

Learning to Imitate God

Lesson 9

GROW DISCIPLESHIP CURRICULUM

Engaging the Learner

At 6:00 in the morning, I heard my father rummaging. Three feet tall and in stocking feet, I padded off to the bathroom, where my dad was getting ready for work. With his shower finished, I heard the hot water running on the washcloth in the sink. Shaving cream covered his face as my eyes crept around the doorway. Before I knew it, the steaming washcloth was on my face and off it. Then, he would fill my undersized hands with shaving cream to be applied liberally to my chin and cheeks. I had my own razor—one without a blade—that my dad had rigged for our morning ritual. There we'd stand, me on a stool and him on the floor, sharing sink and mirror. Two cream-covered faces, one high and one low. I imitated how my father tilted his head to get under his nose and stretched out my neck as he did to pull his chin tight. When more skin was showing than foam, my dad would take a warm towel and wipe the extra shaving cream off my face, then his own. I'd follow him downstairs to breakfast and walk with him out the door, before returning inside and back to bed.

My father was my first hero. Long before Batman and Buck Rogers dominated my wardrobe selection, I wanted to be like my Dad. I imitated him from the way he shaved and combed his hair to the sports teams he loved (the Dallas Cowboys) and the music he listened to (Willie Nelson). The truth is, I'm still trying to be like him.

The apostle Paul picks up on the parent-child relationship in Galatians 5:1. "Therefore," he says, "be imitators of God, as beloved children." Imitating God can be a tall order. If we're not careful, we will dwell on God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence and give up on achieving the apparently unachievable. But that ignores the second half of the verse, for the picture is the same as of a daughter dressed up in her mother's clothes or a son shaving with his dad. We are to imitate God as beloved children of the Father, doing the best we can to be like Him. It will take some growing into, and we'll never be God; but just as children imitate the parents they love, we can imitate the heavenly parent who loves us.

Exploring the Lesson

How are we to become imitators of God? Ephesians 5:1-20 provides a roadmap. Take a moment to read through this passage before continuing.

Like a Child

Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus, instructing his flock to be "imitators of God, as beloved children." What a beautiful analogy. We are to imitate God as a child imitates a parent. But is this easy for us to do? The answer is, probably not. Children copy their parents naturally. As adults, we desire to assert our independence. Imitating God often means denying our own will and plans.

Why, then, would we imitate God? The key to this question is found in the word beloved. Children (and often adults) who are treated lovingly will emulate the person who loves them. God's love is the bond that connects us to Him. On the basis of this love our relationship is built.

Love as Christ Loved

Verse 2 continues to explain how we are to imitate God. “And live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” We are to imitate God as beloved children and imitate Christ in our love for others. God calls us to root how we treat other people in Christ’s sacrifice for us. This means that an imitator of God will prioritize other people. God gives and gives and gives— lovingly, happily, and joyfully. Christ invites us to do the same.

Avoid Improper Attitudes and Actions

The balance of this passage outlines the tangible outworking of a decision to imitate God. Sexual impurity is to be avoided, as is greed and drunkenness. Not only are these actions out of place among Christians, but this passage further challenges believers to guard their speech. Verse 3 and 4 declares these things “must not even be mentioned among you.” And, further, “Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, or vulgar talk.” In other words, sin is nothing to joke about. Dirty talk and vulgar swearing has no place in the Christian walk.

Paul warns his congregation about spiritual leaders who proclaim these practices are acceptable. Do you know spiritual leaders who practice or excuse these types of practices? “Let no one deceive you,” Paul says, “the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient.” We are not to associate with people who engage in this type of teaching. Involvement with the ungodly leads easily to sin (5:7).

Instead of immoral actions, Christians are to dwell on God. Paul instructs us to give thanks to God (5:3) at all times and in every way (5:20). Further, the scripture instructs us to sing spiritual songs, hymns, and scripture, “singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts” (5:19).

Search to Please God

The final piece in imitating God is relayed in 5:10. “Try to find out what is pleasing to God.” While this instruction is short, it packs a wallop. Putting the responsibility squarely on our shoulders, this command gives each person a lifelong quest. And where shall we search? The obvious place to start is Scripture and prayer. We also can glean a great deal from other believers. You can tap this resource through Bible studies, Sunday School classes, sermons, and devotional and spiritual writing. No matter where you search, one thing is for certain: There are always exciting new paths and discoveries around each bend in the road!

Enhancing Our Lives

Having looked over Ephesians’ call to imitate God, let’s examine ways to implement this calling. The following exercises are designed to help you evaluate, work, and plan for future spiritual growth.

1. **Becoming a child.** The following characteristics of a child enable him or her to imitate a parent.
 - a. Trust and confidence
 - b. Love and devotion
 - c. Eagerness to learn
 - d. Openness; no hiding of feelings
 - e. Teachable
 - f. Willingness to try
 - g. Curiosity or intense interest
 - h. Determination

Which of these traits do you have? List below the areas you need to enhance.

2. Giving of yourself for others. The following are ways to give of yourself for other people.
 - a. Share your testimony of what Christ has done in and for you.
 - b. Think of a person who makes you feel good. Write him or her a note of appreciation.
 - c. Make a point to ask a friend a caring question and listen for his or her complete answer.
 - d. Donate money above your tithe to help the needy or feed the hungry.
 - e. Volunteer at a rescue mission or other non-profit organization.
 - f. Evaluate a typical day: How much time is spent for others?
 - g. Set a goal: How much time would you like to spend for others?

3. Avoiding attitudes and actions improper for God's people.
 - a. List the people who bring out the worst in you. Determine to cut down or cut out time with these people.

 - b. Involve yourself with people who bring out the best in you.
 - c. Consider the list of activities or attitudes in Ephesians 1:1-20. Which of these do you struggle with? Ask God to show you areas you need to work in.

 - d. Make the necessary correction to your life.
 - e. What things do you have to be thankful for in your life? Make thanking God for these things a consistent part of your prayer life.
 - f. Write down the thing that is most important to you in life.

 - g. This thing is your idol—your god. It determines your attitudes and actions. If it is not the God of the Bible, pray God to take this idol from you and substitute himself in its place.

4. How to please the Lord. Ephesians 5:10 tells us to search for things that are pleasing to God. The following is a list of things that can be drawn from this passage.
 - a. Determine to live by the spiritual guidance you receive (v. 8).
 - b. Realize your life is viewed by God (v. 14).
 - c. Make the most of every opportunity (v. 16).
 - d. Avoid alcoholic beverages (v. 18).
 - e. Be filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 18).
 - f. Encourage each other with music and Christian songs (v. 19).
 - g. Encourage each other with psalms (v. 19).
 - h. Be a happy person (v. 19).
 - i. Give thanks (v. 20).

Outline for Small Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

All questions and exercises are useful for either personal growth or small group reflection. While exercises marked with an asterisk (*) are written specifically for a small group leader, individual learners can easily modify the exercise for personal study.

Engaging the Learner

Describe your relationship with your mother or father. In what areas did you imitate them? In what areas of your life do you still see your parents?

*Ask your class to describe when they have felt most loved. Then, ask them how they responded to the giver of this love.

Exploring the Lesson/Enhancing Your Life

*Ask someone to read Ephesians 5:1-20 to the class.

What characteristics of God would you most like to be able to imitate?

Like a Child

*Review the attributes of children listed in section 1 of Enhancing Our Lives. Ask your class, "Which of these is most difficult for you in your spiritual life? If you could fully demonstrate these qualities, how would your life be affected?"

In what areas could you be more teachable?

Love as Christ Loved

How much time do you spend giving to others?

What do you expect to receive in exchange for being kind?

*Divide your class into groups of two. Have each person name a conflict he or she is involved in. Now, as a team, determine how each member would resolve that conflict if they were dedicated to resolving the conflict in accordance with Christ's love and sacrifice.

Avoid Improper Attitudes and Actions

What people bring out the best in you? Who brings out the worst?

*Ask class members to describe the actions of an "impure" person, a "greedy person." Ask, "Are there any lures that Americans are more susceptible to than these two?" How can we guard ourselves from these temptations?

What does this passage say about drinking? In your experience, what problems are related to getting drunk?

*As a class, make a list of things pleasing to God.

*Close class by singing a praise song together.