

A Checklist for Imitating God

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

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"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Perhaps you are familiar with this passage of scripture because we sometimes use it during worship as an Assurance of Pardon after the Prayer of Confession. We have all probably wondered, however, **what does it mean that we are a "new creation"**? It certainly has a connection with our understanding of Baptism, connecting the belief that through the water the old life gives way to a new life in Christ as members of the family of God. I basically interpret being a new creation to mean **we come to an awareness of the freedom and ability to live and be who God has created us to be.** That awareness, however, comes with responsibility and accountability.

As we learned from last Sunday's biblical passage from Ephesians 4:1, we are to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you [plural] have been called." So, along the same lines, **what is considered living a life worthy of being called children of God and followers of the ways and teaching of Jesus?** Well, I'm glad you asked, because Ephesians 4 does a fairly thorough job of filling us in. Before looking at that, however, I'd like to share something that may be new to some of you, or something many of you haven't heard in a very long time. In his best-selling 1986 book, ***All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.*** author Robert Fulghum writes:

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don't hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
- Wash your hands before you eat.
- Live a balanced life – learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder.

There is such remarkable wisdom in that list, and it does a worthy job reflecting much of the teaching from Ephesians 4. Last Sunday, looking at the first half of the chapter, we learned things like:

- With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bear with one another in love.
- Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace
- Speak the truth in love
- Grow up in every way into the One who is the head, into Christ.

The lectionary leaves out a small section in this chapter before resuming with the verses we heard today. A couple of those verses tie together this understanding of being a new creation and they will help us as we move forward.

“You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (vv. 22-24).

Again, there are deep ties here to our understanding of Baptism. And notice, our new self is created according to the likeness of God. All this brings us up to the remainder of Ephesians 4. You probably noticed it also sounded much like a checklist. Not too unlike the list from Robert Fulghum, our pew Bibles subtitle this section, “Rules for New Life.” Let me paraphrase:

- Put away falsehood. Speak the truth.
- It’s okay to be angry, but get over it quickly so that you do not sin.
- Don’t steal. Work honestly and share.
- Let no evil talk come from your mouths. Speak only words that build others up, giving grace to those who hear.
- Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.
- Put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander and malice.
- Be kind and tenderhearted.
- Forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

This list concludes with these instructions, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love” (5:1-2). Living a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, being a new creation in Christ, and being imitators of God, involves maturing in our spiritual journey of faith by exploring and reflecting upon those things in our own lives, and congregational life, that need transformation – whether they be particular attitudes, beliefs, or actions.

All these lists exhibit, in part, what it means to be created both in the image of God and according to the likeness of God. That means, who God is, and what God does. The particulars in these lists are also 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 community of faith.**

Upon closer look, however, this list comes from a much deeper theological place than just a directive to follow the basic rules of decent behavior – behavior like the kind we used to expect and demand of our leaders, and for good citizenship, in general.

I think it can expressed best by using something that I found on Facebook years ago. In admittedly oversimplified terms, the post **contrasts the message 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’m accepted by God.” The approach of the ‘Gospel,’ however, flips that around, “I’m accepted by God, so I obey.” This is 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, always has, and always will.** 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, then, 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. Biblical commentator G. Peter Taylor expresses it nicely this way:

The works described by [the author of Ephesians] 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.

Again, 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, now retired preaching professor at Phillips Theological Seminary here in Tulsa, 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, love of enemies – 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 being malicious. 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 characteristics of God.

Agreed, living a transformed life, this new creation, is indeed a challenge. Yet, it's also an opportunity that we face each new day. And remember, **we do not do all this by ourselves or in our own power alone.** We have been blessed here at College Hill with a caring community of faith that nurtures and encourages us all to live this new life. And perhaps most importantly we are blessed with the **indwelling Sacred Presence of God** through the Holy Spirit, who works to draw us nearer to God and to one another, to encourage and support us, and to empower us to live this new life in such a God-imitating manner.

Reflect this week on how you, and we together as a community of faith, live out this transformed, authentic, life-affirming way of life – our new life as 'imitators of God.'

Amen.

Resources:

Resources: *Feasting on the Word*