

*IMITATION LOVE - THE REAL THING*

(Ephesians 5) In one of my favorite movies, *The Princess Bride*, there is a great line about the value of true love. The movie is all about true love and its enduring power. At one point, the character played by Billy Crystal, a character named Miracle Max, says, and I quote: *true love is the greatest thing in the world*. Now, you may know that is not the entire quote. He actually says, *true love is the greatest thing in the world - except for a nice MLT - mutton, lettuce and tomato sandwich, where the mutton is nice and lean and the tomato is ripe*. Great line, but today I am going to present a new idea for our consideration and that is this: Imitation love is the greatest thing in the world and is, in fact, the real thing. Ephesians 5 comes right after Ephesians 4 which concludes with the following verses **31-32** *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you*. That was our text last Sunday. Today we move on to the next verse which is separated by a chapter heading but is a continuation of the same line of thought. 5:**1-2** *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; 2 and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma*.

There are two exhortations contained in these verses, the first is in verse 1 and it says “be imitators of God.” We are instructed here to be like God. This verse carries in it a theme that was introduced way back in Genesis chapter 1. There we read that God made man - how? In His image. We were created to be like God. Our whole reason for being is to reflect the character of our Creator. But as you may recall, Grandpa Adam and Grandma Eve, were not very successful at this. Neither have you and I done very well, so God set out to re-create, to do a saving work, a redeeming work that has as its goal the calling out of a people who will more adequately reflect the character of God. In a word, the imitation of God is the goal of our salvation. Romans 8:29 says that we were predestined by God in order to become conformed to the image of Jesus Christ who is God incarnate. As one has well put it, the gospel tells us that God became like man in order that men might become like God. Now, that is a wonderful truth, a magnificent thing, but it is also a very serious responsibility. Imitation of God is our duty. That means we can never be just worshippers who sing of the perfections of our Lord. We are not allowed to just sit back and say, “Isn’t God wonderful!” We have to go a huge step past that and shape our lives according to His

character. The sincerest form of flattery, the sincerest form of praise is what? Imitation. That is what we are called to by our text.

Now, it is certainly possible to misunderstand this passage and I want to speak to one of those possibilities for just a moment. Some there are who actually teach that in our imitation of God we actually become gods. This is a doctrine very prevalent in Mormon theology. It is also taught by some modern word of faith teachers you encounter on TV. This latter group claims that we can become like God to the extent that we can speak things into existence like God did when He created the world. But, is that what imitating God is all about? Theologians have distinguished between what are called communicable and incommunicable attributes of God by which they mean that that there are some divine attributes that He can and does in fact pass on to those whom He redeems and there are some attributes of God that are not available to you. God does not communicate to His creatures His sovereignty, his eternity, His omniscience, His omnipresence. I don't care how sanctified you get you are still going to be in one place at one time. Omnipresence is non-communicable. But, what about God's love and righteousness and patience and faithfulness? Are those divine qualities that we can grow to share as the Spirit of the Lord takes control in our lives? Absolutely. Those are communicable attributes. Now, when we come to this exhortation to imitate God the distinction between God's attributes becomes very practical. You may recall that when Satan tempted Eve in the garden what was his offer? He said to Eve, "Eat this and you can be like God knowing good and evil?" But are we supposed to be like God in that way? No. In a sense, the original sin is trying to be like God in the wrong way, trying to take for ourselves that which belongs solely to the Lord. So, there is a seeking to be like God that is very wrong and a seeking to be like God that is very right. The difference is found in what aspects of God's person we pursue. What are we supposed to imitate about God? His omniscience? His omnipotence? His sovereignty? No. We imitate His moral character. I Peter 1:16 God says **16** *You shall be holy, for I am holy.* You want to be like God Eve? Then seek to be holy. Really, the emphasis of Scripture, when it speaks of imitating the Lord is predominantly on one attribute of the Lord and it's the one featured in our text as well. Look again at Ephesians 5:1-2 - what about God are we being called to imitate? It is His love. Luke 6:**36** *You shall be merciful, just as your father is merciful.* This is what our text is after. We are to imitate the Lord in many ways, but especially at this point. We are to love one another as He loves us. In the Sermon on the Mt Jesus says that if you love your enemies you will be children

of God. In Ephesians 5 he says to love because you are children of God. Like Father, like son that's the idea. Like Father, like son - can it be said of you?

So, that is the first thing we are called to today. To be imitators of God. What's the second thing? Closely related - in verse 2 it says to "walk in love." Very closely related because it says to walk in love - how? As Christ has loved us. In a sense our two points are really one point. We imitate God and what does that mean? It means we walk in love. I like my sermon title this week. My titles usually don't do much for me but this one communicates. "Imitation Love - the Real Thing." You get it? God calls us to an imitation love, not a phony love, but a love that copies the pattern that is set for us by the Lord. So, let's look together at this imitation love, this call to walk in love. What does it look like? I want you to get a picture of it with five points and five key words associated with each. First of all, consider the importance of love. The importance of love and your key word is "supreme." Love is supremely important. I mean how tough is it to find Scriptures extolling the supremacy of love? It is the first fruit of the Spirit. It is called the sum of the law. In I Corinthians 13 you have a whole chapter teaching that is the sine-qua-non of true religion. Jesus said that love would be the mark of the Christian. Love isn't just one of the qualities that are to mark us out as believers. Love is supreme.

Secondly now, notice the expression of love ®. According to our text, how does love express itself? It says, "walk in love, just as Christ also loved you," and did what? "And gave Himself for us." The key word on this point is "give." That verse you know says that God so loved the world that He what? That He gave. You spell love G-I-V-E. And we aren't talking about things you can wrap. What does Jesus give as an expression of His love? Himself, and that is our calling as well do. Here is another John 3:16. This one though is I John 3:16. Look at this **16** *We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren*

Are you a follower of Jesus? If so, this has to carry enormous weight in your thinking. This isn't just Oprah suggesting this. This is God's word on the meaning of true love - not romantic love, not sloppy sentimental love, but true Christ-like, biblical and Christian love. It means a laying down of your life. A self-sacrifice, a giving of self. Jesus said, John 15:**13** *Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.* For many years, our family, on the first Saturday of the month would join other disciples of Jesus at an abortion clinic to pray and to picket against the killing that would go on there. As we would stand with a sign along the highway a lot of cars pass by and, of course, the reactions to our presence could be varied and colorful. When folks in their

cars bothered to yell at us, you know what their favorite line was? It was real clever. They would ride by and yell at us, “Get a life!” You know, that’s a great idea! Life is what we were all there for anyway. But of course, what those folks really meant is that we should be looking for something self-serving to do on Saturday morning. But you know what God’s word says is the only way to “get a life?” It is to give a life. You get a life when you give a life. Christ said that he who loses his life for His sake will gain it. The way of sacrifice is the way of victory and the way of humility is the way of exaltation. This is the radical nature of the Lord we follow and the faith we believe. It is also the only true expression of love. We lay down our lives, we give ourselves.

Thirdly now we look at the theology of love. ® This is in Ephesians 5:2 as well. *2 walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.* To appreciate the love of Christ which we are called to imitate you need know something about the atonement, about the death which Christ died for sinners. That’s why our key word for this point will be “the cross.” I say “the cross” because it represents what Jesus did there. Here it says that Christ gave Himself. This is consistent New Testament language so whenever you read the gospel narrative about Jesus being tried and beaten and crucified recognize that nobody really is taking his life. You can’t take the life of Jesus anymore than you can catch the wind. He must lay it down. Jesus said this himself in John 10: **17-18ab** *For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. <sup>18</sup> No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative.* You see that Jesus is not just one among many martyrs. No man has ever died like Jesus. He laid down His life for what purpose? Our text says it was as an offering and a sacrifice to God. This is language linked to the teaching of the Old Testament about sacrifices. The ancient Jews were taught, as a means of instruction, to put to death on an altar, certain designated animals that would serve as substitutes for the people. The word “substitute” is important here. You see, the Scriptures teach that sin deserves the punishment of death. The Old Testament says, “the soul that sins shall surely die.” But, in preparation for what He would do through His son, God taught the Hebrews of old to offer their livestock as guilt offerings. On the day of atonement for instance, the priest would take an animal, confess over it the sins of the people and then put it to death as a blood sacrifice and a substitutionary atonement. The symbolism meant that the wrath of God against sin was poured out on the sacrifice instead of on the people. This is the theology behind our verse and this is what happened in the dimension of eternal spiritual realities when Jesus went to the cross and died in the place of sinners. He offered Himself in our

place and took the punishment for our sin on Himself. Isaiah 53:5 *He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.* There is more insight in Isaiah 53:10abc *But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, That is exactly what Paul says that Christ became for us. He gave himself for us at Calvary. And if you really understand that and believe that it will be made visible in your life. Our living flows out of our theology, our practice out of our doctrine. When we appreciate how Christ has loved us we will love others in that same sacrificial way.*

On to our fourth consideration, which is the cost of love ®. The key word here is pain. Pain. I remember when I was a top 40 deejay, playing a green record by a group called *Nazareth* and the title was “Love Hurts.” The first line says: *Love hurts, love scars, love wounds and marks.* There is more truth to that than those singers knew. Love does hurt. It does scare. At least, loving sinners does. It certainly hurt our Lord. His body was scarred and wounded and marked by love for sinners. That death at Calvary was nothing if it wasn’t painful. Laying down your life will cost you. It costs you a lot of tears and a lot of pleasures. There is clearly a price for this imitation love, because it is the real thing. It is the Jesus thing. Elizabeth Elliot has written a lovely book about Amy Carmichael entitled, *A Chance To Die*. In it she prints one of Amy Carmichael’s poems. It says:

*Hast thou no scar?  
No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?  
I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,  
I hear them hail thy bright, ascendant star,  
Hast thou no scar?*

*Hast thou no wound?  
Yet I was wounded by the archers, spent,  
Leaned Me against a tree to die; and rent  
By ravening beasts that compassed Me, I swooned:  
Hast thou no wound?*

*No wound? No scar?*

*Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,  
And pierced are the feet that follow Me;  
But thine are whole: can he have followed far  
Who has no wound nor scar?*

You catch that? Can one have followed Jesus very far and have no scar to show for it? No pains, no wounds. If we haven't sacrificed until it hurt how can we speak of imitating Jesus? Remember, we are the people with the wounded God. Never in human history has a people worshipped a wounded God, but Christians do.

Again, we confront how radical and peculiar our faith is. The world we live in calls us to self-expression. Our Master calls us to self-sacrifice. Big difference. Don Hustad who edits my favorite hymnbook wrote about the natural tensions that exist in the realm of music ministry. He says, "the essence of art is self-expression; the essence of ministry is self-crucifixion." I think he has hit on something. I was intrigued, though not surprised to read statistics recently that tell us that the professional or vocational group most likely to be divorced are --actors. Finishing second in the most divorced category would be musicians and teachers of music. If the essence of art is self-expression, that is clearly not the way of love is it? Love is seen in self-sacrifice, resulting in pain. And too, it should be noted, resulting ultimately in great and lasting gain.

Finally, though #5 is the standard of love. ® And the answer to this reminds us of last Sunday. The standard of love is Christ's love. We are to love as He loved and to the same extent. This deals a death blow to that old line we all say to ourselves, "I just can't give anymore." You ever had that thought? *I have sacrificed all I can. You can't ask me, Pastor, to keep loving that kid of mine, or that husband of mine or that so-called Christian.* Well, how are we to love? How much, how long? I mean, this example of Jesus is simultaneously wonderful and scary. All of us, I'm sure, live sacrificially to some extent. All of us give our lives some. Now we ask, "how much is right for followers of Jesus?" How much do we love, and give and sacrifice? What does your Bible say?

Now, a balancing word here is likely in order. Some could twist what I say to mean that we can never party, never rest, never have any personal time. We are supposed to go, go, go for others until we burn out. That isn't so. Again, look at Jesus, and his example. Did Jesus party? Yes. Did Jesus have personal time? Yes. There were times when Jesus was not available to heal and teach. And hey, if He needed that, certainly you and I do. The lesson of our text just addresses the motivation behind our doings. We need to make sure our batteries are charged, but the motive even

there, the focus is to honor Christ by living unselfishly and sacrificially in the confidence of that God Himself will be our joy.

Now, are you getting the picture? Do you see where this take us? It moves us toward a lifestyle of loving sacrifice. Laying down our lives - what does it mean practically? It means that when you do your budget the word GIVE is to be prominent. The example of Jesus speaks volumes about what it means to use our monies lovingly. Love can be and is expressed in kind words, and gentle hugs, but if it doesn't impact the way you handle your material possessions it isn't real imitation love. If you are a follower of Jesus and God has given you money - what's it for? I was grieved this week to read a word from a famous pastor who has been criticized for his extravagant lifestyle and do you know how he justified it? He said, "God gave me money so I can show the world that Christians don't have to be poor." Is that why God gives us money? Right, Christians don't have to be poor, but they do have to be loving. Is your budget shaped by love? And what about your schedule? How much of your time is spent self-indulgently? I look out at some of you and I know, you are living your life sacrificially and I commend you. I admire you. Busy moms and dads, pouring out your life for your kids. Busy elders and deacons and Sunday school teachers, laying down your lives for the sake of others. I Corinthians 13 reminds us that we can serve others without loving. Lots of people do that and it shows in their attitude. You can serve without loving but you can't love without serving and without giving your time, your talents, your dollars, your life.

In 1941 Maximillian Kolbe was a Polish Christian who was swept into the horrors of the prison camp in Auschwitz, that enormous Nazi killing center where 8000 Jews were gassed and cremated every 24 hours. In this horrible place, Kolbe ministered to his fellow prisoners, praying with them, comforting them. Then one July night at Auschwitz the air was filled with the baying of dogs and the roar of motorcycles. A prisoner from barracks 14 had escaped. The policy of the Germans was simple. For every escapee ten of those left would be sentenced to die, not quickly in the gas chambers, but by starvation, with no food or water until slowly sanity and life slipped away. The commandant lined the men of Barracks 14 before him and inspected them, choosing out the miserable 10. One man cried, "My poor wife, my poor children, what will they do?!" As the commandant lined up the 10 men there was a commotion in the ranks. A prisoner had broken out of line, calling for the commandant. It was unheard of to leave formation, let alone address a Nazi officer. The commandant stopped and said, "What does this Polish pig want of me?" It was Max

Kolbe, who had ministered to so many, who stood now before the Nazi killer and said, “I would like to die in place of one of the condemned men.” When asked for whom he would like to die he chose the man who was weeping over his wife and kids. His wish granted, Kolbe was taken with the others to the death hole where, for the next several days something extraordinary happened. Instead of hearing the usual fighting and howling and frenzy coming from that cell, those outside heard the faint sounds of singing. Why? Why did Max Kolbe do it? Because he was committed to the principles of Ephesians 5:2, to walk in love like Jesus, who gave Himself for us. He did it because he was a Christian. Are you? Are you a follower of this Jesus? You likely won’t get a chance to be a hero like Max Kolbe but the Lord calls you to a heroism of a different kind. He calls you to heroic living for your wife, and your kids and your community He calls you to love. The glory of Max Kolbe’s story is not that God called him to die, but that he called him to be like Jesus in the place God had him. What does that mean for you? The details will vary depending on who we are and where we are, but what God asks from each of us is this Imitation love, because it is the real thing. Let’s pray