

The Strong City

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[0 : 00] I can turn back to the first passage we read in Ephesians chapter 5 on page 978 of our Bibles, page 978. And I want to read again the first two verses for us to focus particularly on this evening.

Where we read, Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.

A fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. I know it's been a few weeks since I've been in this pulpit on an evening service, but those of you who are regular in our evening services, remember certainly up to my summer holiday we'd been considering Paul's letters to the Ephesians, and particularly the focus of love that runs right through this book.

In every chapter of Ephesians, we see Paul emphasizing love. In the first few chapters, of course, we see God's great love for undeserving sinners.

If you were to go back to chapter 1, Remember, we read there and we looked at the whole matter of God's electing love. God choosing before creation itself those whom he would save, those whom he would give salvation, and doing so in love.

[1 : 31] In chapter 2, we read of God's saving love. If you remember that emphasis that Paul brings out about, you know, how at one time we were spiritually dead, each one of us, and God giving life, bringing life to those who were spiritually dead, but those whom God's saving love rested upon.

God's great love bringing new life. God making alive those who were dead in Christ, making alive in Christ, and again, doing so in love.

That incomprehensible love of God that brings new life to sinners. And then, in chapter 3, we notice God's strengthening love.

The love that God gives to believers, so that God roots Christians in the love of Christ, so that you're unable to grow, just like a plant that's rooted in good soil, unable to grow.

And so we notice the love of God that roots the believer in the love of Christ, so that you're unable to grow as a Christian, so that your faith is deepened in the Lord Jesus, so your love for God is deepened, and of course love for one another is strengthened as well, so that you're unable to grow as God wants you to grow in holiness, to be more devoted to God, and to be the more than in prayer.

[2 : 59] And the love of God seen in your life, in your relationships, in your conversation, in your conduct as a Christian. And you who know the love of God, you who know the blessing of electing love, and of saving love, and of strengthening love, well, of course, you have to respond to that.

You have to respond to that great love of God. And if you've received great love, you have to return that love. And you know that you've been loved by a loving God, whose love has reached out beyond the Trinity, beyond the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That love that's reached out to sinful creatures, such as me, and yes, such as you. So how do you respond to that love? Well, Paul tells us, last time we were here in chapter 4, we saw the response of Christians to the love of God, and that emphasis of Christians being, needing to be more like Christ, to live a life of love that glorifies God.

That life of love that responds in gratitude to the Lord who's rescued you, so that you're enabled, and so that it's your response to shine, to shine for the Lord Jesus, to witness for Him in this dark world.

So the demand on Christians is to, of course, to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. It's a righteous demand that we do that.

[4 : 32] And it's surely seen in the way that we do truly love God, as He's blessed us in Christ. And so there are practical consequences for the Christian whom God loves.

I suppose we've seen this in chapter 4, Paul specifically emphasising how we love one another, how we are to love one another, and the manner by which we love one another.

How is that seen? It's seen in humility. It's that characteristic of grace. Grace that recognises your proper place before God. Because we know that we're a sinner.

We're sinners before a holy God. We know we have a standing before God as sinners. And we know that we have that responsibility to serve Him.

And yes, to serve others as humble servants. And to have that Christ-like love. And to have that Christ-like love. Christ-like love in the way that we love one another.

[5 : 38] As Paul shows us in gentleness, in patience, in patience, in forbearance, in maintaining the unity of the church in love.

So, in other words, there's a radical element here. There's a radical call, a radical following of the Lord Jesus. In other words, a complete turnaround in our former ways.

A complete turnaround from what we once were before, before we knew that great salvation. And Paul's, you know, as we get towards the end of chapter 4, Paul's urging us, he's urging his readers, to strive, to strive to accomplish all these emphases that he places at the end of chapter 4, particularly verses 23 and 24, to put off the old man, put on the new self, put on the old self, what we once were, put on the new self, to live a life of righteousness and holiness, to be that new creation.

As we're told here, to be a new creation after the likeness of God. As we see there towards the end of chapter 4. To be renewed in God. To be renewed in God's image.

To be that saved person. So that you become, as God's word teaches us, become like God in righteousness and holiness. And we have to say this is a staggering truth.

[7 : 01] But this is something Paul wants to drive home to us. If we're to live lives to the glory of God, if we're to live a life of love for Him, and for one another, then how do we show it?

We show it, as Paul tells us here, at the start of chapter 5, by walking in love. Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us, and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering, and sacrifice to God.

So what do we notice, then, in these two verses? Well, let's look, first of all, at this whole aspect of imitating God, imitating the God of love.

Be imitators of God, as beloved children. Anytime you see the word, therefore, doesn't it connect with what we've already read? Therefore, in light, in other words, in light of all that Paul's been writing, of the believer's responsibility, to show, you know, your new identity, as a Christian, to show your identity, as a beloved child of God, in light of all that Paul's been writing, of the new life, that the believer has, that he's been given in love, in light of all that our loving Heavenly Father, has given us, through salvation, through being saved, through the saving work, of the Lord Jesus, in light of the fact, that the believer, the one who's saved, is a new creation in Christ, created him, after the likeness of God, we're told to imitate God, to imitate him, as his beloved children.

You might be thinking, well, how can we imitate God? I mean, how can anyone try to be like, the infinite, eternal, unchangeable God, and how can we be like God, who's all holy, all majestic, all righteous, all loving, I mean, how can sinners, imitate a holy God?

[8 : 59] Well, surely the clues, in the passage, surely the clues, in the verse, in these words, as beloved children, as beloved children, isn't this the wonder, of the grace, of adoption?

In other words, God bringing into his family, those of us, by nature, that aren't of his family, that love act, of God, that will be read, right at the start, of the book, chapter 1, verse 5, that God deciding, beforehand, people, in love, that they be adopted, into his family.

So you, who know the Lord Jesus, as your saviour, that's through that, love act of God, you've been given, that status, as a child of God, you're beloved, of God.

Now, as children, to your heavenly Father, what are you to do? You're to be like him. You're to follow his example, the example of, of love, of grace, of mercy, of forgiveness, of justice, of righteousness, of holiness, imitating God.

Because God is, all love, all grace, who forgives you, all your sins, who's all just, all righteous, all holy. And as a child of God, as a son of God, you will love, your heavenly Father.

[10 : 29] And in love, seek to be like him. Seek to be like him. And all these, these characteristics, that we've been, speaking about, love, grace, justice, righteousness, holiness.

You know, in human life, in human existence, a child, a child, will imitate his parents. A child, you'll imitate, your parent. I mean, the good loving parent, of course, wants, wants the best for his child. And how will he do that? He'll set an example. He'll set an example, in words, and in, in behaviour, and in relationships, how he, how he treats others, how he behaves at home, how he behaves outside the home.

And the child, the child's going to observe that. The child, in love, will observe all that, these characteristics. And he'll want to copy his parent. And parents that love their children, of course, will show a good example.

Christian parents, we're told to, to bring up our children, and the nurture, and instruction of the Lord. To lead our little ones, to the Lord Jesus. So the good parent, Christian parent, is an example.

[11 : 38] And of course, not, not merely in a kind of moral sense, but above all, in a God-honouring, Christ-centred sense. If you're in Christ, you who call God, and call upon God, as your heavenly Father, you have the best example, of all examples.

You have that example, how you should live. And so, in the very light, of the change, that God's made in your life, that God's initiated in your life, it's for you, and for me, to imitate him, to seek, to be like him.

Well, remember what God said, to the Israelites, on many occasions, when the Israelites, were in the desert, in the Exodus, from Egypt. What did God say? Be holy, for I am holy.

Then you might ask, well, how does that happen? How do we do this in practice? How do we, you know, how are we to, to be holy, as God is holy?

Well, surely that happens, when you know God, as God has made himself known. Where do you find that, that knowledge of God? You find it, in his word. And how do you apply that word, in your life?

[12 : 50] Well, so you're thinking, on Wednesday evening, surely we, we read God's word. Yes, we digest it. We, we, we meditate, in God's word.

That reflecting, in God's word. That, that digesting, in God's word. That, letting the word of God, sink deep into your heart. If the more you learn of him, the more you read of him, the more you seek to love him, the more you seek to, apply his word, then meditate on that word.

Focus your mind, your heart, on what God has given you. And that's why we read, at the end of Matthew chapter 5, remember what Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount, that believers should be perfect, even as your holy father, heavenly father, is perfect.

You know, that being, being perfect, that's our holy father, the heavenly father, is perfect. That's exactly what Paul's, or certainly a direct correlation, between what Paul's, saying here about, you know, we being imitators of God.

That doesn't mean some kind of, moral perfection, in this life. We're all sinners. Yes, you who are in Christ, we are saved sinners.

[14 : 02] But we're, to strive to be like God, to show forth, to show forth, the perfect love of God, and doing so in love, and grace, and mercy, and justice, in a righteousness, as Jesus said, that loves those, even though they hate us, even though they revile us, for our faith.

So, if we're to be, imitators of God, if we're to be holy, as God is holy, if we're to be perfect, as he is perfect, then you'll want to have, that family likeness.

You'll want to, have that likeness, of a child to his father. So, we come near to him, through his word. Come near to him, through prayer.

We come, near to him, as Paul commands us, here in verse 2, as we walk, in love. Our second heading, walking in love, we might say, walking, in Christ's way.

Walk in love, as Christ, loved us. So, the imitation of God, has to be seen, in a life of love. And, that's what Paul's, impressing upon us here.

[15 : 07] To be proactive, in that imitation of God. And to do it, as we walk, in love, as Paul tells us here, as Christ loved us. I think we need, to explain this. Paul, certainly here, in this case, is using the, the Hebrew sense, of walk, to, the meaning, being, how you live your life.

How you conduct your life. You know, how you express your faith, in the way that you live. And, that sense of walking, it's really an expression, that speaks of behaviour.

How you live your life, and of course, there's got the sense, of being active. Walking, making progress, in the way of salvation. So, your conduct, reflects, the faith that you have, in the Saviour.

or it should reflect, the way that, it should reflect that faith. So, you know, when we speak of, living our lives, in the sense of walking, this is dynamic.

This is, yes, it's a dynamic, kind of, you would say, figurative sense, but it's got a very practical consequence. It's got the sense, of making progress. You know, the progress you make, as, as someone, whose life, whose conduct, whose, whose progress, on the way of, of the Lord, the narrow way.

[16:25] How, how, how do you motivate your life? You motivate it, through the love of the Lord Jesus. And, therefore, to be seen, in your walk, in your conduct, to, to be, you know, active, and dynamic, and real, and in that love, for, for God, and for one another.

Some months ago, I, as you well know, I had that unfortunate experience, of, I have to say it, not being able to walk. All my back spasms, and, muscle seizures, and, truly, having to, be in hospital, in order to, relearn how to walk.

It sounds crazy now, but yes, two months ago, I literally had to, relearn how to walk. And, there's a dick, with a zimmer at the back there. I had a zimmer, trying to take, these few steps, from the bed, to, literally, just a few yards, and then using crutches, getting up the stairs again.

It was a whole new, learning experience. Walking was slow. Walking was actually, very difficult. And every few steps, I took, you know, showing a struggle. To learn to walk.

I mean, it sounds amazing, but it was a very interesting experience, being taught again, about walking. It was, my walking was slow. It was, very stuttery.

[17:37] I was not in good shape. I wasn't walking, as I ought to, to have been. Now, of course, I can walk, and hopefully, I'm making some progress.

Now, you think of that, as a Christian. Your walk, is going to be obvious. If your conduct, is, feeling a life, of love, towards your saviour, love, towards one another, it's going to be apparent, in that walk, in that sure, strong, confident walk.

It's going to be very clear, the how you live. It's going to be clear, that you are loving God, that you're devoting your life to Him. It's going to be clear, in the way, that you love one another.

The consequence, of saving grace in your life, is going to be seen, in the way that you walk, in the way that you live your life. A life, of love, towards God, and towards one another. But then, again, another question.

I mean, how do you reconcile, the amazing relationship, that's what told here, between your walk, as a Christian, and what Paul says here, about when he tells us, or gives us that command, to walk in love, as Christ loved us.

[18:46] As Christ loved us. I mean, you know, already in chapter 4, verse 1, Paul's appeal, to his readers, to us, to walk, to walk in a manner, befitting your call, to serve, for God and Saviour.

Now, here's Paul, repeating this, again. And again, this is a truly, wonderful statement, about the kind of love, we're to show, as Christ loved us.

And you might be saying, this is just, something's too remarkable. I mean, is Paul just making this up? I mean, is this some kind of, wishful thinking? Absolutely not. I mean, first of all, Paul's writing, under divine inspiration.

But remember, what he's doing, he's actually echoing, the words that Jesus, uttered to his disciples, just before Jesus, or not long before Jesus, was arrested, and tried, and crucified.

Remember in that act, of self-sacrifice, when Jesus gave himself up, for sinners, on the cross.

Remember what Jesus, said to his disciples, John 13, 34, a new commandment, I give to you, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.

[20:00] You also have to love one another. And a few chapters later, John 15, this is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. And in the words that follow, greater love has no one than this, and someone lays down his life, for his friends.

So, imitators, of God. We show it love, love is the mark, love is the standard. And of course, the love of Jesus, for sinners, is that, is that, that great, self-giving love.

Isn't that the mark, that you and I, are to attain? But then you might say, well what is the love of Christ? What is that love, that we're to, to emulate? And of course, none of us can love, to the point of actually, saving sinners, redeeming lost sinners, none of us can do that.

None of us have that, that, that pure love, that, that rescues sinners, from a lost eternity. But surely, the love that, that we're to exercise, in our, in our, in our walk, in your conduct, as a Christian, it's got to be that, Christ-like love.

The love that, that's expressed, in that closing statement, in verse 2, and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering, and sacrifice to God. In other words, sacrificial love.

[21 : 20] Notice the words here, and gave himself up for us. This is the language, of self-sacrifice. This is the standard, of self-giving love.

I mean, look at the words, Jesus gave himself. How did he give himself? He gave himself, well, he left the glory of heaven, for us. He gave us, we might say, of his time, for us.

He gave us his wisdom, for us. He gave us his knowledge, of salvation, for us. He gave us his service, for us. He gave us his life, for us.

How did he do that? He did it, in love, for us. Who did he give? He gave himself, and there's no higher love, there's no greater love, that's ever been seen, than the love of Jesus, in laying down his life, for us, for sinners.

Now, of course, our love, our self-giving love, of course, it can't equal, it never can equal, that self-giving love, of Jesus. But we can still exercise, a mindset, a heart of love, that seeks to be like Christ, in giving of ourselves, giving of ourselves, in service, in service for God, in service, to our Lord, our Saviour, yes, and in service, one to another.

[22 : 47] So, remember what Jesus did, when he came, he came, to do his Father's will, and he came in love, for us. So, surely then, the test, the test of your love, for God, is the measure, that you use love, to him, and to one another.

In other words, that giving of self, all that you are, in God's service, not just part, but whole, all, that you are. And again, you know, we have to ask ourselves, we have to ask myself, is the giving of yourself, is the giving of myself, in a service, well, think of an example, in scriptures, think of the widow, the widow, who cast into the, the offering plate, all that she had.

She gave all, that she had, in love, in love for, for our Lord, our God, our Saviour. But then of course, think supremely, of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He, is your inspiration, He, directs your walk, in love. Think of the sacrificial, suffering of Jesus.

Notice how Paul, describes that, that suffering of Jesus.

He speaks of it, as a fragrant offering, and sacrifice to God. In other words, a giving, a self-giving by Jesus, that was acceptable, to God.

[24 : 10] Go back to the Old Testament, think of Noah. Remember when Noah, offered sacrifices, or burnt offerings to God, after the flood, you read in Genesis 8, 21, and we're told that God, smelled the pleasing aroma.

In other words, God accepted that, that sacrifice. You go to the, the other books of the, some of the earlier books, of the Old Testament, the, some of the first, five books, from Exodus, and you read of animal sacrifices, offered to God.

The Israelites, when they offered, these sacrifices, they were, described as being, acceptable, by God, and this often used expression, they were a pleasing aroma, before the Lord.

And when Jesus, gave himself on the cross, when he was, that holocaust, that whole, burnt offering, that complete offering, of himself, his sacrifice, was the culmination, of all these Old Testament, sacrifices.

He was the sacrifice. He was the, pleasing aroma, before the Lord. And that self-sacrifice, of Jesus on the cross, given in love, for us.

[25 : 20] If you love the Lord Jesus Christ, then, that's the likeness, that's the imitation, that you're to follow. The self-giving love, that's acceptable, before God.

Of course, that's going to take, many different forms. I suppose, one direct example, from scripture, even as the way, that we give. Even the financial giving, for the sake of the kingdom.

You go to another, one of Paul's letters, his letter to the Philippians. And in that letter, Paul commends, the church in Philippi, for the various gifts, that they'd sent Paul.

And you read, in Philippians 4.18, these fascinating words. Because Paul describes, these gifts, as a fragrant offering, a sacrifice, acceptable, and pleasing to God.

In other words, this costly devotion, that the Philippian believers, showed, they gave sacrificially. They gave, for the sake of the imprisoned Paul.

[26 : 20] And their giving, their self-sacrificial giving, indicated that, the love that these believers had, yes, first of all, for God. And then for Paul, and Paul's particular need.

God was pleased with their gift. Because it was given, through sacrificial love, love to him, love, for a brother in Christ. Now, I have no idea, how the remainder of this year, is going to be, for any one

of us.

Whether it be self, whether it be you, as a congregation, for each one of us, as individuals. But we take each day, as a gift from God. And, in each day, to have that, that true heart, that seeks, to live sacrificially, in love, to, to give of ourselves, in love, to show the love of Christ, to, to give of self, for, yes, for the sake of the cause, of the gospel, to give for the sake, of, of his name, to give, for him, and for his glory.

And that's going to be costly. That's going to involve love. And not for the sake of any kind of, you know, directing love back to self. But it's love for his sake.

And your stance for the truth, might well, and it surely has to be, and involve much sacrifice. And you may well suffer. You might suffer in your reputation. You might suffer in popularity, or even credibility.

[27 : 47] But always remember, when you take that stand for truth, it has to be done in love. Love for God. Love for others. We don't give of ourselves, in love, for self's sake.

But we do give. We do give, in love, to honour God, to please him, to give him the glory. I prepared this sermon a few days ago, and certainly I was challenged, very much challenged.

And where there's challenge, there's conviction. And certainly, speaking personally, I was very much convicted, as to my own lack of desire, to imitate God, and certainly convicted, of a less than wholesome walking in love, and not having my eyes fixed in Jesus, as I ought, in order to practice that love, that I ought to have towards others.

And certainly being convicted, as to a less than wholehearted, giving of self and love. And maybe in the last, I don't know, half hour or so, you've been challenged, and convicted, in all these matters. And we ought to be challenged, and ought to be convicted, by God's word. But, thanks be to God, that he opens our eyes, to see our own weaknesses, to see our own shortcomings, and it's he, God, who gives the increase.

[29 : 14] And it's his strength, that's made perfect, in our weakness. I pray that you'll, seek the more, yes, to love God, and to love your neighbour, that you'll seek the more, to, to, to, to know that enabling grace, to, to be an overcomer.

And yes, to have done with that life, that, that seeks, self first. And that you'll have that heart's desire, to be like God, in Christ, to follow the Saviour, to follow, the Lord Jesus, in that way, of self-sacrificial love.

And that you'll know, that blessing, of walking, in him, walking with him, walking for him, that you'll know, that true joy, of seeking first, the kingdom of God.

And that you'll rejoice, in his love. That you'll seek, to walk in love. And that you'll be, that aroma, well pleasing, to the Lord. Amen.

Let us pray. Our Lord, our God, our Heavenly Father, you, who first loved us. You, whose love, is that eternal love.

[30 : 25] You, who have sent your people, I have loved you, with an eternal love. May it be, that we bask, in that love, and know that love, and reciprocate, that love, by a life, walking in love, as Christ, loved us.

May it be, that, even the very lives, that we live, the sacrificial lives, may they be, a pleasing aroma, to you, our God. Lord, forgive anything, and all things, that have been said, amiss from this pulpit, this evening.

May it be, Lord, that your word, has strengthened, your people, here this night. And we pray, Lord, that you will bless us, as we, as we depart, one from another, as we go, our separate ways.

We pray, Lord, that you will bless us, in this week, that has begun. And that truly, we'll be given, these opportunities, to live, and to walk in love, as you so, enable us to do.

Go before us now, Lord, we pray, and we ask these things, in Jesus name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.