



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 11

August 8, 2021

Imitators of God

Ephesians 5:1-2

¹ *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.* ² *And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

Not many verses prior to the start of today's Epistle (3:19), the Apostle Paul expresses his desire that the Ephesian Christians might "know the love of Christ." In fact, he says he "bows [his] knees before the Father" praying for this. In today's text he encourages all of us to "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." So, he wants the Ephesians to know the Source of love – Jesus – and then to live in that love toward others. But how do you *do* that? How do you live your life as "a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"?

When I was a kid, I used to have a plaque on my bedroom wall that I'd made at Vacation Bible School. It was one of those plaster-cast things which you painted with watercolors and then took home to show your parents because you were so proud of it, but a few years later you realized with some degree of regret that it was the ugliest thing you'd ever seen. Anyway, the plaque read: "God Is Love." One day, one of my unchurched neighbor friends came over, and when he saw the plaque, he asked what I thought was a very interesting question. He said: "How do you know? How do you *know* God is love?"

And I thought about it for a minute, and then I answered: "I know God is love because of what He's done for me and *still* does for me." That pretty much ended the conversation, which is quite often the case when you're dealing with unbelievers. But, you know, the answer I gave all those years ago is true. Paul tells us in Romans 5: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). And John writes in his first letter: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16a NIV). You see, love is best defined by what it does.

I read somewhere once that the hardest thing in the world to give away is something you don't have. You can't give money if you don't have any; you can't give time if you're already too busy; and you can't give love unless you have love to give. But, here's the thing: we human beings always love something. We were created that way. It's impossible for the human heart to be altogether loveless.

When God created the first humans, there was a true and holy love – a love for God – in our heart. We loved God as God loves and we loved each other as much as we loved ourselves. But when Adam and Eve fell into sin, a terrible change took place. This holy love was extinguished. Adam no longer loved God above all things or his neighbor as himself. But, he still had a heart full of desires and inclinations, but now his heart was full



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of love for created *things* instead of the *Creator*. A heart that's emptied of its love of God and the neighbor doesn't become a vacuum. When you pour out a bottle of water, it's not really empty; now it's just full of air. So, too, with the human heart; having been emptied of holy love, it becomes filled with something else, and that something else is love for the vain and transitory things of this life.

As Christians, you and I should be only be interested in cultivating the love that reflects the Spirit of God, and that kind of love can only be acquired from its source . . . which is God.

How can I illustrate what God's love is like? I don't know if you remember Art Linkletter. He used to interview children on his television show. I remember once seeing a little girl on that program, who must have been about the same age I was at the time – maybe five or six – and Mr. Linkletter asked her if she had any brothers or sisters. “Yes,” she said, “two brothers.” “Well,” he continued, “which one do you suppose is your daddy's favorite?” She answered immediately: “He loves Jimmy best because he's the oldest; he loves Johnny best because he's the youngest; and he loves me best because I'm the only girl.”

Did you know that God loves you like that? No matter how many people there are in the world, He loves them all the same. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. His love transcends everything, and each one of us is precious to Him.

You might think you're not that lovable. Maybe you see yourself as helpless and hopeless on account of your sins. But, it's like what the Lord moved Paul to write: “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6–8).

That's some pretty amazing love. Makes you feel pretty good . . . until you remember that God also moved Paul to write: “Be imitators of God . . . And walk in love, as Christ loved us.”

How are you doing with that? Are you willing to die for those you love? Are you willing to die for a good cause? Would you die for an enemy? If you're even remotely like me, you have to admit, as I do, that as hard as it would be to die for someone you love, it would be next to impossible to lay your life on the line for someone who hates you. We're just not wired that way. To do something like that, you'd have to have love – a great big God-sized load of love. God *has* that kind of love. God *is* that kind of love.

Maybe you don't have that kind of love. Who of us does? But, maybe that concerns you. Maybe you secretly say to yourself: “I know I should love God, but I just don't. How could God love me when I don't love Him?” Oh, dear friend, remember what the Apostle John wrote: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the [payment] for our sins” (1 John 4:10). It's God's love for *you* that matters. It's God's love for you that brought about your redemption. Jesus died for you! And



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because of His sacrifice God has declared you righteous, holy, sinless, and in good standing with Him. God's wrath toward us and our sin has been consumed by His love. You are loved!

And God offers His love freely and constantly. It never lessens in intensity. It never fails to be in force. You could study it your whole life and never completely understand or appreciate it. This is perfect love, complete and pure love. Love like we experience with no one else.

And it's a kind of love that has a profound effect on us. It actually inspires us to love Him in return. The Bible says: "We love [Him] because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God's love draws us to Him, causes us to repent, to seek forgiveness, and to serve Him out of an overwhelming sense of gratitude. It's because of God's great love for us through His Son Jesus Christ, that Paul can write in our text: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." You see, it's impossible for us to receive love and not be affected by it. Maybe you're struggling to love God because you've never come to terms with His love for you.

There's an old story about a little boy who had suffered a crippling injury and couldn't run and play with his friends. The surgery he needed was more expensive than his family could afford. One day, out of the blue, a local surgeon volunteered his services. The operation and treatments, though costly, would be given free of charge. And though the treatments were extensive and painful, they were finally successful, and the boy regained the use of his limbs. On the day of his release from the hospital, he asked his doctor to come to his room, and, through tearful eyes, he said: "Doctor, my friends will never stop hearing about you." See, he'd grown to love his doctor because of what the doctor had done for him and because of what the doctor had made it possible for him to do.

What great lessons we can learn from this little boy! He knew he had been healed. He knew what that meant for his life. And he knew he could never keep silent about the joy this healing gave him. Do you suppose he was worried that people would think he was strange? Do you think he worried about being called a "fanatic" or a "religious freak"?

Beloved, God has done something so much more remarkable for us, and yet we worry about these silly things. The difference is that this little boy wasn't playing make-believe. He knew the reality of his situation. How much better off would we be if we would realize that God has pulled us from the very jaws of death, healing our disease of sin, saving our very lives, not just the one we live on this earth, but the one we'll live forever when this life is over.

It's God's love for us that makes it possible for us to love Him and to love our neighbor. How do we get that love? How do we access it? There's only one way: through His Word and Sacraments. How can we be "imitators of Christ" if we don't know Him? And how can we know Him unless we listen to what He says about Himself, unless we see and experience what He does?



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Listen: If you want to feel loved by God, if you want to be able to love others in the way Christ has loved you, be an imitator of Christ. Learn of Him and from Him. Read His Word. Join us as we study that Word together. Immerse yourself in Him, and you will come to know the power of His love, a power that will change your life, and bring a new life, not just to you, but to the dying world in which you live. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen