

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Follow God's Example

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Scripture: Ephesians 5:1-2

¹Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children

²and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Transcript:

Well, good morning. Warm welcome to you here and those of you joining us online, glad to be together. I'm Scott Mann, one of the pastors here. I teach the Bible, I help connect us to God's larger church and I spend a bit of time with those who choose to become members of our church. But most of the time I work with the leaders of our church and we can be so grateful that God has brought so many amazing servant leaders to us. It's a privilege to work with them.

Today is the final sermon in our series about biblical leadership. All summer we've said that everyone influences others, so everyone is a leader. I have learned so much from countless people who have influenced me and some of them didn't even know I was watching and trying to follow their example. This summer, we've learned from the examples of various biblical leaders from Ananias overcoming his fear of persecution to Esther and Mordecai, bravely trusting God to empower them in a moment of crisis. Five sermons, full of good leadership principles, attitudes and practices as examples for us.

But actually all the leadership guidance in the Bible doesn't matter without the good news found in our passage. This good news provides the foundation, supporting everything else. Here's the most important thing to remember. You are God's dearly beloved child. In love, God created you in his own image. And then God came in Jesus who gave his life to reconcile you to God. We make a huge error if we skip over this great, good news. God is our ultimate leader and he embodies self-giving love. It's the gospel message of the whole Bible. In his life and death, Jesus showcased the love between the father and his beloved son and then imitated the father's love to others throughout his earthly life.

God's loving relationship with us is our wellspring. It gives life to us and provides everything we need to follow his leadership and to lead others. That's what Paul has understood in Ephesians. It is by God's sheer loving gift of grace that we are saved, not by anything we ourselves can do. Remember, there's nothing can do to make God love us more or less. Paul emphasizes that first and foremost and then keeps reminding us, God loves us as his children.

He adopts us as his children and he just keeps doing that. And because that's who he is, our passage today and each of Paul's letters is filled with ethical imperatives. Commands about how we should follow Jesus' loving example.

But grace always comes first. Again, it's the foundation for everything. Only when we've experienced grace, do we then think about how we should respond to so great a love. We love because God first loved us. So when have you experienced God's love for you, personally? Have you shared your story lately? We need to share our moments of grace with one another to honor God and also to encourage one another. As we experience God's love and grace, we begin to reflect Him more and more. Listen to how the message translates, Verse 1.

Watch what God does and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. So Paul commands us to imitate God as dearly beloved children, to reflect God's example of love. But this imperative doesn't come from a place of duty or obligation or fear. We're not blindly following a bunch of rules. We're living out our identity as God's beloved children. We're simply allowing God to rub off on us, allowing our family resemblance to be visible in our world.

Now, these people take family resemblance a bit too far. Dogs are part of the family, right? I love that picture. Our family resemblance with God is not about turtlenecks. Our family resemblance with God is reflected in our character, our attitudes and our behaviors. Scripture says, "The sun is the exact representation of the father. The visible image of the invisible God." Jesus was secure in his beloved identity and reflected the father's love in how he honored God and loved people here on earth. So first, we have great, good news. We are beloved children of God and then we have a command to imitate God's way of love.

So what is God's way of love? Well, everybody has different ideas about what love looks like but we want to know what God's word says love looks like. Paul's culture also had many ideas about love. So he grounds God's definition in the example of Jesus. We don't get to define love, Jesus defines God's way of love. Paul said, "Walk in the way of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." This is a direct reference to Jesus giving his life on the cross for our benefit. God's way of love is characterized by self-sacrificing love for the benefit of another. Jesus shows us clearly that God's love is not centered in what I want but what is best for others.

Remember, Jesus didn't want to go to the cross. Here's how Jesus himself described his feelings about it. Overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, he pleaded with the Father with tears repeatedly, for any way to avoid the cross. And then Jesus got up and walked in God's way of love, straight to the cross. He chose not to follow his own will, his own desires and he trusted the Father. Walking in God's way of love is not centered in what I want or how I feel or what's in it for me. Walking in God's love is centered in our identity as God's beloved children and in who God is. It's centered in how I can reflect Jesus and help further God's loving purposes, wherever he has placed me, right where we are.

And Jesus demonstrated that God's way of love almost always involves self-sacrifice. He didn't come to be served but to serve and to give his life for us. Pastor Dudley preached a whole sermon on Jesus' servant leadership. So I'll just remind us that Jesus cultivated a life of self-sacrificing love for God and for others. And we see the same exact thing in Paul's life, too. He tried to follow God's example of love, just like Jesus did. Well, some of you may remember when four words swept through the American church and even became a common acronym. Who remembers WWJD? That dates some of us.

What would Jesus do? Our verse today is one of the verses that gave rise to WWJD. It says, "Follow God's example just as Jesus did." Which begs the question, what would Jesus do in my situation, in my relationships, in my school or work? How would Jesus have imitated God in my real everyday life? Well, Christians have been asking this question for centuries. And you probably have stories of when you asked this question and then you did what you might not otherwise have naturally done. I know, I have. When I transferred to a new school in the fourth grade and saw a kid getting bullied, I knew Jesus would befriend him.

And so I did, even though I was not at all outgoing like that. When a new family moved in across the street, I knew Jesus would welcome them to the neighborhood. So I screwed up my courage and knocked on their door. It doesn't have to be some huge thing like going to the cross. Showing self-sacrificing love as a child of God can simply become our way of life wherever we live, work, play or learn. But who wants to sacrifice all the time? If all this self-sacrifice sounds like bad news to you consider this, for thousands of years, people who have practiced giving themselves sacrificially have overwhelmingly and consistently been the most joyful, fulfilled people with deep, rich lives and relationships.

This is exactly what Jesus said on multiple occasions, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for me will find it." Living according to the loving ways of God's kingdom is counter-cultural, it's counterintuitive, but it's an essential way that we follow Jesus' leadership and experience the abundant, joyful life he promises. And sometimes self-sacrifice, god's self-giving love, doesn't even feel like a sacrifice. My college pastor profoundly shaped the course of my life in an unexpected way. And none of us realized it at the time. He and his wife routinely invited one or two single Christians to be part of their household.

Some might say this hospitality was a sacrifice for the couple but they say it deeply enriched their lives. It was obvious to me what a gift it was to the singles. This was a great model to me of Jesus' love, which I've tried to model and follow their example by sharing a household with single Christians, now for almost 30 years. For me, this has been a huge gift, a deeper experience of community in the family of God. Sharing my home doesn't feel like a sacrifice but it does build self-sacrifice into my daily life as I have to consider my housemates and not just myself.

So first, we are beloved children of God. Second, we are to imitate god's self-sacrificing love like Jesus did. Well, how do you know when God wants you to do something specific? Pastor Dudley reminds us to follow the nudge, say it with me. Follow the nudge. Yes, exactly right. As I was preparing this sermon, I kept thinking about the self-sacrifice shown by someone in my all-in group. So I asked her to share a bit more of her story. Here's what she wrote. "In 2007, I met Barbara in the Bell Press Singles Group and we quickly became good friends. Barbara's parents had died years before and I was impressed by Barbara's care for an elderly woman she called, her second mom, until she passed away. At that time, I remember thinking, who's going to take care of Barbara when she gets older? Even then I felt a nudge. It was going to be me."

Fast forward 10 years, Barbara had a health emergency and I remembered the nudge and knew God was calling me to help. With two other friends, we became her Power of Attorney and made sure she was taken care of and that all her affairs were in order. The next year, Barbara died and named me executor of her estate. I could have turned it down, that's a lot of work but I loved my friend and knew God had appointed me to this role. I believe God gives us spiritual gifts for such a time as this, when he wants us to do something out of our comfort

zone. As Christians, we need to look out for each other, especially single people with needs that family members usually help with.

Be open to God's nudges. He empowers us to do the work he calls us to do. Well, I'm grateful she shared her story for a couple reasons. First, it reminds us that we are called to care for one another in the family of God, even as we honor our parents and our own families. My parents taught me that we all need both our family and our church family. Second, when we share our stories of God active in our lives, we glorify God, not ourselves. We draw attention to God's good work. And that encourages the family of God. We all need to hear examples of following a nudge and loving God's way.

When we form a habit of following the nudge, several good things happen. Our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit grows. We grow into our beloved identity, naturally reflecting God's character. We see God move powerfully. We experience joy and the flourishing abundant life that God intends. But there's another aspect of this that we should not lose. Don't demand God's nudge. You don't need a nudge to decide to do what Jesus would do. Just do it. The nudge is a great gift. It's deeply meaningful. The God of the Universe is giving me a personal assignment. It's a joyful rush that's awesome but we shouldn't need a specific nudge every time we need to obey what is plainly given to us already in Scripture.

Most of Christian maturity is simply getting to know God better and following Jesus' example, as our leader. The Bible reveals God to us, His character, His purposes. And the Holy Spirit uses the Bible to deepen our relationship with God through spiritual disciplines, like prayer and worship, Sabbath, fasting, giving, as Sergio preached last week. One of our church elders hosts a friend for dinner every Friday night. She didn't need a nudge to practice Christian hospitality and she doesn't feel like it's a sacrifice for her at all. So be grateful for any nudges that you get and follow them. And between nudges, as God's beloved children, do your best to imitate God's love just as Jesus would.

Well, the last line of today's passage protects us from a common pitfall of loving others. Our passage says, "Jesus' sacrifice was an offering pleasing to God." It's very easy to become wrapped up and even overwhelmed with helping other people. But Paul, again, reminds us to stay focused on pleasing God, even before the needs of other people. Pleasing his Father was Jesus's number one purpose, even more than serving others. Jesus often stopped serving people in order to spend more time with God and continue following the Father's will for Him. The Bible constantly reminds us to keep things in the proper order. We love and serve God first, then we love and serve other people.

This passage and many others remind us to seek first, the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, not our own wisdom or preferences or even the needs of other people. Well, the Bible has much more to say about leadership and if you're hungry for more biblical leadership content, you can join me online this Thursday and Friday at the Global Leadership Summit. It's one of my spiritual disciplines to develop my leadership. If you want to check it out, just call or email me at church. Well, this sermon series on leadership started and ended with Jesus.

We try to be a Jesus church, majoring on the majors and minoring on the minors. What's major? The good news that Jesus loves you unconditionally just as you are and then invites us to follow Jesus and imitate God's self-sacrificing love in our world. If you've never accepted God's love and chosen to follow Jesus as your leader and forgiver, you can pray and do that

right now. And if that's you, come and talk to a pastor upfront or chat with a prayer minister online. We'd love to help you begin following Jesus.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, as God's dearly beloved children follow God's example and walk in the way of love just as Jesus loved us and gave himself up for us, as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Amen. Father God, thank you for loving us. Help us Jesus to follow your leadership and trust the Holy Spirit to empower our love. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read Ephesians 4: 1-3,17, 5:1-2 and answer the below questions with your friends, family or All In small group.

Ice Breaker Question:

- What is your favorite flavor of ice cream (or other summer treat)?

Opening Questions:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions – Together read Ephesians 4:1-3,17, 5:1-2 and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following

- What helps you more deeply believe you are God's beloved child?
- What helps you imitate God's self-giving love in your daily life? Briefly share a story as an offering to God.

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.