

## **Ephesians 5-1-2 Imitators of God**

**Ephesians 5:1–2 (ESV) — 1** Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. **2** And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

### **Sermon introduction:**

In 1992, Gatorade aired a commercial showing footage of Michael Jordan hitting clutch threes and dunking over his opponents. According to one marketing historian, the commercial should have been forgotten, since it was like so many others. Instead, it was one of the most popular ad campaigns of the 90s. Why? It included a catchy song with this chorus, “Like Mike, if I could be like Mike.” The commercial ended with these words, “Be like Mike, drink Gatorade.” This ad campaign was so successful, it re-aired 25 years later in 2017, with brand new Jordan merch!

I remember this commercial well. Why? It had a catchy song, but more importantly it captured the desires of so many people. Deep down, every little boy wanted to be like Mike. Kids wore Michael Jordan’s shoes, Michael Jordan’s clothes, and Michael Jordan’s jersey. Other kids adopted Michael Jordan’s workout routine and diet. Others dribbled the ball down the court with their tongues hanging out of their mouths. Why? Because that was what Michael Jordan did.

Everyone wanted “to be like Mike.” We imitate people we respect, don’t we? The more we respect someone, the more we want to be like them.

This brings us to Ephesians 5:1-2. There is no one more worthy of respect than God. Therefore, there is no one more worthy of imitation than God. In these verses Paul exhorts all Christians to do the impossible. He tells us to imitate God. what does it mean to imitate God? These verses bring up four aspects of imitating God.

*The mandate for imitation*

*The motive for imitation*

*The model for imitation*

*The method for imitation*

### **First, the mandate for imitation**

**Ephesians 5:1 (ESV) — 1** Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children

The apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, tells the saints in Ephesus to imitate God. The word for imitate is also translated with the word mimic. We mimic someone, when we act just like them. This mandate may not be startling to you, but it should be. Why? Paul tells us to imitate or mimic God, the maker of the universe.

William Barclay calls this “the highest standard in the world.”

Alexander Maclaren calls it “the sum of all duty.”

Martyn Lloyd-Jones calls command “Paul’s supreme argument ... the ultimate ideal.” (Boice)

### **Illustration:**

Many things in life are optional.

You can drive a Subaru or a Ford, it is up to you.

You can drink Starbucks coffee or Thomas Hammer coffee.

You can live on the South side or on the North side.  
You can buy a Mac or a PC  
You can read JRR Tolkien or JK Rowling  
You can be a Vegan or a Carnivore  
You can do all of these things or none of these things. It is totally up to you. They are optional.

But if you are a Christian, imitating God is not optional, it is mandated.

### **Application:**

According to many, the motif of imitation is at the heart of Paul's theology of discipleship. In Philippians 3:17 he asks his readers to imitate him as he imitates Christ (also 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7–9; 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Peter 2:21).

Being a Christian is not primarily about obtaining eternal life insurance. It is not primarily about having psychological peace of mind. Being a Christian is about glorifying God through imitation.

Life is not about making money, retiring early, having successful kids, spending tons of time with the grand kids, having the perfect body, or climbing the corporate ladder a little higher. Life is about imitating God.

Let me say one more thing about Paul's mandate to mimic or imitate God. How can we imitate someone we don't know? In order to imitate God, we must spend time with him by reading our Bibles, praying, going to church, and spending time with God's people.

I get that we are supposed to imitate God, but what is supposed to motivate us? This brings us to the second point.

*First, the mandate for imitation.*

### **Second, the motive for imitation**

**Why should we imitate God? Because we have been adopted by God!**

**Ephesians 5:1 (ESV) — 1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.**

If you are a Christian, you are a beloved *child of God*. In Paul's day, under Roman law, an adopted son received all the legal rights of a natural-born son, which included inheriting the family estate. When you become a Christian, God the father graciously adopted you into his family. As adopted sons of God, we receive the inheritance that rightfully belongs to Jesus Christ. This means that we are joint heirs with Jesus Christ.

**Romans 8:16–17 (ESV) — 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.**

J.I. Packer was one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. He argues that adoption is the highest privilege offered by the gospel. Why?

Redemption is amazing, but... a jailer can free you and not love you.

Justification is amazing, but... a judge can pardon you and not love you.

Reconciliation is amazing, but... you can be reconciled to someone and not have a warm intimate relationship with him or her.

Adoption is the highest privilege of the gospel because you are brought into the family of God!!! It is intensely personal and relational.

**Application:**

When God adopts us, it is not merely a mechanical or legal relationship. It is an intimate, loving, and personal relationship. It is a father child relationship.

But.... It gets even better. Paul makes the point that we are not just God's children; we are God's beloved children.

Parents, think about how much you love your children.

You are excited when they take their first steps...

You are filled with joy when they eat solid food for the first time...

You are filled with pride as they learn to play violin, piano, or guitar....

You are filled with pride when they score their first touchdown, get straight A's, or win their first tennis tournament.

You are thrilled when they get baptized.

You are filled with pride when they get their first job.

You take a loving interest in your children. Why? They are your children. How much more does God the father, the perfect father, taking a loving interest in us?

**One Scholar writes,**

“God's interest in and concern for His children is infinitely greater than the greatest and the noblest natural parent's interest in his or her child. God is loving concerned about us.” (Lloyd-Jones, 295)

Here is what Paul wants us to see...

Our motive for imitating God the father is love. God's love for us, expressed in our adoption, is the fuel that empowers our imitation.

**Ephesians 5:1 (ESV) — 1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.**

Once again in Ephesians we see that the redemptive indicates drive the ethical imperatives.

We obey because we are loved, we don't obey to get loved.

In other words, we don't imitate God, to get him to love us, we imitate God because he has loved us. He demonstrated his love to us by adopting us into his family.

As our love grows for our heavenly father, we naturally want to be more like him.

*But what does it look like specifically to imitate God? This brings us to the third point....*

*First, the mandate for imitation.*

*Second, the motive for imitation.*

### **Third, the model of imitation**

What does it actually look like to imitate God?

Is there a model? Yes, the model is Jesus. But isn't Jesus God? Yes. He was fully God and fully man. Jesus imitated God the father perfectly in his human nature.

In other words, he imitated God perfectly as a man, giving us a model to follow.

**Ephesians 5:1–2 (ESV) — 1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

Paul tells us to imitate God by walking in love, “as Christ loved us.” How does Christ love us?

#### **Christ modeled sacrificial love!**

**Ephesians 5:2 (ESV) — 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

When Paul writes that “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” he is arguing that Jesus sacrificed his own life for the benefit of believers. In other words, Christ died in the place of believers. In other parts of the Bible, we read that Jesus died in our stead, in our place, or on our behalf (cf. Gal. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:14, 21).

Theologians call this substitutionary atonement. Jesus died in our place. This is the very essence of Christianity. Unfortunately, this is unpopular in some circles because it implies that we deserved to face the wrath of God on the cross. But, until we embrace this aspect of the Bible's teaching, we will not be amazed by grace. Here is the good news, Jesus died for us, that is, in our place. He took the wrath that our sins deserved on his shoulders so that we could be forgiven, freed, and adopted.

We can only understand Christ's sacrificial love when we embrace substitutionary atonement. If Jesus did not die in our place, for our sins, his suffering was pointless.

#### **Illustration:**

James Denney, a 19<sup>th</sup> century British theologian, asks us to imagine two scenarios.

Imagine that someone is sitting on the end of a pier. He falls asleep, as a result he falls into the water. Since he can't swim, he starts to drown. His friend sees him drowning from 30 yards away, he sprints down the pier and jumps in the water to save him. He risks his own life to save his friend. But, in the process of saving his drowning friend, he drowns. This death is a tragedy, but at least the death accomplished something. His death accomplished the salvation of another.

On the other hand, imagine that someone is sitting on the side of pier, perfectly happy, content, and safe. A total stranger sees him sitting there. This total stranger starts sprinting towards him. While he is sprinting, he shouts, “I'm going to show you how much I love you by dying for you.” He runs right past him and leaps into the water and drowns. This death was pointless, it did not accomplish anything. Plus, the person sitting on the pier would wonder what in the world was wrong with the crazy guy who just drown for no apparent reason.

If Jesus did not die in our place, paying the penalty for our sins, his sacrificial death was pointless.

On the other hand, if Jesus died in our place, he atoned for all of our sins. When we fully embrace this glorious reality, we will be amazed by grace.

His sacrificial love was very costly love. And his sacrificial love accomplished something, it was not pointless!!!

*Christ modeled sacrificial love. But he did more...*

**Christ modeled voluntary love.**

**Ephesians 5:2 (ESV) — 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

One scholar writes, “The verb 'gave over', together with the reflexive pronoun 'himself', indicates that Christ took the initiative in handing himself over to death. He went to the cross as the willing victim.” (O'Brien)

In Jesus final days, he could have called down legions of angels to stop his death from happening, but he did not. He went to the cross, because he chose to go to the cross. He went to the cross voluntarily because he loves us.

**Illustration:**

There is a story that goes like this. One day, a railroad switch operator took his beloved son to work with him. After a few hours, the son ends up playing on the train tracks. Meanwhile the father is up in his office, above the train tracks. At one point the father looks up from his newspaper and he sees his son down on the train tracks, but he also sees two trains moving very quickly towards each other from opposite directions on the same track. The only way he could avoid the collision is by throwing a switch to move one of the trains onto another track. But the only other track available is the track that his son is playing on. He has to make a split second decision. He can save his son's life, or he can save the lives of hundreds of passengers on the two trains.

At the last second, the train operator pulls the switch and kills his son. Through his tears he watches as hundreds of people pass by, clueless to the sacrifice he had just made on their behalf.

This illustration tugs on our heart strings, but it is acutely a very inaccurate caricature of the atonement. Why? It totally misses a key component of the atonement. Christ was not a helpless victim, who was blindsided by his just father. Christ died very willingly and voluntarily.

He died, knowing full well what he was doing.

**John 10:17–18 (ESV) — 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”**

Christ died willingly because he loves us.

*Christ modeled sacrificial love.*

*Christ modeled voluntary love. In addition...*

**Christ modeled pleasing love.**

**Ephesians 5:2 (ESV) — 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

In the OT when a Ram was burnt on the alter, it gave off a pleasing aroma. According to Ex. 29:18ff, this aroma was very pleasing to the Lord. Imagine cooking a thick juicy steak on the barbecue on a warm summer evening. The smell of the steak would be very pleasing to many.

God is pleased whenever his people offer sacrifices to him, but God is most pleased with the sacrifice of his son. In Ephesians 5:2c, Paul claims that God the father was very pleased with his son's loving sacrifice. Why? The father knew that it would bring billions of people into his family, while glorifying his great name.

### **Application:**

*Christ modeled sacrificial love, voluntary love, and pleasing love.*

In Ephesians 5:2, Paul argues that Christ's love is worthy of imitation. When we imitate Christ's love, we imitate God. What does it mean to imitate God? It means to love like Jesus loved.

We are not called to imitate God with a generic fuzzy love. We are called to imitate God with a very specific type of love. We are called to imitate God with a sacrificial/voluntary love. When we imitate God in this specific way, God is very pleased.

What does this actually look like? This brings us to the final point...

- First, the mandate for imitation
- Second, the motive for imitation
- Third, the model of imitation

### **Fourth, the method for imitation**

**Ephesians 5:1–2 (ESV) — 1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

Paul tells us to imitate God by walking in love. In verse 2, Paul employs a present imperative verb, which means that we should continually walk in love towards others.

It is interesting that Paul highlights this specific method of imitation. There are surely other ways to imitate God, but sacrificial and voluntary love is the primary method for Christians to imitate God. This is the only place in the Bible where we are specifically told to imitate God, and we are told to imitate him through sacrificial love. This means that loving others is very, very, very important to God. This should not surprise us because 1 John 4:8 says that God is love. This verse does not say that God is loving, although he is, but that God is love. Meaning that God's very essence is love.

### **Illustration:**

In Victor Hugo's play *Les Misérables* the main character is named Jean Valjean. He spends over twenty years in prison for stealing food when he was a young man. When he gets out of prison, he is bitter and hardened. Right after he is released from prison, he seeks shelter in the home of a Catholic priest. Right away, he notices some very expensive silver spoons on the table. Later that night, when everyone was asleep, he steals

the silver spoons from the priest and sneaks out of the house. The next day he gets arrested and brought back to the priest.

The priest could have rightfully pressed charges, sending Jen Valjean back to prison for life. Instead, he says to Jean Valjean, in front of the police, “Jean Valjean I’m very angry with you, why did not take the silver candle sticks as well. They are worth at least 2000 Franks, why did you leave them?”

The priest refused to press charges, instead, he gave the thief even more of his silver. As a result, Jean Valjean is set free. The priest demonstrated costly, sacrificial love, that hurt. He lost his silver spoons and his silver candlesticks.

This is costly love... This is what it means to imitate God.

### **Application:**

What does this look like in your marriage? Are you loving your spouse until it hurts?

What does this look like for parents? Are you loving your children until it hurts?

Are you loving your employer and employees and coworkers until it hurts?

When was the last time you died to self, said no to your own wants and desires, for someone else?

We imitate God the most when we engage in voluntary, self-sacrificing, love.

Can you imagine what our world would look like, if everyone imitated God in this way???

*When we do this, it is a pleasing aroma to God!!!*

### **Conclusion:**

I grew up with a Steve Largent poster on my wall above my bed. When he retired, he was the NFL’s all-time greatest receiver in several categories. I wrote him a letter in sixth grade, and he wrote back.

I wanted to be just like him. I wanted to run routes like him. I wanted to catch balls like him. I wanted to be tough like him. I even wanted to wear his number.

I wanted to imitate him as much as possible. We imitate the people we respect the most.

Paul tells us to imitate God. There is no one more worthy of imitation and respect.

**Ephesians 5:1–2 (ESV) — 1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

Let me leave you with some incredibly good news. Not only is Jesus our model for how to imitate God, he is also our savior. When we fail to imitate God, Jesus forgives and forgives and forgives. Lets pray....