

Share with The Lord's People Who Are in Need

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 12:9-21

The instructions that the Holy Spirit gives us in this passage are meant for all God's people of all times and all places. But they were written to the church in Rome. Paul was trying to form the Christians in the Imperial city. So, what was city life like in Rome? What challenges did it present to the people of that city?

Well, the word squalor comes to mind. Maybe when you think of Rome, you think of fresh-faced men and women wearing togas and sandals, and strolling through sunlit squares. That was not the reality. In his book *The Triumph of Christianity*, historian Rodney Stark writes that people in Rome were living difficult and often chaotic lives. Roman streets were narrow and people lived in tiny, densely-packed tenements. Historians estimate that there were about 300 people per acre. Compare that with modern-day Calcutta where they are at about 122 per acre and Manhattan which is 100 people per acre. The living conditions were difficult. The surviving temples and public buildings in Rome are all spacious and made of stone—which is why they survived, but homes were made of wood. To squeeze everyone in, these wooden tenements were often multiple stories high. They were poorly constructed and often collapsed. They were also fire traps. Cooking was in little braziers over an open flame. Fires were common. Smoke was everywhere.

Then there was the matter of sanitation. There were no toilets in these homes. There were public latrines in Rome, but most ordinary residents would not have gone to the public latrine to do their business—they would have used chamber pots and commodes. These were often dumped unceremoniously out the windows and into the gutters of city streets. The smell of human waste would be everywhere, and this was all before the invention of soap. So everything was dirty. There must have been so many flies. Crime was terrible. The streets were full of pickpockets, thieves and muggers. Living so close together led to lots of riots and civic unrest. Night time was especially dangerous. The poet Juvenal wrote that “to go out at night for supper without writing your will was to expose yourself to reproach for carelessness.” Government was corrupt and unstable. Caesar Augustus who was emperor when Jesus was born died of natural causes, but after him, 7 emperors in a row died by murder or suicide in the face of execution. 7 emperors in a row! So life was hard. Sometimes we lament the social conditions and the social challenges of our day. The crime. The economy. The moral decay. And there is no question that we have problems. But we are living in a paradise compared to the moral and physical conditions of the people in 1st century Rome.

Now imagine the words of our passage coming into that context. Imagine the Holy Spirit creating a community of people in the middle of that city who lived a different way. Imagine a group of people who had been baptized into Christ, whose lives were one with him, who were all trying to live the kind of life described in our passage. A group of people who loved sincerely. Who hated evil and clung to good. A group of people who were devoted to each other in love. A group of people who were joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer. Can you see how such communities would have been attractive to people? They would have been islands of grace and peace in the midst of the chaos.

And that's what happened. The church grew. Here's what Rodney Stark writes. "Christianity generated a community of believers who built their lives around their religious affiliation. And it was this, above all else, that insulated Christians from the deprivations of ancient life...they were not strangers but brothers and sisters in Christ. When calamities struck [as they most certainly would] there were people who cared." So it's not just that the Romans heard church members proclaim the message about Jesus, it was that they saw Jesus embodied in the community of care. They saw the gospel embodied in the way these people loved each other. The gospel wasn't just a message for them to think about, it was a community for them to join, a haven of rest and hope.

Our world might not be as squalid and chaotic as the world of ancient Rome, but it has plenty that keeps us on edge. It's still full of lonely, desperate people, people for whom a Jesus community, a Romans 12 community, would be an oasis of life in the midst of everything. And today too, the Holy Spirit is forming a Jesus-shaped community that would be an oasis of life in the midst of everything. So today let's listen to the two habits of community suggested in our verse, "Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." For each of these injunctions I will focus on a Greek word that is crucial to understanding the Spirit's work.

The first word is *koinonia*. You've heard that one, right? I've talked about it before. When our passage says "Share with the Lord's people who are in need," the verb 'share' is the verbal form of the word *koinonia*. It literally says, "Koinonia with those who are in need." *Koinonia* is a rich word. It has a range of meaning, so it's not easy to translate into English. Here's a sense of the range. In Romans 15:26 Paul celebrates how the churches in Macedonia have made a contribution to the poor in Jerusalem. He calls that gift a *koinonia*. *Koinonia* is a monetary gift. In 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul tells us that God has called us into fellowship (*koinonia*) with his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Now *koinonia* isn't money; it's our relationship with Jesus. One more, 1 Corinthians 1:10, Paul talks about the Lord's supper and says when we drink the wine we participate in the blood of Christ. The word participate is also *koinonia*. So the word *koinonia* implies deep relationship, it implies participation, and it implies giving of money. When Paul says 'koinonia with those who are in need,' he's asking for more than occasional contributions to the benevolence fund. The theologian David Bentley Hart did a translation of the New Testament and he wrote about the challenge of translating this word. He says that he is increasingly convinced that when Paul uses the word *koinonia*, he has in mind a set of community practices. Here's what he writes: "this is no mere recommendation of personal generosity, but an invocation of a very specific form of communal life." So, when the church heard Paul say *koinonia* with those who are in need, they knew he was asking for something very specific.

First, he was asking for radical giving. Extreme sharing. The early church practiced something much more than tithing. Nowadays if a person actually tithes, gives ten percent of their income to charitable causes, we are impressed. But in the New Testament church the standard was much higher. The early church "shared all things in common." That's Acts 2, and that's *koinonia*. All the believers devoted themselves to *koinonia* and they held all things in *koine*. They shared all their resources. That's not a thing that happened for a few weeks after Pentecost; it's a practice that continued into the early church. The *Didache* was a very early guide for Christian life. Written in the 2nd century. It says stuff like this: "Give without hesitating and without grumbling, ... Never turn away the needy; share all your possessions with your brother, and do not claim that anything is your own (cf. Acts 2:44-45)." The *Didache* was written in Greek. Guess what word is behind 'share'? That's right, *koinonia*. We know this kind of

sharing was widespread because in the second century, a pagan satirist named Lucian of Samosata wrote that these weirdo Christians “viewed possessions with contempt and owned all property communally.” So, radical giving.

But this radical giving was rooted in radical fellowship. This is the second thing Paul suggests. This is where the personal relationship side of the word *koinonia* comes in. This giving isn't laid on them as a cold financial obligation, they gave like that because they loved each other so much! Their giving was an outworking of sincere love—that's the beginning of our passage, right? “Love must be sincere.” This giving flows out of love, as it should. The believers didn't share all things in common because it was a rule and they'd be in big trouble if they broke it, they shared all things in common because they were in love with Jesus and his community, and when you really, really love something, you don't have to be told to spend money on it. If you really love something, usually you have to be told to stop spending money on it. “You bought another golf club?! Please stop!”

“Koinonia with the Lord's people who are in need.” With those words, the Spirit is forming something strong and specific: A community where our affection for each other is so deep, that we share all things in common.

Now...I can hear some of you thinking, ‘Well that's great Peter, but you can't seriously be calling us to share all things in common. That would never work in today's society.’ Well, maybe you're right. And maybe you're wrong. I certainly don't see that happening here anytime soon, but ultimately I am called to tell you what's in this book. Whether it's practical or not, I'm here to tell you what kind of life the Spirit is trying to form in you. And that's what I'm doing. This is what Paul meant, this is how the early church understood it, and so this is how they lived. Not only that, but in that society of poverty and desperation, it was an embodiment of the gospel and it brought lots of people to Jesus.

So, I proclaim that truth to you. I know we are far from the kind of community Paul calls for here and elsewhere, and I realize that we won't be that kind of community anytime soon. I also lament that it feels as though the modern church is becoming less and less of this kind of community. Less *koinonia*. Less commitment, less fellowship, less participation. And this at a time when our lonely world needs communities of deep love and deep participation. I don't like to say stuff like that in the sermon. And believe me when I tell you I'm not saying it because I want you to give more money to the church. It's the love side of *koinonia*, the commitment side of *koinonia* that I'm more worried about. I can't in good conscience listen to Paul's words here and not tell you that we have work to do. Fortunately, this is Christ's church, and the Spirit is here, I have no doubt that he who began a good work in us will see it through.

Which brings us to the second of Paul's words. Practice *hospitality*. Here's a practice through which the Spirit can deepen *koinonia*. We did a whole series of sermons on hospitality less than three years ago, so I won't spend as much time on this one. I will remind you that hospitality is not dinner with friends. Dinner with friends is good, but hospitality is deeper. The Greek word is *philoxenia*, which literally means love of strangers. It is the opposite of our natural inclination which is fear of strangers. Hospitality is the opposite of tribalism. Hospitality makes room for difference. When we think of hospitality we often think of meals, which is right. But its more than having people over for dinner; it's a quality of our Spirit. A hospitable person is approachable, she makes room in her life and in her conversation for what is strange and what is broken and what is needy in others. Whether it's in the way they host dinner or in the way they engage in conversation, hospitable people open themselves to the tears and sorrows and questions of others. Hospitable people absorb. They absorb need and fear and weariness and they

give out grace and encouragement. Hospitality is a practice that the Holy Spirit uses to restore wounded souls and wounded communities.

When I think of hospitality and our context, I think of the new entrance to Degage. Degage is one of our downtown ministry partners. They provide shelter and care to all sorts of Grand Rapids' most needy souls, many of whom live in our neighborhood. The entrance to Degage used to be on Division Ave. That meant that all these people used to congregate on division street. Now Degage's entrance has moved to Sheldon, right across the road from our church. Already there are many more neighbors hanging out in our parking lot and on our property. There are some security concerns about that. There has been more panhandling and more garbage left on our property. We're thinking about what to do about that. But I hope that we don't respond to the change simply in terms of security. I hope safety and security isn't the primary frame for that change. I hope that we practice some hospitality too.

We do some of that already. I've told you about the foot care clinic that we host every month here in the MPR. Every month 75-100 people come into LaGrave so that nurses and nursing students can help care for their feet—really important for people on the streets. Volunteer hair stylists give haircuts. Everyone is served lunch. There are activities for everyone, including raffles where we give away Meijer gift cards. It used to be an outside ministry that we just hosted. Other people did the work; we provided the space. But that's changing. A group of LaGrave people are now involved and soon we will take over the whole thing! I visited a couple of months ago and its amazing hospitality. Strangers are welcomed, neighbors are blessed and cared for. Everyone gets to know each other. Relationships are formed. And the Spirit moves. When I visited, I sat with two Calvin nursing students who were helping care for the feet of a local neighbor, let's call her Kathy. Kathy was about 40, she was a college graduate and used to have a good job. But mental illness and other issues had caused her to lose her job, lose her marriage and lose her children. She had nothing. She lived in a subsidized apartment and was trying to find stability. She told her story with a kind of shy kindness, along with some shame and a lot of sadness. As Kathy's feet were being cared for, her name was called by the people doing the raffle. She won a 50-dollar gift card! She was so excited. The volunteers brought over the envelope and gave it to her. She smiled and all the people around her cheered, me included. One of her friends from the neighborhood came over and congratulated her. "Wow that's so great Kathy! That's awesome! You won! I am so happy for you! I've never won anything like that!" And when she said that last sentence, Kathy's smile suddenly vanished. A cloud passed across her face, and she took the envelope with the 50 dollars and gave it to her friend. When she did it she looked as if she might cry.

See what happened there? See what the Spirit blew into that place, how the Spirit used hospitality to create koinonia? All of a sudden I wasn't the one doing the ministry, I was sitting at Kathy's feet and the Holy Spirit was using her to fill me. And that's what can happen, that's what the Spirit promises will happen when we share with the Lord's people who are in need and practice hospitality. © Rev. Peter Jonker