



Imitators of God

Kicking It Off

Think about a habit or interest you picked up simply because you watched someone you loved do it, not because anyone told you to. What was it, and what made you want to be like them?

Read

Ephesians 5:1-21

Summary

There is a difference between following rules to belong and following rules because you already belong, and the whole Christian life turns on getting that order right. Think about a kid in a good home. He follows the rules and goes to bed on time, but none of that is what makes him his father's child. He is already a child, fully and securely, and that is exactly why the house rules apply to him. When he breaks one, and he will, his father does not say the rule is gone and does not say he is no longer a son. The father says, "You are always my child, which is why I keep reminding you how we live in this house."

Paul is doing the same thing with the church. He spent the early part of Ephesians showing that our identity rests entirely on the work of Christ, not on anything we pull off ourselves. Now he turns to how we live, and the danger is that we will flip the order and start thinking our behavior is what earns the identity. It does not. The identity comes first, and it produces the behavior. "Be imitators of God, as beloved children." Not in order to become children. Because you already are one.

That changes what imitation even feels like. Children naturally want to be like their father, not because someone forces them but because they love him and they know they are loved. So when Paul tells us to walk in love, to walk in the light, and to walk in wisdom, he is not handing us a checklist to climb. He is describing what already wants to come out of a heart that belongs to God. The love he means is the costly kind Christ showed, the kind that keeps loving even when it costs you something, because that is the kind of love that was poured out on you first. The goal this week is not to try harder to

earn what you already have. It is to walk like the beloved child God has already made you.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. Paul tells us to obey God as His beloved children, not in order to become His children. Where in your life do you most often slip back into trying to earn God's acceptance through your behavior rather than living from the acceptance He has already given you?
3. The love Paul describes is costly, the kind Christ showed when He gave Himself up with no personal gain. Where are you most tempted to put the brakes on love out of self-protection, and what would it cost you to keep loving there anyway?
4. The cure for covetousness is thanksgiving, because greed and gratitude cannot occupy the same heart at once. What is one area where comparison has crowded out gratitude lately, and what would it look like to deliberately give thanks instead?
5. Esau traded his birthright for a single bowl of stew because he was thinking with his stomach in the moment. What is the "bowl of stew" that most often tempts you to trade something lasting for something immediate?
6. Paul says everything people chase in the bottle, release and joy and connection, is available in greater measure by being filled with the Spirit. Where are you reaching for a cheap version of fullness right now, and what would it look like to seek the real thing instead?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"Your identity in Christ is even more secure than my children's identity as my kids, because the power of Christ on the cross sealing you as God's child is stronger than I could ever be."

"It is not do this so that you will be children. Do this because you are children. There is nothing in the rule-following that makes them my children, but because they are my children, they do follow the rules."

"Jesus was not obligated to die on a cross for you. He absolutely had an option. He chose to sacrifice himself, and that choice, choosing to do what he was not obligated to do, is what we now call his grace."

"Greed and gratitude cannot coexist. You see something on social media and you say, I want that. The believer says, that stew looks great, but I would never trade my birthright in the kingdom of God for it."

Sermon Notes***Ephesians 5:1-21***

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

3 But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. 4 Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. 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. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. 7 Therefore do not become partners with them; 8 for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light 9 (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), 10 and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. 13 But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, 14 for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

*“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”*

15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Outline

1. Walk in Love (vv. 1-2)

- a. The command rests on identity. Paul says "be imitators of God, as beloved children," not "be imitators of God to become beloved children." The same way my kids follow the rules of my house because they are mine, not in order to become mine, you imitate God because He has already sealed you as His own in Christ.
- b. Children naturally want to be like their father. This is not a duty imposed from outside. It is a desire that belongs to a child who loves his Father and is loved by Him.
- c. The imitation Paul has in mind is love, and the love is costly. Christ "gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice." He was not obligated to die. He chose to, out of no personal gain, simply because He loved us. A mature Christian is not measured by how well he keeps the rules but by whether he loves like that.
- d. Walking in love means taking real steps that are not always safe. Like a child learning to walk, we will falter, but the Father catches us, and in being caught we come to know His embrace.

2. Walk in Light (vv. 3-14)

- a. The sins Paul names, sexual immorality, impurity, and covetousness, are all the heart curved in on itself, feeding the belly outside the will of God.
- b. The cure for covetousness is thanksgiving. Greed and gratitude cannot occupy the same heart at the same time. Our feeds train us to want what others have; gratitude trains us to thank God for what He has given.
- c. Esau is the face of this sin. Exhausted and thinking with his stomach, he sold his birthright for a single bowl of stew (Genesis 25:29-34; Hebrews 12:16). The world still offers stew that smells good and promises to satisfy, and people trade their inheritance for it.
- d. We were darkness, and now we are light in the Lord. Children of light expose the darkness not by condemning the world from a distance but by living so openly that the contrast shows God's way is better.

3. Walk in Wisdom (vv. 15-21)

- a. To imitate God is to walk in wisdom, not foolishness. "Do not get drunk with wine" is less a rule against alcohol than a call away from the foolishness of numbing and toward the fullness of being filled with the Spirit.
- b. Everything people chase in the bottle, release, joy, the life of the party, is available in greater measure and without the hangover by walking in the Spirit, in thanksgiving, and in true fellowship that listens instead of demanding the center.

Notes

The truth about being a father to my kids is that both of them are so much like my wife and me that it is scary, and yet they are each unique in their own way. I am no expert. What I have learned is that each child needs to be trained differently, not because what I am teaching is different, but because their personalities are different. With one of them, if you even hint at disappointment, the tears come and it is like defusing a bomb. With the other, you say something and the face goes blank, and you wonder if anything got through. I bring this up because today Paul is talking to the early church, and he is also talking to us, and what he says is built on the foundation we have been laying all series. You are done with the old self. You have put on the new self in Christ. You are a child of God.

There is nothing my kids could ever do that would strip their identity as my children. If you tried to tell me on Father's Day that there is something a child could do to stop being mine, I would fight you on it. But here is the better news. Your identity in Christ is even more secure than my children's identity as mine, because the power of Christ on the cross sealing you as God's child is stronger than I could ever be. I am not your father. I am barely a spiritual adviser to many of you. What I point to is the power of Christ and how He has declared you His child. So when Paul moves into commands, the logic runs one direction only. It is not "do this so that you will be children." It is "do this because you are children."

We have rules in our house. Take off your shoes before you come in. Bedtime comes early, before the sun goes down. There is nothing in the rule-keeping that makes my kids mine. Because they are mine, they keep the rules. When their friends come for a sleepover, those kids have to follow the rules too, and following them does not make them my children. And when my own kids break a rule, and they will, it does not mean the rule is gone and it does not mean they are no longer mine. I would tell them, "You are always my child, and that is exactly why I am going to keep reminding you of the household rules." My concern with this passage is that Paul has spent the early chapters of Ephesians explaining that your identity rests on the work of Christ, not your own, and now that he turns to the practical, people will think the work makes the identity. It does not. Your identity leads to the work.

So the sermon's title is the first line. "Be imitators of God, as beloved children." Not to become beloved children. Because you already are one. Children naturally want to emulate their father. I am not great at much, so when my kids want to learn something I usually point them to a video from someone who knows better than me. But that is not what they want. What I have found is that simply being with them, going to the park, playing in the front yard, makes them want to do what I do. My family is up at 6:30

running laps around the neighborhood, not because they love running, but because they see me run and they want to be like their dad. As Christians, this is not a call to emulate God because you have to. You are His child, He loves you, and you love Him, so the desire to be like Him should already be in your heart.

The question is how. If I just say "be like God," everyone fills it with their own idea. Paul does not leave it vague. First, walk in love, "as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." I want you to see the centrality of love. A mature Christian is not the one who is best at keeping the Ten Commandments. The young or immature believer is the one most anxious about the rules, terrified of breaking them. The boundaries are good. The law of God is holy and good. But even Jesus says the whole law and the prophets hang on loving God and loving others. The prohibitions show me the edges of love. Murder is the antithesis of loving someone. Stealing takes what is not mine. The point is not the boundaries. The point is the imitation of Christ, whose love was costly. There is no rule that commands grace. Jesus was not obligated to die on a cross for you. Some of us have grown calloused and assume He had to, that it was simply the will of God and there was no other option. He had an option. He chose to sacrifice Himself. That choice, doing what He was not obligated to do, is what we call His grace.

Too many good religious people love because they have to, give because they ought to, sacrifice because they should. Why do you tithe? Because God will be displeased and withhold His blessing if you do not? That is compulsory love, and part of me wants to shout from the rooftop, stop gaming the system. Christ died for you out of no personal gain. He loved even the guards nailing Him to the cross and asked for their forgiveness. That is love above and beyond the obligatory. It is expensive and costly. So often we put the brakes on our love out of self-protection, saying I cannot go that far, it will cost me too much. Did Christ stop loving you when it cost Him? It cost Him everything, and He still chose to love. I am patient zero here. I read this and ask, do I love like Jesus? Very rarely. What ends up happening is that I build a religiosity in myself instead of seeing the extravagant grace of Christ.

Walking in love means every step is not the safest, which is why we keep looking to our Father like a child. I love helping a baby learn to walk. A baby who loses balance and steps forward will fall, because the reflexes to catch himself are not there yet. Someone has to catch him. We are sinful and broken, and yet we can teach a baby to walk. How much more your Father in heaven? When you act in faith and try to love sacrificially, He will catch you. People say they do not experience God's presence. Maybe you always catch yourself. You never let Him catch you, because you refuse to take a single step. The beauty of walking with Christ is knowing that if I falter, and I probably will, He will catch me, and in His embrace my faith becomes real.

Then Paul names the sins, and this passage scares me, because it says the sexually immoral, the impure, and the covetous have no inheritance in the kingdom. These sins are all about being selfish, self-serving, self-gratifying outside the will of God. We were not made to satisfy ourselves. We were made to be satisfied by the Lord. The cure for covetousness is thanksgiving, the most mundane application I can give you. Greed and gratitude cannot coexist. The longer I scroll, the more I want what I see. So I ask the question, does social media produce greed in you or gratitude? Esau is the face of this. Exhausted from the hunt, on the brink of death, he sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of red stew, and Hebrews 12:16 calls him sexually immoral and unholy for it. He thought with his stomach. He chose self-preservation over his spiritual identity. The world still woos people with stew that smells amazing and promises to make life worth living. I am not even here to argue the stew is bad. I get it. But the believer says, that stew looks great, and I would never trade my birthright in the kingdom of God for it. People who opt out to live and sleep and have as they please are not being rejected by Jesus. They are rejecting Him, the way Esau despised his birthright. God loved the world and gave His Son. He is not the one doing the rejecting.

We are children of light, and our job is to expose the darkness, to show that God's way is of a higher order. The church has often made sexual purity an obligation, wagging a finger and saying you cannot. The better way is to say you can live led by your stomach, but you are exchanging your identity in Christ for a bowl of stew. Finally, we walk in wisdom. "Do not get drunk with wine" is not mainly about whether Christians drink. It is about walking wisely instead of foolishly. Nobody gets wiser when they overindulge. Everything people want from the bottle, release, joy, being the life of the party, they can have in greater measure by being filled with the Spirit, by submitting to one another, by listening instead of demanding the center. You will not be drunk on alcohol. You will be overwhelmed by the power of God in someone's life, and there is no hangover after that.

I had to pray about covetousness this week myself. I went to a pastor friend's beautiful home, and instead of thanksgiving, what went through my head was that the church is overpaying him. My response has to be to go to the Lord and confess it. We imitate Him not by being strong but by being humble and weak and letting Him clothe us in the blood of Christ. The story of Esau and Jacob ends with Jacob receiving the blessing in borrowed garments while Isaac, who could not see, was deceived. I think God placed that there to show how Christ has given us His body and His blood, so that when God looks at us, He sees His Son. God is not blind like Isaac. He is not tricked. He clothes us knowingly in the real righteousness of Christ and gives us the blessing of His children. Your job now is to be like Christ, to look like Him and walk like Him, while knowing you do

not have the power to be Him. So receive the blessing with no arrogance, and do not trade it for anything in this world.

Blog

Children imitate their parents before they understand a word of what they are copying. They pick up the walk, the tone of voice, the way a father holds his shoulders or handles a disappointment. No one tells them to do it. It simply happens, because a child belongs to a parent and watches him constantly, and what you watch with love you begin to become. Paul reaches for exactly that picture when he tells the Ephesian church how to live. "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Ephesians 5:1). The command sounds impossibly high until you notice the order of the words. The imitation comes second. Being beloved comes first. We are not told to copy God so that He will accept us. We are told to copy Him because we already belong to Him, the way a son already belongs to the Father whose habits he is quietly absorbing.

Everything Paul is about to ask for grows out of a relationship that already exists, not a relationship we are trying to earn. And he wastes no time telling us what the imitation looks like, because if he left it vague we would fill it with our own ideas of what godliness means. "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (5:2). Love is the imitation. But notice the measure he gives it. Not love as a warm feeling, not love as tolerance, not love as leaving people alone. Love as Christ loved, which means love that hands itself over. The word Paul uses for "gave Himself up" is the language of being delivered to death. The love we are called to imitate has the shape of a cross, costly and turned toward God and neighbor rather than toward ourselves.

Once Paul names the real thing, he has to clear away the counterfeits, because plenty of things wear the name of love while doing the opposite. So he gets specific, and he gets specific in a way that lands uncomfortably close to home. "Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you" (5:3). He keeps going, down into our speech, naming "filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking" (5:4), the casual corrosion of words that tear down instead of build up. What strikes me is how little has changed. You might expect that across two thousand years the human heart would have invented some fresh category of sin. It hasn't. Paul reduces the old life to two summary appetites, the misuse of sex and the hunger for more, and we are still living inside those same two. We have only gotten better at decorating them.

The second of those appetites is the one Paul exposes most sharply, because we tend not to see it as sin at all. He calls the covetous person "an idolater" (5:5). Greed is not merely wanting things. It is worship pointed in the wrong direction, the heart setting up a created thing in the place where God belongs. That is why Paul keeps prescribing such an unexpected medicine. Against corrupt speech and grasping desire he sets one small word, thanksgiving (5:4). It seems too gentle to do anything, until you realize that

covetousness and gratitude cannot occupy the same heart at the same time. Greed fixes its eyes on what is missing. Thanksgiving fixes its eyes on what has been given. You cannot ache for more while you are busy giving thanks for what you already have, and that is precisely why Paul reaches for thanksgiving when he wants to break the grip of wanting.

Then comes the line that holds the whole section together. "At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light" (5:8). Read it slowly. Paul does not say we were in the dark and now carry a lamp. He says we were darkness, and now we are light. The change is not external lighting. It is identity. And that is the engine of his command. Walk as children of light, not in order to become light, but because that is now what you are. This is the heart of what I want us to hear. Believing in Jesus has never meant we stop caring about sin. We have been forgiven of it, fully and freely, and that forgiveness leaves us with a new responsibility, to live as what we now are. Grace does not lower the call to holiness. Grace is what makes the call possible, because it has already made us light.

Light, in Paul's hands, does something active. It does not only let us see. It exposes. "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them" (5:11). Sin survives by hiding. It prefers the secret, the unspoken, the thing everyone does and no one names. Light ends that simply by shining, because, as Paul says, "when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible" (5:13). I want to be careful here about what kind of exposing he means, because it is easy to hear this as a license to scold the world. That is not the aim. The exposing Paul describes is mostly the silent witness of a life lived differently. The church does not need to stand over the culture wagging a finger. It needs to live so openly, so honestly, so plainly in the light, that the contrast itself shows the darkness for what it is. We are a congregation surrounded by the assumption that sexuality is a purely private matter, answerable to no one but the individual, beyond the reach of any moral question. I am not asking us to become the morality police of our neighbors. I am asking us to walk the way of the Lord ourselves, out in the open, with nothing to hide, and to trust that a life in the light does its own quiet exposing.

The obvious problem is that none of this is sustainable by willpower, and Paul knows it. So in the last movement he stops describing the walk and tells us where the strength for it comes from. "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit" (5:18). The contrast is chosen with care. Wine and the Spirit both promise release, both promise to lift you out of yourself. But one empties a person and leaves him with less, while the other fills him and leaves him with more. The command itself is worth pausing on, because in the original it is continuous and it is passive. Paul is

not telling us to fill ourselves once and be done. He is telling us to keep on being filled, again and again, by Someone other than ourselves. We do not generate this. We yield to it. The Christian life is not finally about trying harder to imitate God. It is about being filled by the Spirit of God until the imitation starts to come from the inside.

And Paul tells us what the filling looks like when it happens, which keeps this from drifting into something vague or merely emotional. A Spirit-filled church is "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" and "giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father" (5:19-20). There is that word again, thanksgiving, now flowing not as a discipline we grit out but as the natural overflow of a filled heart. The Spirit produces in us the very gratitude that starves our covetousness. And then He produces one thing more. The whole movement lands on "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21). The old appetites curve a person inward, always calculating what he can get. The Spirit bends him back outward, toward the people beside him, willing to yield, willing to serve, willing to put another first. Where sin makes us grasp, the Spirit makes us give.

So the passage ends where it began, with imitation, but now we can see the full circuit. We imitate our Father by walking in love. That love refuses the counterfeits of impurity and greed and walks instead in the light, openly, with nothing to hide. And we sustain none of it on our own. We are filled with the Spirit, who turns our grasping into gratitude and our self-protection into service. The question this leaves with each of us is not whether we have kept a list of rules. It is whether we have settled into some gray and comfortable corner where the line between us and the surrounding darkness has gone faint. Wherever that corner is, that is the place to walk into the light this week, thankful, given to others, a beloved child learning again to imitate his Father.