



Marks of the Christian 4: Generosity

Romans 12:13

Rev. Fred Greco

We're going to be looking again this week at just one verse, verse 13 of chapter 12, but for context, just as we did last week, I'm going to begin the reading in verse 9, which is this series of commands Paul gives to us that are the marks of a Christian. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Romans 12, beginning at verse 9:

“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.”

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask this morning that you would open up your Word to us. We ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit you would illuminate our minds, that you would allow us to hear in your Word the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you would point us to Jesus, that you would allow us to know what you have done for us in Christ. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We have been looking for the past few weeks at the marks of a Christian in Romans, chapter 12. What we are actually seeing are several commands Paul gives to the believer. These are not suggestions from Paul. They are not limited to just a few believers or a select group of believers. Paul is commanding believers here to live out their faith and to do so in a certain way.

This list we find here in Romans 12, like any list, is not exhaustive, but it is foundational. He has told us that the most important mark of a Christian is love. He then has told us that love governs all that the Christian is and does. Love is the result of what God has done for us in Christ. Then Paul moved on to selflessness, that we are not to focus on ourselves but on others.

Then we saw that the Christian is hopeful. Even in the midst of trials and tribulations, the Christian is hopeful, because our hope is not in circumstances but in Jesus Christ. Now we take up a fourth mark: Christians are to be generous. I hope you can see the interconnectedness of all of these marks. Generosity flows from love, and it is motivated by selflessness, and it relies on hope. It is a very practical mark of the Christian.

So, this morning, I would like us to see three things from our text. First, we will look at the *general context* of this verse. What is the context for Paul's command? Then we will look at *sharing with the saints*, Paul's command to us to be sharing with the saints; then, finally, Paul's command that we are to be *helping with hospitality*. The general context, sharing with the saints, and helping with hospitality.

The General Context

Now, before we begin specifically with Paul's command, we need to remember the general context in which Paul is writing. This general context has two aspects I want us to look at. This command comes to us, first, as a response, not as a requirement. Secondly, it is a *specific* command, not a *general* command. The context is important. It has been important for all of the marks, but it is especially important here.

The reason that is is that our world has a certain view of generosity, both how it should be done and how we should be rewarded for doing it. If we're not careful, we can unknowingly fall into line with the world's view of generosity, so we must understand the biblical context for this command. Thankfully, we don't have to go back very far to find the context.

Chapter 12, you will recall, marks a division in the book of Romans. We've talked about this before. Chapters 1-11 form the first portion of the book in which Paul teaches us who we are in Christ, what Jesus has done and what that means for us. Then, in chapters 12-16, Paul explains to us the result of being in Christ, how we are to live in Christ, what flows from who we are.

What that means is chapter 12 does not appear out of nowhere. It sits on the foundation of chapters 1-11. This is one reason preaching consecutively through books is so helpful. We're not simply taking a verse out of context as good advice; we're seeing it in the context of Paul's entire argument. These commands come to us from Paul not as suggested life lessons.

It would be easy if the only portion of Scripture we had been looking at over the last few months in the book of Romans was this verse 13 to see it as a good life lesson for us, that we should be generous because that's helpful and kind, but that's not where this falls in Paul's book. These commands are the outworking of a life that has been changed by Jesus. That was made clear to us in verse 1 of chapter 12.

You remember this well-known word *therefore* in verse 1 of chapter 12. By saying *therefore*, Paul grounds all of what he's about to say in what he has said. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers..." It's as if he has said, "I appeal to you by all of the doctrines I've spoken to you about the righteousness of God and the sinfulness of man and the need for redemption and the work of the Holy Spirit and the unbreakable covenant of God. I appeal to you because of all of that that you know."

Then he goes on to be more specific. "...by the mercies of God..." What we see here is that when Paul calls us to live in a general way in verses 1 and 2, we have to understand there is an important order here. Paul tells us we are to present ourselves as living sacrifices. He tells us we are not to be conformed to this world but, rather, that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. All of that comes *after* the mercy of God. It does not come before.

This context is very important, because most of what we see and hear all around us reverses that order. It's not as if there is no one in the world who calls us to live a better life. People are constantly calling upon us to live better lives, to be nicer, to be kinder. Christians are not the only ones calling people to live in a certain way. In fact, most other philosophies and religions major on that, on how you should live, what you should do, but all of them, except biblical Christianity, put the behavior or morality first.

They say, "Behave a certain way, and then you can have a relationship with God." Only the Bible teaches that God accepts you as you are, a sinner in need of grace, because of the work of Jesus Christ. When you believe in who Jesus is and what he has done, God credits Jesus' righteousness as yours. That's what Paul has been saying in the first 11 chapters of this book. So the context is very important here. Why? Well, because the world has a particular view of generosity. Generosity is seen as a way to make up for past wrongs. Generosity is a way to wipe away guilt.

We've seen this throughout history. Men who have made fortunes in less than honorable ways try to repair their reputations and clear their consciences by giving vast sums of money for charity and humanity. You can go all throughout the country and find large endowments, huge charities, set up by nineteenth-century industrial barons. They did this to change the world's view of them and their business practices, and they did this to clear their own consciences about things they knew they were guilty of.

They thought that by giving money they could then become right with the world and right with God. We see this even in calls today for social justice. It's as if only giving money can fix the problems, only giving money can make things right. This is the world's view of generosity, but we must instead keep *this* in mind. What Paul is commanding here is a *response* to the mercy of God, not a requirement for it.

The second part of the context for this command is that it is a *particular* command. For this we go back to our text in verse 13. Paul says, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." We are going to look at two aspects to this mark of the Christian, generosity: *sharing* and *hospitality*. We'll look at that in just a bit, but we have to see first that these commands are focused. They are not general and uninformed or undefined.

Paul does not say, "Contribute to the needs of others." Now why *doesn't* he say that? What is his point here? What he *does* say you are to do is to contribute to the needs of the *saints*. Very specific, particular. Paul is not talking about everybody here. He is not commanding a general generosity to all people indiscriminately. So, who are the *saints*? The saints are those who have been called out by God to be his people. Literally, *saints* means holy ones.

We should take this not in the sense of super-Christians or a subset of Christians who are holier than other Christians. No. The Bible calls *all* of the people of God *saints*, because they have been set apart from the world by the love of God and the work of Jesus. Paul is not changing his focus here in verse 13 from where he has been. This is not a vague description or direction to be kind to all sorts of people. That's not Paul's point here.

Now, let me say *this* for a moment. Paul is not prohibiting Christians from being kind and generous to non-Christians. He's not saying you're sinning if you help others who aren't Christians. That's clearly not what Paul is saying. That would cut against other passages in the Bible that say we are to show mercy to others. What Paul is doing here as he describes a mark of a Christian is not describing some vague, general kindness. Instead, he is saying that the mark of the Christian is to care for the body of Christ, members of that same body with you. That's what Paul said in verse 4 of chapter 12.

He is saying that a mark of the Christian is to know he is a part of the body of Christ and to care for others who are in the body of Christ. This is very much in line with what Paul has been telling us in this chapter. In verses 3-

8, he tells us all about the body of Christ and how we are members one for another and how we need one another and how when one member suffers all suffer. What Paul is teaching us about here is more than behavior.

The world can tell you how it thinks you should behave, that you should give more to other people, but Paul is teaching us something very specific here. The specific commands assume the community of the body of Christ. We might even say verse 13 is an outworking or an example of what Paul said in verse 10, that we are to love one another with brotherly affection. How do we love other Christians? By providing for them, by being generous with them, by sharing with them.

Sharing with the Saints

So, as we come to the specific of Paul's commands, we must think about them in the context, that they are a response to the mercy of God, not a requirement, and that they are directed specifically to the family of God and not generally to all. Let's now turn to the specifics of what Paul is commanding us. Paul's statement in verse 13 is actually one command in two parts. We've seen this over and over again in verses 9-13. You should be able to do the grammar of this now with anyone who comes up to you and asks you about the Greek grammar of this section. You know it by heart by now.

What we have here is a noun that gives us the context for our action, the sphere of our action, and then we have a verb telling us what to do. You remember. With respect to honor we are to outdo one another. With respect to zeal we are not to be slothful. With respect to hope we are to rejoice. So it is here. The noun is the *needs of the saints*. With respect to the needs of the saints we are to do two things. There are two verbs here, two parts: *contributing*, or sharing, and *practicing hospitality*.

We're going to look at each of those in turn, but let's start with the situation for the action; that is, our noun. Our translation is a good one here. It translates the word Paul uses *needs*. The problem we have is not with our translation. It's not even with the English word. The problem is with the meaning we have poured into the word *need*. What is a need? We use this word often...far too often. We speak about *needing* a vacation or *needing* a new phone or *needing* a bigger house. In fact, we refer to what are essentially luxuries as needs.

Can you imagine someone in the Sudan who is starving, who is beset by war, who fears having his children being taken away into slavery, needing the latest iPhone? Would that really be a necessity? Now please note here I am not saying that you can never take a vacation. I'm not saying you shouldn't ever buy a smartphone. You know me. I love technology.

I'm not saying you should find the smallest house you could possibly find. What I *am* saying is let us not describe these things as necessities. They're not things we *need*. The word here for *need* has as its root necessity, when something is lacking, when something in its absence would cause a grave difficulty. In fact, this word can be and is translated *necessity* or *necessary* or even *to be dependent on*.

Paul is not saying we must be generous with respect to someone's likes or desires. He's not saying it's your duty to make sure every Christian is happy. He's not saying we must cater to everyone's whims and desires. Too often it seems like that's what American Christianity has become. We focus on the receiving end of this command rather

than the giving. We think the church exists to make us happy, to meet our needs; that is, our wants, our desires. If it doesn't, well, then we just go on to the next one, because we have to have our "needs" met.

This should also make sense to us in context what Paul is saying. Paul has just told us in the previous verse, verse 12, that we are to expect difficulties in the Christian life. He told us to expect tribulation. He told us to be constantly in prayer and to keep our eyes upon the Lord instead of ourselves and our circumstances. What we must understand is that American Christianity is an anomaly. For most of history, in virtually every place in the world, to be a Christian was to be in need, to not have enough food, to be threatened, to face attacks and difficulties.

We here have been uncommonly blessed, so we must not project our circumstances on other believers around the world. Equally so, we must not expect that we are guaranteed that our circumstances will continue for the foreseeable future. This is what the needs of others are. So, what do we do when we see fellow believers in need? The most obvious thing Paul tells us is that we are not to ignore them. We're not to consider them and their needs as being unimportant. That makes sense, because, again, we are a part of one body, the body of Christ.

The first part of this command, the first verb, is that we are to "contribute to the needs of the saints." This is a difficult phrase to translate. That is because the word here that Paul uses doesn't seem to go exactly with the noun *needs*. The main idea is captured by our translation: *contribute*. Other translations are similar. They'll use the word *distribute* for the needs of the saints.

The main idea is that we are to give to the saints who are in need. It makes sense, and it captures what Paul is saying, but there is a problem here, a problem that is twofold. First, we have a limited view of what the verb *contribute* means. Second, Paul himself has a broader view in mind, and that's why he's using this particular verb.

When we think of contribution, we think of writing a check, or I guess in our day and age of making an electronic funds transfer. That's what a contribution is. That's how you contribute. Normally, when people ask for a contribution, that's what they have in mind. "Transfer some funds over to me." That is perfectly appropriate to think about in this context. I'm not saying it's wrong. If a fellow believer needs food, it is perfectly appropriate to give them funds to buy food.

The problem comes when we think we can completely fulfill this command with a check or an electronic funds transfer. Instead, Paul uses a very specific verb here. He could have used other words. He could have said *give*. He could have even said *give money*, but he doesn't do that. Those words were available to him. The word he uses here is a word that means to share or even to enter into fellowship with.

As a matter of fact, the other times this verb is used it's not about money; it's about partnership, about fellowship, about sharing. It's a word you may even know. It's *koinonia*. That word here means fellowship. It's just that here it's in a verb form rather than a noun form. It's essentially the same root word we see in 2 Corinthians 13 in the benediction, that we have fellowship with the Holy Spirit. It's the same word.

What Paul is describing here is more than just giving money to others. He's telling you to become partners with those who are in need. As soon as we think about this *this way*, it challenges us. We can't obey this directive simply

by writing a check. When we think about it *this* way, we become aware that Christians have needs that are not just monetary, so my Christian duty is to make others my partner. The one who is in need is my partner. It's more than an action to perform; it is a mindset, an attitude.

So this requires more of me. I have to enter into the life of my fellow believer. I can't keep my distance. How could we think we *could* keep our distance? How could we love fellow believers from a distance? How could we outdo in showing honor at arm's length? No. You see, what Paul is telling us here is the world is focused on getting, but the Christian is focused on giving, on entering into the lives of others.

Are you looking for ways to fulfill this command, to have this mark of the Christian shine forth in your life? Are you seeking to enter into the lives of fellow believers? That does mean helping with the needs they have, providing resources, providing funds. Absolutely. But it also means meeting the needs of loneliness they might have with your time. It means meeting the needs of depression and despair with encouragement and prayer, and it means being generous with your resources *and* your life to help others in the body.

Helping with Hospitality

The second way Paul calls on us to meet the needs of our fellow believers is to show hospitality. Once again, we have to move past our limited view we may have of this word. When you hear the word *hospitality*, what do you think of? We usually think of having people over for dinner. That's hospitality. Just like we said before with the word *contribute*, it's not that this idea is wrong; it's just that it's limited. We need to have a broader view of this.

When you hear *hospitality*, do not only think of pot roast and utensils and centerpieces. For us to understand what Paul means here, we have to think about the need he wants us to meet. The word *hospitality* actually has nothing to do directly with eating or with dinner. There is a reason eating and dinner has become associated with hospitality, but that's not its basic meaning. The basic meaning of hospitality is loving strangers.

In fact, the Greek word for hospitality is basically two Greek words stuck together to form a new word, and those two words are *love* and *strangers*. When you put them together, you get *hospitality*. That's what it means. We've seen the first word, the word for *love*, several times. It's *philos*. You remember Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. The second word is a word we also have some familiarity with in English. It is *xenos*. You may have heard of *xenophobia*, which is, of course, fear of strangers.

We take these words, *love* and *strangers*, and we put them together, and that is what Paul is calling us to. So, why would Paul care if you loved strangers? Why is Paul enjoining that upon us? Well, strangers had special needs. In Paul's day, they were especially vulnerable. They were needy. In Paul's day, there were very few places to stay away from your home. When you traveled from city to city, it was not like we have today.

When you travel to go someplace, you can just pull up an app on your phone, any one of a half dozen, to tell you not only all of your options with all of the amenities you might want, but all of the price values you could have. Now, you do realize... Some of you who are about my age realize this is not how life always worked. Young people, when you used to go on vacation... When I went on a trip with my family, what you had was you ordered the

AAA TripTik, which was basically a paper map you flipped that someone in the office highlighted the road you were supposed to drive on.

The reason this was so important was on the TripTik there would be names of a couple of places in those towns where you could stay the night. Otherwise, you were left to mere chance. You would drive into a town and you'd have to hope you found a hotel. You'd have to hope it had vacancy and that it didn't cost a fortune. You didn't know that. Nowadays we plan everything out. We even make reservations in advance.

Well, go back 19 more centuries to Paul's day, and there were virtually no hotels and motels. There were a few inns, but these were not places you would really want to stay, especially with your family with children. They were more well known as places for drinking and carousing. They were dangerous places to be. You didn't just roll in and find a Holiday Inn.

If you were a stranger in a town, you were especially vulnerable. Unless you found someone who would let you stay in their home, your other choice was often to sleep out in the open under a tree. So if you traveled, you were dependent on the kindness of strangers, the kindness of someone toward people he did not know personally, someone whom they didn't expect to get compensation from.

This was especially true of Christians, because Christians were, generally speaking, outcasts from Roman society. They didn't have much money to provide for themselves when they traveled. They didn't have power to impose themselves upon others when they went out, especially if they were going out with a mission for the gospel.

So what *did* they have? They didn't have money. They didn't have power. What *did* they have? They had the body of Christ. They had fellow believers who, despite the fact that they lived in different places, perhaps even spoke different languages, were a part of the one body of Christ. There is a solidarity, a unity, an identity in the body of Christ. Again, this is the outworking of the great truth of the gospel. You have been brought into a family by the Lord. You are a part of Christ's body.

If you don't practice this hospitality in need, Paul says, you don't understand the teachings of Jesus. This is a very important principle for us. When you fail to follow the commands of Jesus, you are showing that you do not understand the teachings of Jesus, including his teachings about salvation. So often we pit teaching against practice, and we wonder which is more important. The truth is our practice must flow out of our teaching or else we have not properly understood or believed the doctrine.

Now, I want to make one final and important point about hospitality. We have seen that it is to meet a real need, a hardship. We see that it has been something necessary in the past and even in most parts of the world today, but how are we to exercise that form of generosity? Does God care what it looks like? I hope you understand God always cares about how we obey his commands, not just that we do *what* he commands. The Bible is full of statements to this end.

The best example is, I think, a negative one. We see throughout the Gospels that the Pharisees are attempting to do the *what* of God's commands while avoiding the heart of the *why* of God's commands. So Paul helps us with this. The verb he uses here is very graphic. Our translation gets this connotation better than some others. The ESV

translates it "*Seek* to show hospitality." Other translations are a bit weaker: *practice* hospitality or *be given to* hospitality.

The verb here is better translated *pursue* in the sense of going after, being active, running down. The picture in your mind should be that you are racing after hospitality, that you are afraid you might miss it or that you might lose it. You are pressing on to catch it. This is the way this same verb is used in other places in the New Testament. Paul puts it *this* way in 1 Corinthians 14 after that great chapter on love. He says, "Pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts."

It's not as if you can take or leave love. You are to go after it. You are to pursue it. Paul puts it this way concerning his own life in Philippians, chapter 3. He says, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own." The phrase there *press on* is our same verb. We are to press after hospitality.

Do you think Paul thought the Christian life was rolling out of bed and maybe something would come up that would allow him to follow Jesus? I don't know about you, but I don't picture the apostle Paul there. When whatever version of his alarm went off, before his feet hit the floor, he was probably formulating all of the things he could do to serve Jesus, and he didn't want to miss a one of them. He was probably praying that the Lord would not only give him opportunities but that he would make the opportunities clear to him so he didn't miss them. That's how we are to pursue hospitality.

Peter describes this view of pursuing hospitality in the same way, but he uses negative language. In 1 Peter 4, verse 9, he says, "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling." You see, Peter knew there were Christians who knew they had to show hospitality, but they weren't very happy about it. They will do it, if they must, because it is their duty, but they're not happy about it, and they're going to let *you* know they're not happy about it.

Have you ever had that opportunity where someone does something for you and they make it monumentally clear that they're miserable doing it? It's not just that they're unhappy about it. They want you to *know* they're unhappy about it. Does that just give you a warm fuzzy feeling with whatever they're doing? Of course not. You almost wish they *wouldn't* do it so you could find someone else so you wouldn't be blamed for their misery.

What Peter is saying here is if that's your view for hospitality you'd be better off not doing it. Don't grumble about it. Pursue it like Paul says. Be eager for it. You should be asking around trying to find opportunities to help others, to show hospitality to others. You shouldn't be worried about how to pawn someone off on someone else. That's what Paul is saying here.

Are you actively looking for ways to help other believers? Are you actively pursuing opportunities to be a blessing to others? Do you acknowledge and live according to the truth that everything you have is not your own but that you are a steward for God of those resources?

In conclusion, what the Bible teaches us through both Peter and Paul is that the Christian is to be generous not because he *has* to but because he has been changed by God and is now a part of the family of God. God is calling

you today to be generous. Be generous with your resources. Be generous with your time. Be generous with your home. Be generous with your life.

When you are committed to generosity, the Lord will open your eyes to his work, to how he can and will use you. Why is this so important? Because by being generous you are being like Jesus who did not consider his own interests or grasp onto what he had, but, instead, he gave of himself. He gave of himself for *you*. If you know the love of Jesus Christ in the forgiveness of sins, you should want to be more like your Lord. Give of yourself. Follow Jesus.