

## Be Imitators of God!



*This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

**Psalm 118:24**

I'm sure they wondered why Jesus was ignoring them. They asked him as question and he just stooped down and started drawing on the ground with his finger. Once again, Jesus knew it was a trap. How could he tell them not to stone this woman when the law of Moses said adultery was punishable by death? Finally after they kept hounding him, he stood up. **"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her"** (John 8:7). And then he stooped down to write on the ground with his finger again! The older men of the group were the first to get the point, but the younger ones eventually also did. And the left too. Such a simple, subtle way to get his point across. You can't trap Jesus—that is, unless he lets you. You'll only end up trapping yourself. But that wasn't really the lesson he wanted to teach them. He also taught them that they were no better than this harlot of a woman. They were sinners just like she was. It's this same lesson that the Apostle Paul wanted to teach the readers of his Ephesian letter also. But he was not quite so subtle. He spelled it right out for them.

**"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.**

**Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children <sup>2</sup> and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."**

Paul wrote this letter not to address a particular issue or problem. He wrote it as a broad challenge to God's people. He wanted them to appreciate the plans God has for them from eternity—plans to know him, plans to be united with the Gentiles as one body, plans to give them works to glorify him. In a word, he's challenging these Christians to *maturity*. So after reveling

in God's goodness, he helps them understand Christian maturity by describing what it does not look like and what it does look like.

So first he tells them not to grieve the Holy Spirit, who's done so much for them—who has sealed them for the day of redemption. The Holy Spirit meaning he has placed a mark on us. It's a mark of ownership and protection. It's a mark that says, "you are mine; I'm protecting you." We might compare this to the way a rancher brand a steer to show it's ownership. Shepherds in Bible times had a similar mark of ownership and protection for their sheep. They would cut into the ear of each of their sheep a unique pattern. This told anyone who wandered through their fold that those sheep had an owner and protector--that someone was actively working to ensure their safety. So, through faith in Christ our Shepherd, the Holy Spirit has placed his seal of ownership and protection on us. What a comfort that the Holy Spirit is actively working to keep us safe in the faith until Christ comes again!

And, as the Apostle says, this Holy Spirit is the One we grieve with our sins of thought, word and deed? How is it that our sins sadden him? Why do they grieve him? Isn't it because we are doing things he knows are harming us? Isn't it because we are doing them despite and against the warnings in his Word? We never want to sadden the friends and family we are closest to. How much more the Holy Spirit of God who has made us his own by the blood of Christ and through the waters of baptism!

But the Apostle knows the resolve of a Christian's sinful nature. And so, for our protection, he zeroes in on a few of those sins that can cause us great harm and make our lives difficult. "**Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice**" (4:31). It's interesting that Paul begins with bitterness. Bitterness can easily lead to the other sins on this list. Internal rage and angry words and name-calling all can begin with bitterness. But where does bitterness come from? Why are we sometimes bitter? Think about the people or situations that are most often so difficult for you to let go of, the people you love to hate, the ones who are so bad to you that you can even justify complaining about them. I wonder if sometimes we Christians feel like we have a right to be bitter. We know the truth and the "idiots" out there in the world don't. And we have to put up with their ridicule of us! But sometimes it's easy to be bitter and angry even with Christians. And our excuse is, "*well, they aren't acting very Christian, so I'm entitled to be bitter!*" The danger with bitterness is that it can grow into a permanent grudge and rage and hateful words and even worse.

We all know that these kinds of attitudes are harmful to have. But giving them up means we have to give up some control. Yes, bitterness, grudges and anger are often about power and control. And they can devastate individuals and families from the inside-out. A wise Christian woman whose husband had abandoned her once said, "*Bitterness only rots the vessel in which it is stored.*" We know this and yet there are some among us who still cling to grudges that are decades old, while we rot from the inside-out. And for all of us, the deeper we look the more potential we see in our sinful nature for this catalogue of sins. There is a prideful, power-monger in each of us. The deeper we look, the more we see our inner Pharisee and Scribe who would quickly cast stones at another to ease our own guilt.

We don't know if those accusing men had rocks in their hands that day with the adulterous woman. But we might imagine the iteration of thudding stones and fleeting footsteps as Jesus' words begin to sink into their hearts one-by-one. The Apostle encourages the same

release of pride and power in our lesson. He says “get rid of” all these things--literally “lift them off of yourself.” Like lifting life-sucking leaches off of your body, get rid of it all! But he doesn’t just tell them to get ride of the bad. He tells them what to put in its place.

**“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children <sup>2</sup> and live a life of love”** (4:32-2). Even though Paul switches to positive patterns to follow, these are still things we are convicted by. The command to be kind and compassionate and forgiving—even the command to love others is still a law-based message that convicts us because we haven’t done them perfectly.

Paul’s word for *kind* has the idea of usefulness inside of it. This is the act of kindness that has no apparent benefit for the person doing it. This is the waitress who gives equally kind service to all her tables even though she knows the ones who will hardly tip her at all. The *compassion* Paul encourages is the willingness to suffer with another person—to feel what they are feeling right there with them. Job’s friends showed empathic compassion when they simply sat in silence with him. Paul’s word for *forgive*, it comes from the same word as *grace*, to deal graciously with others.

Jesus managed to get the Pharisees and Scribes to at least outwardly deal graciously with the adulterous woman. He works on us, however, inwardly. Paul’s commands internally convict us. They show us where we came from. They expose the sinful man in each of us who is entitled to nothing but being stoned to death and worse. Paul’s commands remind us that our failure to remove all bitterness and embrace Christ-like kindness is worthy of an eternal death in Hell. If it had been up to us, we may as well have given up.

But so typical of Paul’s letters, alongside the command that convicts is the promise that comforts. The command: “[Forgive] **each other,**” the promise: “**just as in Christ God forgave you.**” The command: “**Be imitators of God...live a life of love,**” the promise: “**just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God**” (5:1-2).

Why even try to be like God—to get rid of our sinful behavior and love others in kindness, compassion and forgiveness? Why try when we know we’re going to fail anyway? Because all is forgiven in Christ. God’s justified rage and wrath was directed at us for our sins. But when Jesus offered himself as a fragrant sacrifice for sins, God’s wrath turned away from us and onto Christ. The Old Testament burnt offering was the picture of a sweet fragrance to God. After the sins of the person were symbolically transferred to the animal and the animal sacrificed on the altar, it was as if the smell of the burning animal flesh wafted to heaven and removed the stench of sin from God’s nostrils. So our sins were transferred onto Christ, who became the fragrant offering for our sins.

God in Christ got rid of his own justified bitterness and anger toward us! God in Christ showed us true kindness, true compassion, true forgiveness. God in the Holy Spirit, sealed us with his ownership and protection until Christ comes again. And now through the inspired Apostle, he says, “*Christian, go and do to others as I have done for you.*”

Paul tells us to be imitators of God. The word for *imitator* is *mimetai*, from which we get our English words *mime* and *mimic*. What does a mime do? He copies what others do. Christians are mimes of God. But not just on the outside. We’re not like whose feet finally walked them

away from the adulterous woman. Christians mimic God on the inside too. **“Live a life of love,”** Paul writes, **“just as Christ loved us.”**

When bitterness for another person creeps into our hearts, we show the kindness to that one that God showed to us. When anger boils over and hurtful words fly from our mouths, we show compassion for that person and we take responsibility. When anger boils over in another person and hurtful words fly toward us, we deal graciously with that person, and forgive them, as Christ has done for us. In this way we imitate God. We do unto others as God has done unto us. Why? For every un-Christian word or deed that comes at us, there was one just like it that came from us. For every stone we carry with the name of another on it, there once was one just like it with ours on it. God did away with them all. He deals graciously with us because of Christ his Son.

He is kind, compassionate, and forgiving...because of Christ. And it's our turn to imitate him with others...kind, compassionate, and forgiving...because of Christ. Amen.

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

**Ephesians 3:20-21**

