



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 2

March 13, 2022

The Pattern of Eternal Life

Philippians 3:17-4:1

¹⁷ Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

When our seminaries welcome new students each year, these men come in any number of shapes, sizes, IQ levels, educational backgrounds, and life experiences. But all of this variety serves a relatively small purpose in the grand scheme of things, because the seminaries aren't really trying to put out a group of vastly diverse innovators. The goal is to produce roughly the same thing year after year: faithful pastors united around Word and Sacrament ministry. Our church doesn't need creativity in these things as much as we need faithfulness to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

In light of today's Epistle, this desired uniformity and faithfulness in our synod's clergy truly is something to celebrate. "Brothers," writes the Apostle Paul, "join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us."

Luther wrote his *Large Catechism* partly because of the poor conditions he observed in the Church. People were not being well trained in such basic teachings as the Ten Commandments, the Creed, Holy Baptism, or Holy Communion. Many of them could say *the words* of the Lord's Prayer, but relatively few had any idea what they were praying. The pastors in the congregations were so poorly educated that many were unable to do any substantive teaching, and most of them had no idea how to preach a doctrinally sound sermon. So, part of the idea behind the *Large Catechism* was that, if a pastor didn't know what he was doing, he could at least take the *Large Catechism* into the pulpit and read it to the people. In this way, he'd be following a "pattern of sound teaching" (2 Tim. 1:13), and he'd have a resource by which he could provide his congregation with the Word of God, thereby nourishing them in the one true Faith. The *Large Catechism* allows the poor, undertrained pastor to "keep [his] eyes on those who walk according to the example [we] have in [Paul and others]" and to pattern his own life accordingly, especially in the pulpit.

In essence, Paul declares here that it is not given to any of us – pastors or laypeople – to go off on our own and invent our own way of following Jesus. Rather, he



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 2

March 13, 2022

says, “Join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” My granddaughters have discovered a new way of irritating each other: they repeat everything each other says. And then you get the argument, “Stop copying me!” To which the other one says . . . Paul is saying the exact opposite here. He’s telling the Philippians to copy him, to fix their attention upon and mimic him and those others who live in the way they’ve been taught to live. Identify them, keep focused on them, and imitate them. Don’t imitate your dad simply because he’s your dad! Imitate him because he’s a Christian! Believe as he believes; love as he loves; forgive as he forgives; keep the commandments as he keeps the commandments; repent as he repents. And if your dad should stop living “according to the example you have in us,” then stop imitating him. Stick with those who *do* live “according to the example you have in us.” Follow *their* example. Fix your attention upon *them*.

Pr. GeRue can correct me if I’m wrong, but it seems to me that a military unit will not go into combat until it’s been properly trained. Such training consists of learning patterned behavior and practicing that behavior over and over and over again. Soldiers have combat maneuvers drilled into them so thoroughly that they can practically perform their tasks in their sleep. Such practice, such constant imitation of others, is for the soldiers’ own benefit. It’s what will keep them and their comrades alive.

“Join in imitating me,” Paul says, “and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” He can make this seemingly arrogant claim because he knows how to live rightly, how to believe rightly, and even how to die rightly. He doesn’t call upon the Church to imitate him because he’s learned the “power of positive thinking” or because he’s discovered some “secret way” to get to God. He calls upon the Church to imitate him because God the Holy Spirit has crushed him under the Law, and has raised him to a new life of faith and forgiveness in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s for *this* reason that Paul calls you to such imitation and mimicry. He does so for your benefit, in order that you, too, may know the pattern of eternal life. Just as the soldier in combat will rely on his training, so you may trust and rely on the training you receive when you “keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us” and when you stay closely connected to Christ in His Church.

“Join in imitating me,” the Apostle tells us, “and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” The Holy Spirit is teaching us through the blessed St. Paul that we are to imitate faithful Christians, not choosing our own way or walking our own path, but walking with *them* and the whole Church of every time and place in the pattern of eternal life.

Just as the younger members of a herd will follow the adults to green pastures and sweet waters, so we must follow the pattern of eternal life that’s been handed down to us from Paul and the other New Testament writers. We follow where they lead, not because we’re mindless beasts, but because they know where the water of eternal life is. We pattern ourselves after them, not because they’ve figured out how to please God, but because they’ve walked in the faith and hope that God Himself gave them – the same faith



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 2

March 13, 2022

and hope He wants to give you. We follow their example, beloved, because they followed our Lord Jesus, and where He leads, there is life and salvation.

There's a great line in Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments* in which Sethi, the ruling Pharaoh of Egypt, explains to Rameses, his son, that the selection of the next Pharaoh will consist the one best suited to rule Egypt, not simply the next one in line. He says, "I owe this to my fathers, not to my sons." Many have defended the truth of God's Word over the centuries at the cost of their own blood. How dare we compromise to suit our own taste or water our teaching down to make it more palatable to a world that will still hate us in the end? We owe it to the ones who've gone before us to be as brave as they were in defense of the truth both in teaching and in practice. We also owe it to ourselves and to our children, for truth does not change. What was true for our grandfathers and great-grandfathers is just as true today. The world keeps changing and demanding that we change our teaching accordingly. We need to tell them that we can no more compromise on the truth than we can change the direction of the sun or the reality that two plus two equals four. The fact of the matter is that we have the truth because someone died to preserve it. Our children need that kind of faithfulness from us. Otherwise, we condemn the generations that follow to a faith so diluted by the world that it's not worth having.

The transmission of the Faith begins in worship and it has long been recognized that faith follows form. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, as you pray, so do you believe. If our worship practice across the Synod is so diverse that you can't see any commonality from one church to the next, this is not a strength, but a weakness. Would it be a good thing for our sister congregations to return to a form of worship that we hold in common? I think yes. This doesn't mean that we all sing the same hymns every week, but they ought to be hymns, and the content of our worship should communicate the same basic message of salvation by grace through faith in our Savior, focusing on Him, not on ourselves. Would it be a good thing for our seminaries to redouble their efforts to produce a consistent product: not creative individuals, but faithful pastors? I think that for the most part we're doing a better job these days, thanks be to God and the faithful men He's called to lead our seminaries. Would it be a good thing for each Christian, especially during this season of Lenten repentance, to join with others in following our forefathers' example, and take note of those who lived according to the pattern we've received from them? A unified practice of prayer and devotion is a good thing for any congregation. That's why we produce devotional booklets with common readings and prayers for each day of the year. It's why I spend my Sunday afternoons recording those devotions so that you may be led in them in your devotional life. In unifying ourselves in the pattern set down for us, when we repent of our sins, as they repented, when we daily cry out to God with one voice for His mercy and forgiveness, we bind ourselves together in the Faith, and we begin to trust more surely in the crucified and resurrected Christ alone for our salvation, in the same way our forefathers trusted. By Christ, your sins are forgiven, just as theirs were forgiven. By Christ, you now have eternal life, just as they have it with Him in heaven.



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 2

March 13, 2022

It's true that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, beloved, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, stand firm in the Lord. This is a call to follow the pattern of eternal life handed down to us from the Apostles. It's been proven trustworthy and sure. God keep us faithful to it as we honor those who came before us and as a legacy to those who follow. In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.