

EPHESIANS 4:22-5:2  
FAMILY LIKENESS

There have been a couple of times lately when I've seen children whose family likeness is absolutely clear. A 6-year old little girl whom I know and met recently and she was playing, and she is so like her granny when you see her side-on profile! I was in the company of some adult children and in their conversation and in the way they behave they have obviously inherited traits from their parents and different ones each! We play a little game, don't we, with new born babies – who is he/she like? To me most new-born babies are like a bald 60-year old man that they've never meet! I'm not sure how you can tell when a child is only days old – “he's got his dad's eyes! She's got her mum's nose!” Think about it – it does sound silly when we speak like that, but it's game we play about family likeness. We are all the product of our genetic inheritance and the way in which we've been nurtured: what good habits have we picked up from our parents? Have we picked up any bad habits? Where is our family likeness?

What are God's best qualities? What do we admire most about Jesus? I wonder how you'd answer that question? Most of the time, people answer that question by pointing out His love, His kindness, His Compassion and willingness to forgive. Then – do we aspire to be like that too? Or do we look at Jesus and think “He's too far away! I'll never be like that!” There is a sense in which we will never be like Jesus completely, but the challenge for us is to become more and more like Jesus in the kind of people we are. Is there a family likeness? God is our Father, Jesus is our elder brother – is there any way in which we are like them now? Is there any aspiration to become more and more like them?

*“Be imitators...” (Ephesians 5:1,2)* Paul is writing to the Ephesian Christians about growing in their faith and standing firm in that faith in the days to come. There is a spiritual tug-o-war going on in the Church in Ephesus and in the individual Christians; they are being pulled in two directions. They are being pulled in one direction to live like the rest of the world and to be like everybody else around them; “other people behave like this so it's fine for us to be bitter and resentful and angry and to use bad language and steal” – they are being pulled by the world around them to be like the world around them. They are also being pulled in the other direction to be more and more like Jesus: there is a different set of characteristics, different from the world; you'll stand out from the world when you are honest, when you don't cheat, when you forgive someone who wrongs you; it will be hard, to stand out like that; but that's the better way to go. It actually means some very practical, down-to-earth, day-to-day kinds of life.

Here's the big idea: *“Be imitators ...” (Ephesians 5:1)* Go back to ideas that we admire about Jesus: how many of these are qualities to which we can aspire? First of all, the big idea is to have that aspiration in the first place. We decide to want to be like Jesus; we decide that our big loyalty is to Jesus and that we will live our lives for Him. That's the biggest challenge we face, to want to be like Jesus, to want to imitate God. We are still being pulled in two directions: part of us wants to be like everybody else and just act on our instincts, to live in the ways in which the world around us lives; but part of us realises that there is a better way than that and that Jesus has shown us that better way; we should walk in His ways. But that's a choice we need to make; it is big idea choice, to want to become more and more like Jesus.

We do that *“As dearly loved children”*! Here is the big idea motivation. God has loved us; we are His children because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. God has loved us and has adopted us into His family, as children alongside Jesus, loved by our Father. We have the privilege and the delight of calling the almighty, eternal God “Father” with all the good ideas that come with that word: the Father who loves us and cares for us. This notion can be hard for people whose fathers have been abusive or have walked out and left them, but God is not that kind of Father. He has loved us deeply; He stays with us everywhere we go; He gives us more good gifts and promises than we will ever know. Jesus has done the work that He came

to do and shares the glory of God in heaven; God promises to us that we will share in that glory with our elder brother. This is who we are; this is how much we are loved.

Our choice to be like Jesus is inspired by the way in which God has loved us. We love because God has first loved us; as dearly loved children we are inspired to want to be like Jesus. A few years ago I watched an experiment on television that highlighted the way in which children respond to their parents. The programme filmed a mother and her young child and the mother was animated and interested in her child and was talking away quite a bit and the child was laughing back and smiling and had a great delight on its face as mum engaged and showed her love. Then the person running the experiment told mum to stop interacting with the child, to have a blank expression and not to respond; the child tried everything to get mum to engage, but it was amazing how quickly the child stopped trying and then simply ignored mum because mum ignored her child. We love because God loves us; we tell young children at baptism about all the things God has done for them and promises He has made and that God draws us to love Him because He has first loved us. This is not about making people guilty for what we don't do; this is about being inspired by the love we see and have received and aspire to be like Jesus. Is that our big idea choice?

*“Live a life of love”* Who can argue? Will anyone tell you this is a bad idea? Surely this is such a good and deep value that it goes without saying? But look at what we see in the background, the background noise is our world: there is a new thing called “hate-speech” in which it seems as if people don't care about the impact of their words, especially on Twitter, so they say what they like and often it is filled with hate; we have people stirring up hatred against journalists, particularly in the USA who are just trying to do jobs, but now doing it in fear almost of their lives, such is the hatred and venom directed at them; we have older people scared to open their doors because they are not sure what they'll find on the other side; there are people who are cheated by leaders who are corrupt, people who are poor while powerful people become rich at their expense; so when they have the chance they cheat other people because those above have cheated them. All of this is going on in the background of our world; this is the background noise; and then Paul tells us to *“live a life of love”*. How hard is that? Is it even worth doing?

Elijah was asking the same question – “is this really worth doing?” He'd run away! He'd won the battle for the soul of Israel – *“If the...”* (1 Kings 18:21) and on Mount Carmel he'd demonstrated that the Lord is God. But it hadn't felt like a victory and Jezebel was chasing him, wanting him dead. So, he ran away. *“Was it all worth it?” “I've had...”* (1 Kings 19:4) But God took care of Elijah, knew that he was tired out, worn out with the battle and so God brought him sleep and cakes and more sleep and more cakes until he had recovered, and his loyalty was refreshed. Elijah's story is all about loyalty: he is loyal to God in the most trying places and circumstances; he is loyal to God when it seems as if nobody else wants to be. God honours his loyalty and cares for Elijah; it is a strange but somehow fascinating story when you read all of it! It is a story of loyalty, loyalty tested and loyalty that perseveres. Is it worth doing, Elijah? Absolutely!

*“Live a life of love”* Is it worth doing? Here's the thing: by living a life of love we show the world what God is like! *“Be kind...”* (4:32) Here are three qualities that we admire in Jesus, His kindness, His compassion, and His willingness to forgive. These are such simple qualities, but they speak volumes in our world. It's not that people think compassion is a bad idea – often they are just too busy to care! Kindness for some is a nice idea, but it almost seems to be weak, so parents encourage their children to fight back, to make sure that they're not the ones to suffer at the back of the queue. Resentment is harboured and forgiveness is definitely not on the agenda for some. Kindness, compassion, forgiveness: to be kind – we are to look out for others; to be full of compassion – to feel for and with those who are finding life hard, to try to walk road they walk; and to forgive – to treat those who wrong us as if they had done nothing wrong. These are qualities that will show the world what Jesus is like, quietly, without any fuss,

not making ourselves out to be paragons of virtue, but simply, quietly, letting world see Jesus in us.

Paul is about to set off on his second journey to tell people about Jesus; his friend Barnabas is going with him. Barnabas wants to take his nephew John Mark with them, but Paul says “no!” John Mark had given up to go home the last time he travelled with them; Paul’s not sure they can trust him. There was such a sharp disagreement over this that Paul went one way with Silas, and Barnabas and Mark went another way. Was that the end of the story? Was there a deep resentment building up and kept? No! In Paul’s last letter he asks Timothy “*Get Mark...*” (2 Timothy 4:11) Has Mark changed? Is he now more mature, more reliable? Probably. But Paul has also changed. Grace has been at work in his heart, so that now he looks on Mark in a different way, with kindness, love, compassion and perhaps especially forgiveness. This story was Friday’s story at the Holiday Club last week and there was a danger that we could leave the children on church falling out, but we went on to talk about “*Live a life of love.*” It is hard to do! These are qualities we understand very well, but they are so hard to do, to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving. The background noise tells us a different story. “*Be imitators...*” (Ephesians 5:1) Is it worth it? Absolutely! Is it hard? Of course it is. But this is the way by which we show the world what God is like. “*Live a life of love!*”