

THE IMITATION CHRISTIAN

Scriptures: I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Acts 17:1-9

One of the most talented and productive artists in the last hundred years was a man named Elmyr Dory-Boutin. I doubt that you have heard of him. I am not even sure I have pronounced his name correctly. He is not well known, because he seldom signed his paintings with his own name. He signed them with the name Picasso or Matisse or Renoir. Elmyr Dory-Boutin was perhaps the most successful art forger in history. During World War II in France, he began drawing his own sketches in the style of Pablo Picasso and selling them on the street for just enough money to live on. But in 1946 a British art dealer bought one of his sketches for a large sum of money, believing it to be a real Picasso. After that Elmyr produced a number of drawings and paintings that he sold as actual works of Picasso, claiming that they came from his family's estate in Europe. His imitations were so good, even the curators of prestigious galleries were taken in. By 1947 he had made quite a bit of money. At that point he came to the United States and tried painting his own works and selling them under his own name. But they did not sell. So he went back to forgery. He discovered that he could also mimic the style of Henri Matisse and Pierre Renoir. In 1955 he sold one of his Matisse forgeries to the art museum at Harvard University. Years later he picked up an art history book and discovered that one of his own paintings was listed as an original work by a famous artist.

Gradually, however, people discovered that the paintings were fake, and in 1968 Elmyr was arrested for fraud. But that was not the end of the story. I will come back to Elmyr in a moment.

But now let me talk about our scripture reading. In chapter 1, verses 6-7, Paul says to the Thessalonians, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." In essence Paul calls the Thessalonians "imitation Christians." They are little forgeries of Jesus.

Now the word "imitation" has a bad connotation in our culture. An imitation is a fake. It is cheap. It does not have the same value as an original. This is even truer when the word imitation is associated with the word Christian. An imitation Christian sounds like a fake Christian, a hypocrite, a person who is just "pretending" to be a Christian. And we cannot stand someone who is pretending to be a Christian.

But Paul does not want us to quit pretending to be Christians. He wants us to pretend harder. He wants us to imitate the style of Jesus, just as Elmyr Dory-Boutin imitated the style of great artists. Paul wants us to be a replica, however imperfect, of the life Jesus came to bring. Paul himself is trying to do this, and he wants the Thessalonians to imitate him as he tries to imitate Christ.

Let me give three examples of this in the letter to the Thessalonians. At the beginning of I Thessalonians, in chapter 1 verse 3, Paul says, "We always give thanks to God for all of you." Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians always, even when he is frustrated with them or upset

with them or worried about them. He does this to imitate Jesus. Because Jesus gave thanks to God in all circumstances. Even at the last supper on the night before his death, even when he knew that his disciples were going to betray him, deny him, and abandon him, Jesus gave thanks to God for them, and Paul tries to imitate this in his own relationship to the Thessalonians. “We always give thanks to God for you.” At the end of the letter, in I Thessalonians 5:18, Paul tells the Thessalonians to do the same. He says, “Give thanks in all circumstances.” Paul wants the Thessalonians to imitate the way he tries to imitate Jesus.

Here is another example. In I Thessalonians 1:2 Paul says, “We mention you in our prayers constantly.” Paul prays constantly for the Thessalonians, just as Jesus prayed constantly for his disciples. At the end of the book, in chapter 5, verse 17, Paul tells the Thessalonians, “Pray constantly.” Just as Jesus gave thanks in all circumstances and prayed constantly, Paul wants us to do the same. Paul wants us to be little forgeries of Jesus, so that even if our imitation is imperfect, people will get a glimpse in us of the life Jesus came to bring.

One more example. In chapter 1, verse 6, Paul tells the Thessalonians, “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.” Our first scripture lesson tells of what happened to Paul in Thessalonica. According to Acts 17, a mob of people tried to lynch Paul and Silas, but when they could not find them, they started beating up on other followers of Jesus. That is the situation Paul describes at the beginning of his letter to the Thessalonians when he says, “In spite of persecution you received the word with joy.” Just as Jesus for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, so also did Paul, and so also must we. Our job is to be imitators of Christ.

Now let me finish the story about Elmyr Dory-Boutin. After Elmyr was released from prison in the late 1960s, an interesting thing happened. He became a celebrity. He began appearing on television shows as the world’s greatest art forger. In fact, he began selling his forgeries as forgeries. In other words, he continued to imitate the works of great masters, but he signed his own name to them. They were acknowledged forgeries, but they were so good that they sold for prices approaching what people paid for the originals. In a sense they were buying originals. They were buying original fakes from one of the greatest fakers in history.

In Alcoholics Anonymous there is a slogan: “You have to fake it to make it.” In other words, you have to pretend to be sober in order to become sober. You have to imitate a sober person, you have to act like a sober person, you have to live as if you were a sober person, in order to become a sober person. It is like Elmyr. Elmyr had to pretend to be a great artist before he could become one. He had to imitate the masters before he became one in his own right.

The same is true for us as Christians. So you don’t feel as holy or loving or brave as Jesus. That is fine. You probably aren’t. But you can pretend. You can start in small ways to imitate Jesus. You are not ready to give your life for others on a cross? Okay. Start smaller. Start by not insulting someone back when they insult you. Start by not retaliating when someone says something or does something to hurt you. You are not ready to sell all that you have and give it to the poor? Okay. Start smaller. Start by tithing. Start by giving a percentage of your income to help the poor, and do it before you spend it on yourself. You are not ready to go from town to town preaching the gospel to others as Jesus did or Paul did? Okay. Start smaller. Start

by inviting people you know to come with you to learn about the gospel and what God could mean in your lives.

No one is expecting you to be Jesus or even to be the apostle Paul. But you can pretend to be like them in certain ways. You can make your life an imitation of Jesus, for in doing so, your life, like Elmyr's art work, will take on a value in its own right that you did not know it had.

- Ken Onstot