

## ***“Here I Stand”***

January Sermon Series *Imitatio Christi* on Philippians 3:17

Kenwood Baptist Church

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**TEXT:** Philippians 3:17

This morning we continue in our January series at Kenwood Baptist Church on Philippians 3:17. We are taking a whole month to consider this single verse, and we are looking at this verse in conversation with a single life, that of the German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I want to say at

# IMITATIO CHRISTI

Philippians 3:17



January 3-31, 2016

Sermon Series and Book Discussion  
“Bonhoeffer” by Eric Metaxas

the beginning that I am very proud of how many of you in our church body have said, in a society that is saying “We don't read anymore,” that Kenwood Baptist Church still reads. That bodes well, not only for our present, but also for our future. God's people always need to retain the ability to read, and this is a life worth reading and knowing about. The Word of God is inexhaustible, and that is partly what we want to show in series like these, that we can spend a month considering a single statement of Scripture. There are one hundred thousand sermons that could be preached from Philippians 3:17. This will be our fourth now together. We began by looking at the summons to imitate Christ. Paul summons us as hearers of this command to “join in imitating me.” In our first week, we zeroed in

on this concept, this command to imitate Christ, to pattern our lives after Him. Next, we focused on the aspect of the verse that tells us to “keep your eyes, fix your attention. . .” and how important that is in the life of discipleship. Last Sunday, we focused our attention on the single word “brothers” and all that that implies as Christian community is joined together as a new family of God.

This morning I want to direct our attention to the word *walk* and to consider this aspect of Philippians 3:17:

*“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”*

*Walk* is a biblical idiom that I hope you will cherish by the end of this sermon, and I hope that you will be empowered and equipped with a very dynamic concept of discipleship. Discipleship is not static; it is active. I want first to look at what it means to walk “according to the example you have in us,” and then we will look at how Bonhoeffer’s life, how his walking according to

the pattern, was required in his generation. Throughout church history, throughout the times of Scripture, walking in the pattern that God sets for us will inevitably bring us into conflict with the world around us, so we need to stand on the power of the Gospel this morning.

Let's look first at *walk* and then what that means and how it played out in the spiritual battle that Bonhoeffer went through, which will be instructive for us today. Paul says: "Join in imitating me. Keep your eyes on those who walk." *Walk* seems like a safe word, *walk* rather than *run*. Many of us, especially in January, feel grateful that the command here is not *run*. *Walk* with God is an idiom in the Hebrew language for discipleship. It carries the idea that we are walking with God, that we are His people, that we are together in relationship with Him. We are not walking in front of Him; we are not walking behind Him. We are walking **with** God. It is a very dynamic presentation of the life of a believer. The first person we are told walked with God is Enoch. In Genesis 5:22, we read rather innocently:

*"Enoch walked with God."*

We read again in Genesis 5:24:

*"Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him."*

What exactly that means has generated speculation throughout church history. What is certain is that Enoch walked with God, and when the Bible was first translated from Hebrew into Greek, the Greek translators didn't know what to make of this idiom, because in the Greek language, no one *walks* with Zeus. Zeus holds a thunderbolt, which is the first reason why you probably want to keep your distance. In Greek, no one is invited to walk with the gods, so the Hebrew translators brought this idiom over into the Septuagint as *to be pleasing to God*. Isn't that interesting? That is just one example of how something is always lost in the translation. There is a very different picture between "walk with God" and "be pleasing to God." Throughout Scripture we are told that men and women walked with God. We read in Genesis 6:9 about Noah:

*"These are the generations of Noah. Noah was in his generations a man righteous and whole-hearted; Noah walked with God."*

Abraham is commanded in Genesis 17:1 when he was 99 years old:

*"The LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless.'"*

This command is given to Israel as an entire nation in Deuteronomy 10:12:

*"And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul."*

The very first Psalm in the collection of biblical poetry has this image in verses 1-2:

*“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on His law he meditates day and night.”*

The Bible commands us, invites us, to *walk* with God, to conduct our lives with a pattern of behavior, a rule of conduct, a whole direction of life that is lived out in obedience to God, in fellowship with Him as covenant Lord, and to follow His example. Paul takes this language not only in Philippians 3, our text this January, but in many of his letters. This is the key imperative of Christian living. In Ephesians 4:1, he says:

*“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”*

In Colossians 1:10, we read:

*“Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him.”*

In 1 Thessalonians 4:1, he says:

*“. . . you ought to walk and to please God.”*

In Romans 6:4, he says

*“We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”*

So, this little word *walk* picks up a very important, significant image of a life of faithfulness. To *walk*, to be in relationship with God, is not a static thing. It means that our commitment to God is displayed in observable behavior. It means that we *walk* with God under His authority, heeding His correction, following His example. So far, so good! *Walk* with God. We could almost end the sermon here. *Walk* according to this pattern. It seems that we are invited into an open field, and yet the field of this life is not empty, and that is the problem. You say yourself, “Great, pastor, I hear you: ‘*Walk* with God.’” We look out at this open field, and yet as soon as you start making a commitment to *walk* with God, you will find that the field is actually filled. Instead of an open field on a spring morning, you begin to *walk* with God and you find yourself on an urban crosswalk trying to fight across a busy street with thousands of people who are walking the other direction.

All of a sudden, the biblical idiom of *walk with God* seems difficult, dangerous. People all around you are saying: “Turn around. You are going the wrong way.” We hear the call of discipleship: *walk* with God, this way. Paul knows from deep experience that there are many people around us, even people who claim to be religious or devout, who will say, “You are

walking in the wrong way.” Paul knows this from experience, and as he summons up the reality of this counter-walking that is all around us, his life experience begins to stir his own spirit, and the only time in all of his letters, he burst into tears as he is dictating. He bursts into tears in Philippians 3:18, and he says as he tells them to *walk* according to this pattern:

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

There is a counterfeit vision of human life all around you that is cross-denying, and sometimes it even comes in a very religious package. As Paul describes this, the tears fall from his eyes with warning to people that he loves, a particular pain, an acute agony, that they are opposed, not neutral. There is a hostile-to-the-cross vision of human living that is around you, and you will encounter it. It will try to compel you to turn the other way. The enemies of the cross in Paul's generation were his kinsman who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, his kinsman who still retained the status of defining the kingdom around their ethnicity and privileged place. Paul says in Romans 11:28:

*“As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake.”*

The idiom leaves without doubt that he is describing his kinsman, the people he loves and longs to know Christ, but yet do not see Christ, and who define relationship with God in a way that makes the cross seem irrelevant, strange, and unnecessary. He warns the Philippians that their end is destruction, their God is their belly. They glory in their shame, their minds are on earthly things. This language is calculated with irony to expose the lie of those who would claim the cross of Christ to be irrelevant. Their god is their belly. Their attention is devoted to food laws and keeping them, defining religious identity and culture in a way that “includes me and excludes you.” He says they glory in their shame, probably a veiled reference to circumcision, which we see earlier in the chapter. Their minds are set on earthly things. They evaluate people from a human point of view, a view that inevitably leads to racial superiority, ethnic pride, and a lower view of others. Paul discovered in the Gospel that though he had every conceivable high-ranking place and position of status, he considered it all as nothing compared to the greatness of knowing Jesus Christ. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14,15:

*“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised.”*

He says in 2 Corinthians 5:16-17:

*“From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”*

He speaks to the Philippians using that very powerful, my most favorite, pronoun of all, the

first-person plural: *we, us*. It is so much more powerful to say Christ died for **us** than to say Christ died for **me**. He says in Philippians 3:20:

*“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Our citizenship, our cultural identity, is in heaven. Heaven is a multicultural group. It is an international community of the redeemed, the people of God, men, women, and children purchased by the blood of Christ, from all nations. We have a new political identity in Jesus Christ that supersedes all political, ethnic, and racial criteria. We assert in Christ a common humanity, a shared redemption at the cross, an inclusion of the nations into a diverse people of God, and we proclaim as Christians a glorious future that unites all peoples in future transformation into Christ-likeness. Not only has Christ redeemed **us**, not only has He included the nations in His kingdom, but He actually intends to transform **us**, all of us, transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body. This is a radical, alternative vision. If you don't feel the radical nature of this proclamation, then you haven't understood it. It's a radical, alternative vision of our past. It's a shared past, a shared present, a shared future that God creates for the Gospel and puts on display in the church. At times, this shared vision is so radical, so countercultural, that it is precisely at this point that those around us, even sometimes religious people, will say: “That's the wrong vision.” Pastor Scott mentioned that church growth experts often say that church growth is by affinity groups. This is a betrayal of the Gospel. Paul says in Ephesians 3:10: “No, no, no. We meet together in this diverse ensemble”:

*“. . . so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”*

You must be in a church that has different generations in it. The church is not adequately signaled to the heavenly powers if everybody in it is only three to five years apart in age. The



church is not evidence to heavenly powers when everyone speaks the same language. The church is not evidence to heavenly powers when everyone in the church has the same politics. The culture will push against this high ground that the church occupies, and it is when the culture pushes that the imitation of Christ is given a real opportunity to shine.

This happened for Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a very significant way in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and has profound lessons for us today. You will recall that Bonhoeffer grew up in Germany. He was born in 1906. He received his PhD at age 21, and his doctoral dissertation was on the *Communion of Saints*, the Nature of the Church. Bonhoeffer served in a church. He learned to herald the Gospel that includes all nations, and his society was rapidly turning in a different direction. A conflict developed when the government in his day, Nazi Germany, sought to enforce an alternative

theological vision of what it meant to be a Christian or child of God. Nazi theology, if it could be called that, pushed for a radical redefinition of Christianity because the Gospel version, the New Testament version, of Christianity became increasingly incompatible, irreconcilable with what the state was teaching. We feel this resonance today. In April 1933, the government passed legislation to introduce the Aryan Paragraph. It was called the *Restoration of Civil Service*. Basically, this law meant that no one could serve in public office and no one could serve in church ministry if they had any Jewish blood in their background. There was an attempt to radically redefine the church.

Alfred Rosenberg was put in charge of religion and education in the Nazi State. Rosenberg argued for a new religion of the blood based on the innate promptings of the Nordic race to defend its noble character. He rejected Christianity because of its universality. He rejected Christianity for its doctrine of original sin, because he believed that the German race had been born noble. He rejected Christianity for its teaching that owed an obvious Jewish influence. He condemned what he called negative Christianity and argued instead for a so-called positive Christianity. He recast Jesus as a member of the Indo-European Nordic race who just happened to reside in ancient Galilee and struggled against Judaism. Rosenberg set a societal vision, what he called the “mystical Darwinist vitalism,” whatever that means, and connected the individual person to discovering “his true racial identity.” He believed that the cross, and the emphasis on the cross, was a negative image and that Christians made too much of sin. He outlined a 30 point program to remake the church in Germany including these items:

“The National Reich Church of Germany would claim exclusive control over all churches; the Bible would cease to be distributed; crucifixes would be removed from altars; and the image of the cross would be removed and replaced with the swastika.”

Adolf Hitler put in charge of the German churches a man named Ludwig Müller, and Müller stated publicly that the idea of grace was un-German. He said:

“German Christians have a love that has a hard warrior-like face. It hates everything soft and weak, because only it knows that life can only remain healthy and fit when everything antagonistic to life is cleared out of the way and destroyed.”

He considered an exaggerated emphasis on the cross a sign of weakness. In this climate, the devastating reality was that 90% of Germans said “okay.” Can you imagine? That is so sobering that such a hostile frontal assault on the Gospel could just be absorbed.

Bonhoeffer was 27 years old, and he said: “That's not biblical faith. That's not New Testament Christianity.” At 27 years old, he published a paper called: “The Church and the Jewish Question.” He argued that the church had a responsibility to question the actions of the state when they were illegitimate, when the state moved beyond its borders. Bonhoeffer then said

that the church had an obligation to help those who were victims of state action, even those that did not belong to the Christian community. It was obvious what he was talking about, and when he said this publicly, many people left the room. He said the church also has an obligation not only to help those crushed by the wheel of the state, but the church has an obligation to “put a spoke in the wheel.” The church's obligation to put a spoke in the wheel of tyranny was to move into a place what he called as a “state of confession.” This is not confession like: “I'm sorry for my sins.” This is confession like: “to confess your faith, to proclaim your faith.” Bonhoeffer and others gathered together with believers and pastors who said that this is a betrayal of the Gospel, and the church in Germany must stand for historic Christian faith. They met together in May 1934 and adopted a confession of faith which became known as the *Barmen Confession of Faith*, which says:

“In fidelity to their Confession of Faith, members of [the German] Churches sought a common message for the need and temptation of the Church in our day. . . In opposition to false doctrine, by the use of force and insincere practices, . . . the unity of the Evangelical Churches in Germany can come only from the Word of God in faith through the Holy Spirit.”

The Barmen Declaration asserted that:

“The inviolable foundation of the Church is the gospel of Jesus Christ . . . We are bound together by the confession of the one Lord.”

The Barmen Declaration says that they sought to expose the errors of the so-called German Christians of the present Reich Church by the assertions that:

“Jesus Christ, as he is attested for 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 Barmen Declaration asserted that:

“The Christian Church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word. . . The Church [is a community] of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance.”

The Barmen Declaration says:

“The Church's commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to **all** people in Christ's stead.”

These are radical words! These are very powerful words, saying that the church is Christ's, built on His Word, rooted in the Gospel, summoning all people to obedience, alone testifying in the world of the grace of God that appeared to justify sinful people, of whom we are. No one else

has this message. The Gospel is only distorted and twisted when the onslaught of that urban crosswalk comes against you, and you say: “Oh, I can flex on this. I can flex on that. Maybe the culture is right that Christianity seems exclusive, that I can ignore the Word of God here; I can ignore the Word of God there.”

Bonhoeffer’s circumstances, and these are increasingly ours, called forth courage, and circumstances in a changing society summon up courage. Bonhoeffer’s first step was to confess historic Christian faith. But, he didn't stop there. For many of us, if we observe what's going on in our world today, we take what I would call just a prelude step, which is to be upset or confused or disoriented or mad. But that's just the first step. You shouldn't stay there. People who are streaming the other way across the crosswalk actually think they are doing things that are right. It doesn't help the Gospel for you just to be mad



about it. You need to move beyond that to a confession of historic Christian faith. Beyond a confession of historic Christian faith, Bonhoeffer moved to believe that because the culture around him was walking the other way, what was required of him and of the church was instead a more radical obedience to Jesus. It meant for him that he had to take Jesus more seriously than he had realized. He wrote a letter to his brother, Carl Friedrich, around this time and said to his brother:

“Perhaps I seem to you rather fanatical and mad about a number of things. I myself was sometimes afraid of that, but I think I'm actually right in saying that I would achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all of this idiocy sky high like fireworks, leaving only a few burnt out shells behind. The restoration of the church must depend on uncompromising discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount. I think the time has come to do this.”

Do you see what’s happening to him? The culture is moving against him with a frontal assault. He is not just mad about it. He says, “We are going to confess historical biblical faith, and we are going to take Jesus Christ even more seriously. And he does. He gathers people around him to do that, and it is during these years that the Lord works in his heart to forge what many would say is his greatest work, published in 1937, simply called *Discipleship*. In English, this work is been published as *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this book, Bonhoeffer describes the obedience that is required and central to the Christian faith, a walking with God that displays the Gospel when the world goes mad. There are some stunning lines in *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer warned against what he called cheap grace and instead sets forward a counter

paradigm of the costly grace which includes real discipleship and obedience. He says:

“Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance. It is baptism without discipline of community. It is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.

“Costly grace is the hidden treasure in the field for which people go and sell with joy everything they have. Costly grace is the gospel. It is costly because it calls to discipleship. It is grace because it calls people to follow Jesus. It is costly because it cost people their lives. It is grace because it makes them live. It is costly because it condemns sin. It is grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, grace is costly because it was costly to God because it cost God the life of God's Son and because nothing can be cheap to us which is costly to God.

He introduces the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus' call to discipleship, He says:

“Something happens to us when we hear the call to discipleship. At first, it is extremely unsettling and offensive to the crowds, and yet Jesus calls us to follow Him.”

Bonhoeffer writes in *The Cost of Discipleship* that the great goal of discipleship is transformation into Christ-likeness. He writes that:

“To those who hear the call to be disciples of Christ is given the incomprehensibly great promise that they are to become like Christ. They are to bear His image. They become like Christ. The image of Jesus Christ, which is always before the disciples' eyes, and before which all other images fade away, enters, permeates, and transforms them so that disciples resemble, even become like, their Master. For disciples, it is not possible to look at the image of the Son of God in detached contemplation. This image exerts a transforming power, and all who submit themselves completely to Christ will bear His image. They become sons and daughters of the Most High, standing next to Christ, who bears the same form they do, the image of God.”

The world around us is changing, and I know that many of you, including myself, feel at times that it is disorienting. It is confusing. It seems that religious freedom is assaulted in our country. It seems increasingly that there are direct and indirect ways of encouraging people to either keep their Christian faith quiet or to have a change like what the president United States proposed: to change the discussion from “freedom of religion” to “freedom of worship.” That is a profound shift in the language, actually, because what that means is that it is no longer the case for many in our world today that you have the right to exercise your faith in a public sphere. If you change freedom of religion to freedom to worship, that means that you can be pedantically told: “Sure, believe what you want, think what you want, act how you want within the confines of your religious buildings, but when you walk into the public space, you have to

pretend that everyone is a secular humanist, that our values are yours, and if you say anything in contradiction to that, you can be punished, fined, or lose your position.”

So, how do we respond? If God has given you citizenship here and has called you to be here, then you need to be here. Bonhoeffer felt that acutely. He was given an opportunity to move and spend the war in the United States, but he said: “I can’t do that. I am a German, and I have got to be in Germany during times of trial.” So the flight response is excluded. Can we abandon that together? There is another way, and it is a lesson we learn from Bonhoeffer. It’s a lesson he picked up in reflection on the apostle Paul: It is to question the state’s authority when the state reaches over its bounds; it is to defend the victim of oppression, even if they are outside the Christian community; it is too also embrace a radical obedience to Jesus in our own living. I know it is sometimes presented in a way that is difficult to turn off. I know some of you get stuck in news binges or you read things that just increasingly get you upset and worked up. When you start to feel that way, that’s the time to turn it off and direct that energy and attention to where I can radically obey Jesus today. Where can I dig into His Word now and learn to follow Him?

Let me apply this in three very brief ways.

Number one: The summons is to *walk* with God. That is the call, in relationship, attuned to His voice, hearing Him slow you down when you need to be slowed down, and hearing Him prompt you forward when you need to go forward.

Number two: Confess historic Christian faith even when our culture or political leadership demands that you deny, or at least radically redefine, Christianity into an unrecognizable shape.

Number three: Take discipleship seriously. That’s what we need to do. When we do that, we will stand, and we won’t end up going the other way, and we will be the church, and we will offer hope for the world. You know the amazing thing about Nazi Germany is that it is gone, and you have to read about in the library, and two billion people are gathered this morning, alive to worship Jesus Christ. Let’s stand together and pray.

Lord Jesus, we exalt You this morning. Earthly powers come and go, culture shifts around us, and You have been calling to us since Enoch to walk with You. Lord, help us to take our stand with You and for You, and give us wisdom, Lord, in a complex time, give us discernment and inner resolve, and, Lord, help us to stand with You. I pray for those specifically who really feel the pressure of the crowd or the culture right now. It can come from family, from a spouse. It can come from a boss or an institution with which we are associated or employed. Lord, help us to stand with You, with our arms high, our heart abandoned in all of You, the One who gave it all. We love You, Jesus, and ask that You would fill us with the Holy Spirit this morning, Amen.