

“Being Gracious” based on Ephesians 4:17-32 and Psalm 4

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on August 11, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

In June 2018, at a U.S. Senate hearing, an actor named Terry Crews testified about being sexually assaulted. Two years earlier at a party, one of the then most powerful men in the movie business, assaulted Crews, who is a 6'2" and 250-pound former NFL linebacker. He's huge. So, in the hearing, Terry was asked why he didn't just beat up his attacker.

In that forum, the actor then chose to speak of the power imbalance. He responded, “You only have a few shots at success,” and that while growing up in Flint, Michigan, he saw many of his fellow young black men who were “provoked into violence, and they, were in prison or were killed.”

In his autobiography, “Tough: My Journey to True Power,” Terry Crews tells the whole story. He talks about how abuse, addiction, poverty, bad theology, and all sorts of trauma had shaped him to cling to a false image that made him a prisoner of his anger. It made him a prisoner of misguided notions of what it means to “be a man.”

He said he fed his anger on the football field to get out of Flint. Except that his anger nearly cost him every opportunity he had. His high school coaches told colleges about his anger. He did not get a college scholarship for football. A partial art scholarship for his tremendous art talent that paved his way. He had to “walk on” or try out, and eventually he made the team and earned a full ride.

When his senior year came, he was the fifth rated linebacker according to the NFL scouts. But again, his coaches and others who were consulted spoke of his rage issues and his anger. He was not drafted until the 11th round, the 281st overall pick, by the LA Rams. He struggled to make teams. He was in and around the NFL for about seven seasons, playing in only 32 games over three seasons with a career total of just three tackles. He spent most of his time on practice squads and not playing on Sundays.

After he retired, he worked as a security guard at a movie set. Eventually, this led to him getting a small part in a movie, then a few more parts after that, and finally, a leading role in a sitcom with Chris Rock, called “Everybody Hates Chris.” He celebrated this new role with a fancy dinner that in truth, he still couldn't afford, having run up so much debt. Afterward, he and his wife were approached by some men saying they wanted his autograph. But in the exchange the men pushed Terry Crew's wife.

At that moment, this giant man lost his temper, and a fight broke out. The police showed up and immediately, they handcuffed Terry. On the first night of his new success, it seemed as though it was all over. Except that a witness stepped forward and told the police they had made a mistake. The witness described it all, the provocation, and said Terry acted in self-defense. The police let Terry go.

It was after this incident, and a confession of infidelity that nearly cost him his marriage, that Terry began therapy and became part of a church that wasn't a cult like the one he group in. It had sound theology based in the historic faith of the church. His relationship with God, with his wife, with his children, and with the world, came into focus and he realized that he needed to be open to change.

This is the Terry Crews – changed and open to being changed – who was assaulted that night in 2016. It was not the one who flew into a rage when his wife was pushed. If this incident had

happened 10 or 12 years earlier, he likely would have likely beaten up his assailant, and he'd be out of work now, instead of the agent who was eventually fired for his actions.

In writing in his book about his testimony before the Senate, he explains first what he said in the hearing, and then added, "The deeper answer is that rage and anger are never the way. Any time you're acting out of anger, you are not in control. You're allowing yourself to be provoked. To be filled with anger and rage is to be powerless and weak."

His assailant may have "deserved" a beating, as some would say to Terry in response to his testimony, but what would have changed? Instead, his restraint left an opportunity open to do something with thought and reason that would result in real change, real consequences.

Beloved, in our reading from the Apostle Paul today, we find the challenge of our faith. If we are followers of Christ, as we heard last week, then we're called to live into our calling to be like Christ. We are to reflect the one, who being equal with God, chose not to exploit that. Instead, the Eternal Son of God, fully one with the Father, descended, becoming fully human, just like you and me, for our sake. He revealed what it means to live reflections of God's image, as he was the true image of God for us. Christ did so through this humility, and his gentleness, his patience, and his bearing with us in love to create unity in the bond of peace through the Spirit.

The creator of all things entered into creation and lived within our limits to die for us. But this was not just any death, he died a death of shame and took on fully the curse of our sin. He was hanged on a Roman cross, betrayed by his people and silenced, or canceled, by earthly power. But sin could not hold him back and death could not silence him.

For our sake, he rose again on the third day, conquering sin and death, taking upon himself all our sin, guilt, shame, and punishment. Jesus revealed for us what it means to live for God. The one who came down, also ascended, sending us the Holy Spirit as a downpayment of our inheritance until all things are made new, and heaven and earth become one.

This good news is why we are called to humility, gentleness, patience, and told to bear with one another in love and in unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. And so, our reading today is part two: it is further instruction on this Christian life. Paul says we are not to walk – or live – as the nations do, for the ways of the world involve an emptiness of the mind. It involves being darkened in our deep thoughts on worldly concerns, and therefore, we are alienated from God's life because of our ignorance.

Paul talks of the worldly impulse to send away any suffering to do whatever comes easy. The King James says, "being past feeling have given themselves over to lasciviousness." The NRSV says, "lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness." It's easy to give up lasciviousness and licentiousness because we don't know what that means. I'll give that up, no problem.

But if we translate these words more literally, it speaks to our modern condition. The start of this phrase is literally to "sending away pain," and the close is a word that means "to not do what is hard" or "not brutal." Sure, this word is rightly translated as "licentious" or "lascivious," but these are not words we understand nowadays, but we live in a culture that tells us, "You should never ever suffer. Instead, do whatever it is then, that make you feel good.'

This is what Paul is warning against. He is not saying we should choose suffering, but he is saying we must take the harder path – the path of Christ and not the ways of the world. When we do whatever makes us feel good, it is a performance, a work or practice of impurity and greed because it pulls us away from God and into our own selfishness.

Paul says we have learned something different from the Messiah, and the truth is in Jesus, meaning who he is and what he did. Instead, we put on the new humanity, according to God, to be formed by justice and divine truth, which again is Jesus. We speak this truth to one another, not lies, because we are one body – Christ’s body in the world.

Then comes one of the key lines, that the King James rendered so absolutely perfectly, but once again our language has changed so modern translations mess it up. The King James said, “Be ye angry,” but who says “ye” anymore? Do you know what “ye” is? Ye is a reflexive pronoun. It means “Be yourself angered, but do not sin.”

The NRSV translates it as “Be angry.” This sounds like a command, as if Paul is saying, “You be angry.” No, that’s not what it is. Bruce tells me that the German still gets it right, so it’s something we’re stuck with in English. It means, “Be yourself angered” which literally reflects the Greek, or “Be angered” or “Be provoked to anger, but do not sin.” It’s a rejection of anger, not a command to be angry. It’s the kind of rejection that Terry Crews spoke of.

Paul is quoting from Psalm 4, which in the Septuagint, or Greek translation, matches Paul. In the Hebrew, it is “be tossed about,” which is a metaphor for being provoked to anger. When we feed anger, we give opportunity to the devil, which means divider, “one who throws through.” That means anger must be set aside as quickly as possible, before bedtime at least. Do not let the sun set on your anger, or else you run the risk of dividing you from others, from God’s family. That’s the danger here.

Paul says to anyone stealing – work for those in need instead. Do not use unwholesome talk, or “bad reasoning.” Don’t let it come out of your mouth. This means the excuses we give for what we do. We might say, “Oh, I was justified in my anger” or “I was justified to take that because I don’t make enough money at work.” The unwholesome talk is when we say, “I was justified, in my sin.” Instead, Paul says to speak of what builds up, meaning grace, or unmerited favor, is then given to others through us.

This is hard teaching. We love to justify our anger. We even hear people say it motivates us to do good. But we do not do our best work when angry. Is a police officer best when he is angry. Snipers and killer are trained to keep their anger down and all emotions to do awful things. When we’re angry, we don’t have control of ourselves. It might spur us to action, but it’s never the best action available to us.

This is what Terry Crews pointed out in his book and what Martin Luther King Jr. expressly said, “You must not harbor anger,” and made it clear that love for enemies is what diffuses enemies. You cannot fight hate with hate, anger with anger. Only love – and with it grace – can overcome these things.

This is not the easy way. It’s not that Paul wants us to seek suffering to be Christ followers, but it is to recognize that choosing to go against anger, against taking what we want, and then also against

making excuses for our actions, and against being responsible. This means being like Christ and choosing actual humility, gentleness, patience, and choosing to bear with one another in love, empathy. We do this in the unity of the Holy Spirit and in the bond of peace. This is about choosing to be unoffendable as Christians. (There's a great book called "Unoffendable" by Brant Hansen about this topic of choosing to be unoffendable as Christians.)

Paul says the Christian life is about choosing not to feed anger. It is about not feeling we are entitled to take what we want, do what's easy. It's about being honest, and being gracious. Terry Crews said that a major breakthrough for him came while reading, "Man's Search for Meaning," by Victor Frankl, a holocaust survivor and psychiatrist. The whole book could be applied to this passage from Paul.

The first half of this book is Frankl's description of the concentration camps, in which the brutality, cruelty, and evil of the Nazis was in full force. The Nazis, in their quest for power above all else, killed 6 million Jews, and several million more people who had opposed them. Frankl lost nearly his entire family, including his wife.

Camp life, he writes, forced him and others to comply with a set pattern of what they were told. However, he said there still remained some liberty – the liberty to choose how to react. Frankl asks, "Is that theory true, that would have us believe that man is no more than a product of many conditional and environmental factors, be they of a biological, psychological, or sociological nature? Is man but an accidental product of these?"

Frankl uses the extreme example of his own experience in the concentration camps to rebuff the idea that we are all just product of our environment and circumstances. He rejects the idea that we are not able to choose our actions. He writes, "The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action...apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress."

He said some people remained selfless, even giving their last bits of food to someone worse off than they were. He said these instances of heroism prove, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing, The last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances – to choose one's way." Every day and even every hour, he added, offered opportunities to make decisions, that would not "submit to those powers which threaten, to rob you of your inner self, you very freedom." We are more than the conditions we live in.

Frankl said there are two races in the world – those who are decent and those who are not. Both are found everywhere and penetrate into all groups of society. No group consists entirely of decent or indecent people, he said. This meant that he even at times found a decent person among camp guards. This is because life tears open the human soul and exposes it. In those depths, we find a mixture of good and evil, he said. The rift dividing these goes deep within every person.

This reminds us of what Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a survivor of Soviet camps, or gulags, would later say, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. and even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained."

Sisters and brothers, in closing, the Apostle Paul offers us a choice in our walk with Christ. Do we walk as the world walks, seeking the easy path, or will we walk as Christ walked, as the Spirit leads? Paul sums up by warning us not to grieve the Holy Spirit in whom we were sealed. The Spirit is in and among us as our inheritance for the day of redemption. Paul says that we must lay down all bitterness and rage, our anger and outcry, and our slander. It must be removed along with our malice, a word often translated as evil. The line between good and evil is in our hearts but as Christ followers, so is the Holy Spirit of God and the Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is grounded on grace – on unmerited favor. It is based in God's love and in the forgiveness of our sins found in and through Jesus Christ. This is our faith. You are beloved by God and called to love with God's love. This is not because it is easy, but because this is what it takes to be like Christ. The easy thing is to lash out when taking a stand, to fight and feel good about our own self-righteousness in the moment.

What we are called to is not easy, but it is what it takes to be like Christ. Trust me when I say that I'm preaching to myself here, because I have been known to be provoked to anger. This is not easy, but we are called to be kind to those we meet, to be compassionate. We are to be gracious or forgiving, just as God is gracious to us. If it was easy to change the world, it would be changed already. But we're not going to change the world on our own, but in our everyday actions, how we show love makes a difference, bringing us closer and closer in every moment to a better world. Amen.

Ephesians 4:17-32 (Fresh Translation):

Therefore, in the Lord, I say and give witness to this: No longer are you to walk through life just as the nations also do. For they are walking through life in the emptiness of their mind, being darkened in the deep thought and being alienated from God's life. This is on account of the ignorance that exists in them and on account of the hardness of their heart.

Having sent away all suffering, they have given themselves over to doing whatever comes easy. It is a performance of impurity, all in greediness. But you have not learned this way from the Messiah. Indeed, if you have heard him, then in him, you have been taught. In the same manner, the truth is in Jesus. You are to have set aside the old humanity according to the former way of life, which is being made to perish according to its desires of deceit.

Then you are to be renewed in the Spirit of your mind and to put on the new humanity, according to God, being formed in justice and the divinely sanctioned truth. Therefore, having put off lies, let each of us speak truth with our neighbor because we are members of one another.

Be angered, yet do not sin. Do not let the sun set upon your anger. Do not give an opportunity to the devil. To the one stealing, let him steal no longer. Rather, let him toil, working to do what is good with his own hands, in order that he may have something to give over to another in need.

Do not let any rotten reasoning go forth out of your mouth, but only what is good for the need of building up, so that it may give grace to those hearing. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God in whom you were sealed in the day of redemption.

Let all bitterness and rage and anger and outcry and slander be removed from you, with all malice. Then be kind to one another, compassionate, and gracious to each other, just as God in Christ extended grace to you.