

## **“Be your true self!” Philippians 4:4-13**

**”Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

**Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.**

**I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”**

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Let's have an inspirational sermon! Shall we? “Be your true self!” “Find yourself!” “Be your authentic self!” “Be true to who you are!” “Don't let anyone tell you how to live!” “Follow your own truth!” And so, on and on...

How often do we hear these slogans in our culture? In the Western secular culture, many are close to accepting that this is what we are supposed to do with our lives - to find our true selves, to live our authentic lives, especially among our young.

Then you hear those stories, where relationships, marriages and families are violently torn apart because one of those involved declares that they need to find their true self, they need to figure out who they truly are, so that they can live authentic life. I bet that many of you have heard or even witnessed this playing out in real life. Not pleasant.

What do you think about those slogans? Can we as Christian endorse them? I think it is worth considering what exactly those slogans mean, how exactly they are used and then we can see whether we should stand behind them or not.

“Be your true self, be your authentic self!” Let's assume, for the sake of an argument, that someone makes those suggestions with genuinely best intentions, wishing you only well. But then... How to find that true, that your authentic self?

Where should we be looking? I guess if we want to find our true self, we shouldn't be looking at others, or anything outside us; it makes sense that we would be looking for that true self... within us. So that it is something that we are and not something imposed from outside. And this is where it gets really difficult.

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How do I know which is my authentic self? I don't know about you, but when I try to look inside, I find that there is not one, there is the whole bunch of my authentic selves, if by my authentic selves we understand the desires of our hearts.

Which one to choose – the fit self of the fat self? The one who wants to be in good shape, fit and active, or the one who really enjoys snacking, way too much to remain fit and active? Which one to choose – the one which likes scrolling on social media for hours and hours, or the one who wants to be disciplined and get things done?

Which one to choose - the one who wants to be knowledgeable and well-read, or the one who prefers dumb binge watching of one of movie-streaming services? Which one to choose - the one who wants to be a blessing to others and serve them, or the one who just wants to be left on its own, and not to be bothered by anyone?

We all could make lists like that. It's not that easy to pick that "true self" if we want to take it seriously. Besides, I am a bit suspicious about this whole "find your true self" agenda. And I am not convinced that those who promote and support those slogans really leave it open ended.

I suspect that the "that authentic self" that we are supposed to find should look like something they would gladly support. I don't think that for them that true self would look like a young Christian man, concerned about being faithful to God, and to all his callings. Or a young Christian woman who strives to lead a chaste life, dreams about marriage and family and is a passionate advocate for the life of every human being, unborn and elderly including.

Or that that true self would look like a committed Christian spouse and parents, gladly taking on their daily crosses, sacrificing themselves for their families, leading them to Christ. May I be wrong, but I don't believe that that is meant when anyone is encouraged to find their true self.

You may remember how Dr Luther summarized Biblical teaching about sin – "man curved inward upon himself". I guess today Dr Luther may have called it "man searching for his authentic self". So, I don't think that we can endorse this whole "find your true self" program, but it is good at least to reflect on what it really is about so that we can engage with those in our lives, who may be tricked by those slogans.

But what could we suggest instead? What could be a Christian alternative? Paul offers a good Christian alternative. In His letter to Philippians, which we read today, but also in his other letter he encourages us to imitate himself as he imitates Christ.

**"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."** [1 Cor 1:11] The concept of imitating is certainly familiar to us. We learn by observing and imitating others. Our lives to a great extent are about imitating others. And who do we usually try to imitate? Someone whom we like, value, appreciate, honor, respect, someone whom we believe is better

than us at least in some ways. Someone we aspire to become like. As Paul wrote: **“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things.”** Now, let’s reflect on what Paul says and how heavy this is. Are you ready to say something similar: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ!”

Consider, what ideas people will get about Jesus and His Church if they observe your life? What will they conclude about this God and about His Church from how you live out your Christian faith in every area of your life? In family, marriage, workplace, in your attitudes, in stewardship, conflicts, suffering? What will they notice?

Can we say: **“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ!”** This is such a huge topic. We can’t possibly cover it in this sermon. But we can reflect at least on a few aspects of what this imitation involves. Probably the most important thing for us is to understand what exactly Paul is inviting us to do.

He is not saying: “Look at me, what a great Christian I am, try to be like me, just do what I do, and you will be good!” Paul is so aware of the fact that there is nothing good in him according to his old sinful nature [Romans 7]. He is not inviting anyone to simply embrace some external moral behavior as if that would make anyone a Christian.

The very opposite is true as Paul so fervently argues in this letter to Philippians. He warns us from trusting our own goodness, whatever perfect our actions may look. And He warns us from listening to those who want to be good apart from Jesus.

**“Put no confidence in the flesh [...] If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.”** If anyone could boast about what a perfection in life they have achieved, that was Paul. But this is what he says instead:

**“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”** Whatever outwardly perfect and impressive his life was, Paul counted it not as something to boast, but something to repent from. **“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”**

Anything he valued before, and what the world may still value, career, status, connections, authority, now Paul counts all of that **“as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”** Paul doesn’t want to be seen through his own accomplishments, he only longs to be found in Christ, being made good by God.

This is what he longs for: **“[That] I may know [Jesus] and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”** He longs to know Jesus, to have Jesus’ power in him, to follow the example of Jesus denying himself and considering others as more significant. This is how Paul understands this imitation of Christ. “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ!” **“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just,**

**whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things.”**

Think about those things and practice those things! Or we can say, think about our Lord Jesus Christ, about His life and service to us, and about how Paul the apostle tried to imitate Jesus. Think about Jesus’ trust and obedience to His Father. Think about what authority Jesus cherished the most – the Scriptures, the Word of God.

Think about Jesus’ actions – He came to do His Father’s will, not His own. Think about His attitude, full of grace and mercy in everything He did. Think about how He treated those on the edges of society. Think about His self-sacrifice for others, for you and me including, how He did it joyfully. Think about His commitment to rescue us from under the power of sin, death and devil. Think about His zeal and love for every single sinner whom He could bring into God’s Kingdom.

That is what Paul invites us to imitate. What can be more truthful, more honorable, more just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise?! **“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ!”** But... we have no strengths or will in us to live that way, do we?

Of course, we don’t! That’s quite obvious. Neither did Paul the apostle. And think even about Jesus. As Peter the apostle proclaims: **“God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.”** [Acts 10:38]

The same was true about Paul, he didn’t strive to imitate His Lord and Savior in his own power. As He confesses: **“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”** [Gal 2:20]

You have received the same Holy Spirit in your Baptism. You keep receiving the same Holy Spirit every time when the Word of God comes upon you, either in the Divine Service, or in Bible Classes, or your home devotions, or Christian conversations.

And the same Christ now lives in you, as you are united with Him in His most holy Meal. His goodness already shines through you whether you know it or not. This is how your God Himself renews you, transforms you and shapes you to be more and more like His Son Jesus, which happens to be also - more and more like your truest self. That’s right!

For that is what the Lord wants you to become. Like Jesus. That is what He Himself will shape you to be. And when His work with you is done, then you will be who you always were supposed to become. As beloved disciple John puts it for your encouragement:

**“We are God’s children now, and what we will be [your true self] has not yet appeared; but we know that when [Jesus] appears [in His glory] we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”** [1 John 3:2] This is our message to one another and to the world around us. This is what we should strive to be. **“Be imitators of Christ!”** So that when the world sees us, they could only exclaim: **“We want what they have!”** Amen.