

# Rules for the New Life

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**Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

I spent several days in Ohio this past week, visiting my sister, my brother and their respective children, and my lone uncle and aunt. It was hot and humid there, of course – August in Ohio always feels something like soup. I just missed the annual Ohio State Fair, a favorite experience when we were kids. The Ohio Dairy Barn this year – after having butter sculptures, yes butter sculptures, of dignitaries in years past such as Jack Nicklaus, John Glenn and Neil Armstrong – offered a statue of Ralphie, from “A Christmas Story,” a classic film set in Cleveland, of course.

But even post butter sculpture, there was excitement still to be experienced in Ohio. This past Tuesday, a hotly contested congressional election was held, with millions and millions of dollars spent, and TV screens blanketed with advertisements. The result, now almost a week old, is still too close to call.

But that congressional race was always at best the second most reported story in Columbus. I am sure you’ve heard about, even if you are not a sports fan, the controversy raging at Ohio State and its highly successful and popular football team. It is another in a series of #metoo moments, and the attending issues of domestic violence, power, money, accountability, and so much more.

In the midst of a lovely family visit, therefore, the news of the world, the challenging issues of life in 2018, were all around, permeating life itself, as they do, as they should, in fact. We retreat to reengage, we step back in order to step forward with greater commitment.

I found fuel for that commitment, a clear juxtaposition to the news of the day, in an unlikely place. I visited my sister’s school on the day before Election Day, to help her set up her classroom. When we walked in to the main office, these words were painted on the wall: *“I am a smart, special, valuable person. I respect myself and I respect others. My words and actions are kind and honest. I accept only the best in all I do. I am proud to be ME!”*

What would it look like, I wondered, if we took that seriously, in particular that middle section: *“I respect myself and I respect others. My words and actions are kind and honest.”* A moral, ethical framework not just for students at an elementary school in Dublin, Ohio, but for all students, all ages, adults, for all leaders – political and religious and business – as we navigate

the choppy waters of our present moment. Respect, kindness, honesty, more than quaint platitudes painted on a school wall, but real, honest, true calls to action that would make a difference in the world in which we live, now.

I wondered further: what would it look like for us to have similar words greeting us when we walked into other buildings, other schools, or churches, or statehouses and city halls, or places of business? What would it look like for each of us to do the same, words that we looked at every day, prayed over, sought to take seriously and enact them in our lives?

The Bible that is in front of us in the pews has a long history of development. The original Hebrew and Greek had no chapter or verse headings. Those came later, and thankfully so. Then, at some point, in the past century or so, editors added section headings. Mostly I don't like them, because I don't need to be told what a chapter or verse means. I like to figure that out by myself. But in thinking about this morning some weeks ago, I noticed the heading for this morning's epistle reading, from Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. "Rules for the New Life." Not perfect, I thought – "rules" is such a loaded word – but I can live with it, especially the notion of pointing to a new life.

Paul is writing to this newly formed church, a small, diverse collection of followers of Jesus. He was seeking to provide clarity around belief and encouragement to community life and unity in the face of so much diversity. Paul's theme on many fronts is giving up the old in order to embrace the new. Do not hold on to the old life, the old ways, but live in the new life you have discovered in Jesus.

What does that new life look like? There are some clear communal behavioral guidelines – no lying, no stealing, no bad-mouthing. Words matter – they can tear down or they can build up.

And then this – words that could find a good place on many a school, or church, or business, or family refrigerator, or smartphone screenshot: *"Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."*

Things to shed, bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, malice. And things to take up, kindness, tender-heartedness, forgiveness." Rules, guidelines, for a new life, all made possible because of the claims of Jesus on our lives, and the compelling, alternative vision he offers for living in the world, made incarnate in his own life, and then made tangible and real in the life of the community he continues to gather, whether 25 years after his life or 2000 years.

Stan Mast writes that "We sometimes say that you can learn a lot about a person's character from what she does when no one is looking. Paul would say that we can learn a lot about God's character by studying Jesus Christ.

(With) the help of the Holy Spirit, God's adopted sons and daughters constantly look for ways to deliberately do things like sharing with those in need. We try to build each other up by what we say. (We) pray to God to let the Spirit create in us kindness, compassion and forgiveness."

Mark Tranvik writes that "... instead of simply being exhorted to do good works, the community is continually reminded that it has been engrafted into the body of Christ and that its hope is grounded in Christ's present and future redemption. The result is a life lived in love, rooted and grounded in the love of Christ...(This is) love which reaches out and extends itself to the most unlovable. (Because we) inherit the status of "beloved children" ... (o)ur task then is to take this love to the neighbor ..."

Ronald Olson writes: "The community of reconciliation is to be, and will be, a neighborhood where the old is put off and the new put on. Out with bitterness, anger, shouting, cursing, and any kind of malice. Instead, goodness, warm-heartedness, and forgiveness, with Christ as its example, are to be in evidence...All those things we are counseled to guard against—lying, the indulgence of anger, stealing, foul talk, grieving the Holy Spirit, giving opportunity to the devil—are counterweighted with concern for beneficial effects on the rest of the community. Sharing with those in need, saying the right thing, and honest work give clues as to the ways in which God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are experienced in faith's community."

This past spring I was privileged to hear Jonathan Walton, the chaplain at Harvard's Memorial Church who also teaches in Harvard's Divinity School. Walton sought to calibrate this ethical and moral conversation. How do we live our faith in the world? Each of us, Walton advocated, must "*define a moral framework*" for ourselves. A moral framework. That will help clarify decisions, guide actions, weigh options. A moral framework.

Walton's defining moral framework is "the least of these," paying attention to how the most vulnerable, whether in the room or not, are treated. "The least of these."

- For a school in central Ohio, the moral framework is "respect, kindness, honesty," for self and other.
- For J.K. Rowling, speaking in the voice of Dumbledore, it is "always about love."
- For Martin Luther King, Jr., it was "the arc of justice."
- For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it was the "world we leave to our children."
- For Nightingale and Addams and Schweitzer, depicted so beautifully in our stained glass, it was compassion.<sup>i</sup>

What is your moral framework? What words and values have you articulated and embraced around which you will seek to organize your life, make decisions, take actions. What words are

inscribed on the walls of your life, your heart, and how are you, how are we, living into the vision of those words?

For Paul, in words we lift up as holy that lead to sacred action, the moral framework is clear, and counter-cultural, then and now: “*kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness.*” We think about the world, look around, at a post-Charlottesville, #metoo, world, and say it simply can’t be. And we lean on these words, this framework, and those who have gone before us in faith, and can be encouraged to live as if we can make a difference.

“Therefore,” Paul tells us, and we affirm, “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love – live in love – as Christ loved us.” Love as rule for a new life and love as moral framework. Our clear calling and our best hope. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> A reference to Third Church stained glass windows made earlier in the worship service, portrayals of Florence Nightingale, Albert Schweitzer and Jane Addams