

Sermon for Sunday, August 26, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"MODEL FOR A COPY CAT"  
I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Text: "...so that you became an example to all the believers...." I Thessalonians 1:7

Someone has said that Christianity is not taught, but it is rather like the measles--it is caught--caught from somebody else. The same is true in most areas of life. In a sense, we are all copy cats. Take for example, our clothes styles. Some designer comes out with what at first blush is a bazarre costume. But let one or two leading personalities--such as a movie star or social leader--come out wearing that costume and before long it is the fad, it is the thing to wear. When I got out of the Coast Guard back in the forties, I thought I had seen the last of bell bottom trousers. Now, just about the only thing on the store racks is either flared or bell bottomed.

Or look at our young people. They don't wear their hair or the kind of clothes that the over-forty crowd does. But I'll tell you one thing, they wear the same kind of clothes every other kid does! They want to be different from everybody but each other. As a matter of fact, with the boys wearing long hair, it is even difficult sometimes to tell the boys from the girls! As Schiller once wrote, "man is an imitative creature, and whoever is foremost leads the herd."

It is for that reason that Christianity is like the measles--it is caught more than it is taught. So examples are important. An example is much more readily understood. Suppose I tell you that Christ suffered on Calvary as a vicarious propitiation for your sins. Now, that is a true statement. However, from the looks on your faces I can tell that while it is a great fact--one of the greatest facts in human history--you were not much moved by it. You didn't understand it very well. But suppose I explain the cross to you by example. Suppose I tell you the story of a little boy who had been very naughty and bad. Finally, the father could take it no longer and got a switch to whip the bad child. But his big brother came along about that time and saw what was about to happen. Putting his arms around his little brother he said, "Daddy, whip me instead, Johnny is so little." Jesus on the cross put his arms around us and says, "Father, let me die instead." Now you understand something of the meaning of the cross. It makes more sense. The example has helped to bring it to life for you. Now, in our scripture for this morning Paul tells the Thessalonians that they have been models for others to copy. He says, "you became an example to all the believers." But you know, it is interesting to observe that the Thessalonians copied somebody too! They were also copy cats. St. Paul writes, "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake, and you became imitators of us..."

So, we all learn by copying others, by following the example, the pattern, that they set. By the same token, others are copying us. Lord Clarendon once said, quite correctly, "No man is so insignificant as to be sure his example can do no hurt." To some extent, somebody is going to be copying you this week. You are going to be a model for some other person. By the way you act, by the things you say, by the things you do, you are going to be a model for some copy cat. Some life is going to be affected by you. It may be your mate who will follow your example. It may be your child--it may be your best friend--it may be someone that you don't even know is watching. By your life, by your example, by the model you set, other lives are going to be shaped and formed. That's a frightening thought, isn't it? That is a large responsibility.

I remember reading a story once about a man who had been a stick-up man and a robber for a number of years. He was finally arrested, convicted, and sent to prison. There in the jail he came to know Jesus as his personal saviour. As he

explained it, "Jesus said to me, I will come and live in your heart and we will serve this sentence together." Several years later, when he was being released from prison, he was handed a letter from a fellow inmate. Here is what the letter said, "Dear Fred. When I came here I dispised everything religious. I only went to the chapel services so I could get out of my cell and because there was nothing else to do. They told me you had accepted Jesus and I thought you did it so that it would help you get a parole. But Fred, I've watched you for two years. I've watched you in your cell, in the exercise yard, working in the shop, and at meals. You never made a slip, Fred. Now I'm a Christian, too. Your saviour is my Saviour because I watched you." When Fred told that story he said, "Think what it meant! If I had slipped just once, a soul would have been lost."

Well, that is a sobering thought. On the other hand, I would like to suggest it is also a wonderful thought. Not all of us can teach in church. Not all of us can speak before a group about Jesus. Not all of us are effective in sharing our faith with others. But there is one place where the ground is level. There is one place where we all stand together. There is one place where we are all equal in our witnessing to Jesus. And that place is the place of our example, the model we are. All of us can be effective witnesses for Jesus if we live a God-filled life--a life so dedicated and consecrated to God that others cannot resist it. So that is a wonderful thought. It is wonderful to know that although I may not be able to teach or share or evangelize, still I can witness to Jesus by my life, by my example, by the model I set for others to copy.

Now, there are two things in particular in our scripture this morning that I want to call to your attention. St. Paul told the Thessalonians that they were models that others had copied. I want you to notice first, who they were models to and second, how they were models. So, notice first, who they were models to (or, to put it in proper English, "To whom they were models.") St. Paul writes, "For you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Greece." Now, I know very well that there is a world out there filled with lost people--people who need to know Jesus; people who need to have a saviour. But I also know that people in the church these days also desperately need a model, an example, to follow. Just as an illustration, in recent years we have seen ministers take the lead in certain acts of civil disobedience. Is that the kind of model we need? You know very well it is not. We have seen ministers in recent years preaching the so-called new morality--and then some of them began to practice what they preached. Is that the sort of model we so desperately need? No, what we need is men who love Jesus, who fear the Lord, who serve him in reverence, who preach his word from the Bible, and who can say as St. Paul once said, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ." (I Corinthians 11:1) We also need for our spiritual leaders in the church--our Elders and our Deacons--to be models for us. We need officers who are setting an example in Bible study; we need officers who wear their trousers thin at the knees praying for the people over whom God has set them as under shepherds of the great Shepherd; we need officers who are setting the model in stewardship as they give their first fruits to the Lord. A church will rise only as high as its spiritual leaders and this church will be only as great as its Elders and Deacons.

Yes, we live in a day when we need brave men and women of God who are setting the example, setting the pace, serving as a model for the believers. The second thing I want to call to your attention in our scripture this morning is not only who they were models to, but how they were models. In the third verse of chapter one, St. Paul tells us they were models to others in three particular ways. He writes, "We give thanks to God...remembering before God...your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope...."

What is a work of faith? It is trusting God. It is going out on a limb for

Jesus. Do you know what the Thessalonians did? St. Paul tells us in the 8th chapter of II Corinthians. There was a great famine in Jerusalem and Paul was getting together a relief fund to help them. St. Paul writes of the Thessalonians, "For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints...." Now, that was a work of faith--giving more than they could really afford. There are many other ways you can do a work of faith, but the question I want to address to all of us is this: Is there any work of faith at all we are doing that is a model for somebody to copy? How about you? Is there some work of faith in your life? Are you going out on a limb for Jesus?

The second thing Paul speaks of is a labor of love. Those Thessalonians were working for the Lord because they loved Jesus. St. Paul tells us that when the Thessalonians became Christians it really cost them. He writes, "for you received the word in much affliction...." O how the church needs people who are working for the Lord because they love Jesus. Do you know what one of the really big problems in the church today is? The problem is that too many of us have "Let George Do It Religion." Too many of us are waiting for the other guy to do whatever needs doing. It reminds me of the story of two Christian families who lived next door to one another. They each had a little boy about the same age as the other and that made it nice for them to play together. However, one day they got into a terrible argument over a toy they both wanted to play with. Finally, one little boy drew himself up with all of the dignity and poise that a six year old can muster and said, "It's about time one of us began acting like a Christian. How about you doing it."

Yes, a labor of love. What are we doing for Jesus because we love Him? The third thing St. Paul spoke of about the Thessalonians was the steadfastness of their hope. History tells us that the Thessalonians endured a great deal because of their hope in Jesus. There were many set backs, many discouragements, much persecution. There were to be times when they would be imprisoned, tortured and murdered because of their hope in Jesus. Yet, the Bible tells us that they were steadfast. Are we steadfast? When the stock market goes down, are we steadfast in Jesus? When a loved one is taken and we are left alone, are we steadfast? When trouble and disappointment comes are we steadfast? When things don't go well for us--when a marriage is under tension, when there is a troubled relationship between parent and child, when there is conflict at work with some person, are we steadfast in Jesus? Yes, are we still a model for others to copy?

One way or the other, the kind of life we live will influence the lives of those around us. What kind of influence will it be? More than a century and a half ago the Highland Brigade of the British Army was in Egypt. The men were forced to march across the desert in order to engage the enemy and a young naval officer was assigned to go with them. They travelled across the desert at night and it was his task to serve as navigator, using the stars to guide them. At dawn the destination was reached and in the ensuing battle the British won an important victory. Unfortunately the young naval officer was mortally wounded. Later, when the general of the army was visiting among the wounded, he came to the bedside of the dying officer. The young man looked up at the general and said, "Sir, I did the best I could. I led them straight." One way or the other we Christians are examples to others, models for them to copy. God grant that when we lie on our death bed we may be able to look into the face of Jesus and say, "I did the best I could. I led them straight."