

Ephesians: *Imitators of God*
Ephesians 4:32-5:2

Last week we took a deep dive into those things that we as Christians are to “put away.” In Ephesians 4:31 Paul writes, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” We noted that every word on that list describes the attitudes and behaviors of those who refuse to forgive, which was likely a huge issue in the ancient church. Sadly, unforgiveness remains a huge problem for many of us in the 21st century, and yet unforgiveness is inconsistent with who God saved us to be. And, according to Jesus, our unforgiveness will lead to God’s unwillingness to forgive us. If you were not able to be with us last Sunday, I encourage you to catch that very sobering and direct message on our website or on our YouTube page.

Today, as we look to what comes next, Paul articulates a powerful, summary vision for our Christian life as those who imitate God. So, please stand and let us read Ephesians 4:32-5:2: ³²Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. ¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ²And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) How We are To Imitate God; and 2) What Motivates Us to Imitate God; 3) A Fragrant Offering.

I. How to Imitate God

I’m sure for some of you...who are as silly and as immature as I am...the very thought of “imitating God” makes you want to giggle. We can’t help but think of the iconic movie, *Bruce Almighty*, where Jim Carey gets to play “god” for a week, right? That movie makes me laugh so hard that I end up hurting myself. It’s absolutely ridiculous (and horrifying) to imagine an average human being wielding the power and authority of God. Rest assured, Paul is not instructing the church to “play God” by assuming His authority or acting as though we are “divine.”

So, what does Paul mean when he writes, “Be imitators of God”? Well, let us seriously consider what it does not mean. Remember that the Serpent’s offer to Eve in the garden was “to be like God.” We are always being tempted to be “our own god” or to set aside the one, true God for self-sovereignty and self-rule. That is clearly not what Paul is saying, but we must always guard against that temptation. We are finite creatures; and though being created in God’s image, we will never be able to imitate the unsearchable knowledge of God. We will never be able to imitate the perfect holiness of God. We will never be able to imitate God’s moral authority or God’s perfect justice.

To the best of my knowledge there are only two ways that we are ever called to “imitate God,” and both are present here in our text...and both point to Jesus.

The first way that we are to be imitators of God is in the way that we forgive. Paul writes in vs. 32, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you.” We spent quite a bit of time on this subject last week, but let us remember that as believers, we

are called to forgive one another just as God forgave us in Christ. Which is to say, we forgive even when the offense is very serious; we forgive because we have mercy for sinful people; we forgive even though it is extremely costly to us personally; and we forgive with the intent of being reconciled. We learned how to forgive when God forgave us in Christ; so that is how we are instructed to forgive others.

Several of you wrote to me this week regarding your questions or reflections on forgiveness. One person asked if there was more to forgiveness including accountability and discipline for those who sin against us? Another confessed that even though she believed she had forgiven a person of a heartless sin against her, she still had hard feelings and had no desire to be around the person who had hurt her.

I think Paul would address all of our questions by simply pointing us back to God. How did God forgive us? What kind of accountability and discipline accompanied His forgiveness? Did God forgive and withdraw, or did God forgive and pursue reconciliation and the restoration of relationship?

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're saying to yourself, "Yeah, but I'm not God! You can't expect me to forgive like God forgives...God is God, and I'm not." Well, yes, but notice what Paul says here in vs. 1, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children." You may not be God, but you are not who you once were! As believers, we are God's adopted children. And as such, we are to imitate the Father's unmerited, generous, costly forgiveness...but we do so under human conditions. That means that we are to love and forgive like Jesus. C.S. Lewis is emphatic on this point:

"...our imitation of God in this life — that is, our willed imitation as distinct from any of the likenesses which He has impressed upon our nature or states — must be an imitation of God incarnate: our model is the Jesus, not only of Calvary, but of the workshop, the roads, the crowds, the clamorous demands and surly oppositions, the lack of all peace and privacy, the interruptions. For this, so strangely unlike anything we can attribute to the Divine life in itself, is apparently not only like, but is, the Divine life operating under human conditions."¹

To imitate God under human conditions, we follow Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks to this point as well in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

It is only because he became like us that we can become like him...when a man follows Jesus Christ and bears the image of the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord, when he has become the image of God, we may at last say that he has been called to be 'the imitator of God.' The follower of Jesus is the imitator of God."²

The second attribute of God that we are to imitate is love. Paul writes in vs. 2, "Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." To imitate God in love is to love in such a way that we give ourselves for others. Alexander Maclaren writes:

The Apostle fastens upon a certain characteristic of that divine love which we are to imitate in our lives; and thereby makes the precept a very practical and a very difficult one. Godlike love will be love that gives as liberally as His does. The purest and deepest love is love which desires to impart itself...there is a quality of giving up, as well as giving, in God's love.³

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 15-17.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 304.

³ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture-Ephesians*, 272.

So, what is the difference between the quality of giving and the quality of giving up? Let's look to Jesus, who was God's love incarnate. When we look to Jesus, we know that He *gave up* His glory in heaven to take on flesh and become one of us. And then Jesus *gave us Himself* as an atoning sacrifice for our sin. Do you see the difference?

To love as God loves is to *give up* our rightful position; to *give up* our plans; to *give up* our home; to *give up* our control; to *give up* our anger. The loving quality of *giving up* is an act of personal surrender to bless another soul.

Again, Maclaren says it well:

It is the duty of every Christian man and woman, and they have not done their duty unless they have learned that the bond which unites them to men is, in its nature, the very same as the bond which unites men to God; and that they will not have lived righteously unless they learn to be 'imitators of God' in the surrender of themselves for their brother's good.⁴

The quality of *giving* in love is similar but different. To love "givingly" as the Father loves is to impart to others what belongs to us for the sake of their flourishing. We love by giving our time, by giving our money, by giving our undivided attention, and by giving our very lives to those in need.

I can think of very few examples that better illustrate the imitation of God's love in giving up as those who open their homes to foster and/or adopt children. When a couple decides to open their home to foster children, they must first decide to give up whatever previous plans they had for their lives. They give up a certain degree of control, predictability, and calm in order to make a place for children who have endured great trauma and loss. I have watched several families in our church imitate the Father's love by giving up their hearts, their homes, and their lives at a time when it would have been a whole lot easier not to. In every instance, the decision to open their homes to foster children has been incredibly costly, and at times, heartbreaking. Even so, those who have trusted God to take that step of obedience have grown profoundly in their experience and understanding of God's love in two ways. First, they early on realize how incredibly far away they are from loving like God loves! Without exception, my first meeting with new foster families goes something like this, "I never realized how short tempered I am; how selfish I am; how horrible of a parent I am!" However, over time, these parents learn to love like God loves...they give a lot, and they give up a lot. They learn how to extend forgiveness (and to ask for forgiveness!). Their capacity to love people like God loves people increases exponentially. And it is this very God-like love that helps heal traumatized, broken lives...just as the costly, self-giving love of God healed our sin-sick, broken lives through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And that leads me to my second subheading...

II. What Motivates Us to Imitate God

It is no small thing that Paul writes, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children." I think we all know that children are natural imitators, right? That can be a good thing...that can also be

⁴ Ibid., 273.

a not-so-good thing. For example: nothing is as heartwarming as seeing your child imitate your best behavior, like being polite to strangers or offering to assist somebody in need when you are out and about. However, we also know that our children sometimes imitate our less attractive habits. That was brought to mind when one day I was driving home and spotted my 4-year-old boy “watering” the neighbors flowers...pretty sure he was imitating his mom.

The country singer, Rodney Atkins released a song several years ago entitled, *I've Been Watching You*. It's a song about a little boy who rips out a curse word in the car right in front of his dad. When his dad asks where he learned to talk like that, the little boy responds, “*I've been watching you, Dad, ain't that cool? I'm your buckaroo, I wanna be like you, and eat all my food and grow as tall as you are. We got cowboy boots and camo pants, we're just alike, hey ain't we dad? I wanna do everything you do, so I've been watchin' you!*” Of course, the dad is horrified, so he goes to the barn, gets down on his knees and prays that God will help him stop being a horrible example to his son. Then, later that night, he watches his son get on his knees and start praying to God like their best friends. The father is amazed and asks the son where he learned to pray like that, and of course, the little boy replies, “I've been watching you, Dad!”

I remember the first time I heard that song, it made me cry. I suspect most of us dads wish we could go back and undo some of the things we inadvertently taught our children while doing a whole lot more of the good things we wish we would have taught our children. In fact, here's a great idea for Father's Day that's coming up in a few weeks: write your Dad a card and thank him for all the good things he taught you, and forgive him for all the bad things he taught you...because when it comes to us earthly dads...it's always both! By the way, I'll be gone next Sunday because I'm taking my Dad to Canada for a fishing trip! Totally unrelated...I know.

Now, even though children are natural imitators, most children will only imitate those they love and admire. If children don't feel loved for any reason, they will often NOT imitate their parent but do just the opposite, right? We are the same way when it comes to God.

Maclaren comments on this point:

It is because a man knows himself to be beloved that he is stimulated and encouraged to be an ‘imitator of God,’ and, on the other hand, the sense of being God's child underlies all real imitation of Him. Imitation is natural to the child. Whoever feels himself to be a beloved child is thereby necessarily drawn to model himself on the Father that he loves, because he knows that the Father loves him.⁵

Do you understand what Maclaren is saying? The motivation to imitate God is God's unmerited, constant, unconditional love for us and His adoption of us as His beloved children. This is the beauty of the Christian faith. We don't have to work hard, tinkering with our character to somehow be made acceptable to God and merit His approval. In fact, it's just the opposite.

God chooses to love us, redeem us, and adopt us when we are at our absolute worst! John writes in 1 John 3:1, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”

⁵ Ibid., 275.

It's because God so deeply loved us when we were so unlovable...at the horrific, unthinkable cost of His only Son...that we KNOW without a doubt that we are loved by the Father with the most remarkable, self-giving, self-sacrificing love the world has ever known. He has adopted us and sealed us with His Spirit. As Paul writes in Romans 8:14:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God...you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

When we can walk through life with confidence that we are dearly beloved children of God, empowered, instructed, convicted, and directed by the Holy Spirit...we will have the motivation to imitate the Father by loving other people the way the Father first loved us, amen?

Sadly, the opposite is also true. When people doubt God's love, or they have a horrible, inaccurate concept of God as either abandoning His creation or unjustly punishing His children, they will often live in a manner contrary to the Father. I've always suspected that a large percentage of people who call themselves atheists are actually those who are angry at God or feel that God has in some way let them down...much like many of us carry a wound because we feel that our earthly parents failed to love us as they should have. So many people question God's love or even God's existence because they or the people they love have experienced evil, harm, abandonment, or loss. Once we question God's love for us, we are vulnerable to believe all kinds of lies about God and about our own identity. Like many kids in the foster system, we will build high walls of defense around our hearts, and consequently we will struggle to love people with a self-giving, self-sacrificing kind of love. Love will be like everything else in our lives: a means of serving and protecting ourselves...which is the opposite of this God-like love that Paul is writing about.

Such is why the New Testament is so redundant and so clear about this essential truth: God deeply, profoundly, unconditionally loves you. It doesn't matter what you've done; it doesn't matter what's been done to you. God loves you more than you will ever know. How can I say that? How can I be so sure?

Paul answers that question with perfect clarity in Romans 5: For while we were still weak, at just the right time Christ died for the ungodly...God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.

I know there is pain and suffering, evil and disillusionment in this life. Many of us have suffered much, and we all struggle with the horrible atrocities and injustices we see every day all over the world. But this is what we know: God loves us...every one of us. John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the world that He gave us His Son..." Nothing is more precious to a parent than his child...so if God gives up His Son to save us from the punishment we deserve due to our sin, we can know...we can know without a shadow of a doubt...God loves us. Even more than that, when we repent of our sins and call upon the name of the Son, the name of Jesus, placing our faith in what accomplished on the cross when He suffered for our forgiveness, we will be forever

reconciled to the Father in a way that restores us to His forever family. We are adopted, chosen, and we are forevermore identified as children of God, and God will forevermore dwell in our hearts through the presence and power of His Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit living in us that moves us to imitate the Father in love and forgiveness...but again, you won't be imitators of God until you KNOW that God loves you and that you belong to Him. For us to walk in love, we must first know that we are loved. For us to extend unmerited forgiveness, we must first know that we have received unmerited forgiveness.

Now, in the ancient world, learning was accomplished through three phases: theory, imitation, and practice.⁶ Much of what Paul has taught the church thus far in Ephesians is the TRUTH about who God is, who we are, and what Christ has accomplished on our behalf. Here in the 4th chapter, we have been called to imitate the Father in terms of how we love and forgive. As we move deeper into chapter 5, Paul will be adamant about how we should practice our faith. John Stott says it well:

We must actively cultivate a Christian life. For holiness is not a condition into which we drift. We are not passive spectators of a sanctification God works in us. On the contrary, we have purposefully to 'put away' from us all conduct that is incompatible with our new life in Christ, and to 'put on' a lifestyle compatible with it.⁷

Putting on our new selves includes ascribing to the truth, imitating God as He made Himself known in Christ, and practicing love, surrender, and forgiveness. This is the life that will serve as a "fragrant offering" to God.

III. A Fragrant Offering

Paul uses some language here at the end of our passage that we do not relate with at all when he writes, "as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." What does it mean that Christ was a "fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"?

In the ancient world, sacrifices were regularly made to "the gods," even as the Jews made sacrifices to the one, true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. William Barclay explains: When a sacrifice was offered on an altar, the odor of the burning meat went up to heaven and the god to whom the sacrifice was offered was supposed to feast upon that odor. A sacrifice which had the odor of a sweet savor was especially pleasing and especially acceptable to the god to whom it was offered.⁸

Paul uses the language of sacrifice to demonstrate that the life of Jesus marked by perfect obedience to God and perfect love towards human beings was a life surrendered...a life sacrificed...and the fragrance of a fully surrendered, loving, forgiving life was pleasing and acceptable to God.

This is exactly the language that Paul applies to the church in Romans 12:1 when he writes, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

⁶ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Galatians and the Ephesians*, 160.

⁷ John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 193.

⁸ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Galatians and the Ephesians*, 161.

A redeemed soul that loves and forgives like Jesus is a life that pleases God...our loving and our forgiving...our giving up and our giving...is a “fragrant offering” to our Heavenly Father. Again, always remember that we are not trying to please God in order to be accepted; we have been ultimately accepted in Christ, so that is why we seek to please God and imitate His love and forgiveness, amen?

So, as we close this time together and prepare to come to the table, we’re going to have some silent time with the Father. Ask the Father to speak to your heart. Take some time to confess your sin and remember that while we were yet sinners, the Beloved Son died for us that we might be forgiven...and so that we might have the grace to forgive those who sin against us. Ask the Father to speak His love over you so that you will no longer be tossed about with doubt and uncertainty. And then let us come to the table and remember...it was in love that He gave up his body and his blood...and as imitators of God...we are to love one another as God first loved us. Let us pray.