

### OPENING HYMN

“Amazing Grace,”  
(ELW 779)

### OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you invite us to walk as children of light because you have made us in your own image. Teach us to believe that we are whole, beautiful and strong—not because of anything we have done, but because we are loved by you. Teach us to submit to one another with love and dignity, because you have made each one of us worthy, with your love and grace, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

### FOCUS VERSE

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:1-2)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- Scrap paper and pens or pencils

# Receiving grace: a study of Ephesians

## Session three

Grace-filled living, ancient and new

BY HEIDI HAVERKAMP

### THE OLD LIFE AND THE NEW LIFE

■ **Read:** Ephesians 4:17-5:2

*“Clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”* (Ephesians 4:24)

What is this new life? Early Christians believed that, through baptism, the old, sinful self was dead, and the new self was alive in Christ. This is grace. In baptism, we are set free. We can let go of death—in other words, the past, our sins and our fear of our mortality. We can embrace goodness, community with all creation, and the eternal possibility of new life.

In the earliest baptismal rituals, people acted out this belief quite seriously. Entering a darkened room inside the church, the catechumens—men and women—would go separately, taking off their clothes to walk, naked, down a few steps into a pool of water. Imagine being dunked, naked, under water, then hearing: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit!” Walking out of the water, the newly baptized would be clothed in white robes. They entered a sanctuary filled with people, ready to receive communion for the first time. It must have truly felt like being born into a new life!

Today, most baptisms are not so dramatic. Some clergy do immerse infants naked in a pool of water

during evening Easter vigils. Many others sprinkle a little water onto fully clothed adults and children in the full light of day. Still, I wonder if people in the early church had just as much trouble as us in believing that grace is real.

The terms “grace” and “new life” can sound abstract. But Ephesians provides some help, reminding readers to focus not on “corruptions” or sin, but on being created in the image and likeness of God. Ephesians also gives us a concrete list of things to do, so we know what “new life behavior” looks like. Although some of the language sounds ancient, the list’s meaning is still relevant for us today.

If you’re like me, criticism, judgment and worry can masquerade as constructive ways to improve yourself and the world around you, to live your best life. However, according to the writer of Ephesians, showing grace, mercy and kindness to ourselves and others—“walking in love, as Christ loved us”—is a much more effective way to live a life of love and joy.

## LECTIO DIVINA

 **Read:** Ephesians 4:25-32

Read these verses slowly to yourself. Or take turns reading, as a group. If you have time, read them twice. Hear the words spoken to you. Notice if a particular verse or phrase catches your attention.

**Reader 1:** So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. (v. 25)

**Reader 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. (v. 26-27)

**Reader 3:** 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. (v. 28)

**Reader 4:** 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. (v. 29)

**Reader 5:** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. (v. 30)

**Reader 6:** Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. (v. 31)

**Reader 7:** Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (v. 32)

### Share aloud or reflect:

1. Instead of thinking about these as more rules to follow, ask: How can these instructions increase grace in my life? What stands out as I read them? What feels most relevant to my life this week?
2. In your opinion, which instruction sounds easiest to follow? Which sounds most difficult?
3. No need to share this with the group, but is there one you’d like to work on personally? Journal later, at home, about how following this instruction could bring more grace into your life.

## LIVING AS CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT

 **Read:** Ephesians 5:3-21

*Walk as children of light, for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.*  
(Ephesians 5:8b-10)

Ephesians makes the Gentiles sound like pretty terrible people. Unlike Christians, or so the writer tells us, pagans are dumb, nasty, lustful, and greedy and he wants his readers to stay away from them. While it's helpful to be aware of the effect the people we surround ourselves with may be having on our hearts and minds, "us vs. them" language is reaching dangerous levels in our world today. So, let's turn our focus away from judging our neighbor and towards a deeper understanding of what it might mean to "walk in the light," instead.

Ephesians tells us that "the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true" (5:9). What does "good and right and true" mean exactly? We can take a lesson from the words of Jesus in Matthew 7 (quoted above): we can know goodness by the fruit it produces. We can know the "fruit of the light" by whether it grows into more goodness, more love, and more grace.

But this "light" does not mean we force ourselves to shine constantly only with happiness and optimism, or that we are wearing a sunshine mask to hide our shadow feelings like sadness, fear, jealousy, or anger. Some call this "toxic positivity": when a positive attitude starts to feel poisonous rather than life-giving for us and the people around us.

Denying our difficult feelings or pretending we never make any mistakes is not the way receive God's grace. Grace is about accepting and loving ourselves, whole, as God does. Being whole means being honest: "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness; rather, expose them... everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light." When we expose our whole selves to the light of Christ, we can be truly whole and free - because in him we do not need to be afraid of condemnation or shame. Not that we never need to grow or repent; as my bishop used to say, "God loves you just the way you are, and God loves you too much to let you stay that way!" But the most lasting change in any person happens when

we feel love and belonging, first.

Ephesians points out some ways that we may try to hide from difficult feelings or experiences: sexual promiscuity, greed, harmful words, secrecy and drinking too much. These mask emotion and fill the holes in our hearts with things other than seeking truth and healing. Ephesians encourages us to not fear bringing our feelings into "the light" with God or another person. The writer offers other concrete practices as well, including thanksgiving, gratitude, being wise, choosing our words carefully, letting ourselves be filled with the Spirit, and singing and making music together!

This does not mean pretending to be happy. There is a difference between forcing yourself to seem happy or positive, and truly trying to live a new life of grace each day, so that "Christ will shine on you."

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

4. In Ephesians, which ways of walking in the light speak most to you: practicing thanksgiving and gratitude, being wise, choosing your words carefully, letting yourself be filled with the Spirit, or singing and making music together? What else might you add to this list, from your own life experience?
5. Think of a strong emotion, perhaps a mistake, a wrong or a worry that has been bothering you lately. What would it be like to offer this before God? What if you talked about it with someone you trust? How might the Holy Spirit be inviting you to bring this "into the light of Christ" and move towards healing?

## SUBMIT TO ONE ANOTHER

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 5:21-6:9

*“Submit to each other out of respect for Christ.”*  
(v. 21, Common English Bible)

As you read these next chapters, keep in mind that Ephesians was teaching a way of love for its own time—a time when women, children and enslaved people were almost always considered the property of a man. The *pater familias* or “family father” was the oldest man in a family. He had authority and legal power over everyone in the household from newborn babies to grown men, servants and slaves.

Jesus acted in a very different way from this patriarchal model. We see this difference in Jesus’ behavior toward and teachings about children (Mark 10:13-16, Matthew 19:13-14), women (Luke 10:38-42, John 20:11-18), family (Matthew 12:48-50, Luke 9:59-62), and authority (Matthew 5:1-12, Matthew 23:9-12). But by the time Ephesians was written, Christians did not see themselves as revolutionaries anymore. Instead, Christians were trying to find acceptance in their wider society.

The letters of Paul and his followers try to teach the love of Jesus within this patriarchal framework. And so, the instructions of obedience for women, children and slaves can sound confusing, harsh or abusive to us today. These verses have often been used, not to increase love, but to continue cruel and abusive behaviors. Some readers may decide to skip these chapters because they are too painful. That’s okay.

If you are going to grapple with these challenging verses, take a deep breath and a step back. You may notice that all three sections—about husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves—are built around the teaching of mutual submission, or “being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21).

Mutual submission is actually a radical teaching. A *pater familias* never did anything that was submissive! Even today, most of us don’t consider submissiveness, humility or obedience to be admirable traits. We teach our children to stand up for themselves. We reward celebrities with strong personalities, politicians who never compromise, and leaders who fight for what they want with no regard for who or what who might get in their way. In a society like ours, what could it mean to submit to one another in love?

It does not mean always giving in, being a doormat, or ignoring our own needs and pain. As human beings, we all can remember an experience we’ve had of assault, discrimination or cruelty. We would never want to practice mutual submission in a situation like that.

But in healthy relationships, mutuality means honoring the dignity and integrity of the other person. Reading between the lines, Ephesians, in the context of its hierarchical, patriarchal culture, is trying to teach this. In our own time, spouses, romantic partners and even close (non-romantic) friends, could read this passage (with some tweaking of the words, below) and reflect on what it means to respect and love another:

*Spouses should love one another as they love their own bodies. Someone who loves their spouse loves themselves as well.*

How do you and your spouse/partner/friend nourish and care for one another? How are we members of one another’s bodies? How does how well you love yourself affect how well you love the person who is most dear to you?

Parents, grandparents, caregivers and children can also consider their relationships (with some tweaking of the words from Ephesians 6:1-4, below):

*Children, obey your parents and caregivers in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor the caregivers who*

*raised you” ... And, parents and caregivers, do not provoke your children to anger, but nurture them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

“Obey” comes from the Latin word meaning “to listen.” What does it mean to really listen to and honor someone, especially if this is someone we take for granted or even resent at times? How can we see our parents as full people, with their own joys and sorrows? How can we see our children, our siblings and other extended family members in this same way—not as people who owe us something, but as people who have their own journey and struggles?

I do not have any wisdom to offer about how modern people might consider the parts of Ephesians that deal with relationships between enslaved people and their enslavers. These verses are perhaps best left in the trash bin of history.

The best way to love someone else is to let them be themselves. We often want or expect the people we love to change, to live up to a standard or idea we have of who they should be. Usually, we want people to be more like us, not like themselves. But as Catholic monk Thomas Merton wrote:

*The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them.* (No Man Is an Island, 1955).

Mutual submission means asking others to love us as we are too! If someone else is always trying to change, control or criticize us, this is not a mutual love that can help us grow into the fullness of who God made us to be.

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

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

7. Talk about a time when following a rule helped you love someone else or yourself better.
8. Share a story about a time when breaking a rule helped you love someone else or yourself better.
9. Think about your relationship with your spouse, romantic partner, dear friend, parent or another important person who raised you? In what ways do you “submit to one another in love” well? In what ways could you both be better?

#### **PUTTING ON THE ARMOR OF GOD**

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 6:10–24

*“When I am weak, then I am strong.”*  
(2 Corinthians 12:10b)

When someone says, “Be strong!” what do you imagine? When the writer of Ephesians encourages readers to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power,” does this mean to be strong like a *pater familias*, a Roman centurion or an athlete? Or like “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers”? What about a prisoner, a servant or a child? The Bible describes different kinds of strength, many of which turn our ordinary ideas of strength upside-down.

This passage is often used to encourage Christians to engage in “spiritual warfare”—in other words, to stand up to the devil or other strong-armed, cruel powers of our world. However, the gospel imagines strength in a different way than we do in politics, war or sports. The armor of God is not like the armor of a soldier. We do not wear battle armor as Christians. We wear the armor of grace.

As you read this passage, notice what the armor is made of. The writer does not point to a belt of

bravery or a breastplate of domination, but a belt of what is true and a breastplate of doing what is right. These shoes are not for marching or stomping. The shoes make us ready to proclaim peace. God's shield is not a shield of defensiveness or expertise, but of faith. We are not given a helmet of outrage and a sword of snappy comebacks, but a helmet of saving grace and a sword of the Word of God (which, we read in the first chapter of John, is also the name for Jesus). Sometimes the things we imagine will make us strong and keep us safe are, according to the gospel, not reliable, nor "the things that make for [true] peace."

To truly find peace and "stand firm" in our faith, we don't need to be strong like a soldier, an emperor or a wrestler. To fight the powers of evil, we must use God's armor and weapons, not those of humans. If we follow the gospel and the words of Ephesians, we will find our armor in growing loving relationships, telling the truth in love, choosing goodness, showing mercy, being peacemakers, praying, worshiping and having faith in God's power rather than in our own.

To the world, behavior like this will seem weak, sentimental and even useless. But the power of grace is the power of the cross—the power of submitting in love to one another to show that in God's great plan of salvation, violence, cruelty and bullying cannot win. The practice of grace is what keeps us strong, keeps us truly safe, and teaches us the peace and abundance of God, for ourselves and for all people.

### PUTTING ON THE ARMOR OF GOD

 **Read:** Ephesians 6:11-17


Read these verses to yourself, or with one or two other participants, each read the verses aloud once. As you listen, imagine putting on each of these pieces of armor. Notice whether a certain verse,

image or word catches your attention.

#### Share aloud or reflect:

10. Name a celebrity, politician, athlete or other famous person whose strength and power you have admired. What do you admire about them? What is the difference between their particular strength and the strength that Jesus models, according to Ephesians?
11. Share a few things you are afraid of in this life. What are some ways that God's grace and love could help you release or make your peace with some of these fears?
12. How might God be inviting you, right now, to live your life more fully in grace?

#### CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, you bring us into the light. In thanksgiving and gratitude, help us to submit to one another with love and dignity. Fill us with your Spirit and teach us to pursue the strength you model in Christ. Remind us to bring our mistakes and fears into the light, so we can embrace your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen. 



# Receiving grace

## Session three

Grace-filled living, ancient and new

BY HEIDI HAVERKAMP

Welcome to the third and final session of Gather's fall Bible study series on the Letter to the Ephesians. This leader guide offers helpful tips related to session three's exploration of grace-filled living. Leaders might choose to share "What toxic positivity says to us" vs. "What the Light of Christ says to us" with participants. Or leaders might offer some of this information as examples.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO WALK IN THE LIGHT?

Living and walking in the light of Christ does not mean the same thing as being happy or positive all the time. It is a Christian practice to acknowledge that life is hard and difficult sometimes. Healing requires honesty, as well as allowing painful emotions to be heard.

### What toxic positivity says to us:

- Look on the bright side!
- Everything happens for a reason; God has a plan.
- If you look for the good in life, you will always find it.
- There's always someone worse off than you, you know.
- Don't be so negative./Don't whine./Don't complain so much.

### What the Light of Christ says to us:

- What you are feeling is worth listening to. Just as Jesus listened to the people he met, Jesus listens to you too.
- With the help and love of God and other people, we can do hard things.

- God can bring new life out of death.
- We all struggle in this human life; you are not alone. Even Jesus struggled sometimes.
- If you need to talk or vent about something, it's healing to share your feelings with someone you trust.

### WHAT WAS THE "PATER FAMILIAS" ROLE?

The *pater familias* was the oldest male member of a family. He was considered the protector, authority and legal guardian of all women, children, slaves and other adult males in the household, and their property, land, belongings and wealth. Knowing this helps us understand the otherwise confusing meaning of a phrase found in Ephesians 3:14-15: "before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." The *pater familias* was the single, all-powerful head of a household, just as God was the single, all-powerful father and head of heaven and earth.

According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in Roman family law *patria potestas* (Latin for "power of a father") was the power that a male head of a family had over his children, as well as more distant relatives in the male line, regardless of their age or whether they were brought into the family by adoption. It is shocking for us today to understand that this control included bodily control, as well as a right to inflict capital punishment. Only the male head of the family had any rights in private law. Any acquisitions of children became the property of the father. The father might allow a child to treat certain property as their own, but in the eyes of the law, that property belonged to the father.

Over time this absolute authority lessened, according to *Wikipedia*. The male head's power over life and death was abolished and the sale of children was restricted to extreme necessity. Under Emperor Hadrian, for example, a father who killed his son would lose his citizenship, his property and face permanent exile.

### WHAT DOES HEALTHY MUTUAL SUBMISSION LOOK LIKE?

Mutual submission means loving and caring for one another. It does not mean to take on the needs of other people as if they were our own. When we are “responsible to someone,” rather than “responsible for someone,” we offer sympathy, listening and support, while letting the person live their own life. Here is the explanation I was given in seminary:

#### **When I feel responsible FOR others (this becomes unhealthy):**

I fix, protect, rescue, control and carry their feelings.  
I feel tired, anxious, fearful and obligated.  
I am concerned with solutions, answers, circumstances, being right, details and performance.  
I manipulate.  
I expect the person to live up to my expectations.

#### **When I feel responsible TO others (this is the ideal):**

- I am sensitive and show empathy. I listen, encourage, confront and share.
- I feel relaxed, free, aware and have high self-esteem.
- I am concerned with people, feelings and relating person to person.
- I believe that I just need to share myself; the other person has enough to make it.
- I am a helper-guide.
- I expect the person to be responsible for themselves and their own actions.
- I can trust and let go.

### OPTIONAL EXERCISE FOR THE ARMOR OF GOD

If you have time, and if participants are having difficulty imagining the armor of God, you can help them imagine it by considering the words of Brené Brown. Brown is an author and researcher who encourages people to have:

- a strong back,
- a soft front, and

- a wild heart.

She explains that the “strong back is grounded confidence and boundaries. The soft front is staying vulnerable and curious. The mark of a wild heart is living out these paradoxes in our lives and not giving into the either/or [thinking] that reduces us. It’s showing up in our vulnerability and our courage, and, above all else, being both fierce and kind” (*Dare to Lead*, 2018).

### SHORTEN THIS STUDY (30–45 MINUTES)

#### **Option 1**

- Sing the opening hymn.
- Do “Living as children of the light.”
- Skip all the lectio divina exercises.
- Read “Submit to one another.”
- Do Q1 and Q2.
- Read “The grace of belonging to one another.”
- Do Q6 and Q7.
- Close with prayer.

#### **Option 2**

- Sing the opening hymn.
- Read “Submit to one another.”
- Skip all the lectio divina exercises.
- Read “Putting on the armor of God” and do its lectio divina exercises.
- Close with prayer. 🌿