

Imitators of God

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon emphasizes that true Christian conduct arises from our relationship with God through grace and is exemplified by imitating Christ's love and character.

Scripture: Ephesians 5:1

Topics: "Christian Identity", "Imitating God"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes that Christian conduct is a reflection of our relationship with God, which is established through grace and not by our works. He explains that believers are called to imitate God as dear children, showcasing His character in the world, and that this imitation flows from being in a new relationship with Him. Darby highlights the importance of understanding our identity in Christ, being quickened together with Him, and the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering us to live out our faith. He warns against the misconception that duties precede relationship, asserting that true Christian duties arise from our status as children of God. Ultimately, our goal is to represent Christ in our actions, embodying His love and light in a world that often stands in opposition to Him.

Transcript

Christian conduct, as does every duty, flows from the place we are brought into; and is spoken of in scripture in different ways. Its motive and energy we find in Philippians 3 - Christ in glory as the object we are following after, and in pursuing which everything else is counted as loss and dung. And we get the spirit of our conversation in Philippians ii., and the pattern, too, even Christ come down, and even going down, in lowliness. And then, as representing Christ in the world, we are the "epistle of Christ." It does not say we ought to be such, but we are. (2 Cor. 3:3.) The epistle may be sadly blotted by us, but still, that is what we are "manifestly declared to be." Here, in Ephesians, we are viewed as brought into God's presence, holy and without blame; that is, with a nature and character that suit Him, and are the reflection of what He is. And we are seen sitting in the heavenlies "in Christ;" not running to get into glory, as in Philippians iii. Moreover, we are in the same relationship to God as Christ is, and hence, Christian conduct is spoken of in this epistle as what suits this place, and flows from it.

Through the grace and power of God I am brought into His presence, not seeking to get into it, and my duties flow from the place I am in. People speak as though men were on probation, and the day of judgment would prove how it will turn out with them, whether they will be saved or lost. This is all wrong. Of course each is tested individually, by the presentation of the gospel; but the gospel comes to man and

addresses him as one already lost, and needing salvation. Men have not to wait till the judgment to know how it will turn out. It has already turned out that I am a lost sinner. God turned man out of paradise when he had sinned; and as far as he could man has turned God out of the world when He came into it in grace, in Christ. Of course God can come into it in power, and will do so; but as far as man could he has turned Him out. Man is now lost in himself, but God has acted in grace, so that he who believes in Jesus is saved; just the opposite; and it does not need the judgment to prove either the one or the other. Judgment is for my work (Rev. 20:12), and on that ground all are already lost. But salvation is of grace, and is God's work. What hath God wrought! (Num. 23:23.) God takes up man as dead in sins, and quickens him: he has a new life, and is "made the righteousness of God," being brought to God, and set in His presence, in the same relationship as Christ.

Christian duties (and there are such), flow from the new relationship thus formed by grace, and in Christ, and we must first be in the relationship before the duties are there. People make a grievous blunder here: putting the duties as a means of getting into relationship with God. Such a thing would never be thought of in natural things. Men's minds are clear enough about their own matters; all is simple to them: but when they come to divine things, and having to do with God, all sorts of blunders are made. How absurd it would be for all you people to get to be my children! You might be never so earnest and diligent; but no amount of earnestness would avail to form the relationship. But if you were my children, all would be simple enough, and the duty, too, to act like children. You cannot fulfil the duties of a child till you are one, or show the love of one either. How unbecoming of a servant to jump up and kiss his master! Quite proper in a child. And if we are children of God, then we are to behave ourselves as such; but our duties as children of God do not commence till we are in that place. Of course there are duties that we have as men, but on that ground we are lost. God makes us His children, and then says, Now imitate your Father. "Be ye followers [imitators] of God, as dear children." We are brought into God's presence, and we are to go out into, and through, the world, and show whose children we are: to show His character, and "walk worthy" of Him. "To walk worthy of God" (1 Thess. 2:12.) "Worthy of the Lord." (Col. 1:10.) "Worthy of the vocation." (Eph. 4:1.) God Himself is our pattern, and we are to imitate Him. He loved us when we were enemies, and He causes His rain to descend "on the evil and on the good," and we are to act in the same manner toward men. I am to be kind to the unthankful and to the evil, for instance: so here, "tender-hearted, forgiving," and why? because my Father is. I am to forgive as, in Christ, He has forgiven me. In all things I am to look to Him, as revealed in Christ, as my pattern, and imitate Him.

But all this, of course, flows not only from the fact of a new relationship, but there is a "new man." The nature we had, as children of Adam, was proved to be utterly bad, and nothing would do but the entire setting of it aside, and a new "creation." In this Epistle men are seen as "dead in sins;" not alive in sins, as in Romans. And Christ goes down to the lower parts of the earth, putting away our sins on His way there, namely, on the Cross. So that before He lies there, our sins have all been atoned for; and then God comes in, and raises up Christ, and us with Him, our sins being all left behind. It is not simply that we are quickened, but we are quickened "together with Christ." (Eph. 2:5.) When it is simply quickening, as in John 5, Christ is the Quickener; but in Ephesians, Christ is seen in death, where He had in grace put Himself for us. We were there through sin and disobedience. He came there in grace and obedience. And now, as quickened together with Him, we are, so to speak, raised by God out of His grave, and taken up into the heavenly places in Him. It is a new creation, the sins of the "old man" being all put away and gone. In Colossians we get the same thought: "Quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses." (Col. 2:13.) It is a new creation, and the trespasses all forgiven.

We have put off the old man, and put on the new. In principle we have done this in Christ's death; and now we realise it in knowing that we have died with Him. It is carried into effect in practice in bearing about in our body the dying of the Lord Jesus. The new man is after God (Eph. 4:24), that is, it is like God, and is "created in righteousness and true holiness." Adam was created in innocence; neither righteousness nor holiness. Holiness supposes intelligence as to good and evil, though absolute and perfect separation from evil. Adam had not the knowledge of good and evil, and so is never said in scripture to be holy; nor righteous either, because righteousness is a judgment of, or walking in, ways consistent with the obligations in which we or others stand, and involves also the knowledge of good and evil. Adam was, of course, sinless, for this is one respect in which he was made in the "likeness of God." But the "new man" is "renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him." (Col. 3:10.) The old man is put off in the Christian - in him who has the truth as it is in Jesus, and the new man, which is after God, is put on. God Himself is the pattern, and it is in Christ that we learn what He is.

We have got a new life, and the Holy Ghost in us, as the power to be followers of God.

In Romans 7 we have the experience of a man with the new nature, "delighting in the law of God after the inward man", but without power in the Holy Ghost; and he finds the old is master of the new. It is one who, as to his experience, is under the law, not knowing redemption or liberty in the Holy Ghost, and learning what the flesh is; and it makes him cry, "Oh! wretched man that I am," and long for deliverance. He does not say, How can I get forgiveness? or, how can I get better? but he wants some one to take him clean out of the place of bondage and helplessness where he finds himself, and says, "Who shall deliver me?"

The moment he comes to this he finds it all done, and exclaims, "I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." There are three things learnt in that chapter. First, that there is no good in the flesh. Second, that it was not himself, but sin dwelling in him, that did the evil (ver. 17): he learns to distinguish between the "I" and the "sin that dwelleth in me." Third, he yet finds the law of sin in his members too strong for him; for he always does the evil, though he wills the good.

Nothing will do but to be taken out of it; and this is what he realises in the next chapter. "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death;" and "Ye are not in the flesh, but in Spirit." (Rom. 8:2.) But here the man is looked at as "in Christ," not in the flesh, and the Spirit of God dwells in him, producing righteousness, which is different from the sin dwelling in him, preventing him from performing the good he consents unto and delights in.

But, as we have seen, besides the new man, there is, in order to our being imitators of God, the Holy Ghost dwelling in us. We are told (Eph. 4:30), "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God whereby ye are sealed" &c. It is not only that there is a new nature, but the Holy Ghost comes into the vessel, as we see in the case of the cleansed leper, in Leviticus 14; and leprosy in scripture is a standing type of sin. He was washed in water, sprinkled with blood, and then anointed with oil.

The water is the word applied in power; Jesus said to the disciples in John 15, "Now ye are clean through the word that I have spoken unto you." The word of Christ had been applied to them in power through grace, and by the Holy Ghost, and they were washed. Then we have the blood of Christ applied to the conscience; and next, as here in Ephesians, we are sealed with the Holy Ghost, the "holy anointing oil," the "unction from the Holy One." And this is the second great principle of Christian practice, as brought before us here.

We have the "new man," the new nature from God, and according to God; and also the Holy Ghost, God Himself, comes and owns the person. He seals him and abides there, and we are not to grieve Him, but to walk as though God were seen by us at our side. Everything should comport with God's presence in us; and if we are walking with a good conscience, according to our measure of light; we are then free to think of Christ. The Holy Ghost occupies us with Christ, and leads us on in the knowledge of Him. (Eph. 1:17.)

And it is in this there is growth; as to acceptance and relationship there is no growth; all is perfect from the first, but in the fuller knowledge of Christ, and conformity to Him, we are led on by the Holy Ghost. If walking up to the light we have received, we have, in coming into His presence, communion with Him, and we enjoy and grow in the knowledge of Him. If, on the contrary, we are not walking godly, the Holy Ghost will make us think of ourselves and judge ourselves.

So when we are, not only living in the Spirit, but walking in the Spirit, all we are and do will represent Christ. His aim and purpose is that we should be, in all the moral features of His character, the reproduction of Himself. See Philippians 2:15, where every clause may be applied to Christ, though it is given, as the Spirit's desire, for every Christian. "Blameless and harmless" - so was Christ. "The sons of God" - He was the Son of God. "Without rebuke" - so was He, and so on.

It is a wonderful thing to know myself accepted in Christ before God, that He represents me there; but if He represents me before God, I am to represent Him before the world. "At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and / in you" (John 14:20.) You say, I am in Christ before God, "accepted in the beloved." Well, thank God, it is so: I do not doubt your acceptance, but if you are in Christ, He is in you, and let one, let the world see Him and nothing else.

The new man then (the old being put off), and the Holy Ghost are subjectively that in which we walk; where is then the pattern we walk by? God Himself, God in a man, in Christ; and in Him we get a love that gives up Himself, and that for His enemies. This goes infinitely beyond the law, which only requires that a man should "love his neighbour as himself." If every one did that, it would make of this world a sort of paradise, but that is the measure for man as a creature, mutually recognising each his neighbour's claim.

It does not suit a sinful world. Every one does not love me as much as he loves himself, and if I am to represent God in such a world as this, I must have a kind of love that will get above people hating me, and this we see in Christ. And we are to be "imitators" of God as seen in Him, "as dear children." Not in order to be such, but as such. The same in Colossians 3:12, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved," not in order to be the elect, etc., but as the elect.

The Lord Jesus (in this love we are called to imitate), gave Himself "for us," but it was "unto God." (Chap. 5:2.) God was His object, though it was for us He gave Himself. Divine love, as manifested in this world, takes up its object by its need, and looks at it in grace, and above its evil, so it was in Christ. As having become a man, He must have an object, and God was that object. Man must have an object, to keep him free from and above the evil of those he occupies himself with.

What a man loves, and makes his object, gives him his true moral character. If he loves money, he is a covetous man. If power, an ambitious man; so with pleasure, or dress, it is the same: we are morally characterised by what engages our thoughts and affections. Suppose, for instance, I love a great rogue, I seek his company for its own sake, I make him my object - my affection is a low one. If a beautiful character, the affection is a noble one. Christ offered Himself for us, that was divine love, but it was to God: was the rule and perfection of man.

Christ is our measure: God has now given His Son that we may be like Him not kept back the fruit, lest we should become as God, as the serpent insinuated to Eve. "Walk as children of light." (Ver. 8.) Here we see our relation to God as "Light." He is said to be "Love" and "Light." (John 1.) He is not said to be anything else, as to His nature. He has righteousness, holiness, majesty, almighty power, etc., these are His attributes; but love and light He is. Now, we have been told above to be imitators of Him, and walk in love: here we are addressed as children of light, which we must be, if children of God, who is such, and we are to walk as children of light, and Christ is the measure of both to us.

Though both these essential names of God are used, we are not said to be love, because God is sovereign in goodness, and that does not suit us, but obedience in the walk of love, as Christ. But light we are said to be, because we are partakers of the divine nature in its purity and consequent manifestation of all impurity around. And while the light, shining out, reproveth the "works of darkness," we are to be bringing forth the "fruit of the light" not "Spirit." (Ver. 9.) Light is perfectly pure, does not mix with the darkness, but makes manifest everything that is not of it.

Walking as children of light, "proving what is acceptable unto the Lord." We do not learn all at once what is acceptable to Him: it is a thing in which we make progress. Is this our simple purpose? To prove what is acceptable? (Rom. xii. 2.) In buying or selling, or any common act of life, our question should be, Is this acceptable to the Lord? In purchasing an article of dress, it should not be simply, will this suit me? but is it acceptable to the Lord? Does it suit Him?

In verse 14, a sleeping man is called to "awake," not a dead man: he is a believer, but alas! in what a state. A man, when he is asleep, is no better than a dog asleep. They are both insensible to everything around. Dog and man snore together. But when the believer, who has sunk down into worldly associations, is thus aroused (for he is not dead, but among the dead, and grievous to say, apparently one of them), nothing short of Christ Himself is his light. "Arise from among the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." The light is there when he awakes, and Christ is the measure of it for him. We must have an object. Sanctification is objective, and not subjective only. A man is holy to something, that is, it is not merely a state in itself, though it be such, in ordering and regulating my ways; but in the occupation of heart and mind with an object, my heart is consecrated to that object, and so sanctified, one outside of me, into whose image I am transformed as I contemplate His glory. Christ should ever be that object, and the secret of real progress is personal attachment to Himself. Mary Magdalene is an example of this; others waited till sunrise to come to the sepulchre, but she came "while it was yet dark." It was ignorance, of course, to seek the living among the dead, but it was ignorant affection. She tells the disciples, and they come too, and then go back to their homes - to their breakfast: but will this do for Mary? No; she has found her way back to the sepulchre again. All the world to her was but an empty sepulchre, if Jesus were not there, and her heart, full of Him, was lonely in it; and to her Jesus shows Himself, sending her with that wondrous message to His brethren, which told them of the new relationship in which they now stood - He was ascending to His Father and theirs, His God and theirs. (John xx.)

The woman in the Pharisee's house, in Luke vii., is another example. Her heart was won by Christ - light had shown her her sins, but love and grace in Christ had attracted her, bringing her into that fine Pharisee's house, a poor sinner that, where Jesus was not, would have been ashamed to show her face anywhere. Look at Simon! What does he know about Jesus? He is pitch dark: has got God in his house and does not know it. But the "woman of the city" knows, and Jesus answers her faith. She loved much, and she got from the Lord those blessed words of forgiveness, salvation, and peace: "Thy sins are forgiven;" "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace"

This attachment of heart to Christ is what we so much need. Not mere intelligence in truth, which may puff up, but that knowledge of Christ by the Holy Ghost which makes Him my object. And now in company with this blessed One we have to walk through the world, finding a way in which we can glorify and represent Him, and enjoy fellowship with Him. But how is it we have got to find a way? Because we are not yet at home. Adam had not to find any way, but simply to abide in the place where God had put him, and enjoy it.¹

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