

**“Rights and Obligations”**  
Reverend Bill Gause  
Overbrook Presbyterian Church  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
May 10, 2020

**Introduction:**

What we know as the book of Philippians is actually a letter that the apostle Paul wrote while he was in jail. He writes to the church in the town of Philippi in Greece. In his letter he tells the Philippian Christians about his own situation, teaches them about being disciples, and then offers them encouragement. As he draws his letter to a close, Paul gives one last charge to the Philippians on what it means to be the church.

**Scripture Reading: Philippians 4:4-9**

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>**Let your gentleness be known to everyone.** The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

**Sermon: “Rights and Obligations”**

In this final word, Paul encourages his readers to rejoice and not to worry, but to keep praying; and to commit to living their lives by the best of Christian ideals, doing the things that are pure, true, honorable and so on. And among those notes of encouragement is this: “Let your *gentleness* be known to everyone.” You could probably read that line a hundred times and never think very much of it, but it contains a word translated here as “Gentleness,” that may be one of the most meaningful and important words in all of the Bible. In the Greek in which Paul wrote, this word is “*epieikeis*” and Bible translators have always had a hard time with it because it has no direct English cognate.

The problem with translating from one language to another is that sometimes there isn’t a single word that means the same thing as the one you’re trying to translate. *Things*, like numbers, colors, objects are pretty easy, but *concepts*, can be a little more tricky. A particularly appropriate example these days is the German word “Kummerspeck” which literally translates as “grief bacon.” But what it really means is “the [weight] gained by eating when we are overly concerned with something [or] someone.”<sup>1</sup> “Kummerspeck” is putting on the pounds from stress eating. I’ve heard people talk about the weight they’ve gained during this “stay-at-home” time as “putting on the Covid 19,” but there’s not really a single English word for “Kummerspeck.” So, if you find yourself putting on a few pounds from all the stress eating, now you have a word for that: “kummerspeck.” You’re welcome.

Epieikeis is one of those *concepts* for which there is no single English word. Our NRSV translates it as “gentleness,” but the Revised Standard Version probably gets closer with the word “forbearance.” Miriam-Websters Dictionary of Law defines forbearance as “refraining from the enforcement of something that is due (like a debt, or a right, or an obligation).” Noted scholar William Barclay said that “The Greeks themselves explained [*epieikeis*] as ‘justice and something better than justice.’ They said that [*epieikeis*] ought to come in when strict justice became unjust...”<sup>2</sup>

A good way to understand *epieikeis* is as a coin with two faces, both equally important. On the one side *epieikeis* means taking less than your rights allow you to take. And on the other, it means giving more than your obligations require you to give. Taking less than you’re allowed. Giving more than you’re required. That’s *epieikeis*.

For instance, the law allows a landlord to collect rent money from people living on his or her property and to evict tenants who can’t or won’t pay their rent. But during this COVID-19 pandemic, when many people are out of work and unable to pay their rent, some property owners have given extensions or allowed tenants to pay reduced rent or no rent at all for a time until things settle back down. A landlord has the right to expect payment and a right to evict tenants who cannot pay. But those who don’t exercise that right out of a sense of mercy and compassion are refusing to demand that to which they have a legal right. That is *epieikeis*.

But *epieikeis* is also *giving* more or *doing* more than anyone should rightfully expect of you. For instance, according to Emily Post, you are not obligated to tip when you get takeout from a restaurant unless you receive some special service such as curbside delivery and then, you’re only expected to tip 10%. But during this pandemic, with restaurants *only* providing takeout, employees aren’t making nearly what they would during a normal shift. So, choosing to tip on your takeout order and choosing to tip more than the standard 10% would be doing more than you are obligated or expected to do. That’s *epieikeis*.

In other words, to do “*epieikeis*” means to be considerate of other people; to hold back; don’t demand everything you have a right to demand, but also, offer to do more than anyone would expect you to do.

We all know we have rights. Most folks remember that the constitution guarantees us rights to worship and speak freely, to vote, and so on. And if we’ve learned nothing else from television, it’s that if we’re ever arrested, we have the right to remain silent. But *epieikeis* means that our own rights are not the end of the discussion.

Now, I think it’s important to stop here for a moment and say that *Epieikeis* also does NOT mean relinquishing all your rights or allowing someone to take them away. But it *does* mean being aware of your neighbors and as you move through life, making sure that justice and fairness for *you* does not mean denying justice and fairness to *them*.

Though we may be unfamiliar with the word, the concept is prevalent across scripture. *Epieikeis* is at the center of God’s grace. Humans sin against God and one another and God has the right to punish us. Yet God forgives us and reaches out to us in love and mercy, acting to save us and give us life. God chooses to limit God’s self. God does not demand all that God could demand. That is *epieikeis*.

And in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, God shed the trappings of divinity, to enter this world as a simple man, with all the vulnerability and weakness that comes with that. Who would expect infinite, almighty God to give up so much and endure suffering and death for the sake of humanity? Yet in grace, mercy, and steadfast love God does just that, giving us more than we could ever have a right to expect from God. That’s *epieikeis*.

And we see *epieikeis* throughout scripture. We see it when Ruth stays with her widowed mother-in-law, even though she is under no obligation to do so.<sup>3</sup> We see it when Jesus tells those who would judge the woman accused of adultery “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone” and then refuses to judge her himself.<sup>4</sup> We see it when the Samaritan stops to help an injured traveler, which not only puts his own safety in jeopardy, but also costs him financially.<sup>5</sup> We see it when Jesus does not send the crowds away to find food but rather feeds them himself with loaves and fish.<sup>6</sup> We see it when the father of the prodigal rushes out to meet his son in love and mercy, when no such compassionate response would have been expected or required.<sup>7</sup>

*Epieikeis* is to demand less than is your right. And to do more than is your obligation. Which are terribly important things for us to do during this time when we all need to be able to depend on one another and to care for and support one another. As our state and federal government begins to move us toward relaxing some of the restrictions on movement, and business, and community life, we as Christians have to keep the concept of *epieikeis* ever before us. Taking precautions to not spread disease may be challenging and difficult, but part of being a disciple is self-limiting for the good of our neighbors. Demand less than is your right. Do more than is your obligation.

Wearing a mask in public may be uncomfortable and awkward, but if it helps keep others safe and makes other people feel safer being around us, then we should absolutely wear a mask in public. Do we have a right to not wear one? Sure. But part of being a disciple is self-limiting for the good of our neighbors. Demand less than is your right. Do more than is your obligation.

Same thing with social distancing. If staying apart and not meeting in groups means our brothers and sisters will be safer, then we should absolutely maintain social distancing and refrain from meeting in groups. Do we have a right to hug and shake hands and huddle up like the Cleveland Browns? Certainly. But part of being a disciple is self-limiting for the good of our neighbors. Demand less than is your right. Do more than is your obligation.

And you may need a haircut desperately (as I do) or you may want to go shopping or eat in a restaurant or do any number of other public things without restriction, and you may believe it is your unalienable right to do so. But if refraining from those things or at the very least being careful in how we do them, allowing some limitations, following some guidelines and protocols, and even being inconvenienced; if doing all of that helps to prevent the spread of this disease and keeps just one person safe, then as Christians we should absolutely accept the limitations and inconveniences. You may feel this infringes on your rights, but remember, part of being a disciple is self-limiting for the good of our neighbors. Demand less than is your right. Do more than is your obligation.

We all have rights. The framers of our constitution understood that our rights come from God and are to be protected. And while Christians fight for equal rights for all people and advocate for the rights of the oppressed, we are also taught to be aware when standing on our own rights is hurtful to others. Here Paul reminds us that taking everything we are entitled to when it hurts other people isn’t the way of Christ. Nor is doing only what the law requires.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! Let your epieikeis be known to everyone. Demand less than is your right. Do more than is your obligation.

To God be all honor, glory, power and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "Untranslatable German Words: Kummerspeck and Frustfressen." 7 May. 2020, [blogs.transparent.com/german/kummerspeck-frustfressen](https://blogs.transparent.com/german/kummerspeck-frustfressen).

<sup>2</sup> Barclay, William. *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. pg. 75. Print. The Daily Study Bible Ser.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth 1:16-18, NRSV

<sup>4</sup> John 8:1-11, NRSV

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:25-37, NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 14:13-21, NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Luke 15:11-32, NRSV