



Now to Live the Life – Be imitators of God. Ephesians 5:1-14
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J.Keir Bucknall

I wonder how many of you are currently bringing up teens?

One thing all of us have in common is that we were all once teenagers ourselves...so, I'm sure you can relate to the mixed challenges of parenting teens:

- That proud moment when you hear his first word... which all too soon turns into the teenage Neanderthal grunt!
- When she toddles around in just the cutest outfit... and a few years later you hear yourself utter those timeless words, "You are not going out dressed like that!"
- How one minute they are keen to please at the mere thought of a sticker... and then all you get is the eye rolling "whatever".

You love them to bits, you impart all your words of wisdom... so where does it all go wrong? You want them to enjoy the richness and diversity of all the opportunities around them but they seem constantly to be pressured and pulled away from what we might call healthy life choices. I guess the worry is whether our young adults will be able to remain strong in who they are, and true to all the grounding we have provided over the early years.

In the reading today, I think Paul was aware of some similar challenges facing the young church at Ephesus. Like them, our young people are growing up in a culture plagued by "isms":

- Materialism - a preoccupation on stuff above all else
- Ethical relativism - where we see moral standards slipping, sexual ethics are confused at best and there are apparently no such thing as absolutes any more
- Narcissism - where society revolves around the love of self and we are pushed to find the solution to all our problems from within ourselves, instead of from God.
- Pluralism - where any and every path to God is seen as equally valid and it's wrong to even suggest that Jesus is "the way"

Like parents offering advice to their teenagers as they set off on their road to independence, Paul wanted to encourage the believers to live out their faith yet also to ensure they resisted slipping into conforming with "isms" that we're going on all around them. They had made a commitment to Christ and here, he is stirring them up, challenging them and us - to walk the talk - to walk through this world and yet remain completely dedicated to God. "We are not to be like chameleons, which change their colour according to their surroundings," as John Stott advises. "We are to be like Christ."

But how do we do that?

"Follow God's example," says Paul. We just have to do what God does - the Almighty Creator of the Universe... Maker of all that's seen and unseen! Of course, Paul gave this instruction some 1900 years ago... and science has come a long way since then...but even with all our modern technology, knowledge..and Wikipedia we still:

- Can't create something out of nothing
- Don't know everything - in fact, the more we discover, the more questions we have.
- Can't be everywhere at the same time - although it would certainly be handy sometimes!

And God is spirit - he's outside the physical domain we know. So what on Earth (literally) did Paul mean? How can we imitate our Father in Heaven, living here on Earth in WSM?

In Colossians 1:15 we read "**Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.**" Jesus was fully human and fully God and when Philip asked him to show them the Father, Jesus himself said, "**Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.**" (John 14:9) so if we want to imitate God the Father, all we have to do is imitate Jesus, God the Son... Like Father, Like Son.

Recently I asked some of our young people here, "Which aspect of your dad or mum's character would you most like to imitate?" I wonder if you can guess who these refer to...

- "She looks after me lots - she always cares for me." (Eleanor of Sarah)
- "Her understanding" (Jemma of Ellie)
- "His humility - he's very humble." (Ethan of Tom)
- "His sense of humour - he's good at making people laugh...when he wants to." (Tamsin of Andy)

Yes, mums and dads - be warned - everything you say or do will be copied your children!

Now as any parent knows, if you want your children to learn anything, to develop healthy habits, they need motivation - a reason to do so - especially as they get older. In school we know all too well that stickers and other tangible "rewards" have little long term impact. Real learning, lasting change happens when the motivation comes from inside ...and verse 1 is packed with motivation for us

It contains two crucial, foundational truths of who we are in Christ - something even "mature" Christians can struggle to hold onto at times.

1) Firstly, we are **dearly loved children**. It's easy to know in our head that God loves us but do we have that absolute belief deep in our heart of His personal love for us as an individual?

Can you say with absolute confidence, "I am a deeply loved child of God? God loves me!"?

Remember in Ephesians 1:4-5 Paul told us, God: **chose us ...before the creation of the world ...** He chose you...he created you, he pursued you... and then **In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ**. In love He chose you for adoption as His child...

We must receive the love of God, own this reality for ourselves - Our relationship with Him is personal, we're not just included in a general relationship along with everyone else - and the relationship is rooted in love, not just based on authority.

2) Secondly...we read: **Christ loved us and gave himself up for us**. Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice to God for us - we don't deserve it, **Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath**, as Paul explained in Chapter 2, we deserve to perish... all of us have sinned.

Yet, Jesus, who was without sin, whose life was a perfect balance of joy and sorrow, tenderness and toughness, prayer and action...the one person who was most worthy of living, freely gave everything He had so we might be saved. Furthermore, the overwhelming love that He poured out for us on the cross, was a fragrant offering to God... a fully acceptable, once for all offering, which brought our salvation. That's the example we are to follow - to sacrifice ourselves to God for others.

But the good news is that we don't have to do it alone - the Holy Spirit living within us, is guiding us, empowering us and transforming us. Knowing the limitless depth of God's love for us personally, and the perfect example of sacrificial love on the cross, how could we not be motivated to live a life that cherishes

our relationship with God? But what does this mean for us, in our world today, with all the pressures and expectations and context of modern society? What does it mean to "be a living sacrifice" or "take up our cross daily" and follow Jesus' example? I'm going to approach the answer through: Attitude and Actions.

Attitude

When we look around at society today, everything points to the fact that human nature unrestrained, leads us to be self-centred - the "Look out for No.1- what's in it for me?" mentality.

In contrast, Jesus, although divine, with access to all the majesty and might we could ever imagine, modelled a life of humble, selfless service to others. He washed the feet of his disciples, he healed those shunned by society, he breached walls of prejudice and he challenged hypocrisy at every opportunity. And he trusted God every step of the way. Even at the end of his earthly ministry, He demonstrated this perfectly - rather than consider his own best interests, he faced rejection, humiliation, brutal torture - and the most painful of deaths, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians 2:3-5, we read that believers are to: **"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."** We are encouraged to **"have the same mindset as Christ Jesus"**.

How often do we try to control and manipulate people and circumstances to our own advantage, for our own interests? When we make decisions, when we try to work out what's best - are we thinking what's best for me, or best for other people?

How selfless are our motives? It might make us feel good to make a donation to charity or feel useful to serve on a team on Sunday morning in a nice warm church ... but how willing are we to roll up our sleeves and muck in when the task is grubby or uncomfortable or those to serve, very different from us and our expectations?

Throughout his life and even unto death, Jesus remained obedient to God's will. It's easy for us to trust God when things are going well. How willing are we to trust Him, when we don't understand what's going on or why? - when you lose the job or don't get the promotion; when the illness is diagnosed or healing doesn't happen; when the relationship falls apart or the pregnancy doesn't start; when everything just seems totally pointless.

Recently, following the sudden and very unexpected death of a good friend, I found myself struggling. It just didn't make sense, it was pointless, it raised all sorts of questions and I felt very much adrift - and we know that when we're not grounded in Christ, the devil quickly sees an opportunity to stir up doubts and despondency. Recognising I was sinking, I tried to sort it out in my head, to make some sense of it through prayer particularly and a particular verse kept popping up: **"You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you."** (Isaiah 26:3) I was also blessed by a good friend who helped me to regain balance and move the head knowledge back down into my heart!

When things rise up and start to overwhelm us with fear or anger or grief, that's when we need, more than ever, to have an attitude of complete trust in God, to trust in His love and faithfulness and to hang on until the storm passes and we can see the way forwards again.

You see, we may be self-centred by nature; but by grace, the Holy Spirit is working in us to transform us to be "other-centred" - we need to be open and willing to be changed and **"live by faith, not by sight."** (2 Corinthians 5:7) - to trust God, not rely on our own strength or understanding.

Actions

Learning to imitate God, is a lifelong process - there's no quick fix! In chapter 4 we were reminded **"to put off your old self...and to put on the new self, created to be like God.."** (Eph 4:22-24) Here, in today's passage, Paul is giving further guidelines for godly living. He tells us to beware of the things our sinful nature craves, given the chance. He tells us to avoid even a whisper of sexual immorality, any impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking... and in his letter to the Galatians (5:19-21), he also warns against a raft of other sinful practices such as idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, jealousy, rage, drunkenness, and so on.

We are called to be in the world but to live by God's standards, not those set by ourselves, or our friends or the society around us. God does not encourage us to fulfil all our desires; we are called to make choices that reflect who we are - dearly loved children of God - not just going with the flow.. and that is often contrary to those around us and takes effort and sacrifice.

Where do you find yourself perhaps getting swept along by popular trends? Is it in what you watch: TV, films or the Internet; in what you read; in the jokes you tell or laugh at; or the gossip that's shared? Do you struggle with making the right choices in relationships?

Let there be no mistake, we all fall short in one respect or another and we are often very skilled at rationalising our desires, rather than denying ourselves what we want. However, the Bible is very clear about actions that are contrary to God's will - His good and pleasing and perfect will (Rom 12:2). With the Holy Spirit living within us, hard though it may be, and often though we may fail, we have the power to make the right choices and the promise of forgiveness whenever we mess up and turn back to God.

I just mentioned how we are often very good at justifying our actions. Apparently Paul had come across excuses too, perhaps the same sort we can hear today - for example, how love is permissive and liberates people from obedience to rules - how anything done "in love" is OK because God is love and He will never punish anyone. Well we see here in verse 6, Paul's response: **Let no one deceive you with empty words.** It's important to remember that we are not called to judge others but we are responsible for our own choices and actions. If we are in Christ, we cannot endorse the "anything goes 'isms" in society. However, we should seek to **walk in the way of love** (v1) and when supporting or guiding others, apply biblical principles sensitively.

Conclusion

We are all called by God. We all have a God given purpose for our lives. We are called to do the work God has given us to do (paid or voluntary), where he has placed us at this time (in the home, community or workplace) to act in the way exemplified by Jesus, to the best of our ability in all aspects of our life.

If we hold onto who we are in Christ, if we continually renew our minds and attitudes so we see things from a Kingdom perspective and not an earthly one and if we can allow the Holy Spirit to guide our life choices and actions - all of which are likely to be very counter-cultural - we can experience the reality of Christ in us, which will provoke questions about our motivations and thus point others to God by our witness.

I would like to end with a challenge to each of us here today...

... if we are to be a credible witness, our attitude must reflect God's amazing love and grace; our life choices, our actions must be obedient to His will.

So the challenge is every morning for the next 40 days, to recommit our lives to imitating God. Drawn from Ephesians 5:1, I invite you every morning to take a moment to speak out God's Word:

Today I will follow God's example, as His dearly loved child and I will walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved me and gave himself up for me.

Amen.