

While I was out of town this week, I called the boys at the end of the day to ask how their day went. On two separate times, when I was talking to Logan, I could hear Cameron in the background just repeating Logan's answers to my questions. I would ask how camp was, Logan would say, "Good," then Cameron would say "Good." I asked what he did at camp, Logan said, "We went to the Boardwalk," then Cameron would say, "We went to the Boardwalk." Did you ever do that to your siblings or friends? It used to drive me crazy when my brother would echo me, and I could tell that it was really aggravating Logan as well.

We've all heard the saying that "Imitation is the highest form of flattery," but sometimes we don't appreciate someone copying us. Usually when we imitate someone, we do it because we admire the person, we look up to them so much that we want to be like them. But, Cameron's intention was not that, in this case.

Cameron does, however, look up to Micah and wants to be like him. He wants to play the same video games. He wants to sit next to him, to be close to him, when they play together. Micah, for the most part, encourages him and makes him feel valuable, so Cameron "worships" Micah, in a sense. He wants to be just like his big brother.

The difference between these two stories is the intention of the imitation. One was because he thought he was being funny, and the other was because he truly wants to be like his brother. That got me thinking about what Paul is really teaching in this "letter to live by" when he says to be imitators of God.

Remember last week, we talked about the divisiveness in the body of Christ in Ephesus. Paul hints at the atmosphere again by giving a long list of things not to do: Don't lie, don't steal, don't let anger take root or allow it to lash out at people,

don't be bitter, don't slander one another, and don't be malicious in their actions. With a list like this, who would want to be part of this body of Christ? Anyone want to be a member of the First Church of Ephesus? I wouldn't! Why would I want to be part of a faith community that tears me down instead of lifts me up?

That's Paul's point. He reminds them that this was how they lived in their old life before Christ. But, now, in their new life, they imitate Christ's actions, not their old actions.

This passage may be easy to understand as Paul creates a contrast between the old vs. the new actions, and we may be tempted to reduce it to – Do this, Don't do that, or a list of rules to live by. It is important to learn "right from wrong," and, yes, these sins do cause us and others harm. We are not building up the body of Christ; we're tearing it down.

But, I don't know about you, but my faith does not come alive for me, doesn't feel real, or even doable, if I constantly live by a list of rules. Don't get me wrong – it's good to pause in the heated moments and think about our actions when we find ourselves in conflict and hurtful situations. When we want to hold on to that anger, it's good to stop and think, "Ok, Jesus didn't let his anger tear people down. When he was angry, he didn't make it worse by lashing out physically or verbally." Remember, when Jesus was so angry that his father's house became a marketplace instead of a place of worship, he flipped over the tables. He didn't punch people in the face or call them names or maliciously slander or argue, to prove he is right or to get the upper hand. He kept his anger under control.

So, it's good to stop and think about our actions, but I think the true lesson Paul is teaching is the reason why we stop and think. What is our motivation? What is our intention in the imitation? Do we imitate

Christ's actions of love, compassion, and forgiveness because we know we should or because we truly want to be more Christ-like?

From my own experience, if I do something because I know I should, then I'm really not imitating Christ. Because it's not coming from a place of love; it's not sincere or heart-felt. I still hold on to the anger and hurt. But, when I truly want to be more Christ-like, then I can let go of the hurt and anger and truly love and forgive. It's real and sincere.

When we truly want to be more Christ-like, we love Christ because we know he loves us, we look up to him, and we want to be just like him. Christ did not want us to participate in a legalistic religion that focused on following all the rules for the sake of the rules. Following the rules because we know we should doesn't transform our hearts. Christ wants us to be so close to him that his actions automatically rub off on us. We are transformed when we instinctively echo Christ's actions without thinking.

The real lesson in this "letter to live by" is that we should be so laser-focused on Christ, that we don't think about doing the right thing, we just do it. It becomes natural. When we see an opportunity to build up someone, we do. And, when we don't know what else to do, we love. It's not something we do; it is who we are. When we imitate Christ's love, we become more Christ-like. As the body of Christ, we live a life of love. I will leave you with this question that you can answer for yourself: Do you imitate Christ because you know you should or because you want to be more Christ-like?

Loving and forgiving God, we want to imitate you. We want to love and forgive others, and be compassionate to others' needs and situations, but sometimes we slip into our old selves and do the opposite. We

hold on to anger and hurt and use it to hurt others in return. Help us, Compassionate God, to let go of our old actions. Thank you for loving us, forgiving us, and being compassionate to us in our trials and struggles. Help us to echo that love with others. Fill us with your loving and forgiving presence, so that it just pours out of us. Place a desire within us that longs to imitate you and to become more Christ-like. We want to live a life rooted in your love. Amen.