

# The Imitation Aim

Ephesians 5:1-5 November 1, 2023

**Ephesians 5:1-5 - Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children,<sup>2</sup> and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.<sup>3</sup> But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints.<sup>4</sup> Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks.<sup>5</sup> For know and recognize this: Every sexually immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, does not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.**

Does God want you to be a *good* person? We might think, "Well, God is good and He commands me to *do good*, so, yes." I'd suggest living to be a "good" person sets the bar too low. What does it mean to be "good" in our culture? What did it mean to be a "good" German in the Third Reich, or a "good" communist under Stalin? Stalin once said to Winston Churchill, "*The Devil's on my side, he's a good Communist.*"<sup>1</sup>

Research shows that 75% of Americans consider themselves to be fundamentally good and 46% believe they are better than *everyone* they know.<sup>2</sup> I wonder how that works when those people get together. I'm sure they spend hours arguing over who is going to pick up the check.

As Paul continues to explain the deep-yet-practical aspects of Christianity, we learn that the goal is not for us to be *good*, but to be *Godly*. Tonight's verses are a list of things we should do and things we shouldn't, but it's not about checking boxes. The Apostle is still dissecting and revealing what it means to put on Christ, what it means to walk worthy with Him, what it means to be a Christian.

He begins this section with the bottom line up front: We are to *imitate* God in our conduct, attitudes, and words.

**Ephesians 5:1 - Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children,**

Paul says, "Therefore!" Throughout this letter, we've been learning what it means to be saved, what power and resources are available to us, our place in God's unfolding, cosmic work. Now it's time to go do what we've learned.

Have you heard of "method" acting? That's when actors stay in character for the whole duration of a film's production. Steven Spielberg talked about working with Daniel Day-Lewis, who is a method actor, and Spielberg said, "*[Daniel] so had Lincoln embedded in his psyche and his soul that I would come to come to work at the morning and Lincoln would [be sitting] behind his desk.*"

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Cross *Fallen Eagle: The Last Days Of The Third Reich*

<sup>2</sup> <https://studyfinds.org/half-americans-think-better-person-than-everyone/>

The term imitate means to mimic. It refers to an actor taking on a role. And “[this] verb is always used...in the continuous tense, suggesting a constant habit or practice.”<sup>3</sup>

Imitating God means reflecting His character to the world around us.<sup>4</sup> It means to think like He does, to react like He does, to value what He does, to treat others the way He does.

Christians are to imitate God to such a degree that *others* can then imitate us as they follow after the Lord. Paul told the Thessalonians and the Corinthians, “Imitate me the way I imitate Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Hebrews tell us that, as we walk with the Lord, we should identify Godly, Christian leaders whose life outcomes demonstrate faithfulness and spiritual vibrance, and we should imitate them.<sup>6</sup>

We get to *practice* Christianity. To *put on* Christ, like a method actor. Not being phony, but allowing Him to redefine the way we think and act and move in this world as we take on His characteristics. This is possible because we *share* in His Divine nature. That’s what Peter said in 2 Peter 1.

This imitation isn’t just a *should*. This is who we’re made to be. We are children of God. Just as you grew up in a family, sharing genes and heritage and traditions and ways of thinking, to a much more profound degree we are children in God’s house. The natural progression of our lives is that we mature into spiritual adulthood, formed and fashioned according to God’s will and truths.

And, notice, you’re not just a child - you’re a *loved* child. It’s the same description God the Father used of Jesus at His baptism when He said, “This is my *beloved* Son, with whom I am well-pleased.”

Now, a child needs protection and provision and guidance and correction. And, a child is always growing and developing. So, don’t stay a baby,<sup>7</sup> but grow into spiritual adulthood. We’ll still need that guidance and provision and all the rest from the Lord, but we expect to grow and progress.

### **Ephesians 5:2 - <sup>2</sup>and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.**

This Book gives us a lot of practical items for living the Christian life, but the fundamental way we imitate God is by mimicking His agape love. Without love the rest is a waste of time.<sup>8</sup>

The Father didn’t *make* the Son lay down His life. He did it willingly because He loves us so much.

*That’s* the kind of love we’re to practice. There is no greater love than when a person lays down their life on behalf of others. Of course, that can mean dying for someone, but remember: We’re called to take up a cross every day and live in that same kind of love. To love like *living* sacrifices.

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<sup>3</sup> *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary Of Old And New Testament Words*

<sup>4</sup> Darrell Bock *Ephesians: An Introduction And Commentary*

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:1, 2 Thessalonians 3:7

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 13:7

<sup>7</sup> Markus Barth *Ephesians 4-6: Introduction, Translation, And Commentary*

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:1

**1 John 3:16 - <sup>16</sup>This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.**

To love is to give. And loving in this way is a fragrant offering to God.

Now, Ephesus was a pagan place. We've talked a little about the mystery cults that thrived in the Empire and some of these Christians may have been part of. The mystery religions were very secretive, so we don't always know a lot about what they did, but historians do know some things. And, from what we know, it looks like Paul was drawing some direct contrasts between Christ and these cults. Some of the commands he gives in this section would contradict the normal, regular practices of an Ephesian. And, it's possible that people within the church were *still* practicing some of these things and Paul wants to set them straight and explain that Christianity must be distinct and set apart and counter-cultural. It can't be blended with paganism or humanism or earthlyism.

The city of Ephesus was filled with the worship of Diana and the worship of Dionysus.<sup>9</sup> The other name for this god is Bacchus and the festivals in his honor were known as Bacchanalia.

In mythology, Dionysus...was son of the divine ruler of the world and a mortal mother. He came in human form, was killed and was raised to life.<sup>10</sup> And wine was a symbol of his blood.

Newcomers to the cult of Dionysus would go through a ritual in order to liberate themselves from their worldly constraints.<sup>11</sup> The rituals included things like lots of intoxication, scourging yourself, music, and offerings. Participants would spread musk from the glandular secretions of animals around the ritual area as a fragrant aromatic offering.

Ephesian Christians needed clarity on the difference between the one true faith in the One true God and these other religions and cultures they had been steeped in all their lives. In the case of verse 2, Christ's loving self-sacrifice is the fragrant aroma, one that we emulate as we love others.

Verse three highlights more differences.

**Ephesians 5:3 - <sup>3</sup>But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints.**

Debauched, sexual excess was part of these religious activities. It was normalized and expected. "You're in the cult of Dionysus? *This* is what you do." But it wasn't just the religious people. Ephesus was a sinful city like *every* city, ancient or modern.

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<sup>9</sup> Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. *The Dionysian Background of Ephesians 5:18*

<sup>10</sup> Richard Seaford *Dionysus*

<sup>11</sup> Ancient Literature *Dionysian Ritual: The Ancient Greek Ritual of the Dionysian Cult.*

The library of Ephesus is a famous site that you can still visit today. Nearby, archaeologists have discovered what may be the world's oldest advertisement: It's for the brothel across the street from the library.<sup>12</sup> One interpretation of the sign is, "up at the crossroads, on the left, you'll find women whose love can be purchased." But this wasn't love. And it had no place in the life of a Christian.

The term Paul used is a general one, covering all sexual sins.<sup>13</sup> Adultery, homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, pornography, and all other sexual behaviors that are outside of the Biblical boundaries that have been lovingly given by God. These are the boundaries God has given when it comes to sexuality: Sexual activity may only take place within a *marriage* between one biological man and one biological woman in a loving and consensual manner. Anything outside of that boundary is sin and is detrimental to your life, your partner's, and society at large.

Paul says these sinful, sexual practices are not proper for saints. That can also be read, "there must not even be a *hint* of this stuff among you."<sup>14</sup>

Alongside sexual sin, Paul lists impurity and greed. Scholars argue from the language that these things *were* happening in the church of Ephesus.<sup>15</sup> But these things do not fit the Christian life.

Have you ever had to wear clothes that don't fit? Shoes that are too tight or pants that won't stay up? It's a problem. These practices Paul is talking about, which are so normal to the world are in total contradiction to the life Christ has given us.

Pure, living water, is supposed to flow out of us in streams of love and grace. These things - the sexual sin, the greed, they *defile* that water. And we need to have a strong reaction to pollutants in that water. In America, more than 50% of our water is too polluted to drink<sup>16</sup> and 50% of our drinking water is contaminated with forever chemicals.<sup>17</sup> We can't accept that on a spiritual level.

It's hard to know the true numbers, but based on the research I could find, somewhere between and 54% and 64% of Christian men admit to viewing pornography at least monthly.<sup>18</sup> That's a lot more than a *hint*. That's just one issue. There isn't a lot of research on *greed*. But the sexual ethic in our culture is totally rancid. Our goal isn't to be *good* when it comes to sexuality, but to be *Godly*.

**Ephesians 5:4 - <sup>4</sup>Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks.**

Does Paul mean we shouldn't joke around? The Puritans were famously not a very jokey bunch. Jonathan Edwards said, "*One great reason why religion is judge[d] to be melancholy is because it*

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/brothel-advertisement-at-ephesus>

<sup>13</sup> Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Bob Utley *Paul Bound, The Gospel Unbound*

<sup>16</sup> <https://thehill.com/changing-america/sustainability/environment/600070-about-half-of-us-water-too-polluted-for-swimming/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/05/health/pfas-nearly-half-us-tap-water-wellness/index.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-do-christian-men-watch-more-pornography/>

*has no tendency to raise laughter, but rather to remove it; but that is no argument against the pleasantness of religion, for the pleasure that raises laughter is never great.*"<sup>19</sup>

Paul is talking about coarse, sexually vulgar speech. During those cult of Dionysus rituals, they would sing perverse and vulgar songs. Paul says, "That kind of thing isn't suitable."

We can expand obscene and foolish talking as, "*speech that lacks...a godly perspective on life.*"<sup>20</sup> Again, it's not about having speech that is better than the cussing sailor, it's about Godliness.

Our words matter. Matthew 12 says that, "on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak." Instead of dirty jokes are curses and Godless speech, we should give thanks. That's the *antidote* to the vices of verse 4.<sup>21</sup> Verbalized thankfulness helps to protect us from negative and unsuitable speech. It helps us imitate God.

**Ephesians 5:5 - <sup>5</sup> For know and recognize this: Every sexually immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, does not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.**

These sins are symptoms of idolatry. A few weeks ago, in our Sunday morning studies in Isaiah we heard about idolatry in our hearts and how we need to identify it and deal with it.

On the one hand, it seems like Paul has become very severe, especially after the excitement of chapters 1 through 3. But, as one commentator points out, it was a hard sell for Paul to tell these Ephesians, "You need to stop doing a *lot* of the things your culture and heritage finds acceptable and commendable."<sup>22</sup> Why? Because these things invade the heart and change the trajectory of your life and are an affront to our holy God.

So, is Paul saying if I tell a dirty joke I lose my spot in heaven? No. But he *is* pointing out that Christianity is *completely, absolutely, fundamentally* different in thought, attitude and behavior than regular, unsaved life. Our words and behaviors reveal who we are and *whose* we are. You could look at a life and evaluate whether that person belongs to Christ or belongs to Dionysus. The mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart. From the heart comes sexual immoralities. And from the heart flows God's living water. The question is: What is the condition of the heart?

In the cult of Dionysus, participants would go up this mountain, totally intoxicated, in a weird ecstasy, maybe slashing themselves, and as they go they believed they were *liberated* from their constraints and became god-like, or at least like *this* god of wine, fertility, and insanity.<sup>23</sup>

But a *Christian* is the one who is actually set free. *Jesus* was the one scourged *for us*. He walked the hill to Calvary, not to indulge Himself, but to *die* for us. And now we have the chance to put on His

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Edwards *Sermons and Discourses, 1720-1723, vol. 10 of The Works of Jonathan Edwards*

<sup>20</sup> Ernest Best *Ephesians*

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Fowl *Ephesians: A Commentary*

<sup>22</sup> Ben Witherington *The Letters To Philemon, The Colossians, And The Ephesians*

<sup>23</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysus>

likeness, to share in His Divine nature. Now, we believers *take off* our former way of life, which was corrupted and ruined by our selfish, sinful desires, and are *renewed* in the spirit of our minds, made righteous and pure as we imitate our Holy God.

It doesn't mean you lose your salvation if you fall into sin. Paul is talking about the habitual pattern of our hearts and lives. But falling into sin is a terrible, defiling thing. And a life given to sin is *not* a life that leads to the Kingdom. It leads to destruction. We must put off the old way.

Instead of going the old ways, the world's ways, we are to walk with God, in love, imitating the Lord as we go. One commentator boils it down for us by saying, "*Christianity is an initial decision followed by lifestyle discipleship.*"<sup>24</sup>

We're on our way to glory - to an eternal inheritance in the Kingdom of God. We choose to go God's way, trusting that He is right and He is true and He knows better. We throw off the defilement of the world's culture around us. We progress in our relationship with Jesus, not perfectly, but increasingly. We grow and progress as we imitate God - not trying to be *good* people, but living as *Godly* people.

I'll close with these words from the Apostle John:

**1 John 3:2-3 - <sup>2</sup>Dear friends, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that when he appears, we will be like him because we will see him as he is. <sup>3</sup>And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he is pure.**

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<sup>24</sup> Utley