

Imitate God

EPHESIANS 5:1-21

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This morning I'd like for us to return to our study of the New Testament book of Ephesians, and we begin this morning with Ephesians 5:1, where the apostle Paul tells us to ***"imitate God."*** In our pew Bibles, the passage can be found on page 1832 – Ephesians 5, starting in verse 1. In the opening words of Ephesians 5, Paul says, ***"Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children."*** We know that children will often imitate their parents. As we have learned over and over again up to this point in the book of Ephesians, we are, in fact, God's children. As Christians, we are ***"in Christ."*** We have been adopted into the family of God. And now, at this point in the book, Paul is now saying that there needs to be a family resemblance. There needs to be a likeness, a similarity. The word he uses, by the way, is the basis for our English word "mimic." Literally, then, we are to "mimic" our Father in Heaven. We are to imitate God. What does it mean, then, to imitate God? For the next twenty minutes or so, I would like for us to invite the apostle Paul to answer that question. If you will, then, let us please look together at Ephesians 5:1-21 and keep our Bibles open as we study – Ephesians 5:1-21, the word of God as written by the apostle Paul. Paul says,

¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; ² and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

³ But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; ⁴ and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. ⁵ For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an 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 be partakers with them; ⁸ for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light ⁹ (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), ¹⁰ trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; ¹² for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. ¹³ But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. ¹⁴ For this reason it says,

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

¹⁵ Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of your time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; ²⁰ always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; ²¹ and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

Again, as we look back over this passage, we don't have the time to look at every word in detail, but I want us to take a step back a little bit and at least think for a few moments about what it means to imitate God. How do we mimic our Father in Heaven?

- I. **As we look back to the text, one of the first instructions here comes right away in verse 2 as we are told to WALK IN LOVE.**

In our world today, people often think of love as a feeling, and there can certainly be some feeling involved. But I want us to notice what Paul says about love here. As we imitate our Father, what is this love supposed to look like? Do we understand what Paul is saying here? We are to ***“walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God.”*** Love is a choice to do what somebody else needs to have done, even if it involves a sacrifice on our part. Love gives! Love does what is necessary, even when it is done for our enemies. Isn't that what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 5:44-48?

⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Paul, then, is saying exactly what Jesus had said several years earlier: We are to imitate our Father in heaven by walking in love, by doing what is needed, and by doing this on a regular basis. This isn't a one-time proposition, but it involves WALKING in love, a lifetime of treating others just as we would like to be treated if we were in their situation. We are to ***“walk in love, just as Christ also loved”*** all of us. We are to go out and BE JESUS to somebody today. Is there somebody we know who needs our love and concern in a very practical way? Does a neighbor need a shoulder to cry on? Do we know somebody who might appreciate a brief visit or maybe an encouraging phone call? Is there a young mother who could really use a positive note or message? When we imitate God, we try to do for others what God has done for us. At a neighborhood meeting right here in this neighborhood this past Thursday night, we learned that out of the roughly 540 students at Kennedy Elementary School (just two blocks right over there), out of those 540, there are 30 of those students that are homeless. Can we even try to wrap our minds around that? Two blocks from here, there are 30 students in Kindergarten through 5th Grade who do not have a place to go at night. We learned that the poverty rate right here in Madison is worse than it is in Milwaukee – 30 homeless children right here in this neighborhood. Is there something we can do about that as a congregation? Is there something we can do about that personally? There are so many things we can DO, and Paul would encourage us to keep our eyes

open by always looking for new ways that we can demonstrate God's love here in the Madison area. We are to walk in love just as Christ has loved all of us.

II. As we go back to our text in Ephesians, we see a second basic idea in this passage as we are told in verses 3-5 to LIVE A LIFE OF PURITY.

Normally, most of us put a pretty high value on those things that are pure. We go to a restaurant and find a bright red lipstick mark on our coffee mug, we have a little problem with that. We send it back and ask for a cup that is clean. We find a huge hair on our steak, we send it back. As I mentioned several months ago, we forget that we are eating a DEAD ANIMAL, but we find that hair, and that just puts us over the edge. Maybe you noticed on the news this week that they are dealing with e-coli in the water supply over in Prairie du Sac. Uncool! Not good at all! Officials say that they have traced it back to "warm blooded animals." We know what that means. Not good at all! We want our food to be pure. We want our water to be pure. We want our air to be pure.

It should come as no surprise, then, that God also wants his children to be PURE. We have been made in the image of God, and as members of God's family, as God's children, God also values purity. He wants us to be pure in the things we do and also in everything we say. Starting with behavior, notice how Paul says in verse 3 that "**immorality**" and "**impurity**" and "**greed**" must not even be named among us. As Christians, we are to be pure. The word "**immorality**," by the way, is the Greek word "**porneia**," and the word doesn't just refer to sin, but it refers to a much more specific kind of sin. Some translations might use the word "**fornication**." As you can probably tell just by hearing the word "**porneia**," the word refers to sexual sin in particular. Sexual sin is not to be tolerated – not personally, and certainly not in the church as a whole. No matter what happens in the world, we as Christians, as imitators of God, are to be different. We are to be pure.

There is so much here, but I would also point out that we are to be pure in the things we say as well. Notice in verse 4 how Paul says that "**there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.**" From time to time, somebody will ask me, "What does the Bible say about profanity? What words are we not supposed to say?" Paul says that our speech is not to be filthy. He doesn't give us the list of seven words that we can never say. Those words will change over time, but the Bible is a timeless book. Do not say those things that are generally considered by society to be "**filthy**" or "**dirty**."

"**Silly talk**" is Paul saying literally, "Don't talk like a moron!" The word he uses is the basis of our English word "moron" or "moronic." Don't be going around saying stupid things. When we see the reference here to "**course jesting**," some of us might get a little concerned. In our family, we love laughing together. Some have wondered: Is Paul telling us that it is wrong to joke around? No, he is not! Over and over again, the Bible talks about the value of laughter, the value of having a good time. In Proverbs 17:22, King Solomon said, "**A joyful heart is good medicine.**" We love laughing together. But Paul is telling us here that there are many things that we as Christians should not be laughing about. All of us know people who are so dirty on the inside that they can hardly hear any comment without twisting it into something impure. And so we might make an innocent remark, and certain people will twist it (with a wink and a nudge) into something obscene. Paul is saying: As Christians, be pure – do not go down that road. Do not get caught up in the "**coarse jesting**." Do not add to that filthiness. When those conversations get started, we need to be repulsed by that, just as we might do if we were to find a dirty Band-Aid floating in our glass of water at a restaurant. The things that we say matter. We are not to let our friends drag us down that path. To the children here this morning, I would ask: Do your friends help you in this? Do you have close friends who speak in a filthy way? Do you have friends who bring out the moron in you? Do your friends encourage this "**coarse joking**"? If so, Paul would say: Either be a

leader and change the conversation, or get some new friends. We are to be pure, because our Father in heaven is pure.

III. As we progress through this passage (remembering that this is God talking), we find that Paul tells us that we are walk as children of light – we are to WALK IN LIGHT (verses 6-14).

The idea is: Since we are now *“in Christ,”* we are in the light, and as people who walk in the light, there is a lot that goes along with that. We are not to be deceived (in verse 6), we are not to participate in the *“unfruitful deeds of darkness”* (verse 11); instead, we are to reflect God’s light back out into the world, even exposing sin where we see it (also in verse 11 and continuing down through verse 13). We are not to be mean about it, but we cannot be quiet about it, either. We think of what the Lord himself said over in Matthew 5:14-16, *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”* Our lives, therefore, are to be open and clear, with no sin to hide, even to the point where our lives become examples to those around us. Our lives as Christians are to be transparent and bright. We think about clearing our windshields in the winter. We get 6 inches of snow, and some people think they can get away with just scraping a little peephole. That doesn’t work. In the same way spiritually, we cannot go through life like that. We no longer walk in the darkness, but we are to walk as children of Light.

Our lives are to be an open book before God. As the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 4:13, *“...there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.”* For this reason (according to verses 9-10), we bear the fruit of God’s light, *“all goodness, and righteousness, and truth, trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.”* What a beautiful picture there: As we imitate God, we make it our goal in this life to learn what pleases God. Whenever we love and appreciate someone, we try to learn what that person likes. God likes goodness, righteousness, and truth. Walking in the light, then, means that we learn this and that we then go out and do these things.

And speaking of *“shining,”* I would just point out a little formatting in most of our translations. Did most of you notice how verse 14 looks a little different? In the NASB, at least, that verse is set off with an indent, almost like poetry. The translators highlight it like that, because it seems to be some kind of a song. *“For this reason, IT says...”* What is “IT”? It does not appear to be from the Old Testament. Some scholars believe that verse 14 was a song that the early church would often sing at the point of a baptism. As the person came up out of the water, they would sing, *“Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”* As we come up out of the waters of baptism, we are born to live a new life in Christ, and we are born to imitate God by reflecting God’s light back out into the world. We are to walk in the light.

IV. As we move on to the last section here, we find in verses 15-21 that we are to WALK IN WISDOM.

As Paul says in verse 15, *“Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise.”* We are to be wise, and the main reason Paul gives comes in verse 16, *“...because the days are evil.”* Sometimes we think our world is more evil than the world has ever been. The world today is evil. But I don’t really know whether we can accurately make that judgment, though, because in a sense, the world has always been evil. And so Paul’s instruction here has always applied to God’s people. Live a life of wisdom, because the days are evil.

What is true wisdom? Paul tells us in verse 17, *“So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”* You want to be wise? Figure out what God wants and then do it!

Paul then closes with a warning about anything that might cloud our judgment. Even if we know what the will of the Lord is, if we allow ourselves to get drunk, if we take something that alters our thinking or lowers our inhibitions, we put ourselves in danger. We handicap our ability to make wise decisions. Paul is saying that drunkenness is the opposite of wisdom. And of all the people in the world, we here in Madison know that people will do things when they are drunk that they would never do when sober. People drink and storm into homes that are not their own in the middle of the night. We had a terrible tragedy happen here several years ago because of that exact scenario. College students will step off of a second story balcony thinking they are stepping off of their front porch. That happens all the time. And the reason is: One of the real dangers of alcohol is that it slowly lowers our ability to make wise decisions. Think about this! After a few drinks, we then need to make a wise decision about whether to have another drink, but by that time we are less wise than we were two drinks ago. Several years ago I made a number of visits to UW Hospital to a bright young man who drank and then flipped his car upside down into a creek down near Platteville. Doctors had to remove his teeth from his lungs. Upside down in that creek, he had inhaled his own teeth. Alcohol keeps us from making wise decisions.

“Oh, but we’ve got freedom in Christ, there’s no law in the Bible that says you can’t drink, you can’t tell me what to do.” I know, I know. But we have a real problem with alcohol here in Dane County. Just statistically speaking, in a group of 60 or 70 people like we have here this morning, there will be several (and I mean 5, 6, 7 people, maybe more), but there are probably several people in this room right now who are having some serious struggles with the abuse of what was originally a gift from God. Just statistically speaking, there are a number of people here this morning who are just barely holding on, there are some here today who really struggle to stay sober, there are several here who probably drink every single day and are completely out of control, having no power to stop on their own, and that is a sin. To the rest of us, then, let us be very careful with our freedom. In our own family, we have made the decision to limit our freedom for the sake of those who are struggling, especially as we look at the situation right here in Madison.

Some of the language scholars, by the way, have made an interesting observation about the wording of verse 18. Apparently, the tense of the verb Paul uses literally has Paul saying, **“Do not begin to get drunk.”** We might wish Paul had said, “.08,” or “.04,” or whatever, but he did not. **“Do not begin the process of getting drunk,”** do not even go down that road, Paul is saying. Do not get drunk, but be filled with God’s Spirit, instead. And we fill ourselves with God’s Spirit by singing to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs as we sing and make melody with our hearts to the Lord.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, let’s remember we’re in this together. And thankfully, we have a Christian family to lean on. Let’s make ourselves available to each other. I don’t know what you’re struggling with. You might not know what I’m struggling with. But let’s try to encourage each other the best we can.

If you are a Christian, and if you have slipped in some way, if you have been overwhelmed by some sin, if you have not treated other people the way God wants us to treat people, if you have not been pure lately, if you have not let your light shine, if you have not been wise as this passage has instructed us to do, if you’ve tripped and fallen into the sin of drunkenness, I hope we can all help each other through some of this. God has given us a Christian family for support and encouragement, and I would encourage you to reach out to a brother or sister and take advantage of that offer. I would encourage all of us to spend more time together. We have a good activity planned this coming Friday at the Higgins home. We have something else planned

next weekend out in Cross Plains, we have another potluck and shower planned the week after that, we have our mid-week studies every Wednesday at 7. So many opportunities!

If you are not yet a Christian, if you have been baptized into a man-made denomination, for example, or maybe if you don't have much of a religious history at all, we would encourage you to investigate simple, New Testament Christianity. Step away from all of the man-made religious garbage this world has to offer, and take the Bible as your only guide. We would encourage you to obey the gospel – repenting of sin, confessing the name of Jesus as the Son of God, and allowing yourself to be buried with Christ in baptism for the forgiveness of sins. If you have any questions, if you want us to pray about something on your behalf, or if you would like to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song together. Let's stand and sing...

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