

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Imitating God Ephesians 5:1-2

Intro: As we jump into ch5, understand that Paul is not beginning a new thought here but rather is continuing the theme he started back in 4:17. In fact, 4:32 actually functions as a pivot to this new section with the believer being exhorted to look to the example of God in 4:32 and in both verses of our text (1-2). In 4:32 the believer is instructed to emulate the graciousness of God and today's text exhorts believers to emulate God's love.

I have always been fascinated by biblical outlines, or structured outlines of passages of Scripture as well as entire books of the Bible. I find that a good outline helps me understand the flow of the passage and keeps me focused on the writers intended main points. We find just such a noticeable and helpful outline in ch5. I also realize not everyone geeks over outlines like I do so I'll keep this short. In ch5, Paul returns to the theme of walking and the passage falls into 3 distinct sections. Believers are to walk in love (1-2); walk in light (8) and walk in wisdom (15).

The idiom of walking has already appeared in this letter 4 times and these 4 references are presented as 2 sets of pairs that focus on the Christian's spiritual transformation. In 2:2, Paul presents unbelievers as walking in their sins and transgressions while 2:10 sees believers now walking in the good works God has prepared for them. In 4:1, believers are urged to walk worthy of their calling while 4:17 sees them no longer walking as gentile but in purity. The 3 walking references in ch5 continue this thought and exhort believers to conduct themselves according to who they now are: God's beloved children (1), children of light (8) and people of wisdom (15). Such transformed believers, then, are to live according to love, light and wisdom. Of course, after Paul says all this, he begins to talk about marriage and the relationship between husband and wife in light of Jesus Christ. Kinda seems like a big set up but if it is, it's a necessary one.

1 – Ch5 opens up with one of the most startling admonitions in the entire NT, "be imitators of God..." Though this direct exhortation is found nowhere else in the Bible, the idea behind it is implicitly encouraged in commands such as be holy, as I am holy (Lev 19:2; 1 Ptr 1:15) and even in the creation

story in Genesis where man is to imitate God in working, resting and ruling. Still, this is the only place in the Bible where these words occur but what makes them so startling is that they point to a standard beyond which there is no other. It's been called "the highest standard in the world;" "the sum of all duty" and "Paul's supreme argument . . . the ultimate ideal."

To be clear, while the activity of imitating God is obviously in view here, Paul's literal instruction is to be imitators of God. The focus is on being rather than just doing. Just as [4:32](#) instructs believers to be kind and compassionate – which enables them to be gracious to one another just as God is gracious – so too, they are to be imitators of God, which will in turn lead them to behave like God. Now, this exhortation presents its own set of problems, not the least of which is: God is so far above us in every way, how can we imitate Him? It's one thing to imitate Jesus Christ. He humbled Himself and became a man, that's an existence we can relate to. But the imitation of God the Father is quite another matter; at least it seems so. How is it possible to imitate One who is infinitely above us, the sovereign God of the universe?

Part of our problem with this exhortation comes from what we know of the nature of God; what theologians call His noncommunicable attributes. God has some communicable attributes. These are attributes that humans can also possess but what makes God wholly other than us are His noncommunicable attributes. These are attributes in which we do not share nor can never possess. For example, when we talk about God we often begin with the fact that He is self-existent, self-sufficient, and eternal.

Self-existent means God has no origin and thus, is answerable to no one. This sets God utterly apart, for everything else does have origin and is accountable. Humans are accountable to people (parents and friends), organizations (the church, the state, the company for which one works), and ultimately God. Everyone will face a final judgment. Self-sufficient means God has no needs and therefore depends on no one. That's not true of us at all. We need a multitude of things—food, warmth, clothing, homes, companionship, oxygen. If our supply of oxygen is cut off even for a few minutes, we die. Eternal means God has always existed and will always exist. That's not true of us either. We all have a point in the past when we didn't exist. Besides, we change as time passes. God doesn't change. He is always the same in His eternal being.

To these attributes, without which God wouldn't be God, we can add such things as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, majesty, and holiness in its fullest sense. We can't be like God in these things either. Omnipotence is all-powerful. We're not now nor ever will be all-powerful. If we could be, we'd be God. Omnipresence is being everywhere at once. We'll never possess this ability. We're finite beings and always will be. Omniscience is knowing all things. We'll never know all things. We'll spend all eternity learning. Majesty and holiness also set God apart from His creation. They're what make Him wholly other. We're not that. Each of these incommunicable attributes sets God apart from us and defines an area in which we cannot and never will be like Him.

But we are also overwhelmed by God's communicable attributes, those attributes in which we can share. They're things like justice, wrath, wisdom, faithfulness, goodness, love, mercy, compassion, tenderness, forgiveness. We can exercise these attributes and indeed we should. But when we think of them in reference to God the Father, who is perfect in them, we're legitimately overwhelmed and rightly wonder if there's any point in comparing our wisdom to God's wisdom, our goodness to God's goodness, our faithfulness to God's faithfulness, and so on. That's truly a healthy comparison, which should humble us, if nothing else. But this comparison isn't what Paul intends in our text

While it's true that Paul says we're to imitate God, he goes on to explain exactly how we are to imitate Him: as dear children. The instruction to be imitators of God is grounded in our identity as dearly loved children. As unbelievers, we were by nature, children of wrath (2:3) but now our parentage has changed. No longer children of wrath, we're now the beloved children of our heavenly Father, having been adopted by Him through Jesus Christ (1:4-5). Our changed parentage obviously transforms our identity, reminding us that we can't fashion our own identities in a vacuum according to our own determinations. Our identity is inextricably grounded in the fatherhood of God.

Besides, it's only as dearly loved children that believers are able to be imitators of God. Just as children rightly and naturally imitate their parents, so do the children of God. In fact, children don't consciously imitate their parents, but they are their imitators. Have you ever seen a child sitting in the

front seat of a vehicle, trying to drive like his dad? Or walking behind him, pretending to mow the lawn? In the same way, just as a son should imitate a good father (though he's not a father and can't imitate his father in many respects) and just as a daughter should imitate a good mother (though she's not a mother and can't imitate her mother in many respects), so the children of God should imitate God.

And we have this going for us: we have the enabling life of God within through the indwelling Holy Spirit. So, just as physical genes should lead a child in the direction of a parent's chief characteristics, so should a Christian's spiritual genes lead in the direction of the moral character of God. Thus, in our efforts to be like God, we should focus on God's nature as Father and our nature as His children. Instead of asking, "What would Jesus do?" we should ask, "Who is God our Father and what does it mean to be His child?"

This exhortation provides the basis for each of the 3 walking admonitions in this section. If we are children of God, then we ought to imitate our Father. Because God is love (1 John 4:8), His children should therefore, walk in love. Because God is light (1 John 1:5), His children should therefore, walk as children of light. And, because God is truth (1 John 5:6), His children should therefore, walk in wisdom. Our practical conduct is grounded in our spiritual identity. When we act according to our nature as children of God, we will imitate Him.

2 – The 1st way in which believers are to be imitators of God is by walking in love. What Paul mainly has in mind here is the imitation of God's love. This is what ties 5:1 to the end of ch4 and also links it to v2, as 5:1-2 are actually part of the preceding paragraph. It's in loving and how we love that we're to imitate our heavenly Father. What kind of a love is this? The text answers this in several ways and the 1st answer is that this love is to be forgiving (4:32). Since God forgave us through the work of Christ, we're to forgive one another. This is the nature of God's love.

The link between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others is important because it's only by knowing that we have been forgiven that we're set free to lovingly forgive others. People desperately need forgiveness. One psychiatrist said this, "As far as I am concerned, most of what a psychiatrist does is directly related to forgiveness. People come to

him with problems; they feel guilty about their part in them; they are seeking forgiveness. In effect, they confess their sins to the counselor and find that he forgives them. Then a pattern is set up in which they can show their change of heart in tangible ways toward others.” The head of a large mental hospital in England has been quoted as having said, “I could dismiss half my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of forgiveness.”

That’s exactly what we have in Jesus Christ—forgiveness—and because we find forgiveness there, we can in turn be forgiving. God’s forgiveness is not just an overlooking of sin, as though He said, “Well, boys will be boys (or girls will be girls). We’ll overlook it for now; just don’t let it happen again.” God takes sin with such seriousness that He deals with it fully at the cross, and it’s on that basis—the death of Jesus—that we can know we are forgiven.

Do you know that? Do you really know it? That’s the most important question you will ever answer in your life. Here’s the thing; as long as you think you’re a pretty good person who doesn’t really need to be forgiven, you’ll naturally have a very hard time loving and forgiving others. But if you’re honest with yourself and realize that you have been a sinner under God’s just wrath; all that is changed. God says that in His sight even the best we can do is **vile** to the extreme (**Rom 3:10-18**).

That’s rough but unfortunately, that’s exactly the way God sees us. In our lost condition we were in direct, stubborn rebellion against all the wonderful qualities and characteristics that make God God. If we can see ourselves through His eyes, knowing our vile rebellion against his love and moral standards and yet finding ourselves forgiven on the basis of Christ’s death for us, then we will inevitably love and forgive others. The truth is, nobody can act as badly toward us as we have acted toward God, and yet He has forgiven us. If we’re not forgiving in our love, we really do not know the extent of God’s forgiveness of us. We still consider ourselves to be better than we are. But if we see ourselves as forgiven sinners, then we’ll be set free to imitate God by loving and forgiving others.

The 2nd thing these verses teach us about the love of God, which we’re to imitate, is that it’s not just a forgiving love but it’s also a giving love. Again, God’s the model of this love and it is most clearly demonstrated by the cross.

What is it that God chiefly gives us? He's given us all things, of course. Before Adam and Eve were even created God had prepared a wonderful environment to receive them. It was a place of beauty and interest, with meaningful work to do. Sin marred that environment but even so marred, our experience of God's gifts to us is similar to that of our first parents. God's given us life itself, and He's placed us in an imperfect but still beautiful and fascinating world. And the work we have to do in it is important. But, having said this we must admit that none of this even comes close to the expression of the full measure of God's giving love. For that, again, is seen primarily at the cross: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life ([John 3:16](#)). In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins ([1 John 4:10](#)). But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us ([Rom 5:8](#)). I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me ([Gal 2:20](#)). Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends ([John 15:13](#)).

More specifically, [Phil 2:5-8](#) tells us that Jesus didn't just give up things to save us; He gave Himself. He didn't only give up things that were external benefits of His divinity: His outward glory, the service of the angels, His position at the right hand of God the Father ([6-7](#)). The heart of the passage is that Jesus gave Himself, even to the point of humiliating and excruciating death. The greatest expression of love is not that it gives things or even that it gives up things, but that it gives itself.

In this too we're to be God's imitators. Jesus' giving of Himself was obviously a sacrifice that was pleasing to the Father. This is not to say that God is pleased that sin demands death and that His Son had to die to save lost sinners. Instead, Christ's death satisfied the holy law of God and as such, it was acceptable and pleasing to the Father. We can also offer a pleasing sacrifice to the Father as we give ourselves in love to the Father. Many times we may imagine it to be possible for us to lay down our lives in some dramatic way to show our love for others. But, more often than not, God calls us to lay down our lives little by little – in small coins (as it were) instead of one large payment. But even in this, if we are obedient to the

Lord's leading, it is still no less a laying down of our lives.

Why are we so hesitant to give ourselves to others? It is because we're afraid to and because we're selfish. We want ourselves for ourselves, and we're afraid that if we give ourselves to others, we will be hurt, rejected or disappointed in some way. Only those who have God are set free from these fears and can give to others out of God's own immensity.

The 3rd thing our text teaches about the love of God, which we're to imitate, is that it's to be a living love. It occurs in verse 2, where Paul says, walk in love... Again, walking is a Hebrew metaphor for how a person lives. To walk in a certain way is to conduct one's life, comport oneself, behave, live. Paul is literally saying, "live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

There are 2 things that a living love suggests. 1) it suggests a practical or active love. This is what Paul's whole section on practical Christianity involves. If we ask, "What does it mean to 'live a life of love'?" the answer is in the very thing Paul's been saying all along. To use the outline of the last section of ch4, it means: (1) to put off lying and speak truthfully, (2) to be angry over sin and don't give place to the devil; (3) to put off stealing and work for a living instead, (4) to put off unwholesome talk and instead speak to help others, and (5) to put off bitterness, wrath and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice, and instead to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving (or gracious). This is what it means to live a life of love.

2), living love suggests a love that's made alive by the very life of God and is therefore an eternal love, as God is eternal. What a need we have for this today! Our loves are weak and faltering, variable and untrustworthy. What we need in our loves is something of the character of God's love as Paul writes about it in [Rom 8:35-39](#). Can you be an imitator of God in such an eternal love as that? The answer, if we look only to ourselves, is no. No, we can't. Nothing that is natural to us is eternal, or forgiving or giving either, for that matter. But the answer is yes, if we look to God. The very man who wrote [Eph 5:1](#) also said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" ([Phil 4:13](#)).

But here's the thing, we must spend time with God if this is to ever happen.

The word our text translates as “imitate” or “imitator” is actually mimemtai, from which we get our English word “mimic.” Mimic means to copy closely, to repeat another person’s speech, actions, or behavior. That’s what we’re to do with God. We’re to repeat His actions; echo His speech; duplicate His behavior. Not through a forced exertion on our part but as we come by it naturally. How can we ever hope to do that if we don’t spend time with Him? We can’t, because we’ll never even know what His behavior is. Spend time with God! Spend time with God in prayer. Spend time with God in Bible study. Spend time with God in worship; personally and corporately. It’s only by spending time with God that we become like God. We need men and women who are like God today.

There are practical reasons why we should imitate God beyond just for our own spiritual benefit and the benefit of the body of Christ. When we begin to imitate God in all areas of our life, we become representatives of God right here on earth, especially before those who have shut God out of their lives. Charles Spurgeon put it this way: “What are we sent into the world for? Is it not that we may keep men in mind of God, whom they are most anxious to forget? If we are imitators of God, as dear children, they will be compelled to recollect that there is a God, for they will see His character reflected in ours. I have heard of an atheist who said he could get over every argument except the example of his godly mother: he could never answer that.”

I asked a question earlier in the study and I would like to ask it again: Have you been forgiven of your sins? Do you know you have been forgiven and now stand before God clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ? If you don’t know this; if you can’t say for sure this is true in your life – would you like to make sure of this today? You can! You can leave this building this afternoon with a rock-solid assurance from God’s Word that the guilt of your sin has been removed and you stand forgiven and free before God the Father. Would you like to do that today? ☺