

Imitating God

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[0 : 00] You may find it helpful to have the passage from Ephesians 5 in front of you open. It's on page 951 in the Pew Bibles.

I guess all of us have had people who, on whose lives we have modelled ours in some respects. Especially, I think, children model their lives on particular adults.

Usually sports heroes. I remember playing cricket wishing that I could bat as well as whoever was batting well at the time. My godson Nathan would love to be able to play football like Wayne Campbell.

Many people model their style on film stars or TV personalities. Sometimes in business we model our lives on successful businessmen.

Perhaps, though, the most important model, of course, for us in our lives and especially for young children is the model of our parents. My niece and nephew, who are seven and four, so often reflect their parents in the way they look, the expressions, the things they say, the little ways in which they stand.

[1 : 20] My niece will stand with her arms on her hips and say things just like my sister does. And I'm sure that we can think of many examples like that where we pick up the modelling of our parents or other people, but especially, I think, our parents.

And that's one of the pictures that Paul has in mind here at the beginning of this passage in Ephesians 5. For in the preceding chapter, all the demands that he's been making for holy living, for unity, for maturity and for purity in the Christian church, come and arise in the context of a Father God and Children of God context.

That is, he says it, summing up what he's been saying, Therefore, be imitators of God, not just imitate God as a model out there somewhere, but imitators of God as beloved children.

So in the same way that little children pick up the mannerisms, the character, the ways of speaking, the ways of relating of their parents, Paul is saying, you then, the church, as the children of God, imitate God, your Father, is in effect what he's saying.

Bear the family likeness. You are the children of God, therefore, reflect that family likeness. He's not saying, adopt the characteristics of God and imitate God in order that you might become part of his family.

[2 : 45] He's saying, you are his family, therefore, because God has made you his family, therefore, bear the family likeness in the way you live your life. Notice the order.

Remember, you are his family already. Therefore, reflect the family likeness. It's the same sort of thing that we saw last week. Our allegiance has switched from being an allegiance to the world or ourself to an allegiance to Christ.

I used the picture of putting on a new football jumper. Once you were part of this team, now you're part of Christ's team and you've put on his jumper. But there's more, having done that, then play the style or fit the way of living of that team.

And the same sort of idea here. God is the one who's made you a member of his family. That came up in chapter one. By God's grace, one of the spiritual blessings we've received is adoption into the family of God through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, because we already belong to that family, let us reflect the family likeness in the way we live, the way we relate, the way we speak, the way we think, the way we do everything we do.

[3 : 54] He gives some examples in the preceding verse. At the end of chapter four, I touched on last week, Paul has said, put away all these things to do with malice and wrath and slander, and in its place, put on, at the end of chapter four, verse 32, be kind to one another.

God is the one who's kind. Imitate that kindness. Be tender-hearted. God in Christ is the one who is tender-hearted or compassionate. Therefore, imitate God.

And he makes it clear at the end of that verse, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgives you or has forgiven you. Imitate God.

Imitate those characteristics of God. Tender-heartedness, forgiveness, and kindness. He goes on then to give even a stronger example of the way in which we're to imitate God in verse two.

And live in love. Not any sort of love, but this sort of love. As Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[4 : 59] The nature of love which we are to reflect as the family likeness of God's people, the church, is the love that Christ demonstrated when he died on the cross for us. A love that is selfless.

A love that is sacrificial. A love that is giving for the sake of others rather than for oneself. That's the sort of love that we are to reflect. We are to act out.

We are to speak and think within the family of the fellowship of God's people, the church. That's a costly love. That's real love. Christ, of course, loved us in a unique way.

He died for us on the cross to forgive us our sins and bring us reconciliation with God the Father. But nonetheless, there is a character of that love that we are to reflect as well.

A love that is giving, not taking. A love that is selfless, not selfish. A love that is honouring of God. Paul goes on then to give a contrast in the verses that follow.

[5 : 58] And the verses that follow, I think, is in many respects a description of love in our world today. But fornication and impurity of any kind or greed must not even be mentioned among you as is proper among the saints.

If you were to ask people what love is about today, they think it's to do with sex. And, of course, they've got it wrong. And Paul is making that very clear here. He's saying, have true love, the love of Christ.

But fornication, that is any sort of sexual immorality, that's adultery, prostitution, any sort of sexual indecency, that's not to be part of you. That's a wrong sort of love.

Impurity means, again, any sort of sexual sin. Greed or literally covetousness is probably here not so much thinking about coveting your neighbour's ox or his ass or anything that is his, but rather his wife or her husband.

Sexual covetousness or lust. Paul says they are to have no place among you. As the people of God. These are all descriptions of selfish love that is wanting to receive, rather than the selfless love of Christ that gives.

[7 : 03] This is really lust, not love. This is indulgence, not sacrifice. And Paul says it must not even be mentioned among you. Well, of course, he's mentioning it here in his letter, but he doesn't just mean it in that sense.

He means that it shouldn't be the focus of interest of your life. Talking about it will promote it as a temptation or as an interest. Put it out entirely from your midst.

He makes that clear in verse 4. Entirely out of place is obscene, silly and vulgar talk. Not meaning just jokes, but rather meaning rude or dirty jokes.

Sexual innuendo. That sort of thing. That has no place in the Christian life and in Christian fellowship. And he doesn't mean it doesn't have any place here now as we meet together.

But it means it doesn't have any place in your life wherever you are. At work, at the pub, in a group that you belong to. For a Christian, this sort of talk has no place in your life.

[8 : 04] It doesn't matter what company you're with. It's to be not a part of your life. As we saw last week, Paul is not only on about putting off bad things, but in their place we are to put on good.

It's not just a matter, of course, that we put away the dirty or obscene talk, but as we saw last week in verse 29, we're to exhibit wholesome talk. Talk that edifies and builds up.

Not just neutral patter of the day, but rather positive and wholesome talk. And again, that putting off and putting on comes here. Putting off all this sexual fornication and impurity and silly talk, and instead, the end of verse 4, let there be thanksgiving.

I think that's there. It fits. Because it focuses on God and the things before focus on ourselves. Put away the things that seek to acquire and gain the lusts that we have, but rather give thanksgiving to God because he's given us all we need.

And sexual fornication and impurity and lust is about feeding wrong desires, as though there are things we need or want. But thanksgiving to God reminds us that there are not things we want or need, because God has given us all we need.

[9 : 20] So a corrective to that sexual sin of desire is a recognition that God in his grace has given us all we need already. A severe and solemn warning to those who wish to practice those sorts of things.

Well, what are we to make of these sorts of instructions? Isn't ours a more liberated age? Isn't our society a society that regards biblical sexuality as being a rather old hat, puritanical?

We live in a much more enlightened and liberated time. So really isn't this a bit outdated now? If the church is to be with it for our society, it's got to be relevant.

It's got to show that it's up to date and put aside these sorts of old-fashioned ideas if it's to relate to our modern society. There are enormous temptations and pressures for the church to water down biblical truth about morality and sexual morality.

The Uniting Church is vulnerable to giving way, I think, given the report that's been in the press lately. And the Anglican Church is probably not far behind. All the pressure to get with the times and be up to date and be relevant is an illusion.

[10 : 40] It's interesting to reflect on the fact that the New Testament was written to and in a society that was even more immoral than ours, a society that was more sexually indulgent even than ours.

In Ephesus there was the great temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the world. And one of the means by which people of Ephesus would worship Artemis and be practicing religion in her name would be to engage in sexual immorality and even sexual orgies.

The statues, the pictures are very immoral, almost pornographic in their description of that religion. It's into that context that the New Testament standards of sexual morality were written and spoken about and applied.

There was no compromise there about trying to be relevant for our age, watering down God's standards at all. But rather there was a clear perception that God's standards and the world's standards did not agree.

And there was an enormous resistance, rightly, that God's standards should never be compromised for the sake of the world's standards or for relevance or for being up to date or with it in any sort of sense.

[11 : 58] God's standards are God's standards for every day. And they are not the world's standards. They are determined by God and not the world. And so as members of his family, we are to share his standards.

The pressure to give way in issues of sexual morality is great. God's words here are as relevant for us as for the Ephesians.

And they are truth for us as they were truth for them. Any sort of sexual immorality, any sort of sexual activity outside marriage is wrong in God's eyes.

And Christian people must have no part of that at all. Paul goes on to say, do not be associated with these things in verse 7.

Not meaning the people so much as the activity. He's not calling the church to be cut off from the world, but he's calling it to engage with the world but not share its practices.

[13 : 15] Relate to the people, but do not share or participate in their sexual immorality. And the distinction between those who are Christians and those who are not is abundantly clear in the verses that follow.

For once you were darkness, but now you are light, and darkness and light have nothing in common with each other. You belonged there when you weren't a Christian, but now you belong to the light, and therefore your standards will be completely the opposite of the standards of this world.

We are light in the Lord, remembering that the Lord Jesus is the light of the world, in verse 8. Because we belong to the light, that's already the case if we're Christian people, then the injunction is, live as children of light.

The end of verse 8. You're already light, therefore live, reflect, who you already are as the Christian people in God's family. And the fruit of light is goodness, righteousness and truth.

The things that Paul has been discussing in the preceding verses and chapter. But it's interesting to just reflect on the nature of the way in which light relates to darkness.

[14 : 20] Paul goes on to say, take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, in verse 11, but instead expose them. For if we are light, it's not that we are in light so much as we are light, in verse 8.

We are light. Then one of the ways in which we live as Christians in this world is that we expose the darkness or the sin of the world. So that as we engage with our world and relate to people who are not Christians, then our light living will expose their dark living.

But not so much exposure for the sake of condemnation and judgment, though that may eventually come, but rather for the sake that the dark sins of this world and those who practice such will themselves turn and become light.

So notice what Paul goes on to say in verse 13 and 14. Everything exposed by the light becomes visible. For everything that becomes visible is light.

It's a fairly enigmatic statement. But it seems to be suggesting that for Christians our ethical purity will show up the impurity of our world and ultimately for the sake of winning over those that they may also embrace God and his standards.

[15 : 45] Sleeper awake, rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you. That's a quote we don't know where from, maybe from an early church liturgy, maybe from an early church baptism service.

But what it seems to be saying to the non-Christian darkness of this world, awake, oh sleeper, rise from the dead, for you are dead if you're not Christian, as we saw in chapter 2.

And Christ will shine on you. And in part, that's to be our mission in the world. That by our ethical living, this is only part of our mission, but by our ethical living, we shed light on this dark world.

The last paragraph we're looking at today, verses 15 to 21, has three sets of contrasts. Don't be this, but be this. Don't be unwise in verse 15, but be wise.

And that's characterized by making the most of the time, using the opportunities of the time. And it seems to be in the context of using the opportunities to shed light on an evil and dark world.

[16 : 52] Because, Paul says, at the end of verse 16, the days are evil. There is no place for Christian slackness in life, because time is short. The days are evil.

We must use our time as wisely and effectively as we can to shed light on this evil world. Verse 17 is the second contrast.

Do not be foolish, but rather understand what the will of the Lord is. And that's clear from the verses and chapters that precede. The will of the Lord is goodness and righteousness and truth, and unity and maturity and purity, and so on.

So don't be foolish, but rather be wise by living lives that are good and righteous and pure. And then the third contrast. This is one that is very topical in the church in recent times, and one I want to explain and try and put to rest some misnomers.

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit. To be filled with the Spirit or to be Spirit-filled is one of the little cliches of the day.

[18 : 01] It used to be to be born again. And so in America you can have born again cars and born again this, that or the other. Everything was born again. It became very popular with Jimmy Carter. But now it's to be Spirit-filled.

So sometimes somebody might ask you, are you Spirit-filled? Is your church Spirit-filled? Is your new vicar Spirit-filled? Is your pet hamster Spirit-filled? Indeed you can go into a bookshop and buy a Spirit-filled Bible these days. I'm not really sure why any Bible should be more Spirit-filled than another, but maybe the Holy Spirit's words are in red or something like that.

But it's the in term. But often, sadly, the wrong sort of connotations are applied to us. And we need to understand exactly what it means. Often the expression to be filled with the Spirit is taken completely out of its context.

And here, hopefully, as you've been reading and thinking through Ephesians 1-5 so far in the recent weeks, you understand some of the context with which Paul now says be filled with the Spirit.

Let me make a few observations. In these last two chapters, the context is of worthy living, living worthy of the calling to which you've been called, living a life of love, living a life that's distinct from the pagan society around about you, living a life of wisdom.

[19 : 09] So the Spirit-filled life is in that context of life worthy of God. Spirit-filled life then will be in the context of unity in the church and purity and maturity and growing in maturity as Christian people.

There is a contrast made to drunkenness here. Do not be drunk but be filled with the Spirit. In Ephesus and in the ancient world, drunkenness was sometimes seen to be a religious state.

To get close to God, you would get drunk with wine and alcohol and so on because it was thought to bring on a higher spiritual state. But a contrast is made between that and being filled with the Holy Spirit.

And yet, so often you hear people say, well, if you're filled with the Spirit, it'll be like being drunk. You might fall over or be out of control or something like that. You're not in control of your language. But indeed, they've misread because a contrast is made, not a similarity, but rather a contrast between being filled with the Spirit and being drunk.

Almost without exception in the New Testament, anybody or group who is filled with the Spirit goes on to preach, to prophesy God's Word or to praise Him in intelligent ways.

[20 : 20] and indeed, that's the case in this passage as well as we'll see in a minute. Never does being filled with the Spirit describe some sort of ecstatic experience or some warm inner feeling.

Maybe it's there, but never in the New Testament is the term being filled with the Spirit equated with some sort of strange experience or phenomenon, whether laughing or falling down or feeling heat or love inside or anything like that.

Maybe they're there, but that's not actually what defines being filled with the Spirit. A few comments about the actual command to be filled with the Spirit. It's a passive verb.

Paul's not saying fill yourself with the Spirit. He's saying be filled with the Spirit. You don't do it. I don't do it. We don't need some charismatic super guru to come and do it for us.

God is the one who fills with His Spirit. That's the importance of the verb there. It's also a plural verb. It's not saying you as an individual and you as an individual be filled with the Spirit, but you as a church be filled with the Spirit.

[21 : 25] It's a corporate thing. After all, the unity we have is a unity of the Spirit, so to be filled with the Spirit is in part a reflection of our unity as a corporate people of God. The sense of the verb is of a continuous sense.

In John 2, Jesus said to the people, the servants, go and fill those jars with water before He made them wine. There He used a verb that had the sense of once off. He didn't say keep filling them.

He said fill them. And they did. But here the sense of the verb is to keep on being filled. It's an ongoing, continuous process or event.

And lastly, it's a command. This is not just for the super spiritual. This is for every one of you, every one of us, all of us. It's an obligation of Christian life to be filled with God's Spirit.

It's a command and there is no opting out if we're Christian people. The consequences of being filled with the Spirit come in the clauses that follow.

[22 : 31] There are four of them and they all depend upon grammatically being filled with the Spirit. The first is addressing one another or singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves.

It's actually a participle and it's dependent upon being filled with the Spirit. So the first half of verse 19, that's the first thing that's a consequence of being filled with the Spirit that we're actually addressing each other in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

And the second one is now addressing God, singing and making melody to the Lord. So rather the first one is to each other, the second to the Lord, in your hearts. Well that doesn't mean that we sort of wander through the forest humming poo-like tunes, as in Winnie the Poo-like tunes, but rather it means sincerely from our hearts singing to the Lord.

The third consequence is that we give thanks to God, in and for everything, not just the good times, but all the times, the bad times as well as the good. That's the third consequence of thanksgiving.

And the fourth consequence is verse 21, sadly separated by a little heading in our Bibles, but again it's a participle, not a main verb, and it's dependent upon being filled with the Spirit, being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

[23 : 39] And the fourth consequence then of being filled with the Spirit is of a mutual submission within the people of God. How may we be filled with the Spirit of God?

Paul doesn't actually say. But I take it that one of the parallels of this passage is in Colossians 3. The same consequences get mentioned, but rather than saying being filled with the Spirit, he says, let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.

And I think in the context of Ephesians that fits as well. That as the Word of Christ, the Word of the Gospel, the Word of truth, the statement of the grace of God that Paul has made in Ephesians 1 to 3, as that takes root in us deeply, then so will we be filled with the Spirit of God, the transforming grace and Word of God.

Well, I wonder whether that's a description of us. Is a description of us that we encourage each other with spiritual songs and praises, that from our hearts we sing praise to God and have thanksgiving in everything and have mutual submission in the church.

But I take it they're not the only consequences of being filled with the Spirit. It seems to me that it's applying to all the things that Paul's been saying in the preceding verses and chapter. Living lives of love, living lives of wisdom, living lives that are worthy of God, living lives of unity in the church, of maturity of Christian faith, of unity of faith and of purity of life.

[25 : 06] That's all part of being filled with the Spirit of God. Is that a description of us? It may be that some of you here aren't sure that you even have the Spirit of God in you.

It's worth knowing that if you're a Christian you must. Paul's made that clear in chapter 1. The part of the grace of being a Christian is that God's Spirit is in each one of us. And if you're unsure whether that's the case for you then maybe you'd like to see me sometime or give me a ring during the week.

Maybe you are fairly complacent about your Christian life. You think that you basically live a life that is worthy and that's good if it is indeed the case. But notice that in this passage in verse 15 Paul said be careful then how you live.

For we're not going to live worthy lives naturally. It's not as though we'll just get up in the morning and almost naturally or by habit we'll live worthy lives of love and goodness and righteousness and purity.

There'll be some reflection of that I should hope. But Paul says be careful how you live. It requires conscious effort to live worthy lives for God. And that's why this verb is a present tense because it means keep on being filled.

[26 : 18] We can't sit back and say oh well I've been filled it's okay I've made it. But rather keep on being filled every day every hour every minute all the time keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

But maybe as you've read through and heard sermons on these last few weeks about all these extraordinary demands of God for perfection really for purity for holiness there can be a way in which we feel a bit overawed by it.

Maybe even a bit despairing that we're ever going to meet the standard. Maybe we feel a bit oh I just don't think I can live like that. It's too far beyond me.

Then let me encourage you. God not only sets us a perfect standard but he gives us resources to meet it. Be filled with the Spirit of God.

God not only calls us to imitate him but he gives us his own spirit to enable that imitation to take place and to grow in us. Purity is never the product of our own effort alone but is the fruit of God's work in us as well.

[27 : 29] And the same for unity and maturity and love and wisdom and all these other things. God not only sets us an impossible standard but he gives us the resources by his Spirit to meet it in our lives in a gradual process I guess.

So don't be discouraged by all of this. We're called to imitate God and bear the family likeness but we know also that his Spirit is in us and is working in us and we need to keep on being filled with that Spirit so that we may indeed bear that likeness.

Let's pray. O God you are our Father because you've adopted us to be your children through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And Father we want to reflect you and we want to be like you in our lives and we thank you that you've given us your Spirit so that we may reflect you in our lives and may imitate you and we pray that you will enable us to keep on being filled with your Spirit so that more and more our lives will be worthy of the calling to which you've called us that our lives will be lives of love and lives of wisdom and lives which imitate your character in every way.

Amen. Amen.