

Affliction with Joy

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Growing up I was the oldest of three brothers, and my parents would say, Jonathan, you need to be an example to your brothers. And I looked around for examples, heroes to imitate. This passage shows a *Person to Imitate, the Power of Example, Process of Worship*.

Person to Imitate

Now I know we all like to think we're unique, but when we admire someone *we imitate them*. When we really believe in what their doing, we implement their best practice, incorporate their parenting method, adopt their approach to music, fashion. *We imitate those we admire*. The high ranking women, Jewish and Greek men, in this city, "[You became imitators of us and of the Lord](#)" (1:6). Scholars who study ancient letter writing point out this phrase is a rhetorical device designating "a moral superior or friend," someone *worth emulating*. Who's the moral superior? Paul and his companions. What did the church imitate? [Receiving the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit](#). They imitated *affliction with joy*. This tests your admiration. Who do you admire, so much, that you'd join their sufferings? Just before arriving in the city, Paul and his companions were beaten with rods and thrown into prison. And while in prison they sang hymns to *God*. Affliction with joy. Sounds exceptional, but the Thessalonians imitated them. There, Paul's *host* Jason, was dragged before authorities, charged with sedition, and fined. It wasn't step by step imitation. He *wasn't* beaten or imprisoned. But he was afflicted—how? He was shamed, publicly, in front of his peers. The word "affliction" can refer to *the distress of alienation*. You don't have to go to jail to experience affliction. It can happen at work, in neighborhood, out and about, a snub, a snide remark, you don't really believe that do you? But if you really believe Christianity, you'll embrace affliction. In fact, conversion to Christ entails a change so significant you're willing to endure alienation. This is part of, "turning from cultural idols to serve the *true and living God*." It's saying *I refuse to imitate the dominant, cultural gods because I believe the true and living God. I will not speak like everyone speaks, watch what everyone watches, behave like everyone behaves*. And this will cost you. How much do you admire the faith? The Roman philosopher Celsus wrote a book seeking to discredit Christianity to "shame them out of their religion" and convert back to pagan gods. And he went so far as to say he would be willing to tolerate Xty if Xns would just honor the Greek gods. We'll tolerate you if you tolerate our gods. Essentially a pact. Seems reasonable. Except Jesus didn't claim to be one of the gods; he claimed to be *the God* (10). And the public knew it accusing the Thessalonians, "[they're saying there's another king, Jesus](#)" (Act 17:7). It's not enough to accept Jesus into your pantheon of beliefs; he's got to rule your beliefs, your behavior, your heart, *your sufferings*. They refused the pact and paid the price. But today many Christians are making the pact with Celsus: tolerating the gods, fading to right, to the left, some into thin air so they can't be seen. This summer I was visiting a friend in NYC and she said that everyone she knows is hostile toward Christianity. She feels the alienation, and when people find out she's a Christian you know what she says, "[I worship Jesus, like really worship him](#)." She admires Christ, embraces him as utterly unique, worships him. What do you worship? I don't worship anything. DFW: [there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship](#). What would your neighbors say you worship?

Power of Example

Now what would compel a person to embrace alienation? You'd have to find something so unique, so precious, so un-alienating, so heartwarmingly joyful that you'd gladly suffer the loss. Thessalonians looked to their mentor, "[You became imitators of us and of the Lord.](#)" It wasn't just Paul and his companions, it was the Lord Christ. They modeled the suffering of their God with **joy**: [looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God](#)" (12:2). None of the Greek gods did this, willingly embraced alienation from their own creation. They punished them, used them, lusted after them, but they didn't serve them. Why did Jesus do it? Return to the right hand of the Father, to be reunited with circle of eternal joy between Father, Son and Spirit. How did these Christians, we, do it? [for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.](#) They received the word *with* the joy of the Holy Spirit. This joy comes *through* the Word, as the Spirit draws our attention to a reality in God's Word, and sparks awe over it. It shows you what's really there, like when you fly through the holographic barrier that protects Wakanda, and you see the beauty, the glory, the majesty of the kingdom. It moves your soul and you say, "That never gets old!" This week people in my CG shared how this happens when they read the Bible and pray. The Spirit guides them into the truth, and the joy springs up. You see what's really there, and it's this eternal joy that enables us to weather affliction. [But when you stop making trips](#) into reality, into the kingdom of joy, and you start staring at the discomfort of being a Christian, or the pain of your sorrow, *you lose sight of the joy*. It becomes distant, far off, out of touch. When couples don't create time to date one another. They drift from love. But when they create the space, when they "take the trips" they're reminded of one another's beauty, glory, and the joy is sparked again. When the Thessalonians received the Word with joy they "[became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia](#)" and beyond. These relatively new Christians became an **example** to older churches around them. From the northern tip of Macedonia to the southern province of Achaia, 200 miles, their *joyful faith in affliction* spread like a signal fire on mountaintop, sparking fires in other churches, beacons lit *for Christ!* Paul comments, [Your faith has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.](#) Pre-internet! How? We're told "[the word of the Lord sounded forth from you](#)" (8). How did towns a hundred miles away know about this church's example? *Good news travels fast*, like the soundwaves of a bell rung. When my extended family is at my folks place in Colorado, the cousins fly out the back door disappearing into the rolling greens on the mountain. When its dinner time, my mom comes out and strikes a bell mounted on the wall. And eventually the kids all come running. Why did the joy spread? Because the church rang the *gospel bell* drawing people to imitate their joyful affliction. [They received the Word and spread the Word.](#) Good news travels fast when we share it. Are you sharing the news about the kingdom of joy? Spreading the Word of the Lord? Being an example of joy in affliction? Or are you tolerating the gods, afraid of being alienated, staring at sorrow? This young church, with considerably less resources, training, and experience than our church—did it! They *spread* the gospel. If your city group isn't spreading the gospel, resists multiplying to reach new people, then you have ask yourself who do I really admire/imitate? Perhaps you've made a pact with the gods of comfort, community, ease, and you're beginning to look just like them? If so, you're missing the joy of the Spirit and so are others. *We imitate what we admire.*

Process of Worship

Person to Imitate, Power of Example, Process of Worship. How did this church move from imitating their heroes to becoming examples to others? They *worshipped*: “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (9-10). Their worship is marked by three things: *turning, serving, waiting*. **Turning**. They turn their backs on the gods of power, acceptance, security and turned to the living, true God. The word turn is past tense, meaning it’s a decisive turn not passive intellectual agreement, or adding Jesus to an array of other beliefs. They turned their backs to the gods, to worship Jesus. What gods, idols, do you need to turn your back on this morning? Until you do, they’ll zap you of joy. **Serving**. They didn’t turn just for salvation; they turned *to serve*. The word means total surrender, complete devotion. Everything coming under the direction of their new King. What do you need to surrender? Where do you need to serve? **Waiting**, *wait for his Son from heaven whom he raised from the dead*. If you’re in Christ, you know the rightful king has landed, somewhat in disguise and then gave his life, took it back up again, to call us into the rebellion, to throw off the gods and spread the news of his arrival. *This king is coming back, and the circle of eternal joy with him*. If you want to enter that joy, you’ve got to wait on him. I thought it was serving, now you say its waiting? Which is it? Actually, *waiting inspires serving*. When a city waits for dignitary to come to visit, it doesn’t just sit idly by. The city is bustles preparing for the dignitary’s arrival: arranging security, travel routes, dinners parties and more. Waiting inspires serving. And the greater the dignitary the more earnest the waiting and faithful the serving. Friends, the true King is coming. Do you admire him? Then imitate him. Receive his word, embrace his affliction, turn from idols, and spread the gospel, for the joy of the world!