

"Be Imitators of God"

– A Checklist

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 Ephesians 4:17-24
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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[Introduction]

Both of today's scripture readings, as well as this sermon, are actually a continuation of where we left off last Sunday. Before I read the next section in Ephesians 4, here's a quick recap to lead us into today. The first half of the letter to the Ephesians (chapters 1-3) deals primarily with theological doctrine, especially the emphasis on our being adopted as children of God into the realm and kin-dom of God. The second half of the letter (chapters 4-6) moves from the theological to the practical, moral, and ethical implications of being children of God as diverse parts of the body of Christ.

Our scripture reading last week, Ephesians 4:1-16, which we walked through in a Bible study fashion, starts with the author begging we "**lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called**" (v.1). This life involves being humble, gentle, patient, and bearing with one another in love. The purpose is to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (v. 3). This unity, in part, comes through God's blessing people with diverse gifts for ministry, including church leadership. And that purpose is "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (v. 12), and so that we can mature in our faith. **As children of God, then, we are called, united, and equipped.**

That brings us to this morning's continuation in Ephesians, the first part of which you just heard a few moments ago, Ephesians 4:17-24. Our pew Bible subtitles this reading as "The Old Life and the New." We are told the we must no longer live as the Gentiles live. "Gentile" in this context refers to those who do not live according to the loving ways and teachings of Jesus. But we can actually apply some of this to ourselves when it states, "...**put away your former way of life, your old self...**and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and **clothe yourselves with the new self**, created according to the likeness of God" (vv. 22-24). **Part of any effective and maturing spiritual journey of faith involves exploring and reflecting upon those things in our own lives that need transformation – whether they be particular thoughts, beliefs, or actions.**

We come now to markers that exhibit that we have clothed ourselves with the new self that is **created according to the likeness of God**. Spiritual author Richard Rohr stated it this way in a blog just this week, "Our life's goal is to illustrate both the *image* and the *likeness* of God by living in conscious loving union with God. It is a moment by moment choice and surrender."

I will now read Ephesians 4:25-5:2. I encourage you to follow along in your pew Bible. You will note that this section is subtitled, "**Rules for New Life.**"

[Read Ephesians 4:25-5:2]

These ten verses list **virtues and ways of being that act as markers in living a transformed life**, and participating in a transformational community of faith. Let me reiterate these defining characteristics. They almost read like a checklist, or the 10 Commandments for Christian Living.

- Tell the truth.
- It's okay to get angry - but get over it quickly. (I preached a sermon back in 2009 based entirely on this one point, entitled, "Don't Go to Bed Angry – Stay Up and Fight")
- Don't steal.
- Work hard.
- Speak only words that build others up, not language that is harmful or destructive.
- Don't be bitter, resentful, or hold grudges.
- Don't quarrel.
- Don't slander, insult, or be spiteful and malicious toward others.
- Be kind and tenderhearted.
- Be forgiving.
- Imitate God.
- Live in love, as Christ loves you.

The particulars in this list are intended to help us lead a life of harmony and unity with one another. And while these things apply to all areas of our personal lives, remember that they were **written specifically to apply to church life, therefore to us as a congregation.**

Upon closer look, however, this list comes from a much deeper theological place than just a directive to follow the rules of decent behavior – behavior like the kind we used to expect of our leaders, and for basic good citizenship, in general. (That's the Boy Scout part of my brain speaking this.) I think I can express this best by using something that I found on Facebook years ago. In admittedly oversimplified terms, the article **contrasts the messages often found in 'Religion' with the actual good news of the 'Gospel.'** It states that the approach of 'Religion' is often one of, "If I obey, I will be accepted by God." The approach of the 'Gospel,' however, flips that around, "I am accepted by God, so I choose to obey." This is actually a wonderful representation of our own Reformed theological tradition. As Presbyterians, the motivation for our behavior isn't to be dictated by an understanding that *if we 'follow the rules' then we will find favor with God.* Instead, **our behavior is a response to understanding the reality that through grace God already loves us. In other words, we are to be motivated not by fear (oftentimes the 'Religion' approach), but rather motivated by love (the 'Gospel' approach).**

The list found in Ephesians 4, therefore, isn't so much a 'to do' list for Christians in order to live a new life, as much as it is a compilation of virtues that we exhibit because we have put away the 'old life' and found a 'new life' in Christ. As the apostle Paul explains it in 2 Corinthians, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17). Biblical commentator G. Peter Taylor expresses it nicely this way, "The works described by Paul are not merit badges set out for us to achieve. Rather they are marks of the new life given to us in baptism. As part of this body, we encourage one another and help one another to live out our baptismal promises... That is, we all are in this enterprise of being church together. Therefore, we are to learn from each other and help each other."

The author of this letter to the Ephesians summarizes all this with the somewhat daunting admonition, "Therefore **be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love**" (Eph. 5:1-2a). Richard Ward, preaching professor here in Tulsa at Phillips Theological Seminary, wrote a commentary on this passage. He states, "'Imitating God' means putting our focus on the *actions* that flow from God's character." In fact, when we are able to live in love – love of God, love of neighbor, love of self – we are indeed imitating God.

So, let's **review** this particular checklist from Ephesians 4. We are to avoid behaviors that are destructive, such as lying, stealing, and speaking evil. Instead, we are to exhibit our faith through behaviors that enlighten and uplift others, including telling the truth, working in order to contribute, and speaking words that build others up. This list goes on to warn us of those things that cause discord and disunity: bitterness, wrath, unresolved anger, wrangling, slander, and all malice. Those are to be replaced with being kind to one another, tenderhearted, and forgiving. Since each and every one of us is a beloved child of God, we are called to respond by imitating these same characteristics of God.

Living a transformed life is indeed a challenge. But it's also an opportunity that we can choose to face each new day. We can help each other in this regard. Also, we are empowered to live this new life in and through the Sacred Presence of God that dwells within each of us, within you and me. **Reflect this week on how you, and we together as a congregation, live out this transformed, authentic, life-affirming way of life – our new life as 'imitators of God.'**

Amen.

Resources: *Feasting on the Word*