

Marks of the Christian Life

Romans 12:9-21

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

At a youth retreat the teenagers involved were asked to create a "covenant" that would govern their behavior toward one another during the course of the three-day event. The room erupted in laughter when one teen shouted, "No drama!" as the first suggestion. Other suggestions followed quickly: Do not talk when others are talking. Respect the leaders. Participate fully in activities. Soon the page was filled, and each teen came up to sign his or her name in agreement. Over the next few days both leaders and participants had occasion to remind the group of what they had signed as a corrective to behaviors outside the covenant's boundaries.

These verses in Paul's letter to Christians in Rome would function brilliantly as a group covenant for any gathering of people of faith. In the craft of weaving, the first step is to construct a warp, the base lines of yarn upon which the weaver will weave a pattern or weft. The attitudes and behaviors specified here in Romans 12:9-21 could act as the warp to the weft of the differing gifts Paul describes in the verses 1-8, a covenant that lays the basis for the intricate pattern in the tapestry of the life of a faith community. Like the Ten Commandments, it functions as the

structure, the core values on which all the activities and ministries of the church, and of individual Christians, are built.

This covenant contains a mix of the "usual suspects" and suggestions that promise to stretch us as individual Christians and faith communities beyond what might seem logical, practical, or even "good" to them and us. Few of us as church members would argue with Paul's exhortations to hate evil, to "persevere in prayer," or to celebrate with the joyful and weep with the grieving. The more complicated parts of this text concern our relationships with those whom we find hard to love. To say that our core values include not only extending hospitality to strangers but blessing, feeding, and refusing to take vengeance on enemies will put a strain on some of us within the church, let alone on relationships with those outside the faith community. This passage is not a greeting card slogan but a call to costly discipleship.

The clauses of the first two verses: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor," set the tone for the rest of the exhortation. The type of love Paul describes here is energetic and profoundly optimistic, and rather countercultural in nature. When we consider the competitions most popular in our society, the competition to honor one another would not even make the list. Similarly, Paul's call to "hold fast to what is good" flies in the face of popular culture that calls us to cling to whatever we can get. The sense of this phrase might imply clinging to something for fear of letting it go, we can also read this as "embrace what is good." Paul invites Roman Christians and us to consider love and good to be the constant partners accompanying the Christian and providing the basis for both our attitudes and our actions.

Paul's core values expressed in "let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good" might be summed up in a phrase used by Dr. Paul Farmer as

profiled in Tracy Kidder's book *Mountains beyond Mountains*. Paul Farmer travels the world establishing clinics to treat chronic diseases like tuberculosis in areas of severe poverty and inadequate health care. In doing so, he deals with the medical establishment, various bureaucracies, and local traditions. Kidder explains that Farmer approaches all people with a "hermeneutic of generosity." Hermeneutic is the word used by preachers to explain what and how they teach.

The "hermeneutic of generosity" means evaluating people's actions from an assumption that their motives are good even if, at first glance, one might suspect the opposite. To honor people as the apostle Paul exhorts, which includes attitudes and actions such as not being haughty, being hospitable to strangers, and taking thought for what is noble, reflects an underlying hermeneutic of generosity toward those to whom we relate, both in and outside of the church. When presented with this hermeneutic, the teenagers on retreat included this challenge in their covenant and had cause to refer to it as inevitable conflicts arose during the weekend.

Adopting a covenant including Paul's exhortations and a hermeneutic of generosity as core values has an impact on the growth of a Christian community and its work of evangelism. Unquestionably, when visitors attend worship for the first time in a congregation rent with conflict, they are unlikely to return. Growing churches often report that those who joined after a time of visiting did so because they found in the community a spirit that attracted them by its power of love and hospitality, not just in the way the members treated visitors, but also in the way they treated *each other*. Churches are practice fields for living the covenant of love Paul describes.

While living according to Paul's core values is often hard enough within the context of the church community, to do so in daily life presents even more challenges. We might think these exhortations concern only the faith community, but for sure, the rest of Paul's writings make clear that as Christians we are called

to live by a different standard in all parts of life. That hermeneutic of generosity is meant to extend to the person driving too slowly in front of you on the highway, the ones on I-96 who saw the signs to merge 5 miles back, but still wanted to go to the front and block traffic, the cashier at the supermarket, your coworkers, neighbors, and your extended family.

This text is something more than our moving benediction we hear at the end of each worship service. Paul urges us to use his words to create our own congregational covenant for Christian living. Paul's words are nice but must be put into action. In your prayer time this week you can write on paper how you will show the marks of the Christian life. I invite you bring what you have written to worship next Sunday and place it in the offering plate. We can gather these, place on the bulletin board and we can sign our names as we lift to God our commitment for Christian living. Showing to God how we will turn our words into Christian actions. We will sign as those teenagers signed the retreat covenant. Ultimately, we can challenge each other and help our words become, not wishful thinking or unattainable hopes, but the true basis for the life of each individual Christian as well as our faith community as a whole. **Rochelle A. Stackhouse**

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