

We are in the final week of our series *Ekklesia: Becoming the People of God*. And in this series, we have been looking at what it means for us to collectively be the “called out ones” the *Ekklesia* of God in our cultural moment. Today we look at how we counter the heightened cultural polarization.

So at one point, Jesus is traveling throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in synagogues, healing diseases and illnesses. And as he is doing this work of the Kingdom of God, crowds start to develop around him. People from rural Galilee, to the metroplex of the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, this complex gathering of diverse people from every spectrum of the socio-political spectrum begin to circle near him. And as Jesus sees this diverse group, he thinks, “Here’s a mount that I should give a sermon on.”

So he climbs this hill, and he begins talking about the Kingdom of God as if it is a present reality for us to live into now. He starts to teach them, blessed are the poor, and those who mourn, and others that were normally counted out. And then he starts talking about murder and adultery, divorce, and oaths, and the crowds are intrigued, enthralled with the power of his teaching.

About halfway through, he leans into this crowd and says, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Matt. 5:43). Imagine being there and listening. You would take a moment to consider what was just said because if you are honest, you are frustrated with that. And then, as you begin fuming at the thought of loving the very people you despise, you catch Jesus pose a question. “*If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?*” (Matt. 5:46). May I suggest that Jesus’ question 2000 years ago is just as piercing, if not all the more so, today?

In many ways, this teaching is one of the greatest litmus tests of our faith. It is a profoundly simple and yet profoundly challenging teaching. Consider our modern world and how these questions play out. “You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor.’” I actually think that this is becoming easier and easier. Albeit that may not be a good thing. In as polarized a world as we live in, we are creating isolated echo chambers where our neighbors more and more think like us, look like us, vote like us, and believe like us.

Geographically we see this play out as more and more people move into neighborhoods and states that are more ideologically homogenous than ever before. “But I tell you, love your enemies.” Love those who you think despise me? Love those who I appall? Absurd, they are the ones who are destroying this country. Surely Jesus didn’t actually mean love your enemies. Because we are a world that operates on the concept of

enemies, we don’t know how to function without them. And if Jesus is to be taken seriously here, which I believe he is supposed to be, then that would seem to deconstruct the very idea of an enemy

Well, that would certainly be a teaching that would change the world. But Jesus’ refrain is piercing, “If you love those who love you, what good is that?” What good does it do for our world if we love our neighbors but hate our enemies? What we need, what we are called to as the *Ekklesia*, is a love that transcends those bounds and enters into the space of the other. What we need is a love like Jesus calls us to?

If we are going to understand how to transcend this hostility and be a transformed people - transforming the peninsula, we have to at least take a stab at understanding how we got here.

Enmeshment and Declining Empathy

Consider for a moment that in the past two years, we have lived through and remain in a global pandemic, racial unrest at levels I have never seen in my lifetime, and an incredibly divisive and contested election cycle. Each one of these things would be enough to be a defining historical moment, but all three of them have been swirling at the same time. And the result has been a tinder box of anxiety, rage, and divisiveness.

What is fueling this outrage and polarization is what I heard someone this week call “ideological enmeshment.” And what I mean by enmeshment is the psychological use of that word. Here is my stab at a definition of enmeshment for my purposes here

Ideological Enmeshment

In an enmeshed culture, lines between ideologies and personal identities are blurred or have entirely vanished, and individuals cannot differentiate themselves or others as individuals from their stances, affiliations, and voting patterns.

It is when two or more people or things are involved with one another to an excessive degree that limits and precludes healthy interaction, which leads to compromising individual autonomy and identity. Here is how I think this issue drives polarization culturally.

We live in a public-facing world where dialogue and opinions are necessary. But here is the problem, when a political leader or movement is critiqued, the critique is taken to be a critique to an entire group or party of people. When a group or party is critiqued, it is taken as a critique of the very values that constitute that group. When the values are critiqued, it is taken as a critique of the way you view the Bible or source of authority. When that is critiqued, it is taken as a critique against the very conception of God. And when your conception of God is critiqued, it is taken as a dismissal of the very core of who you are as a person. And if that is the case, then the one offering the critique must be destroyed,

canceled, removed, eliminated because they are inherently seen as a threat not just to what I think about a particular issue but to my very core as a human.

When we are faced with heightened times of hostility, one of the natural human responses is to find safety and security. We do that by circling up and insulating into groups of similarity. These groups are the ones we like, the ones we agree with and think like

The by-product of this is distance from the “out-group.” We move away, figuratively or literally, from those who think differently than us and believe differently than us. This is primarily why dinner with your family or extended family is so tense! Jay Van Bavel, who is the head of the Social Perception and Evaluation Lab at NYU, has spoken and written about what happens psychologically once we draw a line of “us versus them.” What he has found is that once the “us versus them” line is drawn, we actually stop allocating emotional resources to those “others,” which leads to intentional decreases in understanding, compassion, and empathy. They move those emotional resources to edify and protect the “in-group.

When relations between groups harden and we start to see ‘our’ interests as fundamentally opposed to ‘their’ interests, the natural positive emotions and empathy we feel toward our own groups can shift in a dangerous direction. We start to think that we’re not only good but that we’re inherently good. And if that’s true, then they must be intrinsically bad and should be opposed at all costs. Jay Van Bavel

We naturally recoil from those who are perceived as outsiders. Our natural disposition is toward less empathy and more distance. This process creates rigid and hardening lines that become almost impossible to penetrate. And if we are not intentionally monitoring our own internal biases to the best of our abilities, the result is to dehumanize through constructing false caricatures of the other.

This natural process that takes place within us all, coupled with the echo chambers we develop through geographic isolation and algorithmic sorting, creates the conditions ripe for hostility to flourish.

This problem is exacerbated by our current state as a “post-Christian” world. The religious concepts of the divine, sin, evil, and the devil, have been drained from our shared cultural consciousness through the process of secularization. Leaving us with no way to identify the problem. We end up demonizing and “otherizing” the people in the out-group. Because we know deep down something is wrong and something or someone must be blamed. What is most tragic about what is playing out in front of us is this same thinking has infiltrated the church and captured the imaginations of Christians.

By way of warning, can I urge you that if what is happening in your mind right now as I’m talking is, “Yeah, that is a huge problem, I’m glad I don’t contribute to it like those people!” You are in danger of overestimating the impact of others and underestimating your own influence and contribution to the problem, myself included. We have a natural tendency

to judge others by the worst versions of themselves and judge ourselves by the best versions of ourselves

What is the role of the *Ekklesia*, the called out alternative community of God, in a world marked by deep hostility? How do we move from hostility to healing? How do we as the church lead the way in disrupting this narrative of hostility that doesn’t seem to have a clear path to being resolved? How we overcome the hostility of our world is by reviving the ancient Christian practice of hospitality. We will define and look at that concept more in a little bit

Transformed over Conformed

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1). The call to live morally or ethically from Paul is blatant and direct, “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Paul says that we are not our own, and if we are to live in this world, we are to give ourselves away.

All ethical systems make some appeal to a moral law or rule that organizes their thinking, whether it is an appeal to something we “ought” to do (see Kant’s Categorical Imperative and deontological ethics). Or whether it is an appeal to the perceived “greatest good” (see Bentham or John Stuart Mill and utilitarian ethics). Or whether it is social contract theory and the language of rights.

The point is that all ethical systems are built on moral claims of authority. They appeal to some higher standard or natural law that they build their ethics from. And what Paul does here is brilliant. Rather than appealing to a moral law or abstract principle, he appeals and builds his ethics from the mercy of God. “...in view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.” True Christian ethics are ethics from gratitude; they happen out of a reflection of who God is and what God has done for us.

It is the mercy of God that levels everyone before God. It breaks down barriers, arrogance and causes us to act from a posture of humility and servitude. From this posture of gratitude, we live in obedience to the call of God. We love because God has loved us. We are hospitable because God was hospitable to us.

Paul goes on, *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will” (v. 2).* Paul follows up verse one with an equally forceful verse. In many ways, this is the summary verse of our entire series in *Ekklesia*.

All of us live in a network of relationships and systems that are forming us into a particular type of person. This creates what Paul here calls a pattern or a form. This is a habituated way of thinking, viewing, and interacting with people and world around us.

For Paul, it was a commissioning for the Roman Christians to not be assimilated into the Roman way of life, culture, religion, etc. Do not be conformed to the patterns of Rome with their religious idolatry and violent rule. In a world marked by ideological enmeshment, maybe a modern rendering for us is to not be conformed to the patterns of

cable media but be transformed by connection to the Spirit. Do not be conformed to the cheap and flippant opinions of social media, but be transformed by meditation of scripture. Do not be conformed by the dehumanizing language of internet discourse, but be transformed by the edifying alternative community of image-bearers.

There is, hovering beneath the surface of culture, a pattern or form of living that is contrary to the story of New Creation that animates us in this world. Paul says do not be conformed to it. It is by the renewing of our minds that we are pulled out of the powerful sway of our world. We are able to resist as we continually swim in the waters of hostility, anger, angst, and rage. Church, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed."

Notice that Paul cannot separate the two options. The question is not whether you are being formed or not, but whether you are being conformed or transformed. So this is how Paul is framing this section of text. And these two verses are up there with the densest within Paul's writings. The next five verses talk about how we are to understand ourselves in relation to the whole of the Christian community. Paul uses the image of a body that has many members, all operating together to form one body.

Love and Hospitality

Skip down with me to verses 9-21. Here we see an expanded section on what it means to love. This is a topic Paul is intimately connected with from his more famous discourse on love in Corinthians 13. Paul does something beautifully brilliant here in these 12 verses.

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Rom. 12:9). This sets the tone for the entire text. Paul is framing a beautiful scripture that seeks to teach us how to overcome the patterns of this world. Interestingly, the Greek here doesn't actually have a verb in it. Meaning it is not actually a command to love, but rather Paul is speaking of the Christian love. It is a matter of statement. "Love (is) sincere." It is a statement about the nature of Christian love. To be a Christian is to embody love; it is to be marked by the new creation Kingdom of God.

This is why Paul uses the word *agape* for the word love here. *Agape* love is the most like the love God has for us. It is a love that commits itself to the good of the other, regardless of what it will cost the giver of the love. It is not a passive love, but one that abhors evil; it detests evil because it is diametrically opposed to it; like oil and water, they simply do not mix. Not because it is "icky" but because they are ontologically different, they are of different creations.

As the *Ekklesia* of God, this *agape* love defines who we are, built out from our reflection on the very mercy of God that has been given to us. Paul develops this in two profound ways, through a beautiful use of the language that we miss in English.

Verse 10 starts a section that demonstrates how we love those inside the church...*"Be devoted to one another in love."* This is wonderfully illustrated by Paul's use of the Greek word "Philadelphia," which is translated in English as "love." Philadelphia in Greek is constructed of two words: *philo*, which means love, and *adelphia*, which means brothers or

siblings. Put simply; Paul says to be devoted to one another with a sibling or familial type of love.

We will come back to this in a second; Paul will go one in the end of verse 13 to identify a second type of love that is aimed not at those in the church but those outside the church. He writes, "Practice hospitality." Now, most of us, when we think of hospitality, we think of centerpieces or place settings or Martha Stewart. All good things, but the biblical definition of hospitality is far more robust.

Here is where our English misses the play on words. The Greek word for hospitality is the word *philoxenia*. *Philoxenia* is also constructed from two words: *philo*, which means love, and *xenia*, which means stranger or foreigner. Paul says that we, as the *Ekklesia*, are to practice love of strangers. Rosario Butterfield uses this definition of hospitality, "Hospitality is meeting the stranger and embracing them like a neighbor."

Two words for love, with two different audiences, and two profound tasks for us as the *Ekklesia*. Let's take each in turn.

Love in the Church - Philadelphia

"Be devoted to one another in love" (12:10-13a). We don't have time to deep-dive into the entire list that Paul lays out here, but there are eight things Paul lists as the manner in which we are to love each other in a distinctive way, which will reject the patterns of the world.

Honor one another above yourselves: If our neighbor is one that Christ died for, and as Jesus taught in Matthew, whatever we do for our neighbors, we do for Jesus, then it would behoove us to seek their good, honoring them! The presence of God is present with them. Never be lacking in zeal: We must reject apathetic laziness in this regard. There are people to be loved! The functioning of love in the *Ekklesia* requires active zeal and participation. Reject idleness. The enemy of zeal is not opposition but complacency. Keep spiritual fervor: Do whatever you can to stir a spirit within you that seeks after God. There is a responsibility you all hold to take your formation seriously for the sake of the community. We are all responsible for seeking God for the health of our community. What we do in isolation is connected to the whole.

Serving the Lord: The stirring of the spirit leads to a posture of service. It produces a constructive energy toward giving of yourself to the community. Get connected and serve within the church community. Joyful in hope: The Christian always has one eye on the present and the other on the future, seeking joy in both places and recognizing the complexity of hope and its ability to develop into life in the present.

Patient in affliction: One of the inevitable consequences of living as the *Ekklesia* is that its distinction to the world will result in afflictions, pains, and hurts. But we are to remain patient, holding fast. Faithful in prayer: Prayer enables us to endure in affliction. It allows us to be present before God in a posture of humility, quiet contemplation, intercession and listening. Be faithful in prayer church; keep showing up to pray even when it seems futile. Share with each other: Because the Christian recognizes that all of life is a gift, we live open-handed with all things. Meeting the needs of our brothers and sisters is paramount to life in community.

This is the first manner that we counter the hostility of our day through the fostering and developing of a loving community of faith that stands in stark contrast to the broken world around us.

Love outside the church - Philoxenia

"Practice Hospitality" (vv. 13b-21). The word practice here is a very active, intense concept. An even better translation here is pursue. There is an intentionality and striving after the other, not waiting passively but a striving toward the other. Paul now develops an equally challenging and convicting list that is to characterize the ways that we interact and love "the stranger" that counters the "patterns of the world."

Bless and don't curse: Rather than responding to cursing with a retaliatory lashing out, the Christian is called to bless the other. To bless means we seek and will the good of the other. It is paramount to the teaching of Jesus earlier on loving our enemies. No one finds this easy, but we must move toward this.

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn: Our joy and sorrow are often too narrowly tied to our own personal gain and conflict. But the call of the *Ekklesia* is to engage in a deep holy empathy that allows us to enter into experience with the world around us. To love the stranger, we, like Christ, enter the world of the other. Our first reaction should never be skepticism but one of love and empathy. Apart from the renewing of our minds, this doesn't make sense. But as we are renewed, we take on the vision of God for the world, and we enter the joys and sorrows of a world that is full of both.

Live in harmony with one another: Seek the peace of the city we find ourselves in. Do all that we can in our abilities to not stir up dissension. This may mean we don't debate; we don't fight. It may mean we hold our tongue and listen. Or, in the words of James, we may need to be "quick to listen and slow to speak." Do not be proud/Do not be conceited: The world is in desperate need of a church marked by humility—the quiet non-anxious presence of a people that walk with conviction and gentleness.

Do not repay evil for evil: Retaliation is the response that is the pattern of the world. Our natural inclination is to react in a similar or increasing manner when something wrong is done. But the Christian follows the example of Jesus, which is strikingly not bound by natural reflex. In doing so, we reflect our transformed minds. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of every one: The focus is on taking extreme care to live our lives in front of the watching world and doing that which is right. It doesn't mean do what everyone thinks is right, but rather, do what is right while everyone is watching.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone: Paul says to exhaust all possible options to live at peace with others. Spend every ounce of our ability and effort to seek peace with others. This is a high call. We must seek out understanding, conversation,

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

humility, and grace, all of it in an effort to live at peace with others. Peace is not a compromise of good, but we must be a people that seeks to promote the peace at nearly every expense.

Do not take revenge: Our role is not to lash back at others when we perceive we are wronged. Because in doing so, we respond with the same vain that was committed to us. Leave room for God's wrath: We are able to do this because it isn't our job to deliver God's wrath. We are not responsible for carrying out the wrath of God. That is God's job. And we need to leave that for God to do. So many of us want to take this position of God's, but that is not our role. Paul is explicit in what our role is in the next few verses. On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed them...If your enemy is thirsty, give them something. The manner in which we combat evil is not with some sort of equal response of evil but with good. We extinguish evil by living out and clinging to the good.

In verse 20, it has a strange phrase, *"In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."* Most scholars agree that this, in light of how pure motivations are so essential to New Testament ethics, cannot mean malicious intent in doing good to the stranger. Rather, the heaping of coals on the head of the other is an idiom that is linked with exposing the need for one's repentance. It has tones of leading one to repentance. Paul expands this with the final verse; it is through doing good that evil will be overcome.

As if these two lists above didn't provide enough for us to process and challenge ourselves with. Paul closes this chapter with the solution to hostility, and it is profound. *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21).* Verse 21 consummates everything Paul has said of agape. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Agape corresponds to God's nature (1 John 4:16) and his way of acting toward enemies (5:10). Since Christians are being transformed by God's will (12:2), love must also become their nature and manner of behavior.

To repay evil for evil is to become like Satan. But to repay good for evil is to become like God.

The essential victory over evil is the work of love. And this is no imaginary victory. Overcoming evil with good is the most revolutionary force in the world. Love cannot fail because it represents the sovereign will of God (1 Cor. 13).

It was the 4th-century theologian, Pelagius, who said, "The enemy has overcome us when he makes us like himself." There is nothing easy about the task that Paul has laid out for us in this text. But it is the work God has placed before us; it is the work of the *Ekklesia*.

In a world of hostility, the plausibility of our witness is connected to our commitment to hospitality.

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