

Imitating God

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 13th of May 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Imitating God and is from Ephesians chapter 5 verses 1 to 21.

All of us, whether consciously or unconsciously, have had or have people on whom, to some extent, our lives have been modelled. Some people play sport and they consciously seek to emulate their sports heroes.

So little kids will take out their cricket bat and pretend day after day to be Steve Waugh or Alan Borda or someone like that. My godson wishes that he could play football like Wayne Campbell, though he may have changed his mind perhaps this weekend.

Some people in our society seek to look like other people, to emulate the beautiful and the famous. You may remember in Fawlty Towers how Sybil Fawlty, the wife of John Cleese, is on the phone, as always, and wanting her hair to look like a certain person's colouring and hair in a magazine that she's reading.

But perhaps the greatest models, and often unconsciously, are our parents. And sometimes it's quite scary if you're a parent to realise how your children are imitating you.

[1 : 35] I've noticed over the years with my niece and nephew that they'll bring out phrases that are just exactly what my sister and brother-in-law will say. Sometimes my niece, especially when she was younger, would stand with her hands on her hips, just like my sister.

Although, of course, in a different generation. But it's even scarier when we see in ourselves things about our parents. We suddenly think, gosh, I'm like mum or I'm like dad.

In the way we act, the way we say things, the way we respond to situations, not just, of course, in the way we look as well. Well, the context for these verses in Ephesians 5 is like that.

It's modelling on a parent. And so we've got to get, if we're going to understand what this passage and the Bible, generally speaking, is on about when it's talking to Christians about living godly and moral lives, we must understand that the context is the imitation of God.

That is, becoming like God, our heavenly father. So notice how chapter 5 of Ephesians begins, and if you haven't got it open, you may like to, on page 951.

[2 : 50] Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children. That is, our imitation of God is not trying to be like some remote heavenly being whom we don't know, but our imitation of God is to be as his children.

That is, it's a family likeness that we are meant to express, that we are meant to imitate. And just like we physically or socially do some things or look some ways or express characteristics of our earthly parents, Christian ethics and behaviour is about, to a large extent, modelling ourselves and imitating God.

Although this is actually the only place in the New Testament where we get the exact expression, imitate God. But the context is, like father, like child, here. And Christians are the children of God, our heavenly father.

Notice too, that how we behave is not in order to become a child of God, but because we already are the children of God. Sometimes we get it the wrong way round.

Sometimes we think that we've got to become like God so that we can enter into his family. But not at all. Paul made it very clear in chapter 1, in words that were sung also in that last song, that we are already adopted as God's children in Christ.

[4 : 12] So it's because we're already in his family that Paul is now saying, bear the family likeness. Imitate God. He's not saying imitate God so that you can get into his family, but because you're already in his family, which is an act of his doing, by grace in Christ, now our response is to imitate God.

Bear the family likeness. Now Paul has already just given an illustration of that at the end of chapter 4. Notice in the last verse of chapter 4, he says, be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

And then he makes the general principle imitate God. The specific one at the end of chapter 4 was, God's forgiven you, therefore, by way of imitation of God, our Heavenly Father, we are to be forgiving people.

He gives us another one in the next verse, chapter 5, verse 2. Live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. That is, our imitation of God is to be expressed not only in forgiveness, because God is forgiving, but in love because God is loving to us in Christ.

And the nature of love is expressed in the second half of the verse. Love's so often misunderstood and we get so confused by it, but that's not new. The people of Ephesus could have been confused by just saying, be loving people.

[5 : 39] So Paul says a little bit about what he means by love and what God means by love. Live in love in the way that Christ loved us. That's the love that we are to express. And Christ's love was expressed in him giving himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

That is, love is to be selfless because it's giving yourself up. It's for the benefit of other people. It is costly and sacrificial. It cost Jesus his life, his life given as a sacrifice for our benefit.

That's what love is. And it's pleasing to God, the fragrant offering to God. So love is to be because of who we are as God's children, not because of who the objects are.

That is, that they don't deserve love. That is, the love that God has extended to us is undeserved by us. Again, chapter one lays down the basis and the foundation for that.

The love that God has expressed for us is not because we're lovable or loving or worthy of love, but it is because God in his grace loves us anyway, despite our sin.

[6 : 46] So it's the same love that we're to imitate. Not a soppy sentimentality, not a romantic love, not an erotic love, but a love that is costly, sacrificial, imitating God's love for us, expressed in Jesus Christ and his giving of himself for us.

That's real love. In contrast, both in Ephesus and in our society today, there are many ways in which people think they're loving, but actually they've got it all wrong.

So Paul goes on in verse three, but fornication, the sexual immorality, which so many people in Ephesus as well as today think is love, but they've got it wrong. It's just sex. It's fornication.

It's impurity of any kind. Or it's greed, which is the opposite of being selfless in loving, rather being greedy in wanting to gain for yourself, being selfish, must not even be mentioned among you as is proper among saints.

That's the contrast. That's false love, if you like. A love that is greedy, seeking to gain for oneself, that is sexual rather than loving and giving of oneself and for the benefit of another person.

[7 : 59] Those things are not even to be mentioned, Paul says, among you as is proper among saints. That is, they are sinful sorts of ways of expressing love, a sort of sexual immorality, a greed or a covetousness and so on.

Paul doesn't say we should never even mention the words, otherwise I'd be disobeying that by very speaking on this passage. But what Paul has in mind here is that our talk about such things will often fuel our desires.

And so don't even chat or flirt with those difficulties. Now there's some wise advice there for all of us, I think. Because sometimes we might not practice the sexual immorality or the impurity or the greed, but we talk about it and our talk about it, our gossiping about it, actually fuels our desires and makes us more vulnerable to actually commit the sins that we're actually talking about or talking about other people doing as well.

Now so much in our world is like this. So much in our world is just talk about the sexual immorality that people have done over the weekend when they get to their office on Monday or we read about it in magazines and so on.

Paul is saying here, be careful what you speak about, what you chat about, because it will lead you into wrong paths. He's not saying never ever mention the word greed, but be careful in what you speak about.

[9 : 26] There are some things where talk and chat and gossip about it is unhelpful to us spiritually. It's the same with dirty talk or smutty jokes.

He goes on to that in the next verse, perhaps. Entirely out of place is obscene, silly and vulgar talk. That is, followers of Jesus, like us, are to be careful in what we say, because that sort of smutty or vulgar talk or coarse jokes or rudeness or lewdness does not help us spiritually.

It'll lead us into wrong paths. Instead of that, Paul says, let there be thanksgiving. That is, rather than wanting and desiring things, whether it's sexual immorality or fornication or just a general expression of greed, let us be full of thanksgiving so that we recognise that God has already given us every spiritual blessing in Christ, which is what he said towards the beginning of chapter one. Notice too how Paul typically in the Bible does not just say, don't do this, don't do that, don't do this, don't do that, but brings about a positive in its place.

That is, don't talk about things that are obscene and silly and vulgar, but rather talk about things that are full of thanksgiving. And we see that time and again in the Bible.

[10:52] The Bible sometimes is caricatured as God saying to us, stop doing that, stop doing that, stop doing that, and we think, well, what's left? But the way in which we actually flee the wrong things is to pursue the right things.

So fleeing things to do with fornication and greed and vulgar and silly talk, the best way to get out of that is to actively pursue and concentrate on giving expression to thanksgiving and love and forgiveness and so on.

These words of Paul come with a severe warning in verse five. Be sure of this, he says, that no fornicator, person who practices some sort of sexual immorality, a fairly general term, or an impure person, one who's greedy, that is an idolater, because if you're greedy for something, then that becomes your idol, the thing that you live for.

None of those people has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. He's writing to Christians and he's warning them not to go down those paths and not to even begin to go down those paths by talking about it or chatting about it or sort of smirking, you know, well, we're Christians, but we'll have a sort of smirk behind our hand of a smutty joke or something like that. It's a severe warning. If you go down that path, you have no inheritance in the kingdom of God. Yes, it is true that we are God's children and are inheritors of his kingdom by his grace, but we lose our inheritance rights if we pursue these things.

[12:30] Now, what do we make of all this? There are many people, Christians and non-Christians, who would mock these words, in effect. Isn't ours a more liberated age than Paul's?

Haven't we progressed socially so we realise that we have a greater freedom or Paul's got it a bit wrong. It's a bit too tight and a bit too straitjacketed about how Christians should behave in the Bible.

We've got a bit of freedom now. We realise that some of these things are a bit old-fashioned and a bit out of date. It might have stood up well in Victorian times in the 19th century, but we're in the 21st century now.

Isn't biblical sexual morality and other morality, old hat, a bit puritanical? If the church is going to be with it in today's age, in the 21st century, then we've got to be where the world is.

Otherwise, we're just becoming a smaller and smaller enclave of old-fashioned fuddy-duddies and wowsers. For the church and Christians are under constant and great pressure to tone down or modify its morality.

[13:36] Various denominations in recent years have issued reports or interim reports that seem to give more licence to practise sexual immorality and other forms of immorality or ungodliness, as though now it's OK for Christians to do that.

The pressure on the Anglican church is the same. We have to get with the times. But often those sorts of ways of thinking fail to realise that Paul's times in the 1st century AD were far more liberated than ours, far more promiscuous than ours, far more tolerant of things like sexual immorality, homosexuality and so on than ours is.

Paul's sexual ethics, or the Bible's sexual ethics and general ethics, actually ran counter to the culture in which they were in then as much as they are today. In Ephesus, for example, Artemis, the god of the Ephesians, was a patron for sexual orgies.

Paul's words counter that very severely. Our world, in some ways, is becoming more and more like ancient Ephesus. And these words are becoming more and more relevant, not less and less so.

In the end, of course, the standards of God that are placed upon Christians are set by God and not us or our society or our culture. This is all about imitating God.

[15 : 01] And God in his character does not change from the 1st century to the 21st century. And therefore, nor does Christian morality change either. The Bible is clear, as this passage is part of that clarity, that if we are to be Christians imitating God, then there will be a very big gap between the way we live and the way our world lives.

Paul expresses that in verse 7. Therefore, do not be associated with them. That is, the people who, full of empty words, and the fornication and the greed and so on in verse 5, for because of these things, the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient.

So don't be associated with them. Paul's not quite saying there, cut yourselves off from them and become a holy huddle. Have nothing to do with somebody who's sexually impure or somebody who's greedy or somebody who's full of empty words or deceptive words or something, as though we're never ever going to speak to them in this society.

If we pass them on the street, we ignore them and walk on. He's not saying that. He's saying don't have part in the things that they do. Don't associate with them at the level of doing and practicing what they do and practice.

He goes on to give a very strong distinction between the dark and the light. And that begins in verse 8 and goes through to verse 14. The reason why we are not to associate with the world and its pagan practices is because we were once darkness but now in the Lord we are light is what he says in verse 8.

[16 : 36] Now you cannot get a greater contrast than light and darkness. Darkness is the absence of light. Light is the absence of darkness. St. Paul's not talking about shades of grey in between but he's talking about very clear poles that are opposite.

And light and darkness in a sense cannot mix. We belong in the light, he's saying, if we're Christians but once we were darkness and that's what our world is like.

So there in a sense can be no association at the level of practice if you're in the light with doing the things of those who are in the darkness. Once we were darkness but now we are light.

We've changed allegiance. We've gone from the pagan world into God's family. I never cease to be amazed at how quickly especially English football players swap clubs.

If you don't watch it every week you lose track of who plays for whom. One week they seem to be playing for Liverpool and the next week it's for Arsenal or Spurs or someone like that.

[17 : 44] That is they just pull on a different jumper because they get paid a bit more and then a few weeks later they might play for somebody else. That sort of transfer is in mind here. We once wore the jumper of darkness so to speak but now we've put on the jumper of light.

It's God's doing that that's happened but now we're not part of that team we're part of God's team God's family and therefore we belong there and not back where we used to belong.

Very clear difference. You're in one team or the other but not both and Christians belong with God and therefore we're not to play like this team the darkness team plays but rather to be like God and imitate him.

Notice that Paul says in verse 8 that we were once darkness but now in the Lord you are light. That is we're not we're not in the light because of our good works. Paul is not saying that Christians are in the light because suddenly they're behaving in glorious ways but it is in Christ in the Lord that we are in the light because we belong to him therefore we're in the light.

It's again something that God has done and being in the Lord is being in Jesus who is the light of the world. Therefore Paul says in verse 9 the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

[19 : 05] Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. That's the fruit of light goodness righteousness and truth. Therefore we shouldn't have any place for deceptive words that are untrue or false or vulgar or silly words that are not full of truth and righteousness and are not full of goodness.

Now the result of being in the light is that darkness will be exposed and it's here in these verses we realise that Paul when he says don't associate with people of darkness he's not saying cut yourself off from them have nothing to do with them at all but rather that our practices are not to be like their practices.

But being in the light has an evangelistic function to turn the darkness and expose the darkness so that the darkness becomes light. If we switch off the lights here the rooms in darkness bring in a light and it exposes the things that are happening in darkness.

That's what Paul says in verse 11 onwards. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness but instead expose them. Because you're Christians belonging to Christ you are in the light and you bring light and darkness together and the light exposes the darkness and the deeds of darkness. So what Paul is saying in these verses is that as Christians we are not to behave like those who are in darkness the pagans the non-Christians the unbelievers but rather by our lives lived in the light of the Lord we'll actually expose the darkness of the pagan world and bring it to light that it may become converted and come into the light of the Lord.

[20 : 45] So he goes on to say for it's shameful even to mention what such people do secretly but everything exposed by the light becomes visible for everything that becomes visible is light therefore it says sleeper awake rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you.

The thrust of those verses is Paul saying to the church of Ephesus live such lives in light that are different from the dark pagan unbelieving world that that dark unbelieving pagan world will actually be exposed in its pagan sinfulness but itself not to condemn it but to actually draw it into light and therefore salvation as well.

this contrast continues in verses 15 to 21 Paul says there in verse 15 be careful then how you live before I go on to the contrast that he draws out notice that he says it's not an easy thing to live in the light not an easy thing to imitate God he says be careful how you live that is because if we don't exercise care about how we live we will tend to live as we ought not to live but we have to be careful if we're going to do the right thing and typically that's how the Bible acts the Bible has the supposition that if we aren't careful we will veer off the straight and narrow into things that we should not do and think and say that is it does not think that inherently we are good people and so if we don't take care we'll just keep doing the right thing but we have to take care about how we live if we are to live in the light and do what is right technically the beginning of verse 15 is saying be careful then how you walk it's using the image of walking as the way of living and it's not the first time either and it's important to get this context right as well beginning of chapter 4

I therefore the prisoner in the Lord beg you to lead a life worthy or to live or walk a worthy life is literally what Paul is saying at the beginning of chapter 4 he uses the same illustration in verse 17 of chapter 4 you must no longer walk as the Gentiles walk but in a different way and then in verse 2 of chapter 5 the same expression in effect where our translation has got live in love literally it's walk in love and then in verse 8 rather than live in the light it's technically walk in the light and now for the last time in this sequence to live and he goes on to talk about in wisdom so the metaphor is one that's carried through chapters 4 and 5 be careful how you walk worthy of your calling not as the pagans do walking in love walking in light walking in wisdom other five times this expression is used now in these verses Paul has three sets of contrasts that is be careful how you walk not that way but this way not that way but this way not that way but this way three times not as unwise because that's how the pagan unbelieving world lives but as wise he says in verse 15 and that wisdom is expressed in verse 16 making the most of the time because the days are evil the stupid person doesn't make the most of their time doesn't realise where time is heading and where this world will end wisdom how Christians are meant to live will make the most of time knowing that these days are evil knowing that Jesus will return and being prepared for that day that's the wisdom using the opportunities that we have in this world redeeming them from evil the second contrast is in verse 17 be careful then how you live not as foolish but understanding the will of the Lord similar sort of contrast the foolish person doesn't understand

God's will at all they live for their own benefit and gain but the right way to live the right way to walk the Christian way is to understand the will of the Lord and that in effect is what Paul is expounding in these chapters in Ephesians and then the third contrast in verse 18 be careful then how you walk not as drunk with wine for that's debauchery but rather being filled with the spirit not as the world lives but this way not as unwise but wise not as foolish but understanding the will of God not drunk with wine but being filled with the spirit now it's worth now it's worth pausing to make some comments about this verse 18 partly because it's so often misunderstood and Christians can flounder a bit on this verse in some Christian circles to be filled with the spirit is a fairly in term has been for the last couple of decades I guess and you sometimes see of spirit filled churches advertising themselves when I was in Nigeria 18 months ago the churches there advertise themselves with extraordinary names the grace church or the powerful word church or the spirit filled church big billboards and placards down the sides of the streets and main roads you can sometimes hear of people who say that their church is spirit filled or their minister is spirit filled or

even their bible is a spirit filled bible

[26 : 15] I've noticed that you can buy goodness only knows what that means but often the term is full of unhelpful connotations a few observations about what it's about the context here is still the context of living a worthy Christian life in the light of what God has done for us in Christ and that worthy life is in contrast to the pagan life of this world so living a spirit filled life is here contrasted with getting drunk with wine not because they're similar things or similar results as some people get confused but because they're actually very different things being filled with the spirit is part of being wise and part of not being foolish the contrasts in verses 15 17 and 18 are actually related to each other so being filled with the spirit is about being wise about using our time well and understanding what the will of God is in Ephesus part of their religious expression as well as sexual orgies would be religious drunkenness getting drunk as a sort of way of reaching some sort of so called spiritual state in your mind or mindlessness probably but Paul is using a contrast then to their religion be filled with the spirit not with wine that's what

Christians should do in contrast to pagans whenever this expression or related ones are used in the Bible in the New Testament they occur it is almost without exception issues in that is if you're filled with the spirit issues in the proclamation of the gospel and the praise of God and never does the expression purely describe an experience that is it refers to the result of the being filled not the experience of being filled now I say that because in recent years some people sort of get hung up about the experience and rather pushed to one side as peripheral the result but whenever somebody or some people or Christians generally are filled with the spirit in the New Testament we're not told what it actually feels like that doesn't matter but the important thing is the result proclamation of the gospel praise of God and living a worthy life in contrast to pagan living let me make a few comments too about the verb being filled it is a passive verb

Paul is saying here be filled not fill yourselves or fill something else but be filled so that in one sense the person who does the filling is not you but God it's a slightly odd thing but it is saying that God is the one who fills not us we don't need to find the magic technique to fill ourselves it is God who does the filling with his Holy Spirit secondly it's a plural verb and it's not talking about an individual being filled with the spirit and this individual and that individual it's talking about the church of Ephesus being filled with the spirit it's a corporate idea thirdly the verb is also a present tense which means that it is a continuous sense that is it's not talking about I want you to be filled with the spirit next Sunday so that thereafter you're always therefore filled but rather that you keep on being filled with the spirit that's the sense of the verb a continuous sense of keeping on being filled with the spirit day by day minute by minute hour by hour it's not a sort of occasional thing to happen and it's not a once off thing to happen for the rest of your

Christian life but a continuous thing keep on being filled and the fourth thing to comment about the verb is it's an imperative we must be filled with the spirit it's not an optional extra for some super spiritual Christians or some people from other sorts of churches or denominations it is binding on each and every one of us if we're a Christian that we must keep on being filled with the spirit there's no opting out for this because whilst at some level some people have got so hyped up about this that they've got it wrong sometimes in response some Christians have shied away from the Holy Spirit altogether we cannot afford to make that error either we all together must keep on being filled with God's Holy Spirit there are four consequences that Paul brings out how do we know what is the result of being filled with the spirit here firstly it is speaking in verse 19 speaking to each other encouraging each other in unity and maturity it is singing and making music in our hearts then thirdly it is giving thanks to God in verse 20 all of those verbs are participles dependent upon being filled with the spirit that is be filled with the spirit and the result will be that you sing psalms hymns spiritual songs among yourselves that is a mutual edification that's what's behind that secondly that you'll sing and make melody to the

Lord in your hearts that's a more internal thing and then the third thing is giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ so if you're filled with the spirit or if we together are filled with the spirit then these three things will be seen but there's a fourth verb that is also a participle that our Bible gets wrong in one sense because verse 21 actually depends upon verse 18 as well I'm going to elaborate on verse 21 next week more but being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ is the last of the sequence of what it means or what's the result of being filled with the spirit how do we do it then how do we obey the command to keep on being filled with the spirit especially when it's something that in the end God does to us or

for us or perhaps one other passage in Colossians is a helpful thing here in Colossians 3 there's a similar sort of passage that talks about singing songs and hymns and so on but there instead of the expression being filled with the spirit

[32 : 36] Paul says let the word of Christ dwell in you richly I don't think they're opposite things I think actually the two go together being filled with the spirit is the flip side of letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly the word of Christ dwelling in us will be applied by God's spirit God's spirit in us will be applying God's word so if we're to get a bit of a handle on what we must do in order to be filled with the spirit then letting the word of Christ dwell in us is a very good place to start and coming back to Ephesians that helps us realise why this letter is written as it is chapters one to three expound what God is on about in his grace and what he's done for us it is the word of Christ if you like and the reason why Paul goes through chapters one two and three is that this word of Christ and the gospel might actually dwell in our hearts so that we may be filled with the spirit and therefore give thanks and mutually edify each other give thanks to God sing songs and hymns in our hearts and also submit to one another out of reverence for

Christ well let me conclude is this us are we described by these things that are the result of being filled with God's Holy Spirit some of you may doubt that you even have God's Holy Spirit but Paul made it very clear in chapter one that if you're a Christian you do it's not something that is a sort of second stage for mature Christians each and every Christian has received God's Holy Spirit be encouraged by that read again chapter one verses twelve to fourteen if you doubt that secondly some of you may think that yes I am filled with God's Holy Spirit then the command to us is to keep on being filled with God's Holy Spirit not to rest on our laurels not to think that it's all done but to keep on being filled not to be complacent with where we are now to keep on practicing edifying each other building each other up in unity and maturity singing psalms and hymns to each other in praise of God giving thanks to God singing hymns and so on in our hearts and submitting to one another reflecting more of the family likeness but thirdly as we read these passages at the end of Ephesians about how we're to live and especially perhaps next week when we see the rigorous demands of submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ and some examples of that it's easy to become a bit dejected we'll never make it God not only calls us to imitate his perfect standard but by filling us with his spirit he provides resources by which we can seek to do that so then for us all keep on being filled with God's spirit amen amen thanks however are those I will clean I'll- Thank you.