

**AUGUST 13, 2017**

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**I CORINTHIANS 4: 9-16**

Emperor Maximian was one of the last Roman emperors before the time when Christianity was legalized throughout the empire in the early 300's A.D. Maximian had a particularly strong hatred of the Christian Church. When he would go on tour of his domain, he would send messengers ahead to the mayors of the towns he was scheduled to visit. The message would be something like this---"When I come to your town I wish to preside over the trial and execution of the Christians in your city. You must imprison them now and hold them for me until I arrive to have them killed." This royal message was sent to one town but the mayor could only come up with 7 Christians. So he wrote back to the emperor apologizing for having only 7, but promising that all 7 would be kept safe and sound so the emperor could slaughter them when he arrived. The mayor, in order to be sure no one escaped, assigned a very good soldier named Varus to be their special guard. Varus moved right in with the 7 Christians so he could keep a close eye on them.

A few days before the emperor arrived, one of the 7 Christians, an elderly man, came down with some illness and died. The mayor was beside himself as he knew the emperor would be upset, but what could he do? There would be only 6 Christians.

The emperor arrived on the scheduled day and he was bitterly disappointed that there were only 6 Christians to kill instead of the 7 he had been promised. He made quite a scene about how there should be 7, but even an emperor couldn't bring the dead Christian back to life in order to kill him. Then Varus was commanded to bring in the 6 surviving Christians. Varus did so, and then walked up to the emperor and said, "Your Majesty. I have now also become a believer in Jesus Christ---so now you have 7 Christians after all." The emperor was dumbfounded and said, "Soldier, how can this be? You are one of my soldiers. How can you turn against me to believe in this Jesus? If you don't reject Christ right now, you will die along with these 6." Varus explained that he had spent much time with the 7 Christians. He had lived with them for some time, he had talked with them. He had watched how they acted and heard how they talked. They had explained much to them about their Christian faith. He had been so impressed by them that he decided he wished to imitate them, to be like them---no matter what. And so he told the emperor that he was firmly a Christian believer now. The emperor would have his desired 7 to kill after all. The emperor went ahead and had a brief farce of a trial and then had all 7 executed that very day. St. Varus died along with the other 6. And all 7 went to heaven together that day. (in "Orthodox Weekly Bulletin", 10/19/03)

St. Varus watched the Christian prisoners. And then he began to imitate them. He became one of them and he died with them in glory.

We all get imitated. And we all imitate others. We may not be very aware of it., but it

happens all the time. People imitate other people---this happens when it comes to clothing, hairstyles, cars, how we talk, entertainment, etc. We often do something because other people do it.

When I was young, back in the 60s and 70s, there were many of us who decided we didn't want to conform to the society around us. We were rebellious, we wanted to be non-conformists, we wanted to be different, to be unique..... And so we grew our hair long, wore grubby blue jeans, maybe tie-dyed t-shirts. We listened to music that was "different". We spoke "differently." Anything to be non-conformist. But we all were just like each other---same hair, same clothes, same music, etc. We were actually extremely conformist to each other! We were very busy imitating each other.

Yes, everyone imitates. And everyone gets imitated.

Now, if it's just a matter of clothes and hair, perhaps it's not so important (although it sure seemed important at my house when I was 17!). But imitation can be very important when it's about how we live, how we think, and what we believe. Then we need to be very careful, indeed, about whom we imitate.

We should be like St. Varus. He imitated the Christian prisoners because they were people it was good to imitate. We should, like him, imitate someone *worth* imitating.

Our assigned epistle reading today, from I Corinthians, is about imitation. In this reading, St. Paul tells us very specifically who it is we should imitate. Him! Hear just one verse from the epistle, I Corinthians 4: 16, where the Holy Apostle writes: "I urge you, then, be imitators of me." St. Paul, in this epistle reading, talks about how he is the spiritual father of the Corinthian Christians. And he is one of our most important spiritual fathers, too. Where would we be without all the wonderful guidance he gives us in his Holy Spirit inspired letters! He is a wonderful father to us—and so it's important that we obey what he wrote in verse 16---"I urge you, then be imitators of me."

Well, now we know for sure at least one person to imitate! And being he is such a great Saint, there's lots to imitate! Too much to look at today....

So let's just look at one thing about St. Paul that we should imitate:

-----We should imitate St. Paul by being ourselves someone good for others to imitate.

-----To slightly rephrase---let us imitate St. Paul by being good enough Christians that it will be good when others imitate *us*.

As we saw in verse 16, Paul is a very good person to imitate. So let's imitate him by being good persons to imitate. Let us imitate Paul so that we will be the kind of Christians that, when others imitate us, it will be a good thing, not a bad thing.

Because there are people who imitate you. Maybe lots of people, maybe just a few. Maybe they imitate you a little, maybe they imitate you a lot. Even if you don't know they are imitating you, even if you don't want them to imitate you, it's happening.

For example, your children. And your grandchildren, godchildren, nieces and nephews. Also, people at work. Friends. People here at church. They watch you and they imitate you.

Let's focus on children. If you are an adult, they imitate you. And not just parents. If you are a grandparent, a godparent, a relative, someone here at church-----children will imitate you.

So that's a big responsibility for all adults---to be good for children to imitate. St. Paul was definitely good to imitate. Are you good to imitate? Am I good to imitate?

Being a good example for children is so, so important. For whatever path a child is directed on when young has a huge influence later on in that child's life. The English poet, William Wordsworth, wrote these words—"The child is the father of the man." ("My Heart Leaps Up", Wordsworth, Laurel Poetry Series, 1959, pp. 87-88) What goes on in a child's early life influences greatly what kind of adult he or she will be---the child is the father of the man. How did a man end up the way he is? Partly because of how he was steered as a child, perhaps by those he imitated.

So in what way do we influence children? What kind of example do we give them to imitate?

When children watch us, what do they see? Do they see us pray at home? How do they see us treat our spouses? Do they notice what we watch on TV? Do they pay attention to how we act and what we say if we get stuck in bad traffic at rush hour on I-480 on the east side? Do they see how much we read the Bible? How we talk to other people and how we talk *about* other people? Do they watch to see how we treat a beggar that approaches us? Do they notice how often we go to church? And how often to Confession? Will they imitate us in how important we make Jesus Christ in our lives?

Etc., etc.-----you get the idea. Children will imitate adults. And not just their own parents. How good will it be if a child imitates you?

St. Paul was so committed to the Lord that he dared to say to the Corinthian Christians in today's epistle in verse 16---"I urge you, then, to be imitators of me." Can we say that? Would it be a good thing if children (and adults) imitate us? Or is that a scary idea?

You are being watched by other people. Even if you don't know it. And you are being imitated by other people. By both children and adults.

St. Paul, in today's epistle, gave us a very specific command-----Imitate him. Let us ask God to help us imitate St. Paul.

May we imitate St. Paul so much that it will be a good thing that brings glory to God when other people imitate us.

