

Be Who You Are

Ephesians 4:29-5:2 (NIV)

²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. ¹ Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and 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.

What do you think of when you hear the word "imitation"? Maybe you think that this is something or someone trying to be the real thing, but it's not. It's faking it. And we don't want imitations; we want the genuine article, right? Then again, I look in the food aisle and wonder what really is the difference in taste between an Oreo and a Kroger sandwich crème cookie or Del Monte vs. Great Value green beans? For the cheaper price, the imitation does the job just as well, right? Then there is a different side to this where we say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, that imitation is a good thing. Or maybe this is said to justify copying someone. Then again, we laugh and pay people to do imitations of others. We like imitations. So, is being an imitation a good or bad thing?

Maybe this leads us to a much bigger question about who you are. Are you the real, authentic you or are you an imitation? Part of us says we need to be our real, authentic self. To be an imitation is basically being a hypocrite, right? That's bad. No one wants to be a hypocrite. At the same time, if you are being authentic, actually acknowledging who you are and what you do, where does that put you? Are you someone who lets unwholesome talk come out of your mouth – slander, all sorts of malice, hate talk - or do you speak only what is helpful for building others up? Do you have any bitterness in your attitude and actions, or only kindness? Have you had bouts of rage and anger and brawling, or have you only ever exhibited compassion? Do you hold grudges, wanting someone to pay you back for how they have wronged you, or do you always forgive, chose not to demand them to pay back how they wronged you?

We want our authentic selves to be the one who only speaks what is helpful for building others up, people who are always kind and compassionate to others, forgiving instead of holding grudges. But are you? We're not defined only by our best days, when we have had 8 hours of sleep, when we feel good, when things are going well, when your hair lays just the way you want it to. We are also defined by the days when we haven't slept well, when we are in a lot of pain, when a lot of bad things are crashing down on us. We are defined when we lash out at people when we are stressed out, frazzled, wronged, treating them without kindness or compassion. So, who are you?

Sometimes we do identify ourselves with our sins. We call the disciple Thomas, "Doubting Thomas" instead of "Courageous Thomas," even though you have an instance of both in the Bible. We identify with Paul and take up the moniker "chief of sinners," that we are the worst, as if that's the only way Paul ever referred to himself. It's like we make our own nametags with a label of our sins, the sins that really stick with us. Maybe this is even more on our minds following last week's Bible readings where we were commanded by God to point out sins. With the sins we really did, we feel worthless, like failures. We feel unloved, that no one wants to be around us because of what we have done. If we are our sins, then our authentic selves are pretty miserable.

But are your sins who you are? As you heard Paul's words of exhortation and guidance today, did you just hear all the things that you fail to do, all the things you regret doing, all the unkind words, all the words that did not build others up, all your slander and malice and hate and anger? Was that why Paul wrote this to us, to see how authentically sinful we are?

Actually, when you reread Paul's words, he is telling us not to have any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths and to get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and every form of malice because that is NOT who we are. Listen again to God through the Apostle Paul as he reveals our true identity. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." (verse 30) "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (verse 32) "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children..." (chapter 5 verse 1) Did you hear who you are?

You were sealed by the Holy Spirit of God. This sealing was something that people did in the first century to show ownership. It was used as a signet ring on wax, sealing a letter to show who was sending it. It was used as a brand on cattle or tattoo on a soldier or slave. Does that make you cringe? Do you not like the idea that God has claimed ownership of you, that you prize your identity as being free from all, that you can do whatever you want whenever you want?

But how did God claim ownership of us? It was not with gold or silver but with the holy life of Jesus Christ and his innocent suffering and death. He saw who you really were, the authentic self of ours who admitted that we are chief of sinners. Seeing this, God decided that he would pay the price himself to give you a new identity, one freed from all your sins, one where you would belong not to your sin but to a God who thought so much of you that he would live for you and die for you.

Take that in. Value is based on what someone is willing to pay or give for something or someone. Do you know anyone else who not just said that they would give their life for you, but someone who actually did, someone who spent their entire lives from conception to death living it entirely for you? 33 years, every second of every day, lived for you. Then, he gave himself over to the most horrific form of capital punishment in human history, meant to be excruciatingly long. In fact, that word excruciating, is derived from the word "crucifixion," a word the Romans invented to acknowledge the slow, painful suffering that happens on the cross. Jesus paid that for you. That's how valued you are to him.

You were bought by the life and the death of Jesus Christ, who is the only one who could pay the price to change our identity. Since Christ gave his life for ours, we are forgiven by him. That means that our entire debt of sin, all the things that we had identified ourselves with – the anger, the rage, the brawling, the slander, the malice, the unwholesome talk, the grudges - those are gone. He paid the price and does not call us to settle the account with him, just like the king who forgave the massive debt of one of his servants. You are forgiven by God in Christ. That's who you are.

This forgiveness was given both through the message of God living for you and dying for you as well as through his gift of baptism. There he washes away all your sins based on the price paid for by Jesus. At the same time, the Holy Spirit clothed you with Jesus' perfectly lived life. You are perfect in God's sight. That's who you are.

At your baptism God also put his name on you – in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This is the sealing, his mark of ownership on you as one who is valued, forgiven, covered in Jesus' perfection. God adopted you into his family. This means that you are a dearly loved child of God.

Paul tells us that this is who we are, this is your identity: sealed by the Holy Spirit, forgiven and perfected in Christ, a dearly loved child belonging to God and his family. You are not an imitation of those things; you are those things. This is genuinely who God has made you to be and no force in heaven or on earth can take that away from you or invalidate it.

Since this is who you are, guess what. Now we want to live in line with our identity given to us by God. This is why we watch what we say, that we don't let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths. This is why we speak only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that what we say would benefit everyone who listens. This is why we get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and every form of malice. This is why we are kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. This is who we are. We are not God, but we sure do imitate him, reflecting to people our identity in him.

What about when we struggle with our identity? What about when more unwholesome talk comes out of our mouths or we start fights or hold bitterness in our hearts? We go back to what God has done for us. We look again at his love and sacrifice for us, how he gave himself up for us. We keep going back to the Bible: to see Jesus, to see the identity that he has given us. We also go there to see how he loved us so that we can imitate his love in this world to others, so that they see that we are different because God has made us different.

Brothers and sisters, we are imitators of God, but not because we are the poor man's version of God. We're imitators of God because God the Holy Spirit has sealed us with Christ's payment, forgiven us by Christ's perfect life and sacrifice, made us his dearly loved children through this message, through his gift of baptism. Imitate the love of our God which made you who you are. Amen.