

God's New Society

Message 9

The Imitation of God

Ephesians 5:1-21

Introduction

Years ago when Daniel, our first son, was a toddler, he startled us one day by uttering a loud “harumpf!” He had never before loudly cleared his throat, but what was astonishing was the similarity of this noise to Ruth’s father, who would occasionally say “harumpf!” Daniel was simply imitating his grandfather, who was living with us for a few weeks at the time.

We are born imitators. Imitation is how we acquire the skills we need to survive in life. The all-important task of language-learning is mostly a matter of a child’s imitating the sounds he hears his parents say. How you eat, dress, treat other people, etc. are all habits we pick up from our parents. But imitation is more than an unconscious activity. Children admire their parents and *consciously* imitate them. Most little boys have at least one moment in life where they want to do the same job as their dad. Even when they chose a different vocation, children look to their parents as moral examples.

You are very much like your parents – more than you are aware. It is so natural to imitate our parents, it is startling when you encounter a child who is much different than his parents. There is something unnatural about a child who does not imitate his parents. So it is obvious that we, who are God’s children, should imitate Him. This is so natural, it would be abnormal to find a Christian who acts differently than God. In an extreme case we might question whether such a person is in fact a child of God – much as we would wonder how a dark-skinned baby could come from two Scandinavians. And if we, as God’s children, admire Him – we should desire to work at imitating Him. As a child watches his mom and dad and does what they do, we should watch God and do what He does. It is in this vein that Paul opens Ephesians chapter 5 by urging us to imitate God.

Walk Worthy of Our Calling

We opened this application section of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians by noticing that his central command in chapter four verse one is “to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called”. Each of us who follows Christ was called by God, and God had a specific purpose in calling us to Himself. From the beginning God’s intention in calling us was that we should be holy – like Him. So Paul reminds us of God’s purpose in calling us, and urges us to cooperate with Him. Paul continues by explaining the three basic aspects of this calling – unity with other believers, being equipped by the leaders God has given us, and growth to maturity. People who are divisive, unteachable, and juvenile are *not* worthy of God’s call – and we who believe in Christ must repudiate these base characteristics.

Last week we studied the two secrets to successful Christian living. The first is to think like Christ. Paul teaches us that when we believed in Christ, He gave us his mind. We have the ability to think like Him, and this is the key to living like Christ. If we do not change from thinking like the world to thinking like Christ, we will never succeed in living like Christ. But although we do presently *have* the mind of Christ, we must exercise it so that we can actually think like a mature person. The second key to successful Christian living is to live by grace. As Paul said in Philippians, God is at work in you to will and to do His good pleasure. You must abandon the tendency to try to obey God on your own strength. As you keep your focus on Christ and trust Him to guide you into righteous living, you will live more like Christ.

Let me pause a moment to emphasize that these two keys to the Christian life are indispensable. You cannot succeed in the Christian life if you fail to apply these keys. All other approaches will fail. You must train yourself to think differently, and you must trust God to create obedience in you. If you do not,

you will become either legalistic or licentious, judgmental or worldly.

Walk in God's Love

Now having laid the basic foundation to the Christian life, Paul examines some specific cases in Christian living. Last week we covered the end of chapter four, where the overall idea was to treat others kindly. In speaking the truth, avoiding anger, working industriously, speaking to help others, and forgiving each other, we follow Christ by loving our neighbor. Now in chapter five Paul commands us to imitate God. In chapter one (verse 5) Paul told us we are adopted by God. Since we are God's children, how could we not imitate Him?

It is important to note here that you cannot imitate God unless you are His child. Unbelievers may acquire many admirable traits, but they cannot become like God. Before you can imitate God you must be born of God. James Boice, in his commentary on Ephesians quoted John Kenneth Galbraith, "Under communism man exploits man. Under capitalism the situation is exactly the reverse."¹ Boice continues, "In Christianity there really is a reverse, because in Christianity the man who once exploited others becomes a new man..." The first prerequisite to imitating God is to get God's nature, which comes from being born of Him by His Spirit. The second prerequisite, as we have already said, is to think like God. As we think more like Christ, we are in a position to begin acting like Christ.

Now, are you wondering how finite, created beings like us can imitate God? Can we really become all-powerful, all-knowing, and eternal? Can we develop the ability to sustain ourselves by our own power and to create worlds by speaking our thoughts? No, clearly there are some aspects of God's nature that we cannot imitate. What Paul has in mind is God's moral qualities, and in verse two he singles out love as central to God's character. In particular this passage highlights three aspects of God's love.

First Paul presents God's *forgiving* love. Here we dip back into chapter four, the last verse, where Paul says, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32) Christian living involves forgiving others. This is easy to say, but terribly difficult to do. It's not so hard to forgive the person who butts in line or speaks rudely to you – although even trivial offenses like this can be hard enough to forgive. The real challenge comes when people who are close to you really hurt you – when your parents, or your children, or your close friends hurt or betray you. When we are treated this way, we tend to respond in anger and hatred, and proceed to seek revenge and retribution. In the face of sinful desires to get even Paul urges us to be kind. Instead of responding in hostility, Paul urges us to be tenderhearted. Some people become hardhearted rather than tenderhearted. They do not forgive others, and during the course of their lives they treasure up offenses which others have committed against them. I'm sure you know how hard it can be to forgive. What enables one person to forgive and prevents another?

It all begins in the mind, remember? The key is remembering that God forgave you through the death of Christ. Your sins against God were more offensive than anything anyone has done to you. Yours were capital sins – deserving death – but because of Christ, God forgave all your sins. Since you have the infinite blessing of having been forgiven of your massive sins, you must have the common decency of forgiving the smaller sins people commit against you. After all, that is what God did. If we are imitators of God, we will forgive sins, just as He did. God is a forgiving God. When we become His children, we become forgiving people. We must make our actions conform to our nature.

Let's pause here to consider how to apply this verse. Who has hurt you? What wrongs are you nursing? Name them. Then take these to God. Thank Him for forgiving you of your massive sins. Tell Him you want to forgive those who have sinned against you. Ask Him to develop the mind of Christ that is in

¹ Boice, p. 179.

you so that you will remember how He forgave you and you will learn to forgive others.

Second, Paul presents God's *giving* love. We see this in chapter five, verse two. "And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma." God gave His Son, Jesus, for us. What more could He give? Looking at it another way, God gave Himself for us. God gave us everything He had.

We typically give gifts to those we love. We give birthday gifts, gifts at Christmastime, baby gifts, etc., and these gifts express our love. If we are to walk in love, we will be giving people. Giving gifts is an important part of the Christian life, and not only on Hallmark occasions. Giving people bless others with gifts for no other reason than they love them. A loving husband may bring flowers to his wife on some ordinary day, just to show he loves her. Ruth makes me wonderful meals almost every day, and I feel very much loved by her. But such giving is inadequate. That is not what Paul has in mind here. The love that Paul commends to us is that self-giving love of God, who loved those who hated Him. God did not only give gifts, He gave Himself. God did not only give gifts to His friends, He gave to His enemies. In Romans 5:8 Paul said, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." This is the sort of giving love he has in mind here.

Again this is very difficult. It can be hard enough to find the time and money to give a nice gift to your friend, but to give yourself to those who hate you seems impossible. Again, the key is to reorient your mind. Your mind must be washed with the knowledge that God loved you when you were His enemy. You must learn to remember that God gave you everything He had – His Son, Himself.

We apply this by giving ourselves to others. Most of the time we give trinkets to others. We give our spare time, our spare money, our spare interest. Few people give themselves. You must repent of your deep selfishness. Ask God to forgive you for hoarding the gifts He has given you. Ask Him to train your mind so that your natural impulse become to give yourself to others, rather than to manipulate them into giving to you. Make a list of aspects of your life that are precious to you and ask God to help you let go of them so you can freely give your whole self to others.

God's Living Love

Third, Paul presents God's *living* love. God shows His love to us in all He does. So we should love in all we do. Our work, our speech, our thoughts, our desires – all about us should be an outgrowth of love. We might say the rest of this book is an explanation of how to live in God's love. Since life is a big topic, we could spend many hours (or years) exploring how God's love is lived. For tonight we will just make a few comments, which I hope will incite you to further discussion over meals and throughout the week.

Verses three to seven urge us to live clean lives. Verses eight to 14 urges us to live in the light. Both paragraphs are making the same point. God is holy, so His children cannot be dirty. God is light, so His children cannot be in the darkness. If you are God's true child, you must imitate Him. That means you will be different from the rest of the world. Others are sexually immoral, greedy, and foul-mouthed. Notice that these characteristics have in common that they take from others. The unbelieving world takes pleasure from others in sex, in possessions, in speech. The fundamental operative motive in these behaviors is self-pleasure. So men will take a woman's body, take another's goods, and take peace from others by their speaking – for pleasure. Sex is fun, it is fun to have stuff, and it is fun to talk dirty. But we are called to be giving people. In our attitude toward sex, possessions, and speech we should give to others rather than take for ourselves. So sex is a gift we give in marriage, goods are given rather than coveted, and we speak to help others.

There are many specifics we could mention here. Certainly sex outside of marriage is wrong.

Certain language is wrong, but it is harder to define what that might be. Dating in which physical desires are inflamed would seem to be wrong, but I know people who will protest. These are important questions you should – you *must* – discuss with each other, your parents, and older Christians. But let's keep the foundation in view. The basic attitude is one of giving in love. However, beware lest you be deceived by sinful thinking. Some people try to argue, for example, that sex outside of marriage is good because it is loving. Such people may be sincere, but they are sincerely wrong. This is where God's law is an invaluable aid in training our minds to think like Christ. This is also where older Christians are indispensable in helping us develop mature thinking. Do not think that you will arrive at the truth simply by discussing these questions with your friends.

In these two paragraphs Paul also tells us how to interact with unbelievers – those who are morally dirty, living in darkness. In verse six he warns us not to be deceived by them. As we grow toward maturity, we can be misled. Be alert to this danger. Paul is not saying to avoid unbelievers, but he is saying to watch lest they corrupt your thinking. For if your thinking becomes corrupted, you will not be able to live right. Paul continues in verse seven by warning us not to be partakers with unbelievers. Again, this is not a prohibition on being with unbelievers. It is a prohibition on living their lives. That means that some of the things they do, the movies they watch, the places they go, the music they hear – you will avoid. That means that there will be a sense of a barrier in your friendship. There had better be! They are dirty and dark. If you are truly clean and light you will really stand out.

In the next paragraph Paul tells us that we should expose the evil deeds of unbelievers. Now I am sure this does not mean we should poster the campus with signs saying, “Lehigh women are whores”. For one thing, the men are worse. But this is a gross misunderstanding of this passage. How does such language build up people? (4:29) How does it show God's love? (5:2) In 4:15 Paul says we should speak the truth in love. Finally, in 5:12 Paul says the things unbelievers do are so shameful we must not discuss them. I leave it to you to discuss how best to expose the evil works of unbelievers, but keep in mind the necessity of doing it in love.

Walk in God's Wisdom

The last paragraph in tonight's passage is about wisdom. Wisdom is an essential ingredient in maturity. I was impressed at the Ministry Team meeting last week when Peter asked what was the fundamental ingredient in leadership, and James said wisdom. Some discussion ensued, and James defended his position by pointing out that the wise man will acquire all the other aspects of leadership. I am not prepared to side with James entirely, but he is correct in this point.

Wisdom is an essential ingredient in maturity. Anyone may gain education, knowledge, skills, and experience – but only the mature possess wisdom. In fact, you might define wisdom as the mature *use* of knowledge, skills, and experience. Paul just finished talking about the dirty, dark, evil society in which we live – and his response is to “walk circumspectly”. Be thoughtful in how you live. Juveniles and fools are inherently reckless. They run from one thing to another without a thought as to the reasons, means, or consequences. Does this describe you? Do you thoughtfully consider your actions? If not, you will fall headlong into the sinful behaviors of the society around you. Let's get right to the point – you cannot serve God unless you gain wisdom.

Wisdom is to be found primarily with God and in His word. Wisdom is especially concentrated in the book of Proverbs, and I would say that unless you have some acquaintance with this book, you are not wise. Wisdom is also gained from your father and mother. Are you skeptical? That is what God says in the book of Proverbs. And God does not say that only believing parents possess wisdom. God has ordained to give you wisdom through your parents, even unbelievers, and you are a fool if you ignore God's provision. But it is true that parents, even believing parents are limited in their wisdom. So God gives elders, as Paul

said earlier, “for the equipping of the saints...that we should no longer be children...” (4:12, 14) God will use the elders of His church to provide the wisdom that parents lack.

Paul continues by discussing wisdom in three areas of life. First, we need wisdom in the use of our time. Time is God’s gift to us. God made time, and to waste it is to despise God’s gift. This does not mean that you must always be working, but it does mean that everything you do should be productive in some way. If you need to relax, do so in a manner that will really refresh you. In this regard, I think there are some movies which are not overly sex-charged or violent, but are just so stupid, a wise person will not waste his time seeing them. Work, relax, commune with God, do your chores, visit your parents, spend time with your friends, serve the needy – all these have an important place in your life. You need wisdom to know how to order your life. Seek God and consult your parents and elders for the wisdom you need.

Second, you need wisdom to know what the will of God is. God is not a ghost that you can tap into by mystical exercises. God is a real person who thinks and feels and acts in relatively predictable ways. As you get to know Him and learn more about Him, you will know what He wants in all sorts of circumstances. This is wisdom – the application of Biblical truth to daily circumstances. Again, parents and elders can help you gain this wisdom.

Last, wisdom consists of being filled with God’s Spirit.

filled with Spirit

=> verbal testimony

worship, praise, thanksgiving

Conclusion

Core idea – if you love God, your daily joy will be to imitate Him.

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April 5, 2005