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Romans 12:13b

9th Message

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LOVING STRANGERS

SERIES: OVERCOMING WITH GOOD

The theme of our summer series is “overcoming evil with good”, and is taken from the letter of the Apostle Paul to the Romans,

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:21). Everything in Romans 12 flows from Paul’s exhortation at the very beginning of the chapter...

I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. (Romans 12:1 ESV).

We are all sinners deserving God’s condemnation because of our sin, but by his mercy through Christ he has redeemed us, cleansed us, and saved us. He has adopted us into his family and placed his Spirit in us who radically transforms us into his image. In view of that love and mercy, says Paul, we can freely and joyfully worship, serve, and glorify God with all that we are and all that we have.

One way Christians respond to evil in the world is to retreat into isolation, but that does nothing to overcome evil with good. Every good and perfect gift God has given us is not given to us that we hide out in our own Christian enclave, but in order that we might advance God’s kingdom as light in a dark world...demonstrating for all to see the amazing love, generosity, and glory of God.

Christ’s love for us was put into action with his body, and we are to do the same. As followers of Christ, we are not to be people who just talk about love, but people who express it in very practical and meaningful ways in the loving service of one another.

Paul has given us a portrait of Christian love in action...

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. (Rom. 12:9-13)

Paul is addressing here in Romans 12 what many consider to be the credibility gap between what the church teaches and how it lives...between its belief and its behavior. Are our words backed-up by our actions? Our focus this morning will be on the second-half of verse 13 ... “seek to show hospitality”.

Most of us are familiar with the term “*philadelphia*” which is translated as “brotherly-affection” and is the love shown

among friends. Not many of us are as familiar with the term “*philoxenia*” which is translated “hospitality” and literally means “love of strangers”. In spite of what you might have thought, the true meaning of hospitality is not entertaining family and friends but showing kindness to strangers... loving those not before known to us.

Strangers, by definition, do not belong to one’s inner circle. Most of us were taught from a very early age to be suspicious of strangers, and often our first inclination is to avoid them and keep a safe distance away. There is without question a great need to be careful and wise engaging those we don’t know, but we must never lose compassion and generosity for the stranger in need.

The term “hospitality” does not occur in the Old Testament, but a supreme example of hospitality is demonstrated by Abraham in Genesis 18: 1-8. In that scene we read how Abraham rushed out of his tent to invite three strangers into his home to find rest and refreshment. He washed their feet and provided them a generous meal in a cool place. These three strangers were in fact angels sent by God with a special message for Abraham that his wife Sarah, advanced in years and barren, would bear a son within a year’s time.

Abraham’s example of hospitality, and the blessing that came from it, had such an influence on the minds of the people of God that many generations later we find the author of Hebrews encouraging his readers to show hospitality by writing,

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. (Heb. 13:1-2)

Our approach to hospitality at times can be passive, but here in Romans 12 Paul makes it clear that we are not to wait until a stranger in need comes to us, but we are to seek after them. The phrase “seek to show” is really one word in the Greek text and is most often translated in the New Testament as the word “pursue”. It is a strong verb that calls for action, eagerness and intensity like the chase that happens in a hunt. In a world that encourages chasing after all you can get, followers of Jesus are called to chase after those to whom we can give.

In the immediate context here in Romans 12:13 there is a strong argument to be made that what Paul primarily has in view here is for Christians to show hospitality to strangers who are fellow “saints”...fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

That is a beautiful and wonderful thing, and a great blessing in building up the body of Christ. Loving hospitality must be evident among us, but the Bible also makes clear that it is to be shown to everyone in need. Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35) stands for all ages as an example of what it means to love the stranger generously in his time of need regardless of his spiritual condition.

We take after our Heavenly Father when we love strangers. God has always been a lover of strangers. He instructed the nation of Israel, who knew first-hand what it was like to be strangers, to offer compassionate hospitality to the sojourner... the traveler in need,

You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:9)

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. (Dt. 10:17-19)

This kind of deep compassion for the stranger became a hallmark of God's people in the time of the New Testament as well. Travel was dangerous and public inns were often scarce, expensive, and usually of a very low moral standard. Hospitality provided the stranger or weary traveler a safe place to find rest, food, shelter, and protection. The travelling ministry of Jesus, and the missionary travels of the disciples were greatly dependent upon the hospitality they received.

In his third letter, John reminds us that not only did the traveling Christian look to his brothers and sisters for hospitality, but the individual churches welcomed the opportunity to show hospitality and looked to the traveler for fostering a sense of the unity of the church throughout the world,

Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. (3 John 5-8)

Hospitality for visiting Christians was indispensable to the growth and well-being of the early church. The Bible makes clear that hospitality is not to be shown just by the rich or those with nice large homes, but is expected from each member of the church. The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to Timothy, tells him that hospitality is expected to be shown not only by the elders of the church (1 Tim 3:2), but also widows (1 Tim 5:10). Regardless of our age, our financial status, or our living situation...we are all called to show hospitality.

Jesus makes clear that hospitality, showing love to strangers in need, is a direct expression of showing love to Jesus himself and is an expectation for each and every follower of Christ...

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a *stranger* and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:31-40)

The attitude of love toward strangers, and the act of hospitality itself, begins with the heart. We seek to show hospitality, not for the acceptance of others or the acceptance of God, but because we have been shown hospitality in its truest sense by God. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in the letter to the Ephesians that as Gentiles we were strangers and yet God welcomed us to himself in Christ Jesus,

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Eph. 2:12-13)

Do you have a deep and abiding sense that you are not a stranger to God, but that you been brought near in Christ and are “at home” with him and he is “at home” with you? Chasing after opportunities to show hospitality may seem intimidating to you, but we must remember that God has equipped you for what he asks of you.

As Paul says earlier in Romans, God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:5). It is his love and presence in us that enables us to reach out to strangers with authentic and generous love.

Let me share some ideas for you to consider as you “*seek to show hospitality*”:

i. Pray

Begin first with prayer. Invite the Lord to soften your heart and open your eyes to the needs of those around you. Pray for the Lord to fill you with compassion and confidence to step

into the good works he has prepared in advance for you (Eph. 2:10).

2. Plan ahead

Hospitality does not need to cost a dime, but I always believe it is a good idea to set aside money in your budget for expressions of hospitality. There is tremendous freedom and joy when we know that money is available when we want to use it to love others.

Setting aside time is also an important element. Most of us are extremely busy and our calendars fill-up quickly, so keep a regular night or weekend free and use that time to express hospitality.

My friend and former PBCC elder, Bill Hyatt, and his wife Yvonne, excelled at showing hospitality. They would routinely set aside at least one night each month to invite guests into their home to share a meal and the fellowship that comes with it. They would pick out the dates in advance, and then invite others into their home until enough people said yes to fill their large dining table. Amy and I were invited a few times, and you never knew who else was going to be there. It was usually a mix of their neighbors, co-workers, and members of the church. It proved to be a terrific opportunity to get to know people I had never met before, and to love them in Christ's name.

3. Be attentive

Look for the strangers, the outsiders in need, wherever you go. Let me invite you to consider a few places...

At home

Be attentive to those who come into your home already. I have found that teens are very good at offering hospitality to their friends, Christian and non-Christian, if they know their parents welcome it. I always encourage parents of teens to do whatever they can to create a teen-friendly environment where there is no "off-limit" carpets or furniture and lots of food and games around. For my wife Amy and I, this was a great opportunity over the years to be salt and light with our children's friends and the parents of their friends.

At work

Who is the stranger at work that needs your loving hospitality? Who is the one that gets left out of most social gatherings...that seems to always be on the outside looking in? What if you had such a gentle, generous, and hospitable spirit that those who work with you or for you felt welcome and "at home" in your presence?...they don't feel used, taken advantage of, or stepped on, but appreciated, respected, and deeply valued.

Neighborhood and beyond

What would a spirit of hospitality look like in your neighborhood and beyond? There are of course, our actual neighbors. How often do we invite our neighbors over for a

meal, or welcome into our home folks who just moved into our neighborhood?

What if you read the local paper with an eye toward hospitality? Who are those in need? Every year there is a posting in the local paper, and our own church bulletin, about how visiting international high school and college student need a place to live for the academic year.

To broaden this concept even further, becoming a foster parent or adopting a child are supreme examples of hospitality...seeking out and welcoming in a stranger and making them a member of your family. Several in our church body do just that.

Of course there are those who cannot come to us, be we can go to them. Those in the hospital, those in prison, and those in elderly care facilities. Many of them feel abandoned and forgotten, desperately thirsty to be loved like a family member. I'm sure you can think of many more. Opportunities abound all around us.

At church

What might hospitality look like right here at church? There is the Need Sheet on the bulletin boards at church, updated each week, where you might find someone needing a place to stay for a period of time. Hospitality can also be shown in each of our ministries, including hosting small groups for the youth ministries as well as adult ministries like home fellowship groups.

What about hospitality on Sunday morning? Christian author, Robert Webber, reminds us of the power of practicing hospitality at church on Sunday mornings. He writes,

Our God is a welcoming God, and the only way our visitors will know that is if we are a welcoming people.¹

Sometimes our friendship circles within the church are closed-circles...we hug our friends, talk to our friends and spend all our time with only our friends. If that is all we do, then it should come as no surprise that visitors will feel like outsiders.

For good or bad, the research I've read on this topic indicates that the most important question guests are asking during their first church visit is, "Is this a friendly church?" The primary way they determine the answer to that question is by the number of people who initiate a friendly conversation with them. The sad truth is that for most guests, if they cannot develop friendships in a church within six or seven weeks, they will leave and not come back.

There are several things we do at church to encourage conversation and an environment of hospitality, but we need each of you to join us in this effort. Community Café after each service, and our upcoming five-week Sunday Night Life event were started with hospitality in mind. Each seeks to provide a warm and inviting place where we can connect with our guests and help them feel welcome.

Sincere hospitality is naturally evangelistic. How beautiful and attractive is an individual, a family, a church community marked by loving and generous hospitality...where each person is made to feel welcome and at home.

The ministry of loving strangers, of loving newcomers and visitors, is not just for the up-front leaders, or ushers and greeters, but is an opportunity for all of us. Can you image the impact if every single one of us thought of ourselves as hosts at church and each and every visitor as our personal guest?

I've been trying to think of a way to encourage all of you to pursue our guests in the spirit of hospitality, and then I remembered all the old Western movies I saw growing up. When the sheriff wanted to get all the towns people to join him in the "chase" he would deputize them. That is what I am going to do right now. Everyone, please raise your right hand...I now "deputize" all of you to become "hosts" each and every Sunday morning.

4. Rejoice in hospitality

Hospitality is not just a one-way blessing, from host to stranger, but we as hosts are blessed as well. New friendships are such a treasure!

What a loving Heavenly Father we have who reaches out to us, invites us in, and welcomes us into His family. My prayer is that we would continue to do likewise in His name. Be willing and ready to help those in want. Share in their burdens, encourage them in all things and love them deeply as Christ has loved you. May God's love shine through our lives today and every day.

1. Webber, Robert E., *Empowered by the Holy Spirit: A Study in the Ministries of Worship, Volume 7*, (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1998), 68.

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