

**“An Alternative to the Meanness and Claws”**

**Romans 12:9–21**

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Two recent articles document something we are all experiencing. The first is written by David Brooks entitled “How America Got Mean” published in *The Atlantic*. He talked to a restaurant owner who has to eject a customer once a week for rude or cruel behavior. A head nurse at a hospital told him many on her staff are leaving the profession because patients have become so abusive. Hate crimes are up, mass murders abound, gun sales are soaring. There is a lot of meanness in our culture.

We know what he is talking about. We encounter bullying at school, hate speech online, road rage everywhere. While driving home a couple weeks ago, I was passed by four police cars responding to multiple crime scenes that began with a road rage incident. The vehicle of a woman who was shot was in front of our neighborhood. The man who started it all was shot and killed by a woman whose car he tried to enter. All over some perception of wrongdoing in traffic!

There is a lot of meanness in our culture, and there are various theories as to what is causing it. Brooks affirms the often-named causes of social media, political ideation, and economic inequality, but he suggests there are deeper issues. Depression, suicide, and addiction have been on the rise, and feelings of loneliness and alienation can lead to anger. Brooks also points to our lack of consistent moral formation. “In a culture devoid of moral education,” he writes, “generations are growing up in a morally inarticulate, self-referential world.” We have not taught children the basic values of kindness and mutual respect.

But David French points to another dimension of the problem in his article “Political Christianity Has Claws” published in *The New York Times* — many evangelical churches are contributing to the problem. He tells the story of Travis Ikeguchi who killed Laura Ann Carleton in Cedar Glen, California, on August 18 after tearing down a Pride flag. French says what he finds most disturbing is not the predictable anti-

LGBT rhetoric and conspiracy theories on the shooter's X posts, but the Christian posts the same man made, such as, "When your heart is hurting, and you have nothing left to pray, speak the name of Jesus. When the tears fall and no one else can see, whisper His name..."

How can someone who references Jesus in this way be capable of hateful violence? Mental illness is involved, but so is religious ideation. French names several prominent evangelical pastors who refer to anyone with a different opinion as being demonic. One pastor declared war on every "demon-possessed Democrat that comes from the gates of hell."

We may think these are just words, but they are the kind of words that motivate people like Travis Ikeguchi. Not everyone who hears hate speech commits murder, but many say and do mean and hateful things. A Jewish friend of ours was recently told by a fellow Baptist in our city that she was going to hell because she is Jewish.

"Simply put," French writes, "America is increasingly beset by a version of cultural and political Christianity that bears little resemblance to the faith as described in the Bible. It seems as if there's an almost mathematical equation at work — when you combine theology and ideology but subtract virtue, you've created a formula for viciousness and strife."

So, what can we do about all this? There are social and systemic levels at which the battle must be fought, but there is something each of us can do to make a difference. We can follow Jesus, live in a kinder way and thus offer an alternative to the meanness and claws.

Today's reading from Romans provides a concise description of what this involves, things like loving one another, extending hospitality, not repaying evil for evil. We ought to attach this entire passage to the front of our refrigerators so that we can read these words every morning, think about them when we begin to speak or act, and then ask ourselves, "Does this square with how we have been called to live?" If we cannot say "yes," we can choose a more Christ-like path.

So, what does this mean? One theme of this passage is about the priority of love. "Let love be genuine," the Apostle Paul says, "love one another with mutual affection." Many other actions he commends to the

church at Rome are embodiments of love — contributing to the needs of the saints, extending hospitality to strangers, giving food and water to enemies. Love is about not just thinking or feeling but acting on behalf of others, and love lies at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus.

This may seem obvious, but many other things can get in the way of love, things like strong convictions, longstanding traditions, ego, and pride. It was said of woman in another setting where I served that she had a lot of fire, but not much warmth. We have encountered that spirit, many of us have embodied it at times when we have been so passionate about our ideas and beliefs that we have lost sight of love.

There is a song in the musical “Hair” in which a woman points out the hypocrisy of a friend who wants to save the world but doesn’t seem to care about the people in it. “How can people be so heartless?” she sings, “How can people be so cruel? Especially people who care about strangers, who say they care about social injustice.”

Genuine love extends to people close to us and far away, to the individual and the masses, but often our problem is not disingenuous social concern but ego or pride, the need to be right. Bob Talley told me about a librarian at Southeastern Seminary, Dr. Gene Mcleod, who said, “It’s more important to be loving than right.” This is true in families, the church, and everywhere else. It’s more important to be loving than right.

Franciscan Richard Rohr has said this:

If love is the soul of Christian existence, it must be at the heart of every other Christian virtue. Thus, for example, justice without love is legalism; faith without love is ideology; hope without love is self-centeredness; forgiveness without love is self-abasement; fortitude without love is recklessness; generosity without love is extravagance; care without love is mere duty; fidelity without love is servitude. Every virtue is an expression of love. No virtue is really a virtue unless it is permeated, or informed, by love.

If we want to find an alternative to the meanness and claws, we put love at the center of our lives. It’s difficult to seek love and be mean.

Another theme of this passage and thus another way to model a different way of life involves humility. “Outdo one another in showing honor,” says Paul, “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.” He is talking about humility, putting the needs of others first, not thinking too much of ourselves, honoring Jesus’ calling to deny self.

As is the case with love, it may seem obvious that humility lies at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus, but humility is not a popular quality. A cartoon caption read, “The meek may inherit the earth, but the not-so-meek will take it back.” Most of us believe this. Being humble opens the door for others to take advantage of us. It’s a dog-eat-dog world — an offensive image to dog lovers; humans are the creatures who devour each other for no good reason – and we have to live in it.

What is the answer to this critique of humility? After calling his disciples to the radical way of the cross, Jesus said, “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” Others may take advantage of our humility, but we get to hold on to our souls. What can we lose through humility that is more important than this?”

But the truth is humility is not always a liability. Humility often invites respect and opens doors to relationships. A theologian began every lecture with the disclaimer, “About this I may be wrong.” He then went on to speak with conviction, but that simple statement of humility strengthened his message while giving listeners freedom to disagree.

Humility alone doesn’t do away with all meanness and claws. It does bring down the temperature that arrogance creates.

There is one more theme in our passage that speaks to the meanness and claws of our time. It has to do with not seeking vengeance, not repaying evil with evil, but seeking to overcome evil with good. Paul encourages us to live peaceably with others, so far as it depends on us. But human beings have differences, conflict is a part of life, we will be tempted to react in kind to perceived threats. “Don’t,” Paul says, “When others are mean, respond with kindness.”

Baptist News Global carried a story this week about a small-town Texas school board member who made an unauthorized visit to a library

and was subsequently censured by the board in this very conservative town and asked to resign by some speakers at the board meeting. “‘Vengeance is mine, and recompense,’ says the Lord,” the board member replied, adding, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Libraries and librarians have now become the focus of hostility. Dana has a shirt her librarian uncle gave her which says, “My library has something to offend everyone.” This board member wants to remove books she finds offensive, and she asserts a holy motivation. She even quotes scripture, but just before Paul says, “‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord,” he says, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God.” It is not a call to action; it is a call to restraint, leaving judgment to God. What if we exercised more restraint when offended? What if we offered kindness to those who disagree with us? What if we stopped shouting and started listening?

In his book *The Spirit of Jesus* the founding pastor of my previous church in Winston-Salem, Jack Noffsinger, tells a story about how that church began to rethink race issues. Jack’s wife Louise was the youth minister then and through a series of events, Knollwood youth ended up swimming with African-American youth. It was scandalous in that time. The church was ready to fire the preacher and everyone else with him!

But during a heated church conference exchange, a wonderful man in the church I knew thirty years later, got up and said this. “You have known me most of my life, most of you. You know that I have as much or more feeling about this whole Negro business as any of you, but I have never felt that it was pleasing to our Lord (p. 162).” He went on to pledge his support to his pastor and invited others to join him.

Bill Bowman was willing to hold up his strong convictions about race to what he knew about Jesus, and when he did, he realized he needed to rethink his convictions. That was a transformative move vis a vis race in the 1960s and it’s a move I’m suggesting we make in regard to our temptation to join all the meanness and claws around us. We can hold up any word or act we are contemplating to our passage from Romans. How would Paul feel about it? How would Jesus? How do we? There is an alternative path which will make a difference.