

# **Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules**

## *Episode #18: Holiday Expectations and Traditions — Keeping the Good and Letting the Ugly Go*

**Cheri:**

Hey, this is Cheri Gregory and you're listening to Grit 'n Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules. My delightful co-host, Amy Carroll, and I have decided that it's time for us to take a break. Not a break from podcasting, but a holiday break.

We suspect we're not the only ones who need to take a proactive holiday break starting now, before the Thanksgiving and Christmas are actually upon us.

Amy, explain how you came up with our tagline for the next 3 months: "How to Break Bad Rules and Rock Holiday Delight."

**Amy:**

I think more than any other time of the year, this is when bad rules come into play.

**Cheri:**

Oh, absolutely.

**Amy:**

In fact, I know I have spent lots of holiday seasons, Thanksgiving through Christmas or maybe through even New Years just swamped with bad rules and rules that, essentially, are supposed to make it a happy holiday season that just drive me into a state of misery at times. I know you were really interested in what our listeners had to say about bad rules and you did a little survey. So what did you find out?

**Cheri:**

The written responses were amazing, amazing. We got about 30 examples or more of bad rules. As I read through the list, I was like, "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Oh, I rec-..." In fact, let me share some of them with you.

Here's one that just cracked me up. "I'm not supposed to use canned foods in holiday meals." What is it about canned foods? It's like forbidden.

**Amy:**

That cracks me up because my family is lucky to get canned foods, so anyway, just saying.

I loved the one that said, "Everything must be perfect **and** that I'm responsible for others' happiness." That has always tripped me up because I have this idea of how joyful and happy everybody in my household should be to be doing the things that we're doing and I feel responsible if they don't feel that same thing.

**Cheri:**

What do you do when they don't?

**Amy:**

I'll tell you what I used to do is get really mad, which really helped the joy factor a whole, whole lot in our house. Awful.

**Cheri:**

This one hit me really hard: "Not being Betty Crocker or my mother. Just getting nervous. I can't make a good meal happen no matter how much I plan."

My mother was the most amazing hostess. She always had the hot foods hot and the cold foods cold. Everything was served on time and I've never been able to pull it off. We're lucky if everything is lukewarm or room temperature and we eat within an hour of when we were supposed to start the meal.

**Amy:**

Absolutely. Another one of mine that was a favorite, that you have to visit everyone on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

Now, I grew up far away from my extended family. My extended family all lived in Kansas and Colorado, whereas my family lived in North Carolina. Well, my husband's family all lived in North Carolina. But I tell you what cured me of feeling like I needed to see everybody on Thanksgiving Day and that was eating two Thanksgiving meals in one day

that his grandmothers had fixed. Now, both these grandmothers were these grandmothers that were cooks extraordinaire and tables laden with food.

**Cheri:**

What a recipe for being sick as a dog!

**Amy:**

I was so miserable!

**Cheri:**

I love the honesty of this one. "Having to be around people I don't necessarily want to be with and having to get gifts for some of them because they're at the holiday events. I don't really like them, but there they are."

**Amy:**

Wow. That is honest, isn't it?

I think somebody else said, "Spending time with people I never do the rest of the year," which is a really great point.

**Cheri:**

Then there was this one that says, "Trying to make both sides of the family happy and keeping it fair." Ooh, that sounds like a recipe for disaster.

But the one that I thought we could really focus on today is ... somebody just summarized it all up in one word: **expectations**.

She broke it down into two kinds: **my own expectations** and **others' expectations**. What is an expectation or a tradition or some way that you've been tripped up by expectations around the holidays?

**Amy:**

I think that for me, my expectations are my own worst enemy. It's what I was just talking about with feeling that I'm responsible for everybody's happiness, and if you're not happy, I'm going to be mad. That's the worst.

I love the advice that I got from my friend Karen Ehman, one of my Proverbs 31 sisters years ago. Karen is a domestic diva on a level that I've never even imagined. She polled her family—she surveyed her family several years ago—to ask them what was important to them. What did they expect?

She was shocked to find out that their expectations were far lower than her expectations were of herself and of the holiday. That one step, just asking her family, really allowed her to let go of some of those unrealistic things. Just one example she gave is that her family always decorates cookies together, but that next year, after she asked that question, instead of feeling like she had to start from scratch with the sugar cookie dough, she bought sugar cookie dough and they decorated together. Just taking that one step out (or probably 10 steps!) just simplified it to the point that it was even better than it had been before.

**Cheri:**  
Absolutely.

**Amy:**  
How about you?

**Cheri:**  
I always go back to the first Thanksgiving after Daniel and I were married because I was so clueless. We were madly in love, but we had no real capacity to see each other's perspectives because we were 21 — hello!

I had asked Daniel in the days leading up, I said, "What time do you want to eat Thanksgiving dinner?" He said, "I don't care." I asked again, "What time do you want to eat Thanksgiving dinner?" He said, "I don't care." I gave him one more chance: "What time do you want to eat Thanksgiving dinner?" He immediately responds, "I don't care." I'm like, "Fine. We're eating at 3:00."

I spent the whole day making all the foods I had grown up having for Thanksgiving, all the foods he had grown up having ... It was just the two of us. We were in married student housing. We couldn't afford to go anywhere, but more than that, we wanted to start our own holiday traditions. And in this tiny, little kitchen, I did my best to get everything ready, and I was going to have everything on the table at 3:00.

At about 5 minutes until 3:00, he laid down on the couch for a nap. I was undaunted. It seemed a little odd to me. I'd given him a chance to choose, to pre-plan, then I'd

informed him, so I got everything on the table. And I woke him up. He came to the table. He had a bite of everything. At about 3:05, he was back on the couch snoring again.

**Amy:**

Oh, Cheri. This is a really ... What happened? Da-da-da.

**Cheri:**

I did let him sleep. I did not pick up any instruments from the kitchen while he was sleeping. But I was seething. I was so furious. When he woke up, let's just say that we did start a new holiday tradition, but it was the tradition of having a huge, blowup fight almost every holiday.

It wasn't until a year later when we went to visit his family for Thanksgiving and people just showed up all day long and they put their food on the kitchen counter and they grabbed a paper plate. They just sat anywhere in the house or on a lounge chair out in the backyard and they just ate all day. There was no time. There was no set menu.

We had so much fun. It was so much more relaxed and so much easier. That probably was one of the first times it occurred to me, "Oh! There's more than one right way to do things."

**Amy:**

Yes. That really gets to the heart of one of the things I was reflecting on about traditions is that traditions should be wonderful. They should be things that keep us centered, that help us focus, that elicit memories from years gone by. I can think of some of those things of what it was like when I was growing up.

I grew up in the Methodist church, but our church every year had a Moravian lovefeast. That lovefeast was the beginning of my Christmas season every single year, and I loved it.

**Cheri:**

How fun.

**Amy:**

It was one of the things that just marked the beginning of that season. I loved it.

The other thing was my mother made an Advent calendar out of felt when I was a child. My brother and I loved to fight about who was going to get to take out baby Jesus. "You did it last year. It's my year." Every year, that was the fuss of who gets to do it on the 25th.

When my children were born, one of the first gifts my mother gave me after my first was born is she made another felt Advent calendar for our house. That Advent calendar is so meaningful to me. It's such a simple thing, but my mother made it with her own hands and it was something I did as a child. We really enjoy those things. Those are a couple of just simple things that have kept me focused and centered and bring up memories.

What kind of good traditions have you had at your house?

**Cheri:**

Ever since Daniel and I started dating, my dad had gotten a hold of the book ... Oh, I'm going to forget the title. It's either *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* or *The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever* (whichever it is!) and he read it aloud to us on Christmas Eve and we loved it. I remember Daniel got all teary eyed at several spots. And so it become one of our family traditions. Every Christmas Eve, we would read that.

Last year, we were at a cabin as a family and we told the kids, "Okay. We're going to read *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*!" And they didn't join us. This was the first Christmas without my mom, and I really felt the battle inside of me:

*What does this mean? I need to make them join us.*

Never mind that they were 22 and 24 at the time. And it suddenly occurred to me Daniel and I can read the book, the two of us.

**Amy:**

What I started realizing is when traditions start running off the tracks for me is when I'm not able to let go of a tradition because I'm in a new season. For example, if I insisted that I had to go to that lovefeast even now, every year, and I had to pile my family into the car and drive two hours to go to the lovefeast every year, that wouldn't be fun for anybody. I just look back on that time and say that was a season for that tradition, but now, we need to make new traditions for a new season.

Then the other one was when we start to value the tradition over people and we're a slave to the tradition rather than really valuing the people in our lives.

You and Daniel did so well with that. You weren't a slave to the tradition. Even though it was emotional, I hear. Oh, gosh, these are mama moments, aren't they?

**Cheri:**

They are!

But one of the things that's starting to occur to me is that when it comes to these traditions we've had for a long time, we have all of these memories and all of these associations with them, and if we don't think about it, we can assume that the other family memories—that the other family members, what's going on in our head and heart is going on in their head and heart. They may be experiencing it totally differently. I can think of things that give me a warm glow that give Daniel or my kids a headache. It doesn't make me right and them wrong. It just—recognizing that we're different and the way we experience the same event can be incredibly different.

**Amy:**

That's true.

But even as you said that, I thought, "Hmm, so how do we deal with that?"

My family, when I was 14, we lived in England for a year. We traveled all over Europe. It was just such a family bonding time. The rule that my parents made everywhere that we went is that each person got to choose something that they wanted to do, a place they wanted to visit, something that would be meaningful for them. Nobody was allowed to gripe about the other person's choice.

**Cheri:**

That's a great rule.

**Amy:**

Yes. I loved art museums even though I don't know anything about art. I just soak them in. My brother always wanted to go to some museum with armor and battle axes and things. My mom always wanted to go to castles.

But in sharing each other's preferences — and I think it's the same in traditions — we learned to appreciate and love and be giving to other people, too. It's not that we shouldn't do anything or nobody else should do anything we want to do or we shouldn't do what they want to do, but that maybe we find some common ground.

**Cheri:**

Absolutely. I think there's a balance between finding things that everybody agrees on and that's hard. I don't know about your family, but in our family, we are four completely different personalities and so when we find overlap, we celebrate. Those have actually become our anchor traditions.

But we also have realized that sometimes, we shine the spotlight on a different family member, and we sacrifice because we love the person. We may not love the thing we're doing, but we love the person.

For Daniel's 50th birthday, which is four days after Christmas, we're going to spend some time in San Francisco. For years, he's been saying at Christmas, he wants to go and see the art museums and the science museums.

I'd rather stick a pencil in both eyes than go to a big city over the holidays, but it's something he wants to do and it finally occurred to me recently: *We really never do what he wants to do. He's always the one that's doing what we want to do and flexing with us.* I thought, *It's time.* Now, I'm going to arrange it in such a way that the variety of needs we all have get met. Some of the reasons I hate going to the big city are the drive and the traffic and the inability to take a rest in the middle of the day. I'm going to solve all of those, but yeah, it's time.

**Amy:**

No, you won't.

**Cheri:**

I will have an option available. "The story I tell myself..."

**Amy:**

There you go. Pretty sure you're not going to have the perfect holiday, Cheri. Really sorry.

**Cheri:**

Ah, are you telling me I was already starting to raise my expectations too high? Okay. Thank you. That was a really good reality check. I did not see that that's where I had already headed. Okay...



**Amy:** It's going to be awesome, though. I know it.

**Cheri:**

You're right. It will be awesome, but it will not be perfect. I will be reporting on it after Christmas.

Hey, one of the things that I was thinking we could put together and have ready on the website for this episode is a permission slip for our listeners because I think that we get in trouble when we end up with phrases—and they really don't run through our heads. I think these are really embedded in our hearts and they're at the back of our minds—but if we could really look in there, they would be beliefs that say, "I **have to**..." or "She or he **must**..." or "They **should**..." The big one for traditions is "We **always**..."

If we can replace all of those—if you and I can give our listeners permission to replace all of those—with the simple statement, "I would prefer," then we can say, "My preference here would be lemon meringue pie, but look, there's pumpkin." And we can deal with it.

Rather than the **should**, the **must**, the **have to**, because all of those come with dire consequences, like, "Unless they \_\_\_\_, then I can't \_\_\_\_"; "Unless they do things my way, I can't enjoy the holidays." Being aware that most of this really is a matter of preference, I think, really, really helps.

**Amy:**

Oh. That's rocking my world right here sitting at my desk, Cheri. This is going to be my thing this year to remember to start everything with "I prefer."

**Cheri:**

If we could get these expectations and traditions written down and have those discussions like you suggested from Karen and ask people what really matters to them so that we can pool our preferences, then we can let go of that **have tos** and the **shoulds** and the **musts**. We can start breaking the bad rule that says, "You have to do it all right," because it's just not possible. It's just not possible.

You had a great way of phrasing the way we can replace the bad rule "You have to do it all right." What did you come up with for that?

**Amy:**

Good traditions serve people, not the other way around.

**Cheri:**

I love it.

**Amy:**

Too often, I've become slave to the tradition and it no longer serves the people, including me, but *we have to*. Like you said, "we always" is—and so we're going to replace that with we prefer and we're going to choose traditions that serve us and our families well instead of serving the traditions.

As I was thinking, I thought Jesus is always our prime example for all of this. I thought about one time when He healed someone...one time when He and His disciples were gathering something to eat on the Sabbath...and people called Him to task on these traditions that had been built up around the Sabbath. They weren't actually things that were prescribed by God in the Old Testament, but they were traditions that had been built up around it. Jesus rebuked them and said that Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath. I think if we take a look at that and treat our traditions with the same way: "Hey these traditions were created for us, not us for them." That's helpful.

**Cheri:**

If you head over to the webpage for today's episode at [cherigregory.com](http://cherigregory.com), you'll find a free downloadable that helps you recognize your various holiday expectations and traditions. It asks questions so you can reflect on those same expectations and traditions. And then it challenges you to revise and even reject—yes, reject—expectations and traditions that keep you from enjoying the holidays.

You'll also find a permission slip reminding you that you don't have to obey the bad rule that says, "You have to do it all right."

You can focus on the fact that **good traditions serve people, not the other way around.**

We hope you've enjoyed Episode #18 of Grit 'n Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules. Join us for next week's holiday break when we'll discuss our holiday calendars and travel plans.

For today, grow your grit, embrace God's grace, and when you run across a bad rule, by all means, break it.