

A Checklist for Imitating God

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

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Are you the kind of person who makes or likes checklists? Sometimes all they do is remind us of all the things we haven't done yet. But at other times they can be quite beneficial. One of my favorite checklists was put in print in a 1986 book. You may have heard about it, it's **Robert Fulghum's *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten***. This book became a best-seller because of the truth embedded within this list, which **applies to adults just as much as it does to 5-year-olds**.

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:

- Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.
- 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

The assigned lectionary leaves out a small but important section in this chapter before resuming with the verses we heard today. A couple of those verses tie together an understanding of what it means for us to be **a new creation**.

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self.. 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).

Notice that 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**. We can do this, in part, 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**.

No one said, not even the Bible, that the transition from the old self and way of life to the new self and way of life would be easy. Yet, all the items in 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, peace, 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 together as a community of faith**. Thankfully, we have each other here at College Hill to help us with all this.

Upon closer look 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 business, religious, and political leaders, and for all of us as it applies to good citizenship, in general. Perhaps it can be best expressed by using something that I found on Facebook years ago. In admittedly oversimplified terms, the post **contrasts the message often found in 'Religion', on the one hand, with the actual good news of the 'Gospel' on the other**. 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 am accepted by God, so I obey." This is an excellent 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. Therefore, our thoughts and actions 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*, with God's

help, we are working to put away the 'old life' and living a 'new life' in Christ. 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.

It is said that "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." God doesn't need flattering. Rather, **imitation, as already mentioned, is our call to action.** As young children, we imitate our parents or guardians. As we mature in our faith, we are to imitate God. And **as Christians, we are called to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus. Jesus is our model. Therefore, to imitate Jesus is to imitate God.** The question arises, Can we see in ourselves, and others see in us, a family resemblance as children of God? Or as the familiar hymns states, "And they'll know we are Christians by our love."

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.

Before closing, I feel the need to briefly call attention to one specific item on this list that some, like myself, struggle with from time to time. "**Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger**" (v. 26). **Without condemning anger in and of itself, it does direct us to deal with our anger quickly and appropriately.** And here's a bit of wisdom shared at John Pavlovitz's workshop I attended while on sabbatical last year. It's also found in his latest book, "Worth Fighting For: Finding Courage and Compassion When Cruelty is Trending." He starts by quoting **Aristotle**, who wrote:

Anybody can become angry – that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.

We are to direct our anger...

- to the right person
- to the right extent
- at the right time
- with the right motive
- in the right way.

Pavlovitz writes, "So, **the object of our anger, the level of our anger, the timing of our anger, the purpose of our anger, and the manner of our anger all matter.** These *who, how much, when, why, how* questions can give us a really useful filter for assessing the appropriate nature of our outrage and, more importantly, a productive expression of it." When it comes to getting angry, I hope that helps, it has helped me.

I also hope this checklist, partial as it may be, helps us all to a better understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God, according to the likeness of God, and what it means to be imitators of God.

And remind yourself of those lessons learned in kindergarten!

Amen.

Resources:

Resources: Feasting on the Word