

**Romans 12:9-21**

12:9-13

*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. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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." 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." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

**This is the Word of the Lord...**

A little over two weeks ago, our Honda Odyssey minivan went its 215,867<sup>th</sup> mile... and it didn't go no mo'.

There were a lot of factors that made it not the worst day in the world. It was a vacation day so we weren't going to be late to anything; Will was at camp; and even though it felt like the middle of nowhere, we had cell service and we have AAA.

Other times in my life when I've been towed by AAA, the driver has taken me to the service station where he works. In this case, the tow truck dropped us off at a 'Mom and Pop' service station outside of Lancaster... and then drove away. We walked in, and Mom and Pop assessed what was in front of them. Pop went out and looked at the van. It was, as I had feared, the transmission. Mom offered us cold cups of water, and called Enterprise Rent-A-Car. We unloaded the van in front of their shop. We were coming from the beach, so we needed a box for the regular stuff that accumulates in a car over the years you own it, and then they watched as a suitcase, a bag full of towels, beach chairs, a beach umbrella, a cooler, and a boogie board accumulated in front of their shop.

They offered to let the van stay there until I could figure out what was next, and didn't laugh at me (out loud) when I almost couldn't get all of our stuff into our rental.

It was a day we won't soon forget. Because for a day where a major thing went wrong, things went as smoothly as they possibly could thanks to the people that came across our path. A young Amish man who helped me push the van out of the middle of the road, a tow truck driver who was on his way to student teacher conferences for his elementary age boys, a rental car employee, and service station owners – who at one point were trying to put together our story as they saw Martha's "Woman of the Cloth" t-shirt and me throwing white collar tabs from my clergy shirts into the box, and asked us, "Are you nuns?"

I'm guessing none of these folks voted in the last election the way I did – but they all came to our rescue. They were hospitable. They showed who we can be when we choose to remember our common humanity.

In the Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul has spent the better part of 11 chapters assuring one and all that God's grace extends to the Jews and to the Gentiles. In these verses in chapter 12, he pivots to the "therefore".

'You are beloved children of God... Jesus Christ died so that we are no longer separated from God... nothing can keep us from the love of Jesus Christ... **therefore** here are the implications such a grace should have on your life – not just as an individual, but as communities of faith.

A conservative estimate counts 23 separate imperatives:

1. Let love be genuine;
2. Hate what is evil;
3. Hold fast to what is good;
4. Love one another with mutual affection;
5. Outdo one another in showing honor;
6. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit;
7. Serve the Lord;
8. Rejoice in hope;
9. Be patient in suffering;
10. Persevere in prayer;
11. Contribute to the needs of the saints;
12. Extend hospitality to strangers;
13. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them;
14. Rejoice with those who rejoice;
15. Weep with those who weep;
16. Live in harmony with one another, but associate with the lowly;
17. Do not claim to be wiser than you are;
18. Do not repay anyone evil for evil;
19. Live peaceably with all;
20. Never avenge yourselves.
21. If your enemies are hungry, feed them;
22. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink;
23. Overcome evil with good.

The stories of humanity seeking the greater good coming out of the devastation of Hurricane/Tropical Storm Harvey this week have been, at times, astounding.

Neighbors formed a human chain to help a woman in labor get to a flatbed truck that took her to the hospital where she safely delivered a baby girl.

The Cajun Navy – a group of recreational boat owners and volunteers who helped the rescue effort after last year’s flooding in Louisiana mobilized again. So did countless other boat and jet ski owners.

Journalists interrupted their broadcasts in order to get help or offer help to people stuck in flood waters. Strangers risked their lives, in some cases died, in an effort to help those they didn’t even know. People even came in to rescue pets - cats, dogs, birds, and horses. I even saw a pig being rescued.

And then there is “Mattress Mack” – Mack McIngvale. On Thursday he posted on social media that two of his furniture gallery stores would be open for those who needed shelter. “Our stores are open for those in need. If you can safely join us, we invite you for shelter and food. God bless.”

He not only sheltered and fed the people, he sent out his trucks to go help people get out of the water and to his stores. He housed a National Guard unit so that they had a place to rest in between shifts. And in America, where capitalism too often leans into greed, this may be the most astounding thing of all – it’s Labor Day Weekend. This is a huge weekend for the furniture business. And Mattress Mack isn’t kicking anyone out of his stores so he can get back to moving merchandise.

Mack received a lot of publicity, as well he should. But his story is only one of hundreds – thousands(?) – of stories of businesses, neighbors, and strangers taking people in, handing supplies out, and pitching into a massive clean-up effort. No one had to ask them to do it – they just did it.

I don’t want to over-romanticize the situation. The devastation in Texas is incomprehensible and humanity will have plenty of opportunity to show its good, its bad, and its ugly. I guarantee you there are already false claims being filed by folks who don’t even live in the area, there will be folks offering to repair people’s homes who run off with the insurance payment and don’t do the work, there may even be people in our own parking lot in the next few weeks claiming to be evacuees from Texas.

Humanity is the strangers helping strangers in Houston.  
Humanity is also the strangers hating strangers in Charlottesville.

This is why the Apostle Paul calls us as individuals and as communities of faith to live into a better humanity. We have to make the decisions to be who God has called us to be, when the cameras are off; and then if the cameras happen to catch us, we’ll already be making the same faith-filled, God-serving decisions.

Here's the thing about Mattress Mack. This wasn't a new thing for him. Every Christmas he gives furniture to those who are less fortunate. He is known for providing new furniture to teacher lounges in public schools. And in 2005, he opened his store to 200 Katrina evacuees. Some of his current employees are former Katrina evacuees. He says he's part capitalist, part social worker.

In stark contrast, even though many churches, mosques, temples, and other houses of worship opened their doors, the most famous church in the Houston area, did not. And once public pushback became so much that they had to open their doors, they held a worship service for the evacuees... and took up a collection – from them.

That church is known for its encouragement of its disciples to look inward: are you loving God enough? Are you being faithful enough to God? If so, then you will prosper. Last week we witnessed what makes that seemingly harmless line of “theology”, smell so bad.

The leadership was so focused on what they have, and what they deserve to have, that they didn't open the doors of the church. They never planned to open the doors of the church. Their church is not registered with the American Red Cross as a place that is willing to be used as a shelter. MPC – is.

God calls us to look outward.

Are you loving God enough? Are you being faithful enough to God? If so, feed the hungry; give the thirsty something to drink.

We're not always going to get it right. We're going to run out of patience. We're going to make the wrong decisions – sometimes we'll even make the wrong decisions for the right reasons. It happens.

But Paul asks us to aim higher, to live into our fully humanity, to acknowledge that the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ is not something we earned, but instead is something we respond to by extending grace and mercy to others.

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*As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.*

In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

