

*Ephesians 4:29-5:2.*

***<sup>29</sup> Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children <sup>2</sup> and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.***

**Be imitators of your Heavenly Father!**

- 1. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you!**
- 2. Be sealed in your role as his child!**

Perhaps there are pictures somewhere of you dressing up in your father's clothes. What precious pictures of love and admiration, those pictures are! Perhaps you can remember that image of a little boy who was drowning in his dad's shirt or suit coat. Or he has Dad's hat on which is far too big and it is draped over his eyes or pushed back on his head so that he can see. Or the picture is of a little girl stumbling about in her father's shoes so oversized for her small feet. It is a picture of love and adoration. "I want to be like Daddy!" the child seems to say and a father proud of that moment snaps a picture and remembers it fondly.

The apostle Paul digs out, uncovers, and mines a similar image of devotion and love as he encourages us to be imitators of God. As he writes this letter to the Christians in Ephesus he encourages these dear Christians to, "***Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.***"

As a person chuckles at the thought of a child standing in his or her father's shoes, we realize that these are huge shoes that Paul is asking us to fill. "Be imitators of God!" Those shoes are heavy and so terribly oversized for us. These shoes are perfect and holy and we are but foolish sinful children. We stumble in this effort. And it's not very funny at all when we fall on our face trying to be

good let alone perfect. “Be imitators of God!” But that is what God has called us to be. He has called us to be Christians, or “little Christs” demonstrating his mercy and forgiveness, kindness and love to others.

However, instead of imitating God, too often, we end up mimicking and hearing what we see and experience in the world around us. Like some mindless parrot we repeat phrases and attitudes that we see in the world around us, and in a world that is so slanted toward sinfulness this isn't a good thing. The world around us offers an endless supply of bitterness and wickedness and selfishness to copy. Selfish acts of holding grudges and speaking useless words of hurt and anger are modeled by our neighbors and even those that we love. Television shows that get our attention and draw in ratings are laced with plots of revenge and cruel and lewd and devious words and actions; reality shows in particular are chock-full of brawling and slander and every kind of malice. Our sinful nature when surrounded by all of this easily latches on to such terrible behavior, and consequently, because of sin in us, and the effect of sin around us, our homes have felt the awful effect.

Our homes and lives have become places where these worldly thoughts and attitudes are too often mimicked. Compliments and positive examples and words of love and forgiveness are often on short supply, but poisonous words of irritation and hatred and hurt are all around us. And so out of our own mouths come these useless and evil words that we have heard and are too quick to regurgitate and copy. Instead of building each other up in love, we tear each other down. Instead of making our Father proud we grieve the Holy Spirit.

How could we ever make it up to him? How could we ever do enough good to chase away his grief and make God proud of us once again? Could we mask the rotten smell of our bitterness and hate with enough sweet smelling deeds of kindness? Could I truly rid myself of all slander and malice, and bitterness? The answer for all of these questions is a resounding no. The stench of sin still lingers. We can't ever do enough to pay for the sins that we have committed. By means of merely our good deeds we could never win ourselves back into good graces of our God. As hard as we could ever try we could never rid ourselves completely of these negative emotions that crop up so quickly in our thoughts and mind, we could never rid ourselves completely from this stench of sin, it sticks to us.

But God in his grace, in his perfect and tremendous love, he has forgiven us. He has forgotten our thoughtless words, he has forgiven our bitterness. In love Jesus lived a life of perfect love as our substitute. In his death he has removed our sins completely and our punishment has been paid in full and our guilt is washed away; because Christ is our perfect substitute. Not a single thought of bitterness or rage crossed his mind, not a single word of slander or malice fell off his lips. He

did not quarrel and brawl even with those who were so set out to kill him, but instead he willingly went to his death and handed himself over to be an offering for sin. His sacrifice was a fragrant offering to God. It was a pleasing aroma to God for this work of Jesus was complete and perfect and it would bring about the sweet smelling reconciliation of God and his children. God no longer smells the stench of our sin, but his nostrils are filled with the pleasing aroma of Christ's perfect life and perfect sacrifice. We are forgiven. And Scripture tells us this in so many different ways. Christ's love covers over a multitude of our sin; we have been washed and cleansed and made new; our debt has been paid in full. And the precious gift of the Holy Spirit has made us certain of this good news by working in our hearts through his word and sacrament. The Spirit has brought us into the faith and we have the unwavering assurance that heaven is open and it is waiting for those who believe in Jesus. Because of faith in Jesus our Savior we know that our Heavenly Father will one day welcome us to our heavenly home.

It is one thing for a small child to put on her father's clothes and pretend to be like daddy, it is another thing to grow up and realize that the way we act and the things that we do is shaped by our father and his influence. Suddenly you are 30 or 40 or 50 years old and it dawns on you. "I am just like my Father." A silly imitation of gestures and wearing his clothes in time becomes a modeling of his habits and being confirmed and sealed in those ways that shaped so much of our lives. Our fathers are imperfect so this is not always 100% beneficial, but for the most part by their influence and presence these men have made us the men and women that we are today. Traits such as hard work, character, kindness, and faith are often shared and passed on to their children on some level.

It is this kind of natural imitation that is sealed over time that Paul encourages for the Ephesians. "Be imitators of God." This is not to be some act, some holy veneer that we put on once in a while on some grand occasion; but rather it is to be a daily occurrence that genuinely becomes who you are as a person. You are a child of God who lives and acts like your Heavenly Father. It is in this natural way of growing up in the presence and under the gracious influence and forgiving love of our Father that we become just like our Heavenly Father. When we look to our Heavenly Father, through the eyes of faith, and through the viewing glass of his word we are then shaped for a life of emulating his wonderful ways. For in him there are no bad habits to emulate, no negative influence that will impact us, but what will stick with us, what will positively shape us, and mold us the most, what will make us the Christian men and women that we are, is his legacy of love which endures forever.

In love he created this world. In love when man sinned and wrecked his perfect creation he acted not in bitterness and anger, but in forgiveness and

mercy. He promised a Savior. He patiently brought about his plan. God loved the world and so the Father sent his Son. The Son became one of us. He lived a life full of love and compassion. He was kind and caring to so many around him. And then in his ultimate act of love he died in our place. He gave himself up as this offering that was pleasing to God. In his love and mercy our guilt and our punishment was laid on him. He took our sins and our guilt and he took all of that and cast it away from us as far as the east is from the west. He is rich in mercy. He is abundant in his grace. He is so *generous* in his forgiveness; and that influence, that attitude, live of love lived and given for us, is life-changing and life-shaping for us as children of God. It shapes the way we deal with people. It will mold our thoughts and our lives. It will change and form and reform how we forgive others, for our Father has so graciously forgiven us in Christ Jesus.

Dear children of God, grow in, grow up, grow into, this forgiving love of your God, and, “Be imitators of God.” Take off those hateful habits of this world and live a life of love that mimics God’s love for you. Be sealed into this way of life because by God’s grace you have been sealed for the day of your eternal redemption. Live of life of love and forgiveness. Forgive and forget like your Heavenly Father has forgiven you in Christ Jesus. ***Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children<sup>2</sup> and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*** Amen.