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John O. York
john.york@lipscomb.edu

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The Imitation of Christ



John York

Introduction: When you're down and troubled and you need a helping hand, and nothing, whoa nothing is going right, close your eyes and think of me and soon I will be there to brighten up even your darkest nights. You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, I'll come running to see you again. Winter, spring, summer, or fall, all you have to do is call, and I'll be there. You've got a friend. If the sky above you should turn dark and full of clouds and that old north wind should begin to blow, keep your head together and call my name out loud, and soon I will be knocking upon your door. You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, I'll come running to see you again. Winter, spring, summer, or fall, all you have to do is call, and I'll be there. Hey, ain't it good to know that you've got a friend? People can be so cold. They'll hurt you and desert you. They'll take your soul if you'll let them, but don't you let them. You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, I'll come running to see you again. Don't you know that winter, spring, summer, or fall, all you've got to do is call, I'll be there, yes I will. You've got a friend. Ain't it good to know you've got a friend.

The lyrics of Carol King, now more than a quarter of a century old, still ring true in this hurried, harassed, busy, and often lonely, oh-so-lonely world of ours. There are far too many of us who know what it's like to long for just such a friend as the one described in that song. For me, one of the great joys of returning to the

Portland area is that I have a friend there. He's the only guy in the world that I ever play cribbage with. With Dan and me, no matter how long it's been, no matter what else has changed in this crazy world, our relationship always picks up right where we left it. Having a friend, being with friends is one of the major reasons why many of you come back to the Lectures each year, isn't it? For some of you, the friendships go back to college days; for others, they may go back to grade school. Some of you have come this week hoping to find a friend in the midst of a sea of strangers. A friend, someone to call when the sky turns dark, when you're down and troubled and need a helping hand. There are days when singing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" isn't good enough, when you need someone to be Jesus to you, with you.

Imagine being the apostle Paul, this guy who at one point in his life was the golden boy of society in Jerusalem, among the most pious and most powerful of all the eligible Jewish males. He was so zealous for the rules and regulations of Judaism that when heresy broke out, they named him the chief of police, the man in charge of rooting out those crazy Jesus-people with their heretical ideas. Then came the trauma of that trip to Damascus, the complete flip-flop in his belief system. Suddenly he was one of those heretics, those disciples of Jesus, those people of the Way. Imagine Saul's search for a friend at that point. Imagine what it was like to be considered a traitor by your former Jewish friends and a man not to be trusted by your

fellow Jesus-followers. Imagine fleeing for your life back to Tarsus, living in anonymity for ten or twelve years, then having a guy named Barnabas come after you, hunt you down, and treat you as a friend. Suddenly thrust back into the church limelight, you and Barnabas become a team, commissioned to take the gospel to the Gentile world, set apart by the Holy Spirit, sent out from Antioch.

Then imagine becoming, in the name of Jesus, the chief spokesman who could be one moment praised as being a god and the next moment dragged out of the city and stoned, left for dead. Imagine completing one tour of duty as a missionary, only to discover that your proclamation was being fundamentally questioned and challenged, not just in the churches where you had been, but even in the mother church, even in Jerusalem. Imagine surviving that inquest with your message and your commission to preach intact, only to have a falling-out with the one person who had first reached out to you as a friend. Imagine a rift between you and your friend so bad that you could no longer work or travel together. You would have other traveling companions after that, but none of them would ever come after you as Barnabas had. And all too often, even among those who were your traveling companions, you would discover sooner or later that they really weren't your friends after all.

Imagine suffering beatings and shipwrecks and imprisonments for the sake of this proclamation you call good news. Imagine the many occasions, in churches you actually started yourself, when people later turned on you, questioning your authority as an apostle to the point that you had to write letters defending yourself. In fact, of all the churches you ever worked with, only one ever offered any financial assistance. Just one—but they did it not once, but again and again. These are the people who acted as friends, who sent people to be Jesus to you when you were down and out and you needed a helping hand.

The letter to the Philippians is a friendship letter. These are people Paul had befriended. Lydia would have thought of Paul if she had ever heard Carol King's lyrics, don't you think? The Philippian jailer knew that feeling when he was down and out and needed a helping hand because *nothing, whoa nothing was going right*. The slave girl knew how *people could be so cold. They'll hurt you and desert you, they'll take your soul if you let them*. She knew what it was like to find a friend. And there were others in that church experiencing the same pain of broken relationships that Paul remembered from his last conversa-

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tion with Barnabas. Euodia and Syntyche were friends and co-workers of Paul's but no longer friends to each other.

So Paul writes from a prison cell. We aren't really sure if he is in Rome or Ephesus or Caesarea—any of the three could have had these soldiers known as the Praetorian Guard. He writes to the people who are his friends—but the tie that binds them together is not the fact that they went to college or high school or grade school together, or even that they ever spent that much time together; it is that they have a shared experience of Jesus Christ, which has made them kindred spirits. He writes this letter, like many of his others, to those called to be saints in Christ Jesus—those people made holy by their shared confession of faith in the Son of God. One thing that is quite unusual is that he mentions overseers and deacons, men that we later identify as the leaders of the church, but this is the only letter to a congregation where Paul actually names them. The curious thing is that, having named them, he never refers to them again, never offers any specific instructions to them. No, this letter is to all the saints in Philippi, and Paul remembers these people collectively, not just individually.

It is not uncommon for him to begin a letter with words of thanksgiving, talking about how he remembers people in his prayers and is thankful for their faithfulness or for the grace of God given to them. Here, he gives thanks every time he remembers them, constantly praying with joy. Joy will be a favorite word of this prisoner, writing to his friends. Remembering them brings him joy because they are his true partners in the gospel. They have fellowship with him in the gospel (Phil 1:5). Probably a veiled comment on their financial support of him in his work, that phrase also speaks of their overall shared relationship, their mutual understanding of the Christian life, their

joint participation as kindred spirits in this way of being Christ's ones. Listen to the language of love and friendship in these opening verses. Listen also for Paul's understanding of how God is the empowering force in their calling and in Paul's desires for them. (Read Phil 1:3-11. Note the translation of verse 10, "what really matters.")

To be a friend is to renew the focus on what really matters in life.

That is the focus of the rest of the letter. In the face of Paul's own imprisonment, in the face of false teachers who may try to spoil the Philippians' joy in Christ, in the face of personal problems between some women in the congregation whom Paul loves and wants to see reconciled, this short letter is a word of instruction about what really matters. Paul wants his friends to know and remember *what really matters*. That's what true friends are for, isn't it? *When you're down and troubled and you need a helping hand and nothing is going right, close your eyes and think of me and soon I will be there to brighten up even your darkest night.* To be a friend is to renew the focus on what really matters in life.

In the name of Jesus, that's what the Philippian church had been for Paul; that's what Paul wanted to be for them. But the empowerment for that friendship was not in their personalities, nor in their mutual career choices or their tastes in clothing or music. What made a Lydia compatible with a Roman jailer, what made each of them equally compatible with the slaves that were part of their households and part of the church was that they were all friends *in Jesus Christ*. What Paul does in this letter is to take that idea of being in Jesus Christ and carry it to extraordinary heights. By the time Paul writes this letter from prison, he no longer talks about being clothed with Christ in baptism or about putting on Christ. Christ is now all there is in his life. To live is Christ; to die is gain. All other identities and reasons for human existence are gar-

bage compared to knowing Christ and the power of his rising. There is only one mindset, one frame of reference for living, and that is the mind of Christ. Paul can withstand the imprisonment; he doesn't mind other people preaching the gospel out of false motives or even out of a desire to make him look bad. He has learned that material possessions have no value or meaning—he's content in any and all circumstances because he is totally infused with Christ Jesus his Lord.

It is that immersion in Jesus Christ that he wants his Philippian friends to share—to have the mind of Christ, to know that living is Christ and dying is gain, to realize that nothing else in this life matters. If the Philippian brothers and sisters could just imitate Paul, that would overcome the dogs who were trying to annul the faith; that would heal the wounded relationship between those two women who once struggled side by side with Paul for the sake of the gospel. It is curious to notice, in this week in which we want to talk about the imitation of Christ, that the only time Paul uses the term "imitate," he calls on people to imitate him, not Christ. But as we read through this letter, *Christ in Paul/Paul in Christ* is clearly the content of the call to imitation. As Paul talks about his own relationship to Christ, the word "imitation" seems too distant. Paul is not trying to be a copy of Christ, he wants to know Christ in such an intimate way that there is no other identity to be found in him. It is that loss of self and self-centered humanness that Paul wants the Philippian church to experience. And he speaks of that experience not just in individual terms, but in collective terms.

Too often, I'm afraid we hear the words of Philippians only as individuals. Have this mind in you, John. Work out your own personal salvation in fear and trembling, John. Learn Paul's secret of contentment, John. But I hope this week we can also hear this document collectively, as the church. Paul makes his appeal to the whole Philippian church. The great passage in chapter 2 is for you, plural: have this mind in you—all that was in Christ Jesus. Work out you-all's salvation. The call to become imitators is not just an individual matter, but a corporate one. After all, it is the church that is the body of Christ in Paul's understanding. What would it mean for our churches to share this identity? Sometimes I think the name "church of Christ" has become a real stumbling block, because we treat it so denominationally. It's long

past time for us to stop being just a bunch of “churches of Christ” and start being churches that are Christ. That’s our true calling, is it not?

But to take this week seriously, as churches or as individuals, we are going to have to rethink our common understanding of what it means to be imitators. In our time, that word in most senses has come to mean “cheap copy,” something that looks like the real thing but isn’t. When we think of imitating another person, we think only about copying some minor detail. Take the Nike Corporation (I need to be careful here, I suppose, since Beaverton, Oregon, is where Nike is headquartered). I was told when I visited there that if you didn’t wear Nikes that you got at an employee discount, you must not have any friends. Phil Knight, the CEO of Nike, invested millions in Michael Jordan a few years ago, believing that America would want to “Be like Mike,” and that they would believe the slogan “It’s the shoes.” Last Fall, Knight signed a \$40 million contract with a 20-year-old college dropout named Tiger Woods, believing that millions of Americans will next want to be like Tiger. The Titleist Golf company invested \$20 million in Tiger. When Tiger Woods set multiple scoring records winning the Masters golf tournament two weeks ago, Nike and Titleist both seemed to have made a sound investment. They’re counting on all of us wannabe golfers to think that if we wear the Nike swoosh and use Titleist golf balls and golf clubs, we can be like Tiger. But what will we be imitating? Certainly not his golf game! I can wear the shoes and buy the clubs, hit the Titleist golf balls, watch videos of his golf swing, and even try to copy his swing—but I’m not going to be like Tiger except in the most superficial ways.

No, to be like Tiger, I would need to have Tiger’s heart—his incredible desire to be the best in the game. I’d need to have played golf since I was a toddler and to have been tutored by a loving Dad who managed to still be my best friend after all of these years. I’d need to want to go to the practice range at Augusta after just having blown away the rest of the field, leading by nine strokes but knowing that I still had a swing problem that needed to be worked on.

I’m afraid that we would like to imitate Christ, or even imitate Paul, by just wearing the shoes. As churches, we would like to imitate Christ by writing his name on the sign. We would like to have relationships that are Christ-

centered without really centering our lives on Jesus. This week we will talk about *what really matters*. And if we listen with open hearts, we will be changed. What is so amazing about the Amazing Grace of God in Christ Jesus is that he even promises to do all of the transforming work in us. We can have more than just the shoes or the clubs or the right golf balls. As people who have shared in the death,

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burial, and resurrection of Jesus through baptism, we have already been given the empowering Holy Spirit. We can be just as full of Christ as Paul was, as the Philippian Christians were called to be. But we have to want what Paul wanted. Not to be like Mike or Tiger, not even to be like Jesus, but to be Jesus. To be the church that is Christ to our world. To be Jesus to one another. To be a friend. To know *what really matters*.

Last year, Tim Woodroof closed a tremendous series of lectures on Job with those resounding words, “Mr. Job, meet Jesus.” This year we have come, not just to meet Jesus, not just to become better friends than Job’s friends, but to become, as individuals and as the church, the imitation of Christ. Not just a cheap copy, but the real Christ. May God bless our hearing and our becoming this week.

John O. York is preaching minister for the Beaverton Church of Christ, Beaverton, Oregon, and serves with his wife, Anne, on the Advisory Board of *Leaven*. This lecture was the keynote speech at the 54th annual Pepperdine University Bible Lectures, 1997.