

“Imitation?
Isaiah 2:1-5; John 3:16-20;
Ephesians 5:1-20

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Be imitators of God. A bold statement. Be imitators. Generally when we think of something that's an imitation, the first thought that comes to my mind is that it's not that great. An imitation watch. Imitation leather. Not quite the real thing, right?

There is another way of thinking about the word imitation. One of the things people say about imitation is that it is the purest form of flattery. We can think about imitation in that respect, too.

It's interesting, as we begin to think about what it means to imitate and why we imitate, that we are imitators. This has been recognized for a long time. Way back about 400 years before Christ, Plato talked about how we are imitators. Humankind imitates all kinds of things. In fact, Plato began to think everything was an imitation, and he was thinking it was not quite as good as the real thing. There's a real thing out there that we need to pay more attention to. His way of doing that was to ask more questions, and think about it, and look to what is the ideal. When we begin to work with what's ideal then we're really alive, we're really working with what's real. We are going to talk a bit more about that. But way back in Plato's time, he recognized that we are imitators.

There's a guy that much more recently talked about us as imitators. His name is Renee Girard. He talks about how we learn by imitation. He noticed that we learn language by imitating. We learn by imitating how our parents and our teachers do things. What he recognized is that as we imitate, as we grow up, the imitation shifts from pure imitation to desire to have what the other has. That leads to covetousness and greed and all kinds of other things. But he recognized that we are imitators and it is partly what we imitate that matters. I think that's where Paul comes in.

In Ephesians here, Paul says to imitate God. And what does God do? God loves the world so much he gives his only son. If we imitate God, we will love the world, and then we will live in love as Christ has loved us. If we look at the little word “live” in this text, it's not the word that is often used in the New Testament for being alive. It's more of a word that means how we do things, how we live, how we roll. How we roll, according to Ephesians, is to live in love as Christ has loved us.

Now, that all sounds pretty good, although imitating God sounds a little bit like a high goal. There's that encouragement that we can at least live in love. That's the part that Ephesians is helping us see. And, what Christ does is give of himself. Think about three things that Christ does. Christ comes in humility, Christ brings forgiveness, and Christ gives of himself in the love of God. In many ways what we see in Christ is God's giving of himself to us in love.

All sounds pretty good, so there shouldn't be any problem living that out, right? It seems to me the issue comes when we struggle with what we imitate and how that works out. I think Girard helps us out a little bit there as he sees that as we begin to imitate others it becomes that we then want what they have.

Science News put out an article just last week that suggests that we can't help but want what somebody else has. We look to see what somebody else chooses and then we choose the same thing. In some ways imitation is not a bad thing. It is a good way to learn. It's when that imitation becomes rivalry that it becomes something bad. When we begin to covet what somebody else has, then we begin to get into that area of conflict because it's no longer that we're learning from them, we want to take from them.

That's the conflict that Paul is setting up for us here in Ephesians. If we imitate God, God gives in love. God gives his own son. Christ comes in humility, gives of himself. There's a giving. Then, there is the other side. It feels to me like so much of what the world tries to show us is that we need to take for ourselves. It's almost two different images of how we can try to live our lives. We can live our lives taking or giving. In fact, look at the things that Paul identifies here—fornication, impurity, greed. Fornication is taking outside the relationship of marriage. The background of that word is actually prostitution. It's a taking outside of the rightful relationships. Impurity is a broader word that means immorality. Aren't most things that are immoral things where we take from another? If we bear false witness, we are taking somebody's good name, for example, generally for our own reasons. If we steal, we are taking from somebody else. If we lie, we are taking away from others for our own purposes because they don't know the truth.

What Ephesians is encouraging us to do is not live as one taking, but to imitate God without the sense of rivalry. Too often our imitation leads to rivalry with God. That's the third of those words—greed. In some ways greed is the pinnacle of the rivalry, the desire for what somebody else has. You want it all. You want more than everybody else. It becomes what is purely important to you. In a way, when we want to be God so that we have control of something, we have it. We have it all. And that's how it becomes idolatry, because it becomes what our life is about rather than about what God wants us to be about.

So you have the taking and the giving. We can be an imitator by creating the rivalry between us and trying to become better than others, even better than God, because we've got it all. Or we can be an imitator in the way that sees that the other has something to teach us and that is good and that what we do in response is share of our own self, to give of our love, our abilities, our forgiveness. Last week we heard "forgive as Christ has forgiven us. Be rooted and grounded in love." Paul has been talking about what it means to live as a follower of Christ.

So what do we imitate? How hard it is to sometimes see one or the other. I think that's why Paul goes to this image of light and darkness. And there is perhaps a back story to that. If we go back to Plato, he had this description of people in a cave seeing only the

reflections, the shadows of things. When we live in the dark, what do we see? We see the shadows of things. I can be 8 feet tall as a shadow, or see another as bigger than they are. Shadows distort. You don't really see; you don't know for sure what it is. When we live with shadows, we don't see what's real. Plato realized that and that education can help. But what Paul suggests is that what we really need to get beyond the shadows, to get to what's real and what real is, is the love of God in our lives. It's when we recognize Christ is given as one who brings us forgiveness, grace, and a new way of life that we begin to move out of the shadows where we don't just see something that's fuzzy. The reality that God has given us begins to take shape and we are invited to live in that reality. Remember how he talked about speaking the truth, reality, in love. We begin to see what life is all about—about the love of God.

I love that phrase “the love of God” because it goes both ways. It's God's love, and it's our love of God. The love of God. It is then that we begin to live into it.

But what Paul says is if you don't work at being a body, unified, and if you don't allow that change that you recognized in God's coming into our lives to really be part of who we are, we can move back into the shadows. We can live simply with the shadows and it will show up. Who we are shows up, he says, in what we say. Obscene, silly, vulgar talk, for example. It shows up in our behavior, who we are, how we roll. It's an invitation to not only know the love of God but to allow it to fill us, to be the way we roll, to be that which helps us see.

When he says “understanding” here, part of that word means attitude. So it begins to shape our attitude about the world around us. Do we see everything as a rival, or can we begin to open up and see that through Christ we can share ourselves. It is about giving rather than taking. So what Paul is suggesting is, do we know the love of God in Christ Jesus? Are we being rooted and grounded in love? Then let our lives be filled in a way that it is the way we roll, and it will show up. We won't simply be taking. We'll be giving. We will be sharing the grace of God in Jesus Christ as we live. Amen.

Gracious God, let us not live in the shadows, but see clearly your light, the grace you have given us, the goodness. Lord indeed, all that is good and right and true, that is what you want to bring into our lives as we learn the fullness of your love and how to share it. Let us be those whose lives are filled with the love of Christ. Let that be the way we roll. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.