

Paul's ecosystem of love (Romans 12:9-21)

Romans 12 doesn't give us a to-do list.

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August 28, 2026

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I like checklists and spreadsheets. When life feels out of control and I don't know what to do next, I like to create a to-do list, including things I've already done, so that I can see all of my tasks in one place. After I brainstorm my list, I put them in order, seeing how one is connected to the other in a sequential logic. That way I know which to do first.

I am tempted to make a to-do list of these verses from Romans. The dilemma is where to start. What comes first? Does "rejoice in hope" go at the top of the list or "extend hospitality to strangers"? Each characteristic interconnects with and depends on the others. You cannot be persistent in suffering if you do not persevere in prayer. Rejoicing in hope fuels persistence. Mutual affection would not be stingy in offering aid. When we as individuals are contributing to the needs of others, then we as a community have more ability to live in harmony. Living in harmony with one another is dependent on not being haughty. And keeping my own haughtiness in check is greatly aided by seeking harmony.

Paul did not give us a to-do list by which we can measure our progress in achieving holiness. Paul gave us an ecosystem of love.

Naturalist Gary Ferguson recently wrote a *New York Times* essay related to his book *The Twilight Forest: An Elegy for Ponderosa in a Changing West*. In it, he predicts the demise of the pine forests in the Southwest: "Ecologists warn that in just 25 years, more than 70 percent of the Southwestern needle leaf evergreen forests, which include ponderosa pines, may be replaced by grass in what might qualify as the first significant post-climate change landscape in America." He cites two main causes. Drought weakens trees, making them more susceptible to insects, blight, and parasites. Our efforts to suppress wildfires during much of the last century allowed fuel to accumulate in the forests, making hotter, more devastating fires inevitable. It also has led to more densely packed forests, which puts stress on trees, making them more susceptible to beetles.

Without trees there is no shade, which means snow melts quickly and evaporates instead of trickling into streams that feed the rivers that water the west. Land without snow is more susceptible to wildfire, which throws carbon into the air, which leads to higher temperatures, which leads to drought, which kills more trees. Perhaps the title of his essay says it all: "A Water Doom Loop is Coming."

When Christianity gets linked to White nationalism, homophobia, climate change denial, and anti-poor policies in popular culture, we are in a doom loop of our own. Our ecological system of genuine love, hospitality to strangers, and mutual affection has broken down.

There is some good news. Journalist David Wallace-Wells reports that the United States' war with Iran immediately boosted green energy production: The short-term energy shortfalls caused by the war were replaced with renewable energy. "In percentage terms," he writes, "wind power grew, from March 2025 to March 2026, more than twice as much as coal power fell. Solar power? More than four times as much." And this isn't just a blip; it's evidence of a long-term trend. Ember, an energy think tank, found that in 2025, renewable energy exceeded the rise in electricity demand. Fossil fuel generation actually fell. Energy emissions fell in 2025 in China, India, and the E.U., three of the four largest carbon emitters in the world. The fourth is the United States, where emissions went up. "This year," says Wallace-Wells, "the Energy Information Administration reports, 93 percent of all new planned American energy capacity will be green."

I wonder if this is what Paul meant when he wrote, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."