



The People of God Who Do Good

Romans 12:9-21

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During this Easter season, in preparation for the United Methodist Church's General Conference, which begins on April 23, we are looking at the General Rules of the Church. First defined in 1743 by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, the three rules are still utilized as continuing guidelines for the United Methodist Church today.

The rules sound fairly simple: Do No Harm; Do Good; and Attend the Ordinances of God.

Yet, as simple as they sound, there is great depth to these rules. As we discussed last week, the first rule of "do no harm," isn't just about avoiding the *obvious* ways we cause harm ... it requires some intentionality to understand harm from the perspective of others. To do no harm, we must be aware of what is harmful. It requires a focus on the health of the greater community, and an acknowledgment that there are times we cause harm without intention. And this truth, knowing there are times we are unintentionally causing harm, requires us, from a position of living faithfully, to be more aware of how our words, deeds, and actions are causing harm so that we might change our ways and live into the future doing no further harm.

The second of the general rules is to "Do Good."

It is not enough just to cease to do harm, we should be actively engaged in the work of "doing good."

Yet, just like the first of the rules, "doing good" is not always as easy as it seems. Perspective is important.

Let's begin with a solid scriptural foundation for the rule, pulling from Romans 12.

The apostle Paul wrote this scripture to the early church in Rome. In these verses, Paul offers a number of imperative statements. We often define an imperative statement as something that we *should* or *must* do. But for Paul, the statements aren't so much instructions or requirements; they are statements of fact. Paul is talking about faithfulness and love, and indicates that, in the way of God, this is what faithfulness and love look like. Verses 9-13, more than anything else, are "describing genuine love."ⁱ

Paul writes, "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."

You might notice that, similar to our text in Proverbs last week, the focus of these imperatives is in relationship to others. The emphasis on genuine love is grounded in how it affects our interactions with

the world beyond ourselves. Paul's aim here is in "developing harmonious relations among believers."ⁱⁱ This is the continuing thread in this passage. Listen to the ways in which the words of Paul's writing continue to call us into healthier communities: "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; associate with the lowly; do not repay evil with evil; live peaceably with all." The premise of love is in how it leads our interactions with others.

Also in this passage, and throughout his writings, Paul associates genuine love with doing "what is good." Doing good is centering love, and good love facilitates healthy relationships. The aim of doing good (or of Christian love) as the guiding principle of Christian interaction in the world, is to facilitate a just, equitable, engaged, and expansive community. It is this kind of community, the one built upon the foundation of doing good and genuine love, that is represented in Paul's vision for the body of Christ. It's a place where there is true care for one another – where we weep when others weep, and where we rejoice when others rejoice; where we feed others when they are hungry, and give drink to those who are thirsty.

This is the kind of good we are invited to do.

But I want to push the envelope to love and to "do good" just a little this morning, because I think we often misunderstand the depth of the invitation that it offers. Just like with the first of the general rules, if we are focused on ourselves in this invitation, we are likely missing the intent of the rule.

Somewhere in our "me-focused" society, we have interpreted this second rule as if it invites us to "feel good," not to "do good." And you can be assured, there's a huge distinction between the two.

Now, this gets tricky. Sometimes, what "feels good" is *actually good*, so we cannot write off something as being perverse or wrong simply because it feels good. And yet, we know, that not all things that "feel good" are actually good. Again, we have to look beyond ourselves to know if what feels good to us is actually good for God's creation ... and sometimes we need someone else to tell us that what feels good to us is not actually good for us or for those around us. (Can I get an intervention? ... I mean, Can I get an Amen?!)

I know it's hard, but yes, the invitation here to *really* do good is to stop thinking so much about yourself. In today's TikTok kind of world, the goal is to put as much of yourself out there as possible – to center *yourself* in everything you do. Hear me clearly, that is not the invitation of the Gospel. If the only thing that matters to you from a faith perspective is your own salvation, your own attempt at faithfulness, your own well-being, and whether you feel good doing it ... well, I don't know how else to say it ... but you're probably doing it wrong.

Let me give you an examples.

I used to lead a mission trip to one of the most impoverished counties in America. Indeed, at one time, they were in the top 4 poorest counties in the nation. They are still in the top 20. Over 40% of the residents in that community live in poverty with a median household income that is less than \$25,000.

Only 1/3 of the community is employed. Less than 7% have a college degree. Over 15% of the community has no health insurance.

The story of this community is similar to many in our nation where there was once a thriving industry on a major train route. But with outsourcing, offshoring, and globalization, that which used to provide employment and income for the community has long been gone.

Our mission team would go down once a year, working with a United Methodist organization in the local community, to help with home repairs. We built ramps on the homes of those with limited mobility; we repaired walls, fixed plumbing, and replaced entire roofs; we repaired fencing and replaced a few broken doors. But the work wasn't all home repair – some of our ladies held a regular session with some of the women in the community. We offered a VBS-like program for the kids in the community. And on Thursday nights, we sponsored a community-wide ho-down, with a live band, dancing, and barbeque dinner.

We built amazing relationships with the families. And I know that, at least for some of our church members, they had deeper relationships than what that one-week trip offered. They stayed in touch with some of the families throughout the year. We had people go down to the local high school graduation to watch some of the kids who participated in the VBS program years ago graduate. And the church collected Christmas gifts for the families; we made an overnight trip down every December to play Santa for families that may otherwise not be able to provide Christmas gifts to their kids.

There was a lot of good the trip offered, and some honest and genuine relationships were formed.

But I always struggled with the foundation of the trip. The church had been offering this mission trip for over 20 years, and the reality was, not much had changed in the local community – at least not from an economic or quality of life perspective. The locals were just as dependent on outside groups coming in to fix up their homes as they had been 20 years earlier.

I asked one of the long-time leaders of the mission trip if we might consider offering construction classes while we were there, instead of doing construction projects. I questioned, in honest curiosity, what if we continued to provide the materials needed, which most in the community couldn't afford, but we allowed the locals to learn how to make the fixes, to repair their homes, and to obtain the skills to do the very work we were doing for them.

In an area with very little industrial employment available, what if we helped the locals obtain construction skills so that they might be able to work, perhaps even for themselves, whether in this county, or the next county over, which was a bit wealthier? What if the local mission organization, instead of lining up outside teams to come in and do this work – which was clearly needed – hired those projects out to local individuals, and served as a grant resourcing agency to provide the income for this work? What if the community didn't have to wait for the summer months to have repairs made, when mission trips were planned during summer breaks but could have repairs made anytime during the year because local people had been trained and taught how to fix those problems?

I had a lot of questions about how we might do things differently to move the needle some for the residents of that local community.

I'll never forget the response that I received to all of these questions and ponderings. The person I was inquiring with, again, a long-time leader of this mission trip, said to me, "It's important that our people (our church mission team members) get to feel good about doing this work. That's an important part of the mission trip."

I didn't know how to respond. Is our *feeling good* more important than the local residents being able to live well ... or at least live better? Is that what genuine love is really about? Is that what doing good is really about? Feeling good about the work we are able to provide?

In our country's misinformed past, there have been many people of the Christian faith who claimed to be doing good, but who continued to uphold systems and structures of human degradation. They may have felt good about what they were doing, while not actually doing any real good.

This idea of doing good verse feeling good reminds me of the Letter from a Birmingham Jail, as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klan, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."

King continues, offering a line that eats at my soul, writing, "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will."

Perhaps from a mentality of abusive capitalism, where the sole focus is on growing individual and private wealth, any willingness to give up of one's personal resources and time is considered "good." But I think the invitation of the gospel, the focus of Paul's letter to the Romans, asks us to look a little bit deeper.

It is not enough just to feel good about what we are doing ... it is not enough to have a shallow understanding of the invitation of the gospel to do good ... to love genuinely. We are invited to understand this invitation from a much deeper level.

You see, the gospel message is not an invitation to maintain systems and structures of privilege, where a small percentage of the community gets to feel good about giving someone living on the street a few bucks, because we feel like we have helped them. While Paul's letter does invite the reader to feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, temporary satiation is not the goal of God's will. As Rev. Paul Achtemeier writes, "grace itself is a serious, even costly manner – it costs the death of God's Son."

If we really dig deep, we will find that his death – the cost of the cross for Christ – is what Paul is talking about here in Romans 12. "The [imperatives listed in Romans 12] are the response to a grace taken seriously enough to shape one's life accordingly."ⁱⁱⁱ "Loving like God-in-Christ comes in the form of self-sacrificial giving ..."^{iv}

Which leads us back to our current journey in this Easter season. This love – this kind of community renewal – this kind of doing good ... this kind of new creation ... it looks like folly to the world. It sounds like a joke to empires. In fact, the world is so against such a divine love, that the world will try to squash it. It will try to shut it down. It will try to zone it out. It will try to silence it. It will try to redline and blue law it away. It will try to maintain power and systemic control over it. It will, quite literally, crucify it.

And yet, God says through the resurrection, that genuine love will always win out. Love does conquer hate. Light will always provide a path in the darkness. Doing good ... I mean real good ... honest good ... life changing good ... structural good ... lasting good ... systemic good ... community changing good ... poverty busting good ... it may be harder work, but this kind of good *is* the invitation of the gospel.

We shall not be overcome by the temptation of evil to *feel* good, but overcome evil with *real* good ... divine good ... good that looks like the genuine love of God in Jesus Christ.

This is the second of our General Rules: Do Good.

So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Christopher R. Hutson. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Hutson.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul J. Achtemeier. *Romans: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

^{iv} Frank L. Crouch. "Commentary on Romans 12:9-21." <http://workingpreacher.org>. Retrieved April 11, 2024.