

A Change from Within 2021
Jeremiah 31:31-34 Ephesians 4:22-5:2

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (New Revised Standard Version)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Ephesians 4:22-5:2 (New Revised Standard Version)

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

I was surprised to learn this week that the TV program “Survivor”
is scheduled to begin its 41st season during this fall of 2021...
... and I wonder how it is even possible that show is still on the air?

The basic idea is that a group of people who don't know each other
are divided into two teams that will live together
and compete against each other on a primitive island.

The 2 teams are in competition during various activities & contests,
and each individual tries to be a helpful asset to their team,
because toward the end of the show
they gather for a council or tribal meeting,
where someone is voted off the island by secret ballot,

**and the last one remaining on the island
will go home with a million dollar prize...**

... which of course motivates only the very best of
human nature, generosity, compassion and integrity.

... so what could possibly go wrong with that?

As you might expect, the set-up of Survivor leads toward
some pretty low-down and sneaky behind the scenes conniving,
anything goes so that someone else is the one voted off the island.

In contrast to the cut-throat and me-first culture of “survivor”,
the Ephesians passage we read **describes Christian community**,
a vision of a believers helping each other live into God’s grace,

by trying to live in authentic and supportive relationships,
that joyfully share and reflect the gracious love
and compassion that we ourselves have freely received
as God’s blessings and good gifts through Jesus Christ.

Though the words, *love God and your neighbor* sound simple enough,
it’s not always that easy to get that right in every situation,
and sometimes we’re not exactly sure about what to do or say.
or what an authentic Christian life really looks like.

The letter of Ephesians was written to recent Christian converts,
mostly pagans and gentiles learning to live Christian lives,
but who did not know how to follow Jesus within their culture.

The passage we read today, was meant to help them grow in their faith,
by teaching them and instructing them how to follow Christ,
and how to express and live out their new-found faith. vs. 22-24

*You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and
deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new
self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

The letter of Ephesians begins with a wonderful description of grace,
and what God has accomplished on our behalf through Jesus Christ.

The next section explains how that grace
and the Holy Spirit make us one in Christ,
each of us, a member of the body of Christ.

It stresses the clear imperative
that we do have responsibility for the welfare of one another,
and that authentic faith always involves other people.

The section that we read today may sound like a morals-checklist,
but is really intended to be taken as **clear and specific examples**
of what Christ-like behavior & attitude looks like
as an active reflection our relationship with God.

This text serves as a practical guide with real-world instructions
for turning aside from their former pagan ways of living and being,
so that as God’s grace & the Holy Spirit are at work within us
our life’s perspective, values and goals are transformed...
... so that we love, bless and care for those around us.

It should not to be taken as trying to earn or deserve God’s favor,
but to respond appropriately to God’s gracious love & blessings
as we are drawn deeper into the body of Christ, the Church,

where we learn to work together despite our differences,
and for our uniqueness & diversity to strengthen us toward mission.

Our life together is about sharing and reflecting God's blessings,
by of being a healing & supportive community that becomes possible
through God's transforming grace and presence **that is**
active in us and among us when we gather in Christ' name.

**The idea is that an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ
can & will change our relationships, attitudes and behavior.**

**But what does it really look like, to follow Jesus Christ,
in living out faithful and caring relationships with others
and for our lives to be guided by our sense of God's grace?**

Our text offers 4 contrasting examples to illustrate this, vs. 25-29

So then, ¹**putting away falsehood**, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²**Be angry but do not sin**; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.

Thieves must ³**give up stealing**; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let ⁴**no evil talk come out of your mouths**, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

falsehood in contrast to speak the truth to our neighbors
The words we speak, governed to reflect God's image within us.

Be angry in contrast to do not sin, leave no room for bitter resentment
Anger & resentment are too toxic & dangerous to hold onto overnight.

give up stealing in contrast to honest work, to have something to share
The former thief becomes a Christ-centered giver to those in need.

evil talk in contrast to words of grace useful for building up
So after an encounter with us, have they felt God's gracious love?

**Authentic Christian life has never been about a list of rules,
but it's God's love, grace and mercy re-writing the human heart...**
... a new heart that is motivated by the gracious love of God...
that asks, do my deeds, does my behavior, **by my words and my attitude**
am I building up and giving grace or tearing down and causing harm?

Our call really isn't to behave better, or to follow upgraded rules,
but it is to grow closer to God, to live and walk nearer **with Jesus**,
and to submit more and more to the presence of God's Spirit...

**... so that our behavior and our attitudes change and grow deeper
as we are being transformed by the Holy Spirit from the inside out,
by trusting and letting the grace of that relationship
gradually guides us toward more Christ-like behavior.**

That strategy is described in Ephesians, vs. 24, 5:1-2

... clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. ... Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us.

And that is also what God promised through Jeremiah. vs. 31-32

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when **I will make a new covenant** ... It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke ...

Jeremiah's point is that God is more gracious and wants far more than the fearfully-forced obedience from terrified sinners, so God promised to go further than laws carved in stone. vs. 33

But this is the (new) covenant that I will make ... I will put my law within them, and I will **write it on their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

The new covenant is not a new list of rules carved into stone, but it is God's love, grace & mercy re-writing the human heart...
... a new heart that is motivated by gracious love to obey God.

And how does that work in our world?

Most of us will drive a bit more attentively and carefully when we see a police car in the rearview mirror --- but that driving-improvement generally doesn't last long...
... not nearly as well as when you have your child or grandchild riding with you.

For far more than speed limits, traffic regulations and even radar, there is a higher, more powerful **motivation of love**, every parent's desire to protect and care for their child...
... suggesting that the greatest and most powerful Christian influence is not the exercise of power and force, but the presence of grace.

Our life together is about sharing and reflecting God's blessings, becoming a healing and supportive community that is made possible through God's transforming grace and presence that is active in us and among us when we gather in Christ' name.

The church is called to be something different, entirely different than an island of survivors-cast vigorously competing for a prize.

We are to be the voice, body and demonstration of God's gracious love, the light of God's truth, grace and forgiveness out into the world, a place and a people of genuine compassion and forgiveness.

Ephesians is about living inward and outward a new attitude & mindset,
by living as those who are loved by the Lord and equipped by God's Holy Spirit to serve,
as a growing and deepening love that is always ongoing and in process,
by becoming more porous and permeable to the Spirit and grace of God.

This Ephesians passage really isn't all that complex or confusing, but has to do with who we are called to be and who are becoming,
the beloved children of God through whom grace can flow...

... as we read in vs. 4:32 - 5:2

... *God in Christ* has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of *God*, as beloved children, and live in love, as *Christ* loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to *God*.

We do have power for good, and we can all serve usefully in some way.

We do have opportunities, capacity and resources to glorify *God*...

... so consider, how is your faith making a real difference?,

and how is your relationship with *God*, the grace received helping to guide, to serve when you're out in the world?

The question really is, what sort of people & faith community are we?

Several years ago, after a Salt and Light dinner one evening,
a boy from the neighborhood was playing basketball,
and when we spoke, he said that he was hungry,
his mom was at work and there was no food in the house.
I took him inside, and he asked if he could have one of the desserts.

Immediately, I sat him down with a big piece of cake and ice-cream,
while the kitchen crew
filled and packed a tray of leftovers for him to take home.

I wanted to make sure that he wasn't living on the streets,
so I insisted on driving him around to his mom's apartment,
and echoed the many others who invited him back,
urging him to participate in our youth program...
... which he did faithfully for a number of years.

His family has since moved away,
so we don't see him anymore, though I do still miss him.
And wherever he has gone, and whatever else happens in his life,
he'll always know that here he was welcomed,
that here **people cared in real and tangible ways.**

**And I rejoice that we did proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.
We did demonstrate *God's* love and mercy in an authentic way
when we put our food and compassion into that hungry boy.**

It seems to me, that what we do and say in this sanctuary on Sunday
is authentic & truthful, important & matters **only to the degree**
that each of us steps out from our worship and fellowship,
to live committed, active and authentic Christian lives,
discipleship **that proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ**
out in this world, in our homes and out into our community...

... as we are being made whole and being transformed,
into the likeness of *God* in true righteousness and holiness
into imitators of *God*, as beloved children,
who live in love, as *Christ* who first loved us.