

Imitatio Christi

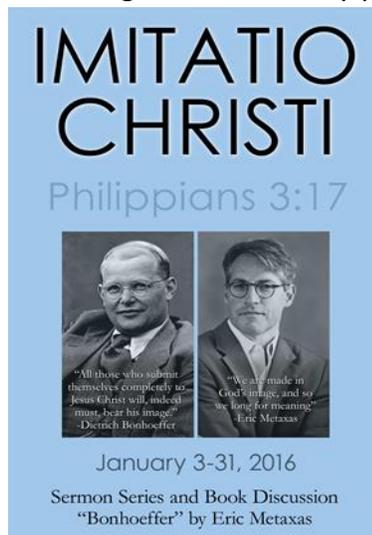
January Sermon Series on Philippians 3:17
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
January 3, 2016

TEXT: Philippians 3:17

Happy New Year! This morning we begin a new sermon series. This January we will focus on a single verse and a single life. This entire month, we are going to be considering Paul's statement in Philippians 3:17:

"Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk in the pattern you have seen in us."

This single verse is a very powerful summons for us this morning to follow and to imitate Jesus



Christ, so the name of this sermon series is *Imitatio Christi*. We will look to together this month at what it means to imitate Christ, and we will do this in context of an important life in church history. The second half of this verse calls us to keep our eyes on those doing the same, and we will do this together in looking at the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. What I want to do this morning is to look together at the context of Philippians 3:17 for a few moments and then to give us an overview of the life of Bonhoeffer, whose life was lived in conscious, deliberate imitation of Christ.

Keep your Bible open to Philippians 3, and let's look first at this important summons. Paul calls us to "join in imitating me and keep your eyes on those walking according to the example that you have in us." It becomes immediately obvious in Philippians that the call to join in imitating him, to look at those living in this pattern, stands in sharp contrast to a counterfeit pattern. In this world, we are all following someone; we are all patterning our lives after an example, whether consciously or not. Paul tells this beloved church and summons us by saying: "Join in imitating me, look at the people living in this way." He then continues in Philippians 3:18:

"For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ."

Here is this great divide: living in imitation of Christ or living as an enemy of the cross of Christ. Paul goes on to say in Philippians 3:19:

“Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds riveted on earthly things.”

They worship their appetites and their own pleasures. In this contrasting example, Paul turns back to the positive and says in Philippians 3:20-21:

“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.”

The call to imitate Christ, the Latin expression is *imitatio Christi*, calls us to follow Christ, to pattern our lives in deliberate, intentional imitation of His example and life pattern. It compels us to reject a counterfeit model for our lives, which Paul describes as a life pattern that is an enemy of the cross. How do we do this? What does it mean? Let’s come back to that opening imperative, command: “Brothers, join in imitating me.” The Greek word that Paul uses in Philippians 3:17 is the noun from which we get the English word *to mimic*. The Latin translation it is *to imitate*. Paul actually creates a new word here, and he says: “Join in imitating; become fellow *mimickers* with me, fellow imitators, if you will, of Christ.” For some of us, especially as postmodern, 21st-century Americans, the word *imitate* has a negative connotation. Some of us feel like *imitation* means fake, like the very pedestrian example of when you go to Kroger and you reach for imitation crab meat. Everybody knows that it is Alaskan Pollock in there, not King Crab. Others may feel that the concept of *to imitate* or *mimic* another is actually a betrayal of our true identity. Some of us have absorbed the cultural message that says that you need to be true to yourself; you need to be utterly original for your life to count. Yet, the Bible offers us a very different model and says that if you want to find yourself, you find yourself in patterning your life after Christ who is the image of God. We find ourselves in imitation of Christ, and do not lose ourselves. In Philippians 3:17, Paul says to imitate him, and we need the full counsel of Paul's writings to know that he is not really calling us to follow him, but, as he makes clear in other passages, he says follow him “as I follow Christ. Join me and get on this road, this highway of holiness.” He says in 1 Corinthians 11:1:

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

The second imperative of Philippians 3:17 is to “fix your eyes, rivet your attention, on other people walking according to this pattern.” We have a great need of examples. We have a God-given capacity for heroes and heroines to admire and to respect. The ancients knew this well. The Romans had a literary tradition of the *exempla virtutis*, lives patterned in such a way that they should be emulated. Plutarch, in the Greek tradition, wrote his work, *The Lives*, which sets forth many examples of heroic lives lived and reflecting the cultural values of the time. For many Protestants, the idea of following another person is pushed so far into the background that we fear it at some level, and yet the Bible is filled with examples of lives to emulate to the

degree that they follow Jesus Christ.

This January, as a congregation, we are going to look together at one life. We will look at how Philippians 3:17, the summons to imitate Christ, is played out at each stage of the life of the



German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer has been called a church father for the postmodern world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that all who submit themselves completely to Jesus Christ will indeed bear His image. We are going to be looking

at Bonhoeffer's life through the eyes of Eric Metaxas. Eric Metaxas wrote this *New York Times* best-selling biography of Bonhoeffer. This is intimidating, no question. I know many of you have already begun reading it as I have begun to

get emails and messages from some of you saying, "I'm hooked; I'm riveted; I'm hanging in there." Others are saying, "I didn't even try. I went straight for the abridged version." I just want to be clear that you will not be judged by which version you read. Some of you will read the unabridged version, and then you will continue the conversation and read more of Bonhoeffer's writings directly, which would be wonderful. But, I want this morning to give a brief overview of Bonhoeffer's life and why this life is so important and worth studying.



I want to walk us through this life. Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Germany. He grew up in a very famous family. His father Karl was the leading physician in Germany at the time. His mother Paula was from an aristocratic family. Bonhoeffer grew up in a very joyous family with eight children. Accounts of his childhood are exuberant and joyful. The Bonhoeffers were



serious around the table, and one of their customs as a family was that you could not speak unless you really had something to say. It was an intimidating table gathering, but it lent itself to serious conversation around the table. They also knew how to have fun. Most of the Bonhoeffer children were musicians, and they gather weekly for music celebration on Saturday night. In this picture you see Bonhoeffer's parents in the

background and their family country home. In the middle of the picture is woman who was their governess. She was a very devout Christian and definitely influenced the faith of the Bonhoeffer children. Dietrich Bonhoeffer grew up within this family. He was confirmed in the

church at Grunewald, and in 1923 he began his theological studies. He announced to his family at age 14 that he felt God's call on his life to be a theologian, and he understood this at an early age. He completed his studies in Berlin at Tübingen University, and then he went to Berlin where he finished his doctorate. He graduated in 1927 summa cum laude, which is with the highest academic honor, and defended his doctoral dissertation at the young age of 21. His doctoral dissertation was on the church was called *Sanctorum Communio, The Communion of Saints*. Bonhoeffer reflected in his dissertation that the church is Christ's living body in the world. It was a very provocative thesis in his dissertation, arguing that the worshipping church, you and I, gathered together weekly is really the body of Christ in the world, and that must be taken seriously. Bonhoeffer, after the completion of his doctoral studies, began to work in ministry. He worked as a youth pastor. In the fall of 1928, he was discipling young men, and he gave a series of talks to the youth group which he was leading. One of the talks was called: "Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity," and in this early stage of his ministry, we hear Bonhoeffer's compelling call to follow Christ at a young age. Bonhoeffer speaks to this group of young men with these words:



“One admires Christ according to aesthetic categories, as an aesthetic genius, calls Him the greatest ethicist. One admires His going to death as a heroic sacrifice for His ideas. Only one thing one doesn't do: one doesn't take Him seriously, that is, one doesn't bring the center of his or her own life into contact with the claim of Christ to speak the revelation of God and to be that revelation.”

Bonhoeffer was challenging these young man that you can't just admire Christ; you can't just have a positive view of Christ from a distance. If Jesus Christ is really the revelation of God, if He is God incarnate, if He is speaking the Word of God, then He must be taken seriously. That means that His claim on our lives is real.

Bonhoeffer began to serve as an assistant pastor. He was a teacher of systematic theology, and then he completed his second doctoral dissertation in 1930, at age 23. He continued during this time to serve and to minister in the local church. As Bonhoeffer grew in his faith in his ministry, his confidence in the Word of God grew deeper. He wrote of an experience of discovering that God's truth is the anchor of all life and ministry. He records an experience he had in November of 1932. Bonhoeffer says:

“At that time, I turned to Jesus Christ. I prayed to God. The Bible, the Sermon on the Mount in particular, freed me. Everything in my life changed, and it became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ belongs to the church. Step-by-step, it became plainer to me how far that must go.”

Bonhoeffer was stirred to a radical obedience in devoted service to the church. He spoke of the Word of God at this time in these words. He said:

“One cannot simply read the Bible like other books. One must be prepared to inquire of it. Only then will it reveal itself; only if we expect the Scriptures to give us ultimate answers will we receive them; only if we venture to enter the words of the Bible as though in them God were speaking to us will He answer our questions.”

Bonhoeffer began to build his life with increasing seriousness on the Word of God and trust its truth as a guide for all of life. The resolve that shaped his soul in November of 1932 became important for the future. Germany was quickly moving towards the arrival of Adolf Hitler as the leader of Germany. In January of 1933, Adolf Hitler became the democratically elected Chancellor of Germany. Bonhoeffer knew at this early stage that Adolf Hitler's vision of Germany was in profound conflict with the claims of Christ. Adolf Hitler began to adopt the title of *Führer*, leader, supreme leader of the nation, and Bonhoeffer knew that any man claiming supreme authority would run into deep and profound conflict with the claims of Christ.

So was that on February 1, 1933, just 48 hours after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave the first public critique of Hitler's vision of leadership. He gave a national radio address, and he called it the “Führer Principal.” Bonhoeffer believed that



Christ was his *Führer*, his supreme leader, and that this was the case for all Christians. In this radio address, which was cut off the air at the end, Bonhoeffer said:

“Only when a man sees that office is a penultimate authority, that is, not final or supreme in the face of an ultimate, indescribable authority, has the real situation been reached.”

Only 48 hours after Hitler became Chancellor, Bonhoeffer was in on the public national radio saying these words:

“The fearful danger of the present time is that above the cry for authority, be it a leader or an office, we forget that man stands before the ultimate authority and that anyone who lays violent hands on man here is infringing eternal laws and taking on himself superhuman authority which will eventually crush him.”

Bonhoeffer said:

“Leaders or offices which set themselves up as gods mock God and the individual who stands before Him and must perish.”

Amazing words just 48 hours after Hitler takes power. After the National Socialists took power in Germany, Hitler and his fellow Nazis began a systematic consolidation of power, shutting down political opposition, and then eventually moving directly against the church. The National Socialists created the German National Church, which was a perversion of Christianity. It was a time when societal opposition arose to historic orthodox Christian faith and required the church to become something different. This is happening in our time, and this is part of the reason why we need to know this life and know what it means to take a courageous stance for historic, orthodox Christian faith. Our society in the present moment is rapidly moving in a direction that makes historic orthodox Christian faith seem strange, seem dangerous, seem hostile to national interests. So it was in Germany in the 1930s. The Nazi movement struck against the churches and passed the following laws: "The National Church demands immediate cessation of the publishing and dissemination of the Bible in Germany; the National Church declares to the German nation that it is been decided that the Fuhrer's *Mein Kampf* is the greatest of all documents; the National Church has decided to clear away from its alters all crucifixes, Bibles, and pictures of Saints; the National Church has decided that on the altars, there must be nothing but *Mein Kampf*, and to the left of the altar, a sword; the National Church, on its foundation, declares that the Christian cross must be removed from churches, cathedrals, and chapels and must be superseded by the only unconquerable symbol, the swastika." The tragedy for Bonhoeffer was that the vast majority of nominal German Christians just went along. Bonhoeffer and others, however, spoke in resistance. Bonhoeffer spoke these words at Trinity Church in Berlin:

"The church has only one altar, the altar of the Almighty, before which all creatures must kneel. Whoever seeks something other than this must keep away. He cannot join us in the house of God. The church has one pulpit, and from that pulpit faith in God will be preached and no other faith and no other will than the will of God, however well-intentioned."

Bonhoeffer, together with other leaders, formed what became known as the "Confessing Church," as the church that said: "We take our stand in the stream of historic orthodox Christian faith." This very small group of German churches and German pastors published what became known as the *Barmen Declaration*. This moving document states a rejection of the counterfeit paradigm and an embracing of the way of Jesus. These are some of the declarations included in the *Barmen Declaration*:

"We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation apart from and besides this one Word of God; we reject the false doctrine as though there were areas of our life which we have that do not belong to Jesus Christ; we reject the false doctrine as though the church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order its own pleasure or to change in prevailing ideological and political convictions; and we affirm that Jesus Christ, as He has attested to us in holy

Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”

The Confessing Church took its stand. Don't think that these types of dynamics are so far from us. The specific form of persecution will change in every generation. It is sometimes very active; it is sometimes very passive. I came into my office this morning and found a little passive form of persecution from Microsoft. Microsoft said that any charitable organizations that don't agree with their stance on homosexuality can no longer use the software at the charitable discounted rates. This is just a little passive form of persecution. It is going to happen. It is happening now, and I have a great urgency in my soul about this because I would be horrified if Kenwood Baptist Church, or the members of our church, cruised along with the drift of the culture. I would also be horrified if we felt so intimidated by cultural changes that we just became silent. This is a temptation for many, to hide your Christian beliefs, to drift along either actively or passively yielding. Christ calls us to follow Him. That is not a passive posture. It is an active one—to follow Him where He is going, with what He is doing. I want to assure you that as violent or evil or destructive a wave of opposition to Christian faith may appear, we know the ending of the story, and God, in His great sovereignty, will use even these things to refine us and make us more like Christ. He will even use these things to cause Christian faith to appear more vividly in the eyes of our contemporaries. We need courage, for many of us are weak-willed and fearful and buckle at the slightest pressure.

Bonhoeffer's cultural moment would not allow such neutrality. After the Barmen Declaration was made, Bonhoeffer, together with others, opened a secret seminary at Finkenwalde to train pastors who were faithful to Christian faith. He published his work called in English, *The Cost of Discipleship*, which in its original German title is simply one word *Nachfolge*, which means *following after*, following Christ. Bonhoeffer's "Cost of Discipleship" begins with these words:

“In times of church renewal, Scripture becomes richer behind the daily catchwords and battle cries needed in the church struggle and more intense question and search arises for the One who is our sole concern, for Jesus Himself.”

What did Jesus want to say to us? What does He want from us today? How does He help us to be faithful Christians today? It is not ultimately important to us what this or that church leader wants. We want to know what Jesus wants and press forward into a costly following after Christ. He wrote that Christ has authority to summon us to follow Him.

Bonhoeffer, in the context of this seminary life, in 1938 wrote this small book: *Life Together*, which is a beautiful description of what it means to be a sacred community of faith under the Word of God. During this time, Bonhoeffer worked on his book, *Ethics*, which calls us relentlessly to a following of Christ no matter what the circumstances. In 1941, after the war

had begun, Bonhoeffer published a book called, *The Commentary on the Psalms, the Prayer Book of the Bible*. For this action, he was banned from ever speaking in public or publishing again because he had the audacity to claim that the Old Testament, and an Old Testament Book like the Psalms, written in Hebrew, could shape Christian prayer. Members of Bonhoeffer's own family served in the German military and served in the *Abwehr*, German military intelligence. Members of Bonhoeffer's family became involved in keeping a record of the atrocities of the Nazis in the war campaigns.

Bonhoeffer was eventually forced to make a decision, and he participated in trying to create relationships with Allied powers in the war so that they would know that there were Germans in Germany who were against Hitler. Bonhoeffer was arrested in 1943 and placed in Tegel military prison in Berlin for his role in helping a group of Jews escape to Switzerland. While he was in prison awaiting what he expected would be a soon release, towards 1944, the German military police discovered the secret file recording Nazi atrocities. Bonhoeffer's family members were implicated, and Bonhoeffer himself was named. In 1945, he was moved to Buchenwald concentration camp. On April 5, 1945, at Hitler's noonday meeting, Hitler gave orders to annihilate all associated with this act. Bonhoeffer was moved on April 8 to Flossenbürg concentration camp, and on April 9, just weeks before the end of the war, Bonhoeffer was hanged at a concentration camp, with six other people. That day, he preached in the morning service from Isaiah 53 that with His stripes we are healed, and 1 Peter 1:3:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By His great mercy we have been born a new to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Eyewitnesses say that when Bonhoeffer finished his sermon and concluded his last prayer, the door was opened and two men in civilian clothes came in and said: “Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us.” Those words, come with us, had come to mean only one thing, the scaffold. Bonhoeffer bade them goodbye and said:

“This is the end; for me, the beginning of life.”

Bonhoeffer's faithfulness in a moment of cultural catastrophe is inspiring. The journey of imitating Christ and the circumstances of his life that forged him ever closer to the center challenge us. Bonhoeffer's legacy in his books have challenged and inspired serious discipleship for many, myself included. I'll never forget reading *Cost of Discipleship* for the first time on a train traveling through rural China. I was stunned to come into the company of someone who took following Christ this seriously.

My challenge for us this morning is multifold:

Number one: Read the book, and what I mean by “the book” actually is this one – the Bible.

This was the living center of Bonhoeffer's life of discipleship. He became convinced that God speaks to us in the pages of Scripture, and it became his regular practice morning and evening to listen for a word from God from Scripture, and to feed on it. It was one of the keys to his radical obedience.

Number two: Read the biography, either the unabridged or abridged version. Another option is the audio book for those of you who drive to work or are often in the car or have radical morning workout times. I challenge you to read or listen to the book. Some of you will offer the very pitiful excuse and say to me: "I don't have time." I would challenge you that you don't have time not to read this. I would love a hundred percent participation in familiarizing ourselves with this important life. If anyone says to me: "I don't have time," I'll ask you how much TV you watched in January. Wouldn't it be awesome if some of you said you have decided to rely on those two to three minute video recaps of the games you were interested in on YouTube. That's efficient. Ask yourself who will remember those scores five years from now. If you are a dad, lead your family in saying: "Hey, family, we are going to gather together and read this important life." The youth group of Kenwood is going to read the youth version of this. So, whether you're going to read the youth version, the abridged, or the full, just make time. This is a life worth knowing.

Number three: I want you to join a discussion group where you can talk about what we are reading. Even better, I want to challenge you to consider starting a discussion group. This is a *New York Times* best-selling book. Even though this is a devoted pastor's life, it has captured the attention afresh of our culture, and it is very appropriate to ask two or three friends or coworkers: "I'm reading this. It's important. You want to talk about it together?"

Number four: I want to challenge us as a congregation to really mark this genuine example. That's his summons: "Join me in imitating Christ, and keep your eyes on, put a mark on other people living this way." I want us together to mark a genuine example so that we can reject the counterfeit.

Number five: I want to challenge us all, myself included, to strive to become a life worth emulating exactly in this way, to reflect Christ in your surrounding environment, whether that's your family, friends, workplace, or school. It is going to be an exciting journey, and we will have the great privilege on March 16 to have Eric Metaxas here at Kenwood Baptist Church speaking on the significance of Bonhoeffer's life and the challenge of religious liberty in our society today. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we come to You. We thank You, Jesus, that You call us to follow You. It is our desire

this morning, Lord, as we begin a new calendar year and a new sermon series, to understand what it means to follow You. I pray, Father, that You would protect our time, that You would capture our attention afresh, and that together as a family of faith we might grow confident and bold in following You. We give You praise.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.