

Imitating God as the Image of Christ

by Stewart Ruch

The purpose of marriage and celibacy is to live in love and sacrificial love, as Christ loved us, and to become like God by imitating Him and walking in love.

Duration: 29:39

Scripture: Genesis 1:27, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 19:8-9

Topics: "Imitating God"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker encourages listeners who may be feeling stressed or pressured to take hope and not panic. The purpose of life, according to the speaker, is to learn to love like Christ. The main exhortation from Paul's scripture is to imitate God, which the speaker acknowledges may seem bold or even blasphemous. However, the speaker clarifies that imitating God means walking in love, just as Jesus loved and sacrificed himself for us. The speaker shares a personal experience of feeling reluctant to give and serve more in their marriage, but ultimately realizes that this is their destiny in Christ and that with Jesus, they can live a holy married life.

Transcript

this autumn marks what is almost 20 years of full-time pastoral work for me. And I think in these last 18, almost 20 years, if I had to sort of say, what are those things in the life of someone who brings the most intensity? What brings the most poignancy? What are those pastoral issues that, as a pastor, listening and walking alongside someone, perhaps stir the heart the most? As many of you can imagine, we get to be at glorious events, weddings, funerals. We are often close to situations where there is death.

We walk alongside the realities of disease. But I've gotta tell you, there's nothing more intense, there's nothing more poignant than the issues raised by marriage and by singlehood, celibacy. I mean, to hear somebody who looks at you and just says, I don't know how I can live the rest of my life with this person.

To hear the sense of growing and developing panic in the voice of a husband or a wife who are perhaps realizing for the first time there are serious issues in this marriage, and I don't know how to solve them, and I don't know if I want to solve them, and I don't know my way through this. To listen to the heartfelt cry of someone who is single that says, I have waited, and I have waited, and I have waited for that man or that woman to come into my life, and I feel trapped. There's nothing that I can do, there's nothing that I can make happen to somehow change my current single state of life.

What do I do to hear marrieds who say, oh, I wish I was single, and hear singles who say, I wish I was married. These are just core questions. And in the Christian perspective, there's only two adult states of life.

You're either married or you're celibate. It's actually very simple. There's two ways you live your life in God according to the scriptures.

You either live them as somebody who is in a lifelong sacramental covenant of marriage, or in a lifelong, and I want to argue it has an important sacramental piece in it, a lifelong sacramental call to celibacy. Or at the very least, at the very least, you have a season of one or the other. In other words, perhaps you're married now, and perhaps you'll be married your whole life.

Or perhaps you're celibate now, and you'll be celibate, you'll be single your whole life. Or maybe you're celibate now, and you'll be married later. Or maybe you're married this morning, but one day you may be celibate and single.

How do we do it? I mean, really? How do you look at the future of your life as a married or as a celibate amidst all the immense challenges that if you've lived life even for a while as an adult, you've begun to experience the remarkable moments of intensity? How are you going to do it? How are you going to live a wholly married life? How are you going to live a wholly celibate life? Here's what I want you to hear. We can work on this for three weeks together, but here's what I want you to hear from the very beginning. I want to be really clear.

I want you to hear very, very clearly. In Jesus and with Jesus, you can do it. As a matter of fact, not only can you do it, you have been designed to do it.

As a matter of fact, if you've had that moment of panic or that moment of fear or that moment of feeling trapped, you're actually living into a reality that God has set up for your life. As a matter of fact, he has created a kind of sacred theater if you're celibate or if you're married within which you can face the deepest realities of life and begin the very purpose and meaning of life, which is this, to love. As a matter of fact, the very purpose and meaning of life is to imitate God, to become like God, to walk in love as Christ loved us.

The place that you are going, if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, is that you will one day ultimately look into the face of love and you will become love. You will become like him. And if you're feeling the sense of immense stress or pressure, you've come out of that season or you have a brother or a sister, a mom or a dad, someone that you're close to who's in that distress as a celibate or as a married, take hope.

Don't panic. It's supposed to happen this way. You're in the theater.

God's begun the process. Life is about learning to love like Christ. If you don't understand that the purpose of your life is this, look at your front bulletin, please.

This is the sort of overriding scripture for our series together for the next three weeks. It's this, imitate God. Admittedly, a very bold exhortation from Paul.

Indeed, it almost seems to kind of push the envelope. Isn't that too much? Isn't that blasphemous? Imitate God. What does that mean? Paul gives a very clear definition right after that in verse two.

Walk in love as Jesus loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God. Right before the Holy Eucharist, I come before you or the servant comes before you and gives you that very verse because if we prepare for communion, we prepare for the very meaning of what our lives are about, which is as Jesus gave up his life, that we might have his body and blood, so we give up our lives and receive his life. That is the center of what's true and real.

That's the purpose and meaning of life right there. We imitate God. We walk in love as Christ loved us.

Okay, here's what imitation is not. If you think that imitation is kind of like Velveeta imitating real cheese, it's not. Senka imitating real coffee, it's not.

Polyester imitating cloth, it's not cloth. It's never seen cotton, ever. You shouldn't wear it.

Some of you, you're 20 somethings and you're hipsters, don't wear polyester, do other things. That's not imitation. That's not imitation.

It's a perversion. All right. What is imitation? What is imitation? My daughter turned 13 in September, my oldest kid.

And Kath and I were remembering the day of her birth because my kids, if I listen to this, they're not here this morning, all five births were really special. But the first one is one that's very memorable because it's your first time. And Madeline had been born, and the nurse brought her over to me, and she put her in my arms, and I held her.

And she was looking, I think, probably toward a light in the window, and I said, Madeline. She literally turned her head and looked up at me. And immediately, Catherine and I started looking at her, and we started saying, oh, the nose, a complete ruck nose.

The mouth, it's a faucet mouth. Oh, the ears, it's just like this thing we began and started, what we still are doing to this day, always commenting on how and who the certain child that we have looks like, because children, they look like us, and they actually begin to imitate us. They belong to us.

They're connected to us in the most profound way. Indeed, imitation, and the reality of imitation, is how we become persons. As that little child grows, eventually, I can guarantee you, they will wear your shoes.

At age two, they will walk around the house in your shoes. Why? Because they see you wearing them. At age 11, your son will do something, and you'll say, oh, that's just like you, honey.

That face, that's just like the face you make. Well, it's just like the face your mom makes. But they imitate.

This imitation isn't a kind of put-on imitation. It's an intrinsic, internalized imitation. We are made to become as we imitate.

How much more so in our journey with God? You are designed. There is a design put in you. It's the image of God.

You are designed to become like Jesus. That's what you were made for. You were designed to become one who loves, and who lives a life of sacrificial love.

Your destiny is to become love, capital L, because God is love. All right, let's work some on moving toward marriage and celibacy more. OK, next week, we're going to do a lot more on marriage in Ephesians chapter 5. Then we're going to work on celibacy, Matthew 19, 1 Corinthians 7. But before we can work on marriage and celibacy, we want to follow Jesus' mode of teaching on marriage and celibacy.

Turn in your bulletin to Matthew 19. We're going to follow his thread, OK? Because what we see in Matthew 19 is that when Jesus is asked about marriage, that's about divorce, here's where he goes. It's packed, what he's saying.

And there's a lot to unpack there. I'm not going to try to unpack all of this right now, OK? Here's what I want you to get. I want you to get Jesus' method, all right? His teaching method.

He says in verse four, have you not read the he who created them? OK, grab these three words, they're really important, from the beginning. That becomes a theological phrase that teachers of the Bible will use throughout the centuries, from the beginning, in the beginning, in arche, in the Greek. He uses it again in verse eight, because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning, it was not so.

OK, here's what Jesus is doing. Before we go down other trails, stay with me on this, OK? It's about the beginning. As a matter of fact, if you want to understand marriage, and if you want to understand celibacy, because Christ goes on to teach about celibacy in Matthew 19, you must understand in arche, you must understand the beginning.

He'll mention celibacy, he'll talk about those who are eunuchs for the kingdom, and I will argue that he's talking about those called to the celibate life. We'll do more on that in two weeks. But he says go to the beginning.

Well, what's the beginning? What's the word for beginning? It's Genesis. So that's where we start. So then let's move in your bulletin, if you have your Bible with you, to Genesis.

He directs us here. OK, what he is saying in Matthew 19 is that there is two states of life for the Christian. There's the married state, and there's the celibate state.

There's the married state, and there's the single state. I will say more about why I much prefer the word celibacy to single. Very shortly, nobody's single.

Nobody's on their own. It's an American misnomer. We'll do more on that later.

OK, but he says each one of those are gifts to be received in Matthew 19. He talks about if you can receive this, he says. Paul will say later in 1 Corinthians 7, each person has a gift that they have received, meaning they've either received the gift of celibacy or they've received the gift of marriage.

Those are gifts. But there's a primary gift that underscores both of those gifts. There's a first gift, and this is what we see in Genesis 1.27. So God created man in his own image.

OK, if you have any background in the Bible, you've read that one a lot. So just tell your brain, OK, go back, read it again. So God created man, created humanity in his own image.

In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. The first gift is that every birth is the inauguration of a new person made in the image of God.

There's a reason why cultures, whether they're Christian cultures or adherent to Christian beliefs or practices, cultures throughout the world, throughout the centuries, have always seen a kind of sacredness to them. There's a reason why there's rituals around birth. There's a reason why there's rituals surrounding birth, and a reason why, whether you're a believer or an unbeliever, you can't help but be somewhat agog at the reality of a newborn baby.

Gregory of Nyssa, early church father, wrote this. He says, a great gift is given at the moment of our birth. It's the gift of being made in the image of God.

This is why Christians absolutely fight for and celebrate the importance of every person made, whether Christian or not. This is why Christians are those who absolutely love and are called to love, not just their own, but those outside their own, because everyone made in the image of God, everyone given a gift at their birth, that's how you start life, with a gift, with a gift from God, every person. And it's a design.

This gift is a design that's in our persons. It's an emotional design. The image of God is an emotional design that we're meant to emotionally connect with others.

It's a spiritual design. It's a bodily design. Look at the human body.

There's two kinds of bodies. There's a male body and a female body. John Paul II, the pope, has called this the marital meaning of the body.

And what he's saying in that is, your body says, I was meant for another. In the case of marriage, it means, initially, for a husband or a wife, but ultimately for God. In the case of celibacy, immediately for God.

Your body says, I was made for another. Your body says, I'm not complete on my own. I must have another.

That's the marital meaning of the body. It's so you never forget. It's so it's sewn into your very person.

It's really imprinted on your skin and your bones and your structure, as well as your heart and your mind. And in this design is a message of great hope. John Paul II says this about being made in the image of God.

We are not the sum of our weaknesses or failures. We are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son. If I'm teaching about marriage, I'm teaching about celibacy, I can't help but imagine that you're aware of your many failures in those two modes of being.

I regularly, regularly cry out to God that I'd be a better husband and father. I'm consistently ashamed at some of my behaviors in my marriage. I know honest celibates in this church who will tell you the same thing.

They wish they didn't face the unbelievable seasons of aching and loneliness, but they do. And that they wish they didn't make bad decisions and sinful choices in the midst of those seasons, but they do. And it's very easy for us, as we begin to approach marriage and celibacy, to feel like we are the sum of our failures and our weakness, but here, the gift of God in making you in his image.

You are not the sum of your weaknesses and failures. You are the sum of the Father's love for you and your real potential to grow into the image of God. Okay, but what is the image of God? We still don't know

exactly.

There's a thing that's called general revelation, which is that anybody, anywhere can see these things, the beauty of nature, the human body. These things initially point us to the reality of God, but they don't tell us everything about God. And they don't give us enough to know about God so we can actually receive him as a savior.

They start us. So we have to go from general revelation to special revelation, which is Holy Scripture. And what we have in Holy Scripture is an answer to the question, but what is the image of God really? What is the image of God really? Some have said, well, to be made in the image of God is to be made with reason, to have the ability to make decisions and sort through realities in life.

Or to be made in the image of God is to be a maker, to be a creator, to be an artisan or to create work or whatever it might be, to make things. Others said, oh, to be made in the image of God is to procreate, to be fruitful and multiply. Others said, oh, to be made in the image of God is to be made male and female, or to be made in the image of God God is to be given creation care and to steward the gift given us in our creation.

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, but not yes enough. There's more. I would challenge if you park in one of those alone, you won't go to the heart of the matter.

Because there's more to the image of God than all those things, and they are all important. This is where we have to have the Scriptures to teach us the Scriptures. We find moments where we say, okay, I don't understand this.

What else in Scripture can I read to help me understand this? And we're given it in Colossians, written by Paul, chapter one, verse 15, where he says, Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God. If you're made in the image of God, you're made to become like Jesus, male or female, married or celibate. That's the purpose of your life.

That's what it means to be made in the image of God, is to become like Jesus, to live your life in love, to walk in love as Christ loved us. There it is. That's your design.

One Eastern Orthodox thinker puts it this way. Humanity is the image of the image. When I'm in my garage and I need to pound a nail, I often find that I can't find the right tool to do so.

It's not complicated, pounding a nail. It's just that I don't always have the right tool in the garage to pound that nail. And because I want to go in the house and try to find that right tool, I always think about trying to use another tool.

So I have a nail, and I want to put it in a wall, and I have reached for a screwdriver, and I've thought, it's pointy, but so is the nail, and maybe the two will collide, and it will accomplish the purpose for which it has been sent. So I will try, and I end up hitting my hand or hitting the wall and creating lots of marks on the wall. So I then say, okay, I need something heavier.

I'll reach for a wrench. I'll pull the wrench out, and I'll begin to pound the nail with the wrench, thereby bruising my fingers. But finally, I realize, no, there's one thing designed to pound a nail.

It's a hammer. This is what it's made for. And when you use a tool by its design, it can be unbelievably effective, unbelievably helpful.

You're designed for a very specific purpose. You are a tool in the hand of God if you'll let yourself be. The heart of sin is that we have said, I don't want the design.

I don't want to live in imitation of God by walking in love as Christ has loved us. I want to live independent. I want to live just a step removed.

I want to have my own life in some capacity. And the instinct for independence will always ultimately run counter to the God-given and developed call to imitate him. But if you eschew the design, if you refuse to use your life for what it was meant to be used for, you will wreak pain and destruction.

It will be a misery to you. It'll be a misery to your celibacy or your marriage. And even if you are perhaps so disconnected, you don't realize the misery it is to you, it will be a misery to others.

And you will hurt many. This design is powerful and glorious, but if we refuse it or rebel against us, it's a sobering reality. So how do we do it? How do we walk in Christ and walk in love as he's loved us? We have a design, but we need more than that.

We need more to actually be able to accomplish that kind of life, realizing it isn't enough. What happens is the fact of the matter is you've got the right tool, you understand the design, but the hammer's broken and it won't pound the nail. The fact of the matter is we do choose the independent, sinful way again and again.

As much as we wish there was a blessing from our lips, there's often a snarl. So what do we do with that and where do we go with that? We go back to birth. We go back to how it all begins because as you were given the gift of design in your birth, in Jesus, when you become a Christian, you're given a second birth.

You're born again. Your mother gave you earthly birth. Your mother church gives you spiritual and sacramental birth in baptism.

I hope you don't underestimate the power of baptism as taught to us in the holy scriptures because if you do, it's very possible that you understand the design and even embrace the design, but you haven't been given the power to live out your destiny in Christ. It's possible that you appreciate the fact that you're made to love, but you're constantly feeling disempowered to be able to live out that love because that is giving you in holy baptism. It's a gift given.

What baptism does is it takes the inarche, it takes the reality of Genesis, it takes the image given to us, it gives us the perfect image of Jesus, and it's like it forms a bridge from the work of Christ in creation at the cross and at the resurrection, and it bridges to our lives now. And baptism received in faith actually instills in you the very life of Jesus himself. As Oswald Chambers puts it, it gives you his holy, I can't say it right now.

You know what I'm talking about. Hereditary. It's something like that.

It gives you that. It instills in you the very life of Christ himself. Now we focus on Jesus as we live out the life of the image.

In the past, if those of you that have heard me teach on this, I emphasized, I think now too much, on living out the image by living out the trinity. It's a late 20th century, very powerful and kind of widely taught understanding. I've reworked that.

I've done more work in the scriptures. I've done more work in the early church, and I think it's very confusing to say we focus on the trinity to live out the image of God. No, we focus on Jesus.

He is who we imitate, but we must have the power in the life of the trinity given to us in baptism, where you're baptizing with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit to do so. This is what it means. If you're a baptized Christian, call this all of us here in marriage.

Here's what it means. You have everything you need. You don't need a new husband as much as perhaps you desperately wish you had one, and you don't need a new wife.

As a matter of fact, if you call this all of us here, you don't need a wife. You don't need a husband to imitate Christ. And I wonder if you're just spending a lot of your energy just wishing you had something else rather than spending it and focusing it on living in Jesus and imitating him.

He gives us two things in baptism. This is what Dan read in Romans 6. He gives us his death. We're baptized into his death, and he gives us his life.

Depictions of the cross after the third century often separated the resurrection from the crucifixion, and the image that we're primarily aware of is an image of the crucified Christ, absolutely appropriate and necessary, needed for the symbol of the church. But the danger would be that we would, in our own understanding, separate the cross and the resurrection, particularly as we live out celibacy and marriage. They must go together.

They do go together in Paul's teaching on baptism. If you don't understand that they go together, then you will have a very imbalanced life. Either your marriage is all grit and no grace in life, your celibacy is all challenge and suffering and no joy, or you're in denial and think you're living the other way.

But both are to mark your life in Christ. Baptism is a gift, but let's be very clear. As it is a gift, it requires grit, all right? Baptism requires grit.

It means working out your salvation in fear and trembling in Christ. It means taking the gift given you and then making small, daily, sacrificial decisions of love. And that's hard.

That can be really hard. But also, it's a life of incredible hope and an incredible sense of purpose in where you're going. Here's the deal.

You must use the tool for what it was designed for. You must have it reforged, if you will, remade in the fires and the waters of baptism. But then once you've got it in your hand, you're supposed to use it.

You're supposed to use the design and the destiny God has called you to in Christ to build a life of love. That's the calling of all of our lives. That's the greater context of the call to marriage and celibacy.

So here's where we are. If you're celibate, receive it as a gift. If you haven't felt or lived that gift yet, don't stop seeking Jesus because there's a gift there.

He promised that. If you're married, receive it as a gift. Your marriage is there to teach you to love.

Secondly, renounce the impulse of sinful independence. Renounce it. Name it in yourself.

Be courageous and then repent of it. Repent of that internal snarl that comes out rather than blessing. Repent of it.

And then just start, just start imitating Jesus by making small, daily decisions of sacrifice, one for the other. I mentioned that we've been reflecting on the birth of our first child. Many of you know that actually we're, Catherine's expecting, come winter, our sixth child.

And it's brought me to a place of incredible crying out to God. We have several kids, they're all young. Catherine and I both have very, very involved lives that require an immense amount of emotional and spiritual and physical energy, all of those things.

And as she's pregnant, it's important that I, as the father, step up and do more and carry more in the house, which is understandable and necessary. But I will tell you, I've done it five times, but this time there was something in me that balked and I just didn't want to do it. I didn't want to give anymore.

I didn't want to serve anymore. I didn't want to sacrifice anymore. And it just brought me to a place, one night in the late summer, where I went out to my study in the middle of the night and I just sat there.

And I'll tell you, I cried and I raised my voice in absolute frustration. Do I really have to give again? And that was the snarl that I reminded that this was what I was designed for, that there's no other life that I should be living, that it would be an easier life than what I have right now, that this is the very thing that is my destiny in Christ, that this is the very way, in those moments when you hit that wall, whatever it might be, that's when you say, yes, I will imitate God. I will walk in love as Jesus has loved us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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