

Be Imitators of God, Ephesians 4:25-5:2

As you know, I love mountains and hiking. One thing on my bucket list is hiking The John Muir Trail. [ppt] The John Muir Trail (JMT) is a long-distance trail in the Sierra Nevada mountain range of California, passing through Yosemite, Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks. The trail's length is about 213 miles with a total elevation gain of approximately 47,000 feet. Would you like to join with me for this hiking trip?

[ppt] While I like hiking and even want to do multi-day hikes, hiking Mount Everest is not on my bucket list. I would not dare to hike K2, in Pakistan. Do you know why? First, Juhee wouldn't let me go. Second, they are too high and dangerous for me to climb. I know myself, so I don't even dream of hiking those mountains. A Korean proverb says, "don't stare at a tree you won't be able to climb." This means you shouldn't try to do something that is beyond your ability. Do you agree with this proverb? Yes? No? If your answer is 'yes,' you are a realist. If your answer is 'no,' you are an adventurer.

Whether you are a realist or an adventurer, please think of how you would answer Paul. In today's scripture, Paul lays out the way of Christian life and a long list of 'dos' or 'don'ts.'

Number 1. "put away falsehood, speak the truth to your neighbors." Can you do that?
Number 2, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger and do not make room for the devil." Can you do it?

Number 3, "don't steal, but labor and work honestly with your own hands." Can you do this? These seem easy enough. Right?

Number 4 will get a little bit harder. "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear." Can you do this? Maybe

Then, let us move to the final one. "be imitators of God!" Can you do this? What do you say? "Be imitators of God!" Climbing Mount Everest may seem a more possible mission than this one. We are only human beings so how can we be imitators of God! It sounds like an impossible request and heavy burden for us to carry.

Guilty of not being able to do it

This year, I was the leader at the United Methodist Women Mission U gathering in New England Conference. I taught Korean UMW last Friday and Saturday. The topic was how we can be moral witnesses to the world through our words and actions. During our small group meeting, people honestly shared their thoughts and struggles. One participant said that she felt powerless facing structural evil and sin such as racism, sexism and economic injustice. As we professed in our baptismal vow, she knew that God calls us to stand against evil and all forms of oppression. Even though she knows what God wants her to do, she is just an ordinary housewife and doesn't know what to do to promote social justice. In addition, she struggles with guilty feelings of not doing enough. I think she was very honest and her struggle is also our struggle.

We all know what God wants us to do. "Speak the truth, work honestly, share what you have, be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us. Be imitators of God!" These are easy to know but hard to practice.

We know the right things to do but we also realize that we often fail to do the right things. When we know that we are not good enough, how do we feel? We feel shame and struggle with guilty feelings. Feeling bad after making a mistake can lead to change. But

constant guilty feelings don't really bring any changes but can breed a sense of powerlessness and moral paralysis. In facing structural evil, we often feel that there is nothing we can do about it. So we assume, "it is, what it is." "That's the way the cookie crumbles!" As a way to avoid feeling guilty, we just accepted unjust social order as normal.

When I served my previous church, a couple visited my church. They came to the church for a month and liked it, so as a pastor of a small church, I was a little excited at the potential of new church members. One Sunday morning, this couple hurried their way out of the church after the worship service. I didn't even have a chance to greet them so I just assumed that they must have somewhere to go. But during that week, I got a phone call from one of them. She complained about my sermon on that Sunday. My sermon was about the beatitudes and woes in Luke. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled... "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry." (Luke 6:20-26) I talked about economic inequality and how it continues in our society through educational inequality. I said, "instead of seeking affluence, standing with Jesus and fellow human beings on the same level are the real blessing."

But she didn't like this message because she and her husband belonged to an economically privileged group. During our conversation, she bluntly said, "we cannot solve the issue of poverty, so why do you talk about it?" I respond, "well.. Jesus wants us to take care of the poor." She agreed but she never come back to the church. I think she didn't want to feel any shame or guilt. To avoid guilty feelings, we accept unjust and sinful social order as normal and sometimes become defenders of those values. Feeling guilt and shame are not pleasant.

Not guilty feeling but Christian perfection

Let me ask you a question. Have you been imitators of God? Yes, no. Is it really possible to be imitators of God? Paul said, "Yes" but we often feel otherwise. On a scale of 1 to 10, how good are you in being imitators of God? One being bad and 10 being perfect. Where are you on this scale now? If we understand Christian perfection in this way, of being good imitators of God in this way, we will never be able to be freed from the burden of guilty feelings.

[ppt] As you can see on the screen, this is the Methodist understanding of salvation. It is a process and we are on our journey toward Christian perfection. But this Methodist understanding of Christian perfection is a little different from our common concept of perfection. Christian perfection is not an end point in the life of faith. Rather, it is best understood as a state of maturity. John Wesley said, "Christian perfection therefore does not imply (as some men and women seem to have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance or mistake, or infirmities or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness." Christian perfection doesn't mean we don't make any mistake or keep every commandment in a perfect manner. Rather, it means we are growing and constantly perusing holy living.

This year, Juhee and I planted tomatoes in our garden and now they are growing. Some of the tomatoes are still green while some of them have already turned red. A big red tomato would be considered "perfect" in the common sense. But from the Methodist's perspective on perfection, even though the tomato is still green, if it connected to it's vine and continues to grow, that tomato is considered 'perfect.' Of course, I can't guarantee the taste of it so I encourage you to wait until it turns red.

I know Paul's teaching, "be imitators of God" sounds like a daunting task. It even sounds impossible. But if we trust God's grace that empowers us to continue our journey toward

Christian perfection, we can embark on this new journey of change. If you are already on this journey, you are already perfect.

Be Imitators of God!

When we hear “be imitators of God,” we often assume that we must do something great. But Paul said differently. “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

I watched a documentary video about Rev. Taewhoo Lee. Rev. Lee is Korean but he serves people living in North Central, Philadelphia. North Central is primarily a black neighborhood and is one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Residents in North Central call it “a prison without bars.” They want to leave this dirty, dangerous and violent place but they cannot leave it because of poverty.

Do you know what Rev. Lee does for his ministry? He lives in that town. He moved into North Central and has lived there for 18 years. When this Korean pastor first moved into this black neighborhood, everyone suspected that he must be a government spy. But now, they call him, “Rev.” and greet him on the street.

Rev. Lee didn’t build a church. His first ministry was cleaning the street. He cleaned the dirty street every morning. He plowed the snow. And he gave his neighbors flowers in pots. A few years later, he realized that kids were neglected, especially, during the summer. Those neglected kids became gang members. So with support from other churches, he started a summer school for a month in the street. After 18 years of ministry, Rev. Lee has seen a small change in his town. Can you guess what it is? Children have begun to dream of their future. Several kids who used to participate in the summer school are now college students and are new models for kids. Rev. Lee is an imitator of God and through him, many people and kids see the love and hope Jesus Christ shows. Rev. Lee has done a remarkable ministry. Right? Can we do similar work in our town? What do you think?

While what he has done is extraordinary, what he actually does is pretty ordinary. Cleaning the street, greeting the people with a smile, being kind to them, sharing food with those in need, consoling people who have lost their family in a tragic accident, calling city hall if something needs to be fixed on the street, playing with kids, doing Sunday school, and loving them. I believe that we also can do such things.

Do you know how to climb a great mountain? one step at a time. Do you know how to be imitators of God? One step at a time. Be kind, love one another, forgive as Christ loved us and forgave us. Don’t give up but continue to walk on our spiritual journey toward Christian perfection. If you are on the journey, you are already perfect in God’s sight. Be imitators of God! God’s grace will continue to remold us into the true image of God. Amen.