

Ephesians 4:25-5:21
(Leviticus 19:1-2; Matthew 5:43-48)
“The Imitation of God”

Introduction

In each of his letters, Paul did what every good teacher does: he said, “Based on what I have been saying, what difference should it make? How should you apply these truths?” We are in that part of the Ephesian letter where he is doing just that. In the first three chapters, he has told us what God has done in Christ to unite all things that our rebellion has broken apart, and how he aims to make all things new. He now describes the kind of transformation that we should expect to see in the lives of those of us who profess faith in Jesus.

In our text last week, we heard Paul say, “Put off the old self and put on the new,” as he called us to have the mind, heart and will of Jesus. Now he works out, through a series of contrasts, what that might look like. In our text, Paul does not develop an argument in logical sequence, but rather describes and depicts this new life. He invites us to measure ourselves, our lives, our dreams and desires and relationships, against what we find here.

But within the picture, there is a shading of light and dark with an attendant call to walk in the light and banish the darkness, as well as an inner Trinitarian structure – a call to imitate God through the gracious working of the Trinity for us, in us and through us. So we will look at this text, not verse by verse, but according to what seems to me to be Paul’s plan: first by noting the theological incentive to life in Christ on which he hangs all of the good advice he gives, and then as a practical picture of what life in Christ should look like.

Body

1. A theological incentive to life in Christ:

Imitating the Father who loves you (5:1).

We have been made in the image and likeness of God, so to imitate God is not to be arrogant, but rather to be fully human. And God is not a distant deity who places impossible demands upon us – “be holy as I am holy ... be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect ... therefore be imitators of God.” Rather, he is a loving Father who provides all that is needed for life and salvation. Paul writes, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children” (5:1).

There we have the comforting key to this entire passage: we are beloved children and the invitation is to be like our *Abba*, our dear Father. But what does that mean? What does that look like?

Imitating the Son who gave himself for you (5:2).

The one place that we see the image of God perfectly displayed is in Jesus Christ, so in seeing him, we see both who God is and who we are meant to be. He is utterly unlike the gods of ancient religions, who favored the religious class and despised the poor and broken and unclean. Jesus came to call, not the righteous, but sinners. And in this, he shows us the heart of God.

And the Son has not merely shown us what we are meant to be: he has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, namely, he has dealt with our brokenness and alienation from God by giving himself in love, a perfect sacrifice on our behalf, so that we might put off the old self and put on the new.

Living in the power of the Spirit who fills you (5:18).

God has not only given us a perfect picture of his image in the face of his Son. The Son has not only given himself in our place so that in Christ life might begin again. He has also given us the power to begin to grow up in conformity to that image. He has given us his own Spirit, the Spirit that led, directed and empowered Jesus in his ministry, the Spirit whom Jesus promised to pour out on his followers so that we could take up his life and ministry and display the Kingdom of God – the presence of the future – in the midst of human history. What practical difference should that begin to make in our daily lives?

It is interesting to me how often at this point biblical wisdom and sheer human wisdom, a gift of God's common grace, coincide. What Paul describes is what, in Philippians four, he calls along with the sages and philosophers of old, the true, the just and the lovely.

2. A practical picture of life in Christ:

Speaking as a beloved and empowered child of God.

The true: Paul calls us to speak what is true and not what is false, what is wise and not what is foolish. We live in a culture that does not value truth as much as acceptance of all views, and anyone who speaks what they believe to be true may be seen as insufficiently tolerant of opposing views. The late John Paul II wrote in his *Veritatis Splendor* ["Splendor of Truth"] of the devastating cultural consequences of separating love from truth. It leads, not to life, but to death. Love – to be love - must speak, however gently and compassionately, the truth, rather than lying to protect feelings.

And he calls us to speak with wisdom, rather than to promote folly. [For example, Jimmy Kimmel's Jesus character quoting "Christian" politicians].

The just: Paul calls us to speak words that build up rather than words that tear down. It is not only unloving, it is unjust to tear people down in order to build oneself up. The command not to "bear false witness" strikes at the heart of this. Am I willing to mock another or tear him down in order to build myself up? Beware of people who do that as their stock and trade. They are under the judgment of God.

The lovely: One of the ways that we are drawn to God's heart is through the lovely and beautiful. So Paul says, do not speak crudely and impurely, but speak words – even sing songs – filled with praise and thanksgiving to God, words and songs that express the beauty of holiness.

Acting as a beloved and empowered child of God.

The true: Paul calls us to honest work, the kind of work he did in order to be self-supporting, and to leave dishonesty behind. Nothing except immorality so quickly destroys a Christian's witness as does dishonesty, plagiarizing other people's work, stealing their ideas or their stuff.

The just: Paul speaks of living in the light and exposing the deeds of darkness. It is a call to live open lives, not seeking the darkness so that we might try to hide our evil deeds. This is a frequent theme in Scripture, Old Testament and New.

The lovely: Paul calls us to faithfulness, to flee sexual immorality and greed which, when exposed to the light, are so ugly. Things that can appear so attractive when entertained as a hidden fantasy become so ugly when brought into the light. How often over the years I have heard people say, "What was I thinking? How could I have done that? How could I have desired that? What a fool I am! How awful!" So Paul says, "Walk in the light."

Thinking as a beloved and empowered child of God.

Rather than go through Paul's illustrations of how we are to think, let me simply read his summary of all this as he expressed it in Philippians:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:8-9).

Conclusion

Could it be more clear that Paul is calling us, not only to a new way of thinking, but to a new way of living? Salvation is new life, life in Christ. It involves daily putting off the old and putting on the new. It involves heart and mind and strength. And, in the end, it leads to life, to love and joy and peace. This is the life that all desire, although apart from grace we run from it. It is the highest call and greatest privilege of all: the call to imitate our heavenly Father because we are his dearly loved children.

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved