

The Cost of Discipleship

January Sermon Series *Imitatio Christi* on Philippians 3:17
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
January 31, 2016

TEXT: Philippians 3:17

This morning we conclude our January sermon series on the *Imitatio Christi*, the Imitation of Christ. We have been looking at a single verse in connection with a single significant life lived in obedience to Christ, the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This morning, the last stage of our journey in this text and Bonhoeffer's life is to consider together the cost of discipleship, to take Christ seriously. Each of these weeks in January, we've looked at one element of Philippians 3:17:

IMITATIO CHRISTI

Philippians 3:17



January 3-31, 2016
Sermon Series and Book Discussion
"Bonhoeffer" by Eric Metaxas

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

We began with: "What does it mean to imitate, to join in imitating Christ?" Then, we looked at: "What does it mean to keep our eyes on, to mark the goal of those walking in this way?" Pastor Scott talked with us from the Word of God about: "What does it mean to be brothers, a community of people striving to do the same?" Last week, we considered the verb of action to *walk*, to live in this observable way. This morning, we look at a small word that is tucked in the last phrase of Philippians 3:17. The ESV says: ". . . according to the *example* that you have in us." The NIV translates this word as: ". . . according to the *pattern*," which, in this case, I think, is actually a little better translation. Paul says in Philippians 3:17 that we are to join him as he is imitating Christ. We are to keep our eyes on those doing the same, walking according to the *type*, is the word he uses, the pattern. A *type* is a Greek word that means that you take a blow or strike something. You stamp it, and as a result, an impression is made. Some of us are old enough to remember typewriters. Do you remember those? Our children will have to go to a museum to see those. My first typewriter was not even an electronic typewriter. I remember pushing the keys, looking inside and watching those arms come out and smack the paper, and when the arm came back, what was left was a letter. It was amazing, unless you misspelled something, and then it was a little less amazing. It was hard to put that white correction paper in, strike it, and try to remove the mistake. But the image is this: a blow is made; a *type* is created. Paul is saying: "*Walk according to the type.*" So, what is the type? What is the letter with which our lives are to be struck? It is the letter of Christ, Christ's dying and

Christ's rising. The pattern of living is the cruciform life. It is united with Christ's death that we might join in His resurrection. This very same term is used in John 20:25 where the disciples say to Thomas: *"We have seen the Lord."*

"But [Thomas] said to them, 'Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe.'"

There's the word: unless I see the *type*; unless I see the *blow* on His hands, I will not believe. Jesus retains the *mark* of the cross after His resurrection, because the pattern of discipleship is to be united with Christ's dying that we might be united in His resurrection. Jesus graciously comes up to Thomas and says in John 20:27 to him:

"Put your finger here, and see My hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."

Touch the mark; catch the type, the blow that is struck and creates an impression and shapes the pattern. The example, the pattern, upon which our lives are to be based is the pattern of Jesus' own living and dying. Jesus says that the way of discipleship is to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me. This language is so difficult for us as 21st century Americans to grasp. It is so arresting, so contrary to the way we think: "Deny? Me?" We live in a culture that is constantly pressing us to seek our comfort, our good, our pleasure.

I stayed in a hotel recently and one of the parking spaces of the hotel was offered only for those members of the "Diamond Elite" status. I thought: "That's a little strong." I was not Diamond Elite, so I parked in the next row back. I found myself thinking as I got out of the car: "This is the distance, these four steps, and now I'm in Diamond Elite status." All around you, the culture is offering reward points: Calculate your benefits, what's in it for you. And we hear the word of Jesus say: "Deny yourself," and we panic. We think: "Do those reward points expire?" Jesus says: "Deny yourself; take up your cross." It seems a total loss, total renunciation, and yet, Jesus is the sovereign King of the universe. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and He continues and says: "For whoever would save his life will lose it." If you live your life seeking your own comfort, your own reward, your own benefit, working the circumstances and situations of your lives, manipulating the people around you to try to extract some benefit for yourself, Jesus says: "You are going to lose. Yet Jesus says: *Whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will save it. Deny yourself; follow Me; take up your cross.*" Embrace the pattern, the type of life that is described as a dying and a rising with Christ. There are tremendous incentives to avoid the cross. As I mentioned last Sunday, when Paul considers the reality that there are those denying the cross, living as enemies of the cross, he begins to weep. It is the only time in his letters when he weeps as he is dictating. People live as enemies of the cross. What does it mean to be an enemy of the cross? To be an enemy of the cross is to prefer your own place and station, to deny the persecution that is associated, the suffering that is

connected with the cross. Paul refuses all such denials. He refuses to accommodate himself to social pressure that says don't stand out. The way of Christianity seems strange to the society: You might have to suffer; you might have someone think poorly of you if you identify yourself publicly as a Christian. Paul says: "I'll have none of it." Those who deny the cross seek to protect themselves from persecution of society. Paul knows well from experience that if you deny the cross, you will avoid suffering; you will avoid shame; you will avoid public disgrace; you will avoid humiliation; you will avoid gossip about you in the office; you will remain in the shadows; your voice will be quiet; you will take no public action on behalf of Christ that will visibly identify you as on His side. You will avoid all of these things, and yet, if you avoid the cross, you will also avoid the fellowship of Christ's sufferings; you will avoid the comfort of the Holy Spirit; you will avoid redemption; you will avoid forgiveness; you will avoid joy in the midst of sorrow; you will avoid transformation into Christ-likeness; you will avoid the bright light of Sunday morning and the voice of Jesus Christ saying, "Come forth!" That is what you will also miss. If you avoid the cross, you will avoid the resurrection.

Paul says: "We carry in our bodies the dying of Jesus so that we might enjoy the living." He says in Galatians 2:20:

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

Paul knows that to deny the cross is to avoid the pattern, and if you avoid the pattern, you avoid the ending of the pattern, and that is how his thought resolves that those who live as enemies of the cross also avoid the glorious ending. Those who avoid the cross end up with destruction. Those who embrace the cross end up with resurrection and transformation, as he says in Philippians 3:21:

"[Christ] will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself."

Times are changing around us. We had a great gift the first part of this week. Kenwood Baptist Church sent 17 representatives to a conference for three days in Minnesota. The theme of the conference was on persevering and faithfulness when we face cultural headwinds or times of opposition. Speaker after speaker spoke of the power of obedience to Christ. I couldn't help but think of the timeliness of a large group of us hearing that and being stirred to faithfulness to Christ. Faithfulness to Christ and embracing of the cross, which was a shameful sign in Paul's day, ended up with Paul in prison. Paul took his stand on the cross. He did not obscure it. He did not hide it. He knew that the cross called people to repentance and faith. He knew that it called pagans to faith. He knew that it called religious people to sincere repentance and new life. Paul's commitment to the cross resulted in his imprisonment. He was imprisoned at the end for bringing people inside the community of faith and calling people into the fellowship of Christ's

sufferings. Paul was imprisoned, and he was transferred to governing powers. He was held for an uncertain duration of time. He was interrogated by people who were perplexed as to the precise nature of his offense. Paul spent the latter years of his life in prison, and during those years, he was refreshed by personal visits and letters from fellow believers. During his time in prison, he read the Scriptures and was constant in prayer. He cared for those who were incarcerated with him, sharing the Gospel with those around him. He continued his ministry through the writing of letters from prison. He wrote most of the letters that we have in the New Testament, including Philippians, and in the end, Paul entrusted himself to the will of God. He would die for his faith, and yet, he lives today. This is the pattern, and Paul's ending, of course, anticipates the latter stages of Bonhoeffer's life, and we find profound correspondences between these two men because they, like each other, lived according to the pattern of Christ—to take up the cross and live.

Bonhoeffer's life, as we have been tracing it together, led him to stand publicly for historic, orthodox Christian faith in the midst of a society that was quickly and eagerly willing to radically



redefine Christianity beyond recognition. As we mentioned last Sunday, Bonhoeffer said that the church has a responsibility in society to question the action of the state when the state overreaches its bounds. The church has a responsibility to aid victims of state action even when they are outside the Christian community. He said that the church also has a responsibility not just to bandage victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel. One of the ways that the church puts a spoke in the wheel of a culture rapidly descending to the degradation of man is the by putting a spoke in the wheel by confessing the Gospel. We looked last Sunday at the Barmen Declaration as a tremendous statement and

confession of faith. Bonhoeffer's participation in that resistance was to confess the faith of the church. He put a spoke in the wheel in different ways. He sought to reach the international Christian community and expose the lies of the German church. He started a seminary to train pastors and church leaders in true and faithful preaching of the Scriptures. He published works expounding the Bible. He called on people to take action and criticize what he called the "*reasonable*" people for not taking action. He wrote:

"The '*reasonable*' people's failure is obvious. With the best intentions and a naïve lack of realism, they think that with a little reason they can bend back into position the framework that has got out of joint. . . Disappointed by the world's unreasonableness, they see themselves condemned to ineffectiveness; they step aside in resignation or collapse before the stronger party."

Bonhoeffer observed that many people in Germany either went along with these radical

changes in denial of Christianity or they just got grumpy about it. Either way, they ended up doing nothing. He asked the question:

“Who stands fast? Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God — the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God. Where are these responsible people?”

So many were just drifting along with the culture. Bonhoeffer's decision to take action led him to seek to create relationship with international community and identify to the international community that there were serious Germans inside Germany that were willing to lead a new government when a conspiracy plot developed. Actually, there were multiple conspiracy plots to assassinate Hitler when they reached the conclusion that he was destroying the nation. Bonhoeffer participated in this in a way that he wrestled with hard. He used his international relationships to the lay groundwork. Eventually, Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5, and he was brought into Tegel Prison. He was arrested, not for participation in making relationships with the international community, but he was arrested on a charge that the Gestapo really couldn't understand initially. They arrested him initially on a charge that they thought he was transferring money out of the country. They thought he was aiding Jews to escape Germany. They didn't really know. What happened was that he was brought into Tegel Prison, and he spent almost two years in this place of imprisonment. I've spent the last a few weeks reading through, not only Eric Metaxas' description of these events, but reading through Bonhoeffer's letters from prison. It has been a joy and delight, and I feel I've spent time with him. There were hundreds of letters written, and I want to share with you a little bit about this story. I want to share with you what Bonhoeffer did during his times of imprisonment, and I want us to see that it is exactly the same things that Paul did. It so refreshing to have a pattern.

Like Paul, Bonhoeffer was refreshed and sustained by personal visits from his family. After he was taken into Tegel military prison, he was moved to cell number 92, and his family, his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer, his parents, and his best friend Eberhard Bethge, came to visit him in prison. He records one of these visits on November 26, 1943. He saw them for just a few hours, and this is what he wrote in one of his letters afterwards:

“It will be with me for a long time the memory of having the four people who are nearest and dearest to me with me for a brief moment. When I got back to my cell, a 7' x 10' cell, I paced up and down for an hour. My dinner stood there cold. At last, I couldn't help laughing at myself when I found myself repeating over and over again: ‘That was really great!’”

Bonhoeffer, the restrained German, just couldn't hold it in. He paced around the 7 x 10' cell and the visit just energized him and sustained him. You can just see him. He said: “That was great!”

And then the intellectual kicked in, and he said:

“I always hesitant to use the word ‘indescribable.’ (He would be so out of step with this culture. Everything here is amazing, indescribable, extraordinary.) I can hardly use that word ‘indescribable’ because I think that if you take enough trouble to make a thing clear, it really shouldn't be indescribable, but at the moment, this is just what this morning actually seems to be. A visit. They came to see me! I was refreshed.”

The Gospel is on display when you reach out in concrete ways and make contact. So many around us are alone, struggling, whether behind bars or life in prison, if you will. He was refreshed, sustained, like Paul, by personal visits of his family and fellow believers.

While he was imprisoned, Bonhoeffer continued the practice, and he said this sustained him unlike anything else. He continued his daily practice of Scripture reading and prayer. After he was imprisoned in April, by the time November came around, he wrote to his best friend and said:

“I've read through the Old Testament two and a half times and I've learned a lot.”

He said to his friend Eberhard Bethge:

“This practice of daily Scripture reading and prayer is able to give us a sense of grounding and continuity and clarity.

He poured over the Scriptures during his time of imprisonment. Not only was he refreshed with visits, he continued the practice of Scripture reading and daily prayer. Do you think that you can really live faithfully day by day without eating spiritual food of God's word, without breathing in the rarefied air of God's presence in prayer? I can't. We can't live that way. Do you believe that? I really do. I cannot live without daily meal from God's word, without daily air from His presence in prayer. Bonhoeffer was sustained in this, and as a result he ministered to the people around him in prison. He was known, by those who wrote about it, to be kind and generous. He refused the offer of a cooler cell on the second floor. He served those who were struggling with depression and offered pastoral counseling to them. While he was imprisoned and the allied forces began to send air raids over Germany, initially there was no air raid shelter for the prisoners, and they were in utter darkness with thousand-plane air raids going over the city, expecting to die at any moment. The windows of the prison were blown out. Bottles and medical supplies crashed to the ground, and prisoners were lying terrified in darkness, with little hope of surviving the attack. Bonhoeffer ministered to them and stood fearlessly, according to those who described it in the midst of such moments. Not only was Bonhoeffer sustained by these visits, not only did he strengthen his soul with daily Scripture reading and prayer so he was able to minister to those around him, he also did what Paul did. He wrote at length, and his letters have been published in a volume called: *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

Let me share a couple of excerpts from these:

- June 4, 1943, letter to his parents: “Thank you so much for your letters. They are too short for me, but of course I understand. It is as though the prison gates were opened for a moment and I could share a little of your life outside.”
- September 13, 1943, again to his parents: “It is a strange feeling to be so completely dependent on other people, but it teaches one to be grateful, and I will never forget this. In ordinary life, we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich. It is easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements in comparison with what we owe to others.”

His parents and his friends wrote back to him. His parents tried to supply his needs. They brought food to him in the prison. They brought books for him to read. They sustained his spirit with letters, and they also took those letters to direct his attention to God. Listen to this letter from his mother in October 1943: (This is the kind of mother you should be!)

“Let me know what you need. I would so like to make your position comfortable as possible within our powers. It is an impossible, improbable situation. I can say one thing: I have always been proud of my eight children, and I am now more than ever when I see the dignity and respect they maintain in such an indescribable situation. This trial of your patience, though, has a meaning for you. Go on entrusting yourself to the divine guidance. God will make things well, and we must wait and keep working. This is a blessing. Thank God for all that you can still do. There is no lack of work for me at home. I will be cheerful as long as I can. All my best, my good boy. Your mother.

Be a mother or parent like that. When your child is in a difficult situation, remind them this has a meaning for them.

Bonhoeffer's letters back and forth described his anticipation of God's work. He became aware of the Normandy Invasion of June 6, 1944 and sent a quick note to his close friend in anticipation that the defeat of Nazi Germany was just around the corner. He hoped to see the Nazi regime removed. He was discouraged when the July 20, 1944 Valkyrie Plot failed, and he wrote a letter to his dear friend. In the disappointment of those days, he again turned his attention to God, reading Scripture. The Scriptures of the day were these:

- Psalm 20:7: *“Some boast in chariots and some in horses, but we boast in the name of the LORD our God.”*
- Romans 8:31: *“If God is for us, who can be against us?”*
- Psalm 23: *“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”*
- John 10:14: *“I am the good Shepherd. I know My own, and My own know Me.”*

Bonhoeffer's imprisonment was a refining fire. He wrote. He thought deeply. He began to embrace the reality of the cross and to trust that even in difficulty and suffering there was joy to be experienced, that the pattern of discipleship was, in fact, the cross, and that Jesus really meant: take up the cross, die to self, and live in Him. Bonhoeffer was eventually transferred from the Tegel military prison. He was moved on October 8, 1944 to a Gestapo prison on Prinz Albrecht Strasse in Berlin. He spent four months in utter darkness. After he was transferred and condemned, he was moved to several concentration camps, and then he was taken in the end to Flossenbürg. Bonhoeffer, in his last days as he was moved through the country, wasn't able to write. He wasn't able to send letters. There were a few men, though, who survived during these times of transfer and wrote about these last days. One of them was a British intelligence officer, Payne Best. He described that when Bonhoeffer was at Buchenwald, he continued to minister and pastor those who were around him. He continued preaching. He preached his final sermon with a combination of Isaiah 53:5: *"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 again to a living hope through the resurrection from the dead."* When Bonhoeffer finished this last sermon, two men in civilian clothes came in and said: "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us." Those words, they had come to know, meant only one thing—the scaffold.

Bonhoeffer was transferred to Flossenbürg prison. He spent only a few hours there, and at 5:30 in the morning on the next day, he was sentenced to death and led out to the gallows, with a number of other people. The camp doctor at Flossenbürg was a Dr. H. Fischer-Hüllstrung, and he reported on what happened on that morning of April 9. These are his words:

"On the morning of that day between five and six o'clock, the prisoners, among them Admiral Canaris, General Oster, General Thomas, and Reichsgerichtsrat Sack, were taken together from their cells, and the verdicts and court-martial read against them. Through the half-open door in one room of the house, I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer. Before taking off his prison garb, I saw him kneeling on the floor, praying fervently to God. I was deeply moved by the way that this lovable man prayed, so devout, so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer. He climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In fifty years as a doctor, I have never seen a man die so entirely submitted to the will of God."

Bonhoeffer's last words as he left when he heard the sentence were:

"This is the end, but for me, it's the beginning of life."

I cannot help but confess to you that I am going to miss Bonhoeffer and this series. I always feel a little sadness when we end a sermon series, and I am going to miss this man. This morning as I was praying, my thoughts rose, and I thought: "I am actually looking forward to meeting him, because in Jesus Christ, dying, we live. In Jesus Christ we are called to action, not fear. In Jesus

Christ were called to faithfulness, and we are called to hear Christ's call at the beginning of the life of discipleship." One of Bonhoeffer's most famous lines is this: *Jeder Ruf Christi führt in den Tod.*

"Every call of Christ leads to dying. The cross meets us not at the end of discipleship but at the beginning. 'Take up your cross and follow Me' at the beginning of our discipleship. The ending of discipleship is resurrection. For me, this is the end—the beginning of life."

This is a life we need to know. It is a life lived according to the pattern: suffering and being raised. It is a life like Paul's, like Jesus', of taking action in the moment God has assigned to us and not hiding in the shadows fearing, but stepping forward, identifying ourselves with Christ. We see the pattern, and we are called in this series this morning to follow. Let us, as Kenwood Baptist Church, not avoid the circumstances that might cause us pain, suffering, gossip against us, or that might discredit us. Do not deny yourself the opportunity to act in obedience to Christ. Let us live by daily prayer, Scripture reading, ministering to those around us, and imitating Christ, following Him, so that in dying, we might truly live. That's the call! Let's pray.

Jesus, we thank You for the gift of this morning. We thank You for the gift of having a clear pattern, to follow You with all of our lives. Lord, help us follow You. We give You praise. We give You thanks. We delight in You above all things. Help us to be faithful to Your call. Help us to embrace the cross at the beginning of our discipleship so that we might join You in the end in resurrection and eternal life. We extol You, Lord. We magnify You.

Would you stand with me as we commit ourselves anew to follow Christ.