

Participate in Needs & Pursue Hospitality

Gospel Culture, Part 7

Romans 12:13

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We're slowly working our way through Romans 12. The context in verses one and two says that in light of God's mercy, we're to offer ourselves to Christ. Then verses three to eight contain a description of the church—how we're many members in one body. From verse nine on, we're given a list of about 20 admonitions that we're taking time to ponder and apply to our lives, by God's grace. Let's revisit the context and read Romans 12:9-13:

⁹ *Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.*

¹⁰ *Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.* ¹¹ *Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.* ¹² *Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.* ¹³ *Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*

We're going to be looking at these twin exhortations:

- First, when God's people are in need, we should be eager to help them.
- Second, we should always practice hospitality.

Let's ask God to help us understand how we are to do these things. Lord, we pray now that You would bless this reading of Your Word and its application. We need Your Spirit to help us live it out. I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts would be acceptable to You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

We often think about the gospel as being a message to individuals. It's true that each one of us is sinful and in need of a Savior. That's the hope we have. God had mercy on us in our predicament and He sent Christ to live a perfect life, die on the cross and rise from the dead so that all who believe in Him will have salvation. Romans 1:16 promise, that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who believe.

So in this sense the gospel is personal, and each one of us has to respond to it individually. But if we think of the gospel only in terms of yourself and God, you're missing the power of the

gospel to unite people. Romans 9-11 describes God's plan to bring Jew and Gentile into one body under Christ. The gospel creates the church. Each of us has three priorities: God, others and ourselves. We not only have a relationship with God, but also with other believers. As we'll see, both of today's exhortations involve these relationships that exist within the body of Christ. They are outward ministries reflecting the impact of the gospel in our lives.

In the context of the church, when we share our possessions and homes with one another, this is a tangible expression of our unity in Christ. Both generosity and hospitality are outward ramifications of the inward changes God has done in our lives. We'll be looking at them under three headings:

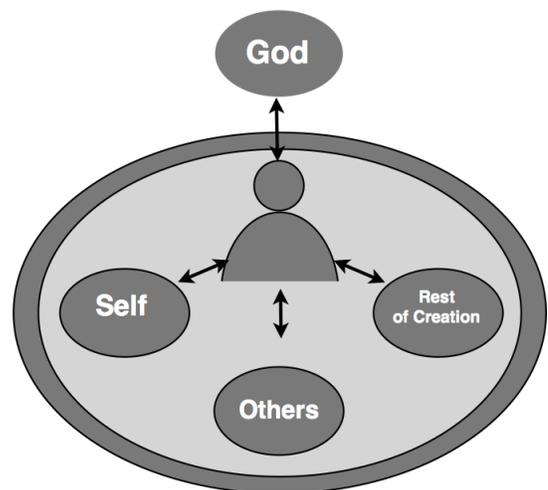
- First, what do these exhortations mean?
- Second, what are the obstacles that prevent us from doing them?
- Third, what are the implications for each of us and for us as a church?

What is the meaning of generosity and hospitality?

Let's think about what parts of our worship service today will we also be doing in heaven. We'll still be glorifying God. We'll be worshipping. We'll be hearing His eternal Word. We'll be gathered together as a people. But there are two things we do in this world that we won't be doing then. We won't be taking up an offering. There will be no expenses and no needs in heaven. There will be no sickness. There will be no missionaries to fund. The gospel work will be completed. There won't be a "Love In Action" offering to collect.

Then too, we probably won't need our Connect Cards in heaven. Nobody will be a visitor. We'll all know we belong there. But the offering and the cards in this world are reminders of what God Himself will ultimately do. He will provide for and welcome all His people together. So even as we consider the needs we have in this world, it gives us hope of what will one day be fully resolved.

Here is a diagram that might help us. In the beginning, God made the world good. Yet the masterpiece of His creation, men and women, chose not to serve God but rather wanted God to serve themselves. They turned inward and rebelled against Him, bringing sin into the world. This spiritual alienation has impacted every aspect of our



lives. Not only are we vertically separated from God, but we also have inward psychological problems and outward social struggles. As we live in this groaning creation, we have needs that bring hardship and grief, as we learned in Romans 8.

But thankfully God responded with mercy, pouring His anger against us onto His Son instead. This allowed us to once again be reconciled to the Father through Christ. But our world is still in bad shape. Before Christ's return, we as Christians still face the realities of fallen humanity. We have been called to bring God's goodness into the darkness through proclaiming God's Word and through our deeds. The church's first goal is to bring the good news of God's merciful plan of rescue to everyone we can.

Then as we live in a world that has so many critical needs—such as people without water and food—we understand that we are called to work against the Fall's impact in others' lives. People have both temporal and eternal needs and Jesus cares about all forms of suffering. He even cares if you can't pay your electric bill. The gospel motivates all forms of ministry, both word and deed. We are to share what we have and welcome strangers because Christ welcomed us. It's also important to remember that we must balance our deeds with sharing God's Word.

Remember these words from Romans 8:22-23: *“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”* Some of our suffering is very intense. Some needs are glaring. God gives us the opportunity to care for one another in these situations.

It's clear that we are to *“contribute to the needs of the saints”* and to *“seek to show hospitality.”* Let's think about what these words mean. The word “contribute” is related to the Greek word *koinonia*. It means to share together in fellowship. We should be mutually interested in one another's wellbeing to the extent that we freely share our possessions. We're all part of the same body, so your needs also become my needs.

The word “saint” might bring to mind certain people who have elevated positions in church history. But in Scripture, all Christians are considered to be saints. When we exchange our sin for Christ's righteousness at conversion, His perfection is now credited to us. Therefore from God's perspective every Christian is a saint. We have been declared righteous in Christ.

But even though we are now children of God, we still have very real needs and experience very real suffering. We still live in this fallen, broken world. We are simultaneously sufferers and saints. And for that matter, according to Romans 3, we're also still sinners. But we, as partners in the body of Christ, are to care for the needs of one another.

Why do you think Paul is making our service to other Christians a priority over people in general? Well, it's like the instruction we hear on airplanes: "First put the oxygen mask on yourself, and then assist those around you." We care for one another so that all of us can care for those who are our neighbors. Paul isn't implying that the church is a swamp. It's very much a living river, doing good works wherever we go.

After exhorting us to contribute to the needs of the saints, Paul says we are to seek to show hospitality. The work "seek" means to pursue. We should look for opportunities to offer hospitality to others. We are to spend time being interested in the needs of others. The word "hospitality" also needs to be defined. You've heard that Philadelphia combines the Greek words for love (*philos*) and brothers (*adelphos*)—City of Brotherly Love. Likewise, hospitality comes from a word like that: *philanexia*, which literally means love of strangers.

So if you're having fellowship today with your family, that's not exactly hospitality—unless you add a guest. We need to show love to people who are strangers to us. But you see how these two exhortations—that we are to love Christians and to love outsiders—must include ministry both of the Word and through deeds. We should be discussing God's truth and caring for practical needs.

Let me share a story as told by Rosaria Butterfield of something that took place in her life about 20 years ago. Hospitality was directly involved with her conversion to Christianity. Ken Smith was a pastor of a church near where Rosaria lived. She was a professor of English and women's studies at Syracuse University, where she was on a track to gain tenure. She was a radical feminist lesbian. She wrote an article in a newspaper trashing one of the Christian ministries that was scheduled to come through New York.

In response, she received a lot of hate mail and a lot of fan mail. But one letter stood out to her, a letter from Ken Smith. All he did was ask some questions and then invited her to come to his house to visit with him and his wife. Her first reaction was to throw the letter away, but she later retrieved it and read it again. For some reason she couldn't shake his questions. She was about to write a book on the Alt Right movement, so she decided to visit Ken to do research for her book.

That one visit stretched into a two-year friendship, where she would visit the Smiths and they would visit her. She'd make them soup or pie, and they'd return the favor. Over time, Rosaria was radically converted to Jesus Christ. You can read about it in her book [The Secret Life of an Unlikely Convert](#). In it she comments that Ken and his wife did not treat her as a "project." It wasn't some sort of "friendship evangelism." Rather, it was friendship that naturally

incorporated evangelism because of the Smiths' authentic faith. They wanted to know her, and they wanted to live out their faith when they were with her. Both were honestly their desire.

The book gives rich insight into how hospitality shown to strangers can be very effective for the Kingdom. Jesus told us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Neighbors aren't necessarily those who share our faith—or even share our lifestyle and culture. Strangers are often very different from us. But this is what Paul is exhorting us to do here in Romans 12:13—to be generous with those in need and seek out strangers to whom we can show God's love through hospitality.

I wish it was just that easy. I could say be generous and show hospitality, then end the sermon and we could all go home. But let's reflect on what it is that often keeps us from doing these things.

What are the barriers to generosity and hospitality?

It's true that we live in a broken world, a world where people need Christ and need kind deeds. But guess what? We're broken too. Our view of money and our view of strangers can keep us from following Paul's instructions. There are barriers we have to overcome.

Romans 12:1 reminds us that we're not to be conformed to the world; rather, we're to be conformed to the image of Christ (8:29). But how often do we view money the same way the world does—and not even realize it. Also, our view of strangers could be the same as that of non-believers around us. These exhortations are part of the way God is renewing our minds. In Romans 12:3, Paul tells us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to. We're also told to think of ourselves with sober judgment. The sin of high-mindedness is revealed when we only spend time with people in our economic sphere, our racial sphere, and our belief sphere.

The barrier to generosity, to put it simply, is greed or coveting—a love for money. Some sins are really obvious. If you're caught because you've stolen something, that's obvious. You're holding something in your hand that doesn't belong to you. You might protest, "I didn't mean to take it," but there it is in your hand.

But greed is much less obvious. We can't tell when we're greedy. Tim Keller says, "No one thinks they're greedy." Partly it's because our lives appear quite similar to those around us. In fact, you're probably not the richest person in your neighborhood and that makes you think, "I'm not greedy. They might be, but look—I drive an older car." Often it takes the shock of something like visiting another country before you realize how greedy you are.

This happened to me when we moved to Morocco. During the ten years we lived there, I was constantly made aware of how I saw my wealth as a security blanket. I almost found myself being thankful; thinking somehow I had a right to my wealth. Then I met some Moroccan Christians who were very aware that they could lose their jobs at any point. It was humbling to me to see that they had come to really trust the Lord for everything they had.

Perhaps what challenges us most in these verses are the things that aren't said. It's those million-dollar questions like, "How much should you spend on yourself?" Statistically, North Americans spend roughly 96-98% of our income on ourselves and our families. That's really not healthy spiritually. Even in the Old Testament, we see that God's people were to give 10% back to Him, to support the temple and the poor.

The New Testament doesn't speak to this quite as explicitly, but Jesus often challenges greed. One time He praised a widow at the temple for giving two small copper coins. He told His disciples that most people gave out of their plenty, but she gave more than anyone, because in her poverty she gave all she had (Mark 12:41-44). It's clear that God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). Jesus challenges us to look at ourselves, to see if our mindset is more consumeristic than generous. Sometimes we really can't see ourselves accurately.

The underlying issue is that of where we put our trust. Last week I quoted George Whitefield as saying prayer is an antidote to all kinds of evil. We can add to what he says that giving is an antidote to greed. Think about the Lord's Prayer. It doesn't say, "Give me this day my daily bread." What does it say? "Give us this day our daily bread." Part of praying this common prayer is the implication that as God provides for me, I need to provide for others. We are to consider the needs of other Christians, even those around the world. What about believers in Venezuela or North Korea? What about Syrian refugees? What are their needs?

When you pray the Lord's Prayer, you're asking that He will provide for the needs of all His people. Our mindset should be broad enough to include others who are needy, and not just ourselves. Let's think about it this way: Say that you and your spouse agree that you definitely need to replace your kitchen table. But if you buy a new one, will there still be money left over for others? Maybe we should start thinking this way: "We can buy this if there's also something we can give to others who have needs."

We see this lived out explicitly in Acts 2 and 4. Acts 4:32-34 says no one had a need, because they were giving generously and freely to each other. That's what God desires us to move toward. Of course, it takes wisdom to know what is truly a need. We read in 1 John 3:17, "*But if*

anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"

If greed and love of money are barriers to generosity, what are the barriers to hospitality? It could be your family dynamic. We treasure our family time and we're used to having it without any strangers present. Maybe we could consciously decide for the next family event to invite someone whom we don't know. Your kids will probably not gravitate toward this, but you can demonstrate to them how to love others because this is what Christ wants us to do. It's part of being conformed to His image.

You've heard it said that if you're heavenly minded you're no earthly good. In his chapter on hope in Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis said it's just the opposite. The more heavenly minded we are, the more earthly good we accomplish. It's not that we're too excited about our hope for heaven, but rather that this hope gives us enthusiasm while we're still here. When we find ourselves without much love for strangers, it's because we're not really gripped by the love of God.

If we really consider our hope and identity in Christ, this can free us from some of our hesitations. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 8:9, *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."* This is what Jesus did for us, and if we're to be conformed to His image, then this is what we are to become as well. Holiness means pursuing and loving God, avoiding sin, repenting. Holiness also includes loving strangers, spending time with people and providing for their needs. I believe the deeper these truths sink in, the greater our generosity will be.

Jesus also said, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"* (Acts 20:35). Do we believe this enough to live that way? We need to remember that Christ first befriended us when we were "strangers" and not part of His family. I was welcomed into His family and given the rights of adoption. I now am privileged to call God my Father and Jesus my Brother. I have innumerable new brothers and sisters as well. That should shape us as a Christian. If Jesus is our Model and our Master, the One Who gives us our new identity, then this should impact the way we view other people who are in need.

Another thing Jesus said was *"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"* (Matthew 6:21). We need to ask ourselves, "Am I treasuring Him? Am I trusting and leaning on Him?" If we are, then our next question should be, "What are You calling me to do in this situation?" Jesus treasures you. He left heaven's riches to come to earth because you were one of

His treasured possessions. How much more should we reflect that in the world, seeing people as treasures to be pursued?

So when it comes to generosity and hospitality, let's pray, "Lord, give me a generous heart. Give me a desire to gather people like You did." Jesus came for the lost sheep. He had to search for those sheep. In the same way, hospitality has to be pursued. We actually need to look for people to invite into our homes and into our lives. These are strong exhortations.

What are the implications of generosity and hospitality?

So what does this mean for us as Christians? We often think about such disciplines as prayer, repentance, church attendance—and we should always practice these things. They very important. But these should serve as fuel for our ongoing ministry to others. Remember, holiness in Jesus' life included both His righteousness and purity before God, His love for people and His involvement in their lives. If we describe our identity in Christ as having the priorities of God, others and then ourselves, we should ask, "How much are my personal spiritual exercises leading me to interact with others?"

These commands have two levels of application. First, they apply universally to all Christians. But there's also a particular emphasis for the church. As individuals, we can ponder various ways to serve others. Discuss it with your spouse and pray about setting aside money. We need to build rhythms of thinking about others in order to make this part of our lives. We can also encourage our children, once they begin to earn money, to consider sharing some of their earnings with those in need.

When we speak a blessing over someone, the source of that blessing is always the Lord. It was part of His covenant with Abraham and we see Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of that. But we need to realize that we are blessed in order to bless others. If we don't, we're forgetting the intent of that covenant. Even as the covenant assures us of God's care for us, we are then free to care for and give to others.

We had a fun practice in Morocco that we haven't been able to duplicate here. On Fridays, a lot of businesses were closed so it became a day off for us. For a season we had what was called "Couscous Friday." I told my wife that on Fridays, I was going to try to find someone, maybe even a family, to join us for lunch. If it wasn't Friday, we tried to make time in our week for this. Some Friday mornings I would be out looking for someone to invite. We wanted to learn the culture and we wanted to get to know other families. And often our invitations were reciprocated.

That culture actually thrives on hospitality. In our country, lunch at Panera might be as far as we go—and that's fine. Still, develop the rhythm in your life of noticing people—troubled teens, single parents, orphans, people who are struggling emotionally. How can you help or host these people?

In addition to your individual family, we also need to pay attention to these things as a church body. Sometimes thinking about hospitality on our own can be overwhelming. Your family can only do so much. But often it helps to think about what can be done through your small group. Maybe one of you is good at hosting, another at cooking and another at leading conversations. Together you can reach out much more effectively.

Similarly, we can give as a church in ways individuals can't. We have a structure for mercy in which the deacons are able to assess needs and meet them using church resources. Deacons are appointed leaders who are trained to serve in a deed ministry at our church. Not only are visible needs being met, but hearts are being changed through encounters with Jesus. In this way the church as a whole can demonstrate love and mercy in a community.

This then moves into our long-term goal of getting people integrated into the life of our church, drawing on their abilities, giftings and resources. To be sure, it takes great wisdom to effectively minister to people in need. Each one of us are complicated people and sometimes our economic or relational situations make things even more complex. Pray especially for our deacons and others who minister in our congregation, so our benevolence actually can benefit others without overloading or damaging the one who is ministering. Alleviating poverty can be a very complicated process. We're working with broken people and we're broken as well, being in a broken world.

By God's grace, through the power of the gospel, we are to work to restore people to the hope and dignity God intends humans to have, as His image bearers, in this world. As we close in prayer, think about what part of the things we discussed today might be God's intended word for you regarding generosity and hospitality, regarding loving the stranger. What steps is He calling you personally to take?

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