

8<sup>th</sup> August 2021

“A Necessary Exchange”

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

**Introduction:** Children learn almost everything by imitation. Babies mirror their parents’ facial expressions and eventually repeat the sounds that adults make, getting better and better at it until the sounds become words. Young children copy their parents’ speech patterns, even when their parents wish they wouldn’t. As they grow, they imitate the adults around them in more complex ways, often picking up some combination of their parents’ habits, values, communication styles, and behaviours.

The imitation sometimes grows even stronger during adulthood. Most of us have said to ourselves at one point or another that, “I sound just like my mother, or father”!

This letter to the Ephesians reminds us that we are children, not only of our parents, but of God. And just as children imitate their parents, sometimes intentionally and sometimes completely without noticing it, when we are in relationship with God, we begin to mirror God. As we grow and mature in our faith, we increasingly embody the values and practices of God, so the person we see in the mirror *shows God* to those we meet.

The whole book of Ephesians, and especially the passage we read today, is all about helping us to understand what those values and practices are, so that we can both recognize them in ourselves as signs of our growth, and gain a clear picture of exactly what it is that we’re supposed to be imitating – what it would mean to see God in the mirror.

All of Ephesians and in fact all of scripture assumes that while there is only one God, God is not alone. The whole idea of the Trinity is that God exists in community, and that relationship is part of the essential being of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, part of what it is to be the reflection of God is to live in community. All of these attributes of imitators of God that are listed here are things that happen in community. We imitate God by *being* in community, and we imitate God by how we *act* in community.

The most significant ways we can imitate God are those that involve how we treat each other. In the first part of Ephesians 4, Paul talked about unity and love in the body and concludes with the importance of each body part effectively functioning within the body, helping the body to mature and grow into Christ, our head. In the remainder of this chapter Paul gives us some practical ideas of how-to live-in community within the body. We need to ‘put off’ the old self, and ‘put on’ the new self.

Paul indicates that there has to be an exchange - for the Ephesians they no longer walk as the gentiles. Loyalties are replaced, it is to stop following one so they can follow the other, because the life style is totally different. Jesus exchanged His life for ours:

- He became flesh – stood in our place at the cross
- His obedience for our rebellion
- His righteousness for our sin
- His wealth for our poverty
- His reward for our punishment
- His life for our death

As God’s redeemed children we are called to exchange a life enslaved to our desires and suppressing the truth, for a life that finds our future and our identity in Christ.

### **1. How Not to Live v17-19**

*“So, I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.”*

Paul starts off by describing the life of unbelievers, and challenges us not to be like them. He has two primary negatives that he shares in relation to the Gentiles, or unbelievers. The first has to do with their way of thinking. It is described as futile, darkened, and ignorant. I suspect that most unbelievers would take offense at this characterization of their thought processes. But if God truly does exist and has a purpose for me, would it not be foolish and ignorant for me to consider life apart from him; to exclude him from my thought processes? It would be to some extent similar to trying to plan a trip to the moon without taking gravity into consideration. It would result in failure and would induce pity in those who knew better.

The second negative is that they have given themselves over to sensuality. We oftentimes think of sensuality in terms of loose sexual morals. But it really goes beyond that. One definition of sensuality is “the condition of being pleasing or fulfilling to the senses.” If you are living in the realm of the physical senses, looking for things that will be pleasing to you, then you are living in sensuality. If good tasting food, quiet and beautiful scenery, sport, music, clothes, beautiful people, etc. are what you are living for, then Paul’s comments in this passage are directed toward you. We should not live like that.

### **2. How You Should Live v20-24**

*“That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness”.*

Instead, Paul tells us to put off that old person, who is living for self and leaving God out of the equation, and to be made new. We are to be made new in the attitude of our minds; factoring God into the equation; and recognizing his place in our lives and in the creation. We are also to put on a new self, created to be like God, living for him in righteousness and holiness, rather than living for self in sensuality. The new life we are to live deals with both of the negatives that Paul has described concerning unbelievers, being renewed both mentally and in our conduct.

### **3. How To Live the New Life**

*“Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body. “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you”.*

The remainder of the chapter gives us some clues as to how to live this new life. Included in this list are admonitions to:

a) Speak Truthfully

Speak truthfully to each other within the body. If we are going to be a body, we need to be able to trust each other. And lying to each other will shatter that needed trust. So why are we tempted to lie? Seems to me it is mostly because I am either trying to hide something I did, or bring harm to someone else. And neither of those is desirable for developing close personal relationships within the body.

b) Dealing with Anger

We need to deal appropriately with anger. Paul does not tell us to avoid anger, but rather to avoid sinning in our anger. There are times when anger may be an appropriate response to some event or situation. But we need to be careful how we respond when angry, and we need to deal with anger quickly. Don't allow it to fester and build up inside you.

We do this, by keeping short accounts with people and learning to forgive quickly, not letting the sun go down whilst we are still angry. We may not always have a chance to reconcile with the person before the day is out, but we always have a chance to internally forgive them. When we harbour bitterness and anger, we give the devil a foothold and allow him a place and opportunity to influence our lives

c) Giving Rather than Taking

Integrity – instead of stealing things (time, resources, money, opportunities) to avoid hard work and doing the right thing, God calls us to live with integrity. Taking from others needs to transform itself into giving to others who are in need. Stealing is a self-first action, while giving is an others first action. Which is better for life in the body of Christ, or in any other community?

d) Useful Conversation

The word 'unwholesome' actually means 'rotten', like how rotten food contaminates and corrupts everything else around it. Unwholesome talk spreads and corrupts the minds of those listening, whereas wholesome talk builds and edifies others. Our conversation is another area of concern. Take the time to listen to yourself. How often is what you are saying helpful or useful to the ones listening to you? It seems often that our conversation is 'talking about' other people, or something that really has no value. How much conversation would survive the 'helpful to others' filter if we applied it to ourselves?

e) Obeying the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit has sealed us for the day of redemption, he is our companion and helper throughout life. He will never leave us, even though we may grieve him. We can follow his direction, which is pleasing. Or we can choose to do our own thing, which would grieve him. This is really very similar to a parent and child. How often does a child disobey and thus grieve their parent; although that does not make them any less loved, or terminate the relationship. In a similar fashion, when I disobey God it causes disappointment, but does not necessarily remove me from his love.

f) Personal Dealings with Others

And finally, Paul gives us a list of things to avoid in our interactions as well as a sample of more positive approaches. Bitterness, rage, anger, brawling and slander all serve to disrupt relationships in the body. Kindness, compassion and forgiveness serve to build up those relationships. If what we are doing or feeling hinders the life of the body, then stop it. Look instead for ways to build up the body of Christ.

I do not believe that Paul's list above should be taken legalistically or as a complete set of requirements. Rather I look at it as some general direction that will help us to live as members of the body. All of these things will help us to live within the body. But more important than just jumping on these few things, is to adopt a new mental attitude and to try and live in a way that would be pleasing to God, and helpful to your fellow believers. Are we willing to subvert our own interests in favour of being a new person in Christ? Are we willing to do what is best for the body regardless the personal cost?

### **Conclusion**

The exchanged life involves the call and cost of a life of imitating God chapter 5:1. It is a remarkable call, almost absurd to think that we could "imitate God"! However, this call to imitation is founded on the love of Jesus. It is significant that the imperative in 5:1 indicates that this imitation is an ongoing process. We might translate it as "*Keep on becoming imitators of God..*"

God sees us through the lens of Jesus, the one who begged those who crucified Him to forgive them. The one who blessed children and came to heal the sick and the outcast and the browbeaten. The one who came to serve and not to be served. God sees us as he sees His son, as true children of God. This is the life that we now live.

Let's live this life of love knowing that we no longer live under a curse of sin or religious legalism. Put on the new life, the life that Jesus shares with us, and in us by His Holy Spirit.

Prayer: