

“IMITATE GOD, NOT THE WORLD”
(Ephesians 5:1-6)

This morning I want to talk to you about who you imitate. Imitating other people is one of the main skills of a comedian. When I was growing up there was a comedian named Rich Little who impersonated dozens of famous people, and his impersonations were dead-on. I looked him up and was surprised that he is still alive and still doing impersonations of current politicians and celebrities. Another form of impersonation in recent years are bands that mimic classic rock groups like the Beatles and Led Zeppelin – and if you close your eyes listen to them perform, you can hardly tell any difference between them and the original group. The most impersonated person of all-time, of course, is Elvis. They say there are over 300,000 Elvis impersonators around the world who try to copy his trademark voice and looks.

All of us are imitators, and we start copying people early in life. When our granddaughter, Arabella, was home this summer I would look at her and smile, then she would smile – unless she was in a grumpy mood... I would clap my hands and she would do the same. Children naturally imitate what adults do. I remember my son Matt would follow behind me as I mowed the yard with his little toy lawn mower, and do whatever dad was doing. When kids get older, they shift their imitation to their peers and mimic whatever the cool kids are doing. Imitation is something we all do without realizing it. The big question is: Who do you imitate?

The main idea of today’s message is that we, as believers, are to imitate God and not the world. Our lives are to be a reflection of who God is, and not of the world that lives apart from God. This idea fits the overall theme of Ephesians which is living out who God called us to be. Since we are saved by God’s grace and made new creations in Christ, we no longer are to imitate the patterns of the old, sinful world – but live a new life that pleases God and imitates Him.

Today we’re going to look at verses 1-6 of Ephesians 5, and in typical fashion the Apostle Paul gives a positive command in verses 1-2 – what we are to imitate, and a negative command in verses 3-6 – what we are not to imitate.

In verses 1-2 Paul writes... “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (ESV). The Greek word for “imitators” is *mimetai* from which we get the word “mimic” – someone who copies the characteristics of another person. We all know what it’s like to imitate another person, but how do we imitate the God of the universe? Is that even possible?

To imitate God means that we are to pattern our lives after His moral character and attributes. When we talk about who God is, theologians like use two categories to describe God’s attributes. One is called His untransferable attributes, meaning traits that are unique to God that we do not share. For example, God is omnipotent – He is able to do anything He wants – we are not. God is omniscient – He knows all things – we do not. God is omnipresent – He fills the entire universe – we do not. These attributes of God are not given to us.

But there are also transferrable attributes, traits that God wants us to share with Him. God is holy and righteous and just, He is loving and gracious and kind and merciful – these are Godlike characteristics

that God wants us to display in our lives. Every person is created in God's image, which means we are like Him and bear His resemblance. When Adam and Eve sinned that image was marred, but not destroyed.

When we are saved, God begins to transform us back into His perfect image. Paul talked about this in 4:24 where he said we are to "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." This transformation can only take place by being born again and adopted into God's family, and once we become children of God, we begin to take on His characteristics.

When my dad was a teenager, he broke his hip and the rest of his life he walked with a slight limp. One time, when I was little, a family friend watched me walking behind my dad, and noticed that I was walking with a slight limp just like my dad. Like father, like son. For better or for worse, children imitate their parents. We consider it a compliment when they copy our good traits and cringe when we see them copy our less noble qualities. Children can't help but be like their parents – it's only natural. In the same way, we imitate the traits and characteristics of our Heavenly Father.

In chapter 4 Paul began describing what our new way of life looks like... we are to walk in unity with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ... we are to walk in truth... we are to control our anger... we are to speak wholesome words to build others up... and we are to treat people with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness.

Now in 5:2 he says, "Walk in love." 1 John 4:8 says, "God is love," and as His children we are called to walk in love. Love is a notoriously difficult word to define, and means different things to different people, but the word used here for love is *agape*, a word unique to Christianity and found only in the Bible. Agape love is a selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love that seeks the highest good of the other person. The world defines love as a feeling that comes and goes depending on the circumstances. It's a selfish love that focuses on what I can get out of it. But agape love is not a feeling, but a choice – it loves even when others are not easy to love – and it focuses not on self, but meeting the needs of the other person.

Agape love does not come naturally to us – in our fallen nature we are incapable of producing such selfless love. If we are to love as God loves, that love can only come from Him. Romans 5:5 says, "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." As Christians we get a supernatural transfusion of love that enables us to love as God loves. Once we've experienced the agape love of God, we have the capacity and the obligation to love others as He loved us.

Our love is to follow the example of Christ's love. Verse 2 says, "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." The greatest act of love is to lay down your life for another. This is why we honor fallen soldiers and policemen who sacrifice their life in order to protect ours. Out of love Christ gave Himself up for us – He gave the ultimate sacrifice to save us from our sin.

Three things stand out about Christ's sacrifice. The first is His willingness to die. Christ obeyed the will of the Father by coming to earth to die for our sins, but He did so willingly. No one made Him do it. At any moment He could have called ten thousand angels save Him from the cross, but out of love for us He willingly laid down His life.

Notice secondly, the substitution of Christ on our behalf... "He gave Himself up *for us*." This reminds us that we all deserve to die for our sins, but out of love Christ died in my place and in your place. He

took all of our sins upon Himself and bore the wrath of sin for us. This is the heart of the gospel – that Jesus died as my substitute – in my place – God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

Third, we notice that Christ's death was "*a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*" This phrase was used to describe Old Testament sacrifices – as the smoke from the offering ascended up to heaven it had a pleasing aroma to God. This is a way of saying that it satisfied or appeased God's wrath, and that He accepted it as an atonement for sin. Through the sacrifices God was teaching His people that in order to be right with Him an acceptable offering must be made to Him – and every sacrifice looked forward to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ.

On the cross Jesus willingly gave Himself up as our sacrifice in order to satisfy God's required payment for sin. God was not pleased not that His Son had to die, but that His Son willingly laid down His life for sinners, and because Jesus' sacrifice was accepted, God accepts anyone who has put their trust in Christ as their Savior from sin.

Christ's death on the cross is the ultimate example of love, and we are to imitate His agape love by loving others selflessly, loving sacrificially, and loving others unconditionally. The way we treat others should be a pleasing, fragrant aroma to the Lord – in keeping with those who have so generously received His love.

After exhorting us to imitate God, in verses 3-6 Paul focuses on what not to imitate – namely, the old patterns and behaviors that characterized our old life prior to Christ. Verses 3-4 says, "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving" (NIV).

The Ephesian believers to whom Paul is writing had once been part of the pagan culture of Ephesus. Ephesus a large, seaport city known for its "anything goes" culture – whatever sinful behavior could be thought of, they had it. But now that they're saved, God has called them to live a moral life as God's holy people. Paul lists three kinds of behaviors they are no longer to practice, behaviors that are just as much a part of our culture as was Ephesus 2000 years ago.

The first is **sexual immorality**. One of the major issues facing the church today is how we respond to the sexual revolution that is dominating culture. Will we succumb to the anything-goes sexual standards of the day or adhere to the standards of sexual morality given to us by God in His Word. In Ephesians 4, and many, many other places in the Bible, God makes his standards of sexual behavior crystal clear. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God." 1 Corinthians 6:18 says, "Flee sexual immorality."

The Greek word for sexual immorality is *porneia*, from which we get the word "pornography." *Porneia* is a broad word that refers to any sexual relationship outside of marriage. This includes sex before marriage and adultery after marriage. God's standard is quite simple: If you're not married, don't have sex until you are married. If you are married, don't have sex outside your marriage.

Porneia also includes homosexual relationships that go against God's will and design, and it includes the stirring up sexual desires through pornography. All sexual expression is to take place within marriage between a man and a woman.

God's Word is very straightforward, and as Christians we don't have to wonder what God wants in the area of sexuality. Yet there is tremendous pressure in culture, that grows more intense each passing year, to lower the standards and adapt to the accepted thinking of the day. Churches are splitting over these issues, and many Christians simply pick and choose from the Bible what they want to believe or not believe. But the Bible does not give us that luxury – if we take a high view of scripture and truly believe it is God's Word from cover to cover, then we obey all that it says, including what it says about sexual morality.

It's important that we back up and look at the big picture of God's design for sexuality. God created us as sexual beings with sexual desires, and the church should not be embarrassed to talk about what God called good. As I used to tell my youth group: God is pro-sex. He invented it, and He regulates it according to His design. His design for sexuality is perfect, and is meant to bless us and protect us. 1 John 5:3 says, "God's commands are not burdensome." They do create boundaries, but those boundaries are given for our good.

When people step outside His boundaries, there are natural consequences – some immediate, and some come later on. Sexual immorality harms yourself, bringing guilt and shame and distrust, and it can cause disease and addiction. Research shows that the more addicted we are to the wrong use of sex the more our sexual satisfaction is decreased. Stepping outside of God's boundaries harms others – it can lead to divorce, to an abortion, it causes kids to grow up without fathers. God doesn't want anyone to experience the fallout that comes from sexual immorality, so He lovingly draws a circle around the marriage of a man and a woman, and says, "Stay within the boundary. Trust me, trust my design. I invented sex and I know how it works."

Because sex was created by God, we cannot disconnect it from the way God designed it and still make it work. Imagine for a moment that you're out on the ocean and you get lost at sea. As your body begins to dehydrate you see water everywhere, and even though you know that water isn't fresh, it appears as though it will quench your thirst. So you drink it and it relieves your thirst, but it's a temporary relief. All it does it make you more dehydrated and shortens the time you have to live. The same thing happens when you disconnect sex from the way God designed it – it promises to fulfill your desires, but it's like drinking salt water. It is pleasurable for a season, it appears to satisfy, but like drinking salt water it leads to death.

When God saves you, He calls you to a new standard of living. His standards are going to seem strange to the world and out of step with what everyone else is doing, but you must trust that His way is best and that obedience leads to blessing.

Notice that Paul says, "among you there must no be even a hint of sexual immorality." There should never be a time when someone accuses you of improper behavior. We can all learn from Billy Graham who made it his practice to never be alone with woman other than his wife. He traveled all over the world, and before he checked into a motel room, he would have someone make sure there was nothing in the room that might tempt him to sin. He took great precautions to avoid any hint of sexual indiscretion in his life, and when he died a few years ago at the age of 99, he died free of scandal.

The second behavior we are to avoid as believers is any kind of **impurity**. Impurity means whatever is unclean, filthy, or perverse. 1 Thessalonians 4:7 says, “God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” We naturally think of impurity as open, blatant forms of immorality, but in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus expanded immorality to include impure thoughts and desires within.

A pure life begins with pure thoughts and desires that come from disciplining what websites we look at, what books we read, and what shows we watch. It’s not easy to get away from all the impurity that surrounds us, but as Martin Luther said, “You can’t keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.” You can choose not to act or dwell on temptation.

The third behavior Paul lists that we are to avoid is **greed**. Greed speaks of uncontrolled appetites, whether it’s for money or power or fame. In this context it also refers to uncontrolled sexual desires. The problem with greed is that it is never satisfied. Rich and famous people – who seem to have everything – are also the most unhappy and dissatisfied people. If a person lives for more – more money, more power, more sexual excitement – the enjoyment of those things will decrease over time, to the point where there is little or no enjoyment at all. One of the most important virtues in life is self-control, and learning to channel your desires in a God-honoring way.

In verse 4 Paul turns his attention to our words. He writes... “Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.” As culture has eroded morally, so has the way we talk. People have always used swear words and told dirty jokes, but it was mostly done in locker rooms and not – as they say – in polite society. When the movie *Gone With the Wind* came out in 1939, the big controversy was Clark Gable saying the word “damn.” We’ve gone all the way from that to movies and TV shows being littered with profanity. The “F” word used as casually as the words “and” or “the.” Somewhere along the line – and I’m getting a little preachy here – it’s become acceptable for Christians to talk just like the world. God has called us to be a salt and light to the world, and if we use profanity, we are no different than the world and lose our influence.

What Paul says in verse 4 is not hard to understand. He lists three types of talk that are out of place for Christians who are to imitate the holiness of God. The first is **obscenity**. This refers to any kind of talk that is degrading and disgraceful. It’s the kind of talk that takes what God has made good and holy – such as our bodies and sex – and defiles it. It takes what is exalted or revered and pulls it down from its pedestal to where it is no longer special.

The second is **foolish talk**. The Greek word for foolish is *morologia*, from which we get the word “moron.” Moron means foolish or empty. It’s speaking of a morally foolish person who doesn’t think about or control what he says. Jesus warned that one day we will be judged for every idle or careless word we say, so we must learn to discipline our speech to speak only what is wholesome and builds others up.

The third is **course joking**. Coarse joking comes from a word that means “to turn easily.” It’s talking about the person loves to take any comment – even the most innocent comment – and turn it into a dirty joke. To the world these jokes are funny, but to a Christian it is making light of what God has made holy and good.

Instead of obscenity, foolish talk, and course joking, our speech should be marked by **thanksgiving**. In Romans 1 Paul describes the downward spiral of a world that rejects God, and the decent into chaos begins with not glorifying God or giving thanks to Him. Once the world ignores God's order and design, they stop being grateful for God's good gifts and give themselves over to sexual immorality and the degrading of their bodies. This is how the unbelieving world acts, but as Christians who have been called to a glorious life in Christ, we should be thankful for every gift we have from God, including sex, and not defile it by the way we talk.

In verse 5 Paul gives a sober warning for those who imitate the world... “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” One of the great blessings of being God's children is looking forward in hope to our future inheritance in heaven – when we are with the Lord and live forever with Him in a perfect world. It only makes sense that there will not be immoral or impure or greedy people in heaven. If they were, it would no longer be heaven. Paul is reminding the Ephesian believers that they are changed people – this is what you were, but because now that you're born again, you are no longer like this.

This doesn't mean that Christians will not stumble and commit sin, but it does mean that sin will not be a pattern. 1 John 3:9 says, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.” As we grow in the Lord our desire to sin and our participation in sin will lessen. I worked with a new believer once who had a habit of swearing before coming to Christ, and a month or two after accepting Christ he said, “I only swore 25 times this week.” Now that the Holy Spirit was living within him, he had a new awareness of sin and a new desire to please and obey God.

In verse 6 Paul reinforces his warning by saying, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.” Not only are those who reject God and disobey His commands excluded from the kingdom of God, but they will be eternally judged by God.

The common perception many, many hold to is that everyone goes to heaven – or almost everyone – people like Hitler and mass shooters and really, really bad people won't go to heaven – but everyone else will be there. If you go to a funeral service, you will hear people say – almost without exception – that that the deceased person is in heaven. Even though that person never went to church, never professed faith in Christ, or lived what others would consider a Christian life, the default destination of every person is heaven. But not everyone will be in heaven – only those who have repented on their sins and trusted in Christ for salvation.

But this verse, and many others in the Bible, says that God's wrath remains on those who are disobedient – who continue in sin without repenting – and the only way to be delivered from God's judgment is to humble yourself before God, admit that you are a sinner in need of His grace, and trust Christ as your Savior from sin – believe that He took upon Himself the judgment that you deserved.

God's Word to you and me this morning is that because we belong to Him – because we are God's children – we are to imitate the love and holiness of God. And since we no longer belong to the world, we are to abandon the immoral, impure, greedy ways of the world and honor God with our bodies and our words. Whenever God's Word tells us something we shouldn't do, it is always for our good. God wants only the best for His children, and we are blessed when we imitate Him and reflect His glory to the world.