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IMITATING THE GOD OF LOVE

Ephesians 5:1-2

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Ephesians Lesson 39

Imitating the God of Love Ephesians 5:1-2

The late Dr. Albert Schweitzer, famous missionary, medical doctor, and musician, was asked, "What is the best way to raise children?" He replied, "There are three ways: 1) By example, 2) By example, and 3) By example" (cited by Doug Spangler, *American Baby* [August, 1979], p. 35). He was certainly right. By your actions, your words, and your attitudes in the home, your children learn to follow in your footsteps.

The apostle Paul knew the importance of example in teaching others. He told the Corinthians that he was their father in the gospel and then added (1 Cor. 4:16), "Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me." Later in the same letter, he repeated (11:1), "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ." He also told the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:6), "you also became imitators of us and of the Lord...." Using the examples both of a tender, nursing mother and an affectionate father, he told them that he had imparted to them not only the gospel, but also his own life (1 Thess. 2:7-11). Jesus told us to imitate God when He said (Luke 6:36), "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." He went even further when He commanded (Matt. 5:48), "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

After showing us specifically how we are to put off the old way of life and put on the new man in Christ (4:22-32), Paul sums it up in one comprehensive command, calling us to be imitators of God and to walk in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave Himself for us. Our text also serves to introduce the next subject on moral purity, as it contrasts God's way of love with the worldly way of lust. Martyn Lloyd Jones (*Darkness and Light* [Baker], p. 291) says that here "we come to what is perhaps Paul's supreme argument, to the highest level of all in doctrine and in practice, to the ultimate ideal." He points out that Paul is laying down here a principle that governs everything. The entire Christian life may be summed up as a life of imitating God as beloved children as we walk in love. As

Paul points out elsewhere (Rom. 13:8-10), if we love one another we have fulfilled God's law. So Paul is saying,

As God's beloved children, we are to imitate Him in loving one another, just as Christ sacrificially loved us.

1. To imitate God, we must be His beloved children.

Note two things in the phrase, "as beloved children":

- A. We are God's children through the new birth and through adoption.

Contrary to much popular thought, all people are not children of God. There is a general sense in which we all are God's children by virtue of the fact that He created us (Acts 17:28). But the Bible is clear that we become children of God when we are born into His family through a spiritual new birth. In his classic, *Knowing God* [IVP, p. 181], J. I. Packer writes, "What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God for his Father."

John 1:12-13 states, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." Or, 1 Peter 1:3 puts it, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Also, as we saw (Eph. 1:5), "In love, He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will."

These two analogies (the new birth and adoption) bring out different important aspects of our relationship with God. The new birth pictures the fact that God must impart new life to us if we are to be in a relationship with Him. Religion, even theologically correct religion, is not enough to get a person into heaven. Nicodemus, who came to talk with Jesus, was a Jewish leader. He knew the Old Testament scriptures and he practiced the Jewish religious rituals. But Jesus told him (John 3:3), "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." When the Spirit of God imparts new life to us, we enter into a relationship with God the Father through faith in His Son Jesus.

The adoption picture emphasizes God's sovereign choice of us as His own children. Just as parents who adopt a child pick the child they wish to adopt, so God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. But the difference is, human parents often pick the child who is the most attractive or cute. But God chose us knowing that we would be sinful and rebellious towards Him. You will never understand God's great love until you understand the terrible depths of sin from which He rescued you. From the gutters of sin, by grace alone He brought you into His house and gave you all of the privileges of being His beloved child.

If you wonder, "How can I know if I'm born again?" I would answer, "First, do you believe in Christ alone as your only hope for forgiveness of sins and eternal life? And, do you see evidence that God has changed your heart?" Faith in Christ is the main evidence that you have been born of God (John 1:12-13). And, if He has imparted new life to you, you will see evidence of it in your heart. You will have a new desire to love Christ, to obey Him, and to know Him more intimately. You will love His Word. You will love His people. (See First John for many such evidences.)

B. We are His *beloved* children.

Every father has a special love for his own children. As I've said before, I never realized how much my own father loved me until I held my firstborn in my arms. One father described his love for his baby girl this way (Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations* [Assurance Publishers], # 1941):

When I go home from here, I expect to take my baby on my knee, look into her sweet eyes, listen to her charming prattle, and tired as I am, her presence will rest me; for I love that child with an unutterable tenderness. But she loves me little. If my heart were breaking, it would not disturb her sleep. If my body were racked with pain, it would not interrupt her play. If I were dead, she would forget me in a few days. Besides this, she has never brought me a penny, but instead is a constant expense to me. I am not rich, but there is not enough money in the world to buy my baby. How is it? Does she love me or do I love her? Do I withhold my love until I know she loves me? Am I waiting for her to do something worthy of my love before extending it?

No matter how much an earthly father loves his children, the heavenly Father loves His own beloved children much more. As John exclaimed (1 John 3:1), "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are." To imitate God, you must be one of His beloved children.

2. To imitate God, we must know Him and His ways.

You cannot imitate someone that you do not know. During the summer of 1970, I got paid to impersonate Charlie Chaplin at the Movieland Wax Museum in Southern California. To imitate Chaplin, I had to watch many of his movies and study how he acted. I had to learn to walk in the funny way that he walked. I studied his facial expressions. I had a blast, getting my picture taken with thousands of people from all over the world. But I had to know Chaplin and his ways.

A. To know God, we must understand who He is as revealed in His Word.

God has revealed Himself to us through His Word, the Bible. It is crucial that we come to know God as He has revealed Himself and not God as our culture portrays Him or God as we would like Him to be. For example, I have often heard people say, "My God is a God of love, not a God of judgment." The implication of that statement is that this "God" tolerates our sin. The problem is, this is not the God of the Bible. Yes, He is love (1 John 4:7); but also He is holy and disciplines His children so that we may share His holiness (Heb. 12:10; see also, Exod. 34:6-7). So we must learn of God and His ways through God's written revelation to us, the Bible. And we must *submit* to God as He is revealed in the Bible.

B. To know God and His ways, we must often spend time with Him in His Word and in prayer.

A child who spends very little time with his father will not be greatly influenced by him. Influence is directly proportional to time spent together. When a father spends time with his children, they will pick up his mannerisms, for good or for bad. They will see how he treats their mother and learn how to relate to others. They will see his moral standards and be influenced to follow the same standards. They will hear his language, whether it is kind or abusive, and repeat it in their speech.

Paul said (Phil. 3:8), "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." David prayed (Ps. 25:4-5), "Make me know Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; for You I wait all the day."

That kind of ever-deepening knowledge of God and His ways only comes through time spent in His Word and in prayer. If you want God to change you, so that you imitate Him in the way that you think and how you respond emotionally and how you relate to others and how you deal with trials, you must be diligent to spend consistent time alone with Him. There are no shortcuts!

Thus to imitate God, we must be His beloved children and we must know Him and His ways through His Word.

3. To imitate God, we must walk in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave Himself up for us.

To imitate God is comprehensive. It includes speaking the truth, because He is the God of truth. It includes being faithful in our dealings with others, because He is a faithful God. It includes being holy in all our behavior, because He is holy. But the characteristic that Paul mentions to sum it all up is love (5:2): "and walk in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma." To be like God, we must walk in love. Christ is the supreme example of love.

- A. To walk in love, we must understand a biblical (not cultural) definition of love.

Our culture uses the word "love" for everything from, "I love pizza," to "I love my dog," to "I love my wife." Hopefully, there is a difference in those references! But, also, we tend to view love as a nice, warm, fuzzy, feeling. It's kind of magical when it hits, but when it goes away, alas, we can't do anything to get it back! Thus I've had Christian spouses tell me, "I just don't love my mate any more, so we're getting a divorce."

We cannot imitate God in loving one another unless we understand what God's love is. The supreme demonstration of God's love was when He gave His own Son to die for us on the cross. As John 3:16 proclaims, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...." Or, Paul tells husbands (Eph. 5:25), "Hus-

bands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." Jesus told the disciples (John 15:13), "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." And, He told us that we are to love one another, even as He has loved us (John 13:34). From these and other references, I have hammered out this definition of love:

Love is a self-sacrificing, caring commitment that shows itself by seeking the highest good of the one loved.

There are five elements of this definition:

- God's love is a costly love.

He gave His own Son. Christ willingly laid down His life for His church. While we seldom have to go so far as actually to die for others, we often have to lay aside our selfishness, our pride, and our rights in order to practice God's love towards others.

- God's love is a caring love.

"Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him" (Ps. 103:13). God cares for us more than any earthly father ever could (1 Pet. 5:7). If we think about someone, "I couldn't care less what happens to him," we do not love him. Love cares deeply.

- God's love is a committed love.

Christ didn't go to the cross because it felt good! Rather, He was committed to do the will of the Father and He was committed to save His people from their sins. Feelings come and go, but commitment is the glue that makes love endure. "Love never fails" (1 Cor. 13:8).

- God's love is a conspicuous love.

It "shows itself." In other words, it is not just nice thoughts, but also evident deeds (1 John 3:17).

- God's love is a consecrating love.

It is committed to seek the highest good of the one loved. Because Christ loved the church, He also purposed to sanctify her, "that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, hav-

ing no spot of wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:27). This means that love must sometimes exhort and correct and impose consequences for sinful behavior. But I'll warn you: if you confront a professing Christian who is in sin, you will very likely be accused of being unloving. But it is unloving to allow anyone to go on in his sin. To imitate God by walking in love, we must begin with this biblical definition.

B. To walk in love is a lifelong process.

This is the fifth time that Paul has used the word "walk" in Ephesians. In 2:2, he mentions how we used to walk in our sins. In 2:10, he says that we are now to walk in the good deeds which God prepared beforehand for us. In 4:1, he says that we should walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which we have been called. In 4:17, he says that we should not walk as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind. He will go on to say (5:8) that we must walk as children of Light and (5:15) that we must walk carefully, not as unwise men but as wise.

The word "walk" implies a step-by-step, slow but steady process. It refers to our entire manner of life. Paul has already said that we must walk "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love" (4:2). He has said that we must speak the truth in love (4:15), so that the body will build itself up in love (4:16). Love is the main responsibility of the Christian husband (5:25, 28, 33). Incorruptible love for Jesus Christ is the mark of all believers (6:24).

The point is, the longer you are a Christian, the more your life should be characterized by love. As Paul puts it (1 Thess. 4:9-10), "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more." Or (Phil. 1:9), "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment...." It's a lifelong process, but we must strive to grow in it.

C. To walk in love, we must look to Christ, who is both our atoning sacrifice and our supreme example.

To know Christ *only* as your example is not enough. He is our example, of course, but the foundation for following Christ's example of love is to trust in His atoning sacrifice for your sins. The two terms, "offering and sacrifice," "include all kinds of sacrifices, both grain and animal" (Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 355). Christ offered Himself to God as our sacrifice. His death satisfied the justice and wrath of God against our sin, which is the meaning of the phrase, "a fragrant aroma." You must come to the cross and trust in Christ as your atoning sacrifice in order to be reconciled to God. Then, with the power of His indwelling Holy Spirit, you can follow Christ as your example.

Study how Christ loved people. In a nutshell, He was kind and gentle with the broken, but He was forceful and direct with proud hypocrites. Sometimes He was forceful and blunt with His own disciples, as when He hit Peter hard: "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (Mark 8:33). But, His loyal love brought Peter and the others through all of their failures to become the godly apostles of the early church. Look to Jesus Christ as your supreme example of love.

D. To walk in love, especially with those that are difficult to love, allow Christ's sacrificial love to motivate you.

Christ took the initiative to give Himself on our behalf, even while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8). There was nothing in us to motivate Him to love us, but He did it out of His own loving nature and to please the Father. In contrast to the Gentiles, who gave themselves over to immorality (4:19), Jesus gave Himself over (same Greek verb) to death on our behalf (5:2). Now, He calls on us sacrificially to love those who may not be very lovable. Since God is love, we imitate Him by walking in love, motivated by Christ's sacrificial love that saved us from our sins (Gal. 2:20).

Conclusion

I conclude with three practical applications:

First, *to love others commit yourself to the glory of God*. Jesus went to the cross to glorify the Father in obedience to His will (John 17:1-5). Your main motivation in loving others should be to glorify God. The reason I say this is, I have seen people who love others for the response that they hope to get from those that they love.

But sometimes people don't reciprocate your love. Sometimes they betray you or slander you. If you love them for the potential response, you'll burn out. You must love others in order to please and glorify God.

Second, *to love others commit yourself to the Lord's Supper*. It is given so that we will remember what Jesus did for us on the cross. If we forget His supreme sacrifice for us, we will have difficulty sacrificially loving others. His love motivates us to love one another.

Finally, *to love others commit yourself to the body of Christ, the church*. It's easy to love mankind in general, but it's more difficult to love the specific individuals in a particular local church. But love is a commitment to seek one another's highest good. This is one reason for church membership. It is the commitment that enables us to work through differences and misunderstandings. Without that commitment, it's just too easy to move down the road to the next church. But, guess what? That church will have difficult people too, because every church is made up of fallen people. To walk in love, you must be committed to work through relational struggles.

A little boy was following his dad, who was walking in fresh snow. He called out, "Look, daddy, I'm walking in your footsteps!" Our heavenly Father in the person of His own dear Son, walked in love to the cross for us. Imitate Him by walking in His footsteps of sacrificial love!

Application Questions

1. Why must we be careful to know God in all His attributes as revealed in His Word? What errors may result if we don't?
2. Why is it essential to have a biblical definition of love? What problems may ensue if we lack such a definition?
3. Is it necessary to *like* everyone you love? How do these two qualities relate to one another?
4. Why is commitment to a local body of believers foundational for loving relationships? When is it right to leave a church?

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