

Ephesians 4:32

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 February 2014

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] The Bible is full of impossible demands. There are certainly demands that appear to us impossible, just too much to ask, too much for us to possibly be able to respond to. And these impossible demands are found from time to time as we read through the Bible. Now, usually we're given a little time to digest a seemingly impossible demand before being confronted with another of the same ilk. However, in our text in Ephesians, in these three verses that we've read at the end of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5, impossible demands seem to be positively tripping over each other, clamoring for our bemused attention. Just notice with me the demands that we find in these three verses. In verse 32, be kind and compassionate to one another. We might say, well, okay, we can try and do that. Forgiving each other, okay. Just as in Christ, God forgave you.

And that last part, we say, well, that's just too much. That's impossible. How will we ever forgive in that manner? But then, before we've had time to digest that, we move on to the first verse of chapter 5, be imitators of God. So often we struggle to know and understand God, and yet here we are being told that we are to be imitators of God. And then, if we've managed to digest that or in some measure get our head around that, we continue into the next verse, and we read, and live a life of love, or walk in love.

And then, of course, what follows that makes it so difficult for us to even contemplate being able to do just as Christ loved us. That the love that we show should be of that quality and of that character as the love of Christ who loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. It just seems too big an ask. How are we to understand these impossible demands? Well, we are calling impossible demands because certainly they appear to be impossible to us. An essential element in beginning to understand is grasping who or what we are as Christians. And that is what we were trying to do this morning. We divided Paul's teaching in these verses into two parts, what we are deeply loved, and what we do love deeply, or to employ the vocabulary I've been using this evening, obey God's impossible demands. In the absence of understanding what we are as Christians, the demands will only serve to taunt and torture us. But knowing what or who we are will serve as the foundation and the impulse for grasping the challenge of God's impossible demands. It doesn't mean that we will meet them fully, but it does give us the foundation, and as I say, also the impulse to have the desire to grasp the challenge that God presents to us.

Just to refresh our memories before we move on to think about what Paul says here regarding this call that is laid upon us to love deeply, to obey these demands that revolve around the matter of love. As we are loved, so we are to love others. But before we do that, let's just refresh our memories concerning what we noticed this morning concerning how we are deeply loved by God. The three aspects of this truth that we found in our passage, and that in some way we'll find mirrored in what we say this evening, were that we are forgiven, were that we are forgiven. There in the final verse of chapter 4, we are to forgive others just as in Christ God forgave you. This forgiveness, as we noticed, is grounded in grace. It's an expression of God's kindness and compassion, and it is secured by the work of Christ, forgiven by God in Christ. Another aspect of God's deep love for us is that we are deeply loved children, loved by our Father, and in a very startling reality, loved as the Son. The very language that the

[5 : 2 0] Father uses of His own Son, His dearly beloved Son, the language used to describe us. And then also, loved not only by the Father, loved by Christ, the love of Christ spoken of there in verse 2, that is self-giving and pleasing to the Father. So, we are deeply loved, and as those deeply loved, we are to love deeply. And as we consider three aspects of God's call upon us to love deeply, we'll see how each of them parallels or mirrors the reality of our being deeply loved that we've just mentioned just now and thought about more in some more detail this morning.

How then are we to love deeply, or what are God's impossible demands? Well, we've already mentioned them as we began this evening. We are to forgive, we are to imitate God, and we are to walk in love.

And so, we want to think about these three demands that together constitute this call upon us as those who have been loved deeply to deeply love. First of all, we are to forgive. Verse 32, Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. The call that is placed upon us is not simply to forgive. We could maybe handle that as a demand. Well, yes, in a measure, we're able to forgive people. People do us something that hurts us or does us harm. If we make a big effort, well, we can just about forgive people in those circumstances. But the demand is so much deeper than that because of the grounds upon which it is made, or the manner in which we are to do so. Forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

[7 : 26] Or if we remember the simple yet stunning language of Paul in his letter to the Colossians, which has many parallels with his letter to the Ephesians. And there he says something very similar, but in very simple and stark language, forgive as the Lord forgave you. It's very simple language, but it is very startling language as well. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And as we think of what is said here in Ephesians, and as we think of what Paul says in his letter to the Colossians that we've just mentioned, notice that there are two what we might call parallel truths implied in the language that Paul uses.

First of all, we are to forgive because God forgave us. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. It carries that idea, forgive because God has forgiven you. And that idea is also present here in Ephesians. Why are we to forgive? Well, because God has forgiven us. So that's within the thoughts of Paul and what he says.

But of course, the second aspect of it is that we are to forgive as we have been forgiven, or in the manner that God has forgiven us. And it's really that second aspect, or that second element that is to the fore in the verse before us. Forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you. Not just because God has forgiven you, that is true, but just as in the manner that God has forgiven you. Well, what can we say of this demand to forgive? Now, given that it is to be just as God forgave, it will be no surprise that what we will say will echo what was said this morning regarding God's forgiveness. So what can we say about the forgiveness that we are to show to others? Well, it is grounded in grace. We are to forgive each other graciously or in the manner demanded by grace. Three words capture the nature or essence of grace-driven forgiveness. We are to forgive each other fully, freely, and finally.

That is grace-driven forgiveness, to forgive fully, not measuring what offenses we are prepared to forgive. And if somebody, as we sometimes, you know, express ourselves, well, somebody's crossed a line, and when they cross that line, well, that's beyond what we're willing to forgive. We can forgive so far, but beyond that is more than we are prepared to do. That is not grace-driven forgiveness. That is not to forgive as Christ forgives us, as God in Christ forgives us. We are to forgive fully and freely, not expecting anything in return, not expecting gratitude or congratulations or even improved behavior on the part of those we are forgiving, and to forgive finally, not keeping a record of those wrongs, to dredge up when we need to in some future conflict or some future difficulty we have with whoever the person might be. We are to forgive in a manner that is consistent with grace. We are to forgive just as we have been forgiven. And I don't want to dwell on this or to dwell on it any longer than is necessary, but simply to leave you with that question, do you forgive in this manner? Is there anybody that you need to forgive that you have not forgiven and that you need to do so in this manner? The forgiveness that is demanded of us is forgiveness that is grounded in grace, but also mirroring what we saw this morning, it is an expression of kindness and compassion. This morning we deduced that that was true of God from verse 32, but as we think of this reality for ourselves, we don't need to deduce it because it's explicit. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other. For this forgiving each other is, it seems to me, an expression of, evidence of our kindness and of our compassion. Forgiveness flows from a kind and compassionate heart. Are you kind? Seems a very simple question, but perhaps Ching Wan. Are you a kind person? Are we kind to one another? There's an interesting, I think we could probably only call it curiosity in terms of the language that Paul employs here, particularly this word translated kind. In Greek, the word that in

[12 : 27] English is translated kind is *krestos*. Now, that's curious, and I don't think we can call it more than curious in that it is very similar. There's no linguistic connection. It's purely a coincidence

of language, but it's very similar to the Greek word for Christ, which is krestos. So, krestos means kind, and krestos means Christ. And it would seem, those who have explored these matters assured us, that it would seem that from the beginning of the New Testament church, Christians recognize the peculiar, if unintended, appropriateness of this word krestos to describe Christians, that we are to be those who are kind. And as I was just, you know, thinking about that and in my head sort of just pondering on some of the implications of that, I was reminded of what we read in Acts about how the believers were first called Christians in Ephesus, this nickname that was given to them of Christians, Christianos, the Christ ones. And I just wondered, and I don't know enough to be able to state this categorically, but I just wondered whether in the ear of a Greek speaker, the word krestos or krestianos would sound like not only the Christ ones, but the kind ones. And if that is so, how singularly appropriate that we as Christians should be known as, and have lives that would merit us being known as, the kind ones. This is certainly the demand that is placed upon us. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other. Are you kind? Are you compassionate?

Are you moved by the plight and pain of others? You know, we read in the news of big disasters and how, you know, there's fundraising efforts and how sometimes these efforts are, you know, prejudiced by compassion fatigue. But it's not only the matter of making a financial contribution to countries that have been afflicted by some disaster, that compassion fatigue can afflict us. Compassion fatigue can afflict us in our everyday lives as we go from place to place and as we relate to people and as we have difficulties with others and how often we, perhaps, are the victims of compassion fatigue. But we are to be those who are moved by the plight and pain of others, be that physical pain or emotional pain or spiritual pain or spiritual need. In the absence of compassion, we will never love deeply or forgive graciously. I think it would be difficult to overstate the importance of kindness and compassion in the Christian life. Recently, I've just come across a very useful resource that I commend to you, which are the Bible reading notes of the Reverend James Philip. His son, Willie Philip, is the minister in the Tron in Glasgow. And on the Tron website, you can access James Philip's Bible reading notes that go right through the whole Bible. It's not a commentary, but just notes that relate to the whole text of the Bible. And I was having a look at them in connection with thinking about these verses. And James Philip's Bible reading, and James Philip's Bible reading, and James Philip, as he comments on these verses, or on this verse in particular, quotes an unknown author who speaks about this matter of the importance of kindness in the Christian life. And let me just read what this unknown author says in this regard. Deep tenderness of spirit is the very soul and marrow of the Christ life. Without it, the most rigorous, righteous life of righteousness and zeal and good works and rigid purity of morals and missionary zeal and profuse liberality and ascetic self-denial and most blameless conduct utterly fail to measure up to the Christ life unveiled in the New Testament. Deep tenderness of spirit, kindness, compassion are at the very heart of what it is to be a Christian. Our forgiveness then is grounded in grace. The forgiveness with which we are to forgive others is grounded in grace, an expression of kindness and compassion. And thirdly, it is offered or granted in Christ. This morning, how God forgives us in Christ. Well, we too are to forgive others in Christ. What does that mean when applied to ourselves? Well, I think it can mean a number of things or perhaps means a number of things, but there's two that I would want to suggest to you.

What does it mean for us to forgive in Christ? Well, we forgive each other driven by our love for and gratitude to Christ. In that sense, we can speak of forgiving others in Christ. But also, and importantly, we forgive each other empowered by the love of Christ in us. And it is only because that is true that we are able to forgive in the manner that is demanded of us, at least in some measure.

So, the first aspect of the demand upon us to love deeply concerns forgiveness. Be kind and compassionate to one another forgiving each other. But the second aspect is, or the second demand is that we are to be imitators of God. Chapter 5 and verse 1, Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.

Now, of the three demands that we've noted at the very beginning and that we're going through and looking at now, this might appear to be the most impossible of the demands, that we should imitate God.

[18:42] God. It's not just that such a demand is seemingly so beyond our grasp in any possible circumstance, or indeed in any parallel universe, to use a concept that seems to be gaining traction

these days, that we would imitate God. It just seems so beyond us. But not only does it seem beyond us, in a sense, it almost seems inappropriate or improper that we sinful creatures would aspire to and actually imitate a holy God. But much as we might struggle with even the concept, it is so clear that this is the demand that is laid before us. Be imitators of God. There's no wriggling out of the demand. It is so clear. Now, the question that I want to tackle to help us think about this demand is, is why?

Why is it that we are called upon to be imitators of God? Why are we to imitate God? And let me suggest three answers to that question that I hope complement each other. Why are we to imitate God? The first answer, I think, is clearly implied and to the fore in the verse before us. And it is this. We imitate God because of who we are, because of our nature, because of our new nature. This is the answer that stands out in our verse. We are God's dearly loved children. We are God's sons and daughters. We have by faith been adopted into God's family. And as God's children, we are to demonstrate the family likeness. I think this is what Paul very much has in mind. You are God's children. And so, obviously, as God's children, you will imitate your father. That is what children do. And we know that's true. We see that on a daily basis. How often do we say of a small child or even of a teenager or even of an adult. How often do we say, well, they're just like their father, be that in their voice, be it in their mannerisms, be it in their appearance. That is something we often notice as being true. And it's that very simple, observable truth that Paul is drawing on here. He's saying, you are dearly loved children of God. You are God's sons and daughters. Well, be like your father. Imitate your father. Why? Because of who we are.

We are God's children. We are His sons and daughters. And so, for that reason, the demand, seemingly so impossible, in that light becomes a reasonable one. That is what we are to do. We are to become increasingly like our father because of who we are. And this, of course, is not a new demand.

Paul is not coming out with anything that is particularly novel. In the Old Testament, God expected no less of His covenant people. In Leviticus 11 and verse 44, we read of how God addresses His people in this way, I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. God says to His people, I am the Lord your God. I am your God and you are my people. And as my people, you are to be like me because of who you are. You are my people and so you are to be like me. I am holy, so you must also be holy. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, echoes this same principle and expectation. Be merciful just as your father is merciful. He's your father and he's merciful. Well, you're His children, then you ought also to be merciful. You are to reflect your father's likeness. So, we imitate God because of who we are. We are, in the language of 2 Peter in chapter 1 and verse 4, partakers of the divine nature or participants in the divine nature. And so, we must demonstrate the likeness of God in our lives. So, that's the first answer, perhaps the most prominent answer to the question, why? Why are we to imitate God? Well, because of who we are.

[23 : 13] But I think we can also say that we imitate God because of what we want. And here I'm thinking of our desire or certainly what ought to be our desire as Christians. And remaining with the picture or the illustration, if you wish, of the father-son relationship, children generally, though not invariably, it has to be said, enjoy pleasing their parents. That's not always true. And the older they get, the less. Perhaps it's true, although they're all different. But I think as a general principle, we can say that children enjoy pleasing their parents. They look for the commendation of their parents. They look for the approval of their parents. And as we are God's dearly loved children, we too should desire to please God. And that desire to please God should serve as a further motivation to imitate God, as that is something that will please Him, for He commands it of us. Now, we'll come back to this matter of pleasing God in a moment. So, we imitate God because of who we are, our nature, as sons and daughters of God. We imitate God because of what we want, our desire to please Him. But we imitate

God also in expectation. And here I'm thinking of what our hope is as Christians. And in making this point, I am going beyond what we have, strictly speaking, in our text. And simply recognizing that likeness to God, likeness to God's Son, likeness to Jesus is not simply a worthy aspiration. God's great work in us has as its ultimate, and we can even say inevitable goal, that we will be like Jesus. And if we are like Jesus, then we will be like God. What does Paul say when he writes to the church in Corinth in his second letter in chapter 3 and verse 18? And we who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory are being transformed into His likeness, into the Lord's likeness with

ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. We imitate in expectation. If we are sometimes downhearted because we fall so far short in our response to this demand, then let this hope ever strengthen us that, yes, we fall short now. But the day is coming when we will, by God's grace and through His enabling, reach that point when we are indeed like Him. But very quickly, what do we imitate in God? And here I limit myself to what we have in our passage. What do we imitate in God? Well, what has come before, the call to forgive, God forgives, and so we imitate God in this matter, in forgiving each other, and also in what is now to come. In verse 2, we're told of Christ's love for us, of His self-giving love for us. So, we too would imitate that in our own lives. And let's move on to this third and final aspect of our call or the call upon us to love deeply. These demands upon us that together constitute loving deeply. And the third one is the demand to walk in love. The language that we have in our own, in the church Bible here, is to live a life of love. But what Paul says literally here is to walk in love. And the idea is captured quite reasonably in what we have, to live a life of love. That's the idea of walking in love. But what he actually says is, walk in love. This is the third demand that makes up the composite call to love deeply. We are to walk in love. What this demand involves echoes what we saw this morning of the love of Christ as self-giving and pleasing to the Father. So, too, with us. To walk in love involves a love that is self-giving. To walk in love is to live in such a way as to place the good of the other over and above our own good. To give ourselves up for others, just like Jesus. [27 : 51] This morning we quoted from 1 John 3, verse 16, but we didn't read the whole verse. Now we will read the whole verse. This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. We left it there this morning because it served our purposes this morning. Jesus Christ laid down His life for us.

But what does the apostle go on to say? And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. As He loved in this manner, in this sacrificial manner, in this self-giving manner, so we also are to love in this same way. Now that is a big ask. It's a huge ask that having been told and reminded of this great act of sacrifice on the part of Jesus Christ that He laid down His life for us that we should then immediately be confronted with these words, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. I wonder what do you think that looks like in our daily lives? I would imagine that for most of us, this as an ultimate demand of actually giving up our life for others is unlikely to be required of us. I don't know if that's true or not, but it seems unlikely that many of us would have that circumstance placed before us. But I don't think the fact that we don't have that as a circumstance that confronts us is reason to think, well, we're free of the obligation that lies behind that, or the principle that is implicit in these words. What do you think that laying down your life could look like in everyday life, short of actually dying? In what ways can you sacrifice of yourself for others? In what ways can you give up of yourself for others? How do you give yourself up for others? How do you in some sense lay down your life for others? I leave that simply as questions for you to think about. To walk in love involves a love that is self-giving. But then secondly, and again, echoing or mirroring what we were thinking about this morning, to walk in love is a love that is or ought to be, I think we can say is, pleasing to God. The self-giving love of Jesus is described as, there in verse 2, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. And as we walk in love, we too are to be aware of and excited by the opportunity to please God. To live our lives in a manner that is acceptable to, but not only acceptable to, delightful to God. That our lives, our walking in love, our self-giving love should be a pleasing aroma to God. To God that is, to us, to us look down and say, this is my Son in whom I am well pleased. His self-giving love, His forgiving of others, His walking in love is a pleasing aroma to me. It's a sweet, fragrant offering. Is that not the idea of what we have in Romans, where we are called upon to offer up our lives as a spiritual sacrifice to God, which is our spiritual or reasonable act of worship. A love that is pleasing to God. We are to walk in love, and that walking in love ought to be, and is, in the measure that we do walk that walk. It is pleasing to God. It is, or it should be, a sobering thought as we think of this matter of our walking in love being pleasing to God. It should be a sobering thought that the opposite is also possible. Just as we are called upon to please God and can please God, it's also possible to sadden God. Notice just in a previous verse, we haven't read this, but it's only just a couple of verses before, and so I can very much imagine it still in Paul's mind as he writes the verses we are thinking about. Notice in verse 30 of chapter 4 we read, and do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. Paul has just recognized this very sobering and, you might even say, frightening possibility, more than possibility, so often the reality that we can grieve God. We can grieve, we can

sadden the Holy Spirit of God. We can grieve the Holy Spirit by a loveless life, but as we can grieve Him, so we can delight the Spirit of God as we walk in love. I wonder how often we even think about what we could do to delight God. Sometimes when we're in love with somebody, that's something that occupies our attention. What could I do that would be pleasing to them? What could I do that they would find delightful? What could I do that they would really enjoy, that would be really pleasing to them?

[33 : 22] I wonder how often we think in those terms as we consider the matter of pleasing God. Is that concern even on our radar? Well, that God would help us to cultivate that love for God that provokes in us a desire to please Him, and an understanding that we will do so as we forgive each other and walk in self-giving love. Forgive each other just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God. Walk in love.

Are these impossible demands. In one sense, perhaps we might say that they are for us, and yet we recognize that in this life we will never perfectly match up to these demands. But in the light of who we are, they are reasonable demands, and the one who demands is also the one who enables and empowers. Let us pray.

Heavenlyinity Case