

Follow God's example *Ephesians 5:1-14*

Children naturally resemble their parents. When I was growing up, people often told me that I looked like my father. Sometimes, when my father would lecture me, I'd joke, "Well, I must have gotten it from you." I think that bothered him a bit because one day, after I said it, he replied, "I guess I can't say anything anymore." The truth is, children reflect their parents—not just in how they look, but in behavior, habits, and personality. Whether positive or negative, children often learn by watching their parents.

In today's passage, the Apostle Paul tells us to be "imitators of God, as beloved children." Just like children resemble their parents, we're called to reflect the character of our heavenly Parent, God. We were created in God's image and are called God's children. So as God's beloved, we're invited to become more like God.

But let's pause for a moment. The idea of imitating God can feel overwhelming. It may even sound a little arrogant—like we're trying to be God. After all, doesn't human sin and brokenness often come from the desire to be like God in the wrong way?

Think back to Genesis 3. When the serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, what did the serpent say? "When you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Eve was tempted by the idea of being like God. The story of the Tower of Babel is another example—people wanted to build a tower that reached the heavens, to make a name for themselves, to be like gods.

So, how should we understand Paul's call to imitate God? Is it about seeking power, knowledge, or immortality—like humanity has always tried to do? Even today, we see how science is pushing the limits of life extension and immortality through technology. I recently watched a sci-fi show called *Altered Carbon*, where people had a chip implanted near their brain that stored their consciousness. When a body died, the consciousness could be transferred to a new body, allowing them to live forever.

This idea isn't just fiction. The book *Homo Deus* suggests that humans are striving to achieve god-like traits—eternal life, perfect happiness, and freedom from suffering—through science and technology. So, the desire to be like God continues to drive much of our modern world.

Imitating God: A Love That Gives Itself Away

But imitating God doesn't mean grasping for power or immortality. Instead, it's about embodying the self-giving love we see in Christ. The Message translation of today's passage says it beautifully: "Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with God and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us, but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that."

The God we see in Jesus is a God of love. As Philippians 2 tells us, Jesus, out of love, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, humbling himself to the point of death—even death on a cross. This is what it means to reflect the image of God—a self-giving love. And we're invited to live out this kind of love, which has the power to save us.

We've learned through history that religion, stripped of love and reduced to rituals, cannot save us. Religious wars are a stark reminder of that. In the same way, humanity has

learned—through events like the world wars, the Holocaust, and the development of weapons of mass destruction—that neither humanism nor the advancement of science and technology can save us.

Think about the issue of hunger. It's said that with the amount of food produced today, everyone on Earth could be fed. Yet, 345 million people still suffer from severe hunger, and every day—19,700 people die of starvation. The problem isn't technology or lack of resources. It's a deeper issue—how we view and treat one another. This is a spiritual problem. Without the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, all the progress of science and knowledge can't save us.

Love as Our Guide

Paul warns us that “immoral, impure, or greedy people are idolaters,” and they have no inheritance in the kingdom of God. But this isn't just about sexual immorality. When we lose a heart of love, we start to dehumanize others, treating them as objects for our own satisfaction. People become objects of sexual desire, tools to make more money, or stepping stones for political gain. Without love, we reduce others to things—something we can use or discard. Sadly, this mindset has become widespread in our society, and we've grown used to it. We don't even see how spiritually asleep we are—how far we are from the light of God's love. Paul said, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Love opens our eyes. Love is what happens when we recognize that you and I are connected, that we belong to one another. Love pulls us out of our “small self” and into a larger sense of connection and joy. When we love someone, we don't see them as tools or objects for our own desires. No one would ever think of their beloved child, grandchild, or friend as a way to make more money. Love leads us to give, not to take. Love unites us, overcoming the temptation to reduce others to objects. Love is the only bridge that connects us, crossing over our differences.

I recently came across a story from a pastor serving in downtown Chicago. One of his congregation members, a woman who had immigrated from China, had shown up at the church on her first weekend in the city. Having grown up in a country without religious freedom, she found the concept of “God” hard to grasp. But she sought God earnestly. Over time, she studied the Bible, attended worship regularly, and became a remarkable Christian. She volunteered at the church's homeless shelter every weekend, helped with meals, and maintained a positive attitude despite tough circumstances.

One day, though, she came to the pastor and asked, “Could you stop the homeless people from coming to church?” The pastor was shocked. Why would she say that? Her reason: “the smell and the noise.” She explained that the rustling of plastic bags and the funny smell bothered her. She felt it didn't belong in God's house.

The pastor, heartbroken, struggled with how to respond. When Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” He didn't say, “unless they smell good or act nicely.” Jesus simply said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” While she prayed about how to respond, it came to her mind: How would Jesus smell if He came to our church today? How would Jesus smell? I'm pretty sure He didn't use deodorant or a nice perfume. He would probably carry the smell of sweat and dust, which would not be very pleasant by our standards. The pastor wanted to share this insight with her.

After several days of prayer, the pastor asked her, “If Jesus came to our church today, what do you think He would smell like?” She laughed and said, “Oh, He'd probably smell

terrible!” The pastor then asked, “Could you worship alongside that smelly Jesus?” to which she replied, “Of course!”

The woman realized that although the smell and noise were hard for her, she could endure them out of love. Imitating God means imitating this kind of love—a love that crosses boundaries and helps us love our neighbors, even when they inconvenience us.

The Call to Love

Today’s passage invites us to imitate God, not in abstract ways, but in practical, everyday acts of love. It challenges us to reflect God’s love in how we treat others—especially those we might otherwise overlook or dismiss. Let’s walk in that love today—a love that gives itself away, that sees others not as objects but as beloved children of God, and that shines with the light of God’s presence. **Amen.**