

Imitators of God

SERMON

By

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TEXT: Ephesians 4:17-5:21 (5:1)

PROP: Because it pleases God (4:30, 5:2) and because by grace we can do it, we must take on His nature, characterized by Christian love. We must be imitators of God

Ephesians 4:17-5:21 (ESV)

The New Life

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Walk in Love

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

³ But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴ Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. ⁵ For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in

the kingdom of Christ and God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷ Therefore do not become partners with them; ⁸ for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), ¹⁰ and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. ¹³ But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, ¹⁴ for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

I want to call your attention to Ephesians 5:1 where we are instructed to be “imitators of God as beloved children.” The verse begins with the word “therefore” so it is incumbent upon us to consider what the word “therefore” is there for. That we must be imitators of God is a conclusion drawn from propositions put to us in the immediate context and there are six of them here. We are to put off our old lives and put on Christ. We are to turn from lying to telling the truth; from anger to self-control; from stealing to gainful employment; from corrupt to edifying speech; from bitterness to love; from sexual impurity to godly relationships and the thankful acknowledgement of God’s good gifts.

If we are to imitate God we must strive to be like him in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. If we are to imitate God we must strive to love as he loved that is to say, we are to walk in love. The apostle urges us to give and forgive. If we are to imitate God we must give, for he is always giving. Paul writes,

2 Corinthians 9:6-8 (ESV)

The Cheerful Giver

⁶ The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

We are to be imitators of God, the constant, generous Giver, who did not spare his own Son. Give thanks to God for his unspeakable gift! If we would be imitators of God we must also forgive. Forgiveness seems to be very hard for sinners but we must remember that God for Christ's sake has forgiven us; he has blotted out our transgressions like a cloud and cast our sins into the depth of the sea; therefore, we are to forgive all who have done us wrong, so that when we bow before God we may say without hypocrisy, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us." By giving and forgiving we show that we walk in love as Christ also has loved us. He has given himself for us, and through his precious blood we are forgiven our iniquities; let us therefore imitate our God. This is our Father's commandment; let it be our delight to obey it.

The apostle writes to the church at Ephesus in Asia Minor and exhorts them not to walk like the rest of the Gentiles walk. Apparently the Ephesian believers, like many of us today, no longer had the love for each other and for the Lord they once had. Their zeal had given way to the status quo. They were satisfied with what they were and it would seem that in spite of their theological rigor and faithfulness they lacked that evangelical vigor so typical of those who are young in the Lord. Their problem was noted by the aged John in exile on Patmos.

Revelation 2:2-4 (ESV) – 2 "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. **3** I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. **4** But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

John goes on to praise them for their hatred of the Nicolaitans, "which I also hate," but he tells them that they need to repent and do the deeds they did at first.

Theirs was not the sin of idolatry nor was it the gross immorality of these Nicolaitans but they had lost their first love. Like Peter, Paul also warns the Ephesians of those practices that tend to wickedness. We cannot be satisfied with our present level of Christian growth nor can we rest on our laurels in the face of so strong an enemy. In fact, the new natures given to Christians by the

grace of God are very different from their old natures and must bear constant effort toward improvement.

We are to imitate God as beloved children and it is of great benefit to us that we are diligent to perform this duty. Many professing Christians believe that the moral law of God has been brought to an end and is no longer relevant to the age in which we live for as Paul says, we “Are not under law but under grace.” But there can be no question as to the relevance of the exhortation, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children,” for it is given to us by the same apostle Paul who exhorts us to this duty in this present age. Furthermore, the moral law of God, the relevance of which is denied by so many today continues to define what it means to imitate God. It continues to define holiness and righteousness just as it has since the Garden of Eden. Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mount, in which he illuminated and expounded the moral law by saying,

Matthew 5:48 (ESV)

⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

We are to be imitators of God, that is, we are not merely to meditate upon God and think that we have done enough, but go on to imitate the perfection of God. Meditation is a happy, holy, profitable duty, and it will instruct you, strengthen you, comfort you, inspire your heart, and make your soul steadfast but you may not stop at meditation, you must go on to imitate the character of God. Let your spiritual life not only be enriched by devout thought, but let it bring forth fruit in holy action. Don't be satisfied with feeding the soul by meditation, but put the strength which you have gained by meditation to good use. Sitting at the feet of Jesus must be succeeded by following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Neither should we be simply admirers of God. We certainly ought to admire God if we are true Christians. Those who have been converted by the grace of God are the only ones who can truly see God and they are filled with a reverent admiration of him. The angels proclaim, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.” Hannah noted, “There is none holy like the Lord; there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God.” (1 Samuel 2:2, ESV) When the best of men are compared with the Lord their holiness by comparison is nothing. “Who is like you, O God, glorious in holiness?” But we cannot be satisfied with rendering such admiration: we must prove that we do really admire God by imitating him. It is said that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” So it is that the imitation of God is the sincerest form of admiring him. Neither can we believe that we know

God, and truly understand his holiness, unless we make every effort, as he enables us, to imitate him as dear children.

The imitation of God even transcends the adoration of God. Adoration issues from meditation and admiration and our whole lives should be adoration. Not only on the Sabbath, and at certain times, and in our assemblies, but everywhere we are adore God by obedience to his law which is as real and acceptable as the most reverent public worship. Remember that "to obey is better than sacrifice," so that holy living surpasses any other form of worship. To love is to adore; to obey is to praise; to act is to worship. If you are imitators of God as dear children your adoration will be proved to be sincere. Worship without the imitation of God is false worship. True adoration consists not only in words, but coming from the heart it affects our entire nature and shows itself in our daily behavior. We need to adore God constantly by reverencing his law, delighting in his commandments, and imitating his character. It is clear therefore that the imitation of God is of the greatest benefit to us.

Some people are very precocious, very self-sufficient. They see themselves as important and indispensable. Like Frank Sinatra they sing, "*I did it my way.*" We are not commanded to do anything of the kind. We are to be imitators. This is what we teach to our children in school. Students don't invent algebra they learn how to use algebra from a teacher. Students can only learn by imitation, and in that respect we are all students. You may aspire to be a great artist but the first thing a young artist must do is to copy. If he cannot copy he cannot originate. How could a man become an artist if he did not attach himself to some school of painting, and sit under a master painter? He may be of the French school, or the Italian school, or the Flemish school, but he must begin as an imitator even if he grows up to be a master himself. When he has been well trained, and has done much work, he may outgrow his master and become a creator of great art in his own right, but he must begin as a careful copyist. Here we are to become imitators but we will never be able to learn all that **this** Master can teach us. Though we be immortal, yet throughout eternity we will never advance beyond our great model; for as Paul writes, "Be imitators of God." Here is a great truth. The most wonderful distinction in this world would be for a man's character to be a precise copy of the character of God. In him there would be creative genius indeed, for he would be like him whose name is called "Wonderful."

Our wonderful Lord Jesus was a great model for us to imitate when He offered himself for our sins on the cross. His sinless character, His truth, His love for us, forgiving even His executioners, His tenderness with the thief on the cross, His willingness to lay down His own life for His sheep, are the exact character of

God. He radiates the glory of God. He is appointed heir of all things through whom the world was made and by whose power all things are upheld. All the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him in bodily form. At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. And Paul writes,

Philippians 2:5 (ESV)

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,

When our Lord Jesus exhibited the character of God on earth, his life was so distinctive that the world did not know him. They were puzzled and amazed at the sight of one who was so like God the Father. His life struck men as being the most amazing thing they had ever seen; and if we are imitators of God our characters will also stand out in relief, and each one of us will be “a wonder unto many.” You see it is a humbling exhortation which only men of childlike spirit are likely to regard. So the Scriptures address the command only to such men. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children”. If you are not his children you cannot imitate him, and you will not even desire to do so.

Imitating God as children may seem humbling to us but what an exalting thing it really is to be an imitator of God! It is an honor to be the lowliest follower of such a leader. Imitating the great men of our time is completely absurd by comparison. It is no honor to imitate a poor example. But he who seeks to imitate the Living and True God engages upon a most ennobling course of action. We are imitating infinite goodness; we seek after moral perfection. We are to be “blameless and harmless, the sons of God without rebuke”. But as God is infinitely more than that, so are we to rise above mere innocence into actual holiness. To refrain from evil is not enough; we must be filled with all goodness by the Spirit of God. Is this not a worthy goal? What happier task could be laid before us? What higher ambition can we know? God’s only-begotten Son, who is Lord of all, is the express image of God the Father so that he could truly say, “he who has seen me has seen the Father.” Jesus is always found pleasing to his Father. The perfect Son of God is as his Father perfect in holiness. We see our calling then do we not? To be imitators of God is the highest calling man can attain to but it requires great zeal for God and his kingdom in many ways.

To be an imitator of God requires great zeal for the knowledge of God. A man cannot imitate that which he has never seen. He who does not know God cannot possibly imitate him. Do you know God, my friends? Have you turned unto

him with repentance? Do you speak with him in prayer? Have you had fellowship with him in Christ? Can you say, "I have set the Lord always before me"? You cannot possibly imitate God unless you focus upon that great model, and have some intelligent knowledge of what it is. We must have a spiritual idea of God or we cannot imitate him; hence the need of the Holy Spirit. How can we know YAHWEH unless the Spirit reveals him to us?

In addition, the imitation of God requires great zeal for love. If we love God, love will compel us to imitate him and nothing but the love for the living and true God will move us to imitate him. We readily grow somewhat like that which we love. In married life persons who have truly loved, though they may begin with many differences, will gradually be conformed to one another in the process of years. Likeness is the natural product of love; and so if we love God truly we will by the power of the gracious Holy Spirit grow more and more like him. If we do not love the Lord we will not follow him or imitate him, but if we truly love him we will say with David,

Psalm 63:5-8 (ESV)

- 5 My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
- 6 when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
- 7 for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.
- 8 My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Furthermore, to imitate God requires great zeal for sincerity. If you are not really a Christian you will not care about your life; but in the matter of imitation you must be very careful. You cannot copy a document without being careful to read every word. In copying from nature the artist has to be careful with every color and perspective or his picture will be distorted and grotesque. If a sculptor is producing a replica of an ancient statue, he must keep his eyes open and follow every line and mark. My friend, you cannot imitate God if you are the sort of person that is constantly in a condition of being half awake, clothed perhaps but not really in your right mind. Such people live a sloppy life, and practice a sort of happy-go-lucky religion, having little care for the truth, and never really study the Bible for themselves. Such people live carelessly, and never come to grips with the sin in their lives so it grows in them like weeds. Such persons, playing hit or miss with holiness, are sure to fall short of it, but he that is truly a Christian will

give prayerful thought and earnest desire to become a successful imitator of God. He will also call on the aid of the Holy Spirit, and thus be led into holiness.

We have seen what it means to imitate God but now we must take account of imitating him as dear children. It is the natural tendency of children to imitate their parents. There are exceptions of course but in general it is true. In the case of God's children they are necessarily like their heavenly Father for he has begotten them unto eternal life. Those who do not belong to Jesus are the children of the Wicked One. We need no proof of this, because their lives bear open witness to their ungodliness. Those who live godly and righteously in Christ Jesus, believing in him, are God's children; and though they do sin, yet they do not love sin, nor remain without repenting of it. Holiness of life is the singular proof of regeneration. "Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:20, ESV) is a universal rule. **God's children must be like him.** With all their faults and failings we will still be able to see their likeness to God. The copy may be blurred, but it is a copy. Those who profess to be Christians should either be like their Father or give up their name. The story is told of a soldier in Alexander's army whose name was Alexander, but when the battle was raging he became frozen in fear. Seeing him in this terrible state Alexander said to him, "How can you bear the name of Alexander? Drop your cowardice, or drop your name." So we say to those who are unholy, unclean, impure, unkind, ungracious, be like God, or cease to bear the name of a child of God. Why should you aggravate your sin by pretending to be someone whom you are not! Be like Christ, or do not be called a Christian.

So we understand that true sons of God will in fact imitate God. There will be a strong desire to imitate God and we will constantly acknowledge our sins and turn away from them because God the Spirit works to sanctify us. As Paul tells us,

Ephesians 2:8-10 (ESV)

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We are to imitate God as beloved children. What a powerful argument it is to imitate God as beloved children. How greatly has God loved us in that he permits us to be his children at all. John writes,

1 John 3:1-3 (ESV)

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

We are told to, "See what kind of love the Father has given us", as if it were a thing of wonder. Do you not wonder that you should be called a child of God? Behold the love, which chose you when you were dead in trespasses and sins, and made you alive into the life of God! Again, John writes,

John 1:12-13 (ESV)

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

What a wonderful love is this that issues in our new birth and our adoption, making us into a child of God! Furthermore as children of God have we ever received such kindness as we have received from God? God deals with us as sons and not illegitimates. John Newton put it this way,

- 1 One there is, above all others,
 Well deserves the name of Friend;
 His is love beyond a brother's,
 Costly, free, and knows no end:
 They, who once His kindness prove,
 Find it everlasting love.

- 2 Which of all our friends, to save us,
 Could or would have shed his blood?
 But our Jesus died to have us
 Reconciled in Him to God:
 This was boundless love indeed!
 Jesus is a friend in need.

- 4 Could we bear from one another
 What He daily bears from us?
 Yet this glorious Friend and Brother
 Loves us though we treat Him thus:
 Though for good we render ill,
 He accounts us brethren still.

We could not wish for God to improve upon his dealings with us. We should say with all our hearts I am filled with admiration at the love of God. I have been a child greatly beloved of his Father. His love to me is wonderful; I am a deep debtor to his grace. If we can say this then let us imitate God for the more the love of a child to his Father the more his admiration of his Father, and the stronger his desire to be like him in all things. Let it be so with all of us.

Paul's exhortations to godliness may seem hard to us all but the end of it is fellowship with God. That we be found pleasing to God is of great benefit to us here on earth and in the world to come. For this reason, too, we must be careful with our relationship to the Holy Spirit. The precious Holy Spirit, that hound of heaven that has sought us out and effectively moved us to repentance, that blessed Spirit who intercedes for us with respect to our groanings that we don't know how to utter, he who indwells us, our comforter, the pledge of our inheritance. How often we grieve Him! We often drive Him from us by our sin and we lose fellowship with God and refuse His word and the blessed intimacy and joy we could have if we were found to be more pleasing to God. Paul writes,

Ephesians 4:30 (ESV) – 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Oh yes, we have a sure hope and our inheritance is kept for us, but we can and do grieve the Holy Spirit of God. Paul tells us that continued grieving of the Holy Spirit produces bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and evil speaking. That we not lose fellowship with God, that we not drive away God's Holy Spirit; Paul would have us imitate God.

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

Now this concept is very deep indeed, who can understand it? How can we plumb the depths of the riches of God in Christ? Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." (John 15:13-14, ESV) How can we walk in this kind of love?

This is not syrupy sweetness or the kind of love suggested by the ungodly people of our generation. This is love that manifests itself in the speaking of truth, in working to share with those who are in need, speaking words of edification to give grace to all who hear. This is love that lacks malice and bitterness. It is

kindness and tenderness with forgiveness. This love is not defiled with adultery or with dishonor and disobedience to parents or to those in authority over us.

My friends we must be imitators of God. We must walk in love, even as Christ walked in love. Then like Christ we will be a fragrant aroma to God. Let this be our goal in life, to be found pleasing to God. Thomas Chisholm, the writer of the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" also wrote the hymn I leave with you in closing:

- 1 O to be like Thee! blessed Redeemer:
 This is my constant longing and prayer;
 Gladly I'll forfeit all of earth's treasures,
 Jesus, Thy perfect likeness to wear.
 - 2 O to be like Thee! full of compassion,
 Loving, forgiving, tender and kind,
 Helping the helpless, cheering the fainting,
 Seeking the wand'ring sinner to find.
 - 3 O to be like Thee! lowly in spirit,
 Holy and harmless, patient and brave;
 Meekly enduring cruel reproaches,
 Willing to suffer, others to save.
- Chorus* O to be like Thee!
 O to be like Thee!
 Blessed Redeemer, pure as Thou art;
 Come in Thy sweetness, come in Thy fulness;
 Stamp Thine own image deep on my heart.