

LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for January 8: The world: Habitat for sensuality

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When I was playing baseball in high school, my goal was to hit like Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox. I used a Ted Williams Louisville Slugger bat, and the number on the back of my uniform was 9—Ted Williams' number.

Needless to say, the bat and number didn't help much, but that didn't stop me from trying to hit like him.

Imitating others doesn't end when we become adults. Just about everything we do is a product of what we've learned from someone else. And, imitating someone else isn't inherently bad if we're imitating the right person. For example, we're to be imitators of Christ, but that doesn't get us many points in the sensual society in which we live.

In Ephesians 4:17-19, Paul (who probably never had any PC training) said: "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more."

That's quite an indictment, but those words are as reflective of our culture now as they were then.

Paul goes on to say that if you're a Christian you don't do certain

things—such as condoning any hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, for these are improper for God’s holy people. Paul’s point is simple: you’re to imitate Christ, not the world. If you want to imitate someone, imitate Jesus. There’s no greater standard of behavior than this and no greater duty for a Christian.

Obviously, we can’t become omnipotent, omniscient or omnipresent as God is, but that’s not what Paul is talking about. He’s talking about the imitation of God’s love.

There’s constancy in Paul’s command to “walk in God’s love” because it implies ongoing action. In other words, imitating the loving character of God must be a way of life, not something reserved simply for occasions of great necessity. And, such imitation should mark all we do.

The non-Christian loves when it suits him or her, or when it’s to their advantage. The Christian, however, is exhorted to “walk in love,” meaning his or her love shouldn’t come and recede like the waves of an ocean, but should be a perpetual fountain.

Christ loved us “and gave himself up for us,” which is the kind of love that doesn’t merely consist of good intentions or feelings, but expresses itself through action. And, the love of Christ also involves acting favorably towards the undeserving. After all, Jesus said “... even sinners love those who love them” (Luke 6:32).

Christ didn’t die for us because we’re loveable or deserving. Paul made that clear when he wrote, “Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). He also wrote, “God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

When Paul commands us to “... be imitators of God,” he is saying something quite profound. To love as Christ loves requires we serve others at our own expense, and we serve those who might be unworthy recipients of our love.

When we witness someone trying to imitate the love of Christ, we tend to think they are engaged in an extraordinary act. For Christians, an act of that nature should be considered ordinary and commonplace. Such acts should, in fact, be a reflection of who we are and of what we do in the normal course of a day.

If you want to become an imitator of God's love, you have to become familiar with who God is; which is why Paul instructs us in Ephesians 5:10 to "... find out what pleases the Lord." And, in Ephesians 5:17, he tells us to "... understand what the Lord's will is."

It is by studying the example of Christ, recorded in the Bible, that we learn how to love as Christ loves. It is in the Scriptures where we learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

Ability is another facet of being an imitator of God's love. Even if we learn how to please God, even if we gain an understanding of how God loves, we're still required to have the ability to act upon this knowledge. We know in our head that we're to show love to our enemies, but are we actually able to execute that command?

We can all think of individuals who have deeply hurt us, but is there one on your list that seems most undeserving of your love and mercy? That's the one to go to. That's the one to shower with Christ's love.

How do you do it? The word of God and the Spirit of God will aid you. When the Holy Spirit directs our behavior, we can do what would otherwise be impossible. If the church is to meaningfully affect this world, our behavior will need to be marked by the love of Christ.

We can purify a sensual world if we understand church is not someplace we go, it's who we are.