

**Series: Rethinking Church**  
**Today: Imitators of God**  
**Text: Ephesians 5:1-21**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**  
**Sunday, August 15, 2010**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

Before I begin this morning, I have a confession to make. For nearly forty years now I have successfully avoided preaching on the passages of scripture we will be wrestling today and next Sunday. Like many of you, I tend to avoid those parts of the Bible that make me uncomfortable. However, this summer we committed ourselves to work our way through the entire letter of Paul to the Ephesians, and that means we can't skip something just because we don't like what it says.

So this week has been hard for me. Dealing with this text was not like dealing with the early part of Ephesians. Most of the first four chapters dwell heavily on the grace of God. Now, in this fifth chapter, Paul gets very specific about the behavior that is expected of those who have made their commitment to follow Christ. It is Paul's specificity that makes me so uncomfortable.

I am reminded of a story of two engineers who were applying for an engineering position at an Irish firm based in Dublin. One was Irish, and the other was an American. Both applicants having the same qualifications were asked to take a test by the department manager.

Upon completion of the test, both men only missed one of the questions. The manager went to Murphy and said, "Thank you for your interest, but we've decided to give the American the job." Murphy asked, "And why would you be doing that? We both got nine questions correct. This being Ireland, and me being Irish, I should get the job!"

The manager said, "We have made our decision not on the correct answers, but rather on the question that you missed." Murphy then asked, "And just how would one incorrect answer be better than the other?"

The manager replied, "Simple, the American put down on question #5, 'I don't know.' You put down, 'Neither do I.'"

So in chapter 5 Paul turns from the grace of God to the behavior that is expected of those who have received God's grace, and I would like to divide his advice into two parts: 1) Be Imitators of God; and 2) Learn to Walk the Talk.

### **Be Imitators of God**

In verse 1 Paul sets a high standard for his reader: "*Be imitators of God as beloved children.*" In short, when we choose to follow Jesus Christ, our goal should be to shape our lives in such a way so that people can tell by our lives that we are imitating God.

Our son, Tim, is an actor, and in recent years it has been our joy to watch him grow in his ability to take on the difficult roles which have come his way. His mother and I remember him in plays that were done at Thanksgiving just for the family; plays in grammar school, Jr. High, High School and college. Here in Lancaster he has had several challenging roles with the Theater of the Seventh Sister and Ephrata Playhouse, and this winter he gained some notoriety in the lead role of Shakespeare's Hamlet which was clearly a defining moment in his acting career.

What we have seen in Tim's growth is his ability to become the character he is playing on stage. He no longer merely recites the lines well. He becomes the character he is playing.

When he played a child molester in the play *Frozen*, he took on the role of a child molester by doing extensive research on the characteristics of child molesters. When he played seven different characters in the play *Stones in His Pockets*, he did extensive research as to the characteristics of each of the seven people he was playing.

In the same way those who have chosen to commit their lives to Jesus Christ are to take on the character of the one whom they have chosen to follow. It is not that we are holier than

anyone else, but our goal is to respond as we think God might respond to the events we encounter in the course of our daily lives. Just as an actor imitates the person he is playing in a role on stage, we are to imitate the character of God in the way we live our lives.

Brennan Manning is a Roman Catholic priest who has an amazing story about how he got the name "Brennan." While growing up, his best friend was a boy named Ray. The two of them did everything together: bought a car together as teenagers, double-dated together, went to school together and so forth. They even enlisted in the Army together, went to boot camp together and fought on the frontlines together.

One night, while sitting in a foxhole, Brennan was reminiscing about the old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade came into the foxhole. Ray looked at Brennan, smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the live grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, but Brennan's life was spared.

When Brennan became a priest he was instructed to take on the name of a saint. He thought of his friend, Ray Brennan. So he took on the name "Brennan." Years later he went to visit Ray's mother in Brooklyn. They sat up late one night having tea when Brennan asked her, "Do you think Ray loved me?" Mrs. Brennan got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of Brennan's face and shouted, "What more could he have done for you?" Brennan said that at that moment he experienced an epiphany. He imagined himself standing before the cross of Jesus wondering, *Does God really love me?* And Jesus' mother Mary pointing to her son, saying, "What more could he have done for you?" [source: adapted from James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (IVP, 2009), p. 142]

In Alcoholics Anonymous there is a phrase everyone who is early in recovery learns: "*Fake it until you make it.*" As people who are disciples of Jesus Christ, we don't always know what the right thing to do is, but we do have the model of Jesus Christ to imitate. Until that

becomes second nature to us, we fake it until we make it. Paul says: “*Be imitators of God as beloved children.*”

### **Learn to Walk the Talk**

Paul then goes on to urge his readers to walk the talk of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. He gives us a very specific list of behaviors which are counterproductive to the goal of imitating God.

When I first read the list, I asked myself the question, “*What was going on when Paul wrote this letter?*” The more I read that list, the more I came to the conclusion that there are things which you and I do, behaviors in our lives, which can either draw us closer to God or take us further from God.

So why was Paul so specific in his list? William Barclay was a helpful resource in answering the question for me. At the top of the list is sexual morality. Why single out this particular sin? Barclay says that sexual fidelity was the one new virtue which Christianity introduced into the ancient world. Sexual immorality was so lightly regarded that it was no sin at all. It was the expected thing that a man should have a mistress. In places like Corinth the great temples were staffed by hundreds of women who were sacred prostitutes and whose earnings went to the upkeep of the Temple. Cicero went so far as to call it a severe rule that a young man should be forbidden the love of courtesans. (Source: DSB, Ephesians, p. 191).

When Paul states sexual purity as an example of what it means to imitate God, he was erecting a standard which the heathen could have never imagined. Yet in a world where internet pornography has become big business and the exchange of sexual intimacy is akin to the good night of a previous generation, it is a word for us, as well.

Paul goes on to expand the list to those who use vulgar language, and to those who are greedy. It is not just sexual sin which moves us further from the goal of being imitators of God. It is the things that we allow to have a priority in our lives. When we focus on the things which culture says lead to happiness instead of those things which lead to spiritual contentment, we are on the wrong path.

Medical science has been helpful here. Neurologists conducted a study where they scanned the brains of people of faith as they recalled and experienced the times they felt close to God, either in prayer, worship, or solitude. Then, when they exposed the same people to stained glass, the smell of incense, icons, and other religious images that connected people to God, they discovered that the same specific area of the brain (called the *caudate nucleus*) lit up in all of these people when they felt connected to God.

Don't get too excited, however. The *caudate nucleus* is not a "God spot." It is just the part of the brain which is activated when we feel connected to the things we think are important in life.

The neurologists similarly tested another group, but this time exposed them to material possessions. When they showed images of products that were tied to "cool" brands, *the exact same area of the brain lit up*. The neuroscientists discovered that people who bought certain items experienced the same sensations as those who had deep religious experiences. [Source: *James Bryan Smith, The Good and Beautiful Life (InterVarsity Press, 2010), pp. 163-164*]

We live in a culture of competing priorities. Wherever we focus our minds can quickly become the God we worship without us ever thinking deeply about what we are doing. Paul is encouraging his readers to keep their minds focused on the things which will lead them closer to God and not further from God.

He gives them an image: the image of light. Followers of Jesus Christ are to live as children of the light and not children of the darkness.

In his commentary on this passage, Maxie Dunham says three specific frameworks of truth may be gleaned. 1) Light is productive; evil is barren. 2) Christians are to have no fellowship with, but are to expose the works of darkness. 3) Light not only illumines, but it also transforms. Whatever the light shines on—if it shines clearly enough, consistently enough, and long enough, it must in the end, transform.

Bono, the lead singer of the popular band, *U2*, has experienced this life-changing light in his life. In an interview for a book about his band, he said this: *Your nature is a hard thing to change; it takes time.... I have heard of people who have life-changing, miraculous turnarounds, people set free from addiction after a single prayer, relationships saved where both parties "let go, and let God." But it was not like that for me. For all that "I was lost, I am found," it is probably more accurate to say, "I was really lost. I'm a little less so at the moment." And then a little less and a little less again. That to me is the spiritual life. The slow reworking and rebooting the computer at regular intervals, reading the small print of the service manual. It has slowly rebuilt me in a better image. It has taken years, though, and it is not over yet.* —Bono, lead singer of U2 [Source: *U2 (with Neil McCormick), U2 by U2 (HarperCollins, 2006), p. 7*]

## Conclusion

Paul ends his appeal to the Ephesians by urging them to stick together in community as they struggle with what it means to follow Christ in their time, and this is why we have chosen Ephesians for our theme this summer. As we rethink church, it means becoming the kind of place where we can be honest with one another about how difficult it is to follow Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century, and how much we need the support of one another to establish a new way of life. As we study together, pray together, work together, and encourage one another to be children of light and not of darkness, we discover the joy of community in Christ and the hope we have for the transformation of our lives and the life of our community. In the end, we discover with Paul the joy of giving thanks to God at all times in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ.