

## NO ORDINARY PENNY

24<sup>th</sup> in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"  
**Ephesians 5:1-2**

I suspect you are going to think that Laurie and I are as dumb as a block of wood after I tell you this, but I want to relate to you an incident that occurred in our lives this week. We went to Mission Bay one day and took our nice beach chairs that we got at Costco. These are great chairs, but we have one problem with them. We've never really mastered the art of closing them up when we're done using them. So at the end of the day as we were packing up, we faced the chore of packing up the chairs. We both pushed and prodded them in a plethora of ways but had no success whatsoever. Laurie had discussed this problem with a friend who also has some of these chairs. She said you just have to kind of flip them over and toss them down and they'll fold up. So we tried that repeatedly to no avail. Laurie began laughing uncontrollably. I thought she was laughing at me at first, but then she said, "I just thought if someone was watching us they would think that we have to be two of the biggest idiots who have ever been born." I had to agree. I'm sure anyone watching us would have thought, "Dude, you just have to be a little smarter than the chair. It's not that hard." In despair I googled how to fold up those chairs, and was relieved to find that there actually was a video where a guy demonstrated the simple trick that is key to folding them. It relieved me because there wouldn't be such a video unless some other people had the same problem we had. It also meant there was some hope it would help us solve the problem. I watched what the guy on the video did, and thought it couldn't possibly be that easy, but then I imitated his actions, and voila! The chair just about folded itself up. It's amazing how helpful it is to have an example to follow. That's also true in life.

What is this new life that we have been given in Christ like? Two weeks ago we looked at the Four Taboos. Paul began by telling us there are some things that human beings habitually do that people who are transformed by Christ must not do. But what should we do? Beginning in 4:30 Paul tells us some positive steps we should take. Remember that in Paul's original letter there was no chapter break at the end of chapter 4. The context flowed smoothly from 4:32 right into 5:1. This is a continuation of the positive that goes with the negatives of the Four Taboos.

## CHOOSE THE BEST MODEL

It is astounding watching young children learn. We all know that they start out seeming to be almost a blank slate. They know how to eat, sleep, cry, eliminate bodily waste and spit up. That's about it. At some point they develop the ability to think. But have you ever considered what thought is without language? I expect someone has studied that issue, but

I have a hard time comprehending what that would even mean. Over time children learn to walk and begin to understand what is said to them, then they begin talking.

The amazing thing about this is that they learn just by watching. The process of acquiring a language is fascinating to me. I have studied, at least to some degree, three languages beside English. At this point I would unabashedly tell you that I am fluent in... exactly none of them. I can translate Ancient Greek, but it takes me a long time. And I would not have a prayer of understanding it in conversation or speaking it. And that's the best of the three. In high school and college I took German, and I've got next to zero of that left. No one teaches two-year olds grammar. They don't know anything about nouns and verbs, to say nothing of participles. They aren't taught sentence structure. Yet somehow they learn the meanings of words and then how to put them together, and they do it purely by watching people and listening to them.

Pretty much everything we learn, we learn from other people. Many animals have instinctive behaviors. An instinctive behavior is one that an animal will display the first time it encounters a particular stimulus and does so without ever having seen that behavior demonstrated. A kangaroo rat will exhibit a particular evasive jump the first time and every time it hears the rattle of a rattlesnake. Honey bees after finding food upon returning to the hive will perform a particular dance that tells other bees where the food is, even though the bee has never seen that done before.

But humans have few instincts. Babies have the startle reflex, and early on if you put something in a baby's palm it will grip it, but we don't have much beyond that. This means that we learn most of our behaviors, and we learn them from other people. So much of what we do is not even close to obvious. How do we learn how to drive a car? How do we learn how to set up a WiFi network in our home? That kind of thing seems to be almost instinctive for some young people, but I assure you that was not so for me.

So we learn from other people. Furthermore, we all have some kind of image of what we should be and do. Before we ever do anything we have to have a vision of what that is and how we will do it. We form some mental model. And that is true of how we live our lives. We may not have it explicitly stated, it may be even at a subconscious level, but somewhere we have a mental model for our lives. Often that model is derived from having seen other people and how they lived.

The question is, what should be our model? Suppose you are a young man who loves football. You are tall, athletic and have a great throwing arm. You want to be a quarterback. But what is your image of what a qb should be? You will look to the NFL for models. So who will you model your game after? You could choose Blake Bortles, former

Jacksonville quarterback, who last year was the lowest rated non-rookie quarterback in the league. Or you could choose Kirk Cousins, a decent quarterback who has a huge guaranteed contract to play for Minnesota. Or you could choose Tom Brady, arguably the greatest of all time. Which of those would you choose? That's a slam dunk. Most would choose Brady, because he's the best.

In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, the late Dallas Willard, philosopher and professor at USC, wrote, "Who teaches you? Whose disciple are you? Honestly. One thing is sure. You are somebody's disciple. You learned how to live from somebody else. There are no exceptions to this rule." Since we must imitate, who should we be imitating?

Would it not be reasonable to choose the best? Wouldn't it make sense to live the best possible life and be the best possible person? To do that you must choose the best model to follow. In verse 1 Paul tells us to do just that. He says we should follow God's example. Literally we should imitate God. In other words, watch God, then do what he does. Be like him and live like he does.

This raises several questions. First, we are not God, so how in the world are we supposed to be like him? He's all powerful and we're not. He's all knowing and we're not. He's perfect and we're not, and never will be. So how are we supposed to be like him? Second, wasn't it the desire to be like God the thing that got Satan into trouble, and later Adam and Eve as well? Isn't wanting to be like God, the center of all things, the cause of all the misery of the human condition?

Theologians make a distinction that is important for us to remember. They say that God has communicable attributes and incommunicable attributes. What does that mean? Think of a communicable disease. That's a disease that you can share. Other people can get that disease from you. I recently read an article that surprised me. It was about staying healthy while traveling. One point it made is that you need to separate myth from reality. It said you need to understand that the idea that the risk of catching an illness in an airplane because of the air in the plane is not actually true. The air in an airliner is circulated at a much higher rate than in most places and it is run through filters, so it is actually healthier. The article said that the place you most often catch diseases while traveling is in the airport.

The point is that there are diseases that are communicable. When Laurie and I took care of our granddaughters a couple of months ago and both of them had colds, we felt doomed. Sure enough, a couple of days after being in close contact with them when they were sick, we both got colds. The cold is a communicable disease. If you visit someone in the cardiac

ward of the hospital you don't have to worry about catching heart disease from them, because heart disease is not communicable.

God has attributes that are not communicable. His omniscience (meaning he is all knowing) is one. So is his omnipotence. Recently Laurie and I were on a walk and we saw some men working on a street construction project involving installing new cables underground. I remarked on the fact that I could never have envisioned the systems of power generation and delivery that bring us power, or of cable that bring us television and internet. I said that there are a lot of people who are way smarter than me in this world. Laurie said, "But you are smart in ways they are not. And you're not God." I said, "No, I'm not, but I just know there are people way smarter than me." She said again, "Well you're not God." I said, "I know, I'm just marveling at how smart some people are." She said, "You're not God." At this point it seemed like she was camping out on that message. She was being overly insistent on getting that point across. But the fact is, she was correct about an incontrovertible fact. I am not God and will never share his incommunicable attributes. That is not possible for human beings.

But God does have communicable attributes that he can share with us. His love, patience, goodness, wisdom, kindness, justice are all communicable. They are character qualities that we can also share in. Our problems come when we try to act as though we have those incommunicable qualities. Only good will come from us seeking to be loving, good, kind, patient, just like God is. That is the best possible way to live. But won't our imitation of him fall far short of who he is?

Our son, Toby, spent a summer in China on a mission trip when he was in college. He and his buddies bought a lot of souvenirs of that trip, so many that they did not have room for them in their suitcases. So they went in together and bought a suitcase to pack them in. It was a Ralph Lauren suitcase, complete with that company's logo. It was a very nice bag, and they were able to buy it for an absurdly low price. You know why the price was so low. While the bag seemed very nice, they knew, as you do, that it was an imitation. It was a knockoff of the real thing. It did the job, getting their souvenirs home, but it fell apart shortly thereafter. So aren't we going to be like that bag, cheap imitations? Yes, compared to God we will at our best be cheap imitations. But in being cheap imitations of God, we become the best possible version of ourselves, something much greater than we would ever be, and we experience more of life as it should be, than we ever would have otherwise.

#### REMEMBER WHO'S YOUR DADDY

There is some critical information at the end of verse 1. We are to imitate God "as dearly beloved children." That last phrase tells us two crucial things. First, we are children of God. He's our daddy.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 Jesus taught his followers how to pray. Do you remember how he started his sample prayer? “Our Taskmaster in heaven, hallowed be your name.” Oh, wait, that’s not right. It was, “Our Judge in heaven, hallowed be your name.” What? That’s not right either? Oh, right, it was, “Our disciplinarian in heaven...” Hmm, that doesn’t sound right. Okay, I have it now, “Our Great Unknown.” Nope, that’s not it. Uh, “Our Creator in heaven”? No, it was none of those. Jesus said fundamentally our relationship to God is this, “Our Father in heaven.”

God wants us to understand that he is our Father, and he wants us to relate to him as his children. Galatians 3:26 says, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” In 2 Corinthians 6:18 we see God saying, “I will be a father to you. And you shall be called sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.” In John 1:12 John wrote, “But as many as received him (Jesus), to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name.”

What did you do to become a child of your father? I thought back to all I did to become my dad’s son. Here’s what I came up with: zero. I didn’t do anything. I didn’t earn it, I didn’t deserve it, and I had no part in it coming about. I was a child of my mother and father solely through their choices and actions. And that’s kind of what happened with us becoming children of God. He did the work for us. We didn’t earn it. We didn’t make it happen. He chose us, according to Ephesians 1:4, he made us alive in Christ when we were dead in our sins, according to Ephesians 2:5, and he did all of this as a gift of grace, according to Ephesians 2:8-9.

I was blessed with a gift that everyone wishes they had, and some do. It was a Dad who was what a Dad ought to be. I grew up with no Daddy issues whatsoever because I had a Dad who loved his sons, was an example for them and who always cared about them. He encouraged us and supported us. Yes, he disciplined us, and he guided us in the right direction, but his love was unconditional. We would always be his children no matter what we did.

There was a moment when I embarrassed my dad when I was in high school. It was at a baseball game. I have mentioned before I almost never got a chance to play. One year early in the season the coach actually let me start a game, basically because it was not an important game in any way. He batted me last in the order. My first time up I popped out. My next turn to bat didn’t come around until well into the middle of the game. I came up with two men on base, our first chance to actually score some runs. As I stepped up to the plate the coach called time out, and informed me and the umpire that he was going to put in a guy to pinch hit for me. He wasn’t even going to give me a chance. I was really upset. As

I headed back to the dugout in disgust I flung my bat up against the fence next to the dugout where our bats were lined up. It kind of got away from me and it slammed into the fence quite a bit harder than I intended. It looked kind of like I was throwing a tantrum. (I kind of was, just not as big of one as it looked). After the game my dad calmly but clearly let me know that that was not the way to respond. It showed disrespect to the coach and it made me look immature. I could have pointed out I didn't just look immature, I was, and I knew it. I also knew it didn't exactly make my parents look sterling either. But Dad was calm about it, and understanding. He knew I was disappointed. He instructed me in how to do better, but he affirmed that he loved me and always would. He never said a word about it to anyone else and he never mentioned it to me again. It was one more moment that affirmed his unconditional love and the fact that I would always be his son, and nothing on this earth would ever change that or cause him to stop loving me. That is what a dad should do, and our Father in heaven relates to us in total love like that.

Our God is the perfect Father. He is what a Father should be. That means that not only did we not have anything to do with becoming his children, that it was 100% by his grace; but it means nothing can ever cause us to no longer be his children. In our worst moments we are still his children and he still loves us. We saw last week that we may grieve him, but we will never stop being his beloved children.

One thing that is natural for a little child is that they want to be like their daddy. Recently when we were taking care of Ella and Cara I noticed Ella had a toy stethoscope around her neck just the way her doctor daddy does. And she was tending to some illnesses and injuries that some of her toys were dealing with. She told me, "I'm taking care of them and making them better the way daddy makes sick people better." The most normal and reasonable thing in the world is that we would want to be like our loving Father in heaven. In fact, following God's example is only possible for his children. To live as he does requires his life to be in us.

But notice also that in verse 1 Paul said we are God's "beloved" children. We are beloved, special to him. Think for a moment about what that means. Have you noticed the kinds of things parents have on their cars? You see those bumper stickers that say, "My child was student of the month at Whackdoodle Elementary School." Or they paint on the rear window of their SUV things like "Go Lindsay, soccer all star!" My kids are all grown up now and I have a different perspective on those kinds of things than I did when they were little.

I realize that those childhood awards that seemed so big end up being insignificant. We've been cleaning out our garage and have run across all those plaques, certificates and trophies our kids were given back in the day. We ask the kids if they want them and they

say, “No, just throw them away.” They mean nothing to them, and they certainly don’t mean anything to anybody else.

But those things that are so celebrated by parents do tell us one important thing. Every parent wants to proclaim, “But this is my son(/daughter), and he(/she) is *special*.” They feel in their hearts that this child is not just another ordinary kid. They want other people to know and acknowledge that their kids are special. They feel that because to them the child is not ordinary. They are unique, treasured beyond calculation, and they want to proclaim that to the world.

That is terribly important to all of us. Dallas Willard wrote in *Divine Conspiracy*, “apart from its creator...the ‘ordinary’ truly is so ordinary and commonplace that it is of little interest or value...In its own right everything is always just ‘another one of those.’ To be ordinary is to be only ‘more of the same.’ The human being screams against this from every pore. To be just ‘another one of those’ is deadening agony for us...This is why everyone, from the smallest child to the oldest adult naturally wants in some way to be extraordinary, outstanding.”

I know this is true. In my head I know, and have known for a long time, that I am as extraordinary as a Lincoln penny, which is to say as ordinary as it is possible to be. Can you tell one penny from another? If you see one on the ground do you even bother to pick it up? There are 130 billion of them in circulation. And I know intellectually that I am the human equivalent of a penny. Nothing particularly valuable and there are billions much like me in circulation. I know that in my head, but somehow my heart wants me to be seen as extraordinary, special.

The good news for us is that while in the world it appears that we are as ordinary as pennies, God views us the way a parent views a child. The parent sees that child as the farthest thing from ordinary. To the parent a child is extraordinary, special, cherished. And that’s how God sees each of us who are followers of Jesus.

This is important because we will try to prove somehow to ourselves and to others that we are special by something we do, something about us. That tends to dominate us and drive us. But the fact that we are beloved by God, extraordinary and cherished in his sight, means we cannot be owned by that need to be special. We already are special to God, and he is the one who matters most in the universe. So instead of proving something about ourselves we can remember the truth and focus on imitating the Father who loves us.

## WALK LIKE DAD

Verse 2 tells us to walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us. Literally Paul wrote “walk in love.” What does it mean to walk in love? If I told you to walk in fear, what would that mean? It would mean that fear should determine how you feel and what you do. Every step you take would be controlled by fear. So if you are to walk in love then love would determine how you feel and what you do; every step you take would be controlled by loved.

This is a specific implication of what it means to follow the example of our Father. John wrote in 1 John 4:8 that God is love. He is the pinnacle of it, the epitome of it, the very demonstration of it. Whatever God does, is what love would do, because God is love. He is love in action and attitude. He defines what it means to love and exemplifies it. Love is behind everything he thinks, says and does. When God created the heavens and the earth he was motivated by love. When he instructed Adam and Eve about the one thing they shouldn't do, he was motivated by love. When he expelled them from Eden he was motivated by love. When he called Abraham he did it because of love. When he parted the Red Sea he did it because of love. When he sent his Son into this world he did it because of love. When he had his Son die on a cross he did it because of love. When he raised him from the dead he did it because of love. When he gave us his written Word he did it because of love. When he instituted the church he did it because of love. Everything he thinks about you, everything he does in your life, everything he allows to happen is motivated by love.

If we follow the example of the Father, then this will also be true of us. When I preach a sermon, it should be motivated by love. If you are a teacher, when you teach your students, it should be motivated by love. When you have to discipline them it also should be motivated by love. If you are a sales person, when you deal with a customer, your primary motive should be to love that person. When you have to deal with some corporate drone who is not helping you with the problem you are having with his or her company, your motive should be to love that person. Everything you do should be controlled and directed by love.

Laurie and I have had an interesting summer. Toby and Anna have needed quite a bit of help with their two kids because Toby's schedule has been outrageously hard, Anna is trying to work and ride herd on two preschoolers, and she has had to take them to a number of doctor appointments, speech therapy sessions and swim lessons. So they've needed help from us, especially Laurie. We've spent lots of time at their house in San Clemente. Meanwhile, Carissa has been on modified bed rest and her doctors don't want her left alone, so when Michael has had to fly, which has been quite a lot this summer, we've been staying at their house so Carissa is not alone. Meanwhile I'm trying to work and we're



trying to keep up with life. It's been a whirlwind. One night a couple of weeks ago I woke up in the middle of the night when Laurie got out of bed and opened the door to our bedroom, usually a step toward going downstairs. Usually if she leaves and goes downstairs in the middle of the night it's because she's not feeling well or she's just not sleeping. So when I heard her open the door I asked, "Are you all right?" She said, "I'm fine." I said, "Why are you going downstairs?" She answered, "I'm not. I have to go to the bathroom, but I forgot where I was. At Michael and Carissa's house I have to go left and open the door to get to the bathroom." Yeah, it's been that crazy. We have been tired a lot, but we don't mind even a little. We are having a blast because we're getting to be with our kids and our grandkids a lot and serve them. It turns out that real joy is found in loving and serving.

This is what we were created to do because we were created in God's image. We were made to be like him. If we are like him we will have love controlling and directing every single thing we do and say. If we are walking in love, then just as John could say "God is love," people will be able to look at me and say, "Rick Myatt is love." When they watch you they should think "That person is love in action."

## APPLICATION

### KNOW THE FATHER

First, you have to be a child of the Father to be able to follow his example. You have to have his life in you to be able to live like him. That means you need to become his child by believing in Jesus. So if you haven't taken that step you need to make the choice to put your faith in him and let him be Lord of your life.

Assuming you are his child, in order to follow his example you are going to have to know what that example is. Suppose you decided that for some inexplicable reason you decided that I needed to know how to play soccer and play it well. So you explain the rules of the game and then tell me, "What you should do is model your play after the example of Lionel Messi." I'd answer, "Uh, who? The only Lionel I'm familiar with is Lionel trains, the model train company." I know zero about Lionel Messi, whom you inform me is one of the best in the world, so there's no way I could learn how to play from him. I would have to study him to learn about him. And so we must study God to learn from him and know what it means to follow his example.

### KEEP AIMING AT THE TARGET

One obvious objection to this command might be that there is no way we can ever truly be like God. He is holy, he is all powerful, he is perfect, and we are not any of those things, nor will we ever be. You could tell me follow the example of Josh Groban and sing like he

does. To sing like Groban is simply not in the realm of possibility for me. My best efforts will not sound anything like him. In fact, they will make people think that maybe singing is a bad idea, so why don't I stop?

Sometimes our efforts to be like God come about as close as my efforts to sing like Groban. But think of it this way. Imagine that some advertiser announces that at the NCAA national championship basketball game next year they are going to choose some lucky person and give them a chance at half time to attempt to make a basket from half court. If they do they will win \$1 million. Suppose you are chosen to be that lucky person. And suppose also that you are not very good at hoops. If you are given ten shots from the free throw line, 15 feet from the basket, you'll be lucky to make one. So your chances of hitting that half-court shot are close enough to zero that the difference is negligible. So there you are at half court and they hand you the ball. The question is, what are you going to aim at? You know you can't hit the basket so will you just aim at the photographer sitting down underneath the basket? Will you aim at the free throw line because it's a little closer? Will you aim at someone sitting in the first row behind the bench to your left? Would aiming at any of those things help you get closer to the basket?

We need to pick something to look at to model our lives after, and the best thing we can look at is the character of God. No, you won't perfectly reproduce his character, but you'll come much closer to it if you aim at it, and the closer you come, the more life you will experience.

#### LET LOVE RULE

If we are following God's example, the thing that will rule our lives – that will be the controlling factor – is love. It will be God's kind of life, the love that sacrificed for undeserving people. We will always remember that the right thing to do at every moment and in every situation is to love.

On Monday Laurie and I took a day off and as part of our day we toured the USS Midway downtown. On the hangar deck they have the actual cockpits of several retired military aircraft. Laurie really wanted to sit in the F14 cockpit. But there were a couple of families from some foreign countries there. The kids, rather than waiting their turn ran in front of Laurie, who had waited her turn and the parents just let them. Then in the case of one family, even though people were waiting, the kids just stayed in the cockpit, giving every indication they planned to spend the rest of the day there. For all I know they may still be there. It was really annoying. But it was annoying because we weren't getting what we wanted. What God wants is for us to view those kids and those families with love, and to have our actions toward them be dictated by love.