

Genuine vs. Counterfeit Love – Part 1

Ephesians 5:1-7

Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ love us...

Introduction: One of the hobbies I enjoy is to read historical accounts, biographies, and watch documentaries of the past, particularly in terms of wars of our nations past. World War 2 is a specific area of study since it was so pervasive in its origins, reach, and the ongoing consequences of its end. In 1998, during my junior year of college, Steven Spielberg came out with a movie called, *“Saving Private Ryan”* a fictional tale of a small band of soldiers trying to find and bring home a young man who was the lone survivor of four brothers in the war. Touted as one of the most realistic war films of all time, some men who had stormed the beaches of France watched the movie and said the only thing missing was the smell of war. Though not a movie I would recommend to many BECAUSE of its realistic telling of war, there several poignant scenes of bravery, sacrifice, brotherhood, moral tension within decisions in war, and the fragile nature of life. But there are also deep scenes of sadness. Senseless loss of life, especially of young people who had so much to offer yet were dutifully called to war, only to have life end, sometimes unceremoniously. But one of the most hopeless, sad, and heartbreaking scenes was the conclusion, which most likely was played to leave audiences with thoughtful reflection. It left me with frustration and a reminder that the world’s system cannot truly answer the real questions of life.

At the conclusion (spoiler alert – but its been 24 years so...) of the movie, the Private who was saved by the sacrifice of many, including his mentor/older Captain that he looked up to, stood over the graveside of his Captain and harkened back to the last words spoken to him by the man who saved his life, giving his life for Private Ryan: **“Earn This”** he said. Earn this. On one level, makes total sense. So much given, so the only right action was to do all he could to earn the sacrifice and pay off the debt paid for his life. But as the elder Ryan stood in tears, he whispered, *“I hope it was enough. I hope, in your eyes, I’ve earned what all of you have done for me.”* When his wife finally came over to him, he could only utter, *“Tell me I’ve lived a good life. Tell me I’m a good man.”* To which she said, “you are” and walked off.

Sad. Yet so common. It is built into our nature that we must earn everything, including our salvation. Grace and mercy are foreign to us. Religion is built on **“earn this”**. I talked to a friend this week who commented on how nice and moral her Mormon neighbors are, but then remembered that it is a religion based on works, not faith alone. Most people live life with the hope that they have done enough, lived a good enough life, that when they get to the end of it all, they can ask God, *“Please tell me I was a good person”*, and hope (with fingers crossed), He says “of course you are!”.

But we know that this is NOT the case. No one has ever or will ever earn their way into heaven, or will do enough to be forgiven, or work enough to be accepted by God. The only way any of these can take place is if **God, out of His great love, makes a way for us to be forgiven, to be accepted, and to be welcomed into heaven.** This was the radical, transforming, and revolutionary offer of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who was just in His keeping all the Law, perfect in all morality, and who willingly died in our place so that by believing in Him, in turning from our self-trust and sin, we can be forgiven, having been made at peace with God. **“Earn this”** is impossible on our own, but because Christ did, we can now live by grace and the righteousness He provides. We can **walk out our salvation, living in categorical differences, with different values, joys, motives, security, hope, love, and holiness.** And all of this is fully expected by God, not in a way of earning, but in the way of faith and grace He provides, all to His glory and our satisfaction. The more we understand this, the more we will embrace the hard practices like **love and forgiveness.**

We always read Scripture in its context so that we don't make it say something that it does not. Books and especially epistles like Ephesians give a thoughtful, logical case that builds from a foundation upward. We looked in the first three chapters of Ephesians at our **position in Christ**, the work that God did before the foundation of the world, the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and the meaning and purpose of the church. Starting in 4:1, we began with the **"walk"** passages, explaining HOW we should live out these positional realities practically. We are called to **"walk worthily of our calling"**, in unity together in the church (4:1; 2-16). We are called to **walk in holiness** (4:17) that are categorically different than those who do not know Christ. For the next two weeks we will look at **"walking in love"**, both positively in true and authentic love and exposing the counterfeit love the world panders. Then we'll see we need to **walk in the light** (5:8) and **walk in wisdom** (5:15), culminating in all of these affecting our marriages, parenting, work life, and spiritual warfare. In other words, each of these steps is vital and imperative to understand if we are to live out the realities of the gospel, to the glory of God, in each and every part of our life.

Continue Walking in Love

"Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (5:1-2)

BASIS OF WALKING IN LOVE

As we explore the nature and expression of Biblical love over the next two weeks, it's important to examine the way that Paul builds his argument. Whenever you see *"therefore"* in a text of Scripture, it's a blinking red light to stop and consider what preceded it. In this case, it refers back to the verse before, but really to whole section. In other words, because we walk in a manner worthy of our calling, because we live a transformed life, putting off the flesh, renewed in our minds, and putting on righteousness and holiness, we can do what is commanded next. If you take 5:1 out of context or fail to consider the word *"therefore"*, one can easily come up with some self-serving, crazy, outlandish, and interpretations that fall short of the Spirit's intent.

Imitation Game – Imitation is often the highest form of flattery. The word "imitation" comes from the word *mimetes*, which translates clearly to the word *mimic*, to copy another. Here, the word is a present imperative, which means to "become" imitators of God in a continual way, rather than somehow seeing ourselves as God. Paul often called fellow believers to "imitate" him as He imitated or followed Christ (1 Cor. 4:16; 10:31-11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9), and also encouraged some churches to mimic other churches (1 Thess. 2:14). But only here are we commanded to become mimics of God Himself. At first blush, that is an overwhelming thought, but I believe that is the point. There are **2 principles that come out of a continual imitation of our God:**

- **We imitate God's character and nature** - The primary characteristic that we emulate in the context is **God's love**. He has poured out His love in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:5), and demonstrated His love through Christ that while we were sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). We live out what we have tasted in Him, His holiness (1 Pet. 1:14-16), grace, and mercy. And how do we know His nature? Through the self-disclosing Word of God, where God not only shows us His divine nature and power in creation (Rom. 1:20), but in His specific revelation in Scripture. This requires time and intimate knowledge. We mimic who we are around, who we spend time with, who we respect.
- **We remember we cannot imitate God on our own** – Far from a call to try to **"earn it"** with God, the context demands that we are constantly reminded that any good works we walk in were

prepared beforehand by God (Eph. 2:10). As we seek to love like God loves, it drives us to total dependency on His grace, which means He gets all the glory, and brings satisfaction and joy to us by operating out of His strength, not our own.

Secure Children – There are certain phrases that stand out in Scripture, and some hit us more subtly than others. “As beloved children” resonates and knocks us backward at its beauty and implications. Again, God could have saved us to a slavish life alone, and He would be absolutely justified in doing so. But He saved us into His family and brought us in as **beloved children**. Children easily mimic their parents without knowing it. Have you ever said somethings in your life and thought, “that’s exactly what my mom used to say”, or watched your child walk around with a tool belt like dad or an older sister scold a younger like her parent? We mimic those that we have a loving, secure relationship with.

This is such an important point when we talk about love and forgiveness, worth a few minutes of consideration. Love brings **security**. God loves each of His children as if he or she was an only child. He has adopted us as sons and daughters (Eph. 1:5) with full standing as heirs. He satisfies our built in longing to be loved, and does it perfectly and impartially, meaning He cannot love us more and will not love us less. When it comes to walking with other people, what is often revealed is our **insecurity, which causes us to be DEFENSIVE, SELF-PRESERVING, and seeking our own JUSTICE**. Children who are securely loved know that they no longer have to fight for their own value since it is secure in Christ. This puts away the “*Its not fair*”, or “*That’s not equitable*”, or “*You’re asking too much of me because their offense was greater than mine!*”, and “*I won’t until they do*”. Being securely loved means we can absorb the inequity of loving others for their best, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:38-39). Love is not efficient nor can it be defined as fair, but neither is God’s love for us, the kind of love we are to mimic to each other and display to a thirsty world who are still trying to **earn it with God and each other**.

PATTERN OF WALKING IN LOVE

The text gives us **three ways** that an imitating, mimicking love of God play out in our life. Some of this will be overlapping from last week, so praise the Lord since we need it.

- **Imitating God’s forgiving love**

Last week we looked at “forgiving each other as God in Christ forgave us”, which is glorious, hard, and so needed in all of our relationships. We don’t want to go over all that ground (but please feel free to download the notes or listen), but continue to add to it here.

John MacArthur said “***The greatest evidence of love is undeserved forgiveness.***” We are never more like God, then, when we offer forgiveness to those who by definition do not deserve it. We also never understand God’s love more than when we offer forgiveness to one that has wounded us deeply and hurt us beyond description. There is an undeniable union between **love and forgiveness**, and Biblically, one will breed the other, and the absence of one means the absence of the other. Let’s look at two texts of Scripture to help us see this truth and reality.

“***So also my Heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.***” (Matt. 18:35) These words came at the conclusion of Jesus’ teaching of dealing with our sin, especially helping those who sin against us (Matt. 18:15-20), where we get our process and practice of church discipline and restoration. The goal is to “gain or win and brother”, with the pathway of restoration being “listening”, and includes acknowledging, turning, and forgiving. To pound the point to the disciples as to **how often we forgive those who sin against us** (77 times!), Jesus told the parable of a man who had an unforgivable debt (10,000 talents, with one talent equal to 20 years wages for a

laborer). In pleading with the king, the king took pity on him and FORGAVE the debt, one that could never be paid back. Upon leaving debtors prison, that man took hold of another who owed him 100 days wages, a paltry sum by comparison, and when that man pled for pity, the forgiven man had none of it and threw him in prison until he could pay. This brought the ire and anger of the king, who heard about this lack of grace and threw the first man into prison until he could pay the debt (which would never come).

What's the point? What we offer in forgiveness of others pales in comparison to what we've been forgiven by God. We have too high of a view of our own goodness and righteousness when we see others offenses toward us as somehow more egregious than what we have committed against God. God forgives us of innumerable sins, from our past, present, and future. HE IS One who should be and is truly OFFENDED by sin, so much so that death is the only recourse. When we refuse to forgive another in our heart or one who asks for it, it signals that we actually think we are not LIKE God, but ACTUALLY GOD HIMSELF. Praise the Lord that is not the case, since if we were God, no one would be forgiven.

Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven — for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little (Luke 7:47) — When having dinner at a Pharisee's house, an unidentified woman with an unidentified sin problem came to wash and anoint Jesus' feet with her tears, costly ointment, and hair. The Pharisee was indignant that Jesus would allow a SINFUL woman to touch Him. So Jesus told a quick story of two men who both had a debt, one owing 500 denarii, and the other 50, and asked which would love the one who forgave the debt more. Simon answered rightly, the one who owed more. Jesus then turned to the woman who and observed that because she knew the **depths of her sin, she understood the breadth of being forgiven, which led her to LOVE MUCH!** Her faith had saved her (Luke 7:50) and she could leave in peace. But it was clear that **love was magnified when the depth of forgiveness was understood.**

What's the point? Our ability to love is bound to our acknowledgment of our own sin. It's easy to point out the sin of the obvious in culture (this woman was probably a known prostitute) and subtly think we are not as bad as someone **like that!** Perhaps the reason we have a hard time forgiving others or loving the lost is that we don't admit the depth of our own sin. Which also means the way to grow in love is acknowledge, confess, and ask for forgiveness for everything that we do that falls short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23) and is not done in faith (Rom. 14:23). The rabbit hole of our sinfulness is far deeper than we'd like to admit (at least in public!), but so is the depth of God's love and forgiveness for us. Much confession of sin reminds us of how much we are loved, which frees us to love others in the same way.

- **Imitating God's unconditional love**

The second way we imitate God's love is by loving **"just as Christ also loved you."** Divine love is an unconditional love, a love that depends entirely on the one who loves and not the worthiness of the object of that love. In Deuteronomy 7 we see God reminding Israel that they were loved because God chose to place His love on them, NOT because they were the biggest or strongest, but simply because He made a free choice (7:6-8). It was not that we loved God that compelled Him to die, but He died while we were STILL enemies (Rom. 5:8). He loved us before the world began, before we could choose or utter a word or sin (Eph. 1:4-5). This love seeks the highest good of the one loved, and is a love of **volition and willful choice** more than emotion. It loves regardless of emotions, attraction, or deserving.

Where do we experience this kind of love? Think about the love you have for your kids. That love is NOT tied to performance, is it? Sure kids bring us joy (sometimes) but they don't DO anything for the first

years of life, then they take most of the time they are with us, only to leave in the end! But no matter what they do, no matter how many times they disobey, or fail, or even if they must leave our house because of sinful choices, our love for them will not change. They can end up accomplishing all they set out to do or live 8 hours in a mother's arms, and our love will not change.

The problem is, we do not apply this same kind of love to others, a love that is devoid of conditions and seeks the highest good of the other. A love that embraces consequences for actions but one that is quick to run after a prodigal son like a father who had been taken advantage of (Luke 15:11-32). This is how we love, since this is how we are loved. *Think about what would be different about your relationships if we loved this way.*

- **Imitating God's sacrificial loves**

It's appropriate on a day that we are training volunteers to serve that we have a passage on the sacrificial love of Christ. This sacrifice is what we are to model, and it absolutely matters in terms of service, love, and forgiveness. Jesus showed us the way. John 10:18 says Jesus laid down His own life for His sheep, and no one took it from Him. John 13 gives us a pathway of humble service as He stooped down to wash the dirty feet of His disciples, all of whom would leave Him in His greatest time of need and one who would deny Him three times. John 15:13 says that there is no greater love one who lays his life down for a friend, but we would rather do that once with a bullet than daily in love, service and forgiveness. By definition, true love is a sacrificial love, since all others are expressions of self-love. **But how do we grow in this sacrifice, that is absolutely needed in my marriage, workplace, parenting, and relationships?** We must see ourselves clearly. Not only are we overly defensive of our own rights in forgiveness, but we are overly preserving of our own pleasures and comfort. We stop short of sacrificial love because it seems too hard, costly, or not worth the return. This is why the only pathway of sacrificial love is one of **death**.

On Monday of Passion Week, some Greeks had come to see Jesus. Jesus said, ***"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loses his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternity."*** (John 12:24-25). The time to be lifted up had come for Jesus, and He reiterated that following Him will cost us everything. So to truly serve, we must die! Die to self, die to certain pleasures, die to OUR plans and dreams, for the sake of following Christ, choosing to love, and serving those God has given us care and charge over. Again, the reason we withhold love and forgiveness is often because we are **unwilling to sacrifice our rights in this world, thinking that preserving our rights (including "being right")** is the most joyful path. It is not.

Jesus loved us sacrificially not only out of a love for us but as a **"sacrifice to God"**, meaning He sought in all things to be pleasing to His Father. The sacrifices that are acceptable to God are those that are **willing, not forced or out of mere duty**. When we operate as living sacrifices to God, we become a fragrant aroma to God in worship and an appeal to the world around.

"But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." (2 Cor. 2:14-15)

Earn this? Nope, we can never earn forgiveness and love from God, and no one can earn it from us. God's love FREES us, securing us in Him and allowing us to be loving, forgiving, and sacrificial to others who by definition DO NOT DESERVE IT. When we understand the depths of our sin and the height of Christ's love, it is not a far walk to see that there is nothing that is unforgivable and no one we cannot love. This is what the world cannot explain or figure out, what they desperately need, and what we need to proclaim and show.

