

It's just five questions. It will take you less than two minutes. And faster than you can say, "Cheesy Internet quiz with no scientific value whatsoever," you'll know which house to be sorted into at Hogwarts, which dead president shares your pessimism, and which comic book superhero happens to have everything in common with you. Let's face it, sometimes we possess qualities that make us like others, and often times we like to imitate the people we look up to and idolize.

"Are you always mad, and do feelings of rage get the best of you? Congratulations, you have anger issues like the Hulk." "Are you prone to patriotic acts of heroism like Captain America." "Do you possess an inability to see anything beyond your desire for power, or do you use anger and hate to attack others as if you were clinging to the Dark Side like Darth Vader! Clearly this is information that we can't live without. Plus, through the power of social networking, we can share the results with everyone on the planet!

The popularity of these five-question quizzes on websites like Facebook, have even drawn in the Christian crowd. It's common to see quizzes that allow us to discover which Bible character we closely resemble. And if you're well versed in these things, you may have noticed that the answers are almost always positive. "You have a heart for worship like David! A passion for calling people to Repentance like the prophet Isaiah!" No one, it seems, ever gets aligned with the likes of Saul or Judas, even though we've all known plenty of people who fit that mold.

Shouldn't we find it a bit ironic, that such things are so popular in a culture that upholds — even idolizes — the idea of individuality? In 21st-century America, ingenuity is the ideal, originality is everything, right? But if this is the case, why than are those foolishly fun quizzes on Facebook so popular? Perhaps our interest

in such things reveals something inherent to our human nature? Maybe our interest in comparing ourselves to others can offer us a clue as to how we're wired to live.

Individuality may be the cultural ideal, but if you take a tour of the Bible, you'll see that it's far from what God created us for. Yes, we often love to think of ourselves as unique individuals; we're all precious snowflakes, after all. And yet we find, in another of Paul's letters, in the book of Ecclesiastes that, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."

According to God's word, being truly unique isn't even a possibility. Individuality is a myth. Rather, you and I are creatures of conformity; we are inherently imitators of the world around us. Imitation is how we learn to be human at every level. We learn to speak by imitating our parents. We learn to walk by watching our older siblings. Later in life we create our own "unique" identity by imitating our teenage friends in high school, and we may even follow a particular clique in college. Finally, we set certain people in our professions on a pedestal, and mimic their movements. And, of course, whether we'll admit to it or not, we often find ourselves imitating our spouses. Why do you think so many older, married couples look like twins?

Apparently, we are what we imitate. Each of us is a mosaic of influences resembling many people in our past and present. We conform to the image of others, and others, right now, are conforming to us! Perhaps we should consider the idea that we are **called to imitation, while being a little less concerned with innovation**. This idea can also help us understand what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Thessalonians.

In it, the Apostle encourages us to consider who we are called to imitate. It's advice we've heard him offer up time and time again in his letters to the different

churches he was in correspondence with. We witness Paul encouraging this imitation mindset in 1 Corinthians chapter 4, we observe it in an epistle written to the Philippians, we hear it proclaimed in his 2nd letter to the Thessalonians, and he begins his 1st letter to them with the same recommendation. In his writings to the church of Thessalonica the Apostle reminds his listeners in our second lesson for today, “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.”

Paul doesn't ask us to be innovators, instead he request that we be imitators. After all, sometimes innovations in Christian confession, and Christian life, so easily lead us into foolish and meaningless excesses and misdirection. Paul instead commends imitation as the way to go. He acknowledges that we are creatures of conformity. What Paul is telling the Thessalonians — what he's telling us — is simply this: “You're going to copy. You're going to mimic someone's steps, and you're going to mirror someone's movements when it comes to learning this Christian life. That's how we roll as human beings. So if you're going to imitate somebody, go ahead and imitate me. Follow me as I follow Jesus.”

In fact, Paul takes this a step further. He tells us that whenever we see people upholding the confession of the gospel and exhibiting the Christ-focused, cross-loving style of faith and life that he has modeled among the early church, we should keep our eyes locked on that person. Why? So that like a child absorbing every move from his or her mother, father, grandpa, or grandma, we might learn how to live from that model. Imitation is key to the Christian life.

All of this, of course, leads us to a few questions for us to ponder. First, who are we imitating? From whom are we learning what it means to live as a follower of Jesus in this messed-up world? Is it our spouse, who always seems to be five steps ahead of us spiritually? Do we have a Christian friend whose faith feels more

mature? Are we soaking up the wisdom of a fellow small-group member? Are we following the pattern of a faith-filled parent? Or are we simply asking ourselves at every turn, “What would Pastor Ryan do?”

Here’s the second question. Who is imitating you? If you have children, this one is easy to answer. But your sphere of influence extends beyond the home. Who in your life knows that you’re a Christian and, thereby, who’s understanding of Christianity is influenced by your words, your actions, and your attitude? Who is learning from you? That’s a scary one to wrestle with, isn’t it?

The bottom line, is that if there is no one for us to follow, then there is a void of influence in our lives that must be filled. Likewise, if there’s something going on that leaves us feeling completely unworthy of having any kind of following, that’s an issue that needs to be addressed with some wise, Christian counsel. Which begs, the question what point am I trying to make? Why is this all so important?

The words we find in Scripture inform us, that as we imitate the likes of Paul, as we learn from the faith and life of our baptized brothers and sisters around us, the end result isn’t a bunch of little Christian clones, but a community of people who resemble Christ. In his Incarnation and earthly ministry, Jesus not only assumed the role of our Savior, by taking our sin as his own on the cross and defeating the power of death in his resurrection, but in his living and breathing, in his walking and talking, in his healing and loving, and perfect commandment-keeping, he also became our example. Our Lord Jesus demonstrates for the world what it means to be fully human: to be right with God the Father, filled with the Holy Spirit, and completely in step with the rhythms and patterns of life on this Earth.

The book of Romans, also written by Paul, tells us that all those who are baptized into Christ’s name are not only forgiven of sins, right with the Father, and

filled with the Spirit, but also have embarked on a lifelong journey of being “conformed to the image” of Jesus. That is, we will slowly but surely start acting like him, loving like him, and resembling him.

One of the primary ways this happens is through our Holy Spirit-empowered and scripturally influenced imitation of one another. By imitating one another in the faith, we begin to resemble and reflect the object of our faith, Jesus Christ. For those who like big, theological words, another way to put it, is that imitation is key to our sanctification. Let me provide you with an example of what this might look like.

Let’s say you’re a mom who takes the commands of God found in Scripture seriously, and you aim for obedience to God’s Word in everything you do at home or at work. Your daughter imitates you as she starts a family of her own. Together, you resemble — rather than duplicate — the perfect obedience of Jesus the Son, to God the Father.

Perhaps your best friend has all the talent in the world, but at every turn gives all the glory to God. Maybe it would be a good idea to try and imitate him or her? Together, you will find yourselves resembling the humility of Christ. After all, we human beings are creatures of conformity; we are inherent imitators. The question is not **if** your life will resemble someone else’s, but whose life yours will resemble. Knowing this, let’s embrace the instruction found in 3 John 1:11 “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God.”

As of now, there’s no quick, five-minute quiz that can tell us how well we’re doing in becoming like Christ. While we wait for one to be created, perhaps one way to gauge our godliness is to simply take a quick glance at what’s in front of us, and a short look at things behind us. Whose footsteps are we following in today?

What's coming from those who are seeking to walk in our shoes? Chances are, from time to time we will be convicted by what we see — or by what we don't see.

Try not to worry too much though. If you don't like what's in front of you, or the things behind that resemble you, simply look to the cross, to our Role Model, our Savior, and example, Jesus Christ. In two ways the cross is at the very center of Christianity. It is central because we believe that through the death of Christ on the cross, we have forgiveness and acceptance with God and thus eternal life. The cross is also central to our understanding of discipleship. Jesus calls us to take up the cross and follow him, and Paul knew that he must accept “the fellowship of sharing in his suffering, becoming like him, in his death.” As the season of Advent draws closer let us think about imitation and conformity. And as we live in the shadow of Christ's crucifixion, death, and resurrection we should try our best to remember that just as Jesus has graciously forgiven us and generously poured out his love for us, he asks us to go and do likewise!