

# *The Ethics of Hodgepodge*

## *Romans 12:9-21*

James S. Lowry  
Hendersonville, North Carolina

Let love be genuine.  
Hold fast to what is good.  
Love one another.  
Outdo one another in showing honor.

It really is quite a hodgepodge, you know, this list of what the church is to do. It's an impressive list, but it's a little hard to know how one lives out such teachings as we gather speed passing the midpoint of the second decade of the twenty-first century. In other words, I wonder exactly how you play all this out in a standard brand Christian Church in a post-enlightenment, post-modern, post-Christian world?

Never flag in zeal.  
Be *aglow* with the Spirit.  
Serve the Lord.  
Rejoice in your hope. (Try preaching that in Syria.)  
Be patient in tribulation. (Try preaching that in Equador on the sad day of the earthquake.)

Still, if we believe in Jesus, this is the way we're supposed to act. It's kind of the Heinz 57 of right living, the Pandora's box of doing right:

Be constant in prayer.  
Make a financial commitment to the church and keep it. (I reworded that one a little.)  
Practice hospitality.  
Bless those who persecute you.  
Rejoice with those who rejoice.  
Weep with those who weep.  
Live in harmony.  
Don't be conceited.

It's a laundry list of ethical behavior with no red thread running through it, no common theme, and no common denominator until you get to the end of the list:

Repay no one evil for evil.  
If your enemies are hungry, feed them.  
Do not overcome evil by evil;  
Overcome evil with good.

Overcome evil with good? Umph! That's pretty radical, pretty easy to say, and far

too hard to do. Overcome evil with good, indeed.

I suppose human beings have wondered about the origin and nature of evil ever since we first came up out of the swamp and began to look around, as Joanna Adams says. It seems to me, for us, the question came most clearly into focus when, in the providence of God, we started to believe deeply in one God who is good. You know the theodicy question. How can there be evil in a world made good? If God is good, why do bad things happen? What *is* evil and from where did it come? It's the question we replay with the news of each new rocket attack that hits innocent children and the news of each new political standoff. It's the same question we revisit as we revisit pictures of car bombings and news of yet another senseless act of gun violence, and still there's no will in sight even to try to do anything to curb it.

Is evil what makes people kill each other in wholesale lots;  
or is evil the spirit between us  
when there is stone cold silence at the breakfast table?  
Is evil what makes powerful people abuse the weak,  
or is evil what makes weak people weak?  
Is evil what drives the oil and drug cartels,  
or is evil what causes our pervasive addictions to gasoline and drugs?  
Is evil that which,  
within the lifetime of many in this room,  
caused a funny looking little madman with a funny looking mustache  
to manipulate fear and anger among the masses  
with poison words of bigotry and hate,  
or is evil what made the thousands stand and cheer him on?  
Is evil what causes the violence that makes refugees of innocent people,  
or is evil what causes the refusal of hospitality?

Whatever it is, because we're who we are, we are not to overcome evil with evil; but because we're who we are, we are to overcome evil with good.

Let me tell you what I mean. I have raised some very intense questions this morning about which nothing should or shall be made light; but listen carefully and see if in this bit of comic relief, you can find serious truth with which to address serious matters and by which to live into the hope of the Christian gospel.

Not long before my wife Martha and I left Memphis for me to start an interim ministry trek around the mid-south and southeast, a well known steakhouse chain advertised a Monday-through-Thursday two-for-one special on their prime rib. In those days I was taking Thursdays off, so on Thursday of that week Martha and I decided to take advantage of the bargain by going to an early movie and then out for a quiet dinner. As it happened, we were not the only ones to have had such an idea. We arrived at the restaurant promptly at 7:25, just in time for our 7:30 reservation. The parking lot was packed. I let Martha out at the door to claim our reservation, and I started circling the lot trying to find a parking space.

The second time past the door, Martha came out and said, "Hurry up, our table's ready." "Claim the table and order for me—medium rare, baked potato, butter only, blue cheese on the side," I said, as if after more than 40 years she didn't know such things about me and my taste buds. "I'll be there in a minute."

Just then, as luck would have it, some folks came out of the restaurant. I followed them to their car

and waited as they fumbled for keys,  
and waited as the gentleman opened the door for his lady,  
and waited as they made nests in the car for themselves,  
and waited as she put on lipstick,  
and waited as she blotted the lipstick,  
and waited as he adjusted the rear view mirror,  
and waited as they put on seat belts,  
and waited as they backed out at a snail's pace.

Then, just as they were finally backing out, a big white luxury sedan came bopping in right off the street, into the parking lot, and zap, right into *my* parking place.

Now friends, no matter your metaphysical understanding of evil and regardless of your theological considerations of its origins, greed like that is evil's manifestation—a minor manifestation, mind you, but a manifestation all the same. The white haired couple of shameless greed bounced out of their luxury car giggling and acting more immature than any two teens of my knowing.

Now, it's test time. I want you to take out your bulletin and be ready to write your answer. So far, the story is absolutely true in every detail. Now I'm going to give you three possible conclusions to the story, only one of which is true. I want you to write down the letter corresponding to the conclusion as you think the story really played out:

- a) As the couple bounced giddily across the parking lot, I rolled down the window and snarled at the driver: "Hey, buddy, enjoy your dinner, but if you get choked on your prime rib, I hope there's nobody in there who knows the Heimlich maneuver!"
- b) I glared at them with a look that would kill, but said nothing, and when I finally found another parking space, I went inside where I was unable to enjoy my meal until Martha rolled her eyes at me and said, "Get over it and eat your prime rib."
- c) I went inside, and seeing the couple across the dining room, I asked the waiter to add their bill to our tab, and I sent them a note which said, "Your meal is compliments of the person in the parking lot, the one in the modest dark green Saturn."

Well, which do you think it was for your guest preacher, this man of God(?) or-dained by the church(?), set aside to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ(?), and foisted off on you for a certain Lord's Day in Eastertide?

Was it a) Vengeance, b) Silent suffering, or c) Returning good for evil? I'll give you the answer at sermon's end, but for now I'll give you a hint: what I did was not particularly noble; but, on the other hand, despite my anger, I did not bring overt shame on the church I was serving either; and it occurs to me, that's maybe mostly the way of it for most of us in this work-a-day world on this side of Eden's garden. We seldom do the really bad thing, but we seldom do the really good thing either. It

seems to me we do a lot of suffering in silence. Oops! I gave away the answer to the quiz, didn't I? The answer is b), I stewed inside but did nothing. The implication of this gospel we follow is pretty radical stuff, you know. This Gospel of Jesus Christ is definitely not for sissies.

For preaching purposes, this week's text follows logically on the heels of the verses that immediately precede it. In the verses before today's text, Paul moves from *right belief* to *right behavior*. We Reformed Christians, not just Reformed Christians, of course, but especially the followers of the reformers, like to take our cues from Paul, especially I think, from his letter to the Romans. We like Paul's kind of logic. For eleven chapters, as we have now divided it, the letter to the church describes in finest detail what God has done: "By grace we are saved through faith,"<sup>1</sup> said the letter to the church. "The gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God,"<sup>2</sup> said the letter to the church. "If God is for us, who can be against us?"<sup>3</sup> said the letter to the church. On and on the letter goes in what is arguably the most masterful expression of Christian thought in existence:

We have been united with Christ in death,  
we shall also be united with Christ in his resurrection...<sup>4</sup>  
Nothing can separate us from the love of God  
in Christ Jesus our Lord...<sup>5</sup>  
We have peace with God through Christ.<sup>6</sup>

On and on and on the letter goes, spelling out what gracious things God has done in Jesus Christ, and at last the apostle says to the church, "now *therefore*,<sup>7</sup> on the strength of what God has done for you, you must do the right thing."

Actually, first the apostle says to trust God completely; then the apostle says for us to do the right thing. Then to illustrate doing the right thing, the apostle gives us this magnificent hodgepodge list of appropriate behaviors:

Let love be genuine.  
Hold fast to what is good.  
Love one another.  
Never flag in zeal.  
Be patient in tribulation.  
Make a financial commitment to the church and keep it. (That's the one I edited.)  
Practice hospitality.  
Bless those who persecute you.  
Rejoice with those who rejoice.  
Weep with those who weep.  
Live in harmony.  
Don't be conceited.

It really is a hodgepodge list, gathered in from who-knows-where. Some of it appears to have come from the Old Testament; some of it appears to have come from the Apocrypha; some of it came from other letters to the church; but almost nothing on the hodgepodge list is original to this letter.<sup>8</sup> Meaning no disrespect, but, in some

ways it's like the apostle borrowed a little from the Rotary Club creed, a little from the Boy Scout or Girl Scout motto, and a little from Benjamin Franklin, put them together in a list and said, "Now, this is the way I want the church to behave." No red thread, no common theme until the end; but then, at last, to the hodgepodge list gathered in from who-knows-where, the apostle, having done one important thing, did a second important thing. From the first he said our motive for right behavior is not like the Rotary Club or the Scouts or Benjamin Franklin. Our motive for right behavior is our belief in Jesus of Nazareth. Then, at the end of the list, he did the second great thing when he said because we believe in Jesus, it is not enough not to do the bad thing; you must do the good thing. And that just may be the greatest contribution we have to make to the world into which God has called you and me to be the church of Jesus Christ.

It's so basic, but it just may be in the neighborhood of most of the problem, the problem and its solution: not doing the bad thing is not enough. Doing the good thing is what is needed. Doing the good thing is what is inspired by Jesus.

Nita Pringle is my friend and colleague who until recently lived and preached in Wilmington, Delaware, and now, like me, is retired and preaching only occasionally. Nita points to the perfect example. Any parent of more than one child knows the familiar refrain. It can happen on a family vacation trip of 2,000 miles or on a trip of two blocks to the grocery store. One voice pops up from the back seat: "Daddy, she hit me."

"He started it."

"Did not."

"Did too. You made a face."

Every parent knows better than to take sides in such an argument. Many parents also know that, as important as stopping the bad behavior is, before it's really over, in order to break the cycle, someone is going to have to do the good thing.<sup>9</sup> Before it's really over, someone in the back seat is going to have to say something like, "Ouch! That Hurt! Here, would you like to play with my Teddy bear?" They may be forty years old before they say it, but someone's going to have to say it.

It's the same with husbands and wives.

It's the same with the Serbs and Croats.

It's the same with the Arabs and Jews.

It's the same with whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and all the rest.

It's the same with rich and poor.

It's the same with Tea Party Republicans and yellow-dog Democrats.

It's the same with the Al Quaida and the Americans.

It's the same with the Islamic State and almost everyone else in the Middle East.

It's the same with liberal Christians and conservative Christians.

As important as ending the bad behavior might be, and listen carefully, in many instances, the bad behavior simply has to be stopped. Listen now even more carefully, the warm truth is, conflicts will never be over until someone does the good thing, and that is very near the heart of the truth by which we live and the truth we have to offer to a world too often gone mad.

This hodgepodge of ethics we have here is quite a list. Of itself, the list is quite a contribution borrowed shamelessly by this old preacher from the old apostle who borrowed it from who-knows-where. It is, however, the motive for obedience that is the first half of the greater contribution. The second half is the red thread that runs through the list. For you and me the motive for such behavior is the grace of Jesus. Then for you and me the red thread through it all is overcoming evil with good. I do wish I had picked up the tab for the greedy couple's dinner. Maybe there'll be other opportunities to return good for evil. I'm sure of it. Aren't you?

#### Notes

1 Adapted from Romans 5 with apologies to the saints of Ephesus in whose letter the quote is, of course, much more direct.

2 From Romans 1:16.

3 From Romans 8:31.

4 Adapted from Romans 6:5.

5 Adapted from Romans 8:38 ff.

6 From Romans 5:1.

7 This section of the sermon, with only minor changes, is lifted directly from my sermon on Romans 12:1 ff.

8 Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox/Westminster, 1995), 465-6.

9 A version of this scenario was set up in Pringle's very helpful paper on the text which she presented to the 1996 meeting of the Movable Feast.