

Being Imitators of God

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In the eleventh chapter of Romans, Paul offers one of the most compelling rhetorical flourishes in all of his writing. The following text serves as a word of praise and exaltation in response to our Creator's achievement in the Messiah:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:33-36).

Without question, the power and intellect of God are awesome. Everything we have and hope to receive is entirely dependent upon Him. Yet, in another letter, Paul wrote, "*Be imitators of God, as beloved children*" (Eph. 5:1).

How can we imitate such a wondrous and powerful God? He is eternal and we are mortal. We do not possess an ounce of His creative capacities. We often find ourselves dealing with problems beyond our solving. The unabridged differences between God and us are endless. How, then, are we to be imitators of God?

Obviously, Paul did not intend us to imitate God's power. We cannot speak worlds into existence, breathe life into dust, or atone for our sins. This short text relates to the transformation of our character: changing attitudes and behaviors which reflect God's heart.

How to Imitate God

1. We imitate God as dear children. Parents consider their children dear and beloved. There is a natural affection that parents feel for their children. They pour this affection into the lives of their children. They care and provide for them. They teach them about God. In response to this love, children will offer their parents love, loyalty, and obedience. This is the natural order of things.

Likewise, God, as our Father, has poured love into our lives. No one knew this better than Jesus, God's Son. Jesus told Nicodemus, "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). Also, God has poured love into our hearts by the Spirit. Paul wrote, "*...God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us*" (Rom. 5:5). Clearly, we are dear and beloved to God. Therefore, as God's dear children, we are to return love to Him by obeying Him and loving one another.

Concerning how we are to respond to God's love through obedience, John wrote, "*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's*

children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:1-3). The love of God is designed to persuade us to become pure. In addition to becoming morally clean, we are to give ourselves entirely to the service of God.

Later, John wrote about responding to God’s love by loving one another: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:7-11).

Becoming an imitator of God is not something God accomplishes in us forcibly. God brings us into submission to His will by love. By reciprocating love, we can become imitators of God as children who are dear to Him.

2. We imitate God by renewing our image. Becoming an imitator of God is not a natural process. It is not accomplished by intuition. Rather, this transforming work is realized by thought and deliberate changes to our personalities and behaviors.

As humans, we were made in the image of God. God gave us His image to be used as a glorious reflection of praise and as the means of exercising wise stewardship of His world (Gen. 1:27-31). Sadly, God’s image was and is ruined in us by sin. In such a deplorable condition, we cannot imitate God. In sin, we only imitate the idols formed by our evil desires. Therefore, our image must be renewed in order for us to properly imitate God and reflect His glory.

To provide for our renewal, God sent Jesus to the world. Jesus was not merely an imitator of God but was the express image of God; the exact imprint of God’s nature (Heb. 1:3). Therefore, by faith in Jesus, our image can be renewed. Consider how Paul describes this renewal process in Ephesians:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:17-24).

3. We imitate God in hope of Him glorifying us. What is the purpose of imitating God? Well, bringing God glory as His image-bearers is the purpose for which He made us. However, bringing God glory is bigger than just our present lives.

Imitators of God live in the hope of God glorifying them in eternity. In a passage of hope, Paul wrote, *“For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him”* (Rom. 8:13-17).

There are two ways we can express our humanity. 1. We can use our humanity to share in sin, decay, and death: i.e. the flesh. 2. We can use our humanity to be led by the Spirit to reflect God’s glory. These are two different ways of expressing our humanity which produce two very different results: eternal death or eternal life. If we want to be glorified by God in death, we must first glorify Him in life.

Conclusion

There are aspects of God that we cannot gain. He will always be the Creator and us His creation. He will remain separate from all that is earthly and human. However, there are traits of God that we can and must develop. We must seek to imitate God’s love and purity. While Paul’s command to be imitators of God is a short, easy verse to memorize, fulfilling it requires prayerful deliberation and heartfelt devotion. Are you an imitator of God?