrews 13:7 we are told, “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” In the same way the Christian leaders lived out what they believed the other believers were to live out their faith. They were to imitate them.
- One more. In 3 John 1:11 the Bible says, “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good.” When you see someone doing something good, imitate that.

Imitation is part of your transformation. Imitation is a tool that God uses to help you learn how to live your Christian life for God’s glory.

2. Imitation does not mean conformation

Number two, imitation does not mean conformation. Paul says, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord.” The word “imitators” (mimetes) means one who follows. From the Greek word for “imitators” we get our word “mime,” which means one who acts out an imitation of another person.¹ A healthy practice of spiritual growth involves mimicking and imitating other believers.

To what extent are we talking about? The main idea here is to follow someone who is an ideal model or example, but as the New Testament context makes clear, this is not

¹ We also get words like “pantomime” (a theater production which originally was without words) and “mimeograph” (a machine which makes many copies from one stencil).

merely a matter of external conformity, but change from the inside out through receiving and following the spiritual truths of the faith as seen in the life of the model.

Here is what we have a tendency to do. We say intentionally or unintentionally things like this, “Good Christians will dress like me, use the translation I use, sing God’s praises with my music style preference, and attend church as much as I do.” If a new believer were to dress like you, use your translation, sing with your music style, and attend church as much as you do they have only conformed to your external habits. Here’s what’s wrong with that. A person can dress like you, have your translation of the Bible, prefer your music style, and attend church as much as you and still be lost and not a believer. If they are a believer and they want to imitate you in that way that’s fine, but that’s not what this is talking about. Its not talking about external conformity.

The areas of imitation the Bible is talking about deals with faith and character. Hebrews 6:12 tells us to imitate other’s “faith” and “patience.” 3 John 1:11 encourages to imitate what is “good.” When you see a believer encouraging, imitate that. When you see a believer loving, imitate that. When you see a believer forgiving, imitate that. We are not talking about looking alike, sounding alike, dressing alike, and singing alike. We are talking about imitating a way of life that is driven by faith, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and self-control that can only come from the Spirit of God operating in your life.

3. Imitation calls for variety

Number three, Imitation calls for variety. Imitation involves more than one Christian role model. Look again at 1 Thessalonians 1:6, “You became imitators of us....” You need to have more than one Christian role model. You need to imitate other *believers*, not just one other believer.

You will have a believer in your life that is really positive. They know God is in control and they talk like it and live like it. Imitate them in that. You will have another believer in your life that is bold in their evangelism, imitate them in that. You will have another

believer who is really good at praying, imitate them in that. Let many believers become your role models as you transition into a mature believer.

4. Imitation has an experiential order

Number four, imitation has an experiential order. Notice the order of which Paul describes their imitation. He says, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord” (1 Thess. 1:6). It is almost shocking that Paul places himself first. You would expect him to say, “You became imitators of the Lord and of us.” But he flipped it around. Why? Because that is how they experienced it.

When a person gets saved they don't know a lot about Jesus. They know He is Lord, lived for them, died on the cross for their sin, ascended to heaven, and will return some day. But outside of that they don't know what it means to live for Jesus or to walk as Jesus did. Somebody has to show them. Somebody has to be an example of what it means to follow Christ. They have to see it lived out.

They saw what a lifestyle of forgiveness looks like when they watched Paul, they saw what a lifestyle of grace looked like when they watched Timothy, they saw what faithfulness looks like in Silas. The believers were saved, but as time and their growth moved on they eventually focused more on the Lord and became imitators of Him. It is an experiential order. So every new believer needs to have other believers showing them how to live lives that honor God.

5. Imitation is evidence of your salvation

Number five, Christian imitation is evidence of your salvation. What you imitate reflects what you intake. If you have received Christ you are going to want to imitate Christ. The Holy Spirit will give you that desire. I mentioned this at the beginning of the message, but I want to make it a main point. In verse 4 Paul says, “For we know, brothers, loved by God, that He has chosen you.” How does he know that God has saved them? He lists several things through verses 4-6 including who they imitated. One evidence that you are a believer is that you are imitating other believers and eventually the Lord Himself. Your model for life and the patterns you are developing

for your life are based on others who are following Christ and Christ Himself. That becomes an evidence that you are a child of God.

6. Your imitation should result in you being an example to imitate

Number six, your imitation should result in you being an example to imitate. Notice verse 6 where Paul says, “You became imitators of us” then they became “imitators of the Lord” and then verse 7 says they “became a model” for other believers to imitate. This is how it looks. You get saved, you don’t know how to study the Bible or even to pray, so you learn from other believers. As you study the Word the Holy Spirit begins to teach and train you and things become more clear. You find yourself not focusing on how other believers do it as much as how you think God wants you to do it. The Lord becomes your example. Then as you follow Him new believers begin to look at you as a mature follower of Christ and they see you as a model to follow as a Christian. Then the cycle of imitation begins for them. It is the law of imitation.

7. Imitation applies to churches as well as individuals

Number seven, imitation applies to churches as well as individuals. Look at verse 7, “And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.” You Thessalonian believers became a model to follow. Now look at 1 Thessalonians 2:14, “For you brothers, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea....” The context there is that they imitated the believers in Judea regarding how they handled persecution and suffering. But here’s the thought: Just as we would want to imitate a church that handled persecution well we would also want to imitate a church that is reaching lost people well, that is making a difference in their community, that is helping believers grow, that is penetrating this culture with the gospel and seeing a significant impact on people’s lives.

It is a Biblical principle to study, examine, and evaluate other church’s ministries and apply the good stuff to our ministries. We need to learn from other church’s who are doing it well and to teach us how to do it well. It is the principle of imitation that applies to both individuals and churches.

Conclusion

The law of imitation says, “If I am to develop as a believer then I need to follow others who have already developed more than me as a believer. As result, other believers can follow my example because I am following Christ.” It’s the law of imitation. As you imitate other believers and the Lord it becomes evidence that you are a believer and as time passes your walk with God should become personal an unique to you.

Two questions we need to consider:

- Who are you following and what does that say about you?
- Who is following you and what are they learning?