

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and *there must be no* filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” Ephesians 5:1-5, NAS95.

Imitating the God of Love is at the core of this section of Pauls’ letter. In these verses we can see the contrast of living as godly or ungodly persons. Paul continues these thoughts for more verses.

“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light *consists* in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. For this reason it says, “Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you.” Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.” Ephesians 5:6-21, NAS95.

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, meaning Christ, for Christ is the fullest expression of who God is in the New Covenant era and to walk in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave Himself for us. 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 Christ 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 Christ in loving one another, just as Christ sacrificially loved us. This is in part what it means to live according to the Law of Christ.

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. This is the promise of the New Covenant:

“But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write

it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. "They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." Jeremiah 31:33, 34, NAS95.

"He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel *and* its Holy One, To the despised One, To the One abhorred by the nation, To the Servant of rulers, "Kings will see and arise, Princes will also bow down, Because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You." Thus says the LORD, "In a favorable time I have answered You, And in a day of salvation I have helped You; And I will keep You and give You for a covenant of the people, To restore the land, to make *them* inherit the desolate heritages;" Isaiah 49:6-8, NAS95.

B. We are His beloved children.

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.

A. To know God, we must understand who He is as revealed Christ and in the word of God.

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

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

To imitate Christ 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 anymore, so we're getting a

divorce.”

We cannot imitate Christ 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), “Husbands, 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, having 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 the standard 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).

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 Christ. 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 Christ.

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.