

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH  
SUNDAY, AUGUST 13, 2023**

**I Corinthians 4: 9-16**

**“IMITATION”**

Back in the early 300's A.D., not long before Christianity was legalized, the Roman Emperor Maximian had a particular strong hatred for Christians. As he visited the parts of the Empire under his control, his trips would become what you might call “tours of terror”. He would write governors and mayors of places he would soon visit and command them to arrest as many Christians as possible and hold them until he arrived---then he would have them executed. One mayor did his best but could only find 7 Christians in his town. They were arrested and awaited the upcoming imperial visit in jail.

A soldier named Varus was their guard. As he guarded them, he observed them closely---and he came to admire them for their bravery, their love for each other and for him, and their strong faith in God. And he came to secretly believe in Jesus Christ.

Shortly before the emperor's arrival, one of the 7 prisoners fell ill and died. The mayor was very worried, because he had already told the emperor that there would be 7 prisoners to kill, but now there were only 6! The emperor arrived and was upset that there were now only 6 Christians to execute. He made quite a scene at the trial of the Christians. At this point, Varus stepped forward and said, “Your majesty, it has been my job to guard these Christians until your arrival. I have been with them all the time and have closely observed them. I have come to admire them and to share in their belief in Christ. So now you have 7 again, for I am now one of them.”

The emperor was very upset to lose a good soldier---he had Varus tortured to try to change his mind. But Varus wouldn't give in and died along with the other 6 believers. Varus had watched the prisoners. He had come to admire them. And he imitated them by also believing in Christ and by dying with them. (“Orthodox Weekly Bulletin”, 10/19/03)

We all get imitated. And we all imitate other people. Maybe we're not aware of it, but it happens all the time. When it comes to clothing, hairstyles, houses, food, entertainment, speech, etc.----we often imitate those around us.

In the 1960s and 1970s there were many of us (those of us who were young

back then) who considered ourselves non-conformists. We wanted to be different---so we had long hair, listened to unusual music, wore grubby jeans, etc., etc. To be different and not conform was our goal. But we strongly conformed to each other! We were quite extreme in our imitation of each other. In our “non-conforming”, we were actually very conformist!

Now such matters aren't all that important when it comes to clothing and hairstyles, etc. But very important when it comes to how we live, how we think, and what we believe.

We should be like St. Varus, the prison guard I told you about. Varus imitated the Christian prisoners---very good people to imitate! Like him, we should imitate someone who is *worth* imitating!

Who? St. Paul in our epistle reading tells us exactly who to imitate. Listen to verse 16 of I Corinthians 4---“I urge you, then, be imitators of me.” St. Paul says we should imitate *him*. In this epistle reading, he says that he is the Corinthian Christians' spiritual father. And in an historical sense, he is our father, too. So we should obey what he says in verse 16---“I urge you, then, be imitators of me.” Imitate St. Paul. Lots to imitate there! Let's look at one thing in particular this morning.

We should imitate St. Paul by being ourselves good enough Christians that it will be good if others imitate *us*. Let me slightly rephrase that to make the point---Let us imitate Paul by being good enough Christians that it will be a positive thing when other people imitate *us*.

If people imitate you, or imitate me, is that a good thing or a bad thing? Because there are people who imitate you! Even if you don't know it, it's happening! For example, you are being imitated by your children, grandchildren, god children, nieces, and nephews. By people at work, here at church, at school. People watch you and imitate you. Think about that fact....and in your case, is this good or bad?

Let's focus on children...They imitate adults and not just their parents. This is a big responsibility we adults carry---that children imitate us! Even children you don't know. St. Paul was good to imitate. Am I? Are you? What do children see when they watch us?

What influence do we have on them? Do they see us pray at home? Do they see us pray before eating in a restaurant? Do they watch how we treat our spouses? What we watch on TV or the computer? How we act when we get caught in a traffic jam on the freeway? Do they see us read our Bible? Do they notice how often we go to church? Or to Confession? How we talk to

other people? How we talk *about* other people? How we act when a beggar on the street asks for money? How important God really seems to us? Etc., etc.---you get the idea.....

All people imitate someone. Children especially will imitate adults and not just their parents. We see it all the time! (One example I love---to see a little pre-schooler come to church and race up to the front to venerate the icons! They didn't think that up on their own---they are imitating adults whom they have seen do that.) Again the big question---are we good for children to imitate? And for adults to imitate?

St. Paul was so serious about Christ that he *dared* to say to the Corinthian Christians in verse 16---"I urge you, then, to be imitators of me." Can we say that? Is it good when others imitate us? Or does it make us sad to think that others will imitate us?

You are being watched by other people, even people you don't know. And you are being imitated by other people, both children and adults. St. Paul's very specific command in our epistle reading is that *we* should imitate *him*. Let us ask God to help us imitate the Holy Apostle Paul.

With God's help, let us imitate St. Paul and all the Saints....so that it will be a good thing when other people imitate us!