

Ephesians 5:1-20
A Family Likeness

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.

3 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. 4 Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. 5 For of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure or greedy person – such a person is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. 7 Therefore do not be partners with them.

8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) 10 and find out what pleases the Lord. 11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. 13 But everything exposed by the light becomes visible – 14 for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said:

*'Wake up, sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.'*

15 Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. 18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. 19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is creating a new family. That is the heart of Ephesians. This new family is made up of a diverse group of people who all believe in Jesus and who all have access to God through Jesus. We've been asking "What does God's family look like?"; that's what the second half of the letter is all about. First of all, it was one family, united and together in love, patience and kindness; then it was a work-in-progress family, putting off old ways and putting on the new. Today, it is a family-likeness family! You know the thing that we do with children: is he like his dad or his mum? Who does she take after? We try to find the family likeness; it is maybe not so apparent in small babies, but it becomes obvious later in life. Here are a few examples; I've given you the pictures so that you've had a chance to work them out!



Colin Hanks: he is an American actor with an even-more-famous actor father; his name is Colin and his father is Tom!



Sophie von Haselberg is an American actress with an even-more-famous American actress mother; her mother's name is Bette (Midler)



Prince George do I need to say more?

There are lots of others; there are some in our family; there will be some in your family too!

The members of the new family that God is creating are to look like Him. *“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us...”* (verses 1,2) That is the headline; that’s the big lesson of this whole passage; the people of God should become more and more like our Father. We don’t see God, but we do see Jesus in the gospels; we see what God is like in Jesus, so we can learn to imitate Jesus in the kind of people that we are and in the way that we live. We’ve said something of this before, but here Paul makes this the big theme, the headline issue; *“be imitators of God...”*

There are some ways in which that is just not possible. The Bible tells us, for example, that God lives for ever; He is eternal; we’re not like that. The Bible tells us that God is full of glory and majesty, a great King who created the universe and who rules over everything; we’re not like that and can’t be. God is able to do anything; God is everywhere; God knows everything. In all of these ways, God is God and He alone has these qualities and powers. In all of these ways, we can’t be like Him and it would be a huge mistake to try to emulate Him in these ways.

But there are qualities that we see in God, that we can try to copy! God loves; God forgives; God is faithful, full of compassion and grace; God loves what is right; He is just and fair, with no prejudices; God is patient and long-suffering. God is holy. All of these are qualities of God, qualities that we see in Jesus. All of these are qualities which we can have and are to aspire after; these are the qualities that will show the family-likeness in us. This is the way in which we can imitate God and be like Jesus. Jesus loves perfectly and we never can be perfect but we can aspire to be better; Jesus is always full of compassion – for us it is a bit hit-or-miss but we want to be more compassionate; Jesus forgives and we find that really hard to do, but we recognise that forgiveness is at the heart of good relationships. This is the challenge we face as Christians in God’s new family – the family is to be like the Father; we are to be like Him; we are to imitate God as we see Him in Jesus.

The first part of our reading is a reflection on what it means for us to be holy: *“among you there must not be a hint of sexual immorality... or greed, or obscenity...”* (verse 3,4) and so on. The way Christians behave is to be shaped by the way in which we see Jesus behave, always proper, always just. The qualities and values that we see embodied in Jesus are to be the qualities and values by which we shape our lives. The word “holy” is a hard word to define, but we know it when we see it. We see it in Jesus and we should see it in one another. Don’t shy away from the idea because it sometimes carries the notion of being “holier-than thou”, a kind of spiritual one-up-man-ship; that’s not what we’re talking about; we’re talking about living by the qualities and values of Jesus.

Then Paul tells us to *“live as children of the light.”* We know the contrast: light and darkness. We’ve just changed the clocks and autumn is fast making the light disappear and the nights are longer and the darkness is deeper. We love the light; Jesus is the light of the world; light stands for everything that is good, right and true. We are to be altogether good people, only thinking good thoughts, saying good words in a good way, and doing good deeds. The notion of right and wrong is hard to find in our culture because people do what suits them; fake news is a new idea when people just say what suits them! Love what is right; love the truth. Being good, right and true people – we walk in the light; we walk with Jesus.

Finally, there are 3 more qualities that shape life imitating God. Be wise; be filled with the Spirit; be thankful. *“be wise, making the most of every opportunity”* (verse 16) *“Be filled with the Spirit.”* (verse

18) “...giving thanks to God the Father for everything.” (verse 20) Be wise not foolish; be filled with the Spirit not drunk with wine; give thanks for everything. We learn to be wise by reading the Bible, by listening to other people and by learning from our mistakes. We pray that God will fill us with His Spirit over and over again; the Spirit makes us able to be like Jesus. Giving thanks means that we have a grateful heart.

God’s family has this family likeness. Or is meant to have. There are times when we forget, or when we can’t be bothered because it is too hard. There are times when we just don’t want to be different from other people or stand out from the crowd, so we just blend in and become like everyone else. The Church’s story is littered with times when the has family behaved badly, times when darkness has invaded the soul of the church, and God’s family has lost our way. That is true of the Church as a whole and it’s true of all of us as individual Christians. We need one more key quality – repentance, turning back to God.

There was a young man who lost his way in life. His dad loved him, but he wanted to be free, so he left home and made a new life for himself, until it all went wrong. His life was a mess and finally he decided to go home; we call him the prodigal. When he was nearly home, his dad saw him and came running to greet him, to hug him and to give him the robe, the ring and the shoes that showed him to be the son in the family. Jesus told that story in such a way that the father in the story is meant to show us what God is like; here is God through the story of the waiting father. God is full of compassion, love, forgiveness, patience and so many other qualities.

The family likeness: there are ways in which we can never be like God; there are ways in which Jesus is miles above us. But there are ways in which we can “*be imitators of God as dearly loved children*” ways in which we can display the family likeness. This is all to do with the qualities and values by which we live our lives: full of love, goodness, kindness, patience, forgiveness, compassion; loving what is good, right and true. Can we be like this? Of course we can; we will always be a work-in-progress and we will always make mistakes, but let this be our aim. Let the church family have this family-likeness; let the church family be a family that looks like our Father, that becomes more and more like Jesus.