

“Us—Imitators of God?”—Ephesians 4:32-5:2

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Us—Imitators of God?”, is Ephesians 4:32-5:2 → *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. 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.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

It is interesting to observe the behavior of little children, especially when they don't know you're watching them. Ever notice that much of their behavior is an effort to imitate others? I remember watching my small son in his efforts to imitate my behavior while reading a book. I would lick my right finger and turn the page with my right hand while he would lick his right finger and turn the page with his left hand. One may observe young children playing football on the sidelines of a high school football game in an effort to imitate their high school “heros.” The father of a teenage son may be able reflect back to the day when his young son couldn't wait to mow the lawn “like daddy” . . . wishing his son had that same desire now.

Actually imitating others is a part of human nature for all ages. People

of all ages will act and/or dress like someone to whom they look up. Interesting how cultural phrases, idioms and words become a part of ones' casual vocabulary by imitation. Ever heard someone break God's 2nd Commandment by using a cultural idiom such as "Oh, my god!"? The unfortunate aspect of imitation is that it too is tainted by your sinful nature and can produce behaviors which need to be sanctified by God in a new relationship with Him. Thus, verse 1 of our text says: *Be imitators of God, as **beloved children**.*

"Us—imitators of God?" How can we imitate the holy and perfect God? Actually, sinners try to do it all the time. People constantly strive to practice omniscience (i.e. to be all-knowing). It happens every time you judge the motives of others' behaviors. Only God is all-knowing. People strive to practice omnipotence (i.e. to be all-powerful). It happens when they refuse help from others, pridefully thinking their own power and strength sustains them in life. They do so also when they try to control their situations by manipulating others. Only God is omnipotent. Such efforts actually usurp imitating God, replacing it with the sin of Adam and Eve who gave into the devil's lie—*your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.* (cf. Genesis 3:5)

The imitation of God is all about relationship as His *beloved children* and how that relationship expresses itself in relationship with others. The struggle with imitating God is that we are all sinners who fall short of the

perfection of God, Who demands from us perfect obedience to His Law. Failure to deliver that perfect obedience requires punishment of an eternal nature—eternal suffering in hell. How can God demand imperfect people to be perfect? That's impossible! Exactly! When Jesus' disciples asked Him how a person can be saved, He replied in Matthew 19:26 saying, *With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*

Verse 2 of our text says that *Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* God took on human flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ in order to live in perfect obedience to His own Law **for you**. Thus, He was the perfect sacrifice, suffering the punishment of your hell **for you**. Why would He do such a thing willingly? Because of His steadfast, eternal love for the crown of His creation—sinful human beings—you and me. Through faith in the Person & Work of Jesus you become God's *beloved children*, forgiven and declared righteous, holy and blameless in His sight! All because God has done it for you!

So, if this is the case why did Paul have to admonish the Christians in Ephesus to stop stealing, *let no corrupting talk come out of their mouths, to not grieve the Holy Spirit, and get ride of all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander . . . along with all malice?* (cf. Ephesians 4:28-31) While Christians are declared righteous in God's sight we still have to deal with the presence of the devil and our own sinful

nature this side of heaven. Even as God's *beloved children* we fall into sin, disobeying His commands in our dealings with others. This is why imitating God must always function under the cross of Jesus Christ where He forgave your sins, making you His *beloved children*.

Therefore, the imitation of God finds its ultimate fulfillment in how He has dealt with you in your sin. Romans 5:6-8 says: *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows His love for us in that **while we were still sinners**, Christ died for us.* The point is that God loves the unlovable and in His love has done all that is necessary for you to be forgiven of all your sins through faith in Jesus Christ. His forgiveness is not like that of humans who may forgive but cannot forget. Yahweh says in Isaiah 43:25 → *I, I am He Who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, (that is, on His terms) and **I will not remember your sins.***

Thus, verse 32 of our text describes the ultimate imitation of God: *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.* This is in direct opposition to the world's concept of forgiveness. The world says forgiveness is based upon proof of being worthy to be forgiven. Have you apologized? Sincerely? Have you promised to change your ways and never do it again? Do you have a reputation for keeping your promises? If your answer to all these

questions is “Yes” then I’ll be kind and “let you off the hook” this time. Actually, such “kindness” proceeds from a hard heart which demands worthiness in the other person for your forgiveness. In the end, it is not forgiveness at all.

When our text describes forgiving others in a *tenderhearted* manner it is a forgiveness flowing from a heart which has been “tenderized” if you will. It is a conscience which has been beaten with God’s Law, feeling guilty over grieving your loving God by your disobedience. It drives you to your knees to finally repent of your sins and experience the Holy Spirit turn your heart of stone into a heart of flesh (cf. Ezekiel 36:26-18) through the absolution—that is, the pronouncement of forgiveness of your sin accomplished for you in the Person & Work of Jesus. It is this heart “tenderized” in the Gospel which looks on other sinners with compassion and kindness, willing to forgive others *as God in Christ forgave you* freely in His love and grace. It is in no way based upon any merit or worthiness in either you or the other person.

This is not just simply a “pay it forward” act of gratitude either. This commendable activity is performing an act of kindness for someone else because you’re so thankful that someone was kind to you in your time of need. In order to perform such an act the person to whom you “pay it forward” must be receptive to your act of kindness and usually you expect a response of gratitude from him.

The forgiveness of God spoken about in our text is given and expressed based upon a change in your heart by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel. It is based upon a *broken and contrite heart* (cf. Psalm 51:17) which God has made a completely *new creation*. (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17) Thus, this forgiveness is not based on how you were treated by someone or how the person responds or reacts to your forgiveness. It is totally unconditional, an act of grace!

It is within the context of such grace that Jesus commands God's *beloved children* in Luke 17:3-4 → *Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him.* This is why Colossians 3:13 talks about us ***bearing with one another*** and, *if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.* Your forgiveness must be based on God's forgiveness because your forgiveness may be taken advantage of or rejected or even bring you persecution.

Us—imitators of God? This may seem like a ridiculous statement since we fail so often to be imitators of God's love and grace. But as His *beloved children* who daily receive the benefits of His gracious love in forgiveness of our sins in the Person & Work of Jesus, we go forth desiring to imitate this forgiveness in the daily vocations of our lives. We

do so humbly remembering that we are not perfect. Rather, we are forgiven and willing to confess our own sins as well as share the forgiveness of sins freely with one another. Amen.

We love because He first loved us.

(1 John 4:19)

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