Philippians 2:19-3:21 *Disciples Who Make Disciples: Copycats*

***Mimics***It’s no secret that children learn by copying what they see. If daddy cheers for the Vikings, Jr. is likely to cheer for the Vikings. If mommy curls her hair, it’s not surprising to see her little girl pretending to curl her hair as well. Give a toddler a banana, and he or she is just as likely to talk into it like a telephone as to eat it. Kids practice what they see others doing.

Researchers have done experiments to see just how powerful learning by imitation can be. In one laboratory study 14-month-old toddlers were placed on their mother’s laps while an adult experimenter played with different objects in front of them. One was a flat box with a yellow top panel. The adult looked at it, and then leaned forward and touched it with the top of his head, which made the panel light up. At no point did the researcher say “Watch me” or “do what I do.” The toddlers were not allowed to touch the box either.

Then they let a week pass before bringing the toddlers back to the same room and allowing them to play with the box. 2 out of every 3 babies—67%--touched their foreheads to the panel and made it light up. They also had a control group of children who were allowed to play with the box but did not watch the adult model demonstrate what was to be done. Exactly 0 of those children touched the panel with their foreheads.

Other experiments have been done to test how much children learn from imitating one another. A “tutor child” was taught how to pull apart a unique toy. Then that child was brought to a daycare and played with the toy in front of other 14-month-olds. None of those children were allowed to touch this particular toy. Then, two days later, a different researcher brought a bag of toys to the homes of each of the children, including the one that had been modeled by the “tutor child.” Neither the new researcher nor any of the children’s parents had been present at the day care, so the only person who knew what actions had been demonstrated was the “student-infant.” And yet, a significant number of the children were able to repeat the actions they had seen modeled two days before.

In other words, imitation is a powerful learning tool. Our children learn by mimicking what they see.

But it’s not just children. How many of us, after spending a few days down south, find ourselves saying words like “howdy” and “y’all”? Or, if you take a trip out east, do you find yourself saying “forget about it” like a New York mobster? Or go up to Minnesota and see how long it takes to start saying “Ya, you betcha.” We have a tendency to imitate what we see and hear. We take on the characteristics of those around us.

And if that is true for accents, it is also true in the way we shape and order our lives. We are influenced by the company we keep. We tend to take on the characteristics and behaviors of people we admire.

***Keep Your Eyes On Those Who Live As We Do***  
We are in the midst of a sermon series on discipleship. Our goal is that we will be a church full of Disciples who make Disciples. That is, that we will be growing in our relationship with Jesus Christ and that we will also take responsibility for helping to prepare one another for glory. We want to be people who are following Jesus.

And so, we have defined discipleship as making a decision to follow Jesus with our heads, having an openness to being changed by Jesus in our hearts, and an availability to be used by Him with our hands. We’ve talked about how making disciples is the heart of Jesus’ great commission for us. Disciple-making is the number one priority of the church. And we’ve seen that this isn’t something that can be reduced to a program or for a limited number of people, but is for all of us.

But, you might ask: how do we learn to be disciples? If it’s not a curriculum or a class that we can take, then what is the best way to grow in following Jesus? And one of the best answers is: by imitation. We learn to follow Jesus by watching others follow Jesus. So much of Christian character and lifestyle is caught, not taught.

Here’s our key verse for this morning, **Philippians 3:17.** This is the Apostle Paul writing:

**17**Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

Paul is inviting the Philippians to imitate him. He says, look at the way I live my life and then model yourself after me. And not just me, but others who live the way I do. Those who set a good example of what it means to be a Christian: find them, and follow them. Be a copycat. Mimic the Christian life.

Now, lest we think Paul has an overly high view of himself, I need to note the similarity between what Paul says here and what he says in 1 Corinthians 11:1. In **1 Corinthians 11:1** he says:

**1**Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

Paul understands that the only thing that makes him worthy of following is that he is following Jesus. And if he isn’t following Jesus in certain aspects of his life, then those things should not be imitated. We’ll talk more about this verse next week.

But Paul understands the value of imitation. He sees the importance of role models. He knows that if we are going to learn to talk like Christians and think like Christians and evaluate the world in a Christian manner; if we are going to learn how to raise our families in Christ and how to share our faith and how to give and how to serve; then we are going to learn it from one another.

So here’s our big idea for this morning, right out of Philippians 3:17: I**f you want to grow as a follower of Jesus, keep your eyes on those who are following Him.** The Christian life is caught, not taught. So we need to find Godly examples and imitate them.

***Who Should We Follow?***That leads to the next question: how do we know who to follow? Who makes for a good role model?

And to answer that question, I want to dig into the context of Paul’s statement. If we dip back into Philippians chapter 2, and look at everything Paul has to say in chapter 3, we can get a pretty good sense of the kinds of people Paul wants us to pay attention to. We can get a look at the pattern that Paul is holding up as worthy of imitation. There are 5 things:

***Genuine Interest***So, first, **imitate those who look out for the interests of others.** Find people who have a genuine concern for those around them, and do what they do.

Let’s look at the text. As I said, I want to dip all the way back into chapter 2. So we’re actually going to read quite a few verses today. We’ll read them all, but I’ll only be able to hit the highlights. **Philippians 2:19-24:**

**19**I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. **20**I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. **21**For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. **22**But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. **23**I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. **24**And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

So this is kind of the housekeeping section of the letter. Paul is currently in prison, so he wants them to know that he may be sending Timothy to check in with them, to bring back news about his situation. And since he has mentioned Timothy, he also talks a little about him. Timothy is an example of someone who is worthy of emulation.

And the thing that particularly stands out about Timothy is that he is someone who shows “genuine concern for your welfare.” He looks out for the interest of others, the interests of Jesus Christ.

Some people give the impression that it’s all about them. It’s their agenda that matters. Their problems that take precedence. Their needs that must always come first. They’ll talk to you, but you really never get a sense that they are listening to you. Instead, when you are talking it seems like they are just planning what they want to say next.

I read about something that just terrified me this week. This author was describing a seminar he attended that was designed to help people to discover what they really believed. He said there was one exercise that really got to him. There were about 50 people in this seminar and they’d been together for 2 days. Then, at the start of the third day, the facilitator made them take off their name tags and go to everyone in the room and call them by name. And, here’s the part that terrifies me: if you didn’t know someone’s name you had to say: “I’m sorry, but I don’t care enough about you to learn your name.” I imagine I would not do so well with such an exercise.

But Timothy, Paul says, isn’t like that. He lives for other people. He is genuinely interested in their well-being.

And in doing so, Timothy is following the example of Jesus. Just a few verses earlier, Paul wrote: “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” and then he goes on to give the example of Jesus who, even though He was in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but humbled himself to become a human and to face the cross. Jesus is the one willing to lay His life down for His friends.

And so, these are the kinds of people we should follow: Christians who exemplify the habit of helpfulness. Those who are more interested in your problems then telling you about their own. People who are willing to clean up after others, to lend a helping hand. Those who are constantly trying to do good spiritually, to do good materially, to do good emotionally. Those who are committed to the well-being of others.

Take note of them. Watch them. Watch how they act, how they talk, how they react. Talk with them. Learn what makes their heart beat, and then emulate them. Imitate those who look out for the interests of others.

***He Risked His Life***Second, we **should imitate those who risk for the sake of Christ.** Find people who have proved themselves in the midst of hardship, and learn from them. **Philippians 2:25-30:**

**25**But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. **26**For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. **27**Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. **28**Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. **29**So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, **30**because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

The background here is that the Philippians took up a collection for Paul, to help him in the midst of financial trial, and Epaphroditus is the one they chose to send with the offering. So he is a native of Philippi, who has been working alongside of Paul, but he became ill. So ill, in fact, that he almost died, so Paul is now making the decision to send him back home. It is probably Epaphroditus who carried this letter to the Philippians.

And the thing that stands out to me here is the way Paul describes him in verse 30: “he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.”

This, Paul says, is worthy of emulation. Verse 29: “honor people like him.” Epaphroditus is committed to the cause of Christ, whatever it takes. There is nothing he will hold back from Christ’s service, even his own life.

So, we should be on the alert for people like this. People who are prepared to risk everything: their money, their time, their reputations, whatever, in service to Christ. Not people who are in church because it helps their social standing. Not people who come for what the church can do for them. People who are so committed that they will pay any price to serve Jesus. Imitate people who risk for the sake of Christ.

***I Consider them Garbage***Or, third, **imitate those who put Christ above all else**. Find people whose constant confidence and boast is in Christ Jesus and in nothing else, and soak in their example. Now Paul shares some of his own testimony. **Chapter 3, 1-9:**

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. **2**Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. **3**For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— **4**though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: **5**circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; **6**as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

**7**But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. **8**What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ**9**and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

This is the part of the letter where Paul is taking on some of the false teaching that is plaguing the Philippians. The crucial controversy that underlies so much of the New Testament is the question of whether a Gentile has to become a Jew in order to fully follow Christ. And the symbol of this controversy is the ritual of circumcision.

So Paul has made it one of his life missions to say that we are saved by Christ and Christ alone. To argue that certain rituals and rules have to be observed in addition to what Christ has done is, in Paul’s opinion, to cheapen the price that Christ paid at the cross and to make ourselves the authors of our own salvation.

And so, Paul has some harsh words for those who are pushing circumcision. In verse 3 he calls them dogs, evildoers and mutilators of the flesh. No one ever accused Paul of being subtle.

Besides, Paul goes on to say, if it were all about Jewish rituals and adherence to the law, no one would be better positioned than him. He then goes through his curriculum vitae: he’s Hebrew of the tribe of Benjamin who was circumcised on his 8th day; he was trained as a Pharisee and followed the law to the letter; when it comes to Jesus he was so zealous for the law that he was actively persecuting the church. In other words, if salvation worked the way his opponents say it does, nobody would be in a better position than Paul.

But, he says in verse 7, “whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.” In fact, he goes on to say, he considers all that stuff as rubbish or garbage compared to what Jesus has done for him. He is not about to find his hope in anything other than Jesus.

We live in a world where people put their hope in a lot of things: our wealth, our status, our education, our emotional stability, our families, our political or business associations, our church affiliation, or more. We need to be careful of people like that. They tend to regard everyone outside of their group as somehow inferior. Somewhere along the line they inadvertently—and sometimes intentionally—imagine that faith in Jesus Christ isn’t quite enough.

Instead, we need to look around for those whose constant confidence is Jesus Christ, whose constant boast is Jesus Christ, whose constant delight is Jesus Christ. That doesn’t mean they have to talk about Jesus all the time; but when you can see by the way they live their life that their hope comes from Jesus, that’s the kind of person you should emulate. Imitate those who put Christ above all else.

***Press On***Fourth, **imitate those who know they still have more to learn.** Find people who are continuing to grow spiritually and copy their attitude. **Verses 10-16:**

**10**I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11**and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

**12**Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. **13**Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, **14**I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

**15**All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. **16**Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

When Paul says that he wants us to follow his example, we might think it is a bit arrogant of him to set himself up as the spiritual guru, as though he had it all figured out. But Paul will be the first to tell you that he has so much more learn. He hasn’t obtained all this, he hasn’t arrived at his goal, but he presses on to take hold of that which Christ has already taken hold of for him.

Paul knows that the riches to be found in Christ are unending. We will spend all of eternity getting to know him better, and even then we will discover that there is still more to discover.

And so, as we look around for people who are worthy of our emulation, we should look for people who are always hungry to learn more about Jesus. People who are passionate to press forward. People who are in it to win it. People who know they have not yet arrived, but are always eager to build on what they have attained so far.

Paul even uses the word mature in verse 15. That’s the same word I mentioned last week from Colossians 1. It’s Paul’s word for the goal of discipleship, the word for growing up into Christ and continuing to grow, the word that describes someone who has been walking with Jesus but knows they still have a long ways to go. Find people like that, Paul is saying, and keep your eyes on them. Imitate those who know they still have more to learn.

***Citizens of Heaven***And then, **fifth, imitate those who are citizens of heaven**. Find people who know that there are bigger things than this life, and pay attention to them. **Verses 17-21:**

**17**Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.**18**For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. **19**Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. **20**But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, **21**who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Paul draws a contrast here. Some people live only for this life. They make a god out of their appetites and boast about their sin. Their minds are set on earthly things. Paul says they are enemies of the cross.

In contrast, Paul talks about those who live as citizens of heaven. People who know that eternity awaits after this life. People who live with bigger things in mind than the daily commodity prices or fantasy football scores. People who realize that the awful significance of this life is that it prepares us for what comes next.

D.A. Carson, one of my seminary professors, writes:

Genuine spirituality cannot live long without an attitude that is homesick for heaven, that lives with eternity’s values in view, that eagerly awaits Jesus’ return, that anticipates the day when Christ himself will “bring everything under his control” and “will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” Thoughtful Christians will not see themselves first of all as citizens of Great Britain or the U.S. or Canada or Pago Pago. We are citizens of heaven. Only that citizenship has enduring significance. (Basics for Believers, p. 93)

So, find someone who shows an awareness that heaven is waiting. Find someone who is long-sighted about life, rather than short-sighted. Find someone who knows that this world is not their permanent home. Find someone like that, and imitate them.

***Application***So Paul says: “Follow my example…[and] keep your eyes on those who live as we do.” We learn by imitation. We take on the characteristics of those around us. So find people who are following Jesus and follow them.

Very quickly, then, let me give you three suggestions for how to make this work. Three points of application:

One. **Engage in the life of the Church**. The church is the community that brings Christians together. The church is the family of God, where we get to know one another and model Christianity for one another. In biological families, children learn about life by observing and imitating Mom and Dad. In the same way, if you get in the church and start watching those who are walking with Jesus, you’ll pick up and learn how to walk with Jesus yourself.

Lone Ranger Christianity is not God’s plan for us. One of the reasons participation in a local church is so important—beyond hearing the weekly sermon or giving your offering check—is that this is the community in which discipleship takes place.

Two. **Examine the people who influence you.** Here’s the opposite idea. Not only do we need to have good role models in our lives, we also need to evaluate our relationships to see if we have bad role models. Some of us have friendships that are dragging us down. People who are influencing us away from Jesus instead of toward Him.

I’m not saying you need to cut those people out of your life entirely—we are called to be witnesses after all. But if you have relationships where people are influencing you in a negative way, then you need to change the nature of those relationships.

And, three**. Express an interest in being mentored**. Finally, when Paul tells us to keep our eyes on those who live in a Christ-honoring way, one of the things he is saying is that we should approach those people and ask them to mentor us.

I know this can be awkward. It’s not every day that you walk up to someone and say: “Will you mentor me?” It takes a little courage. But it is worthwhile. I’ve done it a couple of times in my life. Most recently with Rick Porter, from the Okoboji Bible Conference. I just went up to him one day and said, “Rick, you’ve got a lot of experience as a pastor. You interact with a lot of Christian leaders. You are an easy guy to talk to. I wonder if you and I could meet on a regular basis and you could just mentor me?” It was an awkward conversation. But it was worth it. For a couple of years Rick and I met every other month or so and his wisdom was a real blessing to me.

So, look around for people who are following Jesus the way you want to, and see if they can make time for you. It’s a rewarding experience.

And, of course, one of the things we are building towards is our Ironman and Refined suppers where we will have men and women who are ready to be mentors, and you’ll have the opportunity to sign up to be mentored. So, if you have not yet, please sign up for those meals.

Christianity is caught more than it is taught. So look around for those who are following Jesus well, and follow those people.