

Body Works – “Imitate God”

Ephesians 5:1-2

with communion

You’ve just inherited an unbelievable sum of money from a long lost great aunt. You have given generously for the Kingdom of God by ending world poverty, feeding the world’s hungry, investing in world peace and there is still money left for you – enough to get the car of your dreams. What kind of vehicle would you buy? You could get the world’s best luxury car with your own driver. You could get an off road vehicle and explore mountain and canyon trails around the world. You could get an exotic sports car and feel the wind in your face. You can get an old classic favorite and build a hot rod.

Cars are an expression of their creator. Henry Ford produced cars that reflected his personality. He said that you could get a Ford in any color you wanted as long as it was black. Cars are designed to perform within specific conditions. A low slung hot rod wouldn’t do very well cutting across the back country trails. Just as cars are an expression of their creator, so too are we. We are an expression of our Creator. We have been created in His image. We have been designed to be like Jesus.

Our world is full of imitation and mimicking. Marketers make millions of dollars by playing on our desire to be more than we are. So often the heroes we idolize and chase after end up letting us down or even worse leading us down an empty path to nowhere.

Have you ever had someone say to you that you sound just like your father or mother? How cool it is that each of us is created in the image of God. God offers to continually fill us with His Spirit so that we can be more like Jesus. I wonder if from time to time there is a conversation in heaven as an angel notices one of us acting just like our Heavenly father. I wonder if in that moment the angels smile and God lets out a gleeful chuckle as He watches us from above.

When I was a boy I wanted to be just like Willie Mays. Since that time I have had other heroes that I tried to emulate. At this point in my life, I would be more than satisfied if I could be like

Jesus. So let's look at our text in Ephesians for today. This week as we continue our Body Works series we are looking at chapter 5. Our primary text is found in Vs 1-2: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

When we study the Bible and we come to the word "therefore", we always need to ask a basic question, "what is the word 'therefore' there for?" In Vs 1-2 the Apostle Paul in this letter to the church in Ephesus is offering a summary. He has been building toward this since 4:17 where he began writing on how to live as children of the light. Chapter 4 finishes with verse 32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Our Bibles today are divided into chapters and verses. But in the original letters there were no chapters and verses. The end of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5 is an unnatural break in one continuous thought. Let's put it together like this beginning with 4:32: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Paul is writing using a classic form of logic. If this, then that. Since "X" is true, then "Y" should follow. Paul has been making the case that we should live in the light – that we should live as children of the light. And since this is true, Paul follows this to a logical conclusion: If we are to live as children of the light, then – or therefore, we should be imitators of God.

Which takes us to a basic question from Vs 1-2, "How can I imitate God?" What are the basic characteristics of God that we should emulate? Chapter 5 helps us answer this basic question. Vs 1-2 give us a summary capsule of what God is like. First, we should realize that we are dearly loved children. Ellen and I have enjoyed having our grandchildren visit this month. We thank the Lord that our children and their spouses are good parents. If you watch a child at play you can soon tell whether or not that child feels loved. Perhaps you have walked through a grocery store or a park and observed a parent child moment and realized that you were witnessing a child that was not dearly loved by a parent. It is a sad moment to observe. Some of

us spend the rest of our lives trying to compensate for the absence of unconditional love. But the Word of God tells us that we are dearly loved children. If the world has abandoned us, and if our own parents didn't love us, we are still loved – and loved dearly – by the God who created us!

Paul continues his seamless thought as we read from Vs 1 to Vs 2. As dearly loved children of God trying to be imitators of God, we are to live a life of love. Paul even gives us a definition of what it means to live a life of love. Paul tells us to look at Christ as our example. How did Jesus love us? He gave Himself up for us. Jesus left the throne and glory of heaven to come to earth to live as a man. And then out of His love for us, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus went to the cross to pay the price for our sins that we might find forgiveness and a right relationship with God. Vs 2 gives us a more intimate peek into the love that Jesus has for us. Jesus gave Himself up for us “as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”. In Matthew 26 a woman came to Jesus with a container of very expensive perfume. She poured it over the head of Jesus. When others asked why she did this, Jesus said that it was like a gift and that she was preparing Jesus' body for burial.

Vs 2 tells us that Jesus “loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”. This means that when Jesus went to the cross He was motivated by love. It is true that as Jesus prayed He did ask the father if it was possible to find another way to care for the sins of the world – another way other than the cross. But when it was clear that the cross was the will of His Heavenly Father, the Bible tells us that Jesus went to the cross, not begrudgingly with an “if I have to attitude”, but as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Bottom line – Jesus embraced the cross. It was a place of extreme suffering ... let there be no doubt. But Jesus loved us so much, that He embraced the cross.

Our Bible lesson this morning is simple and clear. Imitate God. How? What is God like? We are to live a life of love just like Jesus who loved us and gave Himself up for us by embracing the cross. Let's stop and pray for a moment and ask the Spirit of God to speak into our lives ... who is God asking us to reach out to in love?

To imitate God and to live a life of love there are some lifestyle considerations that the Bible offers to us. In Vs 3-7 the Bible says that “not even a hint ...” of these things should be found in

our lives if we want to imitate God. Let's consider the list: sexual immorality, any kind of impurity or greed. Why, because these are not proper for God's people – for God's family. The list continues ... there is not to be a hint of obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking. The Bible says that these are out of place and that instead we should give thanks. Paul as the writer of these verses wants us to clearly understand, so he emphasizes his point once more in Vs 5, "For of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolator – has any inheritance in the Kingdom of God and of Jesus".

I began my message this morning by mentioning a fictitious inheritance that we had just received. But there is an inheritance for the people of God that is not fictitious, it is very real. But while God's love is unconditional, His inheritance for us is conditional. God will never stop loving us, even if we walk away from Him in sin. But His inheritance is reserved for those who respond to Him in love.

Did you even for the slightest moment get excited at the remote possibility of an inheritance from a great aunt? Do you get excited even for a moment as you fill out the application for the Reader's Digest Sweepstakes lottery? Do you ever for even a moment begin to dream about what you would do if you won? Well friends, go ahead and dream because God has an inheritance for each of us if we respond to Him with love and obedience.

Paul goes on to talk about the life we need to leave behind. In Vs 8-14 Paul says that we were once darkness, but now we are light. Paul immediately gives us a definition of what it means to live as children of the light. In Vs 9 we read that "the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth".

Vs 10 goes on to say that we should find out what pleases the Lord. Fair enough, but how do we do that? Let's connect verses 9 and 10. How do we know what pleases the Lord? We use verse 9 and simply ask if it is good, right and true? If something is good and right and true then we know that God will be pleased.

Paul goes on to warn again about the darkness. In Vs 11 the Bible says that we should have “nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.” To fully understand this we need to keep it within the context of all that we are reading. Vs 11 does not give us permission to go out on a holy crusade destroying those that we do not feel are living in the light. It is absolutely essential that we remember that the Bible calls us to live a life of love. We are to love others the way Jesus loves us.

Yes, it is true that the Bible tells us to have nothing to do with fruitless deeds of darkness. And yes it is true that we are to expose this darkness with the light of Jesus. But we do this by living lives of love. We can have nothing to do with the deed while we reach out in love to the one who commits the deed. That is being like Jesus.

Ellen and I have good friends who are also in ministry. They have a adult child that is openly gay. Their son lives in a city at a distance from where our friends live. Ellen and I used to travel quite a bit and when we would visit that city we would phone their son and ask if we could have dinner with him. We simply wanted to live a life of love. We didn't preach and we didn't scold. We simply tried to live as children of the light trusting that the Light of God would create a longing for the Giver of Light.

Some of you have heard me mention before that Ellen and I immersed ourselves in the Harley culture before moving here. Often on a Saturday afternoon, we would often gather with other biker friends and ride to some of the favorite spots. We had our diet cokes and met some great people, some of whom became very good friends. We also met some people living life in such darkness that it was almost as if they preferred to lurk in the shadows rather than get to close to the light. But we prayed and knew others were praying with and for us, and we simply tried to live a life of love.

In Vs 15-20 Paul goes on to tell us that we should “be very careful then ...”. Why does Paul now warn us about being careful? Let's look at Vs 15. Paul says that we should “be very careful then, how you live...”. We should not live as unwise but as wise. We should make the most of

every opportunity, because the days are evil. We should not be foolish but instead understand what the will of God is. We should not get drunk which leads to debauchery (or wickedness).

Paul is warning us to be careful how we live. Why? Because once we begin to imitate God and to live a life of love, others are watching. They want to know if we are for real or simply putting on a show. They want to know if what they see in public is authentic and genuine. They want to know if there are any secrets that we keep hidden in the darkness. Even the world knows that real Christianity is not something that can be compartmentalized. The world calls that being a hypocrite. Its where we live one way on Sunday and with our churchy friends and then have another alter ego and lifestyle that we roll out when church is over and churchy friends aren't around. One of the reasons that Ellen and I had credibility and were accepted in the Harley culture is that we didn't "put on church" when we were with churchy friend and take it off when we weren't around them. We just tried to be like Jesus where ever we were or whoever we were with.

How does that happen? In Vs 18-20 the Bible tells us to "be filled with the Spirit". This is a critical verse. What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of God? If you look at this verse in the original language of the Greek, it means more than come to Jesus once and be filled. It is not saying that we can come to an altar once and then live however we want. It also is not saying that we should come to church every Sunday just so that we can be filled up for another week. The literal understanding of this verse is that we are to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit. In John 4 Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give Him will become in him a spring of living water welling up to eternal life."

Some car dealers will send you off the lot with a full tank of gas as you purchase a new car. But we all know that one tank of gas won't last for the lifetime of the car. We understand that as we drive all week long we are going to have to stop and fill our gas tank at least once a week so we don't run out of gas along the road somewhere. But the promise of Jesus is that He will continually refuel our spiritual gas tank. The promise of God is that His Holy Spirit continually fills us and can keep our spiritual tank full of His presence.

When we are baptized, we are baptized in ... water. The water symbolizes the Spirit of God cleansing us and making us new – making us like Jesus. And Jesus said that this water – the Holy Spirit – becomes like a spring of life within each of us. We gather as a Deer Flat family each Sunday and come into this “family room” to worship together. Worship is an act of love that we offer as a family to our God in heaven. And we do draw strength from being with God’s family for inspiring worship. But Ephesians 5:18 says that God wants to continually fill us with His Holy Spirit.

And as we are continually filled with the Holy Spirit we begin to speak to one another in different ways. In Vs 19 it says that we will “speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs”. We will “sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Ellen and I loved our visits to Haiti. The poverty and starvation there is real. It haunts your memory. But what we loved is that when we worshipped with and lived among our Haitian brothers and sisters we never heard them complain. Here we can find the silliest of things to complain about. But there, surrounded by tragic suffering, they just find it in their hearts to give thanks to God in everything.

I want us to briefly look at one last verse this morning. In Vs 21 we read that we are to “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”. This is our final piece this morning as we consider how to imitate God. The Bible says that one of the ways we imitate God is by submitting to one another. Let’s try to understand the depth of meaning in this word “to submit”. It means to defer to one another, meaning my opinion doesn’t have to be right all of the time. It means to yield to one another, meaning I don’t have to be first all of the time. It means to make ourselves available, meaning that if you need me you can call me. It means to commit to one another, meaning that I don’t live my life alone but that I give my life to live in community with God’s people as children of the light.

Imitate God. Wow – what an invitation. It is not just for pastors and those who have walked like Jesus for fifty years. It is an invitation for all of us. At its essence it means to live a life of love. To best imitate God we become more and more like Jesus. We begin to love others the way Jesus loves us.

This morning we are coming to the Lord's Table to receive communion. I invite you to talk to God and to listen for His voice as we prepare. Go ahead and ask God if there are ways that you can better imitate Him. Ask God if there are ways that you can better live a life of love. Ask God if there are ways that we can become more like Jesus. As we take the bread and the cup we believe that it is a means of grace – a way for us to become more like Jesus.