

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. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Dear Friends in Christ,

If you are of a certain age, you might know the impressionist Rich Little, “The Man of a Thousand Voices.” His impressions include such distinctive voices as Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Stewart, and Howard Cosell. Rich Little is about a month away from his 79th birthday and is still performing!

But these days, you are more likely to run across Frank Caliendo, currently the most well-known impressionist. If you don’t know who he is—and you like to laugh—do yourself a favor and look him up. You’ll be entertained and impressed. It is amazing how he can sound exactly like Morgan Freeman or John Gruden or Charles Barkley. If you just hear him and aren’t looking at him, you would bet your last dollar that it was the real celebrity talking! Caliendo also does skits where he dresses up like those he is impersonating—like John Gruden doing his *Quarterback Camp*. So he looks like him, he mimics his facial expressions and, of course, sounds like him. The difference is, of course, that his comedy shtick is over the top; he has John Gruden saying outrageous things. It is truly remarkable that he can so closely imitate the unique and famous voices and mannerisms of other celebrities!

As Christians, you and I are called on to imitate someone, but the One we are to pattern our lives and speech after is much more important than a celebrity and our routine is not for purposes of entertainment. And the imitation is to be much deeper than outward expressions. Those who trust in Jesus are called on to imitate our loving God. The words from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Ephesus tells us that

A Christian Imitates God

1. Imitation gone bad

2. Adopting God’s way of thinking, speaking, and acting

Imitation gone bad

Do you have that friend who thinks he can sound just like John Wayne or Arnold Schwarzenegger or Chris Rock—but they don’t? It’s kind of awkward to listen to them because the impression isn’t as good as they think it is! Sometimes a Christian’s imitation of God isn’t very good either. Our thinking doesn’t match God’s. Our hearts are not in tune with our Savior’s. Our lives don’t look like the way Jesus lived. Paul wrote the lesson before us today to Christians who struggled with their sinful nature just as we do. Their hearts and voices and lives didn’t match God’s and our struggle is the same.

Scripture tells us that failure to live a life of flawless love for God and for other people is sin. You know that—it's obvious when looking all the way back to the Ten Commandments. And that sin is damning. And this isn't just about bad actions or even *primarily* about doing bad things. It all goes back to the heart. I think that's evident in our lesson today as Paul speaks of living a life of love. Paul does speak about words and actions, but behind those outward things is the attitude of the heart. So it's all important—what we think, how we speak, the way we act.

For instance, you don't have to murder someone to be guilty of a lack of love. All you have to do is hate them, talk badly about them, ignore them, not care about them, or not forgive them. God sees it all, hears it all, *condemns* it all. Divine justice calls out for removal from God's sight and eternal punishment for not being like God, for not thinking like he thinks, sounding like he sounds, doing what he does. When you consider how you have thought about some people and how you have spoken to them or about them and how you have acted toward them—or failed to act—you must know that you're deserving of being dismissed from God's presence now and after you die. You have not been a spot-on imitator of God. I haven't either. We are tragically bad impressionists!

Just like when we have disappointed someone who is important to us, we feel bad about it, our hearts must sag a bit when we hear that we are not to **grieve the Holy Spirit of God**—because we know that we've done that. We've done that by not being god-like. Did you ever even associate those kinds of feelings with God the Holy Spirit? Did you realize that you cause the Holy Spirit to feel sadness, to grieve over you?

Think about it—the Holy Spirit has given you the gift of faith. You believe in Jesus because of him. He gave you faith as he worked on your heart in baptism or as you heard God's Word. He is the one who lives in you, encouraging you to live for God. He's the one who prays on your behalf to the Father when you are distraught and upset and don't even know where to begin or what to say. Does it make sense that he would be upset, that he would grieve, when you decide to disregard your Savior's wishes and fail to model your life after his? Does it make sense that he would be saddened when your words don't sound very Christian or when you are unkind or lacking love and forgiveness for people around you? How do you feel about letting the Holy Spirit down because you don't always do these very things mentioned in the words before us this morning?

I pray that there is a repentant heart beating inside you. And I urge you to look to Jesus for forgiveness. Jesus lived in a godly way without any flaw or defect. He never messed it up once! You might say, "*Well, he is true God, so it doesn't really count! It couldn't have been that difficult for him!*" And you would be half right. He is true God. The half you would have wrong is thinking that the life he lived didn't count. It did count. It counted before God the Father. He looked at Jesus' life and saw the perfect life of love, the spotless reflection of the Father shown to everyone all the time.

We dare not forget that Jesus took on a human nature when he entered this world on that Bethlehem night and he lived with it every day. He was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet did not sin (Hebrews 4:15). That means that there were annoying people around him and mean people and tragedy and trauma and disasters and godless governments and faulty religious leaders and religious institutions and friends who weren't really friends. And yet his thoughts and words and actions toward others—no matter what they were doing—were a fragrant offering to God. In situations where what you and I think and say and do stink to high heaven, his perfect life was a fragrant offering to the Father.

This is important because this was Jesus doing what we don't do perfectly. This is why he came into the world at all, to do this in the place of sinners who always fall short of impeccable love for God and others. It is in his life and his sacrifice for these things that we find forgiveness for our imperfect speech and attitudes and actions and our grieving the Holy Spirit. While being confronted with our sins causes sadness in our hearts too, knowing that Jesus lived and died to forgive those particular sins brings us a comfort we find nowhere else and produces thankful hearts that are inspired by his love to change what is wrong in our hearts and lives.

Adopting God's way of thinking, speaking, and acting

After Jesus' forgiveness gets our full attention, we then listen closely to what pleases God. When he says to be like him, we *want to* be like him. Unlike an impressionist, we don't pretend to be something that we're not, someone that we're not. We are actually changed by the love of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit! God calls us a new creation. We actually are different, so we look and act and sound different.

There are several places in the Bible where God's people are held up as examples to follow when it came to some specific things—the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 4:16), Paul, Silas & Timothy (1 Thessalonians 1:6), other groups of Christians (1 Thessalonians 2:12; Hebrews 6:12). And it is true that we can see the Christian life in action by looking at others around us as well. But the One we want to imitate in every way is the perfectly loving God himself. As dearly loved children of God, we want to imitate God by adopting God's way of thinking, speaking, and acting. With love as our underlying emotion and concern, we set out to live this way.

I read a devotion based on this lesson recently. It talked about how gross it would be to take roadkill—decaying animal flesh—and put it in our mouths. We would never, ever, want to do that; it's disgusting! It pointed out how the word "unwholesome" here in our lesson is really the word for decay or rot. God doesn't want words coming out of our mouth that lead to decay. Christians are not to use rotten words. God doesn't do this and neither are we to do this! And you know what he's talking about—things we might say that lead to strained relationships or cause them to break down entirely. Posts on Facebook that are not carefully screened by a Christian mind and only serve to dishonor others and, in the process, dishonor God too. God points us to the alternative, words that are **helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.**

Christians have the Holy Spirit in them to help sift out intentionally harmful words and seek ways to actually help. We do this when we think of what others need to hear and consider a godly way to share that with them. You can see that love for others—even those who may not “deserve” that love—is what prompts the way we talk. Christians who imitate God actually want to benefit others, so they’re careful about their word choices.

They are also careful when it comes to their emotions. They want to feel the way God feels and express themselves as God does. The imitator of God senses when bitterness and anger are rising up and they get rid of it! It’s interesting that two words are used here for hatred: **rage and anger**. The word translated “rage” means a hatred that rises up quickly and then fades; the word for “anger” means a hatred that does not subside. A follower of Jesus realizes if those things are beginning to happen inside and pushes away that temptation. The same goes for what our lesson calls “brawling.” We hear that and we think “fighting,” like literally fighting, but it actually means something more like screaming and yelling, verbal fighting. So this too has to do with how we talk with one another. Slander addresses how we speak *about* one another. And, as in the other lessons today, God speaks to us about the need for us to forgive others.

How many specific instances in our lives give us the opportunity to imitate God in these ways?! Think of times of disagreement with a friend or with our spouse. How many chances do we have to exercise God-like attitudes and words with our children? Church discussions provide more opportunities—and the perfect setting—for godlike attitudes and speech. What about when you view the world out there—a world that is often in opposition to God and Christians? Here too, you and I can decide that our conversations with or about those people, will be such that the Holy Spirit will be pleased, that God will be happy about our approach.

If you’re like me, you can see how hard it is to be kind and compassionate and forgiving. But the example that we have is the way God has treated us.

In Christ, God has forgiven us.

In his Word, God has spoken his truth to us in a loving way.

By his Holy Spirit, God has built us up according to our needs.

With self-sacrificing love, God put us first in order to save us.

He asks that we imitate him as we respond to and interact with others. When Christian love rules our hearts and we imitate God’s way of talking and acting, our lives are also a fragrant offering to God and evidence of our faith in Jesus. We pray today that the Holy Spirit will continue to work on us and in us and through us until we are in heaven with our God and all our hearts will know is love and our every expression will be full of love and praise for our God. Amen.

**Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.**