

Eastwood Baptist (AM, 30/9/'18) **"I URGE YOU TO IMITATE ME"** (1 Corinthians 3-4)

Introduction How would you feel if someone told you to imitate him or her? How would you feel about telling someone to imitate you? I think I would question another person's right to say this to me. And I would not feel entitled to say it to someone else. Yet Paul says it in our passage today – **read 1 Corinthians 4:16**. Not only this, but he says something like it again later in 1 Corinthians, and says it a few more times in other letters. How can he do this? Why does he do this?

Understanding Paul's Making Himself an Example (4:14-17) We are helped with these questions if we look at the other example in this letter – **read 1 Corinthians 11:1**. Paul is an example to others because he strives to follow the example of Christ. But we still might ask why Paul doesn't simply tell them to follow the example of Christ – why put himself in the picture? This is not an easy question, and in the past I have preached a whole sermon on it. My first answer in that sermon was that there is value in imperfect examples precisely because we are imperfect ourselves. It can help us to see other imperfect people genuinely striving to follow the example of Christ. My second answer was that we can be helped by seeing someone who lives in our time and place who strives to follow Christ in precisely that time and place. Finally there is a clue in the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 4:16 – **read 4:14-17**. Paul himself was not simply an evangelist and teacher, who spoke about Jesus and the gospel. He was a father to those to whom he spoke. And he sent Timothy to them in the expectation that not only his words would speak to the Corinthians, but also his faithful life. Effectively sharing the gospel is not a matter of mere words, but a personal matter, in which one life speaks to another. Even if we don't feel able to tell people to imitate us, they will look at how we live, and what they see will influence their response to the gospel. It was probably easier to tell people to imitate you in Paul's culture than it is in ours. But it was still a big thing to say. So we should look carefully at what Paul wanted the Corinthians to imitate. We should look carefully at the larger context of Paul's call to imitate him. This morning I want to focus on what comes immediately before it.

Paul's Example as a Servant (4:1-13) If we go back a couple of paragraphs we find some more words about learning from his example, and in this case also that of Apollos – **read 4:6-7**. Paul addresses them as people who want to boast, who want to be proud about being superior to others. He implies that he and Apollos exemplify a contrasting attitude, one of humility rather than pride. If we now go back one more paragraph, we can see where their humility comes from. **Read 4:1-2**. Paul and Apollos see themselves as servants of Christ. They are not men who find greatness in themselves, but men who humbly serve the One who is truly great. And they are not about their own business but about God's business. The NIV freely translates the word *oikonomous*, literally "stewards", as "entrusted". This captures the implications of the word, but less clearly conveys the idea of having care of what belongs to another. The gospel doesn't belong to Paul or Apollos but to God. Therefore, as Paul spells out in the next few verses, they are answerable to God, and it is what God thinks of them that matters, not what other people think. And Paul goes on a little later to underline the contrast between this attitude and that of many of the Corinthians. I have in mind verses 8 to 13, but I'll just **read verses 10 to 13a**. The concern of Paul and

Apollos is to be faithful servants of Christ, whereas the concern of many of the Corinthians is to be admired by other people. Paul and Apollos are prepared to suffer and be humiliated in order to serve Christ faithfully, whereas many of the Corinthians desire to be prosperous and honoured by others. We need to ask ourselves whom we are more like. If we are Christians we are servants of Christ. But are we faithful servants?

Paul's Example as a Fellow Worker (3:1-9) I now want to go back to the previous chapter. It also casts light on the example of Paul. Chapter 3 begins with Paul returning to the issue which was at the heart of the first two chapters, the issue of division, but this time Paul offers the example of Apollos and himself as a corrective to their worldly quarrelling. **Read 3:5-9.** The Corinthians have seen Paul and Apollos as rivals, and many of them have lined up behind one or the other, or Peter, and formed divisive groups. Paul, however, tells them that he and Apollos are not rivals but fellow workers for God, not trying to outshine one another but working together harmoniously to achieve God's purposes. Paul ends with the image of God's building, an image which stands for God's people, thus likening Apollos and himself to master builders cooperating in the one building project. This is how Paul wanted the Christians of Corinth to work together. This is how God wants Christians in every church to work together. This is how God wants us at Eastwood Baptist Church to work together.

Paul's Example as a Careful Builder (3:10-17) Paul now develops the building image, with reference to his role as a master builder (or expert builder, in the NIV translation). **Read 3:10-13.** Here Paul conveys that his building task, and that of Apollos, and that of any Christian worker, is a sacred task. As a gospel worker, he builds on the only possible foundation, the sacred foundation of Jesus Christ. And he builds carefully, desiring to serve Christ in a way that is worthy of this foundation, like a builder using good and durable materials, not one who uses shoddy and flimsy materials. He is conscious that the worth of his labours will not be judged here and now by the Corinthians, but on the Day of Judgment by God. Then Paul moves naturally from the idea of a sacred building task to the idea of a sacred building. **Read 3:16-17.** Paul is using their understanding of the sacredness of temples to teach them that the church at Corinth (the congregation of believers) is God's temple, and therefore sacred, and this is true of every Christian congregation. But our difficulty is that temples, and the idea of the sacredness of temples, are not part of our world today. Some of them, if they were Jews, would have thought immediately of the temple in Jerusalem, and would have understood that this was a sacred building, so that it was unthinkable to damage this building, let alone destroy it. Others would have thought of the pagan temples in Corinth. They might not have believed any more that these were genuinely holy buildings, but they would have known that many of their fellow citizens believed they were, so that they would not have dared to damage these temples. We need to try to think ourselves into the way people of the first century thought about temples, then apply that thinking to the church. Each congregation of Christians, including Eastwood Baptist Church, is sacred in God's eyes. It is wonderful that God considers us to be so important. But it is also a sobering thought. God wants us to think the way he thinks, so that we are determined never to do anything to damage the church to which we belong.

What Makes Us Important (3:18-23) We come now to the end of Chapter 3. Although we have already looked at Chapter 4, this is a good place to finish this morning. In vv.18-20 Paul again corrects their false ideas about wisdom, dismissing the wisdom of this world as foolishness in God's sight. Having thus dismissed false ways of making themselves feel important, Paul declares what really makes Christians important – **read 3:21-23**. Paul tells them that they are shortchanging themselves when they find their importance in being followers of Paul or Apollos or Peter. This is foolish boasting about human leaders. What makes Christians important is all the limitless riches which we have in Christ, in whom we share in all the riches of God himself. What a difference it would have made to the Corinthians if they grasped this! And what a difference it can make to us! We are not important because of how much we know, or how much we possess, and certainly not because we admire a particular Christian leader. We are important because we belong to Jesus Christ, through whom God the Father gives us every good thing.