



Roanoke, Virginia

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“H of G”

Romans 12:9-21

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⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰No, “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.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Every year on the first day of Sunday School, our youth go through a practice of creating a Class Covenant. The Class Covenant is a guiding document that governs each class’s behavior toward one another during the course of the year. It is a document for the entire class, youth and



adults alike, so all are invited to share what they think should go into the covenant—in our Confirmation class this document is called the “Rules of the Road.” I am not sure what each class will include in their own covenant this year, but some usual suggestions are: when someone is talking, others are listening; respect each other; share materials; be fully present; participate in discussions and ask questions; be on time (which in reality is the responsibility of whoever drives them to church); be nice; help others when you can; step back and step up. You may not have heard of that last one, but it is one of my favorites. I heard it for the first time at a youth retreat I led back in 2018. “Step back and step up” is a reminder for those who usually do the talking to step back, so others have the space and opportunity to step up.

After all covenant suggestions have been made, the class then gets to discuss which suggestions or rules are a necessity, which ones need to be edited or could be grouped with similar ones, or which rules need to be removed. After the entire class is satisfied with the covenant, each person signs it as a mark of their agreement and commitment. The document remains visible throughout the year as a reminder of the covenant and correct behavior when necessary throughout the year.

I would encourage all our classes next week to go through a similar process as a way to set the framework for the year, or to run with our CE theme, to set a foundation upon which we will build upon together through our learning in community.

These verses from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome would be a brilliant start to a classroom covenant. The behaviors and attitudes outlined here act, much like the Ten Commandments, as foundational values on which all interactions are built within a community of faith. Who could argue with Paul’s exhortation to hate what is evil, to “persevere in prayer,” to welcome newcomers, or to celebrate the joys of others and empathize with those who are grieving.

So, if you don’t know where to start next week in developing a classroom covenant, use these verses as a guide.

But the difficulty lies when Paul pivots to our relationship with those we find hard to love. Paul moves from extending hospitality to strangers to blessing and feeding our enemies.

Paul starts off with how we are to be guided by genuine love and goes on to imagine what “genuine love” could and should look like in the various circles of interaction. As Mary Hinkle Shore notes, there seems to be 4 general types of interactions: the immediate community; “the



saints” and those in need of hospitality; enemies; and all people.¹ I am not going into detail for each circle, because each could be a sermon in and of itself. Suffice it to say, love that is genuine does not depend on who is on the other side.

Starting with genuine love, Paul urges the Christians in Rome to pursue an active, energetic, and optimistic response to all people, to those within the church and to those outside of the church, and even to our enemies. For love to be genuine, Paul says one must abhor evil and hold fast to what is good, that is to pursue justice against the evils of the world and to embrace the goodness found in the world. In other words, push back against what is wrong, in order to seek—and hopefully find—what is good.

This can be applied to the systemic evils and the systemic goodness of the world, as well as the evils and goodness within the people of the world. Yet we must consider, and always remember, the world, and all that is in it, was created out of the goodness of God.

Paul’s core values of love and goodness, as they pertain to all interactions, can be summed up by a phrase used by Dr. Paul Farmer, as profiled in Tracy Kidder’s book *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. Farmer was a physician, activist, Harvard professor, and a humanitarian, who upon his unexpected death in February of last year, was considered a hero, a visionary, and a global health giant. Dr. Farmer traveled the world establishing clinics to address chronic diseases in areas of severe poverty. Through his work, Farmer sought to change the paradigms of public health and human rights, on all levels, to demonstrate that it is possible to deliver world-class medical care to people in the most resource-poor parts of the globe. In his book, Kidder explains that Farmer approaches all people with a “hermeneutic of generosity.”²

The “H of G,” as Farmer calls it, is to interpret what others say or intend in a “favorable light.”³ H of G allows us to seek to understand what lies beneath what was said or done, giving others the benefit of the doubt, especially when the words or actions of another offend or seem mean-spirited.

This makes me think of another covenant suggestion that I heard for the first time at the same youth retreat back in 2018: assume best intentions. Assuming best intentions, or operating through the “hermeneutic of generosity,” is a mindset shift of evaluating people’s words and actions through love and goodness and honor.

¹ Mary Hinkle Shore, “Commentary on Romans 12:9-21,” published on August 28, 2011 on *Working Preacher*, eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22/commentary-on-romans-129-21-2>

² As noted in Rochelle A. Stackhouse’s “Pastoral Perspective Essay” on Romans 12:9-21, published in *Feasting on the Word*, p. 18.

³ Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*, p. 215.



Paul’s exhortation to honor all people, which includes actions and attitudes like the hospitality extended to the stranger and the care of the enemy, reflects a hermeneutic of generosity to those whom we associate and interact with, in all parts of life, inside and outside the community of faith.

Too often, though, we operate out of a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” that is our first interpretive stance is to criticize, to question, to push back against words or actions, and to not take them at face value. The H of S is to question the preconceptions and prejudices of the author or actor, so that the hidden agenda and the hidden intention or meaning of what is said or done can be confronted and critiqued. And through the “suspicious” questioning, one can uncover the biases of the author or actor, as well as our own biases.

Both the Hermeneutic of Suspicion and the Hermeneutic of Generosity seek truth. The difference comes in the way each of them seeks that truth.

You see, we all experience life through the lens of our own reality, which includes our tradition, beliefs, assumptions, reason, and all that influences our lived experience. But suspicion operates out of *deconstruction*, while generosity operates out of *reconstruction*. Suspicion *breaks down*, while generosity *builds up*. Suspicion moves *from* to uncover truth; generosity moves *toward* to uncover truth.

But I would say, as I think the Apostle Paul suggests, we must take this one step further. As a community of faith, a community that claims God is creating something new, a new heaven and a new earth, through the love made known in Jesus Christ, we are called to not simply approach people with the hermeneutic of generosity. Rather, knowing that the grace of God is freely given to sinner and saint alike, that while we were all still sinners, Christ died for us all, we are to approach life with the **hermeneutic of grace**.

The Apostle Paul begins chapter 12 with “Therefore.” Paul took 11 chapters to detail for his readers, then and now, how God has dealt with creation’s rebellion, and now shifts to what our appropriate response ought to be. Each one of Paul’s exhortations found in our passage is filtered through the opening verses of chapter 12: Therefore, on the basis of God’s mercy, do everything as an act of worship... do not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern the will of God—what is good, acceptable, and just.

Because of God’s mercy, love ought to be genuine. It is through God’s mercy towards us that we then ought to resist evil and embrace goodness; because of God’s mercy, we are called to honor all people, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer; because God’s mercy is extended to all of creation we can help the saint, the stranger, and the sinner; bless and



feed our enemies, and leave judgment to God; because of God's mercy, we must overcome evil with good.

Because of God's mercy, the hermeneutic of grace by which we interpret the world, provides a lens to see and be seen, and to enter each day as an act of worship, responding to God's grace and goodness with our grace and gratitude.

The lens by which we experience the world, the lens by which we interact with people, ought to be a lens of the new reality, a reality that reflects the structuring power of grace, the re-constructing power of grace.

Dr. Paul Farmer's hermeneutic of generosity seeks to reconstruct by "giving people the benefit of the doubt."

The apostle Paul's hermeneutic of grace seeks to reconstruct by giving people the benefit of the undoubting claim that they are a beloved child of God.

Perhaps, as we enter a new church year and think about what to include in our classroom covenants as rules of the road, we might include the H of G, the hermeneutic of grace, and build a world of love and goodness and honor together.

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

