

Be Imitators Of God...Really

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- [0 : 0 0] Therefore, be imitators of God. Ephesians chapter 5 verse 1. Be imitators of God.
- Really? The word that Paul uses that we translate imitate is *metetus* from which we get the English word *mimic*. Therefore, be mimics of God.
- Mimic God. Really? Ten years ago today, we witnessed one of the worst manifestations of evil ever experienced in history.
- Suicide bombers using loaded passenger airplanes brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Center, symbols of Western strength and invincibility, resulting in the death of some 3,000 people and causing untold grief for thousands more.
- The event has been replayed over and over again on the screens, the television and computer screens of the world. The event has changed the world in ways we do not yet fully understand.
- [1 : 2 0] All around the globe today, people are remembering that horrific morning, remembering the devastation and the carnage, and remembering the amazing ways ordinary people sacrificed themselves for others.
- I'm thinking of the people of Gander, Newfoundland, that little town of 9,000 people, who took in 6,700 passengers and crew members of airplanes that had been grounded when the U.S. airspace was closed.
- And I'm thinking of those hundreds of firefighters and police officers who died trying their very best to rescue as many people as they could.
- Over the summer, I have prayed about what text of Scripture I should preach on 9, 11, 11. I have thought that maybe I ought to preach from one of the great prophets, Isaiah or Jeremiah.
- Or maybe from Amos or Micah, sounding again their passion for justice. Or maybe from the prophet Habakkuk, the prophet who helps us see the movements of peoples and nations as part of God's outworking of His justice.
- [2 : 4 3] The prophet who calls us from fear to faith, though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the vine of the olives should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exalt in the Lord, I will rejoice in God my salvation.
- Or I thought maybe I should preach from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus calls us away from the unredeemed instinct of eye for eye and tooth for tooth, showing us that living by such an instinct means that a person or a people or a nation has no inherent moral compass, but is simply echoing the behavior of its enemies.
- And where Jesus calls us to actually love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. But as I prayed, I sensed the Lord saying, Stay the course.
- Stay the course. Last January, we began a study in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We began a study, what I entitled, Navigating an Alternative Reading of Reality.

We paused the series at the end of June, having made our way through the end of chapter 4 of the letter. Stay the course, the Lord seemed to say to me. And as I honored this sense of his leading, I came to see how appropriate the remaining chapters, chapters 5 and 6 of the letter, how appropriate they are, not only for the anniversary of 9-11, but for everything else the world is facing and experiencing right now.

[4 : 44] In the remaining chapters of the letter, Paul exhorts us, Therefore, be imitators of God. Walk in love. Do not imitate those you fear, which is what you do when you let fear rule your heart.

He exhorts us, Therefore, be children of light. Get your cues, not from all the darkness around you, but from Jesus Christ, the light who shines upon you.

He exhorts us, Therefore, be careful how you walk, for the days are evil. Be filled with the Spirit. In this age of anxiety, be filled with the very life of God.

And Paul exhorts us, Be strong in the Lord. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the evil one, against the real enemy behind the enemies.

Very timely exhortations. Would you not agree? So, I will stay the course. We will finish what we began. Our text today is Ephesians chapter 5, verses 1 and 2.

[5 : 52] Hear the word of God. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, 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.

Spirit of the living God, we believe, that you got a hold of the Apostle Paul, who was in jail, and you enabled him to think, and write these words.

Will you now, in your mercy, cause these words, to come alive, in our lives, as never before? For we pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Now, before focusing on the main exhortation of the text, be imitators of God, let me call your attention to a number of features of this text that help keep the focus on the main exhortation.

First, notice the therefore. You may know that little saying, that when you're reading the Bible, and you come across a therefore, you were supposed to say, what is the therefore therefore?

[7 : 12] Therefore. Now, as we have worked through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we've come to see that he composed the letter in two halves. Two almost equal of length halves.

Chapters 1 to 3, and chapters 4 to 6. Chapters 1 to 3, are this alternative reading of reality. Chapters 4 to 6, living in this alternative reading of reality.

Or, as a young New Testament scholar, Timothy Kumbis puts it, chapters 1 to 2, are the drama of God's victory in Christ. Chapters 4 to 6, the roles each of us are to play in this unfolding drama.

Chapters 1 to 3, begin with a blessing, and end with a benediction. Chapter 1. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

And then Paul goes on to unfold those blessings, or some of the blessings, because in his letter, he doesn't record all the blessings he could. In Christ, we were chosen before the foundation of the world.

[8 : 28] We were adopted into the family that is God. We were redeemed by the blood of Christ. Our sins have been forgiven. We have been clued in on the mystery of history. We have obtained an inheritance, and we've been sealed by the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of that inheritance.

We've been made alive with Christ. We've been raised up with Christ. We've been seated with Christ where Christ is seated. We are God's workmanship, made to do good works in the world.

In Christ, we have been brought near to God, so near that we now constitute God's very presence, his temple in the world. We have direct access into the holy places, through Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit strengthens us with power in the inner person. Christ has come to live in our hearts by faith. We are learning how to grasp the height and depth and width of the love of Christ, and we are being filled up with all the fullness of God.

Blessings indeed. And then the benediction, now unto him who is able to do far more exceedingly and abundantly than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forevermore.

[9 : 37] Amen. Amen indeed. Then, chapter 4, verse 1, therefore. Of course. Given all that God has done, there has to be a therefore.

And it turns out there are a series of therefores. Chapter 1, verse 4, Therefore, I entreat you to walk worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

Chapter 4, verse 17, Therefore, walk no longer as those who walk in the futility of mind. Chapter 4, verse 25, Therefore, laying aside all falsehoods, speak truth to one another.

Chapter 5, verse 1, Therefore, be imitators of God. Chapter 5, verse 15, Therefore, be careful how you walk. Be filled with the Spirit. Therefore. A second feature of the text.

Walk. Some translations simply render Paul's word live. I prefer walk because that keeps alive the biblical understanding of spirituality.

[10 : 38] We are not simply made alive so that we can breathe. We have been made alive so that we can move. So that we can be active. So that we can go down new roads so that we can walk.

And so Paul has this series of walks. Chapter 4, verse 1, Walk worthy of the calling to which you've been called. Chapter 4, verse 17, Walk no longer as those who walk in the futility of mind.

Chapter 5, verse 2, Walk in love. Chapter 5, verse 8, Walk as children of light. And chapter 5, verse 15, Be careful how you walk. And then the third feature is crucial to hold before us.

Just as. Just as Christ also loved you. Imitate God. How? Walk in love. What does that mean? Just as Christ also loved you.

Paul loves this phrase, just as. He uses it throughout his letter. In fact, he uses it in all of his letters. Chapter 4, verse 1, Just as he chose us in him, in Christ.

[11 : 38] 4, verse 32, Forgive one another just as God in Christ has forgiven you. And 5, verse 25, Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Therefore, walk just as. Okay, now let's focus on this main exhortation. Be imitators of God. A huge challenge.

A challenge above all challenges. A seemingly impossible challenge. Can you think of any more challenging challenge?

In every realm of life. Family. Work. Sports. Politics. Economics. Academics. Mimic God.

Really? Really? Really? This is the only place in the Bible where this challenge is put so straightforwardly.

[12 : 39] But, the challenge is there throughout the Bible. Leviticus 19. Be holy as I, the Lord your God, am holy. Deuteronomy 10.

Show your love to the alien and stranger because you were an alien and stranger and I loved you. Deuteronomy 15. The people of God are exhorted to free their servants every seven years because you were slaves and I freed you.

Over and over again, because I am who I am, you should be. Because I did what I do, you should do. Jesus speaks this challenge, especially in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5, 44 to 45. Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, in order that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. For he causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust.

And then Matthew 5, 48. Therefore, you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Yikes. We'll wrestle with that more directly after the first of the year in a series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount.

[13 : 56] Now, as we read the unfolding story in the Bible, this imitating God slowly and rightly becomes imitating Jesus, the Son of God, God in the flesh.

Follow me, says Jesus. And as we do, we discover that he too is following someone. He is following his Father. When Jesus then calls us to imitate God, he is calling us to do what he does.

We imitate God by imitating Jesus, God made flesh, God in our skin, God in our shoes. And so, the Apostle Peter can say in 1 Peter 2, 21, For you have been called for this purpose since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps.

We imitate the God we cannot see by watching the God we can see and walking in his steps. Now, you may know that there is a tradition in the Christian faith that actually calls people to an almost literal imitation of Jesus.

This is most powerfully put in the book, *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas Akempus, written in the early 15th century. Many significant players in Western history have sought to live out Akempus' book.

[15 : 20] One you may know well is Dag Hammarskjöld, the Swedish politician world leader of the 20th century, who during frightfully turbulent times served as General Secretary of the United Nations.

Hammarskjöld tried to live in Akempus' imitation of Christ. He kept a copy of it right by his bed. This tradition also came to fore in the 20th century in a book entitled *In His Steps* by Charles Shelton.

Any of you ever read *In His Steps*? It's a powerful story of a fictitious community that seeks to do just that, to walk in the steps of Jesus in all of its ways.

It was this book that posed the question that comes around every so often, and you find it on posters and on wristbands. WWJD.

What would Jesus do? And the thought is that when facing any choice, any ethical choice in particular, you were to ask WWJD. What would Jesus do?

[16 : 24] Now, John Stackhouse, in his helpful book, *Making the Best of It*, argues that the question is finally not very helpful, because it turns out to be the wrong question.

For one thing, we are not and never will be Jesus. He does make us into His image and likeness, but we never will be Jesus. And for another, Jesus is doing a unique work.

He is fulfilling all the promises to Israel. He's inaugurating the kingdom of God. He's coming up against and overcoming forces ranged against us, sin and evil and death, something that we cannot do.

Well, if WWJD is not the right question, what is the right question? I submit to you that the right question is WIJD. What is Jesus doing?

That's the question to ask in any context. What is Jesus doing? And the call, then, is to cooperate with what He's doing and to participate in what He is doing.

[17 : 33] Still, the exhortation, the challenge of challenges, is there in the text. Be imitators of God. So, let's dig a little bit deeper.

As I wrestle with this challenge in the Ephesian text, three questions I find helpful to ask. They are, where, what, and how? Question one. Question one.

Where can I see God as God really is so that I know what to imitate? Question two. Clearly, I cannot imitate everything that is shown.

I clearly cannot imitate all of the omnis. God's omnipresence. God's omnipotence. God's omniscience. God's all-knowing. I've tried to imitate that omnipresence thing and that omnipotence thing, but it doesn't work.

So, what about God does He particularly call me to imitate? And third, how can I, a mere human being, and a sinful human being at that, possibly imitate anything divine?

[18 : 41] Question one. Where can I see God as God really is so that I know what I am to imitate? Answer. Everywhere.

All over the place. God has revealed Himself as He really is all over the place. In creation, the heavens are telling the glory of God and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands, sings the psalmist.

Through creation, God daily tells us who He is and what He's like. And in historical events, like the Exodus, for the people of God, for the people of the Old Testament, God clearly revealed His nature and character in His rescuing His people from Egypt.

In the face of injustice and oppression, God meets Moses at the burning bush and He says, I have surely seen My people's affliction. I have heard their cry, and I feel their suffering, and I come down to deliver.

Boy, that text has been really in my mind. I feel that the Lord is speaking that text over our city. I see My people's affliction. I hear their cry. I feel their suffering, and I come down to deliver.

[19 : 55] And for centuries, the Jews hung on to that fundamental revelation of God. And we see God in His good law, especially in the Ten Commandments, which do not begin, you shall not, but begin, I, the Lord your God, am.

The Jews loved the law because in it they saw the character and passions of the living God. And we see God in the incarnation, in God's coming to live as one of us as Jesus of Nazareth.

Over and over again, Jesus says, they who have seen Me have seen the Father. And how often does He say, I'm only doing what I see the Father do.

As we watch Jesus act, as we watch Him relate to children and women and outcasts and the elite, we are watching God at work. So we see God as God really is in creation, in the Exodus, in the law, and chiefly in the life of Jesus.

So, question two. What about all that God has revealed about God does God want me especially to imitate?

[21 : 09] His work of creating the world? I don't think so. No way. God did that out of nothing. I cannot do that. You cannot do that. But we can cooperate with and participate in His creative works.

We can join God in His passion for order and beauty and bounty. And we can resist and we can even reject work that brings chaos, work that devalues human beings, and work that deprives anyone else of God's abundance.

Imitate the God of the Exodus? No way. That's a work that no one can mimic. God overcame from outside, so to speak, this entrenched oppression and an economic system that needed the poor to remain poor.

People are trying to copy this work, but only God can finally do it. We cannot do it. God must break in from the outside of unjust systems and does and will.

And we can cooperate with and participate with Him and we can resist and reject the ways that get in the way of God doing that. The law. Can we imitate the God of the law?

[22 : 23] Here the answer is not, no way. For the law emerges out of the character's very being. The commandments emerge out of the heart and mind of the one who made us.

They tell us who God is. Do not lie because I, the Lord your God, do not lie. Do not steal because I, the Lord your God, do not steal. Do not commit adultery because I, the Lord your God, do not do that.

Do not bear false witness because I, the Lord your God, do not bear false witness. The commandments tell us who He is and the commandments tell us who we are. The commandments do not just come out of thin air.

They are not impositions on the human species. Rather, His commandments are an exposition of who we've been created to be. The law is telling us that we are hardwired for integrity and fidelity and generosity.

That we are hardwired to keep the Sabbath. Which is why when any of us as an individual or as a people or as a nation violate the commandments, we suffer.

[23 : 32] When we violate the commandments, we're violating who we are. Imitate the incarnation. Do all that we see Jesus doing?

Yes and no. Not all. Not the work Jesus uniquely came to do and certainly not all those omnis. I'm freshly struck by the fact that Jesus Himself does not do all the omnis.

He could not copy God's omnipresence. If He were in Jericho, He couldn't be in Bethany. And He did not copy His Father's omniscience. He has to say, who touched me when a crowd comes upon Him and He says, I don't know the date of My return.

Only the Father knows that. So even God in the flesh does not imitate everything about God. What He does imitate and what He calls us to imitate is the love of God.

As we watch Jesus relate to all kinds of people, we are watching the love of God in action. We are watching the love of His Father in action.

[24 : 48] Like Father, like Son, they say. In nearly every conceivable human situation, we are watching the visible God copy the invisible God.

love of God. And then He turns to us and says, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I love you.

He had already reiterated the great commandments. You shall love the Lord your God with all your being and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love your neighbor the way you love yourself.

You make sure that you have food and shelter and a job. So make sure your neighbor has food and shelter and a job. A radical command. But nothing close to the new command Jesus gives us.

Love one another the way I love you. The way the God I am copying loves you. Thus, in our text, Ephesians chapter 5, Paul says, be imitators of God, walk in love just as Christ also loved you and gave himself up for you.

[25 : 58] Christ gave himself up for you. That's what his love does. That's what love does. Gave himself up for us. Jesus says, I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He lays down all he is for us. He gives up all he is for us.

No one takes his life from him. He gives it freely. When Jesus dies on the cross, he is not a victim. Evil is not taking his life.

Evil is not taking Jesus down. That's a wrong way of looking at the cross. He's giving himself up for us. And this, of all that God reveals of God's self, this is what we are called to mimic.

this is what the apostle Paul makes so clear in a hymn he records in his letter to the Philippians. Philippians chapter 2 verses 5 to 11 which we read to start our service this morning.

[27 : 06] Have this mind in you which is in Christ Jesus. Think this way. Come at life this way. Copy this way of thinking. Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus who because he existed in the form of God.

Not who although he existed in the form of God which is the way it used to be translated. Not although. Paul is not saying that God in the flesh somehow contradicts who God is in the heaven.

Rather Paul says who because he existed in the form of God emptied himself. Not although but because. Because he existed in the form of God he empties himself.

Jesus thinks that the best way to be God in the world is to empty himself. To give himself away. He takes the form of a servant. Not again not although he existed in God but because he existed as God.

Jesus thinks that the best way to be God is to be servant. He gets down on his knees and washes feet. And in that act he is imitating God.

[28 : 15] He is telling us he learned this from his father. In washing feet he is imitating the father. This is what the father does. Because Jesus is God he washes feet.

Because he is God he gives himself up for us. He goes to the cross. He is only doing what he sees his father do. Jesus is imitating God when he gives himself up on the cross.

cross. I often imagine myself standing near the cross and asking why are you doing this? You are the living God.

Why are you doing this? Or I imagine myself in the upper room where Jesus is washing his disciples feet and I get down close to Jesus and I ask why are you doing this?

Why are you God in the flesh doing this? This is so incongruent for God. This is so beneath your dignity. And he looks up at me because he is always lower.

[29 : 13] He looks up at me and he says Daryl you do not yet get it do you? I only do what I see my father doing.

I am imitating the true and living God. It is because Jesus is God that he lives as a servant. There is no other God but the God who gives himself.

for the life of the world. Question three. How in the world am I as a human being and a sinful human being at that supposed to copy this God?

Look at the text again. It is full of gospel. It is full of good news. Notice how Paul puts it. Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children.

Beloved. He used this term in the opening of his letters in chapter 1 6. To the praise of the glory of his grace which he freely bestowed on us in the beloved.

[30 : 16] Referring to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the beloved and in relationship with him we now become the beloved. Paul is saying that we can love because we have been loved.

We can love because we are being loved. We can wash feet because our feet are being washed. Beloved. And he says children. As beloved children.

We have been adopted. We have been adopted into the family that is God. The father has adopted us and he is treating us the way he treats his only begotten son.

The father is loving us the way he loves Jesus his son. Like father like son. Like father like daughter. Like Jesus we are growing to the place where we too can say I only do what I see my father do.

And in this relationship we are being recreated. We were originally created in the image of God. We sinned. We fell. That image was distorted.

[31 : 16] But God did not give up. God is coming and recreating us into the image of Jesus Christ who is the image of God. Ephesians 4 24. Put on the new self which in the likeness of God has been created.

created. We are being created in the image of God who thinks being God means giving himself up for the life of the world.

What Paul is saying to us in this text is that the people of our city are to look at us and other congregations in the city and say so that's what the God of love looks like.

The waiter at the restaurant where we may eat today is supposed to be able to say after we leave so that's what the God of love looks like. The people with whom we work are to be able to say after our interacting with them so that's what the love of the cross is all about.

You see the fact is we all mimic some God. Every human being mimics a God. Dare I say we all automatically mimic the God we really believe in.

[32 : 41] We can sing all the hymns and we can recite all the creeds but what we really believe comes out in the way we treat people. We all copy the God we really believe in.

And the good news is that we can copy the true and living God. For we have been recreated in the image of this God. Our DNA is being altered.

It is now in our DNA to give ourselves up for others. It's built into us. The miserable people around us are miserable because they don't get this.

Miserable people around us are turning on themselves. They are violating who Jesus Christ is creating us to be. And that's why they're miserable. The firefighters who gave themselves up on 9-11 may or may not have ever heard Paul's exhortation therefore be imitators of God.

But what they did but when but they did what human beings recreated in the image of the God who comes to Jesus are hardwired to do.

[34 : 04] Give yourself away. let us be still before this God and ask him to show us just one way today or this week we can copy him and give ourselves for somebody else.

to do this all. It could be still like, run, you know, hear, you know.

You know, everybody knows anything we want to are awesome. Do you know what people can■■■■■■■■