

Be Imitators of God

Walk in Love

Ephesians 5:1-7

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October 7, 2018

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Scripture

Today I am beginning a new sermon series in Ephesians 5:1-21 that I am calling, “Be Imitators of God.”

In his letter to the Ephesian Christians, the Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:1a, “Therefore be imitators of God.” Commentator James Montgomery Boice says that this is “one of the most startling admonitions in the New Testament.”¹ It is the only place in the entire Bible where Christians are commanded to imitate God. What does that mean? And how are Christians to imitate God? That is what we will be examining in our series titled, “Be Imitators of God.”

Paul began by exhorting Christians to walk in love.

Let’s read about walking in love in Ephesians 5:1-7:

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

³But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. ⁵For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. ⁶Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷Therefore do not become partners with them.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 171.

(Ephesians 5:1-7)

Introduction

Ron Walters tells the story how in the autumn of 1912, presidential hopeful Teddy Roosevelt was in Milwaukee to deliver an important campaign speech. Throngs of well-wishers lined the motorcade route, hoping for a glimpse of the American icon. Roosevelt was only too happy to accommodate them, waving his hat and flashing that famed *bully grin* from his open-air motorcar.

But from out of nowhere, a deranged man stepped to the edge of the car and aimed a pistol at Roosevelt. From point-blank range he fired a single bullet deep into Roosevelt's chest. The blast knocked TR across the car and into a crumpled heap. Blood was everywhere. Chaos reigned. The police gang-tackled the gunman. All eyes focused on the fallen hero.

Immediately, TR's handlers discussed contingency plans and the quickest routes to nearby hospitals. But the wounded Rough Rider would have none of that. "You get me to that speech. It may be the last one I ever deliver, and I'm not going to miss it."

A man with a message is a powerful force.

Minutes after the shooting, Teddy Roosevelt stood before his appreciative, albeit unaware audience. And without a microphone, the usually robust politician meekly said, "Friends, I shall ask you to be as quiet as possible. I have just been shot, and even now the bullet is in me. So I cannot speak for long, but I will do my best."

As Roosevelt opened his coat to retrieve his handwritten notes, he exposed for the first time his blood-soaked shirt. The crowd gasped. Doctors rushed to the stage, only to be held off

by Roosevelt. Medical attention would have to wait. The message was the priority.

That night TR's speech was more candid than scripted, more urgent than routine. It was driven by passion, not politics. It contained no campaign rhetoric, no jockeying for votes, no idle promises. Instead, he spoke with deep resolve to cure the nation's problems, even at the risk of his own. The truth had to be told. Political correctness took a beating. Winning an election was less important. Declaring his deepest beliefs was the issue.

Even the many detractors who had come to jeer and protest sat silently.

Ninety minutes later, an exhausted and colorless Roosevelt was finished. He had done what he came to do. Slowly he turned to the nearby doctors and said, "Now, we can go to the hospital."

A thunderous applause erupted and continued until the motorcade was out of sight.

It's interesting that audience reactions tend to change when they sense the urgency of a message; they evaluate it differently. Truth is more acceptable. Vision is caught. Passions are stirred. Even Roosevelt's greatest critic, the *New York Herald*, saluted him in the next day's headline: "WE'RE AGAINST HIS POLITICS, BUT WE LIKE HIS GRIT."²

A man with a message is a powerful force.²

The same could be said of the Apostle Paul. He endured unbelievable suffering for the sake of getting God's message of salvation to the world. He simply *had* to preach and teach and write the good news of the gospel so that the world could

² Provided by Ron Walters, Sr. VP Ministry Relations, Salem Media Group, at <https://letstalkfaith.com/content/all/pastors-letter>.

hear the saving message of God.

One senses Paul's urgency throughout his letters. But, perhaps today's text ranks supreme when Paul calls Christians to "be imitators of God" (Ephesians 5:1). In fact, William Barclay calls this "the highest standard in the world."³ Alexander Maclaren calls it "the sum of all duty."⁴ And to Martyn Lloyd-Jones it was "Paul's supreme argument...the highest level of all in doctrine and in practice...the ultimate ideal."⁵

So, let us turn to our text and learn about what it means to be imitators of God.

Lesson

The analysis of the concept of imitating God in Ephesians 5:1-7 teaches us to walk in love.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The General Precept (5:1)
2. The Specific Command (5:2)
3. The Practical Applications (5:3-4)
4. The Particular Warnings (5:5-6)
5. The Final Exhortation (5:7)

I. The General Precept (5:1)

First, let's look at the general precept.

Paul said in verse 1a, "**Therefore be imitators of God....**" As I have said before, "Whenever you see the word

³ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1970), 190.

⁴ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, vol. 10, *2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pt. 2, 270.

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:17–5:17* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 291.

‘therefore,’ see what it is there for.” The word refers back to the previous section.

In Ephesians 4:25-32, Paul gave five examples of how Christians are to relate to others. Each example has a negative prohibition accompanied by a corresponding positive command, with a reason for the command that is either stated or implied. So, in the fifth example, the negative prohibition is in verse 31: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice....” Here are a number of sinful characteristics that belonged to the old self. None of these characteristics are to be seen in a Christian.

Paul gave the positive command in verse 32a: “...Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another....” We are to exemplify godly characteristics in our daily lives with every person with whom we come into contact.

Paul gave the reason for the command in verse 32b: “...as God in Christ forgave you.” We have been forgiven such a great debt. God has intervened in our lives in a wonderful way and has granted us new life in Christ. He now expects us to demonstrate to others what he has demonstrated to us.

That is why Paul said in verse 1a, **“Therefore be imitators of God....”** The Apostle Paul called Christians to imitate God in the way we relate to one another. We are to reflect God’s communicable attributes to one another, things like, as Boice says, “justice, wrath, wisdom, faithfulness, goodness, love, mercy, compassion, tenderness, forgiveness.”⁶

But Paul also gave a motivating reason for imitating God. He said we are to be imitators of God **“...as beloved children.”** Christians have a new status: we are God’s **beloved**

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expositional Commentary*, 172.

children. And because we are now his children we are to imitate our heavenly Father.

Children naturally imitate their parents. This past week our daughter, Lauren, sent us a video of our eighteen-month old grandson, Isaac, stepping into his father's shoes and walking in them. As he grows older, Isaac will want to do more things like his father.

And so do Christians. We want to imitate our heavenly Father and be more and more like him every day.

II. The Specific Command (5:2)

Second, let's notice the specific command.

In the next couple of weeks, we will see three specific ways in which we are to imitate God. We are to walk in love (which we will examine today), to walk in light (which we will examine next time), and to walk in wisdom (which we will examine in two weeks).

So, let's see the first way we imitate God. Paul said in verse 2a, "**And walk in love....**" What does it mean to **walk in love**? It means to put into practice what Paul had been teaching in Ephesians 4:25-32: (1) to replace falsehood with truth-telling, (2) to replace unrighteous anger with righteous anger, (3) to replace stealing with honest work, (4) to replace corrupting talk with edifying talk, and (5) to replace sinful characteristics with godly characteristics.

Paul again gave a motivating reason for walking in love. He said in verse 2b, "**...as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**" Because of his love for us, Christ went to the cross and paid the penalty for our sins so that we might be reconciled to God. Moreover, Paul wrote to the Romans, "...but God shows his

love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

Because of what God has done for us in Christ, we are to respond by walking in love.

III. The Practical Applications (5:3-4)

Third, let’s examine the practical applications.

Paul gave two practical applications, one negative and the other one positive.

A. *Pay Attention to the Prohibitions (5:3-4a)*

First, pay attention to the prohibitions.

Paul said in verse 3-4a, “**But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place....**” Christians who imitate God by walking in love must not engage in impure activities. Some of these activities are rather clear, such as **sexual immorality**. On the other hand, we might wonder why activities such as **foolish talk** or **crude joking** are on the list. Not only are they in themselves improper activities, but they feed the more serious infractions.

Young persons are particularly vulnerable here. They try to fit in with a crowd or group of friends. But the friends are engaged in **foolish talk** and **crude joking**. At first, the young persons are taken aback. But, wanting to fit in with the crowd, they do not react negatively. They just stay, and the longer they stay, the more they get used to **foolish talk** and **crude joking**. And, sadly, it is not a long way from that to **sexual immorality** or **impurity**.

So, Paul wanted Christians to pay attention to prohibitions.

B. *Respond with Thanksgiving (5:4b)*

And second, respond with thanksgiving.

Paul said in verse 4b, “**...but instead let there be thanksgiving.**” Once again, Paul followed a negative prohibition by a corresponding positive command, in this case, **thanksgiving**. Paul wanted Christians to replace sinful thoughts and actions with their thoughts about God’s forgiveness, his mercy, his grace, the fact that they are now the children of God because of the ultimate sacrifice of Christ. Thoughts along these lines will produce an overflow of thanksgiving for the blessings of God in the life of the believer.

IV. The Particular Warnings (5:5-6)

Fourth, let’s observe the particular warnings.

Paul went on to give two warnings to people who are not walking in love.

A. *The Loss of Inheritance (5:5)*

First, there is the loss of inheritance.

Paul was writing to Christians. He knew that Christians are not free from sin. Christians do sin, but it is not their habit to sin. They hate their sin. They repent of their sin. They cry out to God for forgiveness of their sin. They plead with God to free from their sin.

Paul in this section was writing of those who professed to be Christians but who really are not Christians. He was warning

people who want the benefits of eternal life, but are not willing to give up their sin. And so, Paul said in verse 5, “**For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.**”

B. *The Reception of Wrath (5:6)*

And second, there is the reception of wrath.

If it is not bad enough to have no inheritance in the kingdom of God, Paul said in verse 6, “**Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.**” What is interesting here is that God’s wrath is in the present tense. Paul said, “**...the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.**” There is a very real sense in which unbelievers are experiencing the wrath of God right now. In fact, Paul stated this in his letter to the Romans. He said in Romans 1:18, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” Then he described all the ungodliness and unrighteousness that is presently under the wrath of God, things such as idolatry, homosexuality, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness, and those who are inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless (cf. Romans 1:18-32).

And, of course, there is the future wrath of God that will be poured out on unbelievers who never repent of their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. They will spend all eternity in hell paying the penalty for their sin, experiencing the righteous wrath of a holy and Almighty God.

V. The Final Exhortation (5:7)

And fifth, let's notice the final exhortation.

Paul said in verse 7, "**T**herefore do not become partners with them." This seems to be so appropriate for the Apostle Paul. He urged the Christians in Ephesus not to **become partners with them**, that is, with those who were not walking in love.

Christians are set apart by God for God, and they are to imitate him in the way in which they live their daily lives.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of imitating God in Ephesians 5:1-7, let us walk in love.

When we walk in love we are imitating God. According to James Boice, to imitate God means "to copy closely, to repeat another person's speech, actions, or behavior. That is what we are to do with God. We are to repeat his actions, echo his speech, duplicate his behavior. How can we do that if we do not spend time with him? We cannot, because we will not even know what his behavior is. Spend time with God! Spend time with God in prayer. Spend time with God in Bible study. Spend time with God in worship. It is only by spending time with God that we become like God. We need men and women who are like God today."⁷ Amen.

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expositional Commentary*, 177.

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and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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