

Imitators of God

St. Marl Lutheran
Two services

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Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God...Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light, and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness...And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.
Ephesians 5:1, 6-10, 18-21.

The story is told of a young soldier and his commanding officer. When they boarded a train together, they saw only two available seats. The seats were right across from an attractive young woman who was traveling with her elderly grandmother. They engaged in friendly conversation, and the soldier and the young lady kept eyeing one another.

Suddenly the train went into a tunnel and the car became pitch black. Seconds later, two sounds were heard. There was the "smack" of a kiss, and shortly after, there was the "whack" of a slap across the face.

The grandmother thought, "I can't believe he kissed my granddaughter. But I am glad she gave him a slap for being so bold." The commanding officer thought, "I don't blame the boy for kissing the girl. But if she was offended, she should have been more careful. She slapped me instead of him!" The young girl thought, "I'm glad he kissed me, but I wished my grandmother hadn't slapped him for doing it." Finally, the train pulled out of the tunnel into the sunlight. The soldier had a hard time keeping a smile off his face. He had certainly taken advantage of the opportunity. He had kissed the beautiful woman, and also managed to slap his commanding officer right across the face!

Now I am not recommending that you steal a kiss or slap someone across the face this morning, but we can learn some things from people of the world. This young soldier knew how to "seize the day", or in others words, take advantage of an opportunity.

We, the followers of Jesus Christ, can learn something from this. There is an area in our lives where we should take advantage of every opportunity that comes our way. Just as the soldiers had a mission, we have a mission also. We are to share, in some way, the good news about Jesus Christ. We need to be bold and push ourselves a little outside of our "comfort zone" in order to do this. That's step #1. But we may have another problem in being a succesful witness. That is the main thrust of our message today.

WE may be that problem. Studies and polls show that in many cases the life of a Christian is not much different from the life of someone who is not a Christian. Many people are not interested in what Christianity offers because many who call themselves Christians seem to be living their lives just like everyone else.

Paul addressed this problem in his words to the Christians at Ephesus. He said, "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."

Actually, right back at the start of chapter 5, Paul sums up what is necessary and what is expected of children of God. He says, "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Maybe this story, shared by a young father, will help you realize the importance of our theme today. This is what he said. "When I was a small boy, I was consistently late for dinner. On one particular day, my parents sternly warned me to be on time. Yet, I arrived later than ever. I found my parents already seated at the table, just about to begin eating. Quickly, I sat at my place. I then noticed what was set before me. There was a slice of bread and a glass of water. There was silence as I sat there looking at the plate. Then, I saw Father's hand slowly reach over, pick up my plate, and set it before himself. He then placed his own full plate in front of me, smiling warmly at me as he made the exchange. All my life, I have known what God is like, by what my Father did that night."

We are to model our lives, as much as possible, after the life of Jesus. We are to emulate the one whom we call Savior and Lord with our own lives. We give a powerful testimony by not just what we say about Jesus, but also in the way in which we pattern our lives after his.

What kind of an example did Jesus give us to imitate? He gave many examples, but I chose three of the toughest to consider. Jesus loved the unlovable. Hear his words from Luke 27: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Jesus forgave the unforgiveable. He hung on the cross and said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus reached out to the untouchable. He said this to those who caught a woman in adultery and brought her to be stoned to death: "Let those of you who are without sin cast the first stone.".

At the same time, we are warned not to be caught up in the world of darkness ourselves. We who know Christ are called "children of light". Our participation in works of darkness such as sexual immorality, greed, drunkenness, filthy talk and other things, is dangerous for us and a terrible example to those who are around us. The lives of many Christians have been ruined by such things, including even members of the clergy.

The thing is, It takes more than just good intentions to be a good Christian. So Paul tried to help the Ephesians. He encouraged them to fill their lives with the right things, rather than unholy practices. He realized that the strength we need to live the Christian life comes from the Lord.

He said, "...be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." I am sure this is not an exclusive list. There are other spiritual disciplines or practices that can help us to be the children of light that we are called to be.

Martin Luther found real peace and great joy when he came across the key teaching in the Book of Romans that by the grace of God we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ. (Romans 3:23-25). But one thing continued to bother him through most of his life, and there is no getting away from it. Even the strongest Christian retains his sinful nature. Even the Apostle Paul himself said, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." (Romans 7:19) If Martin Luther and the Apostle Paul needed spiritual maintenance, then we need spiritual maintenance also.

God knows our situation. In the Holy Scriptures, he has revealed at least seven key spiritual disciplines by which we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, that he might do the spiritual maintenance we need for our sanctification. They are: 1) Regular worship of the Lord; 2) Pray often; 3) Confess your sins regularly; 4) Participate in the Holy Supper; 5) Study God's Word; 6) Sacrificial offerings of time and money; 7) Tell others about Jesus. If you follow these spiritual disciplines, expect to be filled with the spirit, and I believe you will be blessed. Amen.