

## **"Instructions for Life: Be Imitators"**

**Scripture References: Ephesians 4:17-5:2**

**Sunday, August 12, 2018**

How well do you do in following instructions? The U.S. Department of the Interior once conducted an experiment using migratory birds. The birds were tagged with metal strips, and all those strips were printed with the abbreviation, "Wash. Biol. Surv." for "Washington Biological Survey." However, that abbreviation was eventually changed after a farmer from Arkansas wrote to the department: "Dear Sirs, I shot one of your crows. My wife followed the cooking instructions attached. She washed it, boiled it, and served it. It was the worst thing I ever ate."

Sometimes following instructions just doesn't work, because let's face it, instructions can be complicated. There was this brochure that was put out by the Durham, North Carolina public library that explained their card catalog. Well, one person who read on the brochure, "See Main Entry," immediately went out to the front steps of the library and waited there for further instructions.

Parents, I am confident that every single one of us who have tried to put together a swing set, or a child's bike, or some other complicated toy, have mumbled a few choice words under our breath, because those blasted instructions were impossible to follow.

Well, I don't think we have that kind of problem with the instructions that the Lord gave us in the Bible. The Ten Commandments seem to be very clear and easy to understand. Even the instructions that we read in the three Scripture readings today seem very clear. In Luke's Gospel, we are instructed to love everyone, even our enemies. In that passage from Romans, it again talks about loving others, as well as, being persistent in prayer, helping others, not being vengeful, but living peaceably with all. Simple instructions.

But to make this even simpler, I think all these instructions can be summed up in what Paul wrote in that Ephesians passage, where he instructs us to "be imitators of God." That simple, right? Okay, so let's take a look at what it actually entails to be an imitator of God.

First of all, Paul tells us what not to do. We are not to be like the Gentiles, the unbelievers, because they don't understand any of this, they are alienated from God because they have hardened your heart to the Gospel of Christ. So consequently, they have given themselves over to sensuality, greed, and impurity.

Paul goes on to say, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice." (Ephesians 4:29-31).

So, Paul gives us very clear instructions about the kind of life we are to avoid. Bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, (which means being loud and obnoxious) slander, malice, (which means wanting to cause pain or injury), none of this is to be a part of anyone who has a saving faith, saving relationship with the Lord. He is saying that a person like this has nothing to do with the Lord, and that this is not who we are in Christ.

Now, I realize that there are some days when anger, wrath, malice, bitterness, slander, and clamor rears its ugly head in our life. And that is exactly why we have these instructions. These instructions make it very clear that this is not who we are in Christ. So, what Paul is saying here is simply, "Live out who you are in Christ."

Okay, so who are you? Well, to answer that, let me tell you about something that happened in Bible study last week. As I have shared with you many times, a lot of people have a difficult time taking themselves off the hook. They look at their life, their sins and they think, "How can God love me? How can He forgive me?" Being forgiven is really a very difficult concept for people to grab hold of. So, they go through life with their sins, their guilt, their fears and doubts hanging over them. It's not a great way to live, but that's how a lot of people live their life.

So, last week in Bible study, Odell Binkley had an epiphany. Basically, he said in his usual quiet and timid voice, "I have lived my life knowing that I am a sinner and I need forgiveness. But now I realize that I am loved by God, and I am forgiven." Well, the whole place erupted with laughter.

But you know, Odell is right! This is exactly who he is! He is loved by God, he is forgiven by God, he is a child of God. Oh, how I pray that every single one of you would have this kind of epiphany. This is who you are! This is who I am! This is who anyone is, who truly trusts in Jesus as Lord and Savior!

Folks, our sins can no longer condemn us! Satan can no longer accuse us! Death and hell are no longer a threat to us! We are loved and forgiven children of God who will never die, but who have eternal life, a life that one day we will celebrate to its fullest when we are finally home in Heaven.

All of this is ours because of God's amazing grace. All of this is ours because Jesus loves us so much that He took onto Himself all the garbage that we deserve because of our sins. With our sins on Him, He suffered through the pain, the torture, the Hell, the death that we deserve. He took it all so that we wouldn't have to. He took it all because you and I mean that much to Him. He took it all so that we could be with Him for all eternity.

Do you want to know who you really are? Well, this is who you are! You are so loved! You are forgiven completely, for everything! You are a child of God, who has such an amazing Father, and such an incredible inheritance! That is who you are!

Okay then, if this is who you are, and this is who I am, then let's live our life accordingly. And how do we do that? Well, as Paul put it, we imitate God. And how do we do that? Well, once again, Paul gives us a little insight. In verse 29 he writes, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." (Ephesians 4:29).

So, we are instructed here to use our words not to tear people down, but to build them up. Okay, as we all know, we can be so good at tearing people down. That's because this is our nature, our sinful nature. But remember, this is not who we are, not anymore. We are instructed here to build people up. You might really be amazed at how an encouraging word can change someone's attitude, how a word of support can really build them up.

You know, there is an African proverb that says, "When a man steps into the center of the circle to dance and no one claps, he will soon tire and sit down; but if everyone claps, he will dance all night." Well, that is so true. Supporting one another, building each other up, this is all a part of imitating God.

Then in verse 32 we have further instructions. Paul writes, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32). So, we are to be compassionate and forgiving. In fact, we are to "Forgive as God, as Christ forgave us." Simple instructions, but is it easy for us to do this? Not really, unless we remember one thing. We simply need to remember who we are now. Let me show you what I mean.

During the Korean War, there was this South Korean Christian, a civilian, who was arrested by a young communist officer who ordered him to be shot. However, when this officer learned that this man was in charge of an orphanage caring for so many small children, he decided to spare this man and kill his son instead. This man was then forced to watch as they shot his little boy.

Later, the fortunes of war changed, and the young communist officer was captured, tried, and sentenced to death. But before the sentence could be carried out, the Christian man, whose son had been killed, pleaded for the life of his son's killer. He said that this man was young and that he really didn't know what he was doing. "Give him to me," he said, "and I will train him." The request was granted. So, this man took the murderer of his son into his own home and cared for him. Well, over time, that young com

That is the kind of compassion and forgiveness that Paul is talking about here. So, do you have this kind of compassion, and do you think you can forgive like this? The answer is yes, but that can only happen when you know who you are, by knowing God's forgiveness in your own life. Understand, it really is possible for you and I to imitate God like this simply by following these instructions.

Paul then kind of summed all of this up in verse 2, where he wrote, "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesians 5:2). That sounds great, doesn't it? But is this realistic? Can we actually walk in love as Christ loved us? Well again, this goes back to knowing who we are now in Christ. If we lose sight of this, we fall back to our old nature, our old self where we come first, this will never happen.

But when we let go of our old self; when we let go of our pride, our ego, our worldly attitude, our hardness of heart, our anger, our bitterness; when we surrender all of this to the Lord, and we realize who we are in Christ Jesus, and all that we have in Him, that's what changes everything for us. We see things in a whole new light.

Folks, we are the Lord's now! We belong to Him! And we will be His for all eternity! When we truly cling to this great truth, that's when we can let go of our self, this world, this life, and give our whole life over to the Lord. That right there is a fragrance offering and sacrifice to God.

So, you see, the instructions are rather simple. We are to be imitators of God. But for us to actually follow those instructions, we need to surrender our life, our whole life, our old life, to the Lord, and put on the new self. In other words, we need to clearly see who we are in Christ, and then to live like that. That's what makes us imitators of God, and that's my prayer for all of us. Amen.

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