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***Caring Relationships***  
***Romans 12: 9-18***

*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.*

When I was in youth group during high school, we had a ***covenant for the group***.  
 It was a set of ***rules*** that we designed ---  
*like no gossip, let everyone speak for themselves, listen, hold things in confidence, no cliques...*  
 Our Youth minister thought it best to have US come up with the rules for the group, instead of him dictating them, so that we would actually follow them.  
 And his plan worked!  
 I've heard of many groups doing this same thing over the years, and it is powerful to see what a group of young people come up with as rules, because they are often ***more strict*** than the ideas of the adults!

What Paul is writing here is ***like a group covenant*** for the body of Christ, the church.  
 He is suggesting that these are some of the ***ground rules*** for how we will act and treat one another, both inside and outside the church.

Depending on your translation, there are more than 20 "rules" here, concrete examples of how we are to be in relationship.  
 But the ***foundation*** of all of them is one thing: ***LOVE***.  
 And Paul says it must be a ***genuine love***.

That word genuine in Greek means a love that is *not hypocritical*.  
In other words it's real, inside and out.

These words in Romans 12:9-21 are kind of like  
the *core values* of Christian life.

They are like the *warp* of a weaver—the base that is built of yarn,  
before the weft or pattern is woven into it.

They are similar to the *Ten Commandments* in our Old Testament—  
But they are *ground rules for following Jesus Christ*.

These are ways that we put our love in action,  
much like we talked about '*Doing Love*' a few weeks ago,  
instead of just saying we love one another.

Love is a *verb*, and here Paul gives us *practical ways of living out our love*.

I was reading this week about a traveling doctor named Dr. Paul Farmer,  
who is profiled in the book *Mountains beyond Mountains*.

Dr. Farmer travels the globe treating sickness and disease in the poorest areas.  
And he does it with a certain mindset, as he deals with the leaders, the medical  
establishment, and the local traditions.

He calls it a *hermeneutic of generosity*.

What is a hermeneutic?

Hermeneutic here refers to a type of interpretation.

Dr. Farmer's 'hermeneutic of generosity' means judging people's actions  
generously, by assuming that *their motives are good*,  
even if they appear to be the opposite.

Rochelle A. Stackhouse, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, pg. 16

What if Paul is urging US to have the *same mindset*?

A hermeneutic of generosity?

What if we assumed that most people's motives are good?

How would that change the way we treat each another?

Would that make a difference in YOUR life?

Wouldn't that *help us to*

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to good;*

*... outdo one another in showing honor?*

Wouldn't that be the *basis* for our

*Contributing to the needs of the saints; or extending hospitality to strangers?*

Wouldn't that help us to

*14 Bless those who persecute us...?*

*15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep?*

*16 Live in harmony with one another...and not claim to be wiser than we are?*

Consider this—if we take Paul seriously here,  
we are **actually following Jesus!**

After all, Paul sounds like Jesus here in Romans 12.

And much like Jesus, Paul really expands the calls to live differently.

He offers these **bold and provocative** ways to live:

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*

*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;*

This echoes **Matthew 5:43-46**, when Jesus said:

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'*

*44 But I tell you, **love your enemies and pray** for those who persecute you...*

*46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?*

It sounds like Jesus in **Luke 6:27-36**:

*Love your enemies, **do good** to those who hate you,*

*28 **bless** those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.*

*29 If someone slaps you on one cheek, **turn to them the other** also.*

*If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.*

*30 **Give** to everyone who asks you,*

*and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.*

*31 **Do to others as you would have them do to you...***

*36 Be merciful, just as your **Father is merciful.***

And of course, Jesus sums up this whole way of life in

what he called the **Greatest Commandment in Matthew 22:36-40**:

When he was asked, *Teacher, which commandment is the greatest?"* <sup>37</sup> Jesus said,

*" 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and*

with all your mind.’<sup>38</sup> *This is the greatest and first commandment.*<sup>39</sup> *And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*<sup>40</sup> *On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”*

It all *sounds really good*.

But if we’re honest, it’s *challenging*, right?

We are imperfect.

We are proud and often selfish people.

We do not tend to bless those who curse us, or live in harmony with everyone.

We do not tend to extend hospitality to everyone.

Doesn’t Paul know how *difficult* it is to live this way?

I believe he does.

After all, these words were written to a Roman congregation.

*under the control of the Roman* government.

And what Paul was trying to encourage them to do,

was to be an *alternative community*—

a *different* kind of community within Rome--

People who *loved one another deeply*,

*and loved even their enemies and did good* to those who persecuted them.

Now, that’s not easy, is it?

So, what about us?

Aren’t *we* supposed to be an *alternative community*

in our world today?

Especially when our *culture is so divided, and hateful*,

so quick to *judge and condemn*?

Isn’t it rather *countercultural* for us to genuinely love others?

Just before these verses, in Romans 12:1-2,

Paul says that we should present ourselves to God as a *living sacrifice*,

Then he says we should use our spiritual gifts...

Then here, he tells us how to treat our friends, our enemies, even strangers.

When Paul says let your *love be genuine*,

he’s saying we need to learn a true, deeper love.

A love that *extends*--

even to those on the other side of the political *aisle*,

even to those with different *ideologies*,

different *perspectives, and prejudices*,

Even those who *act out* of evil!

Paul says *when we suffer* (which we will),  
we should be *patient, prayerful, and even rejoice!*  
He says we should bless our enemies, live in peace and harmony,  
and *never repay* evil with evil, or try to *avenge* ourselves—  
because that's God's job!

Paul is basically saying:  
*we are to hate the evil, but not the evildoers.*  
We can and should stand up against what is wrong,  
but not through *anger or violence...*  
instead we are to fight evil with *love, mercy, and grace.*  
With *blessings, and hospitality!*  
Talk about *counterintuitive, and countercultural!*

It reminds us of the life Jesus offers--  
*To take up a cross, and follow Him.*  
In other words, we have to *let go of our own ego* and agenda,  
and *follow* Christ—  
Who said, we should love our neighbors, and even *our enemies.*

Think about the recent devastation of Hurricane Ian.  
It's *heartbreaking* isn't it?  
It's *overwhelming* to think of how many people have lost everything.

But in it, we have seen such amazing and life-giving stories of *heroism*, and  
*sacrifice*, of *loving neighbor*, and helping one another.  
And as I was working on this passage and watching the news—  
I thought about how *disasters often bring people together.*  
We often see the best of humanity in the worst of conditions!  
And I was struck by this realization:  
You know, *no one in* those *rescue boats* was *asking* stranded people—  
Hey, are you *Republican or Democrat?*  
Who did you *vote for?*  
Where do you stand on the controversial *issues?*  
Of course not!

They *didn't have a litmus test* for rescue—  
every person was just *a human being*, in need of help.

Isn't that *how we are supposed to love our neighbor?*  
 Whether we are facing a disaster, or not?  
 Aren't we supposed to *show the love and mercy of God—to everyone?*

And that means our *hospitality extends* to strangers, and to enemies.  
 Paul says we should give our enemies something to drink and eat!  
 And finally at the end of this passage,  
 Paul says we should not be overcome by evil,  
 but we should *overcome evil with good.*

Kind of reminds me what Martin Luther King, Jr. said:  
*Hate cannot drive out hate.*  
*Only LOVE can do that.*

What if we took Paul's words here in Romans 12 (with Jesus' words),  
 and used them as *a guide to loving our neighbors?*

What if we asked ourselves,  
 could these words be on the *walls of our church,*  
 as a group covenant?  
 What about in *our homes?*  
 Are we willing to see these words as a *covenant* for our daily lives?

It's a great question to consider,  
 when the whole country seems so divided, right?  
*What if we treated one another as neighbors, even when we don't see eye to eye?*

And wouldn't that be a *great witness* to the world about our Christian faith?  
 And about the church?  
 Isn't that what we want people to see,  
 when they walk in these doors, or meet us on the street?

So many of our newest members have commented on how *friendly and welcoming*  
 this church is—which is awesome!  
 Jesus asks us to take that even *a step further,*  
 and deeply love one another, even those with whom we disagree!

What do we want the world to see?  
*Genuine love, or fighting?*  
 Mercy and grace, or hatred?

So, what about this as *our group covenant*?

Look at the piece of paper that you received with your bulletin today---

Look at these verses carefully.

What **stands** out to you?

What is the most **challenging** for you?

What is **easier** to do?

Truth be told, I believe it's ALL challenging,  
and we cannot do this on *our own!*

*I know I can't.*

We need God's help.

We need the Holy Spirit acting inside of us.

We need the *power of Jesus* to help us choose what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:31 is '*a more excellent way*'.

That's our calling—to choose the better way, the way that is *good and noble*.

Isn't that how we *hold fast to good*?

Isn't that how we *outdo one another in affection and honor*?

What if we made these things the very *foundation*  
of our caring community of faith?

What if we worked to become *Christians who practice what they preach*?

*We can do that!*

We can take these verses home today,

If you're watching from home, look them up, write them down or print them out.

Romans 12:9-18.

And put them somewhere prominent in your home.

Try to memorize this!

We can also *sign our names* on the way out of church today,  
on the board in the narthex—promising to live this way at FPC Matawan!

Wouldn't that be a great way to put our *love in action*,

By making a commitment to this way of life—here in the church and beyond!

Living this way is *not easy*, but it's who *we are called* to be,  
with the help of Jesus.

And it's who the *body of Christ* is called to be,  
together in this world.

Friends, hear the *Good news of the Gospel* today:

We are called to genuine love.

To outdo one another in showing honor to all.

In the face of *evil*, we are called to *goodness and love*.

In the face of our *enemies*, we are called to *mercy and grace*,  
to *hospitality and welcome*.

This is the *way of Jesus Christ*,

and this is *OUR way*.

And for that, all God's people said, Amen.