

Imitatio Dei

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15:31-33 | Psalm 34:1-8 | Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2 | John 6:35, 41-51

EPHESIANS 4:25 – 5:2

²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸ Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. ¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

INTRODUCTION

The scene is the Garden of Eden. The crafty serpent speaks to Eve as she looks upon the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.¹ As John Milton tells the story, the serpent whispers:

Why then was this forbid? Why but to awe,
 Why but to keep ye low and ignorant,
 His worshipper; he knows that in the day
 Ye eat thereof, your eyes that seem so clear,
 Yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then
 Opened and cleared, and ye shall be as gods,
 Knowing both good and evil as they know.
 That ye should be as gods, since I as man,
 Internal man, is but proportion meet,
 I of brute human, ye of human gods.²

To be like God is the temptation in front of Eve. And it is no accident that being God-like sits here at the centre of the story of the Fall of humankind, the moment at which sinful disobedience entered into existence. From that day on, humankind was fundamentally changed. While still being in the image of God, humans would now be born also with a sinful nature—an inherent incapacity to be perfect, a state of always being tainted by evil thoughts, actions, and consequences. Augustine called it *original sin*.³ And it is a theme that gets picked up again and again in the Scriptures. For example, the Babylonian king in Isaiah 14 wishes to be lifted high like God—only to find himself brought down to the pit of Sheol.⁴ To seek to be God, to take his place on high, brings God’s righteous judgment.

¹ Gen 3:1-7.

² John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 99. Gen 3:5 puts it somewhat more simply: “for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

³ Augustine, *Confessions* (Trans., H. Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 3-23. Cf. Augustine, *Contra duas epist. Pelag.*, 4.4.6.

⁴ Isa 14:14-15.

Our reading from Ephesians, then, is something of a paradox. It drives to that final sentence where Paul's primary aim for the passage is revealed: "*Therefore be imitators of God.*"⁵ What are we to make of this? Can we actually imitate God? Can we be godlike or godly? Should we? Let's take a closer look at this Ephesians reading and see if we can make sense of it.

1. TWO KINDS OF GODLINESS

The lectionary designers have done us a disservice. They've separated our passage from the preceding paragraph—which they actually skipped entirely—and upon which the rest of the letter depends. The paragraph concludes:

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.⁶

Paul introduces an important set of categories. And forgive me for going over some basic Christian theology, but this is important. He identifies who we are, in our sinfulness—that sinful nature, fallen, original sin, however you want to frame it—he identifies us as our *old selves*, corrupt and deluded. Yet, as Christians, we are to put on our *new selves*—like clothes, restoring the undefiled image of God in us, in righteousness and holiness. Think on that for a moment. Take a moment or two. We have within us our *old selves*, our non-Christian selves, the part of us that is selfish and always wants to do what is easy, self-serving, or simply evil. We want to be our own little gods, worshipping ourselves. And yet, in Christ, we also have our *new selves*—that part of us that wants to do good, to be just and merciful, to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Paul describes the tension between these two selves elsewhere as an inner conflict, a battle.⁷ And yet, both sides, both selves, are related to this idea of wanting to be like God—the old sinful self, having come from wanting to take God's place, wanting the privileges of godliness, and the new Christian self being challenged to conform to God's likeness, to following in his ways. Perhaps you know the inner tension of which I speak?

2. FOUR REQUIREMENTS OF GODLINESS

And this is where our passage begins. Paul outlines four ways of putting on the new self, four specific ways of imitating God. Each is set up as a contrast—a prohibition and then a corresponding exhortation—a picture of the old self and the new self. Each is also accompanied by an explanatory note. And then after these four sets of contrasts—he goes over the ideas once more in a rhetorical flourish. But let's start with the four contrasts:

He begins by contemplating truth and lies. 'Put away falsehood' he says to the old self. 'But let us speak the truth' as the new self. This is more than just explicitly lying about something important. This is every deception. Every omission. Every tweaking of the details in order to leave a somewhat skewed but advantageous impression. Unlike certain politicians, Paul leaves no room for alternative facts. But rather, he exhorts us to tell the truth. Why? Notice this. It's for

⁵ Eph 5:2.

⁶ Eph 4:22-24.

⁷ Rom 7:14-25.

our collective good. We belong to one another and so, out of a care for one another, we owe each other the truth. Lying matters at a community level.

Paul goes on to a second contrast. ‘In your anger, do not sin,’ he warns the old self. While he certainly makes room for righteous anger here, the focus is on not sinning. ‘Do not let your anger grow. Do not let it fester. Do not let it even stay warm over night,’ he says. ‘Put that fire out.’ When he gets to the repetition a little later, he’ll contrast anger with forgiveness. We ought to have a disposition of forgiveness, so that no room is left for the devil. Again, the concern here is how we treat each other. Anger that leads to forgiveness, not sin, is what we need.

The third set of contrasts continues the theme. ‘Don’t steal,’ Paul tells the old self. ‘But rather, work honestly’ as the new self. This also is more than just home invasions and muggings. Stealing may be the little things at your job. It may be the tiny little insignificant material objects when nobody else is looking. But it might also be time. Goodwill. Patience. We can waste other peoples’ time. We can deplete their goodwill. We can run out their patience in ways that are impossible to replace. Are we but thoughtless consumers? Do we just take? Or do we contribute? Do we provide? Are we a net positive so that all in the community may benefit?

The fourth set of contrasts is, perhaps, even more relevant. ‘Don’t speak evil,’ Paul challenges the old self. ‘But speak what is useful and what builds up.’ He gets more specific in the repetition: ‘Put away wrangling and slander and malice,’ but rather ‘be kind to one another and tender-hearted.’⁸ If ever there were a message for us right now. In our polarized world, where we have much about which to disagree legitimately, how we speak to each other matters. It matters more than ever. Respect. Kindness. Dignity. These are how our communications with one another should be characterized—especially when tensions run high and disputes cannot be avoided. And why? Once again, the focus turns to the community: “so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”⁹ Your manner of speech will either bring evil or grace into the community. It is not neutral. Words matter.

Having covered this ground, Paul reiterates several of the points again in rapid succession—he repeats for emphasis: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”¹⁰ He brings it all to a stunning conclusion.

3. ONE REASON FOR GODLINESS

Godliness. This is how Paul concludes. “Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children.”¹¹ Imitate God. *Imitatio Dei*. He has made you a new creation. He has given you a new self, so much so that you can be considered a child of God. And so, be like him, be godly, imitate God in these four ways: in truth, in forgiveness, in service, and in edifying speech. God is the embodiment of these virtues—truth, forgiveness, service, edifying speech—for the sake of his people. And in case that wasn’t clear, Paul says it another way. “Live in love,” he goes on. This is a phrase that

⁸ Eph 4:31-32.

⁹ Eph 4:29.

¹⁰ Eph 4:30-32. The reference to the Holy Spirit here points us back to the discussion of the *new self* in Eph 4:22-24.

¹¹ Eph 5:1.

you will hear more and more in this church over the coming months as the Church of England has created an initiative called *Living in Love and Faith*.¹² However that unfolds, know that here—living in love is to imitate God, it is to put on the new self. Or alternatively, it is not living in love without truth, forgiveness, service to one another, and speech that brings about grace. And, by the way, the passage goes on. These are not the only four ways a Christian must put on the new self. The rest of chapter 5 and beginning of chapter 6 get into sexual ethics and secret sins, as well as the inner workings of marriages and families and vocational relationships—most of which the lectionary unsurprisingly skips.

But for now, we return to the question why. Why put on the new self? Why be an imitator of God and live in love? Why stop worshipping at the idol of self, stop being your own god? Why put away falsehood and unrighteous anger and stealing and evil talk? Why commit yourself to truth, forgiveness, service to one another, and edifying speech? The inherent result is there—we have already seen it. Practically speaking, it makes for a better community. If a peaceful, just, merciful, and grace-filled community is what you desire, here is Paul’s prescription for the disease of the old self. It’s a new self that looks like godliness

CONCLUSION

But there is a more foundational reason. And with this, I’ll conclude. It’s articulated there in how Paul ends the final sentence. “*Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*”¹³ This isn’t just godly living, this is Christ-like living. Christ gave himself up for us—meaning he died on a cross and rose again to save us, to make us our new selves, to restore the image of God in us. For those of you who believe, who are constantly repenting of your old selves, this is who you are called to be. Live in love as Christ loved you. And if you don’t believe this, that’s where you should start. Forget the rest of it for a moment. Godliness will come later. Faith—belief—repentance. This is your starting point, so that you may also know that Christ loves you so much that he gave himself over to death for you.¹⁴

And it is to this act—this giving himself over to death, that Milton also points for our hope:

The law of God exact he shall fulfil
Both by obedience and by love, though love
Alone fulfil the law; thy punishment
He shall endure by coming in the flesh
To a reproachful life and cursèd death,
Proclaiming life to all who shall believe.¹⁵

Let’s pray. *Heavenly Father, thank you that your Son, our Saviour Christ Jesus, gave himself up for us. Help us to live in his love and to imitate you in loving one another. We ask this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹² For more on the *Living in Love and Faith* initiative, see churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith.

¹³ Eph 5:2.

¹⁴ It is a matter of faith, as Paul demonstrated earlier: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” Eph 2:8-10.

¹⁵ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 137.