

Sermon ✝ August 8, 2021
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
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Today's sermon is based on the second reading . . . it is a portion of St. Paul's letter to the people of Ephesus (the Ephesians).

Considering the letter as a whole, the first half of the letter is more focused on God; in the latter chapters it is more focused on our response to God.

Our text for today is a really good example of that. It first lists a whole series of things to do and not to do. In the end, the reason is simply because of what God has done for us.

For a few moments, I want us to consider why this letter is still relevant for us. We'll begin at the end of the passage.

“Be imitators of God . . .” Pretty high standards, if you ask me. How are we to reach that standard? How are we to become perfect? How can we imitate God? Or maybe the better question is, “What **God** does our life imitate?”

Imitation takes on different forms. The *intentional* act of imitation is simply an expression of love and devotion. It's the sincerest form of flattery. Dressing up like a favorite uncle.

Unintentional imitation comes as a result of spending many hours with someone. Their habits become a part of our lives without any intentional effort. Our lives simply reflect those with whom we spend the most time.

So, again, the question isn't whether or not we are imitating the God we worship. It isn't whether or not we are imitating the God we love. The question is, “which **God** do our lives imitate?”

Another way of saying this: *“How do you live your life? And what does that reflect about what and whom you value?”*

A number of years ago, many folks wore bracelets with the letters “W.W.J.D.” on them. I admired the people who wore them because I knew they are trying to be intentional about following God . . . about imitating God. Of course, “W.W.J.D.” stands for *“What Would Jesus Do?”* It is still a valid test for every decision made throughout the day.

There are those who will tell me that the answer lies in following the Ten Commandments and other rules and laws that God has given us in the Bible. Some believe the Bible is a set of directions to be read as if it were a cookbook. Do this and don't do that; don't do that and do this.

The list we read today from Ephesians offers some great advice:

- * speak the truth
- * give up stealing
- * work honestly
- * share with the needy

However, the Bible is not a set of easy, simplistic answers . . . able to immediately solve any dilemma life throws our way. That was the problem faced by the people of Israel and faced by Christians in every century since the birth of the church: when we rely on a set of directions, we can easily get lost.

I know that sounds confusing . . . but when we begin to focus on exactly what was said (and what was not said), we can forget what we are supposed to be doing. Certainly there are rules to follow. But, sometimes, following the rules isn't enough.

The ancient Israelites spend years debating the finer points of the 613 laws of Moses. They spent enormous amounts of time trying to determine what the law allowed and what it didn't. The directions were incomplete . . . or at least they didn't answer all of the possibilities that could be thought of. Looking at the bark on the trees, they missed the beauty and splendor of the forest.

Jesus scolded his peers when they focused on the words of the law and overlooked the meaning. In the 15th chapter of Matthew they were having a debate concerning the ritual washing of their hands. How they washed their hands, Jesus said, wasn't as important as why they washed them.

So . . . what's the answer here? As the church we are called to point the way for people. We are called to provide *direction* along with the *directions*. One without the other is incomplete. One without the other is helpful but not sufficient.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul gives us three chapters that address the *direction* of our faith. He speaks about God's grace and love. He paints a vision, a goal for all of us to attain.

In the next three chapters, Paul is giving examples of how that can be done. Here, he is giving *directions*. One is not complete without the other. We need both.

We have been told to "imitate God". And Paul has told us what God is like. He has given us *direction*. Then he gives us *directions*.

He gives us examples of what it looks like when we imitate God. We imitate God when we forgive one another, for God has forgiven us. We imitate God when we share with the needy, for God has shared with us, God is the source of all we have. We imitate God when we speak the truth, for God is truth.

To some extent, these are intentional acts of imitation based on the *directions* we have been given. But, as we spend more and more time with God, I believe we also begin to

unintentionally imitate God based on the *direction* we have been given.

For that it at the heart of this letter. And, yes, even after all this years . . . it is still relevant . . . it still speaks to us.

Thanks be to God for both the set of directions and the sense of direction we have been given. Amen.