

December 16, 2012

Philippians 2:1-11 / I John 4:7-12 / Ephesians 5:1-2

Holiness Defined (#4): God-imitating, Dearly Loved & Sacrificially Loving

I don't usually start my message with a quote. But because it fits so well with today's text and accentuates what Paul is saying here, and because I will be building off what he says, I felt I needed to.

It's by Alexander MacClaren, who says in regard to this passage: ***"This is the only place in the Bible where that bold word "imitate" is applied to the Christian in relation to God. Yet although the expression is unique, the idea underlies the whole teaching of the New Testament on the subject of Christian character and conduct. To be like God, or set ourselves to resemble Him, is the sum of all Christian duty."***

That's what we're going to be considering today: The Christian's high and lofty calling to "imitate God," and what that imitation involves, since it is obvious to anyone that although it does involve resembling certain aspects of His nature, it cannot include resembling Him in other aspects!

Therefore, since "imitating Him" is the essence of true holiness, let's get right into today's verses considering as our **FIRST** point, exactly what it is that Paul is calling us -- as Spirit-birthered and Spirit-sealed and occasion-ally (as we've seen for the last two weeks) Spirit-quenching believers in Jesus, to do, when he calls us to, ***"Be imitators of God..."*** Or as it should more accurately be translated: ***"Become, therefore, imitators of God..."***

Which is Paul's way of saying that "imitating God" is NOT something the newly converted person is immediately or instantaneously able to do. As if it's possible (because they've been given a new nature) to imitate Him right away. It's not. It's something that takes place over time! It's fruit bearing -- and all fruit takes time to ripen.

It's a goal we progress toward, slowly, as we grow, and learn, and stumble, and fall, and fail, and repent, and get back up, and brush ourselves off, and set our sights once again on the goal of continuously seeking to develop into a person who ***"imitates God."***

And listen: Just as a person hiking through a mountainous wilderness needs a compass to help guide them on their way and point them to "true north," so also the Christian needs a spiritual compass to continually remind us of the direction we need to be heading in.

And Paul has given it to us in this command: "***Become, therefore, imitators of God...***" It's the Christian's "true north," keeping us going in the right direction.

And I need to stress that, because so many Christians I know (especially the younger ones) are looking for God to give them a very detailed map. They want a blueprint laying out their entire life, and pointing out every path, and every turn, and every detour, and every danger well in advance. A topographical map of sorts that lays out -- where to go to college, where to live, career choices, who to marry, how many kids to have, and how to avoid every hardship or struggle!

But God doesn't do that, nor has He ever done that for any of His children, Abraham being a case in point. He was called by God and then told: "***Leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the place I will show you.***"

And I can just imagine him saying: "***You mean you want me to just gather up all my belongings and leave all that is familiar and all that's dear to me and start walking? No map. No directions. Not a clue about where I'm supposed to be going or where I'll end up?***" "***That's right,***" God would say, "***I simply want you to go, in faith, and trust that I'll lead you to the place I want you to end up.***"

And the same is true for us. God does not give us a map. He simply gives us a compass point and says: "***Start walking. I know where I want you to end up -- its already been determined -- but I'm not going to lay it all out for you ahead of time. I'll simply lead you at points along the way as you stick to going in the direction the compass I give you points.***"

And that's what this command is. It's not a map. It's not a detailed blueprint. It doesn't tell us everything we need to know along the way. It simply keeps us habitually pointed in the right direction.

And if we follow it, regardless of the turns and bends and detours in the road, it will bring us (like Abraham) to the destination God wants us to end up at. It will keep us from getting side-tracked by lesser things, or from getting lost in the maze of worldly pursuits which our adversary sets in our way to distract, confuse, misdirect, or cause us to lose our bearings.

So, what exactly does Paul mean when he says, "**Become, therefore, imitators of God**" since there are obviously things about Him that we could never imitate / and other things about Him which Paul suggests we must seek to emulate?

The word translated imitators is "mimates." It's a word that was used in ancient times to refer to an, "actor," or even a, "look alike," whose job it was to "copy" or "impersonate" or "resemble" someone else. In fact, in the bad sense of the word, it was used to refer to an, "imposter."

We see this today when some Hollywood actors or other famous people hire people who look very similar to them (and the closer the better) to "imitate" or "impersonate them," copying their every movement, their hairstyle and the clothes they wear so as to throw the paparazzi off their trail just long enough to sneak out a back exit and get away without being seen and thus mobbed by photographers!

Yet unlike them, our goal is not to draw people's attention away from God, but to point them to Him -- and what He is like -- by observing the way we live and act.

And because that's the case, it means we should seek to be the highest quality reproduction or imitation of God that we can -- since our representation of Him is a reflection upon Him, for better or worse.

Likewise, the root of this word can also mean, "a counterfeit." A word which to us has mostly negative connotations, even though a person who is able to create a good counterfeit, or a close replica, or a high quality reproduction (one that's about as close to the real thing as possible) will be in high demand as an artist, furniture maker, restorer of cars, or replicator of cherished antiques.

And that's our goal. To be the best "imitator," or the "closest resemblance," or the "best counterfeit" or "impersonation of God" that we can possibly be. That is Paul's clear word to us in these verses.

Yet, you know what? In the Church, down through the ages, there has been somewhat of a resistance on the part of many, not only to seek to do this, but to even suggest we should! And you know why? Because they are quick to point out (and with good reason) that any attempt on our part to imitate God, is always so flawed (in comparison to how perfect He is) that it brings shame upon Him by suggesting that He is in any way like us.

And I have to say there's a sense in which I tend to agree. For if people are told that our lives are a close representation of God, and the picture of Him that we convey is flawed (as it must always be, and sometimes severely so), it's as misleading as if we were to teach false doctrine, spread heresy, preach a different Christ or advocate a different gospel.

Thus, some have suggested: ***"Better not to encourage it, or if we do, not to tell unbelievers that's who we're seeking to mimic or impersonate God, lest by looking at us they get the wrong picture of what God is like."***

Yet although part of me resonates with that, it's impossible get around the fact that that is what Paul calls us to do. And therefore, it forces us to consider exactly how it is that we are to, "impersonate God" -- remembering as we must that there are things about Him we could never imitate, and other things we both can and should seek to emulate.

What are some of the things could never in any way imitate and shouldn't even try? You know: His omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. / His incomprehensibility, transcendence, complete self-sufficiency, immutability, sovereignty, eternity, and self-existence.

We can't emulate those things and shouldn't even try! We must simply stand back in awed wonder and adore the God who possesses them, never seeking to emulate them (nor be deceived enough to even try) as some cult leaders have been known to do.

Yet at the same time, there are aspects of His nature and being we ARE called to emulate and reflect to the on-looking world. What are they? His holiness. For as Peter has said in 1 Pet. 1:15: "**But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do...**" And again, citing the OT: "**Be holy because I am holy.**"

It's essentially what Paul said in chap. 4, v. 24 where he told us to: "**put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.**"

And he's been has been explaining exactly what it means to be like God in true holiness ever since v. 24, showing us how we are -- as much as His grace allows -- to imitate or emulate Him.

Imitate Him in His "truthfulness" (v. 25) / His "reconciling nature" (v. 26) / His ongoing work of doing "useful things" (v. 28) / and in His "generosity toward the needy" (v. 28b). We are to emulate God in all those ways.

Likewise, we are to "imitate Him" in His Fatherly intent to speak to His children in ways that, "build us up," "minister to our needs," and "impart grace to us" (v.29) / And as we saw last week in v. 32, we are to emulate Him in His, "kindness," "compassion," and "graciousness in forgiving us."

And as I mentioned a couple weeks back, Paul will continue along these same lines clear through v. 20 of this chapter. In fact, upon closer examination, he will continue with it -- in various forms or applications -- clear through to the end of the book!

Which brings us to the **SECOND** phrase Paul uses: "**as dearly loved children...**" / "Become, therefore, imitators of God, as dearly loved children..."

And LISTEN: This is not simply a descriptive phrase placed here to remind us of the fact that God loves us dearly. If you saw it that way, you missed Paul's point. Because what he's doing is presenting this truth as THE PRIMARY TRUTH we need to keep continually before our eyes, if we are ever to "become imitators of God" in regard to any of the things he's mentioned up to this point.

Or to put it in other words: Unless you are assured of this truth (of how much God loves and cherishes and treasures you as His graciously adopted children, you will NEVER be able to emulate those aspects of God's nature that Paul calls us to imitate.

It is the assurance that God loves us with a great and passionate love, that makes us able (as Paul will go on to show) to imitate Him. Not only in the things he's already said, but in the next thing he calls us to emulate -- Christ's self-sacrificing love. The person who is unsure of God's love, or has not grasped it, or experienced its depths, cannot emulate it -- for they don't understand it and thus don't know how to express it.

You must experience it, know it, or understand it to some degree, before you can ever mimic it. And that's not just true of God's love, its true of anything.

So what does Paul want you as a believer to know? Not simply that you are loved, but that you are "**dearly loved children.**" The Greek word is "**agapata.**" It was used in reference to children who were "**contented.**" That is, contented in the knowledge that their parents loved them.

Or as Hoehner points out, it referred, "**particularly to a child who was an only child to whom parents had devoted all their love. In other words, because the child had received so much love, the child had the security of being loved, and was thus contented.**"

That is, he was so assured that his parents loved him, or loved him dearly (as the NIV puts it), that he could rest in that love and be energized and strengthened by the assurance of knowing he possessed it.

He was spared of that horrible scarring, anxiety-breeding, and soul-draining feeling that he'd never had it -- or that in order to get it -- he must always be doing things, or doing more things, or greater, more praiseworthy and attention getting things in an attempt to earn it.

And believe me when I say: I've seen the pain and hurt and turmoil caused in the lives of many teenagers, young married people, and even older people, whose parents had made it clear that they were not loved.

One older lady in one of my churches actually flew home, hoping beyond hope that on her mother's death-bed her mother would have a change of heart, affirm her just once, and tell her that she loved her. Just the opposite happened. Inconceivable as it may sound to us, the mother -- on her death-bed -- said to her 60-something-year-old daughter: *"You've always been a disappointment to me, and nothing has changed."*

And let me tell you, she came back from that trip an emotionally broken woman. Why? Because not only had she never received her mother's love, she was denied it when she asked for it at her mother's death.

So, how did we counsel her in the weeks that followed her return? By pointing out the truth that Paul shares here. That although she could never say she had been truly loved by her mother, she could know beyond any shadow of a doubt that she was loved by her Father in heaven -- dearly loved -- loved as if she were the only child He had. A child into whom her heavenly Father had poured all His love.

She may have been a disappointment to her earthly mother, but she was a cherished, treasured, affectionately and intimately loved daughter -- in whom her Father in heaven, delighted.

She would never have the "contentment" that comes to the soul of a child -- regardless of their age -- who knows deep down that they are, or were, "dearly loved" by their parents. But she could rest assured -- beyond any shadow of a doubt -- that she was dearly and passionately -- both prized and treasured by the God who went to great lengths to convince her of it -- through the death of Jesus and all He purchased for her on the cross.

You see, when it comes to holiness, and imitating God -- there is nothing as important to that process as knowing and being convinced -- that you are a dearly loved child of the Father. Loved (as I pointed out) as if you were the "only child" God had to love!

You're not, of course! Yet the Bible's message is that God is so infinite, in both the depth and magnitude of His love that you may as well be. He can lovingly

attend to the needs of all the two-and-a-half billion Christians in the world / at the same exact time, and do it as if each one was the only child He had to love!
That's what Paul wants us to know.

The question is, do you believe it? Do you believe God loves you that much? That He loves you "dearly"-- as if you were His only child? Because if you don't, it will inhibit your ability to bask in that soul-contented rest of spirit that God not only wants you to enjoy, but is absolutely essential if we are ever to truly, "become imitators of God."

This is one of those truths that "faith" is called upon to lay hold of! A truth we must not only believe, but internalize deep down in our soul! God not only wants us to know it, but believe it so much that it transforms the way we relate to others, making us more able to mimic such love to them.

Which brings us to our **LAST** thing Paul tells us -- that we are to, ***"walk in love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."***

And here, in light of this verse, I need to stress what is often overlooked when people think of holiness: That the greatest expression of holiness is **NOT** what we don't do. It's **NOT** our morality, or how long we pray or how many Bible verses we have memorized and can quote, or how many of the spiritual disciplines we've mastered, or how much theology we know, or what spiritual gifts we have -- or any such things (though there is, of course, significant value in all those things as well).

No. The greatest expression of holiness is seen in how sacrificially we love. That's Paul's point in I Cor. 13, and he makes it again here. That we most fully "imitate God" -- who is Himself love -- when we love like He loved us / or like Christ loved us.

And notice how quick he is to point out that the love of Christ is not simply affectionate feelings. Nor is it sentimental emotions, or even a deep heartfelt love. It's love that is seen because it shows itself in actions that cost us something -- and may even cost us our lives. ***"Walk in love,"*** he says, ***"just as Christ loved us, and gave Himself up for us..."***

So what are we talking about? We're talking about sacrificial love. A love where feelings don't even need to come into play!

Sometimes, in fact, sacrificial love even means going against our feelings -- our feelings of fear and self-preservation. As in the case of the soldier who is scared, and doesn't want to die, but sees his wounded friend laying in the line of fire, and jumps up, and runs to him at the risk of his own life, and drags him back into the fox hole -- maybe taking a bullet himself just for trying.

That's Paul's point. If the "love" you show doesn't cost you anything, then you are not imitating or emulating the love of God. Because the love that displays God's likeness to the world, is a love that has substance to it, costs us just as it cost Him, and shows itself in sacrificial actions.

John made that clear when he spoke of agape love in 1 John 3:16 and said:
"This is how we know what love is (that is, what agape love is): Jesus Christ laid down His life for us, and we ought also lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has no pity on him (that is, does not take action to help him), how can the agape of God be in Him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth." (That is, actions that put us out and cost us something.)

LISTEN: Anyone can feel sentimental feelings. Anyone can say they love. Anyone can express their affections in words -- they can "love with words or tongue," as John puts it.

But emotional or sentimental love is not what reflects the nature of God, because God is not emotional or sentimental!

God shows His love in actions, and supremely in the sacrificial actions of Christ. In His coming to this earth, and taking on human form, and living among us / and ministering to us, and suffering for us, and dying to atone for our sins, and rising again to make us right with God! God's love is demonstrated in His actions -- His sacrificial actions on our behalf.

And that's the type of love what Paul calls us to emulate. Love that costs us something, and often costs us a lot, and sometimes costs us everything. It's love that takes it to another level! And because it does, it imitates the love of Christ, who, "gave Himself up for us."

People can see God in it, because it's not natural for people to love that sacrificially, or give till they themselves must go without, or sacrifice until it costs them everything. Yet that IS what Paul calls us to do.

And the structure of the verse implies we are freed up to do it by the knowledge, and assurance, and the inner conviction (nurtured and fed by the Holy Spirit and faith) that God loves us "dearly"!