6-2-19

Ephesians 5:1-2

Paul is continuing with the practical side of his letter to the Ephesian church, but as usual, there is still some deep doctrine in these verses. In all his letters, Paul is very concerned about the Trinity and it shows up again here. Back in verse 4:20, he speaks of “learning Christ”; in verse 4:30, he speaks of “grieving the Holy Spirit”; now we are told to be “imitators of God”. The doctrine of the Trinity is very real and very clear in the Bible; it is just something very hard for us to grasp. It is worth dwelling on; it will add to our sense of wonder for God and therefore, help us in our worship of Him.

Paul tells us to be imitators of God. In some translations it says to be “followers” of God. There is nothing wrong with this translation as long as we take the word follower in its fullest sense. A true following, like discipleship, means to become like the one who is our master. Part of this is to imitate him as much as possible; in thoughts and outlook as well as in actions.

This requires us to consider God and what He is like so we know what to imitate. Fortunately, we have the nature of God revealed to us both in the Bible and in Jesus Christ. In fact, part of our discipleship in Christ is to become more like Him. These two desires in our lives, to imitate God and to become more like Christ, are compatible and are never contrary to each other. This is because God and Jesus are one. This comes from the doctrine of the Trinity.

Now, as we read the Bible and learn about God, we realize that there is a problem for us in trying to imitate God. There are certain characteristics of God that are simply beyond us. For example, God is omnipresent. He is everywhere at once. We read about this in Psalm 139:7-10.

Where can I go from Your Spirit?  
Or where can I flee from Your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;  
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.  
If I take the wings of the dawn,  
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,  
Even there Your hand will lead me,  
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.

God is absolutely independent; He doesn’t need us or anything else to be perfect and to be content.

Acts 17:24-25

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things.

God is omniscient; He knows everything.

Psalm 147:5

Great is our Lord and abundant in strength;  
His understanding is infinite.

These are just a few examples of God’s characteristics that we can’t imitate, so what do we do about them. First off, we must realize that God won’t ask us to do what we can’t do. But our real conformation of this is to look at Jesus. Jesus is God and certainly has these attributes, but look at what Jesus did when He became a man; He laid aside His own Godly abilities and depended entirely on the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The man Jesus wasn’t everywhere; He existed in one place at one time. He gave up His independence. He needed all the things that a human-being needed like food and water and rest. He also depended on the Father and the Holy Spirit. He gave up His personal omniscience. He knew men’s hearts, what they were thinking, and what the future held; but He received all these things from God. So, we can be at peace and content to imitate God in the things we are able to.

Paul goes on in this section to explain some of the ways we can imitate God. We are told to walk in love, to walk in light, and to walk as wise. Notice how much these describe God: He is love; He is the light that shines in the darkness; and the Bible shows us over and over again the wisdom of God. Again, Jesus is our example. He showed His love for people many times and ultimately in the cross. He Himself is “the light of the world”. We see His wisdom in how He dealt with treacherous religious leaders and with poor sinners who desperately needed Him. These are the attributes of God that we are to imitate.

We are to be imitators just like children; beloved children. Notice how our children will imitate us. We can tell them something a hundred times and they may or may not listen. But how often do we see them imitate something they see us do one time; many times, to our embarrassment. The thing is that we are children of God once we accept Jesus Christ as Saviour. Back in 1:5 we read “He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself”. Consider too, the fifth commandment: We are told to honor our father. This would apply to God our Father as well as our earthly fathers. What better way to honor than to earnestly endeavor to imitate Him; to want to be like Him.

In verse 2, everything is boiled down to walking in love as being the best way to imitate God. Remember the command of Jesus in John 13:34, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” This is a very difficult commandment; impossible without the indwelling Holy Spirit. First off, we are supposed to love one another. It doesn’t say “love the ones you get along with” or “love the ones who treat you well”. We are even to love those who cause us problems. Consider that Jesus loved us and died for us even when we were His enemies. This love is not based on emotion; it is a decision to love. This involves being concerned for that person and being kind to them. This is done in obedience to Christ.

The really hard part is where Jesus adds “even as I have loved you”. This is a sacrificial love. We are called to experience hardship on behalf of others, even if we have a hard time getting along with them. Paul reminds us of Jesus’ command in our reading today when he says “walk in love, just as Christ also loved you”. Paul now mentions how Christ loves us and actually goes into more doctrine with the substitutionary atonement of Christ.

“[W]alk 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**.” So often, we think of Christ’s work on the cross as being an act of love and leave it at that. Yes, love is very important here and Paul is using it as an example of the kind of love expected from us. Jesus and God the Father both love us enough for Jesus to have gone to the cross. Jesus loves the Father such that He is obedient to Him and went to the cross as God desired. We have here the demonstration of God’s surpassing love for us.

But we can’t miss what happened there. Jesus was an offering and a sacrifice. This was all foreshadowed in the Old Testament animal sacrifices made by the priests, where the blood of the animals covered the sins of the people so that they could have a right relationship with God. Jesus offered Himself, that we might have a right relationship with God.

The doctrine of what happened at the cross has a name, it’s called penal substitutionary atonement. It’s one of the basic, core doctrines of Christianity. Let’s look at what it means. Atonement involves taking care of a debt that someone owes. We, as Christians, must always bear in mind that we owe God a debt because we have rebelled against Him and offended Him. For us to repay our debt ourselves would require spending eternity in torment; suffering God’s wrath. Jesus Himself became the atonement for our debt; in other words, for our sins. In His work on the cross, He paid the price for our sins.

Penal involves punishment. There can be no doubt that on that cross, Jesus was punished. Even on the way to the cross, He was beaten, spit on, scourged, and mocked. He was nailed to the cross and hung there in shame while people still mocked Him. He endured a terrible physical punishment. But even worse, He endured the wrath of God. All the anger and punishment that our infinite God had stored up for all His people’s sin, past and future, came upon Jesus. All the eternity of hell that we deserve, came upon Him. Jesus was punished; He had never in His life done wrong or offended God, but He was punished.

That leaves us with substitutionary. Jesus took all that punishment on our behalf. He paid the price that we owe God for us; in our place. Jesus was the substitute. In Him, God’s wrath and anger and justice were satisfied. Penal substitutionary atonement; this is what Paul is talking about when he says that Jesus was an offering and sacrifice.

Paul refers to this sacrifice as being to God as a fragrant aroma. He borrows language from the Old Testament.

Exodus 29:18

You shall offer up in smoke the whole ram on the altar; it is a burnt offering to the Lord: it is a soothing aroma, an offering by fire to the Lord.

This language of burnt offerings being a soothing aroma for God is very common in the Old Testament. It conveys an idea. We are not to imagine that God sits in heaven and likes the smell of burning animals and this makes Him feel better. No, these sacrifices, offered by His people in faith, meant that they repented of their sins and desired to be made right with God. This obedient attempt made by His people is what was pleasing to Him; this is what enabled Him to set aside His wrath until Jesus could actually pay the price.

It is the same here. Jesus’ sacrifice was ultimately pleasing to God and because of it, His wrath is not just set aside, it is satisfied. Here we are offered our one and only chance; if we accept Jesus and the work He did on our behalf, God’s wrath against us has been satisfied and we are free from it. If we do not accept Christ, then His wrath on us still exists and we must experience it ourselves.

One more thing we see here in the character of Jesus, one more thing for us to imitate. Paul tells us He “gave Himself up for us”. It is important to understand that Jesus gave Himself up, He knew full well what He was doing; no one was taking His life from Him.

John 10:17-18

“For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.”

It was fully Jesus’ decision to suffer and die for us. The Jews or the Romans didn’t kill Him. Recall Jesus’ last words recorded in Luke 23:46. And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.” Having said this, He breathed His last. He chose the time of His death; and it wasn’t until everything was finished.

A lot of powerful things happened there on the cross. It was done because God loves us and it was the only way. It was done because Jesus is obedient to His Father and because He loves us. This is the kind of love we are called to as Christians. As difficult as this kind of love is, what other reasonable response do we have after what Jesus has done for us.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, how difficult it is to follow You. Almighty God, how do we imitate perfection? And yet, this is what Your perfect word calls us to. When we consider how inadequate we are and the evil that remains in our hearts, it becomes clear that we must depend on You entirely, and that is why we have received the most precious gift of the Holy Spirit.

You, Lord Jesus, know exactly how hard it is to love others. During Your earthly ministry You were followed by unbelieving sinners who only followed for whatever benefit they could receive from You. You earnestly taught those whose hearts were hard; they could not see nor understand Your words. You faced those who antagonized You in pride and arrogance, even to the point that they plotted Your death. And yet, You loved them all.

You have experienced what You call us to and so, You are the perfect High Priest. Therefore, we receive strength from Your Holy Spirt. We accept Your calling to love others with sacrificial love. We ask forgiveness for the times we fail. We desire to bring You glory through our own obedience.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen