

**Ephesians 5:1**  
***“Be Imitators of God”***

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“Be imitators of God,” says Paul. To which Oscar Wilde once said, “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” I’m pretty sure Oscar wasn’t thinking of Paul when he said this, but the truth remains: if you really want God to know how you feel about him, be like him. Of course, if want to talk about imitating God this morning, we’re going to have to expand our use of pronouns. Is God really only a he? Or a him? My contention has never been that God isn’t a he. Those who see in the person of Jesus the face of God have long proclaimed in faith and creed, “*He* is God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God...of the same essence” as God. But what about those who don’t see God in Jesus? Those whose faith tradition doesn’t include Jesus? And what about those who just aren’t a he or a him? How are they to imitate God? If Paul said to the people in Ephesus, “Be imitators of God,” to the people in Athens he said, your god is too small. It may be that the true test of faith is not whether we can convince people of our truth, but whether our faith is big enough to have room in it for more than one truth.

So Paul says, “Be imitators of God.” Now Paul is going to go on to tell us what this imitation does look like for him, but before we even get there we need to ask, how will we know what we’re looking at when do get there? Because the whole point of imitation is to be so good at it that it causes us to wonder whether what we’re looking at is actually the real thing.

My father, who is 61 now, has been in banking since he was 18. It’s the only job he’s ever had. Anyway, many years ago, while visiting him at his office, I asked him how you could tell a counterfeit bill from a real one. He picked up a stack of one dollar bills, I would guess about 100 of them, and quicker than a machine, he started to sift them through his hands. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, he stopped. “This one’s counterfeit.” He handed it to me. I looked at it, flipped it over, asked him to give me bill #15 to compare it to. They looked the same to me. “How do you know?” “I can feel it,” he told me. “Get out of here!” I gasped. “You can’t tell counterfeit just by feeling it.” And he said to me, “You can if you know what real feels like.” Do I even need to explain his point? If we want to know

what it means to imitate God, we first have to have spent a lot of time getting to know what the real God looks like.

So what does the real God look like? If you were to run into God on the street this afternoon, how would you know it's God, and not some cheap hack pretending to be God?

One way to answer this question is to ask if your God is just like every other god out there. Moses. The writer of Exodus says he was leading a comfortable life in retirement when one day he saw something he couldn't ignore—a bush that, though on fire, was not burning up, and from out of this non-burning fire bush a voice called his name. "Moses, I have seen the misery of my people." It's something Moses had never seen or heard before in a god, and Moses knew a lot of gods. Back in Egypt, where he had grown up, they had all kinds of gods, but always these gods seemed so powerful while at the same time being so useless, so remarkable and yet so uncaring. In Egypt, all the gods just sat, like little carved trinkets that people buy in airport souvenir shops. We bring them home, set them up on a table in the front hallway. From time to time we pick them up, we talk about how great it was to be somewhere else, and how we should move there some day, only we can't decide which place we'd want to go back to the most. These trinkets have the power to fill us with longing, but not satisfaction. They can give us a momentary thrill, but not joy. They can make us concerned for the state of our lives, causing us to think that we are not good enough, but they cannot show us a better way. But we hold to them anyway, just in case. Moses was well educated in the way of these gods who are nothing more than trinkets. But who was this God who was a like a burning bush, this God who bids us to draw near, who is moved to compassion by our misery, who wants to get involved with us, to light us on fire, that we too might be moved to compassion by the misery of people? Is this the real God?

Another way, I suppose, to answer the question, what does the real God look like? is to consider the life of those who worship God. In the opening chapter of his book, "The Cost of Discipleship," Dieterich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and pacifist who was ultimately hung for opposing Hitler, writes,

“Cheap grace is what the church is up against. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, it is baptism without discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace says God has everything covered and so nothing needs to change. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship...without the cross...without Jesus Christ. Costly grace [on the other hand] is the treasure hidden in the field; the one a person will gladly go and sell all that they have to buy the field. It is the rule of Christ for which a person would gladly pluck out their eye if it causes them to stumble. It is the call of Jesus that makes followers out of fishermen, and sisters out of sinners. It is costly because it cost a man his life, and because it gives every last one of us true life. *I have no need of a God who peddles cheap grace. Give me a God who demands costly grace.*<sup>1</sup>

Show me someone whose God can be contained in a few trinkets, and I will show you a small boy offering up his full catch of fish at the end of the day to help feed a few thousand people. Show me someone whose God has easy answers, and I will show you Abraham binding his only son Isaac to a piece of wood, fully prepared to sacrifice the boy to God, and fully prepared to tell his son, “I don’t know how this is going to work out, but God will provide.” Show me someone who believes their God has rewarded them with a nice home and a cushy bank account and I’ll show you a rich young ruler who went away sad because he had too many possessions. I have no need of a God who peddles cheap grace. Give me a God who demands costly grace.

Still, one more way to answer the question, what does the real God look like? is simply to consider how long something has stood the test of time. This is what God said to Moses at the burning bush when Moses asked God who he was. “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.” In that moment, we’re told, Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. Anyone who has ever thought about their father knows there can be some fear to it. The fear of embarrassment, the fear of punishment, the fear that we have done no better than them or by them. If you ask me, I think what made Moses afraid

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<sup>1</sup> P. 44-45. *Italics mine.*

was the realization that he was dealing with a costly-grace God. That the same God of his fathers, the God who called upon his great-great-great father Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, who wrestled a blessing out of his great-great grandfather Jacob at midnight, whose idea of faithfulness would very soon come to include dying on a cross, this same God was now calling to him, and it made Moses afraid, probably made him want to turn and run from that bush as fast as he could. But thank God, instead he let that bush draw him in. He listened to it call his name, and when it wanted to send him to Egypt to organize and lead the first civil rights march in history, Moses went. And should we think Moses would be disappointed or surprised to discover that all these years later we're still having to march, I doubt it. In fact, I think he would tell us this is how it's supposed to go. That when you imitate God, when you walk in the footsteps of your fathers, when you spend your life on costly grace, you're going to get into some good trouble. Our Jewish brothers and sisters know it. This past Friday marked the start of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Anyone know what year Jews are celebrating this year? They are celebrating year 5,781. Imagine all the darkness they have endured, all the light they have fought for, all the death, all the fear, all the prejudice and holocaust...and all the faith, hope, and love it has taken to circle the sun 5,781 times. So if 2020 feels like a tough year that is never going to end, well, be not afraid. Many have come before us, many in hope will come after us. God can stand the test of time.

What does the real God look like?

I opened this sermon by quoting Oscar Wilde, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." What you should know, however, is, there is more to the quote. The full quote goes, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness." Yep, that's us, mediocrity, mediocrity that no matter how hard we try is never going to be able to imitate the greatness of God. Let's face it, if someone were to walk into the art store asking for a picture of God, and they picked up a picture of me, they're not going to confuse it for an original of God.

The good news is, though, we don't have to be originals of God. We don't even have to be imitators. Paul says, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children." For Paul, this is what the whole sermon comes down to: imitation begins not with knowing who God is, but with knowing who we are as beloved children, as those who are loved by God, mediocre as we are.

So if you want to imitate God, if you want to see a bush on fire today, and change the world for good, love the mediocre, love the less than mediocre, love everyone. How can we not when God loves you, and God loves me.