

“Imitating Dad”

Ephesians 4:32-5:14

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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When babies become toddlers things really start to change. They become mobile. They can scoot around and then they start walking. They become more aware of their surroundings and the people in their lives. And they begin to speak. One of the things that happens at this age is that children will begin to imitate their parents. You have to be very careful about what you say in front of young children because they will repeat it at the worst possible time. A young couple invited a group of people, including their pastor, over for dinner one evening. When it was time to eat the pastor asked their four-year-old to say the blessing. The child said, “I don’t know what to say.” So the pastor said, “Just say what you hear your mom say.” So the child prayed, “Dear God, why did I ever invite these people over!”

If you have kids you know what I’m talking about. You often don’t realize what you say or your mannerisms until you hear it from your child. But here’s the good news. Your children are watching and imitating your good qualities as well. That’s what Paul has in mind in this passage from Ephesians when he writes, “be imitators of God, as beloved children.” In a number of places in the Bible God assures us that we are His children if we are followers of Jesus. Romans 8 says, “you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

But what does it mean to *imitate* God? Is that even possible? He’s God. We’re clearly not. I think that this is where it matters what you understand about who God is. You will end up imitating what you think God is like. For example, if you think God is angry or judgmental, that’s probably how you will treat others. If you think God is distant or uncaring, you will probably be distant and uncaring. If you think God is primarily concerned with you

being happy, you will tend to pursue your own happiness above all else.

Learning what God is like is not really that difficult. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus! The center of the Christian faith is the fact that the God who created the entire universe and everything in it, the God who created *you*, entered into His creation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth at a particular time and particular place. Colossians 1:15-20 makes this very clear.

“He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” In John 10:30 Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.” And in John 14:9 he says, “whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” This means that we imitate God by imitating Jesus.

Thankfully Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, tells us how we should imitate Jesus when he says, “walk in love.” In the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters, “walking” means the way we live our daily life. To walk in love means to live a life of love every day. But that naturally leads to another question. What kind of love? How are we to love? Paul gives us two ways. First, this love is to be *forgiving* love. “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Today it seems that forgiveness is in short supply. It’s been replaced by anger or

resentment or revenge. Here's an illustration of how the two are related. When someone wrongs you and you feel resentment or anger, it's like picking up a rock that weighs maybe two or three pounds. It's not really very heavy. But if you carry that rock around all day you'll find that it gets heavier and heavier. That's what resentment does to you. It wears away your strength. Forgiving the person who hurt you is like putting down the rock.

The key to forgiving is to know that you are forgiven by God. That's the message of the cross. God takes sin very seriously. You and I have offended God far worse than we will ever be hurt by someone else. Jesus died on the cross for our forgiveness. When you realize how much God has forgiven you, then you are freed to love and forgive others.

The second way we are to love people by imitating God is a *giving* love. "Walk in love, as Christ loved us and *gave himself* up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Genuine love is always sacrificial. It means giving up your selfish desires in order to focus on the other person. This is the key to any healthy relationship.

God is very generous with each one of us. For starters he gave you life. He gave you the ability to be here this morning. He gives us beauty and joy. But God also gives each of us talents and abilities and He gives us resources like money. Imitating God means giving to others, sacrificing for them, just as Jesus did for us. Romans 5:8 captures this idea perfectly: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Focusing our attention on Jesus' sacrifice for us enables us to sacrifice for others.

In addition to walking in love, Paul instructs us to "walk as children of light." This is related to what we talked about last week. Every moment of every day we have a choice to move closer to Jesus or farther away. The farther we get from Jesus, who said, "I am the light of the world," the darker it gets. As we saw last time, darkness can refer to ignorance or wrong thinking. But the result of that wrong

thinking is wrong acting and so darkness also refers to our attempts to hide our sin.

Ephesus was a notoriously sinful port city in the ancient world. There was an "anything goes" attitude about sex. In fact their religion was basically a sex religion. Their advertising slogan was "what happens in Ephesus stays in Ephesus." Maybe you can think of similar places today. The problem was that some people didn't give up their ways when they became Christians. The same thing happens today. Often people in the church still have the same attitudes about lifestyles they had before giving their life to Christ.

But God is very clear and very serious about sin. "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among the saints." Now it's important to understand that sex is not the problem. Sex is not bad. Remember, God created sex. The problem that Paul is addressing is sex outside of marriage. Christians are often portrayed as being against sex or as just trying to keep people from having fun. The truth is that we actually have a higher view of sexuality. It's not just for recreation. It's much more important. It's the closest bond between a husband and wife.

This warning about cheapening sex also applies to how we talk about it. "Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place." As Christians, we can show how sacred sexuality is by the way we talk about it, or in this case the way we *don't* talk about it. Our culture loves crude, sexual humor. God says if we love Him we shouldn't participate. One of the reasons is that thinking leads to doing. If we are thinking that way it's likely we will begin to act that way.

Instead, you and I are to replace those sinful thoughts and words with thanksgiving. We are to thank God for his good gifts, including the gift of sex. We thank him with our words and we thank him with our actions, using God's gifts in the way He intended. Paul calls this the "fruit of light." Verse 8 says, "for at one time you were darkness, but now you are

light in the Lord.” You and I, as followers of Jesus, are to shine the light of truth into our dark world.

That leads to one last thing we need to understand from this passage. Verses 13 and 14 say, “But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light.” The message here is that repentance leads to forgiveness. All of us will fail from time to time in one of the areas Paul

addresses here. Maybe we get caught up in some crude jokes or maybe we are unkind or unforgiving. But no matter how far you have wandered away from God into darkness, He’s only one step away. Confess your sin, repent, and know that you are forgiven. That should lead you to thanksgiving and the way we show God our thanks is worship.

Amen.