

Watching What God Does, and Doing It

Ephesians 4:31-5:1

Ken Ramsay is the Senior Pastor of the Bridgeport United Methodist Church, in Bridgeport, West Virginia. He once told about jogging with a friend named Joel at a local park when they were both in seminary, and he noticed that his friend was smiling. “What are you smiling at?” he asked. The friend pointed to a little girl who was fishing with her dad, as she imitated every move he made. When he cast, she cast. If he adjusted his hat, she did, too. Everything he did, she did. And Joel explained, “Just something about a child imitating her father that makes my heart smile.”

Ken and Joel shared a class together at the seminary. Another class member seemed always to be ultra-critical of Joel, making remarks that were demeaning and rude. One day they exchanged some harsh words. When they left the group that day, Joel angrily said, “That guy has pushed me too far! He makes me want to run him over like I used to do on the football field!” Joel was a big guy, and Ken said that the veins in his thick neck were bulging when he said that.

A few days went by, and everyone wondered what was going to happen between Joel and his enemy at the next meeting. The day before they were to meet again, Ken and Joel were jogging again in the park. Ken asked Joel, “So have you decided how you are going to deal with that guy?” And Joel said, “Yes, I sure have. I have decided to forgive him.”

Ken asked, “Say again?” Emphatically Joel replied, “I have decided to forgive him!” Ken smiled. “What are you smiling at?” Joel asked. And Ken said, “There’s just something about a child imitating his father that makes my heart smile.” http://www.exponent-telegram.com/bridgeportnews/news/what-i-saw-while-jogging-in-the-park/article_ebc10938-c88c-11e2-8c6e-0019bb2963f4.html?mode=jqm

In that moment of forgiveness, Ken saw Joel imitating his heavenly Father. And that is what Paul is telling us to do in this passage from Ephesians.

Paul tells us in verses 22-24 that we are to “*put off the old self*” and to “*put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*” We’ve compared that to taking off dirty clothes, and putting on clean clothes. In keeping with that analogy, in verse 31 Paul tells us that we are to “*get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.*” In recent weeks we have covered those topics pretty well, so we’re not going to spend a great deal of time on them. We do want to remind ourselves, though, that these are all things that simply do not fit us as believers. Take them off! Exchange them for clothes that are clean and fresh, and which fit us the way clothes should fit. Do things that are appropriate for Christians to do, and leave the rest alone.

Paul tells us now what we are to do instead. The words he gives us are very simple words, when we are reading them, but picking up those words and making them part of our lives is sometimes very difficult. Paul writes, *“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.”*

In essence, Paul is telling us that we are to be like God in the way we deal with each other. Bruce Larson once remarked that we people in the church are like porcupines in a snowstorm. We need each other to keep warm, but we prick each other if we get too close. The way we relate to one another has a direct bearing on the level of holiness and depth of discipleship in our lives. Take Ephesians 4 and slice it, dice it, analyze it, prod it, scope it—and it still comes out the same way. If we want to be obedient followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have to discover what this means. The words are simple, but it is important that we stop long enough on our expedition to hold this jewel from Scripture up to the Light of God so we can get the full meaning of it.

You will notice that the very first word in verse 32 is the word “be.” Get this! The word literally means “to become.” It’s not just “*be* kind”; it’s “*become* kind,” “*become* compassionate.” Paul is acknowledging that his first readers had not completely reached this level of maturity in Christ. Back in verse 13 of this chapter, Paul had written that God is working in the lives of His people “*until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*” The whole idea of the latter half of Ephesians 4 seems to indicate that this was something that they were to be striving toward, that they had not reached it yet. Have any of us?

Break it down some more. The word for “become” is a command, and it is something we are to be continuously doing. It would be better translated: “Be constantly in the process of becoming.” It expresses the idea of someone who has begun something and is now continuing to work on it. It is not something any of us can look back on and say, “Well, I’ve finished with that! Bring on the next thing.” We haven’t arrived at our goal yet, but we’re committed to keep working on it and to stay in the process of becoming. So the thought flows from verse 31 quite naturally into verse 32:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice, becoming kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

In the *process* of getting rid of these things, you will become kind and compassionate. But wait! There’s more! That word is also the way the very next chapter begins. It’s not “*be* an imitator or

follower of God,” but “*become* one who imitates God.” Remember that the chapter and verse numbers were not there originally, but were added much later to make it easier for us to refer to the Scriptures. So we need to tell our brains to ignore the “5” there, and see this as one continuous thought:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice, becoming kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you, becoming imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.

In the *process* of forgiving each other, you will become like God in His forgiveness of us. Do you see how it ties together now? It is a process, a journey, an expedition. None of us is completely “there” yet. We all have some work that needs to be done on us. God is in the process of developing us as we move through our lives and years. He is making us into what He wants us to be, and He tells us through His Holy Word that we must be yielding ourselves to His Holy Spirit so He can accomplish these things in us.

Next we need to look at the word for “kind.” It means that we show a sweet and generous disposition toward others. There is a play on words here in this verse, but it’s more than that. The original word for “kind” is pronounced “chrestos.” The original word for “Christ” just a few verses later is pronounced “christos.” “*Become chrestos, because Christos has forgiven you.*” Be like Christ in the way you deal with others. Now put that thought over here, because Paul’s not finished with it. Remember, the thought continues into 5:1, where Paul says that we are to imitate God. The word used there gives us our English word “mimic.” Paul says that we are to mimic God, the way that a child mimics its father. So take those two thoughts and put them together. Ephesians 4:32 says that we are to be like Christ. Ephesians 5:1, the very next verse, says that we are to imitate God.

Next, let’s talk about the word “compassionate.” This word is rarely used in the New Testament, and describes the kind of feeling that you get for someone else that rises from deep inside you. The King James Version translates it as “tenderhearted.” God’s Word teaches us that when Christ gets hold of your heart and life, He changes you so drastically that you are different from the inside out. You have compassion for others, the way Christ had compassion for you. When Christ changes you, you really become what you were created to become.

“Forgiveness” is the next thing he writes about, and it’s a biggie. Pay attention to the fact that this verse does not say, “Hey guys, if it ever becomes necessary, be sure to forgive each other.” No, it is taken for granted that forgiveness will be necessary. We’re going to sin against each other. We’re not always going to agree, we’re not always going to behave in a pleasing manner, we’re not always going to do things that make others happy with us. Many times we will need

forgiveness, and we will need to forgive. But this verse tells us that the standard for the way we are to forgive one another is set by the way God in Christ forgave us!

A stubborn old farmer was plowing his field. His neighbor was watching in puzzlement as the old guy was struggling much harder than necessary to guide the plow horse. Finally he said, “I don’t want to butt in, but you could save yourself a lot of work by saying ‘gee’ and ‘haw’ instead of jerking on the reins.” Wiping his brow, the old timer replied, “Yep, I know, but this here mule kicked me six years ago, and I ain’t spoke to him since.” How like that farmer we are! How much work there is yet to be done in our hearts by the Spirit of God!

But look closer at the word “forgiving.” This is not the usual word for forgiveness used in the New Testament. This word actually is related to the word for “grace.” And here the word noun “grace” becomes a participle. If we were to translate it literally, we could read “gracing each other, just as in Christ God graced you.” It means to bestow grace on one another, the way God through Christ has bestowed grace on you. You see, when God forgives us, it is an act of His amazing grace. Ephesians 1:7 reads, *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”*

Compare Scripture with Scripture to unlock the sparkling treasures! It helps to find out how the word is used elsewhere in Scripture. We don’t have to go very far—look in Philippians 2:9, where we read, *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.”* Do you see that word “gave”? It’s the same word used twice here in Ephesians 4:32, *“grace one another, just as in Christ God graced you.” Give to one another the gift of forgiveness, the same way that in Christ God gave you the gift of forgiveness.* What is a gift? It is at its very essence something presented to someone when they don’t necessarily deserve it, but just because you wish to express your love or appreciation to that person. The idea behind this word “forgiving” is that this is a gift we bestow on others. We cannot earn the forgiveness of God—it is a gift of grace to us—*nor should we expect that others should earn ours.* That’s how it works, folks. God didn’t bestow forgiveness on us because we deserved it—we don’t grant forgiveness because others deserve it. In that respect, we are to become like God.

Then Paul ties all these thoughts together with the first verse of chapter five. When God says through Paul in Ephesians 5:1 that we are to be “imitators of God” that means that we are to mimic God in His actions. The King James Version uses the word “followers.” The original word used here gives us our English word “mimic” so to translate this as “imitators” is pretty accurate. We are to find out what God is doing, and imitate Him in that. Naturally, we cannot be like God in everything, because we are *not* God. But the idea here is that we imitate our Father-God the way that a small child might imitate his father. The word was used to describe an actor on a stage, who mimics the actions of a character in a play. Have you ever heard someone try to do an impersonation of someone famous? The character Goober in the old Andy Griffith Show

would use his impersonation of Cary Grant when he would say, “Judy, Judy, Judy,” and to Goober, it sounded just like Cary Grant. But not to others! The impersonation is not good enough for others to know who it’s supposed to be.

Our imitation of God is not supposed to be like that—others are *supposed* to know that it’s God we’re mimicking! Let’s say that I decide to mimic one of you. If I’m going to mimic that person, and I intend to do a good job so you know who it is without me telling you, then I’ve got to study that person. I’m going to watch him—his facial expressions, how he combs his hair, his gestures when he talks, his emotions, how he reacts to certain circumstances, how he holds himself when he’s standing still. I’ve got to know something about his character. Does he have a determined walk or a slow, leisurely gait? When he sits, does he cross his legs or stretch them out in front of him? Is there a favorite expression he uses when he talks? In essence, I’ve got to know as much about him as possible before I try to mimic him in front of others.

A wildlife artist was talking to Sharon one day, and she told her that before she paints an animal, she studies it, and gets to know it as intimately as possible. She learns its eating habits and the dimensions of its head and body and how it sleeps and how it stands. She does all of that before she even attempts to “mimic” that animal in paint.

So the same thing is true of our following God. We’ve got to study Him, spend time with Him and learn His Word. We have to watch Him. We must put our ears up against His heart and hear how it beats. We must time our breathing with His breath. Our spirits must commune with His Spirit. Our walk should be like His walk, our attitudes should be like His. Our kindness toward others should be like the very kindness of God toward us. Our compassion and tender feelings toward others, even those not like us, should mimic the very compassion of God. And our forgiveness of others is to be exactly like the *forgiveness* of God toward us.

When we are faced with a particular situation, we are to ask ourselves, “How would God handle this?” and that is what we are to do. When someone is unkind towards us, we should ask, “What would God do in this set of circumstances? Would He be unkind towards them in turn? Would He react towards them with revenge, and be unkind towards them?” No, for He causes the rain to fall on the just as well as the unjust. We are to find out through careful study of the Scriptures and watching God carefully how He would respond. We are to watch what God does, and then do *that*.

When we encounter “bitterness, rage and anger” in someone else towards us, are we to respond in kind? Not if we are going to mimic God, as a child mimics its father. When we run up against brawling and slander, and every form of malice, should we react as though we were living the old life before Christ? Not if we are going to reproduce the character of our Heavenly Father in our lives. We are to watch what God does, and then do *that*.

When someone has treated us scornfully or with contempt, or done something that harms us in any way, or has said something unkind and disrespectful about us, what choices do we have? At the bottom of it all, we have only one option if we are going to imitate God: we must forgive, because that is what God has done for us, time and time and time again. Someone has written, “The moment a man wrongs me I must forgive him. Then *my* soul is free. If I hold the wrong against him I sin against God and against him and jeopardize my forgiveness with God. Whether the man repents, makes amends, asks my pardon or not, makes no difference. I have instantly forgiven him. He must face God with the wrong he has done; but that is his affair and God’s and not mine.” (R.C. H. Lenski) We are to watch what God does, and then do *that*.

A new missionary recruit went to Venezuela for the first time. He was struggling with the language and didn’t understand a whole lot of what was going on. He visited one of the churches, but got lost and arrived late. The only pew with a seat open was the one on the front row. He didn’t want to make a fool of himself, so he decided to follow the man sitting next to him on the front pew.

As they sang, the missionary tried to follow along. When the man stood up to pray, the missionary stood up, too. When the man sat down, he sat down. When the man took the cup and bread for the Lord’s Supper, he took the cup and bread. During the preaching, the new missionary didn’t understand a thing. He just sat there and tried to do just what that other man did.

Then he understood that the preacher was giving announcements. People clapped, so he looked to see if the man was clapping. He was, and so the recruit clapped too. Then the preacher said some words that he didn’t understand and he saw the man next to him stand up. So he stood up, too. Suddenly a hush fell over the entire congregation. A few people gasped.

He looked around and saw that nobody else was standing, so he sat back down. After the service ended, the preacher stood at the door shaking the hands as the people were leaving. When the missionary recruit stretched out his hand to greet the preacher, the preacher said, in English: “I take it you don’t speak Spanish.”

The missionary recruit replied: “No I don’t. Is it that obvious?” “Well yes,” said the preacher. “I announced that the Acosta family had a newborn baby boy and would the proud father please stand up.”

So we have to be sure that when we imitate God that we know what we are doing. We have to understand His language, His mind, His heart. We won’t always get it right, but we keep trying, so that others will know from their association with us that we are following after God, that we

are walking in His paths. It requires time and commitment. It requires that we spend more time fellowshiping with God in prayer and worship. It requires that we read His Word more. I met a woman one day who told me that she prayed once, “God, I want to know You better.” And He answered her by saying, “I’m in the Book.” She understood from that that if she wanted to know God better, she had to spend more time with her Bible. The same thing is true of us.

Our lives would be dramatically affected if we acted like God. We would be more kind. Compassion would become characteristic of our actions and decisions. We would forgive others with the same grace that was given to us in Christ. And we would imitate God, mimic Him, in all we do. Someone once wrote:

“If Christians never lied but always spoke the truth; never became angry in a sinful way but always acted in love; never stole but always shared; never spoke in a coarse manner but always spoke edifying words; never were bitter, wrathful, resentful, violent, or slanderous but were always characterized by kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness, don’t you think the world would pay attention to our message?”

Are you ready to become that kind of person who imitates the character of your Heavenly Father? It won’t happen if you sit there or stand there and stare out into space. It will happen when you and I determine in our hearts that we are going to “*put off the old man which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of our minds; and to put on the new self,*” and get this, “*created to **be like God** in true righteousness and holiness*” (Ephesians 4:22-24).