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# Imitating God

Ephesians 4:31-5:2<sup>7</sup>

*Russ Kennedy*

Oh how hard it is when people wrong us.

Alexander Dumas' story *Count of Monte Cristo* is a classic tale of the destructive power of vengeance. One character observed, "Hatred is blind; rage carries you away; and he who pours out vengeance runs the risk of tasting a bitter draught."

Small slights that escalate into big troubles... the elbow in the ribs in passing that becomes a fist in the mouth.

The injustice received... someone slanders us. Someone harms us. Someone ruins our work. Someone lies on a report or website.

Someone pokes us on FaceBook... In the public space of electronic friends and button likes we shrivel and then plot our own digital sword.

A small slight, a sharp word, a passing comment is nursed like a bitter drought at the bar of our growing anger and bitterness.

Yet into this gnarly snarl of roots and fruits, God says:

<sup>31</sup> Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. <sup>1</sup> Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. <sup>2</sup> And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

So what does it mean for Christians to live together in love? What does it mean for us as we wrestle with sin, serving and suffering?

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**Poise in our Relationships****(v.31- 32)**

What is the posture of our hearts in our relationships? We speak often of a desire to move towards people. However, our author begins with the poise of our hearts towards those who have sinned against us, who hurt or harmed us. What he says to us is very, very convicting.

**In what we must put away****(v. 31)**

<sup>31</sup> Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

Since we have put off the old, put away all that is associated with it in our relationships. Don't leave the dirty garments of the old person you used to be lying around. Put them away where they belong – in the grave. These vices to be put away are all too common among Christians and horribly destructive. I have watched over and over again what that nest of vipers does to people. Bitterness, wrath and anger rampage in the heart and emerge as clamor and slander. These will not only destroy relationships, but will make reconciliation and restoration very, very difficult.

Pastor Michael walked us through these vices to be put off last week. I commend that to you. I want to illuminate them again, highlighting the facets that particularly relate to how we respond to those who sin against us. This will help us make sense of what we are to put on instead.

In our response to people who sin against us we must put away the roots of our hatred and anger. These are bitterness and malice. Bitterness is the sourness of a long nursed and not dealt with grievance. It is the lava contained under the rock. Malice is the evil poise of your heart to harm and ruin someone who has wronged you.

Wrath and anger are direct expressions of hatred and anger. Wrath is a consuming anger. It is anger flashing and burning and boiling. Clamor is the noise in your hearts stemming from hatred that spills over into causing noise and commotion in other's lives. Slander is the lying words you speak to yourselves and others intending to ruin the person who wronged us.

Now, pause for a moment. Think through your Christian relationships:

Is there anyone you have bitterness and malice towards in your heart?

Is there anyone against whom you are experiencing or expressing hatred, anger, or wrath?

Is there anyone whose name or presence causes noise in your heart?

Is there anyone you have lied about in order to get even for something they have done to you?

But, then comes the surprise.

## In what we must put on

<sup>32</sup> Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

The Christian is to be marked by kindness, tenderness and forgiveness. These are the virtues that we need *when we are being sinned against*. So even if you are right, you must act and speak in a way that reflects God's kind of love.

This verse commands an outward expression and an inward orientation. We are to act towards those who sin against us because of our attitude towards them.

We are to be kind to one another. It is important to be kind to all. But kindness is especially important in our difficult relationships. Kindness in our words and in our deeds is to replace wrath, anger, clamor and slander. A genuine gentleness, thoughtfulness and charity towards others is called for.

We are to have a tender heart to one another. This is our attitude towards one another. It is the opposite of being hard hearted, unfeeling, uncaring towards one another. This word occurs only one other time in our New Testaments. It is in 1 Peter 3:8-9:

<sup>8</sup> Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. <sup>9</sup> Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing

Oh how we must cultivate a heart that is sympathetic, compassionate, caring and open to our brothers and sisters. This comes as we affirm in our hearts that they are our brothers and sisters. This grows as we want to engage them, listen to them and help them as we are able. We intentionally seek this with those we are close too. And we seek this with those we struggle to love and who may have hurt us.

This is highlighted even more when our brother or sister is our spouse. The 1 Peter text is the conclusion to the section addressed to wives and husbands. May God grant that, even in our marital troubles, we will remind ourselves that our spouse is first our brother or sister in Christ and we will make our hearts tender toward them.

## In our understanding of God's forgiveness

<sup>32</sup> Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Be kind. Be tenderhearted. Forgiving... You hear it? Do you hear the on-going sense? Keep on forgiving...

Forgiving as God has forgiven you is not talking about His example, His pattern. This is not intended to motivate us: "Be like God who forgives and forgive others." No, look at the sentence carefully.

God has forgiven us in Christ. This is talking about the redemptive grounds for forgiveness. Forgive each other *on the same basis* as God has forgiven us. What is that? It is based on that fact that all sin will be judged. We have all sinned against God. We deserve to be punished by God. Because Jesus took our punishment for us, God forgives

us. All sin will be punished. Jesus suffered the punishment of God for us. Therefore, God forgives us in Christ.

Now, what does that mean for you?

If someone has sinned against you, their sin deserves to be punished. They ought to be punished for their sin.<sup>2</sup>

You must forgive people who sin against you and confess their sin. Forgiving them is not excusing them from punishment. You are *not* responsible to punish them. You are responsible to forgive because punishment will happen.

Punishment has either happened at the cross or will happen at the judgment in the last days. Either the person is a Christian and their sins have all been punished already or they are not a Christian and they will suffer for their own sins against you, eternally.

You will not become angry, bitter, demanding or slandering because you are willing to forgive those who don't acknowledge their sin and actually do forgive those who confess.

Many people struggle to forgive because they think the person is going to get a free pass. No, sin will be dealt with. Your responsibility is to entrust that to God, to be poised to forgive the unrepentant and to actually forgive all who confess their sin.

This is what it means to live as the new person in the community of the church, with God's people. This is what living the truth looks like. This how the new person you are and are becoming, behaves.

## **Pattern for our Relationship**

**(v. 1)**

This is one of those classic places where a chapter break might keep us from seeing connections. God is the model of kindness, tenderness, forgiveness. So, be like God.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

## **In its Command**

Previously in Ephesians, our author has given us a template for transformation. We have put off and put on certain things through having received a renewed mind. Because of this, we are to put off and put on heart attitudes and actions by renewing our thinking. At the center of all growth and change is learning a new way to think.

What we have in this command is a new way to think. We are to think about how God is and what God does and to imitate that. God is long suffering with people. He is patient and kind. He supplies for them even when they are rebelling against them. He is willing to allow His purposes to work themselves out so that punishment and forgiveness are enacted at the right times.

Several times in the New Testament we are exhorted to be like Paul, like a particular church, like the Old Testament saints. In this setting, we are to be like God. Follow His

pattern. In all that has been and will be commanded, do your best to be in that situation like God is.

### **In its Comparison**

We are to intentionally seek to be like, like much loved children. In other words, children who have a great relationship love to imitate their parents. Now this is often a good thing and sometimes a bad thing. The point Paul is making is that our love for our heavenly Father causes us to want to be like Him.

### **Practice of our Relationships**

**(v. 2)**

And this all the more in how we live. As someone who really loves God, imitate Him...

<sup>2</sup> And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Now I know I am taking these little phrases and somewhat looking at them alone. That is helpful but may actually cause us to lose the overall sense of the sentences. So here it is from the NLT. "Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God."

### **By its Command**

The command here is obeyed by having a lifestyle that is characterized by love. It is a walk, a manner of life. It is not an option. It is not a higher life. It is not for advanced spiritual people. It is for every Christian.

We are not walking alone. This is not you going through your Christian life in the love bug with the doors closed and the windows tightly shut. This is all of us walking together in love even when there are very difficult differences that might give rise to anger and call for kindness and forgiveness.

### **With its Standard**

This love is not primarily emotional. It is not feeling a deep, warm passion for one another. There will be affection involved. This love is seen when we sacrifice ourselves for each other like Jesus did. In seeking to be like God we will give up ourselves for each other.

Now, let's think about that practically. It is no good talking about sacrifice for one another if you won't actually give up yourself for one another. One of our purposes as a church is to express our love for God in sacrificial deeds of love to one another. So let me suggest some ways in which your sacrificially loving one another might be expressed in the life and ministry of this church.

- Nurseries - there are people in this church who serve faithfully month after month to free parents of preschoolers to sit without distraction in worship. Why isn't every able person in this congregation serving like this? A number of your elders serve in the nurseries. Do you love the nursery servants enough Dottie Engle and ask how you can get involved?

- Children's ministries – over the last 5 years we have had to stop a number of ministries to children here. The primary reason? Not enough workers. Yes, we would like to do more and have programs and ministries in our pocket. But, we simply do not have the people to do them. And so we don't. Would you love another parent or a child enough to go to Pastor Dale and see how you could be used?
- Youth and young adults – what about you? Can you love parents and kids and families enough to get involved? Some of you young men who don't yet know what your gifts are could serve in the campus ministries to mow, clear snow and setup/takedown chairs.
- Do you put others ahead of your own concerns and interests? Whose comfort matters the most to you?
- Are you quick to overlook and forgive small slights and offenses?
- Do listen to people who are struggling and suffering? Or do their stories become an excuse for your story?
- Do you love your flock enough to go to meetings? Do you help each other? Watch over kids? Provide meals?

Or are you so self-absorbed with your life, your kids, your games, your work, you stuff that frankly you really don't care too much about the nice people at church much less the difficult, awkward and even offensive ones? Brothers and sisters, if we struggle with the inconveniences of ministries, what will we do when it could cost us our lives?

### **In its Motivation**

Why in the world would you do that? Why would be kind and compassionate to those who have hurt you? Why would you forgive them? Why would you walk in love and sacrificially serve others? Because this pleases God. Your heart for others and your sacrificial deeds of love rise up to God with the fragrance of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

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## **Reflect and Respond**

Brothers and sisters, become who you are.

Determine in your heart to walk in love, ready to forgive, serve and sacrifice.

Imitate the Lord for His glory.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Bible, there is no difference. Sin is not something that can be punished apart from a person. Sin is not a something apart from the one who is doing the sin. So to punish sin, is to punish the one who sins. This is fundamental to understanding our redemption and the work of Jesus on the cross.