

# Imitate – Impersonating the Saints

Selected Scripture

## Introduction

Today, we are going to study a very interesting word. It may seem surprising that this word occurs in the New Testament.

One of my favorite types of comedy is impersonation. I will sometimes stay up late at night to watch a number of things, like the second half of a football game or the NBA playoffs, but also, to watch a good impersonator or a comic. If you watch and enjoy them, then you know that in order to be a good impersonator, they must essentially assume the appearance of the individual they are impersonating. They must take on their gesturing, change their voice, and even assume some of their appearance, whether it is their dress or hairstyle or whatever. I would imagine, if you were an impersonator, to be really successful in your field, you would spend a lot of time diligently picking out a few characters and then developing the ability to impersonate them.

One of the interesting discoveries that I have made from my studies is that in order to be effective as a Christian, there are certain people that we are supposed to impersonate or imitate. Now I will give some cautions at the end of this study, so do not start throwing tomatoes yet! Let us take a look at some of the people in scripture that we are to imitate.

The word for imitate, “mimeomai,” from which we get our word “mimic,” appears eleven times in the New Testament. We are only going to deal with four of them.

## Imitate Abraham

The first use of the word “imitate” that we will look at is found in Hebrews 6. Look at Hebrews 6:9-12.

*But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the*

*full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*

In other words, “We want you to grow up in the Lord that you may imitate, “mimeomai,” those who through faith inherit the promises.”

Now this is speaking specifically about one individual. Continue to Hebrews 6:13-15.

*For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you.” And so, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise.*

So if you want to develop; if you want to mature and grow up in the Lord, then focus on Abraham, who, because of his patience and great faith, inherited the promise.

## Common misconceptions about faith

Now we previously studied this passage in detail, but let me review a few misconceptions of faith.

1. The first misconception about faith is that faith is exercised by self-confidence.

This is a misconception that our faith is evidenced by the expectation that something will happen. In other words, if we have faith, then we will expect God to do something because, if we do not expect Him to do something, then we do not have faith. Have you ever heard this? This is an equation of faith with confidence in what I am giving, in terms of faith.

I would suppose then, by this standard, that Paul lacked faith because he prayed three times that God would take his thorn in the flesh from him. Did Paul lack confidence? No. Faith is not self-confidence. This is a misconception.

The passage, in fact, continues to say, in Hebrews 6:18,

***so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie . . .***

There is faith in the character of God. I have assurance that God is hearing my prayer, though it be of little faith, not because of what I say or do or the confidence that I may have, but because of who He is – He cannot lie; He is unchanging.

2. The second misconception is that faith is equated with emotion.

In other words, “I feel so good about this. I’m just as confident as I can possibly be. In fact, I’ve claimed this verse and now, I’m waiting for a heavenly zap.”

How often do we equate our faith in terms of how we feel; in terms of our emotion? It is not what we feel, it is who we have placed our faith in. It is not the greatness of our emotion, it is the greatness of our God that is the evidence of our faith.

If we were to ask Abraham at any given point in time, especially right before the promise was given, “Abraham, how do you feel?”

He would say, “Well, it’s been twenty-five years since God promised that. I’m not sure how I feel.”

Yet, God’s promise would come true, independently of the way Abraham felt.

3. The third misconception about faith is that it is energized by huge amounts.

In other words, if I did not have enough faith, and God did not heal or give me the job or come through in some way, then if I had had enough, He would have come through.

How often we hear this misconception. It is not the amount of our faith, it is the object of our faith. We are small, He is great.

This is, in fact, the point of Matthew 17:20, when Jesus Christ says,

***. . . if you have faith the size of a mustard seed . . .***

Jesus is saying, “Let’s choose the smallest seed and within the kernel of that seed are hundreds of smaller seeds, smaller than the size of a pin – if you have that much faith.”

So what are we supposed to do? Are we to go out and try to drum up a mustard seed full? No. The

point is, you do not need much at all. It is the object of your faith that is significant.

How many have prayed over a car that would not start? Admit it! You get in and the car will not turn over and you throw out a prayer, “Lord, not now!”

I do not know if it is the cars I choose or what, but I have had this experience on several occasions. I was never really serious about it, but I would say, “Lord, come on, I need this thing to start.” – and then try it again.

One time, however, I remember being terribly serious. I got out and lifted the hood, although when a guy like me lifts the hood, it does not mean anything! If someone walks by, I try to look intelligent and screw the little air filter thing. That is about all I can do! I remember lifting that hood and placing my hands on the battery, looking to see if anyone was watching, and seriously saying, “Lord, heal this battery.”

This is an admission! I got back in that car and the thing would not even sputter. Do you know what happened? I set myself up, and you probably have too, because I was overwhelmed with the thought, “You didn’t have enough faith.”

I was in college at the time, and even then, when this happened, I had opened myself up to a subtle attack of the enemy with the thought, “Your faith is not enough.”

It is not an amount, it is the object. It was not the amount of Abraham’s faith that mattered.

4. The fourth misconception about faith is that it is evidenced by human consistency.

Read Hebrews 6:17,

***In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath,***

Whose purpose? Underline the words, “His purpose”. This verse says, “The unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath” – given by God.

Faith is not evidenced by human consistency. In fact, if it were, we could go to Abraham and say, “Abraham, is this based on consistency?”

If he were to say, “Yes,” we could then ask something like, “Well, who is Hagar? Explain that one.”

“Well, ah, that was plan ‘B,’ just in case God didn’t come through. It had been several years.”

Did God remain true in His promise? Yes, even though mankind was inconsistent.

5. The fifth misconception of faith is that faith eliminates the need for patience.

We live in the “nowism” generation. If I have enough faith; if I evidence my faith in the right way, then God will answer *now!*

Did you notice, earlier in this passage, that two things are equated? Look at Hebrews 6:12 again.

***that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.***

We are to be imitators of those who through faith and what? Patience. We are to be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

I think the difficulty in developing faith, men and women, is developing it along with the practice of patience. With the little faith we have in God, we wait until God decides, according to His sovereign will, in His unchangeableness, in His own way, to act.

Let me read the words of a writer who writes with such clarity. Mark Littleton, whose father pastored and frequently had to travel to meetings, writes,

*As a child, I loved to curl up in the back of our car as we drove through the night. I felt so safe, tucked back there, with Dad in the driver’s seat. But sometimes my grandmother would go with us. She would sit on the edge of her seat barking instructions about every car that came our way, “Watch the side of the road there. Be careful of that guy next to us. Don’t go so fast.” I don’t think she ever enjoyed the ride.*

Note Mark’s next words. I especially like the way he summarizes this.

*Why? Because she didn’t trust my father; she couldn’t rest in his care. Grandmother and I both reached our destination, but one got there with frazzled nerves, while the other arrived happy and rested. I was learning to rest in my father’s care.*

## Imitate Paul

We should not only imitate Abraham, but also Paul. Turn to I Corinthians chapters 10 and 11.

We will look at I Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1. These verses are often taken out of context because the whole paragraph is not read.

***Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.***

The last statement is the purpose statement, “so that they may be saved.” But we have not finished the paragraph yet. Continue to I Corinthians 11:1. This verse may be coupled with the verses preceding it in your translation.

***Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.***

Paul had a passion that whatever he did, he would do to the glory of God. In this way, his life would be a constant signpost to people for the cause of Jesus Christ. He had a passion.

### Thoughts on Paul’s passion for the lost

Turn, in fact, to Romans chapter 1 and let us look at Paul’s passion for the lost, amplified. He gives us three thoughts about his passion.

1. First, Paul says, “I am a debtor (under obligation).”

Look at Romans 1:14.

***I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.***

The word “obligation,” in this verse, is the same word that was used for “debtor”. A debtor, in Paul’s day, was thrown into prison until he could pay the debt he owed. So Paul is, in a sense, saying, “Though I’m liberated in Jesus Christ, I am imprisoned in my passion to share with the Jew and the barbarian, the name of Jesus Christ.”

2. Secondly, Paul says, “I am eager to preach (evangelize).”

Look at Romans 1:15.

***So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.***

The word “preach” has been misunderstood, as this word now has the meaning of “preacher”. The word used in this verse is “euaggelizo,” from which we get our word “evangelism”. So Paul is saying, “I am eager to evangelize the gospel to you.”

The word “eager” is an interesting word. It is the word “thumos,” which could be translated “fire”. The root of this word, in fact, is translated “fire”. So Paul is saying, “I have this fire to evangelize,” which gives us the word “passion” – “I have this passion to evangelize.”

3. Thirdly, Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.”

Look at Romans 1:16-17. Note, in verse 16, that Paul is *not* the power.

***For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous man shall live by faith.”***

This is a man consumed with the desire to live in such a way that people saw Christ. We are to imitate that.

Let me read the words of a public relations officer for the Jehovah’s Witnesses Watchtower. I am sure you have seen these people. They have probably come to your home. They, by the way, spend three hours a week pounding the pavement. He says, “Our whole lifestyle revolves around our obligation to witness. We have five hours of meetings each week, in addition to our personal study, in addition to three hours a week pounding the pavement to prepare for the job.” Can you imagine this?

Do you want someone to imitate? Imitate Abraham, in his faith. Imitate Paul, in his passion to live so that others see Christ.

## **Imitating God**

We should also imitate God. Now this is going to get difficult.

Turn to Ephesians 5:1. Paul writes,

***Therefore be imitators of God . . .***

What are some things that we cannot imitate about God? Can you think of things about God that there is no way we can imitate?

We cannot imitate His perfection; His righteousness; His sovereignty; His perfect faithfulness. How about His vengeance? We will never perfectly model because God is holy.

So when Paul says, in this verse, “be imitators of God,” there is either an inconsistency or we need to dig a little deeper. I think he gives us the clue in the next phrase. He says, in Ephesians 5:1b-2a,

***. . . be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love . . .***

Paul is specifying the quality of God that he wants us to pursue; which is, His love.

### **Characteristics of God’s love**

Now in the next two verses, Paul will give us four qualities or characteristics of love. We have previously studied this in detail, so we will only discuss it briefly.

1. First, love is the privilege of believers only.

Ephesians 5:1 says,

***Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children;***

How are we given the capacity to be imitators of God and His love? Because we are “beloved children”.

A “worldling” cannot imitate the love of God because there are impure motivations. Though believers have impure motivations, because God loves us and we understand His love, we pursue Him and Christ is in us, we can properly, purely love other people.

2. Secondly, God’s love was voluntary.

As Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:2a,

***. . . walk in love, just as Christ also loved you . . .***

It was uninvited; that is,

***. . . while we were yet sinners, Christ [loved] . . . us. (Romans 5:8)***

3. Thirdly, God’s love was self-sacrificing.

Paul continues in Ephesians 5:2, to say that Christ totally,

***. . . gave Himself up for us . . .***

4. Fourthly, God’s love was gracious.

In the last part of Ephesians 5:2, Paul says,

*. . . an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.*

Jesus did not say, “Oh God, I don’t want to do this.”

Christ was “a fragrant aroma.” This points us back to the Old Testament where this offering was ascending into the nostrils of God with fragrant aroma – a thanksgiving offering.

### Thoughts on imitating God

I want to give two thoughts concerning imitating God, before we move on.

1. First, whether we like it or not, it is a command, not a suggestion, to “imitate God and His love”.

As He loved us, we are to love Him and to love one another. It is a command!

2. Secondly, imitating God and His love is a pursuit, not an impossibility.

Why can I say this in an encouraging way? Because the Holy Spirit lives within us and the first and primary fruit of the Holy Spirit is what? Love.

Paul says, in Ephesians 5:2a,

*. . . walk in love . . .*

I like the word “walk,” “peripateo,” which means to draw a circle around every activity of our lives and walk in the totality of love; everything in our lives is to be characterized by love. This is a mouthful! This is a pursuit. It does not happen overnight. We will pursue it until we see Him.

We can take courage, according to Philippians 1:6,

*. . . He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Do you want something to imitate? Imitate Abraham’s faith, Paul’s passion, and God’s love.

### Imitating Other Believers

We are also to imitate other believers. Turn to III John. This is a powerful little book that has been a delight to study this week.

In this book, there are four paragraphs, with a hinge verse in the middle of the third. This means that everything in III John revolves around this verse – everything prior to the verse points to it and everything after the verse points to it.

The hinge verse is verse 11, which you may want to underline. It says,

*Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.*

The word “does,” in this verse, means, “a practice; a perpetual habit”. John says the one who habitually practices good is of God and the one who habitually practices evil has not seen God.

### Negative and positive examples

Now, in order to help our understanding of this epistle, John will give contrasting examples of this hinge verse; this command. He will give a negative example and a positive example.

1. The negative example that we should not imitate begins in III John 9 with the man Diotrephes.

In III John 9, John writes,

*I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.*

“Loves to be first” is one word, made up of “phileo,” which means, “to love,” and “protos,” which means, “to be first”. Diotrephes loves the first place; he loves the “preeminence,” as your translation may read; he wants to be out front.

It is interesting that most commentators that I read on this, feel that Diotrephes was not the pastor/teacher; they think that Gaius probably was (III John 1). However, most of them think Diotrephes was an official. In fact, most think that he was a deacon because in historical studies, it was a deacon’s responsibility to, as mentioned in III John 10,

*. . . receive the brethren . . .*

In other words, missionaries would come; brethren would come and it was the deacon’s responsibility to receive these brethren. So most commentators, almost in unanimity, feel that Diotrephes was a deacon, although it cannot be proven.

A. T. Robertson, a great Greek scholar whose massive grammar I have on my bookshelf and doubt I will ever read completely, wrote an article for a Baptist publication. Robertson, who lived around the turn of the twentieth century, wrote on Diotrephes. The editor wrote back and said, “After your article was published, twenty-five men, who announced they

were deacons, cancelled their subscription. They did it because they felt they were personally attacked in the paper.”

Now let me say that I am not referring to deacons at this church, so just relax. I work with the greatest group of deacons in the world.

I have no idea what this situation must have been like with Diotrephes. Evidently, he was an authority in the church who was grasping after the power, when Christ alone is the ultimate power.

John said, basically, “Don’t imitate that which is evil – don’t pursue a lust for power.”

2. The positive example begins in III John 12 with the man Demetrius.

I love this example. Look at III John 12a and underline the word “everyone”.

***Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; ...***

Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone and he matches up to the truth!

Now it is interesting that Demetrius occurs in this epistle and one other time. Demetrius was the silversmith that incited a riot against the apostle Paul (Acts 19). We are not sure that this is the same Demetrius, but it is interesting that both men lived in Ephesus. I think, perhaps because John seems to point him out and say, “Look, he has a great reputation,” it is almost as if he is saying, “He *now* has a good reputation.” So perhaps John is pointing to the same individual.

John continues, in III John 12b, saying that everyone bears witness to Demetrius’ testimony,

***. . . and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.***

So do you want someone to imitate? Imitate, not Diotrephes, who wanted to be first, but Demetrius, who was perhaps, a believer with a shady background, who was now pursuing the truth in such a way that his testimony and his reputation was now pure before all the people.

## **Application – Two Cautions When Imitating Others**

Let me give two cautions, as we close. When imitating other people, keep two things in mind.

1. First, when imitating someone, do not expect perfection, but expect character.

Now if you are going to imitate someone, I suggest you do it silently. If you say to them, “I’m going to start imitating you,” they will die of a heart attack on the spot. This is not for them to know.

Do be careful who you choose to imitate. However, heed this caution and do not demand perfection of them because you will soon be disappointed.

As a youth pastor in a number of churches, I would often cringe when I would go into a teenager’s room and see a poster on the wall of some strange looking person. You could look around their room and see who they admired.

You might say, “Come on now, I had a picture of the blue suede shoes guy on my wall.”

Let me say this – if they are old enough to choose a poster, they are old enough to choose someone to admire. I challenge all parents to sit down with their teen and say, “What is it about that guy that you admire? Is he worth admiring?”

We start at a very young age in life choosing people to admire and follow; choosing characteristics to emulate. We must be careful who we choose. Do not expect perfection; do not place them on a pedestal because they are going to fall off. However, make sure they have character and they are pursuing the God that you pursue.

2. Secondly, and this is very important, when imitating someone, do not imitate their performance, but imitate their attitude.

I remember one of my college classes in which the professor stood up and said, “It is my goal in life to win somebody to Christ from every country on planet earth.”

I sat there thinking, “Wow! That’s fantastic! I’m going to write that in my journal. I’m going to pursue that one.”

However, by the time I got out of that classroom, it hit me, “I’ll probably never get out of America.”

There is something about his goal to be pursued, though, and it is his passion to win people to Christ.

I think pastors are the worst for imitating other pastors. One pastor gets some program going, so all the other pastors think, “Oh, he’s bringing in a

hundred people. Let's start that program in our church."

We tend to view performance – all of us do. Do not keep a record sheet because that is not what you are after. You are after their attitude. What is it about them that seems to exude joy, peace, and longsuffering? That is what you are after. You watch them, prayerfully, and choose that man or woman of faith; that man or woman of passion; that humble servant. You take them out to lunch; you have them over to your home; you pray for them; you imitate them. I would have never believed this was biblical unless I had just read it, but it is.

One final thought, not only should we check who we are impersonating, but has it ever occurred to you, men and women, that someone might be impersonating you?