### “Be Imitators of God,” by S. Finlan, August 12, 2018

**Ephesians 4:25–5:2a**

25 So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. 26Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27and do not make room for the devil. 28Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. 29Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. 30And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

31Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, 32and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. 5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, 2and live in love, as Christ loved us.

**John 6:35, 41–48**

35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. . . .

41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 42They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” 43Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. 44No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. 45It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. 46Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48I am the bread of life.”

The letter to the Ephesians is carefully and thoughtfully written to convey ethical instruction and spiritual encouragement. I’m going to look at some of the ethical sayings, but the main focus of my sermon will go way beyond the category of “ethics.”

Let’s start with the unusual and possibly unclear saying “do not let the sun go down on your anger” (4: 26). I think that means that if you are angry with someone, go deal with it right away, before the day is over. Don’t let anger stew overnight for even one night. Go address it immediately. An unresolved grievance can lead to resentment and even boil over into revenge. Instead, the parties should seek to understand each other.

How can we build bridges of communication when we sit on far shores of misunderstanding? One way that works is to meet with the other person, to make I-statements about what you feel and felt, without blame or analysis, and then listen to the other person’s I-statements about what they are feeling, until you come to understand each other better. What if we did that? What if we sought to settle all our disputes right away, instead of nurturing and holding onto our anger, *treasuring* it, as people sometimes do?

Notice that it does not say “don’t get angry.” But it *does* say take immediate steps to resolve the problem that *caused* the anger. It takes strength of character to do this, because it involves *listening* rather than arguing. Unfortunately, if either party does not *want* to resolve the problem or will not be honest about it, then it cannot be resolved. In that case, pray to God for help in not obsessing over the situation, becoming bitter, or grinding your teeth down. If you can’t resolve what caused the anger, then at least prevent the anger from *controlling* and distorting your thinking. And you can pray for the other person.

After you have given it your *all*, then hand it over to God, admit your helplessness over this gnawing feeling, and seek God’s help every night. God can work upon us during our sleep. God can empower us to “put away bitterness, and all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (4:31–32). What a great goal for a church! Be kind and tender-hearted, and know that there is strength in kindness. This doesn’t mean we will never get angry, but we will seek to *resolve* the anger, to reach understanding. “Live in love,” it says, “as Christ loved us” (Eph 5:2). We can pray together, and seek to be guided by Jesus’ love.

After this sound ethical advice, comes a saying that is not just about “ethics” but about salvation and spiritual destiny: “be imitators of God” (Eph 5:1).

Is that possible? Obviously there are many things God can do that we cannot. You or I could not spin out galaxies and nebulae from our fingertips. We cannot compute *pi* down to the last digit, if there *is* a last digit.

Then what does it mean, to be an imitator of God? It must refer to moral and spiritual things—relationships, purposes, spiritual qualities and values. It must refer to goals that *are* within human reach, or we wouldn’t be told to do it. In the New Testament, it has to do with being transformed into the likeness of Jesus—which is a *VERY* high goal! Speaking of the image of Christ, Paul says “beholding the glory of the Lord, [we] are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18 ESV, English Standard Version). Becoming an imitator of God means *experiencing* this spiritual growth.

If we are inspired by Jesus, know about his life, and act in a Spirit-led way, then we are being transformed, step by gradual step, into Christ-likeness. This was a central teaching of the church for its first 600 years. It came to be called deification or *theosis*.

Because of Jesus’ life, a new age of spiritual possibilities dawned for us. We could start to take on some of the features of the divine nature! Am I making that up? Here’s what Second Peter says: “You may become participants of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4), or “partakers of the divine nature” (ESV).

And remember Jesus’ remarkable saying from Luke 17: “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21 NIV).

Sayings like this are not meant to turn us into anxious perfectionists. We would always fall short of our ideals and feel crushed afterwards. But the New Testament *does* provide us with ideals that can inspire us and draw us on. Nor, of course, are the sayings meant to make us spiritually boastful. We are not just striving to be spiritual, but also balanced and responsible. The sanity test still applies, and so does the ethical test. And while we seek to bring Spirit and spiritual values into the life on this level, we still have to take care of material requirements.

But here is a fact about the Christian life: With God working on us, spiritual transformation is the *expected* and *natural* result. We face the amazing prospect of being made, in a small way, *Godlike*.

Is any of this supported by today’s Gospel reading? I think so.

Jesus quotes Isaiah’s saying “they shall all be taught by God” (Isa 54:13); he continues, saying “everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (John 6:45). If we are truly responsive to God, then we will be drawn to Jesus. We will be *taught* by God. And we will have eternal life (6:47). Who knows what changes we will undergo? But can there be any doubt that we *will* be spiritually changed, when the kingdom of God is within us? We have all eternity to delve into the spiritual riches God wants us to discover.

Let these promises become part of *your* faith. So what do we *do* about it, about this belief that we will be transformed? We let it be part of our belief, build upon it, and truth that the process will unfold in God’s way. *Theōsis* is growth, and you can’t rush growth.

So what am I asking you to *do* after today’s sermon?—To have faith, to trust God, and to believe this remarkable promise that, if you desire to do God’s will, you will be a partaker of the divine nature. This is part of the *normal* process of spiritual growth and eternal life. Do you feel amazed at such an extraordinary promise? Good! I am too.

God, protect and guide us this week
 as we seek to grow in you.

We know that you love us as we are *now*,
 and will love us as we grow in your everlasting love. Amen.