

“Be Imitators of God”

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Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil.

²⁸ Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

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

IMITATORS OF GOD

“Be imitators of God.”

That sounds impossible.

How can we imitate the Creator?

To even suggest such a thing...
seems outrageous, even sacrilegious.
And yet our lesson for today commands,

“Be imitators of God.”

In the Old Testament imitating God seems impossible. In the Hebrew Scriptures the “otherness” of God is emphasized.

God is high and lifted up.
 God’s ways are not our ways.
 God is holy.

God’s presence, God’s “glory” is overwhelming.
 No one can see God and live.

But, in the New Testament,
 there is a different emphasis.
 God is portrayed in a more down to earth way.
 God was in Christ.

In Jesus we get a human portrait of God’s love.
 It’s something that we can relate to.
 It’s something that we can see and understand.

It’s even something that we can even imitate.

Instead of being estranged from God,
 we can claim to be God’s children.
 We can, according to this passage,
 learn to love as Christ loved.

We can imitate the self-giving love that Christ demonstrated on the cross.
 His sacrifice is can be an example that we can follow.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking.
 “That still sounds impossible.
 We certainly can’t live up to the example of God’s love that we see in Jesus.”

And you would be right.
 So, does this mean that we can’t “imitate” that love?

When some people hear that word “imitate” they think of an action that is insincere.

We talk about imitations not being the “real thing”
...or the famous phrase from commercials, “don’t accept any imitations”.

LEARNING BY IMITATION

On the other hand,
we actually learn by imitating.

Those of you who have small children
know this to be true.
Children are like sponges.
They soak up and imitate everything they hear and see.

We’re not as good at it as children, but we too learn by imitating.

And it’s important that we learn by imitating someone who is great at
what she or he does.

I’ve been taking online guitar lessons from a guy who idolized the great
blind guitarist, Doc Watson.

And he said that when he was just learning to play as a child he had the
opportunity to go to several of Doc’s concerts at bluegrass festivals. He
had a friend who allowed him to stand close to the stage so that he
could watch Doc play very closely.

And after the concert, he would take his guitar out of the trunk of the car
and try to imitate the way Doc fingered the guitar.

Now this guy himself is recognized as one of the best bluegrass gui-
tarists around.

And his skill was honed by trying to imitate the best.

How many great basketball stars began by trying to “be like Mike”?
How many great golfers began by trying to emulate Jack Nicholas’
swing?

And so forth.

Imitation is not just the sincerest form of flattery.
It’s a powerful way to learn.

And that’s what today’s lesson is all about.

When we imitate the love of God as revealed in Christ, we are the road to living the life of love that is our birthright as children of God.

GRACE AND VIRTUE

So what does that love look like?
What characteristics should we imitate?

In a way, today's lesson is a continuation of last week's lesson.

It's another list of Christian virtues, a description of a way of life that will help us imitate the life of Christ.

One thing we need to keep in mind.

We don't imitate these Christian virtues to earn our salvation.
We imitate these Christian virtues out of gratitude and joy.

Let me go back to my friend who tried to copy Doc Watson's guitar style. He didn't go to such pains because he was trying to please his parents or someone else.

He did it because he had fallen in love with the music.

When we fall in love with the grace of God as revealed in Christ, we want to learn those gracious songs and play them for the whole world to hear.

It's sort of like that idealistic soft drink commercial.
"We want to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony..."

We want to sing because we love the music of grace. We love the Savior who first loved us.

Having said that let's add to our list of Christian virtues that will help us imitate God as revealed in Christ.

TELLING THE TRUTH

The first virtue is telling the truth.
Paul urges, "Put away falsehood" and speak the "truth to neighbors for are members of one another."

This is a reference to the body of Christ.
Since we in the church are members of the body of Christ, it is important that we speak the truth to one another.

In fact, if we do not speak the truth in the church, since we are all members of the body of Christ, it's like we're lying to ourselves!

But, of course speaking the truth does not mean speaking the truth in a way that is harsh or divisive.

We talked about that last week.
We are to speak the truth in love.
When we have to speak as hard truth, we say it softly.

Jesus was the way, the truth and the life.
But, his way was the way of grace.

His truth did not condemn.
His truth set people free.

Jesus didn't believe that since we made up our bed that we have to lie in it.
Jesus believed that we can take up our bed and walk.

"Your sins are forgiven."

That was Jesus' truth.
It was a truth that transformed.

And that's why we can dare to speak the truth to each other.
We believe in the truth that transforms.

We don't have to tell ourselves and each other falsehoods in order to feel better.

We know and live by God's truth.
We believe in the truth that sets us free.

DEALING WITH ANGER

And that means we can be honest about our feelings. The next verse reads,

“Be angry but do not sin;
do not let the sun go down on your anger,
and do not make room for the devil.”

When my wife and I had premarital counseling,
this was a verse that the pastor asked us to put into practice in our marriage.

(I bet some of you got the same advice.)

But this is good advice not only for married couples but for all of us.

We will be angry.
And the most dangerous thing we can do is deny our anger.

Anger by itself is not bad.
In some circumstances, not being angry is a sin.
We should be angry at injustice and oppression wherever we find it.

It's what we do with anger that makes the difference.
It's not good to stuff anger down deep inside,
nor is it good to just let angry words fly without any forethought.

Whether our anger is justified or not,
we need to recognize it,
and act quickly to bring it under control.

In this way we can channel that energy to do good instead of harm.

Denying our anger will only make us “passive aggressive”.

That means our anger will come out in indirect ways.

When that happens,
it's hard to recognize our true feelings.

This verse suggests that we should analyze why we're angry and deal with those feelings “before the sun goes down”.

I interpret to mean we deal with our anger as soon as possible.

Living with anger is not a good strategy.

I believe anger and fear are related.
When I get angry, I'm usually afraid of something.

If I can identify that fear and tell someone else about it, quite often those angry feelings are lessened somewhat.

ROOM FOR THE DEVIL

Notice how important it is to deal with anger.

If we do not deal with anger,
Paul says that we make room for the devil.

Every devilish deed you see on the evening news comes from unresolved anger.

And unresolved anger is magnified by what Paul calls "evil talk".
The word translated evil can also be translated "rotten" or "putrid".

Sometimes people talk about letting angry words fly as "clearing the air".

This passage suggests that when we do that it makes things smell worse.

Quite often people use "speaking the truth" used as a self-justifying excuse to manipulate, retaliate and tear down others.

In this case a lie masquerades as the truth.

It began of course when political and religious leaders crucified Jesus for heresy and sedition.

But, ironically Jesus' name has been used to justify "crucifixions" of others down through the ages in the name of truth.

My wife and I are planning our annual cruise vacation this fall, and one of the stops is Cartagena, Columbia.

You know what the big tourist stops are in Cartagena?

One is a beautiful cathedral and buildings in the old city. And the other is a tour of a place where people were tortured during the Inquisition.

The reviews of that tour complain that the guide didn't say much about the historical background on this tour.

That might be a good thing.

If people really understood what went on in that place, they probably wouldn't be able to eat their dinner that night on the ship.

Christianity has been used as an excuse to harm others in the past.

GRIEVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

But, it's not just an ancient problem.

Christianity is being used today as an excuse today to harm others. It usually begins with someone saying something like,

"There are some truths that we can't compromise, and if someone believes (fill in the blank) then they're not really Christian.

They are God's enemy."

This is evil talk.

This is talk that smells bad.

This is talk that makes room for the devil.

And, more than that, this is a judgement that should be reserved for the Lord.

It's one thing to say that someone has made a bad mistake in their theology.

It's another thing to say that a person is beyond redemption.

When we speak like this, we're just one small step away from harming someone in the name of faith.

When God's people act and speak in ways that are not in keeping with the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, according to the Apostle, we "grieve the Holy Spirit".

Our actions separates us from God
and from each other.
And it breaks God's heart.

We need to deal with anger, but we don't deal with it by telling someone
"exactly how we feel".
As we mentioned last week, biting our tongue to prevent the angry
words from coming is a good first step.

But, more than that, it would be good for us to study church history.
Church history is hard to study because quite often Christians have not
lived a life worthy of their calling.

And yet, I firmly believe that old saying is true.
"If we fail to study history, we are doomed to repeat it."

So holding our tongue and reflecting upon the mistakes of the past keep
us from speaking in a way that is destructive.

ECHOES OF GOD'S GRACE

But, we can do more than just holding our tongue for fear of the harm we
could do.

We can try and figure out a way to talk about our problems that will bring
about reconciliation.

Paul puts it this way. Our speech should build up the body of Christ, the
church. How can we challenge injustice and oppression and yet at the
same time bring God's people together in a fractured world?

When you first read this passage parts of it sounds like something you
might teach kids in kindergarten.

"Tell the truth. Don't steal. Don't use angry words that will harm peo-
ple."

Someone wrote a book a while back entitled, "All I Really Needed to
Know I Learned in Kindergarten".

There's some truth to that.
Sometimes moral judgements are not complex.

We just need to have the courage of our convictions. We just have to do the right thing.

But, in many cases moral judgments are a bit more complicated.

The truth is often twisted.

And our so-called moral outrage is sometimes nothing more than just rage.

How do we tell the difference?

According to Paul, when we're not sure, we ask this question,

“Do our words build people up?

Do our words echo the grace of God as revealed in Jesus?”

That's the gold standard when we're trying to figure out what to say in difficult situations.

FORGIVENESS AS A WAY OF LIFE

In the early church new converts would literally take off their old clothes, be baptized and then put on new, clean clothes.

It was a visual symbol that they were a new creation in Christ Jesus.

That may be what this passage is referring in verse 31.

Just as they put off their old clothes when they were baptized, they should put off the old way of life.

They were to put away “bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice”.

And in the same way, as they put on new clothes after their baptism to represent being reborn to new way of life

....they were to put on kindness, being tenderhearted, and “forgiving one another, as God in Christ” had forgiven them.

To say it another way, our life together is based upon confession and forgiveness.

This is not an easy or natural way to live.
We want to nurse our sense of self-righteousness
while putting the blame on someone else.

But, we know that's not true,
at least it's not totally true.
Part of the blame always lies with us.
Our anger is never completely justifiable.

So, how do we get beyond the blame cycle.
We constantly refer to the touchstone of our faith.

"In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

And we try to forgive others as Jesus forgave us.
We imitate the grace and truth of God as revealed in Jesus.

Over time, what seemed so unnatural and forced will become second
nature.
Our imitation of the love of God as revealed in Jesus will get better.

But, in the meantime consider this:

Even a faint imitation of that love and forgiveness
can make a difference in our life together.

And it can make a difference in the world in which we live.

God's forgiveness is more powerful than anger.
As the hymn puts it,

"Grace, grace, marvelous grace.
Grace that is greater than all our sins."

And so we pray,

"Lord, help us imitate your marvelous grace."

Amen.