

How to Imitate the Lord in Our Lives

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An Imitation of Someone Else

We love to ask kids what they want to be when they grow up. But that's really not the right question. It's not, what do you want to be? It's who do you want to be? Because every little kid, when you ask them, what do you want to be? They're going to come up with a variety of jobs and kind of personalities. I want to be an astronaut. I want to be a caveman. I want to be a basketball player but the reason they want to be those things, the what, what they think that their life could look like. The reason they want that is because of a who, because of someone they've seen that's captured their imagination or someone who's modeled a lifestyle that they ultimately want to imitate.

Because here's the thing friends, growing up, we all are trying to be like someone else. And we're trying to integrate who we are and what we know about ourselves with this vision of a lifestyle, of a personality of a character that we aspire to. And this is hardwired into humanity. And this is in many ways, the ways the Lord intended it. I mean, part of the point of a family is that children could be raised in an environment where they learn how to live. They learn how to thrive. They learn how to function in society by modeling themselves through the discipline and leadership of their parents. They want to be ultimately, whether or not we want to be like our parents, we often are trained to be like our parents because they're the ones primarily given the responsibility to show us what life is about.

So, at the core of every human being is a desire to integrate an imitation of someone else, with who we uniquely have become. We have been crafted by the almighty God with unique gifts and talents and desires and dreams. And yet those dreams, desires and talents are funneled through a vision of what life could be like that is informed by someone else.

You know, growing up I wanted to be Chris Paul, the basketball player. I was a point guard and I loved watching him play. I emulated every one of his little movements, his hesitation dribble, the way he would backpedal, the way he would kick out his leg on the jump shot. That no look pass that he had. I wanted to be like Chris Paul, but ultimately, I didn't know how to become Chris Paul, not just because he was far from me and his life was inaccessible to me but also because I'm just my own unique person. But the reason I couldn't ultimately become like Chris Paul is what I just said. His life was far from me, I had no access to his life. It's hard to imitate something and really integrate someone into your life if you don't have access to them.

And this is what we're going to be talking about now in the next few minutes is how do we imitate Jesus? Because ultimately, the project of discipleship, this project of becoming a little follower of Christ. This project of having Christ's life become our own is about learning Jesus' life. Letting his DNA become our DNA, integrating who he uniquely has made us into the virtue and the character and the holiness that he offers us through the holy spirit. We all imitate. We are all disciples by someone or something, either an idea that we're following or a person that's embodying that idea.

Live a Jesus Shaped Life

And the Christian is saying, the way I want to live my life is I want to live in imitation of Jesus. I want to learn from him as he instructs us to, because he has meek and humble of heart. I want to, as St. Paul says, be imitators of me, St. Paul says, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." Really, the only way though that that's possible is if somebody opens up their life to you and shows you how to do it and this is what Jesus does through the gospels and then through the teachings of the church, is literally opening up the life of God and drawing us into it.

One of the definitions of discipleship is living an imitable life. You cannot disciple somebody, you can't show them how to live unless they can see your life, unless they can see how you do it. And this is what Jesus does both in the gospels, but then also in the people of God throughout history, is the great saints, the great leaders of the church and the people who have accepted his life through baptism and been filled with the power of the holy spirit through confirmation are able to then live a Jesus-shaped life. So that from generation to generation, we can learn Jesus. We can learn how to actually live like him.

Another definition of disciple is living as Jesus would live if he were you. Living as Jesus would live if he were you, just think about that for a second, how would Jesus navigate your life? How would Jesus enter your workplace? How would Jesus relate to your spouse? How would Jesus relate to your children? How would Jesus relate to politics? How would Jesus relate to the divisions in the church? You know, those old bracelets growing up, everybody had one of those WWJD bracelets. You know, I had a kid in the neighborhood with like 40 of them all the way up his arm. And I was so jealous. Look at all those colors, look at all the, what would Jesus do? It's actually like a perfect question because a disciple is preoccupied with what would the master do? What does Jesus want me to do in this moment?

Another way to think about discipleship is constantly answering two questions. What's God saying to me, and what am I doing about it? What's God saying to me, and what am I doing about it? You know, in the gospel of John, before I get to the gospel of John, there's this old adage that you are most like the five people you associate with. Or if you look at somebody's friends, you're probably going to get a pretty good picture of the person.

Obedience is the Key

Well, in the gospel, John, Jesus says, you are my friends. I want to be a friend of Jesus. Do you want to be a friend of Jesus? Yeah, because friendship with Jesus is to live his life with him, to imitate him. He says, you are my friends if you do what I command you. At the core, at the beginning maybe of imitating Jesus is a movement of God towards us, that through faith we receive, right, God initiates, he reaches out to humanity and we through faith, say yes to it. But that faith very quickly then leads, that faith, that births a new relationship of love very quickly leads though to a term that we don't generally like in society right now but is so vitally important to our life as a disciple, it's faith and love, but leads to obedience, obedience. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

In order to do what Jesus commands of you, you need to be in relationship with him and you need to be listening to him. What's God saying to me, and what am I doing about it? And are you obedient to that? Because Jesus says, the reason this is so important is because Jesus models this with his relationship with the father, he says I only do what the father commands me to do. I do all of this so the world may know that I love the father and my loving relationship with the father is solidified and clarified and continued through this obedient relationship. That God is a real authority in our lives. And that we are not kind of trying to figure out how to integrate Jesus into our life. No, Jesus in his life, in his commands, in his desires for us become the all-encompassing reality of who we are. That as I begin to desire to imitate him, it means I have to grow in a desire to love him, which means I also have to grow in a desire to obey him. So fundamentally, if you're feeling led to imitate Jesus, to be like Jesus, then you need to be obedient to Jesus.

Imitating God's Character

Second thing I want you kind of focus on is let's look at all right, if we're going to imitate Jesus we need to imitate him both in his character, his holiness and his competency, his mission, what did he do? What are the things he actually did? So, when we look at Jesus, we can't just look at him as just a great teacher or just a Messiah. But this holistic approach of if his life is supposed to become my life, what can I learn from looking at his life and letting that life penetrate into mine?

So, his character, his holiness, growing in virtue being more and more united in love with the father, in prayer and for us, in the sacraments, in this deep, deep, spiritual connection, this deep and ever deepening well of being drawn into the life of God. So, his character, his virtue, his holiness but then also his competency, his behavior, his mission field. What did Jesus actually do? Will he raised the dead, he cast out demons. He proclaimed a message of truth that set people free. He healed people. He walked with people. He fed with people, he taught people. He showed he a new way of life to a group of people. And you can't separate his character and his competency, his holiness, and his mission go hand in hand. And that should be the same for us.

Three Co-Missions of a Disciple

So an easy way to think about this is when we're trying to remember and trying to lay hold of the life of Jesus, to imitate the life of Jesus, I'd encourage you to think of it as a triangle. And if I had like show and tell here I'd be able to like point this out to you but just picture a triangle in your mind. At the top, I want you to think of the word up, the bottom right hand corner out and the other corner, in, up, in and out, up, in and out.

That's the triangle. Jesus lived three directions. He lived up towards the father. He lived in towards his disciples and he lived out on mission. Up in prayer, in union with God the father, how many times in the gospels do you see Jesus taking time away to commune with the father, in times of worship, in times of distress in the garden, in times of crying out, oh, Lord hear my prayer, oh Lord, what will I do with these people? Oh Lord, keep them as one. He's constantly communing up with the father.

Then he has a group of people that he's united around himself. That he's called into a specific type of relationship with him. Not only the three, Peter, James and John, but the 12, the rest of the apostles. But then that group of 70, he has all these layers of relationships that he's drawing people in. He's part of a family on mission. It's not just Jesus kind of off, lone wolf, doing his own thing. No, he's part of a group. He's part of a unit. He's part of an extended family on mission. And then he's out, he's got a purpose. He's going out to fulfill the mission the father has given him, to seek and save the lost, to bring people from death to life, from captivity to freedom. He lives up, he lives in and he lives out.

John Paul II actually called this the three co missions of a disciple, prayer, communion, and mission. Prayer up, communion in and mission out. So, I'd encourage you, just take a minute, draw that triangle up, in and out, and look at it and say, how am I living up? How am I living in? And how am I living out? And which one is out of balance? Because what you see in the life of Jesus is this beautiful synergy, this beautiful harmony of rhythms of up, rhythms of in and rhythms of out. And very often they overlap, right? Like his in crowd says, teach us how to pray. They want to pray with him. So, it's in kind of an in and up moment. He certainly, not whenever, but often, when he's going out, he's doing it with a group of people. There's an in and out component to it. They need to be in harmony. You need to be living up. You need to be living in, you need to be living out.

Tips on How to Imitate Jesus

So here are two tips then to kind of close our time here of how we can start to imitate Jesus. So, I've given you kind of a framework, you need to be, what's God saying to me and what am I doing about it? It needs to be about obedience. It needs to be about living an imitating life, imitating Jesus but then giving access to our life to others so that whatever is being poured into us can be shared with others. It's about living up, in and out. But how do we do that? Two things that I see in Jesus, there's a lot more, but just two for now.

Living Your Incarnational Reality

The first one is this, Jesus lived a specifically incarnational life, which of course we know about the incarnation, right? With the capital I, that Jesus became man. God became man, took on human flesh, fully God and fully man, right? But this incarnational existence was not without specificity. And what I mean by that is Jesus didn't become man in kind of any old time, at any old place and kind of lived whatever life he wanted. No, he became a man in Israel, in Palestine, at the time that he did, with the family that he did, with the culture and the rhythms, he was a Jewish man. He went to the temple. He had ritual purification that he needed to do. He actually had a job to do. He had a mother and a father. He had friends, he had a way of life. He didn't come to ancient Palestine like in a car, and expect people to understand it. No, he came and he lived the life of the people that he was sent to in that particular time, in that particular place, with that particular culture.

So, to think about our up, in and out, not as just some abstract that, oh, however John Paul II lived up, in and out, therefore it must apply to me. No, John Paul II lived at a particular time, in a particular place, with a particular rhythm, with a particular group of people. So to be able to

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receive the gift, the beauty of the principle up, in and out, but the principle being expressed in the specific of where do you live, in Fargo, North Dakota, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in Florida, in Texas, in Australia wherever you live in, whatever time and place with the people that you're in, with the culture that you're find yourself in, how are you called to live up, in and out? Building on the principles and the foundations that the church gives us through the sacraments and through the beautiful spiritual writings and all that we have at our disposal says, but then ask the question, how is that supposed to be expressed in your life?

And this is not like a radical individualism thing. I'm not suggesting that you can just cast off and say, oh, I'm going to do mass however I want. No, no, no. We're still again, in obedience to what the church has given us an obedience to what the father's calling us to, but to recognize that there's a uniquely incarnation reality of I am me, in this place and the spirit wants to teach me how to pray. The spirit wants to teach me who to invest in deeply. And the spirit wants to teach me how to go on mission. So that's the first one is incarnational. And then I just gave away the second one, is that this whole process of imitating Jesus, growing in his character and his competency, living up, in and out is only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the spirit, the very life and power of Jesus Christ that he won for us on the cross, that he pours out lavishly on the church at Pentecost. This life is embedded in us, is come alive in us. Is him dwelling in us through the power of the holy spirit. We become temples, Tabernacles of the triune God, through the spirit dwelling in us through a baptism and confirmation. The ability to even hear God, what's God saying to me, what am I doing about it? That's the holy spirit, the ability to grow in holiness, the consuming, purifying love of the power of the holy spirit, the ability to go on mission, to know who to speak to, what to say, when to say it and have the courage to say it, that's the Holy Spirit.

So, if you're wondering why it's so difficult to imitate Jesus, if you're wondering why it's been such a challenge to grow in his holiness and in his competency, to go on mission, to find a people to run with, to engage in prayer, I'd venture a guess that more of the holy spirit is needed in your life. Jesus was perfectly united to the father through the Holy Spirit. So should we.

Recap

So, to recap, it's really important that we imitate Jesus. There's a lot of other things we can imitate. A lot of other people we can imitate but ultimately, as a disciple, our primary cause to become like him, to live as he would live if he were you, to be little Jesus's in the world so that everywhere we go, not only do we bring the kingdom but we bring his presence and people can come to know him because they've come to know you.

When Jesus is dwelling in our heart through the power of the Holy Spirit, when we're living out his virtue, when we're living out the fullness of the life of God that he wants to give us through his presence with us, then all of a sudden, when we go out into the world we're not just proclaiming a message.

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We're not just proclaiming a set of rules, we're embodying and we're revealing a person who wants to know you and to love you so that at the end of our life, the father, as we stand before the Father, He sees the son in us and he says, well done my good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of our master. This is why we imitate Jesus, not only so that we can be him on the earth, but that we can be with him for all eternity. God bless.