

A Model to Follow
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Ephesians 4:31–5:2
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Here are some thoughts on “role models:” John Wooden, the basketball coach said, “Being a role model is the most powerful form of educating.” He added, “Whatever you do in life, surround yourself with smart people who will argue with you,” Geena Davis says, “If they can see it, they can be it.” Lana Del Rey, advises, “Pick your role models wisely.” James Baldwin noted, “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.” And Craig D. Lounsbrough reminds us, “Some of the greatest lessons that we’ve been granted are from those who showed us how ‘not’ to do something.”

One of the challenges of our day is finding good role models for young people. The individuals Americans teenagers admire most are Kylie Jenner and David Dobrik. The former is a fashion model and media personality, and the latter is a YouTube celebrity. Basically, they are two people who are famous for being famous. They have succeeded in that, but are they really good role models? Yet, all of us, young and old do need good models to imitate.

When the apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians, a letter that is for all Christians at all times, in all places, he tells us to follow the best model. He says, “Be imitators of God.” Just as children often imitate their earthly fathers, Christians should imitate their heavenly Father. Without question, God is absolutely the best role model anyone could ever follow. This morning, as we continue our study of Ephesians, we will explore the end of chapter 4, verses 31 and 32 and the first two verses of chapter 5. Let’s pause and pray that the Lord would use His word to help us imitate Him and follow His model.

So, how do we imitate our heavenly Father? How do you be like God? Do you create your own planet or try to govern the universe? Well, you can try, but you will not succeed. Yet, it is possible to imitate the Lord in some important ways. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul says to follow his example as he follows that of Jesus. He says in **Ephesians 5:1,2 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. So, how do we imitate God? Paul gives a three-word phrase that sums it up, “Walk in love.” The old NIV said, “Live a life of love.” Paul is not saying anything really new. The old Testament contains 39 books, 951 pages in my Bible, and within it are hundreds of instructions. But in Matthew 22, Jesus says all of them can be summed up in two commands; love God with your entire being, and love other people, as you love yourself. Love God, love others. We live in a complex and complicated world. Yet, our primary purpose is still simple. Follow the example God gives us. Walk in love.

Now, maybe you are thinking, “Pastor Dan, that is not really profound. Almost everyone agrees that we should love other people.” Yet, often our ideas about what is involved in being a loving person are pretty shallow. A common definition of “walking in love” means being a nice person who is concerned about humanity. If you support good causes, don’t scream at your kids, cry during the right movies, then you are seen as a loving and sensitive individual. Yet, God’s standards are higher. Our love is to be an imitation of His love. However, that statement by itself is not enough. There is a bit of confusion and misunderstanding about what God love is like, and thus it is unclear as to what we are to imitate. So let’s try to bring things into focus. I want to point out four characteristics of God’s love that we should imitate.

First, God’s love is a righteous love. Some folks focus on love, one aspect of God’s character, but ignore other important attributes. The result is comments like this: “A loving God would never allow anyone to end up in hell” or “A loving God would not punish sincere people, even if they are wrong.” That is not true. God is love, yes. That is what 1 John 4:8 says. But His love is always true, Holy, righteous, and just. To imitate God’s love does not mean we smile sweetly at people no matter what they are doing. One of Dr. Dobson’s most popular books is “Love Must Be Tough.” Indeed, if we really love someone, we care enough about that person to confront him/her when necessary. There is a song that says, “God loves you just the way you are, but loves you too much to let you stay that way.” Most parents

understand this. If we love our children, we do not let them have whatever they want, whenever they want. It is because you love your son, that you don't let him have peanut M&M's instead of vegetables for dinner each evening. It is because my wife, Nancy, loves me that she doesn't let me have peanut M&M's for dinner.

Okay, I hope you get the analogy. The point is simply that God's love never compromises His righteousness and holiness. Even though God loves us, He doesn't overlook our sinful attitudes and behavior. And folks, our love for other people should be the same way. When you love someone it doesn't mean you give into every whim or desire that person has. Instead, you do your best to help that individual become who God wants him/her to be. That will work out differently in various situations. Maybe your friend Joe asks for a loan of \$100, but because you love him you give him \$200. However, if Jeff asks to borrow \$100, the loving thing to do is to say, "No, Jeff, I am not helping you by giving you more money." Our love, like God's, should be a righteous love.

Second, God's love is gracious. It is given to those who don't deserve it. His love cannot be earned. On occasion I hear a Christian pastor or teacher say something like this: "God loves us. This means we are loveable. Therefore, we are valuable, should always feel good about ourselves, and be please with whoever we are." Wrong! That is not what the Bible teaches. That is not the gospel. The great news, the true gospel, is that God loves us even though we are not all that loveable. **Remember Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** Did you catch that? "While we were still sinners, even when we are rebelling against Him, God loves us. He loves us not because we are so lovable, but because *He is so loving*. That is the amazing grace of God His love for us in unmerited and underserved.

So if we are to imitate God, this means our love must extend to folks we don't think are very lovable. It might be someone whose lifestyle is quite different from yours. It could be an individual who makes a lot more or a lot less money that you do. The less loveable may include people whose political view you abhor, or those individuals who you think are simply weird. One verse in the Bible that always challenges me is

Matthew 5:46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? So, when someone tells me, "Pastor Dan, you are suck a kind, loving person," I should ask, "Hey, are you just saying that I am really nice to people who are nice to me? Or do I love folks who don't seem very lovable? Do I love those who are unlikely to love me back?" If I am imitating God, that is what I would do.

Friends, who do you consider to be difficult people to love? The guy at work who is always suing foul language? The gal at school who seems to be super popular and often makes fun of you? The Lesbian who lives across the street? Your cousin, doing time in prison right now? People who are drug addicts, mentally ill, or active in the other political party? Oh, I know I can find some of those folks hard to love, but I also know that if I'm going to imitate God, that is what I need to do.

Third, God's love is practical. It is love in action. It is nice when people say they love us. It is nice when someone has warm feelings toward us. However, what really counts is when people love us with their actions. **Ephesians 5:2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.** God's love is clearly linked with the death of Jesus Christ. The cross is God's love in action. Jesus died as a substitutionary sacrifice, taking the place of sinners like you and me. He experienced that punishment for us for our sins, so that we don't have to do so. It is important to realize that without the death of Jesus, God's love would be rather empty. The Lord could serenade us with love songs, but these would be of little value because without the death of Jesus Christ we would be lost in our sins. Jesus' death on the cross is exactly what God provided. God's love involves more than good intentions. It is love in action. As we seek to imitate the Lord, we too need to put our love into action. Thomas Watson, one of the English puritans, said, "Faith deals with the invisible, but God hates invisible love. Affection without action, is beautiful, but barren." He was right. Friends, it is great to tell people that we love them. It is super to be compassionate and shed tears for someone who is hurting. But as 1 John 3:18 notes, our love for others must be more than words. To be true love, it must include action.

That is what Florence Hodges of Dothan, AL, always sought to do. She believed the Lord had called her to share her love with those who were sick. For years, she volunteered at the hospital seven days a week, eight hours a day. She would spend her time in the ICU, visiting patients and comforting their families. She carried on her work with great enthusiasm until she was 95 years old. Friends, she was imitating the love of God.

Fourth, God's love is expressed through forgiveness. In some say this is the most powerful expression of His love. Though we may consider ourselves to be nice, good natured people the Bible makes it clear, that each of us, in our own way, has wronged God. In fact, we have wronged Him big time. That is why in **Romans 3:10** the apostle Paul says, "**There is no one righteous, not even one.**" Friends, God is the creator. We are His creatures. The reason He put us on this planet, our purpose in life, is that we would worship Him, enjoy Him and serve Him. Yet, most of the time we don't want to do that. We are rebellious, inclined to serve ourselves, rather than serve God. Oh, we might be going to church almost every Sunday. We may consider ourselves a devout Christian, other folks may think we are a wonderful person. However, each of us has told God, probably not with these words, but in our way, "Get lost. Leave me alone. *Let me do things my way.*" That offends God, deeply. It wrongs Him. There is really no adequate analogy, but it would be like if a wonderful parent, who had made many sacrifices, is told by his/her 18-year-old child, "Dad/Mom, I hate you. Give me some money and leave me alone." That would be awful. Yet, on a spiritual level that is what we have each done to God. However, God forgives all of us who trust in Jesus Christ. In **Ephesians 4:32b** Paul says we are to forgive each other, **Just as God in Christ forgave you.**

The Bible says that when God forgives us, He remembers our sin no more. He removes the deep stain that has been left on our soul. Because of Jesus' death for us, He justifies, considers Jesus' perfect score to be our own, and treats us as if we have never sinned. That is God's amazing grace and love. And Paul says we should imitate this. We should forgive those who have wronged us. No, that is not an easy thing to do. But, if you are a Christian, if you have experienced God's saving grace in your life, that is what you are to do. **Ephesians 4:31 Let all bitterness and wrath**

and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. In other words, get rid of those things. Before you were a Christian, if someone stepped on your toes, if someone took advantage of you in some way, it was okay to be mad. It was even better to get even. Yet, as a Christian, getting mad or even is totally inappropriate. It won't do. **Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.** Some of you are thinking, "Pastor Dan, you do not know what this person did. You don't know how much he hurt me." You are probably right. Unless you told me, I don't know. But this is a choice each of us has to make. Neither I, nor anyone else, can choose to forgive for you.

Now, this can be a very complicated topic because I believe there are situations where the Lord doesn't expect us to forgive in the same total, unconditional way as He does. The Lord promises His people, **Hebrews 8:12 I will be merciful toward their iniquities,** and **Psalm 103:12 says, As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.** It would be ideal to forgive others that way, but sometimes that is just not wise. Let's say my friend, Joe, slanders me, tells some people things about me that simply are not true, and he knows they are not true. Should I forgive him? Yes, but... What he did really hurt me and I cannot and should not just ignore it. Unless he acknowledges what he has done and apologizes, it is impossible for that relationship to truly be restored. Now, if Joe does apologize and he is sincere, I need to be willing to forgive him. Yet, it is likely that our relationship will still be damaged. I probably won't trust Joes like I once did. Hopefully, I won't be angry and bitter toward him, but it will be a while before my relationship with Joe is fully restored and I have *forgotten* that he hurt me. That is when forgiveness will be complete. And truly like the forgiveness that God grants us.

Now, Paul didn't have these caveats in mind when he wrote **Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.** In other words, those who have been forgiven by God, must forgive others. We need to avoid bitterness, get rid of grudges, and be willing to forgive those who wrong us.

In fact, one of the indications that someone is truly a believer in Jesus is a willingness to forgive. Those who have truly received grace, are inclined to extend grace to others. Corrie Ten Boom would tell about speaking at a church in Munich, Germany, and seeing one of the former Nazi guards from Ravensbruck in the audience. His presence in the room brought back the horrors and humiliation of that concentration camp, including the death of her sister, Betsy. After the meeting, the man approached Corrie, put out his hand and said, "I am grateful for your message, frauline. To think, as you say, that he has washed my sins away." Even at that point, a shadow of hatred covered Corrie's heart and she felt like turning her back on this murderer. But his words, her experience of God's love and forgiveness, and the power of the Holy Spirit, enabled her to forgive and to grasp the hand of that former S.S. guard. That, friends, is an imitation of God's love.

Friends, we have talked before that because Jesus is the unique, eternal son of God, we are not called to imitate everything He did. Walking on water, unless the ice is three or four inches thick, or dying on a cross for the sins of others, are not what God expects us to do. However, the Lord has made clear through our text today that we are to imitate His love and live that life of love. A good question for you to ask yourself is this: Do I have a love for others that is righteous, gracious, practical and full of forgiveness? If not, why not? Maybe you didn't know you were supposed to do that or were not aware of what God's love is like. Now you know, at least if you have been listening, what God's love is like. Or maybe the problem is that you are not really capable of this type of love. To imitate someone we need to both know what that person does and be able to do the same thing. I would love to imitate Jeanne when it comes to playing the piano. I know what she does. I have watched her play, but I cannot do it. Even if I was good at reading the music, my fingers will not do what hers do. Friends, the only way we are capable of imitating God and loving other people is if we have experienced His love in our lives. Frankly, if you are not a believer in Jesus Christ that has not happened. Thus, your efforts to imitate God's love are destined to fail. The first step of becoming an imitator of God is to turn to Jesus Christ and embrace Him as Savior and Lord. If you're not sure what that means, or maybe not sure you've done that, make sure you talk to me real soon.

Friends, if you are a genuine Christian, you then have experienced God's love. And whether you realize or not, that love enables you to love others, even those who are not exactly loveable. It probably won't be easy, it will take some practice, but through Christ, you can do it. Now, you will still fail sometimes and when that happens you need to confess your lack of love to the Lord, receive His forgiveness. And then you can renew your commitment to be an imitator of God, sharing His love with others, but His grace and for His glory.