

On The Imitation of God

10-04-09

Ephesians 5:1-2

Ever have a hero – someone you wanted to be just like
When I was young my hero was Stan Musial – Stan The Man
He played for my favorite team the St. Louis Cardinals
He's left handed - I'm left handed
I tried to copy his batting stance – couldn't be done
I would get into arguments about the best player in the history of the game
Babe Ruth – he was ok – Ted Williams – he was moody – Mickey Mantle – inconsistent
– no matter who anybody named it couldn't be him
There was only one player who had it all – and that was my Stan Musial
He hit for average – hit for power – good throwing arm – hit in the clutch
He was left handed and played for the Cardinals
There was nobody like him - never had been – there never would be
I was pretty sure that if there was such a thing as a saint – he was it
Then one day I was reading Post magazine
And on the back cover there were pictures of major league ballplayers
In the midst of these pictures was Stan Musial
Telling the world that he smoked Chesterfield unfiltered cigarettes
I couldn't believe it – it couldn't be true – it wasn't possible
I still like him but he dropped in my esteem
That cigarette ad forever changed my opinion of him
That day reading Post magazine Stan the man became very human
I was about 13 when I lost my hero
In a way I was lucky to learn so young
For you see every man will disappoint you
As a pastor put it later – everyone has clay feet
My mistake was not trying to be like somebody
My mistake was in the person I chose to imitate
In his letters Paul gives us three pretty good people to imitate

He says imitate me – imitate Jesus Christ

And in our passage today he tells us to imitate God

Those are pretty high standards

Those who seem to know tell us that

Whether we like it or not we tend to be like our parents

And that is just what Paul is telling us in this passage

Be imitators of God

Be like your Heavenly Father

In the 15th century the Hundred Years War was taking place

There were two men calling themselves pope

The black death claimed hundreds of thousands of lives

Corruption disease unrest and disillusionment dominated the land

But in this time of incredible turbulence

A monk named Thomas a Kempis wrote what has since been called

The most influential book in Christian literature

He titled it – Of The Imitation Of Christ

And for more than five hundred years Christians have had no trouble

With the concept of imitating the Jesus of history

But the imitation of God the Father is quite another matter

We can wear our “what would Jesus do” bracelets and it makes sense

But what would Holy Omnipotent God do

How is it possible to imitate one who is unseen and infinitely above us

How can we imitate the Sovereign God of the universe

We have some real problems to overcome if we are to imitate God

There are many things about God that we are not in the least like

For instance God has what are called incommunicable attributes

Incommunicable attributes are those characteristics that are unlike us

God is self-existent – self-sufficient – and eternal – we are not

Self existent means that God has no beginning and answers to no one

We are created beings – creatures

We answer to the state – our parents

And all of us will ultimately face a final judgment – we will answer to God

Self-sufficient means that God has no need of anything or anyone

That is certainly not true of us

We are dependent upon God's world and upon others for survival

We need oxygen and food and protection from the elements

Even compared to other creatures we are helpless and dependent

Eternal means that God always was and always will be

We came into being on a certain day

We weren't and then we were

There are other attributes which God has that we don't

For instance God never changes – that is His immutability

We are changing all the time – we change our minds – our bodies change

We change in personal appearance

We cannot be like Him in these ways and we never will

But we can also be overwhelmed by God's communicable attributes

God's communicable attributes are attributes that we share in some way

Things like love and justice and holiness compassion forgiveness

We are somewhat like God in these respects

But when we think of them in relation to God who is perfect in them

We are awed by differences between us on our best day and God all the time

But we have a factor in our lives that helps us achieve

That which we could never achieve without it

You and I have the enabling power of God working in us

I am not the same Ken as I was 20 years ago or even 5 years ago

I saw my brother for the first time in 8 years

He noticed my gray hair and remarked about how I had changed

I might have said

If you think I've changed on the outside - you should see me on the inside

It has been said that men and women cannot really change

And for the most part I agree with that statement

But God – don't you just love the statement "But God"

Any time God enters the picture something wonderful is about to happen

That's true of external situations – it is true in each of our lives

You see the Holy Spirit of God is at work in all of God's children

Transforming us into the image of God's own Son

Every one of us – 2X

Try as I might I can't change my character

But the very power of God has changed me

You can't change yourself but God is at work changing you

Phil 1 – I am confident of this very thing; He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus

Phil 2 - God is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure

The primary purpose of God's work in you is to change you

To recreate within each of His adopted children the life of His only Son

To strengthen you to enable you

You have the enabling life of God within you through His Holy Spirit

It is God's work in you that allows you to be an imitator of God

His work guides you in the direction of the moral character of God

As we look into this short passage we see that

Although it is possible to imitate God in more ways than Paul mentions

It is God's love that Paul is commanding us to imitate

You see vss 1&2 although in a separate chapter are part of the paragraph that ends chapter 4

We should read it this way - READ 4:32-5:2

We are to imitate God's love

God's love is forgiving love

God's love is giving love

And God's love is Living love

God's love is forgiving love

Since God the Father forgave us through the work of Jesus

We are to forgive one another

This is serious business

Jesus said that if we don't forgive others God will not forgive us

There is a link between God's forgiving us

And our being able to forgive others

You see only through knowing that we are forgiven are we set free to forgive others lovingly

People are in desperate need of forgiveness

One psychiatrist said – 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 finds that he forgives them.

The head of a large New England mental hospital said – I could dismiss half of my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of forgiveness

Complete and total forgiveness is what you have in Jesus Christ

And because we find forgiveness in Jesus we can also be forgiving

We can set people free from the guilt they live with

Remember God's forgiveness is not the overlooking of sin

He is not our grandpa who pats us on the head and says - don't do that again

Sin is serious business

God takes sin so seriously that He dealt with it at the cross

And it is on that basis that we can know that we are forgiven

Do you know that you are a sinner who needs forgiveness – do you – do you

If you think of yourself as a good person who does not need forgiveness

You will have a very hard time loving and forgiving others

If you continually justify your actions you will imprison yourself in un-love

If you think of yourself as innocent you will stand like granite in un-love

But when you know that you deserve wrath and are receiving love

All that is changed

It takes a right understanding of your corrupt self

To be able to forgive others

But once you have that right understanding

And you see your actions as God sees them

As Job put it you will understand the greatness of the ransom

The enormity of God's forgiveness and you will be able to forgive others

If we see ourselves through God's eyes

Knowing no motive is pure other than that of glorifying God

And realize that He has forgiven us – then we can forgive others

Nobody and I mean nobody has acted as badly towards us

As we have behaved towards God

Here is the key – if you are not forgiving in your love

You still do not know the extent of God's love and forgiveness of you

But when you see yourself as a forgiven sinner

Who does not deserve forgiveness

Then you will be free to love others in imitation of God

God's love is forgiving love and aren't you glad it is

The second thing these verses teach us is that God not only forgives

God's love is a giving love

You might ask - What has God given us

He freely has given us all things

Out of God's love He gives us mercy

Out of God's love He gives us grace

Before God created Adam and Eve

He created the perfect environment for man

God has given us life

He has placed us in this beautiful and incredibly diverse world

He has given us work to do in it

He has given us families – He has given us each other

He has given us His Son

Although you can see God's love in His creation

Just like His forgiving love God's giving love is primarily seen at the cross

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son

Jesus so loved you that He gave up His life

God's giving love is best explained by sacrifice

Tony Dungy's son committed suicide

During that time of grief and at the funeral service

Several people came to the Lord

Mr. Dungy said – It was a great blessing that came out of the tragedy

But had God said – will you give up your son

So that these people might know me – I would have said no

But that is exactly what God did for me

God gave His Son so you and I might have a right relationship with Him

Who do you love enough to sacrifice something dear for them

That is the love of God – That is the love of Jesus

Jesus Christ so loved you that - **He regarded equality with God as something not to be held onto, but made Himself nothing, taking the very form of a slave, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even the death of a cross**

The greatest expression of love is not that it gives things or gives up things

The greatest expression of love is that it gives itself

We are to imitate God in this giving love

We are to empty ourselves for others

Why don't we give ourselves to other people

2 reasons - It is because we are selfish and it because we are afraid

We want ourselves for us – we know that we are safe

And the giving of yourself takes time

And sometimes it costs you more than that

Then not giving ourselves is safe

And you think you are the only one you can trust with your well being

We are afraid that if we become vulnerable we will just get hurt

And you know what – sometimes we will

Who do you love enough to give yourself to

Who do you love enough to pay the price

Enough to risk the pain of rejection and misunderstanding

Only when God has truly set you free from these selfish fears

Can you risk giving yourself to others

Only when you are free in Christ can you risk the cost of giving love

God's love is a forgiving love - God's love is a giving love

Finally God's love is a living love

Paul says - **live a life of love, just as Christ loved us**

There are two things that living love suggests

First living love is a practical active love

If we ask – what does practical active love look like

The answer is found in our previous section on practical Christianity

It is the outline of the last chapter

Living a life of love means

Put off lying and speak truthfully

Put off unwholesome words and speak to lift others up

Put off bitterness rage and malice and anger and brawling and slander

This is the way of the world - It is not the way of Christ

You did not learn Christ in this way

This is the way you learned Christ

This is what it means to live a life of love

Uplifting truthful speech that exalts Christ and encourages others

Is living a life of love

But Paul goes even beyond what we say and how we think

He gets into how we live our life – he begins to meddle

He says - Put off stealing and work for a living giving to others in need

In other words

Living love means you look out for your neighbor's welfare

And while I have mentioned uplifting speech and helping those in need

They are not the primary means we are to show our love

The greatest need of all humanity is righteousness

Living a life of love means sharing the truth of Jesus Christ

So telling people about Jesus

Encouraging others in their walk and helping those in need

Are all ways we live a life of love

Living a life of love will always glorify God and exalt Jesus Christ

It cannot help but do it

How do you get this kind of love

Living love is love that is made alive by the very life of God

We have it because God has it

It is in us because God's very presence resides in us

So then living love is eternal as God is eternal

Our love is weak faltering and situational

We have a "because of" kind of love

I love you because you make me feel good

We have an "if" kind of love

I will love you if you do this for me

Only in God is there an "in spite of:" kind of love

God's love is not wavering or conditional – it does not ebb and flow

And when we are in God that kind of love is in us

Romans 8 – Who will separate us from the love of Christ? I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the very definition of eternal unwavering love

Only God has it – and He is ready to display it through your life

If we are going to imitate God we need that kind of love

Is it really possible be an imitator of God and have such a love as that

The answer is, no you can't if you look only within yourself for the power

Nothing that is natural to us is eternal or forgiving or giving

But the answer is - Yes you can

You can have eternal forgiving and giving love if you draw it from the well of Christ

Paul who is commanding this of you knew how hard this imitation is

If it came naturally you would do it automatically

It is hard

But he said – **I can do all things through Christ who strengthen me**

And certainly by implication

You can do all things through Christ who gives you the strength

Try to imitate God out of your own love and you will fail

You don't have it and God doesn't expect that you do

Call upon the illimitable resources available from God's indwelling Spirit

And you will succeed

But how do you do that

For God's love to control you, you must spend time with God

The word that is translated imitate is actually the Greek word for mimic

You know how children mimic each other

The most obvious game of mimic is "follow the leader"

Well you cannot follow the leader unless you are with him

You cannot mimic God unless you are spending time with Him

But that is what you are to do with God

You are to repeat God's actions, echo His speech and duplicate his behavior

You do that without spending time in His Word

And spending time in prayer

You cannot because you will not know Him well enough to imitate Him

Spend time with God in His Word

Spend time with God in prayer

Spend time with God in worship

It is only by spending time with God that you will be like Him

The way the world is running out of natural resources

The world is running out of wildlife like the snail darter and polar bears

The world is running out of arable land and trees

God would tell you that

What the world really doesn't have enough of is love – real love

There is all kinds of conditional love out there – the world is full of it

What the world doesn't have enough of is “in spite of” love

Unconditional love – God's love

God's love is forgiving – it is giving - and it is living

The world is in short supply of that

And it is in desperate need of men and women who can imitate God's love

Men and women who display God's love through their lives

Will it be you