

Semicontinuous
**2 Sam. 18:5–9, 15,
31–33**
Ps. 130

Complementary
1 Kgs. 19:4–8
Ps. 34:1–8
Eph. 4:25–5:2
John 6:35, 41–51

Imitating Christ

Goal for the Session

Following Ephesians' description of God's beloved children, adults will determine behaviors to embrace and behaviors to discard to be imitators of God.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Ephesians 4:25–5:2

WHAT is important to know?

— From "Exegetical Perspective," Jaime Clark-Soles

The author insists that we need to speak truth because we actually are all part of one another. Not speaking truth to each other is tantamount to not speaking truth to ourselves, and vice versa. We could dispense with this verse as some sort of temporary insanity on the part of the author, were it not the case that he repeatedly returns to the themes of speaking truth (vv. 15–16, 21) and our connection with our Christian brothers and sisters. Without truth, authentic community fails.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From "Theological Perspective," G. Porter Taylor

Christianity has yet to grasp the full implication of the incarnation: the Word has become flesh and dwells all around us. Paul is calling for these early Christians not merely to worship God in Christ, but through the Holy Spirit to imitate Christ in their own behavior, for the sake of the Christ's church and the sake of the world. They are to forgive as they have been forgiven. They must turn from wrangling and slander and turn instead toward kindness and forgiveness for Christ's sake. We imitate Christ in hopes that through the Holy Spirit we will grow into the likeness of Christ and that God will use us as instruments to bring in God's realm of peace, justice, and mercy.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From "Pastoral Perspective," Paul V. Marshall

A final motivation for inhabiting the virtues that protect and deepen community is the writer's understanding of Christ's work as sacrifice. The ancient world believed that offerings had an olfactory quality that pleased the deity. Christ's surrender to God was motivated by love, and Christians are here invited to follow suit, understanding their own lives as pleasingly sacrificial. There has been much quarreling in Christian circles over whether we have anything to offer God, whether Christians should ever speak of any sacrifice except that of Christ. One may wish to fence the word in such a way as to exclude the idea of sacrifice as motivating God to act or to be well disposed toward those who offer, but the idea of offering one's attitude and behavior from a desire to respond pleasingly to love of God seems inescapable.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From "Homiletical Perspective," Richard F. Ward

The writer chooses "forgiveness" as a theme. This is a word for the church, not just for individuals in it. For this writer, to be "forgiven" is to be "pardoned." God has done something "in Christ" that forgives or pardons all those who take this letter to heart, and in recognition of that action, recipients of God's forgiveness and pardon freely offer it to others in kind.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Ephesians 4:25–5:2

Focus on Your Teaching

Do participants behave differently in church than in the outside world? Do they show one face in church and another when they leave? For many churchgoers, coming to church is a time they look forward to receiving a genuinely warm smile and treating each other more equally than in their daily lives. While Christians may disagree on particular behaviors to follow, all would agree that imitating Christ involves following his behaviors inside and outside church walls. Today's focus scripture offers a chance to discuss the sorts of behaviors Christians should embody. Some adults have painful memories of church conflict where these values were not practiced.

God, make my life and teaching a reflection of your loving forgiveness, truth, and peace. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- paper
- pens
- board or newsprint
- markers

For Responding

- option 1: paper, pens
- option 2: Resource Sheet 1
- option 3: magazines, scissors, glue or glue sticks, sticky notes, newsprint or poster board, pens

Ephesians is addressed to the “saints” or “holy ones” (Greek: *hagioi*), which means people dedicated to the service of God. All who are faithful to Jesus Christ are considered to be “saints” in Ephesians.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome adults and introduce any visitors.

Distribute a piece of paper and a pen to each person. Have participants make three columns by drawing two vertical lines on the paper. Ask them to list the various types of groups to which they belong down the left side of the paper. Groups may include the congregation, teams, family, work, clubs, or school. Then, in the middle column, have them list one-word descriptions of attitudes or actions that weaken a group, such as selfishness, unreliability, cynicism, laziness, rudeness. Finally, in the right column have them list behaviors or attitudes that strengthen a group, such as honesty, cooperation, generosity, humor, compassion.

Invite participants to call out responses they wrote for each column.

Say this prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for this community. Open our hearts to love each other as you have loved us. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (The Letter to the Ephesians) and allow a few minutes for participants to read it. Encourage them to mark statements that they find helpful or interesting, or about which they have questions, to be discussed with the group.

Invite a few volunteers to tell the group what new things they learned or what questions they have.

In early Christian times, a sacrifice was a burnt offering that released pleasing odors, which wafted up to the heavens. Jews and Gentiles alike practiced sacrifice as a form of prayer, repentance, thanksgiving, and commitment to God.

EASY
PREP

Have a volunteer read aloud Ephesians 4:25–5:2. Go around the room and ask each person to select a phrase from the passage and state it as a rule, such as “Put away falsehood” or “Speak truth.” Keep going around until all the “rules” have been exhausted. If you prefer, make it a friendly contest. Form two or three small groups and give them three minutes to come up with a list of rules from the passage.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Ephesians 4:25–5:2). Invite a volunteer to read the “What?” excerpt. Have the group imagine that they are members of the Ephesian church who have received this letter, and answer the following questions:

- ✧ What are examples of speaking truth you think the author meant?
- ✧ Ephesians, what does this text tell you about being imitators of God?
- ✧ As imperfect people, how can you Ephesians pursue such a high ideal?
- ✧ Who or what can be your guide?
- ✧ What does this letter tell you about Christian community?

Distribute paper and pens. Ask each person to create a bumper sticker that summarizes something they have learned about imitating Christ from the focus scripture. Invite participants to show their bumper stickers to the group. Consider posting them on the wall for everyone to see.

To transition to Responding, invite a volunteer to read the “So What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. *Ask: How can our actions and attitudes be like a sacrifice, pleasing to God?*

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session.

- 1. Rewrite the Focus Scripture** This activity helps adults reimagine the focus scripture for the church today. Pass out papers and pens. Ask participants to imagine that they are writing a general letter, like Ephesians, to be read by churches today. Ask them to rewrite the Ephesians passage for modern Christians, following the same themes. Depending on time, invite several volunteers to read their letter aloud to the whole group. As a group, choose one action that would be helpful to building up the church and commit to imitating that behavior in the future as a whole group. If one of the letters is especially compelling, encourage the group to submit it to the worship committee or pastor for possible inclusion in a worship service or to be published on the church Web site or newsletter.
- 2. Bidding Prayer for Forgiveness** The focus scripture describes a loving community as a place that offers forgiveness. This activity will allow adults to ponder the role of forgiveness in building community and to practice a prayer of forgiveness. Invite a volunteer to read the “Now What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Discuss why forgiveness is important for a community. Ask for ideas about what the church or they, as individuals, would like to be able to forgive.

Pray a bidding prayer. Tell the group you will begin a prayer that ends with the refrain: “Today, we pray that you help us forgive . . .” At that point, anyone can add something they want help forgiving. Let them know you will continue repeating the refrain and leaving an opening for someone to fill until there are no more responses.

“God, you sent your son Jesus to teach us to forgive as you have forgiven us. Today, we pray that you help us forgive . . .”

Encourage participants to practice praying for forgiveness, for themselves and others, throughout the week.

- 3. Becoming Imitators of God** Ephesians instructs Christians, as followers of Christ, to “imitate God.” This activity will help adults identify concrete examples of imitating God-like behavior. Tell participants that they will explore what “imitating God” might look like. Provide news magazines and other magazines with pictures of people or situations where Christ’s forgiveness and compassion are needed. Place large sheets of newsprint or poster board on tables or on the wall. Provide scissors, glue, or glue sticks. Form small groups of two or three and have each group work together to create a collage about being imitators of God through Christ. Upon completion of the collages, ask participants to describe their creation to the whole group. Distribute sticky notes and pens. Ask the whole group to brainstorm ways they can strive to imitate God through Christ in their daily lives and to write these ideas on the sticky notes. Invite them to post these ideas around their collages. Hang the collages in a place where others in the congregation can see them.

CLOSING

Invite participants to say one thing they have learned or voice a question they would like to pursue and tell how they plan to go about finding answers.

Gather in a circle and have each person state one thing about Christ they will try to imitate this week and in coming months.

Say this prayer or one of your choosing:

“God, as your children, help us to imitate Jesus today and always.”

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for August 16, 2015, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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The Letter to the Ephesians

“To the saints who [are in Ephesus and] are faithful in Christ Jesus.”
—Ephesians 1:1b

Ephesus, a Greco-Roman city (located in modern-day Turkey) was the capital of a Roman province in the late first century CE. In the early days of the church, missionaries like the apostle Paul were traveling to far-flung regions of the Roman Empire to teach Gentile Christians how to lead a new life in Christ (4:17–24). While there are several clues that Paul himself probably did not write this letter (the style of writing and context are quite different from Paul’s other letters), a loyal follower of Paul’s probably did write it, and the church accepted its scriptural authority.

Unlike Paul’s other letters, which were written to individual congregations, Ephesians is addressed to the entire church (1:22; 3:10; 5:23). Ephesians seems to have been composed as a general letter, intended for circulation among many congregations, not just in Ephesus. In fact, the earliest manuscripts of this letter do not include the words “in Ephesus” in the address (see 1:1). Originally, the letter was addressed: *“to the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus.”* Do these “saints” include us, today? We are not accustomed to thinking of ourselves as “saints” and may protest that we cannot live up to such a high calling, but Ephesians assures us that we can: because the church is lifted up with the risen Christ, Christians are empowered to do more than we thought possible (1:19–23; 2:5–10; 3:20–21).

The letter encourages Christians to live out their faith as a “new creation,” in the likeness of God (4:24). Ephesians describes Christians as “children of light” (5:8) who live in the “present darkness” (6:12), but assures Christians that Christ has dominance over evil (1:20–21) and that the church shares in Christ’s power (1:22–23). Furthermore, God equips Christians for the struggle (6:12). Therefore, Christians must continue to have faith in what God can accomplish through the church (1:15–23), respond with good works (2:1–10), and make God known (3:1–13), while continuing to grow in knowledge and wisdom (4:17–24; 5:15–16), prayer (5:19–20; 6:18), and love (1:14–15; 5:2).

Christians must be unified (4:2–16), speak the truth, treat each other as “members of one another” (4:25), and be “imitators of God” (4:17–5:20). Becoming “imitators of God” sounds impossible, but Ephesians has no doubt that Christians can strive for this goal, because Christ empowers us.

