

“Excel in Love: Seeing God”

2 Corinthians 8:1-9/Ephesians 5:1/1 John 4:7-12

11/8/09

As 1 John tells us, no one has ever seen God, but we do when we love one another. Love is what overcomes and transforms all things. [service team]

Well, we have reached the final week this morning in our sermon series on excelling in everything. We have heard about faith, speech, knowledge, eagerness, and now this morning it is about what Jesus said all other things hang on and are built upon—love.

I thought, in my maybe-not-so-funny way: This is the last of these “excel” sermons, so now we call go back to being average.

No! Kidding! I pray that you truly do give all that you are over to God that He might continue to do good works through you for the good of others. Every day is an opportunity to be and do your best—as Paul says, all for the sake of the Gospel.

So yes, love. Excel in love. What does that mean? And I suppose the more helpful question is “What does excelling in love look like?”

You can certainly start with the example we see in those who are working in Haiti. Giving of ourselves for others in need, no matter who they are or what the cost.

Well, let’s start where we ought to start.

1 John 4:7-12

God is love.

Yes, there are many different images and thoughts we have on who God is: Creator of all; powerful; nurturing, judge.

But right here we hear it straight out who God is and how He showed us that: God is love and showed us that by coming to us in Jesus and loving us to the point of His own death that we might live.

Love is not just some nice thought or feeling. Love is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all life. Love is all-powerful, overcoming all things.

You were made in love.

God came to us. And as 1 John says, No one has ever seen God, but the closest we will ever come is when we love one another. Because if you love, that means God lives within you.

I was recently engaged in a conversation with someone, a conversation you’ve probably heard before. It is the debate over “nature verses nurture”—the discussion over whether someone becomes who they are mainly from their genetic makeup at birth—nature—or from the ways that person was raised—nurture.

It’s obvious when you talk about having brown eyes and brown hair—you’re clearly born with those traits. But it begins to get fuzzy as you get into other behaviors, such as crimes or addiction or attitudes for life, and a whole host of other characteristics. It comes down to the question of “who makes you who you are?” “Why do you do what you do, and who’s to credit, or blame, for it?”

Parents certainly want to take the credit when their child turns out to be a genius—“O, Petey gets that from my side!” Of course, blame always goes somewhere else when things go wrong—“We didn’t raise you that way!”

It may be something which the science and other communities need to debate. We can get lost sometimes in who we are and the pasts we carry with us. But there is an entirely

different picture that we heard this morning. And that is this: We were created by God in His image, then we fell into the grip of sin, in Christ we are redeemed and made to be children of God, and as we are told by His Word, we are to complete the picture once again and be imitators of God. We started out in His image and it is into God's image we must once again be transformed.

Ephesians 5:1

Be imitators of God.

That seems a little far-fetched, doesn't it? Can we create the world? Can we literally give people a relationship with God? No. But God gave us creative power to better the lives of everyone around us and create opportunities for someone to open themselves to God and invite Him into their lives.

To imitate means action. But this is not an empty "mimicking" of someone, just going through the motions. There certainly is a lot of that around. Kids mimic sports stars. Adults mimic business stars. We can even do that with good role models. Except they are all human beings who are flawed and who will never truly change who we are as a person.

We are to be imitators of God "as children dearly loved."

If you have children or have seen children in action around loving parents, then you can begin to get a picture of what "as children dearly loved" means. First of all, speaking as a parent, I love my children. I love them with all my life. Into them I want to pour myself, that they would know they have worth, are accepted no matter what, are given direction and purpose for their lives, and that they would know what it is to have a real, deep, loving relationship with someone and eventually return that love to others.

Yes, that is what God is to us—and infinitely more. We are children of God who are loved deeply by Him. Through God's only true Son, Jesus Christ, we are adopted into the family, made to be sons and daughters of God. And no matter what your background is and genetic makeup may be, in Christ you are a new creation, and into your life God pours His love and grace. And from that we are called to "live a life of love."

That's why the Bible says the greatest commandment of all is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. That is the greatest commandment of all. Why? Because the power to change is given in relationship, and what you love you become like.

Think about that one for a moment:

What you love you become like.

It doesn't mean it is truly what you are, but you will be shaped and molded by the thing you love. Because that's what you'll devote yourself to.

Listen to this literal translation of this text from Ephesians from the Greek text: "*Become then imitators of the God as children loved and walk around in love, just as also the Christ loved us and gave over Himself on behalf of us offering and sacrifice to the God for odor of good smell.*"

Yes, from our relationship with God as His children, we are to become imitators of God. "Walk around in love." God is to be our model, our image for life.

We walk around a lot, but it's not always in love. Walk around in steaming-hot and claustrophobically-crowded King's Island for a day and you know what I mean. There's not much odor of good smell there.

Now I am not trying to bust on amusement parks, I do enjoy going occasionally. I grew up in Hershey with Hersheypark, so I know all about them. I worked there for a couple summers. Yet I can't help but look at Hersheypark or King's Island as a microcosm of our world

today. Full of people. Absorbed in entertainment and finding that immediate satisfaction. Eating things that I am sure God did not intend for us to put into our bodies. Having fun, yet walking around with a look of desperation at times, tired and wanting to sit down and let the crowds pass by. It is not long before your love for people begins to fade. Lots of odors, but not too many good smelling ones.

Sounds a lot like everyday life can feel sometimes, maybe all the time for some of us. We are in a time when things are really tough. It does not take much effort or great insight to know that the world is a hurting place.

I got on a news website Thursday and looked at the headlines for the U.S. 18 out of the 20 were negative—just downright nasty.

We can get torn down by our circumstances and bodies. We may never have had a good role model for our lives, or know where to look for one now. You may be totally confused or conflicted as to who to be. In all this, we are given the answer—to imitate God. You are a child of God in Christ, loved by Him—accept that into your life.

Walk around in love.

What a radically different image! What does that look like? Paul tells us a few verses back from where we read this morning, beginning in verse 25.

It is being imitators of God's creative power. Don't live a lie and deceive people, but create an atmosphere of trust by speaking the truth to your brothers and sisters around you. Be angry, but don't sin in it. Rather, create open communication lines where you can resolve differences and heal relationships. Instead of taking from someone, work with your own hands, create something, so that you can give instead of take. Don't talk nasty, tearing people down, but create an atmosphere of love, saying things that will help people and be full of God's grace.

God's Word tells us that "God is love." Be a Creator Imitator. Create opportunities for life.