

Imitating Christ's Love

Ephesians 5:1-2

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. – Ephesians 5:1-2, ESV

Introduction: Who Do We Imitate?

When I first started preaching, I found myself subconsciously imitating preachers I admired. The late James Boice, a local PCA pastor named Glenn Parkinson in Severna Park, John Piper and others have all influenced my theology and my preaching, but early on in my preaching days, I would sound and act more like these men in the pulpit, like I was imitating them, even though it was unintentional.

Who do you imitate? You might not think that you do, but think again. How many of the things you do as a parent are copy-cat versions of things your mom and dad said and did with you? At work, do you find yourself doing things just the way someone higher up in the organization does them, maybe somebody who trained you?

There's nothing wrong with imitating others; it's one of the ways we learn, especially when it comes to skill-based tasks. Classical education encourages students to imitate the writing of great classics. In fact, this is how Benjamin Franklin, one of America's most effective and most original writers, first learned how to write. But you do need to be careful who you imitate and why.

I. A General Call: Be Imitators of God (v. 1)

In today's passage, Paul begins Ephesians 5 by calling us to "be imitators of God." Obviously, it would be pretty difficult to find a better role model. But as we think about the command, it's not really easy to understand what it means, much less how such imitation can be possible. I can't speak worlds into existence out of nothing, I can't uphold and govern the universe. I can't be everywhere or do everything according to my perfect and holy will. In fact, in some sense, almost everything that comes to mind when I think of what it means to be God is impossible for me to do and makes little sense for me to imitate.

A. Imitation of God as Image-Bearers

I think it helps if we step back and understand how God created us and how that relates to imitating Him. Unique among all of creation, human beings are made in God's image. Now that does not mean that God made us infinite and eternal spiritual beings, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-present. Those qualities are unique to God.

In understanding what it means to be made in God's image and called to imitate Him as image-bearers, theologians distinguish between God's incommunicable attributes and His communicable attributes. Now these are not words we use every day, but doctors do talk about communicable diseases, also known as infectious or contagious diseases, which means diseases you can catch.

God's incommunicable attributes are those attributes of God that we cannot catch, that don't transfer to us as His image-bearers. These are the things we think of when we think of God being uniquely God – He is eternal, infinite and unchanging. He is all-powerful, everywhere-present and all-knowing.

Yet God has other attributes that are communicable, that do transfer to His image-bearers. Because of the reality of sin, these don't transfer perfectly, but God's communicable attributes include His wisdom, justice and love – also His goodness, His mercy, His knowledge of truth and His ability to communicate truth in language. We are even created to imitate His rule and His holiness, though in a much more limited way.

And so, in being created in God's image, we are created to be able to imitate God in key, specific ways. Specifically, bearing God's image carries with it the responsibility to represent God's character in our government and stewardship of the world, God's creation. This was God's intention for Adam and Eve, to fill the earth and subdue it, to rule over it as God's representatives. Sadly, the fall into sin has so fundamentally broken human nature that we no longer naturally possess either the ability or the desire to faithfully imitate God as His image-bearers. We want to rule in our way, according to our desires, for our own pleasure and power.

B. Imitation of God as Beloved Children

But Paul is not addressing humanity in general as God's image-bearers in this verse. He is addressing believers as God's children. He is speaking to the company of the redeemed, those who have been loved by God and redeemed by love. We are not called to imitate God not just as image-bearers but as children.

Children are excellent at imitating their parents. It's been said that your children will not always do what you say, but they will never fail to do what they see. Every parent has felt the joy and the pain of this reality, as we see our children copy us in ways that are cute, touching, endearing and painful to see.

As His children, God calls us to imitate Him. We are to look to Him, observe Him and copy Him. But how? After all, my children have an easy time imitating me because they can see me. They live with me. But God is invisible. So, how do we imitate Him? Well, we obviously need to spend time in His word, since that's how we can see how God thinks and acts. But still, even if we love Him and wish to imitate Him, He's God and we're not.

So Paul transitions from the call to imitate God in general in verse 1 to the call to imitate Christ specifically and focuses on one specific way we are to imitate Christ in verse 2 -

II. A Concrete Example: Christ's Love (v. 2)

"And walk in love, as Christ loved us . . ."

A. God is Love. Walk in Love.

Already, centuries before Jesus was born, God had shown His children how to imitate Him. God gave the Moral Law, summarized in the 10 Commandments, which reflect His moral character and give a pattern of how to imitate the righteousness, holiness, justice and love of God. Jesus summarized the Law of God in two Great Commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. As Paul wrote in Romans 13:10, "love is the fulfilling of the law."

God is love, and so to imitate Him is to walk in love. Our standard and pattern for what it means to walk in love is Christ, who loved us perfectly and fully. Jesus was the human being who perfectly bore God's image, who perfectly reflected and embodied the Law. He was the fulfillment of the Law and He lived a life of perfect love from beginning to end.

Christ was motivated by His love for His Father and His compassion for His people. He sought always to glorify God and to love people. Sometimes His love came in the form of teaching the truth or healing the sick or feeding the hungry or delivering the demon-possessed from oppression, Jesus' whole life was the consistent and flawless embodiment of the love of God.

B. Herein in Love: Christ Gave Himself for Us

But that's not where Paul focuses His main emphasis. Rather than emphasizing the details of Christ's life of love, Paul says "*walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.*"

Christ loved us and gave Himself up FOR us. The word "for" in Greek is the word "huper." German theologian Karl Barth identified "huper" as the single most important word in the Bible. Here it is the word that tells us that Jesus gave himself up in our place and on our behalf.

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." But right before this, He also said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Our pattern for imitating Christ is to walk in love as He loved us and gave Himself up for us. Our pattern for imitating Christ is the cross, the greatest love anyone can show, to lay down one's life for his friends.

But you may wonder why it is considered such great love for Jesus to give Himself up for us. After all, it's not always an act of great love for someone to die for someone else. There needs to be a real, life-threatening need and the person dying needs to be accomplishing something to meet that need in order for it to be an act of love. If I'm walking down the sidewalk peacefully and someone jumps out in front of a truck and is killed "for me," this is not an act of love; it's merely senseless suicide.

So to understand the supremacy of Jesus' love, we need to see our need and how Jesus' self-sacrifice met that need. This begins by understanding that we are guilty and stand condemned in the eyes of a Holy God. God is absolutely pure and holy and perfectly just, and we have repeatedly, willfully broken His laws in rebellion against Him. The just penalty we deserve for our sin is the wrath and curse of God, eternal condemnation. The severity of our sin is measured by the greatness of the God against whom we have rebelled.

So we stand in the ultimate danger, in the ultimate need, and there's no way we can help ourselves. Even if we were to vow with absolute sincerity to stop sinning against God right now, we know that vow wouldn't last until lunch time. We would soon enough be coveting, lusting, deceiving, hating someone or just failing to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength and failing to love our neighbor as ourselves. And even if we could hypothetically stop sinning right now and for the rest of our lives, we

still have the hundreds, thousands, millions of sins we have committed in our lives to this point. Our need is great and we cannot help ourselves.

But what does the death of a Jewish rabbi-carpenter outside of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago have to do with us? How can it possibly benefit us? Well, it can only possibly benefit us if Jesus truly was the Son of God and was truly perfect and innocent. If He was the Son of God, then His life is of infinite value and if He was truly innocent, then He did not deserve to die Himself. As the perfect Son of God, He could offer Himself FOR us, in our place and for our benefit. He could agree to be substituted for us, to be punished for us, to be condemned for us. And that is exactly what He did.

By offering Himself for us, Jesus took our sin and condemnation upon Himself. He placed Himself where we deserve to be – despised, rejected, abandoned, condemned. No one but the perfect Son of God could have done this for us, and it was the act of supreme love that He did.

C. Godward Love: An Offering and Sacrifice to God

But Jesus did not just offer Himself up for us, He also offered Himself up to God. He offered Himself as “*a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*” Here Paul is intentionally using the language of Old Testament sacrificial worship. The ESV renders this phrase “a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God,” but a more literal rendering would be “an offering and a sacrifice to God for a pleasing aroma.”

To understand the connection between Christ offering Himself “for us” and “to God,” it helps to understand the Old Testament sacrificial system. When the tabernacle worship under Moses was confirmed in Exodus 24, Moses took the blood of the burnt offering and sprinkled half of it on the altar and half of it on the people. Under the Old Testament worship, the sacrifices were offered up to God in the place of the people and the altar and the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant would be sprinkled with blood. The sacrifices were burnt and the smoke and the aroma would go up to God, mingled with the incense burning in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple.

Jesus’ sacrifice of Himself in our place, this supreme act of love, had effects both for us and toward God. Because He took our place and offered Himself up for us, His sacrifice atoned for our sin and we were covered. Because He offered Himself up to God, His offering of Himself satisfied God’s justice and appeased God’s wrath. Thus, in place of our sin, the pleasing aroma of Christ’s sacrifice ascended to the throne of God.

Now, of course, like in everything else, theologians have fancy terms for this dual effect of the atoning sacrifice: They say that Jesus' sacrifice of Himself in our place expiated our sins and propitiated God's wrath – that is, Jesus provided both expiation for our sins and propitiation of God's just anger and demand for punishment. In simpler terms, His sacrifice both covered us and satisfied God. Thus He “gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Listen to how the second half of the ninth chapter of Hebrews makes the connection between the Old Testament sacrifices and the fulfillment of every sacrifice in the better sacrifice of Jesus:

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify^[1] for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our^[2] conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

¹⁵ Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant ¹⁶ For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. ¹⁷ For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. ¹⁸ Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. ¹⁹ For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, ²⁰ saying, “This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.” ²¹ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²² Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

²³ Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴ For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵ Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶ for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes

judgment, ²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:11-28)

So we can clearly see that when Jesus offered Himself up for us as an offering and a sacrifice to God for a pleasing aroma,” this was both the supreme act of love and highest act of worship ever done in the history of the world. In showing such perfect love for God and for us, Jesus fulfilled the Law in a profound way and showed us the heart of God.

Conclusion: What is the aroma of our lives?

But we need to also be reminded of Paul’s command here in Ephesians 5:1-2: “*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*” What Christ accomplished on the cross was a unique, once-for-all sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and cover all of our sins forever. However, it was also a pattern for us to follow. If we are to be imitators of God as dearly loved children, then we are to walk in love, as Christ loved us. We are to live a life that is an offering to God and is for others.

Paul not only gave us this command, but he also set the pattern for us in living out this calling. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1, he wrote: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” Paul was committed to doing everything for the glory of God and for the good of others, and he was so committed to these priorities that he was able to call people to imitate him as he imitated Christ. Not that Paul was perfect, but he was sincerely striving after the glory of God and the good of others, to live unto the Lord and for the benefit of others.

What about us?