

For better – and sometimes for worse - human beings are imitators. As children grow up, they imitate their parents, consciously or unconsciously adopting their parents' habits and mannerisms; reflecting their parents' likes and dislikes in the choices they make; often even following their parents' career paths. Students imitate teachers they admire. And at almost every stage of life people choose heroes or role models whose lifestyles and life choices they try to imitate. Among sinful human beings, however, imitation isn't always a good thing. As children imitate their parents, it's sad but true that they all too quickly pick up on and imitate the sins and bad habits they observe in their parents, often to their parents' great dismay. All too often it's the public figures who flaunt selfishness and immoral lifestyles that eager wannabees try to imitate. And it's downright chilling to observe how quickly wicked and heinous actions find imitators. Think, for example, how one or two mass killings have spawned seemingly unending and deadly imitations.

As we Christians live our lives in the world, we, too, are imitators. Yes, like everyone else, we imitate parents and teachers and others we admire. But over and above that, we are called to be imitators in a higher and unique sense. "Be imitators of God," our text for today encourages, "As his dearly loved children." That, dear friends, is an awesome calling indeed. Let's consider what it means as we continue our study of the Epistle to the Ephesians by looking at OUR CHRISTIAN LIFE: A LIFE OF IMITATING. That life is I. A life of love II. Motivated and empowered by God's love for us.

The Epistle to the Ephesians can be neatly divided into two parts. In chapters 1 through 3, the apostle reviews for his readers all that God in grace has done for them and for their salvation. In chapters 4 to 6 he urges believers to thankfully respond to the blessings of grace by the way they live their lives. In our text for today he shows us what those thankful lives should look like. "Be imitators of God," he writes, "And live a life of love."

There's our key word: "imitators." Believers are dearly loved children of God. As God's children they are called to live lives that imitate God's love. Through the gospel and its good news of God's unconditional love in Christ, the Holy Spirit has bestowed on believers the blessings Jesus won for them and creates in their hearts the faith that takes hold of those blessings as their own. He brings believers into God's family. And the Spirit himself takes up residence in believers' hearts. Those truths, the apostle tells us, will shape the way believers live. Together with the faith that he graciously bestows through the gospel, the Spirit creates a new nature in each believer's heart. That new nature, or new self, is created in God's image. But as long as they live, their old self, the sinful nature with which all people are born since our first parents fell into sin, still clings to them. Every day a struggle takes place in believers' hearts and lives between their old and new natures. And every day the indwelling Spirit strengthens believers for that struggle, as he renews their hearts and minds through the gospel. That daily struggle, Paul tells us in earlier verses of this chapter, involves a putting off of the old self and a putting on of the new self.

In today's text St. Paul describes some of the attitudes and actions that are involved in this daily putting off and putting on. As he often does when he describes what believers' lives should look like, Paul begins with the negative. "Put off," he says, "get rid of every kind of bitterness, rage, anger, quarreling and slander, along with every kind of malice." All of those attitudes and actions are characteristic of the old self. They flow from the natural selfishness that dominates the sinful nature. Paul describes these characteristics in a kind of progression. The old self, prompted by the devil and urged on by the sinful world in which they live, prompts human beings to dislike others and to harbor bitter, resentful thoughts toward them. Left to fester, bitterness becomes anger. As anger burns with ever greater intensity, it breaks out in harsh words, quarreling and slander, and finally in all kind of sinful words and actions.

All of these things, Paul says, grieve the Spirit of God, who lives in believers' hearts. The Spirit's presence is a seal, a guarantee that believers belong to God. It's the Spirit that empowers believers to live as children of God. Don't offend the Spirit, Paul urges believers. Don't drive him from your heart by yielding to the desires and temptations of the selfish nature. Instead, tap into the spiritual strength he gives through the gospel to put off the old nature and all its sinful and selfish qualities every day.

With the word "Instead," St. Paul turns our attention from the lovelessness that Christians must put off to the qualities of the new nature that the Spirit empowers them to put on. "Be kind and compassionate to one another," he urges, "Forgiving one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven you." How different these qualities are from the selfish attitudes and actions that characterize the old self. All of them reach, not selfishly inward, but outward in love. And all of them imitate the love that Jesus showed to those he encountered when he walked this earth, as well as the sacrificial love that led him to give his life to save a world of sinful and selfish human beings.

Kindness is goodness of heart that shows itself in genuine willingness to help and to serve others. Compassion trains itself to care for others and to recognize and respond to their various needs. And willingness to forgive is the unique response that imitators of Jesus have to the sleights and hurts that others inflict on them as they travel through life. The forgiveness that imitates that of Jesus is free and unconditional. It doesn't depend on whether the Christian thinks the other person deserves it, or even on whether the other person asks for it. Wholehearted forgiveness imitates the spirit of Christ, whose unconditional love for the world of sinners led him to die to earn forgiveness for the whole human race. Believers' willingness to forgive those who sin against them is an expression of gratitude for the forgiveness of an infinitely greater debt that Jesus has bestowed on them.

The life to which believers are called, the life that imitates Jesus and the Father, is a life of unselfish love, a life that consciously seeks to put off the selfish attitudes and actions that come naturally to the old self, and to put on the new self "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." We need Scripture's reminders about our unique calling as dearly loved children of God and a clear picture of what our lives ought to look like. How easy it is for us to grieve

God's Spirit and get mired in the muck of the bitterness and rage, the anger and quarreling that goes on constantly in the society in which we live. How easy it is to forget who we are and to be influenced only by what our old self wants us to be. Putting off the old self and putting on the new is a painful and difficult thing. As long as our old nature continues to cling to us, we will stumble and fall over and over again as we strive to live lives that imitate our Lord. But there is no limit to the spiritual growth each of us can enjoy as we continually find refreshment and strength in the Spirit's assurances that we are God's dearly loved children.

Dearly loved children of God who strive to imitate the Father who loves them and the Son who saved them are motivated and empowered by God's love for them. It's natural that children who enjoy a loving relationship with their parents and admire them will seek to imitate them. Christians strive to be imitators of God, because he has adopted us as his children and his Spirit dwells in our hearts. Each new day brings new evidences of his amazing, unconditional love for us. That love motivates and empowers us to love him who loved us first; and to imitate him in our human and imperfect way by reflecting his love in attitudes, words and actions that serve him, one another and those around us in the world.

The ultimate evidence of God's love for us; and consequently, the ultimate motive for our loving and imitating him, is Christ's atoning sacrifice for us. That sacrifice was pleasing and acceptable to the Father. As the smoke and odor of the Old Testament sacrifices were a fragrant offering and pleasing to God as they rose to him as his people's worship, Jesus' sacrifice of himself rose to the Father as a pleasing sacrifice, an acceptable atonement for our sins. It removed the offensive odor of our sins and rose as a fragrant offering to God. Now as we, motivated and empowered by his love, offer our lives, not as atoning sacrifices -- only Jesus sacrifice could do that -- but as sacrifices of thanksgiving for all his amazing grace has done for us, he accepts them as a fragrant offering, pleasing and acceptable in his sight. God help us celebrate grace each day as God's dearly loved children, children whose lives imitate and reflect his amazing love for us. Amen.

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