

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: July 13, 2025. Week 3 of 3 on Ephesians

Text: Ephesians 4:17-5:2

Title: Living by Grace

Focus: How do we make sense of Paul's focus on grace, the call to holy living, and extrapolating from the setting of Paul's world to our own?

What's the best guide from this passage or Ephesians as a whole?

### **Epistle Reading Ephesians 4:17-5:2**

<sup>17</sup> Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer walk as the gentiles walk, in the futility of their minds; <sup>18</sup> they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. <sup>19</sup> They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. <sup>20</sup> That is not the way you learned Christ! <sup>21</sup> For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus, <sup>22</sup> to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, <sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

<sup>25</sup> So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. <sup>26</sup> Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup> and do not make room for the devil. <sup>28</sup> Those who steal must give up stealing; rather, let them labor, doing good work with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. <sup>29</sup> Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

**5** <sup>1</sup> Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, <sup>2</sup> and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

### **Grace and Rules**

We have been talking about grace for two weeks. Grace is . . .

- Something which I do not deserve and cannot earn.
- Grace is something which reassures, builds up, and provides hope.
- Grace is persistent kindness, as we saw in the scenes between Robin Williams's character Sean and Matt Damon's Will in the movie *Good Will Hunting*.
- Grace is a gift which brings healing. Last week we talked about how grace helps our gifts emerge. When grace transforms the pain we have experienced, it produces greater empathy and compassion.

- A catechism asks, “Don’t you have to be good for God to love you?”<sup>1</sup>
  - Grace responds, “No. God loves me in spite of all I do wrong.”
- Grace reminds us that we belong to God not because of who we are or aren’t, but because of who *God* is and what *God* has done.

### **What is the relationship between grace and following a set of rules?**

“If grace means that God loves us in spite of what we do, then why do we have all these rules?”

This question about the relationship between grace and following the rules comes up in our reflection on the book of Ephesians as we move from the focus on grace in the last two weeks to this reading from chapter 4, which is filled with exhortation (urging people to do something) or rules for moral behavior. There are lots of imperative verbs in the passage:

- Put away falsehood
- Be angry, but do not sin
- Give up stealing
- Do good work with your own hands
- Let no evil talk come out of your mouth (vv. 25-29)

Paul poses the question even more bluntly in Romans. He asks it rhetorically himself because he anticipates it is a question others would ask.

- “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1).

He poses the question because he can imagine people asking it. “If grace is bigger than sin, why not let grace continue to increase?” And he answers strongly: **By no means! May it never be!**

## **Grace and Rules in Ephesians**

In response to the question about grace and faithful living, (drawing from both Romans and here in Ephesians), Paul would say that by the grace of God, we belong. We have a new life in Christ, and we have been changed. Paul would encourage us,

- “Remember who you are! Remember the one to whom you belong! Live a life worthy of your calling.”
- Here in Ephesians, Paul says, “Put away your old self (4:22), clothe yourself with the new self, which is a reflection of God’s righteousness and holiness” (4:24).

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<sup>1</sup> Question 4 in *Belonging to God: A First Catechism*. Approved by the 210th General Assembly (1998) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

- You are God's beloved children, so be imitators of God and walk in love, in the same way that Jesus loves us and gave himself for us (5:1-2).
- You belong to God. Remember who you are and to whom you belong.

## Living by Rules, Breaking Rules

Heidi Haverkamp, the priest and spiritual director who wrote this study on Ephesians which our Thursday Women's Bible Study used<sup>2</sup>, asks.

- When do you find comfort in having rules to follow?
- When do you feel suffocated or irritated by having to follow the rules?

Haven't we all experienced times when we found rules to be comforting and helpful and other times when we found them to be irritating and restrictive?

- How do you determine the difference? Aside from personal preference or a self-centered desire for our own way—something like "I want rules to be binding on others and not on me," what's the difference between a good rule and a bad rule?

We have just celebrated the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, which draws our attention to the Declaration of Independence, the founding of our country, and the ideals of freedom, liberty, and self-governance. What do you know or remember about the Boston Tea Party? Like the Declaration of Independence, it was a statement or a political protest. It was an act of defiance. It was "breaking the rules." Colonialists dumped 342 cases of tea into the Boston Harbor. It wasn't their tea to dump.

Do you remember what message the colonialists intended to convey? Their protest was against "Taxation with Representation." What they meant to say through their protest is that it is unfair to impose taxes on people without giving them any say in how they shall be governed. The colonists believed they should not be taxed by the British Parliament without having elected representatives to voice their interests.

**What lesson would you draw from this?** Perhaps that there are times when breaking the present rule becomes necessary. It's the right thing to do—even if it is against the rules.

## Other Rulebreakers

**What do you think about that? --That there comes a time when breaking the rules may be the right thing.**

I'm usually an orderly person. Church people are usually orderly people. We tend to be rule followers. There is a good basis for that. We tend to be trusting. We tend to

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<sup>2</sup> *Ephesians: Receiving Grace, A Study of Ephesians* from *Gather* magazine, Sept./Oct. 2024. Gathermagazine.org

see the best in people or *want* to see the best in people. We tend to be people who see the benefits of rules and are a bit suspicious of those who break rules.

What's the danger or risk of that? (of being a Rule Follower) You can get hung up on the rule and forget the intent of the rule. You can overlook that when power is concentrated in too few people, those with that power have a tendency to set rules that benefit themselves and not take into account the good of all. That, the colonialists would say, was the problem with a king who wanted to benefit himself and prevent colonialists from having a say.

In the 1960s in the American South it was church people, specifically white clergymen—pastors, who wrote a letter to Martin Luther King in April of 1963 to tell him to follow the rules. They called their letter “A Call for Unity” and they published it openly in *The Birmingham News*. Here is some of what they said:

- “We are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. . . we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.”<sup>3</sup>
  - The “outsider” reference was a dig at Dr. King.
- They wrote, “When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.”

Martin Luther King replied to these eight white clergymen four days later with his ***Letter from a Birmingham Jail***.<sup>4</sup>

- He made a distinction between order and justice:
  - “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice” (p. 1).
  - “I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice” (p. 4).
- He differentiated between unjust laws and just laws:

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<sup>3</sup> “A Call for Unity,” letter to Martin Luther King, April 12, 1963. It was published openly in *The Birmingham News* and signed by 8 white clergymen in response to civil rights demonstrations. It is available from many sources. See [https://www.dbu.edu/mitchell/modern-resources/\\_documents/acallforunitytextandbackground.pdf](https://www.dbu.edu/mitchell/modern-resources/_documents/acallforunitytextandbackground.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963. [https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/\\_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf](https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf)

- “Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority” (p. 3).
- In response to the critique that the protests were “extreme measures” and were unjustified, he wrote that at first he was disappointed that fellow clergymen would see his nonviolent efforts as extreme. Then he wrote,
  - “But as I continued to think about the matter, I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist.
  - Was not Jesus an extremist in love? [For he taught,] “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.”
  - Was not Amos an extremist for justice? “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”
  - Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ? “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.”
  - Was not Martin Luther an extremist? “Here I stand; I can do no other so help me God.”
  - Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist? “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

So the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?” (p. 4 of the letter).

Dr. King used the term, “extremist,” which picked up on the critique of the eight white clergymen, but he is making a similar point that we have made—that there comes a time to challenge unjust rules. If he’s being called an extremist, then he counts himself in good company when Jesus, the prophet Amos, Martin Luther, and Thomas Jefferson and others were labeled in the same way when history would show they courageously stood up for justice.

### ***For Such a Time as This: Teri McDowell Ott Editorial***

Pastor and editor Teri McDowell Ott is a contemporary church leader who also observes that church people tend to be rule followers and a bit passive:

There’s a fair critique of [well-educated church<sup>5</sup>] readers: we read, but we don’t act. We read as though reading is enough. Clearly, in such a time as this (She

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<sup>5</sup> She specifically says *Presbyterian* here where I have substituted “well-educated church.” Teri Ott’s primary audience is Presbyterian, but I think the same point holds true for ELCA Lutherans.

calls this “a volatile and violent time.”), we cannot just read. As Edmund Burke said, we don’t want to be the “good men who do nothing” while evil triumphs.

But if you’re like me, you’re wondering what action is yours to take. Is it enough to call my representatives when vulnerable populations are targeted and terrorized? To post my outrage on social media when masked men apprehend college students and funds are withheld from research institutions? To stay on top of the news, verify sources and check facts, despite the exhaustion this brings?<sup>6</sup>

She draws inspiration from **Esther** in scripture, who is encouraged by Mordecai to consider that perhaps it is God’s call that she has come to her role “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). She responds by courageously speaking up to the king on behalf of her vulnerable people.

She concludes her column by encouraging her readers in the same way Paul writes to the Ephesians:

This is not a time for hiding and hopeless despair. This is a time to remember who we are and whose we are. If you read something that stirs your heart or fuels your courage, let it not stay on the page. Let those words kindle something in you — a prayer, a protest, a partnership, a plan. Listen for God’s call, trust it, and act with the wisdom and boldness that love demands.

Whatever strength or platform we’ve been given – whether it feels mighty or modest – it is ours to steward. Like Esther, we may not have chosen this time, but this time has chosen us.

## Closing Encouragement

- Living faithfully, morally is hard.
- This is a particularly challenging time—Pastor Teri Ott calls it “a volatile and violent time.”
- The challenge: Remember who you are and whose you are.
  - Paul reminds the Ephesians, “You are God’s beloved children, so be imitators of God and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us” (Eph. 5:1-2).
- Use whatever power and position we have to thoughtfully expose injustice and protect the vulnerable.

May God bless us with wisdom to discern God’s call and courage to act.

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<sup>6</sup> Teri McDowell Ott, “For Such a Time as This,” Editorial published July 8, 2025 in *The Presbyterian Outlook*. <https://pres-outlook.org/2025/07/for-such-a-time-as-this/>