

## **Imitators of God**

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**“I Believe in the Church” Series**

**Ephesians 5:1-17**

A number of years ago my family and I visited some old college friends in another city. Because it was Sunday, they took us to their church. It was a good church. We enjoyed the worship. I thought the message was a good one. But the pastor of the church had a really funny little affect that as a speaker I just kept picking up on. And I couldn't focus very well on his message because of his effect. It was a small thing, but it was so striking to me that it was hard to concentrate on his message. He had this funny little laugh that came out at odd and almost inappropriate times. He would say something like, “Jesus stepped out of the boat...hehehehe...and he walked on the water.” Or “Then a storm arose and the waves grew...hehehehe...and it seemed like there was lightening.”

I said to myself as I heard that funny little laugh, “I've heard that laugh before. Where have I heard that laugh before?” I was wracking my brain listening with two channels to the message and thinking, “Where have I heard that laugh? Where have I heard that laugh?” And then it came to me. About 10 years earlier I was at a conference and there was a conference speaker who I will call Pastor Paul Smith, who had exactly the same laugh. I said, “That's it. That's Paul Smith's laugh.”

So after church my friend asked me how I liked church. I said it was great and that I really enjoyed it. They are going to a very, very nice church and I can see why they like it so much.

But I couldn't resist, I said, "You know, I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but your pastor has a funny kind of laugh."

He said, "Oh, yeah...I guess he does."

I said, "You know, I've heard that laugh before."

He said, "You have?"

I said, "Yeah, Pastor Paul Smith has exactly the same laugh."

My friend said, "That's really interesting because Pastor Paul Smith disciplined my pastor."

You know, when we admire someone, when we respect someone, we find ourselves almost unconsciously taking on a number of their traits, including odd ones like funny little laughs. Throughout the Vineyard there are John Wimber clones. John Wimber was the founder of the Vineyard movement. He had an enormous influence on my life and the lives of many pastors. But I've watched the way that many pastors preach, their hand motions, the way they ask the audience questions and it's John Wimber all over again.

John used to have a funny way of walking out and saying, "Hello..." and then he would turn in a circle, he would point at someone and say, "Gotcha!" John was really over weight for much of his adult life and he used to joke about being a "fat man trying to get to heaven." I decided pretty early on in our relationship that there were a lot of things about John that

didn't make sense for me to imitate. I mean it doesn't work quite as well for me to say, "Hey...I'm just a fat man trying to get to heaven" as well as it did for John.

But there were other things about John that I've often reflected upon and have consciously tried to imitate. One thing I always admired about John was he was very comfortable with who he was. He was the real deal. He wasn't out to make an impression or to be voted Mr. Popularity. He just was who he was and I really admire that when I see that in someone. Someone who is just comfortable being them – however quirky they are, however odd they are. I think I love people in all their quiriness when they are comfortable with who they are, when they've come to a place of self-acceptance. This is who I am; this is what I'm about.

I always admired John's lack of pretense, his lack of hype, his lack of show and showmanship. I admire John's willingness to be weak and to show his flaws. The first time I ever met John Wimber personally, we had just joined the Vineyard movement and I was just beginning to pastor. John heard about me through some friends. I was a young pastor and he invited me to stay with him in Washington DC in his hotel suite. He was doing a conference and wanted me to hang out with him for 4-5 days.

So I flew to Washington and made my way to the hotel to visit this great man, this famous pastor of a big church, a great conference speaker. He opened the door and greeted me. I put my bags down and the first thing John Wimber ever said to me, "Well, Rich, I have something to confess to you. I was alone in the hotel room last night and I watched

something on TV that I shouldn't have. I just stared at it for about 10 minutes and here's what I watched. So, I just wanted to confess that to another brother."

I thought, "WOW. That's incredible. I want to be like that."

We imitate what we admire. My daughter, Sharon, when she was a little girl, used to parade around the neighborhood in my wife's shoes, carrying her little baby doll, with a purse. She wanted to be just like her mommy. Even to the point of taking mommy and daddy's papers. We were looking for our life insurance policy one time and a bunch of our checks. We discovered that Sharon had shoved our insurance policy and checks into one of her purses and was parading around the neighborhood with it.

If you visit almost any school yard in the country in the late 1980's, early 1990's, there was almost no boy with a basketball who didn't say, "Hey, watch this move...just like Michael Jordan." There used to be riots in malls all over the country when the latest style of Nikes Air Jordan's would come out. Kids would line up for hours before the shoe store opened.

I just read in Sports Illustrated a few weeks ago that there has been a rash of emergency room visits all over the country from teenage boys who are getting severely injured because they are imitating a WWF big-time wrestler in their backyard. Apparently, kids around the country have set up wrestling pits in their backyards and they try to replicate a lot of the craziness they see on the wrestling programs. They even charge admission to watch them slamming each other onto tables that are built on sawhorses with broken glass on the top.

18-19-20 – one of the boys was 24 years old and his friend had to pull staples out of his head

with pliers. He said, “It really hurt.” Yes, broken glass and staples in your head really does hurt.

But these boys are dreaming of making it to the big-time and so they are imitating their heroes...even to the point of severe injury. We imitate what we admire.

In the text that we are going to be looking at today, the apostle Paul says this in Eph. 5:1-2 – *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children 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.* Be imitators of God. That’s the title of my message.

Ephesians 5:1-19 – *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children 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.*

Imitators of God. The Greek word here for imitator literally means to mimic, to copy. Be copies of God or mimickers of God – imitators.

It’s important that if you are going to imitate a model that you, of course, choose the right model. For years we’ve heard of the need in America’s inner cities to have mentors or good models for kids to follow. Rather than trying to imitate the drug dealer, whose driving a fancy car and always seems to have cash, folks have said that we need other kinds of models. We need other kinds of examples in the inner city for young men to imitate. We need examples of business owners and engineers, and school teachers, and bankers. We need men around who are responsible with their children, who are fathers, who are husbands,

who are providers for their families. If we are talking about imitating, it is important that we imitate the right people. Not necessarily big-time wrestlers or pro-athletes, but the apostle Paul says be imitators of God.

But beyond this, it is not only important for us to choose the right model, we also need to be discerning about what it is about that model that we are going to imitate. Like that pastor I mentioned before, are we going to imitate someone's funny little laugh or people imitating John Wimber's speaking style or his hand motions – or do we imitate a person's character, the way they treat other people?

Listen, one of the most important things that you can ever learn is what qualities of God you should imitate and what qualities of God are you not asked to imitate. Let me give you a little theology lesson here for a moment. As theologians have talked about God and what it means for human beings to be made in the image of God, they've said that God has certain attributes. He has certain qualities. And God's attributes, his qualities, can be divided into two categories. One category of his attributes are what theologians call "incommunicable" attributes – those attributes that he does not share with human beings. And then there is another category of his attributes, his qualities, that are called "communicable" attributes – those attributes that he does share with human beings.

You can think about it in terms of diseases. Some diseases are communicable and some are incommunicable. Communicable diseases are like a cold spreading from one person to another. A sexually transmitted disease is communicable. If one person gets it, another

person can catch it from them. An incommunicable disease might be something like cancer. You can be around someone who has cancer and not get cancer yourself.

Now, God has these attributes – incommunicable ones that he does not share with us and communicable attributes that he does share. So, his incommunicable attributes would be things like his sovereignty, his control over the universe, his omnipotence, the fact that he is almighty, all powerful, his omniscience – the fact that he is all knowing. He knows the beginning and the end. He knows how everything is going to work out. Incommunicable things – he doesn't share that with us.

The qualities that he does share with us are qualities like his love, his righteousness, his mercy, his kindness, his goodness, his faithfulness.

Here's the problem of human beings. Here's your problem in life and my problem in life. We almost always try to imitate those attributes of God that he does not share with us and we fail to imitate those attributes of God that he does share with us. If you look at the problems that you have in your life, many of the problems are the result of trying to imitate the wrong things about God. You are trying to be like God in places that God is not sharing himself with you and you are not trying to be like God in those places where God is sharing his life with you.

For example, how many of you wrestle over issues of control? As a human being, you were never given control over the universe. God does not share that with you. As parents, we try to control every experience that our child has, good and bad. We try to control all the

circumstances surrounding our businesses and the economy. We try to control other people's feelings and other people's actions. We try to control the future and damage suffered as a result of the past. You are not asked to imitate God's control and your attempt to do so leads to massive anxiety and frustration.

Likewise, you are not asked to imitate God's knowledge. I was talking with someone recently and they were sharing with me a problem, a frustration, because another person was not moving along spiritually the way they wanted them to. I said to them, "Your real problem is that you can't figure out exactly how this person is ever going to turn to Christ." They said, "That's right. I can't figure it out." I said, "So you mean you aren't God?" The light went on and they said, "That's it. I'm always trying to be like God and I get frustrated because I can't figure things out, because I don't have all the answers."

One of the secrets to living life well is, first, picking the right model, the one you want to imitate, the person you want to be like. Paul says the model is God. And then figuring out what about that person should you try to imitate and what shouldn't you try to imitate?

The apostle Paul lays out exactly what we should try to imitate about God. In 4:32, he says, *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you.* God wants you to imitate his forgiveness, to let go of the past, to not keep throwing up in someone else's face their faults. And most of all, God wants you to imitate his love. Vv. 1-2, *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children 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.*



Children imitate their parents. We Christians are not just moral people. We aren't just religious people. The identity that we Christians have is that we are children of God. And as children of God, we should seek to imitate our Father in what way? In living a life of love.

The apostle Paul gives us a wonderful definition of the life of love in v. 2, *Live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* Here is the biblical definition of love summed up nicely in one verse. Love is more than a feeling, an intense emotion; according to the Bible love is more than talk. In the Bible love always boils down to giving. *Live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* The two words that you should always tie together in your mind are love and give. Not just love and feel; love and speak; but love and give. The proof of love is always giving.

So we read in John 3:16, *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.* Or Galatians 2:20, *The life that I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.*

If there's no giving, then there's no love. No sacrifice, no love. You might say regarding this church, "I love this church." Really? Do you give to it? Do you give time, energy and money to the church that you love? No giving, no love.

The opposite, of course, to giving and love is taking and that's what Paul talks about in vv. 3-7, *But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality or any kind of impurity or greed because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking,*

*which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*

Paul is talking about the great counterfeit of love, which is lust. Love gives; lust and greed take. Love has this overflowing quality, it is like a fountain, it continually replenishes. The lover is a great giver. They give and they give and they give. The person described in vv. 3-5 is a taker. They are like a whirlpool. Everything in life is there to satisfy their appetites. Other people are there to satisfy their appetites. And things are there to satisfy their appetites. And opportunities are there not for the purpose of giving, but for the purpose of taking.

This difference between love and lust, between giving and taking, leads Paul to talk about the difference between assurance and spiritual presumption. He says in v. 5, *For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.*

I am often asked the question, “What does Vineyard believe about the possibility of losing your salvation?” Or sometimes more personally, “What do you believe, Rich, about someone losing their salvation? Do you believe a person can lose their salvation? Do you believe a person can truly be saved and then not end up in the Kingdom of God?”

My response is always the same. I believe that the Bible teaches that a person who is truly saved cannot lose their salvation, provided in fact that they are truly saved. That's the issue.

Now, here's a pastoral dilemma. On the one hand, we pastors and leaders often speak to spiritually insecure people – people who pray the sinner's prayer over and over again to make sure they did it right. I want to make sure that I did it exactly right the 847<sup>th</sup> time. Spiritually insecure people who are always afraid that they have committed the unpardonable sin – you know, the unforgivable sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit – we pastors and leaders often run into the super scrupulous who live in fear of hell, who are trying to follow Jesus, but they feel like they are falling short. And for the spiritually insecure, we pastors and leaders frequently have to talk with them about assurance of salvation. We pastors and leaders will point out the promises in the Bible that God surely saves those who look to Christ in faith, who are not relying on themselves, but who are wholly relying on Christ, that person is a saved person. Saved not just in this moment, but saved eternally.

If you are a spiritually insecure person, if you always are living in the fear of hell even though you've trusted in Christ to save you, and you are endeavoring to follow him, I want you to put your fingers in your ears for the next few minutes. Because what I am about to say is NOT for you.

See, the bigger problem in America right now is not the spiritually insecure folks who fear judgment, who are struggling with the prospect of going to hell. Do you know less than 1% of Americans, according to a survey, believe they are going to hell. Less than 1%. We live in a great country, where 99+% of Americans are going to be with God in heaven, according to their own personal view. We live in America with absolutely the opposite problem to spiritual insecurity. The main problem in America is spiritual presumption. There are tens

of millions of people who believe that all is right between them and God, when all is not right. People who believe they are saved and have been assured by a pastor or a leader that they are saved, when they are not saved and they will not see heaven or the smile of God on their lives.

Paul is speaking to the spiritually presumptuous in vv. 5-6. He says, *For of this you can be sure, no immoral, impure, or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you of empty words.* Don't let anyone come up to you and say, "It's OK, rest assured. All will be well. God is a God of love. You will not see his frown." The Bible often speaks to the spiritually presumptuous – you know, all the verses that are not on our refrigerators.

For example, Jesus says in Matt. 7, *Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name? And in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles." Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers."*

Jesus talks about the wise builder who puts the words of Christ into action in their lives and the foolish builder, who hears the words of Christ and doesn't do them. And the foolish builder's house is built on sand so that when the storm of judgment comes, the house of their lives will collapse. Spiritual presumption.

The apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 6 speaks to the presumptuous when he says, *Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor*

*idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. It won't happen.*

Jeremiah talks about false prophets who go around saying, *Peace, peace* when there is no peace. Everything will be OK, when everything will not be OK. Ephesians 5:3-6 are some of the verses that we American church goers never hear. We never talk about it. I think one of the greatest spiritual problems in America right now, second only to individualism and a loss of view of the church, is spiritual presumption. Millions of people who believe that they are born again, who believe that they are regenerated, when in fact, they are not regenerate. They aren't born again. And there are some here in this very room who believe that you are saved, when you are not saved.

George Barna is perhaps the leading poll taker and researcher of churches in America today. I heard him speak at a recent seminar. He said, according to his polling data that he has collected over the last 10 years and dozens or dozens and dozens of polls, he made this really shocking statement, "Apart from religious practice, things like church going and Bible reading, apart from religious practice, if you took 50 Christians in America and 50 non-Christians, and followed them around for a year, you would not be able to tell the difference between the two groups. If you segregate out religious practice in terms of attitudes, racial attitudes, attitudes toward life, money, their fellow man, in terms of spending habits, in terms of leisure activity, in terms of every other element of life, you could not tell the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian."

I believe one of the fundamental problems we are facing in the church right now is that there are literally millions of people who have been told that they are saved, that everything is well with their souls, that they are OK with God, when they aren't saved. People pray a prayer sometimes called the "Sinner's Prayer," which I have led thousands of people in and have prayed and will likely pray at the end of this message – a prayer of confession of our sins, a prayer of trust in Jesus and Christ's death for us on the cross, a prayer of commitment to God. But one thing you will never hear me say, I don't care how long you've been in the church, I don't believe you've ever heard me say at the end of the prayer, "Now that you've prayed this prayer, rest assured you are now saved."

And this is where I part company with lots and lots of fellow pastors and other Christians. See, I have no idea when someone prays and says certain words, what their understanding of Christ really is. I have no idea what is going on in a person's heart, whether they are in fact resting solely on Christ to save them. I don't know what the person's motive is, if they've just been forced up front by an over eager mother or because they want to date a Christian girl or preserve a marriage, or whether, indeed, they are surrendering to Christ and are choosing to become one of his followers. I don't know.

I don't know when people are saying a prayer if, in fact, there has been a miracle of God in their lives. Salvation is not something we give ourselves, but something God gives us. I don't know. I don't have a spiritual x-ray machine to see inside someone else's heart to see if, in fact, the Holy Spirit is active and present and making a spiritually dead person alive. I don't know those things. I hear the words. I pray with someone the Sinner's Prayer. But just because you have said a set of words doesn't mean that you are right with God.

The only sure proof, according to the Bible everywhere, the only sure proof of salvation is a changed life, a transformed life. That you live a life of love. That you are seeking to be an imitator of God. That you are becoming holy as God is holy. Salvation is by grace alone. Hear me now. Salvation is a gift of God. Not by works, not by our efforts, but the evidence, the proof to ourselves that we are, indeed, saved people in whose lives God has worked the miracle, is that we see a changed life.

Let me press this home. I've had conversations with people about their family members and we'll be talking about my family and their family. I will inquire about a brother or a sister and I will say something like, "Well, where is your sister at with Christ?" And I've often received the response, "Well, you know they went forward at a Billy Graham meeting 24 years ago. We prayed together for them to accept Christ 17 years ago."

I'll say, "Well, do you see any change in your brother's life? Any evidence of transformation?"

They'll say, "Not really. Maybe for a few days after we prayed or a few months, but he's living with his girlfriend. He's been divorced and never attends church. Actually, he's not particularly interested in spiritual conversations. He is fairly resistant now when I talk with him. But he prayed the prayer."

Again, I don't know what's happening in your brother's heart or your heart. I barely know what's going on in my own heart. But before we hand out assurance, before we say

“Everything’s OK between you and God,” it better be based on the biblical reason for handing out assurance – a changed life, a transformed life.

Every counselor runs into a couple where one person is willing to work on the marriage and the other person isn’t. They are resistant. There’s no humility. There is a lot of blaming and a lot of pride, but there is no willingness to change at all. What’s the problem? It may be that the person lacks communication skills. It may be that they don’t have the tools. It may be a lot of things. It may be that this person who prayed the prayer is not, in fact, a follower of Jesus Christ.

We separate in evangelicalism what the Bible always holds together – Jesus as our Savior and Jesus as our Lord. What God does for us at the cross and what God does in us by his Spirit. Salvation from the penalty of sin and salvation from the power of sin. Justification and sanctification. Righteousness put in our account and righteousness put in our hearts. The Sinner’s Prayer and the transformed life. Belief in Jesus and following Jesus. Decisions and discipleship.

Let me put this as plainly as I can. If Jesus is not your Lord, if you are not following him, if you aren’t being transformed, if there is no change, then the entire Bible and the whole history of the church from whatever theological tradition you may be coming from, from Calvinism, from Armenianism, the whole history of the church and especially the great reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, if you are not being changed, then the Bible and the whole history of the church would say you are probably not a saved person.



I am not saying that you must be sinless or that we have no problems, stumbles or falls on our face. But do you see, friends, a change in the pattern of your life? Do you see it? Are you more loving than you were? Are you more giving? Are you more forgiving? When you fall, do you just lie in your sins and say, “Don’t bug me about it” or do you get up and ask forgiveness from Jesus and commit yourself again to follow him? Are you committed to change or are you totally resistant to change? Can God get through to you about your life? Or do you fight him at every turn? Is Christ your Lord or not? That’s the question.

I love hearing stories about transformation. I love people who are going into recovery, who are part of one of our life transformation groups – pursuing sexual wholeness, or they are in some 12-step, Christ-centered group recovering from drugs or alcohol. They are participating in our Begin Again weekends to renew their marriages. I think to myself, “There’s Christ.” Because there is change.

So you came forward – that’s good. But if you are looking for the real deal, it’s more than just coming forward, you will make a commitment to become a follower of Jesus.

So let me wrap up this point. Where are you at in your heart of hearts? Have you given yourself cheap assurance based on a prayer you once prayed? Or is your heart at rest because you know that you know that you’ve trusted in Christ for salvation because you see you’ve really been changed by him. Do you see change? I once was this, but now I’m that? If someone followed you around, would they see a difference between your life and the life of a non-Christian?

The apostle goes on in talking about our imitation of God and calls us to live in the light.

Vv. 8-14 *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."*

We need to live in love and we need to live in the light. The Bible says that in God there is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we are imitating God, then we will be light in the Lord and live as children of the light. There is a major difference, Paul is saying again, between being a Christian and being a non-Christian. There is a difference. It is the difference of being in the light and being in the dark.

Have you ever been in a strange hotel room, and gotten up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night? You get out of your bed and bang you knee into the corner of the bed and stub your toe on the dresser. You stumble your way, feeling your way along toward the bathroom, especially if it is really, really dark. You are trying to feel for the light switch. There is an absolute difference between being in the dark and being in the light.

You once were darkness, but now you are light. There is the great "but now" again in Paul. You were this, but now you are that. How do you know that you are a Christian? There is a change, an absolute change. It is interesting that Paul doesn't say, "Now you are in an environment in which there is light. Now you go to church. Now you attend a small group.

He is not saying that you are in an environment in which there is light. He is not saying that you are carrying around a little light, that you carry your Bible.

He says now you are light in the Lord. You Christians have light in you. A Christian is someone into whose soul God has spoken the first words of creation, “let there be light.” And that has happened to you, if you are a real Christian. Do you sense that inside? Are you aware of God speaking the word, “Let there be light”? And from the inside, do you feel like the light has come on? It may be a very dramatic thing, like turning on the lights in a hotel room, or it may be a slow thing like the dawn breaking. But are you aware of light in your soul? Has God spoken the regenerating word inside of you, “Let there be light”?

Paul draws a contrast between light and darkness. He says clearly there are some things we are to avoid. The things in vv. 3-5 – sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk, coarse joking.

About 20+ years ago I did a study of this coarse joking because I was concerned. I really enjoy humor and I love kidding around. Some of my best friends are people I think have great senses of humor and I was really concerned. I saw this thing about joking and I thought, “O my goodness. This is terrible.” But he’s talking about joking that has a double meaning, one of which is a sexual meaning. The kind of thing that is on late night talk shows where the talk show host mugs at the camera and winks at you, suggestive humor, stepping over the line – the stuff of almost every situation comedy today.

There is a difference between being light in the Lord and living in darkness. And interestingly, one of the differences that the apostle Paul points out is the difference between being fruitless and being fruitful. In v. 9 he says, *The fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth; find out what pleases the Lord.* In v. 11 he says *Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.*

The contrast the apostle Paul draws between being darkness and being light is a contrast between the fruitless life and the fruitful life. Being darkness, or living without Christ or God, as the Bible is teaching here, ultimately results in a fruitless, unproductive life. The characteristic of life without God is that it is ultimately empty. It is hollow, it is unfruitful. It doesn't add to us. It doesn't add to people. It is not a life like a fountain. It doesn't replenish. It doesn't water. Life without God is a drain. It steals and sucks things in. It takes, but it doesn't give.

Isn't this fruitlessness, emptiness, hollowness, unproductiveness, whatever you want to call it – isn't this the stuff from which mid-life crises come? A person's lived apart from God their whole adult life. They are now 45 years old and they are beginning to experience the drain of their life energies. They aren't as vigorous as they once were. They aren't as mentally sharp. They are beginning to forget things – forget people's names, forget details. It is harder to keep stuff fresh. A person's body is beginning to change against their will. Everything is dropping. They are losing inches where they want them and they gain them where they don't. Do you know that one?

So you look at your life. You've given yourself to your job and to building your career and making a good living. You are now 40-45 or 50. Maybe you have the house. Maybe you have the cars. You have the DVD player. You have the home theater and the surround sound. You have a great computer. But inside you are empty. And now all you have to look forward to is further decline. You've begun the long, slow, slide down – mentally, physically. You've begun the long, slow, slide down toward old age and death.

And so having come over the top of the mountain, and beginning the downhill slide, what happens to people in that situation? They have a crisis. What's my life about? I need to regain my youth. I need to have a fling. I am going to show that I am physically just as attractive as I ever was. I am just as vigorous. I am going to get a great sports car. I am going to get myself a motorcycle.

The wonderful thing about living for Christ is that when you hit middle age, instead of increasing emptiness, instead of having spent down all your capital and looking into your account and seeing nothing, you've been investing, investing, investing and now at middle age, you begin to taste some of the fruit of your life. You've now got some wisdom.

Because you've walked with Christ, because you know the Bible, because you've invested your life with God, you now have something to give away. People are starting to talk with you and ask your advice about their marriage, about their child-raising, about relationships. Instead of a fruitless life where you've been spending down, spending down, spending down – you've been storing up, storing up and storing up. And at middle age, you are starting to hit the best time of your life.

You've dealt with a lot of the insecurity issues. You've dealt with a lot of the identity issues. You aren't wrestling over who you are and what you are all about. Those things have been settled through your walk with Christ. You are able to be free in order to live for others and serve others and be a blessing. Middle age can be the best time of life.

But if you are in the darkness, it is fruitless. It is ultimately empty. And you really see that when a person hits trials and difficulties in their life how empty life is without God.

I've quoted Lee Stroebel before in one of my messages. Lee Stroebel has written two of the really fine books in answering questions about dealing with doubt about the Christian faith. One of them is called, "The Case for Faith." The other is called "The Case for Christ." Stroebel was a legal affairs reporter for The Chicago Tribune. He has a background in law. He said that before he came to Christ, the picture he had of his life was like he was driving down the road in a really cool convertible on a summer night, just flying down the road. He had one arm out of the window and the other arm around his beautiful wife. They are just driving down the road laughing, but he had no hand on the steering wheel. He said that works real well as long as the road in front of you is straight and true. But in his life, he hit a curve, an unexpected problem. His dad got sick and died. And when you are without God and your life hits a curve – it hits an unexpected difficulty - you realize that all of the answers you have are ultimately empty and fruitless. He said his life just began to spin out of control once his father died.

So, let me ask you, friend, what's in your life? What do you have when your teenager comes to you and they say, "Mom, Dad, I am having a sexual relationship with my boyfriend."

What do you have? When the doctor's report comes in and it's not good for you or your spouse – what do you have? When the layoff notice comes or your house is broken into or you don't get into the college graduate program that you really want to get into – what do you have?

The Christian life is a life of increasing fruitfulness. Where over the course of time you are getting progressively freed up. You are more useful. You are having a greater effect on other people. You are more of a blessing. Isn't that the kind of life you want?

We are called to imitate the love of God, the light or holiness of God and the life of God.

*V. 15, Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.*

What does the imitation of God look like? It is learning to live wisely instead of foolishly. The Bible has a great deal to say about foolish living and wise living. We certainly see this contrast in the book of Proverbs. Whenever I think about foolish people, I think about people who never consider the consequences. They live just in the moment by their impulses. There is an immediacy about the foolish person when the way they approach life is "I want what I want when I want it. And I never look ahead. I never think about what's coming down the road." There is an impatience in the foolish person. They are like children. I don't think about the fact that if I eat this now I am going to ruin my appetite. If I spend this now, I am not going to have money to purchase this thing that I really want later.

The wise person is characterized by a carefulness. Paul says, *Be very careful then how you live.* You don't just rush ahead into things, whether into new business ventures or into marriages, or into close relationships or investments. The wise person is a person who is careful, not timid, not fearful, but careful. The foolish person, every six months or every other year, has another get-rich-quick scheme. They are sending money here or there. Or they are involved in that pyramid scheme there. They get a tip on a stock and they are putting all their money into it. They don't listen to counsel and they rush ahead contrary to what everyone says. They rush ahead toward commitment in marriage. They won't slow down. They won't look at the facts. They won't think ahead.

A wise person is a careful person. And they are particularly careful because the wise person recognizes that there are a lot of dangers. Paul writes, *Not as unwise, but as wise making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil.* A wise person doesn't go blindly walking down the road, because they understand that there are a lot of potholes, there are a lot of problems. A wise person considers that they live in a world that is full of dangers and temptations. A wise person understands that they live in a world in which they fight against a spiritual enemy, namely Satan. And the wise person knows that Satan has a target on their chest.

Do you know that? Do you know that you have been targeted by the enemy? That there is a big bull eye's on your chest, if you are a Christian? That Satan would like nothing better than to bring you into disgrace. To cause you to lose your testimony. To render you ineffective, to cause other people to mock God because you are supposed to be his representative and have done a poor job of it. A wise person is careful as they live,



considering their own weaknesses, their own susceptibility to certain temptations, so they don't put themselves into situations where they can be compromised.

For a wise person, if they know they have a problem with alcohol, they never go to a bar. If they know that they have a problem with pornography, they throw their computer out or they get filters to keep the garbage out of their home and out of their lives. If they have a problem with homosexuality, they don't go to gay hangouts. If they have a problem with shopping and spending too much money, they don't go window shopping or flip through catalogs. If they keep falling sexually with their boyfriend or girlfriend, they don't go up to the other person's apartment. They understand that the days are evil.

The Christian life is a transformed life. It is a changed life. The only explanation for the Christian life is that a miracle has happened. God breaks in to the life of takers and he transforms us and makes us givers. God breaks into darkened hearts and he speaks a recreative word, "Let there be light." He floods our being with light. God breaks into fruitless, empty lives and he causes us to be fruit producers. God breaks into foolish lives and he makes us wise. Transformed lives; changed lives – imitators of God. Let's pray.

## Imitators of God

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Rich Nathan

May 26-27, 2001

"I Believe in the Church" Series

Ephesians 5:1-17

### I. Love

A. Giving v. Taking (Eph. 5:1,2)

B. Assurance v. Presumption (Eph. 5:3-6)

### II. Light

A. Darkness v. Light (Eph. 5:7,8)

B. Fruitless v. Fruitful (Eph. 5:9-14)

### III. Life

A. Foolish v. Wise (Eph. 5:15-17)