

Double Negative

Text Hebrews 13: 1-3, 5-8, 15-16

Every week, a printed manuscript of the sermon I preached on Sunday, gets emailed to the forty or so people on our Sermons to Go email list.

A copy is also printed on our church website, where perhaps more people read them.

I wonder how many of those readers wonder if I flunked English in school?

When I write a sermon my go-to mode of expression is not precise grammatical correctness so much as it is a relatable, conversational tone.

You could say that I write em' as I hear them being spoken in my head, which tends to flaunt the boundaries of proper syntax.

So, what you get on Sunday morning are sentences scandalously ending with prepositions, or recklessly launching with conjunctions and occasionally even mercilessly splitting infinitives!

But it is all done in the interest of clearly communicating something that is too important to risk having it get lost in a tangle of proper but pretentious ways of speaking.

Now, admittedly, there probably are many things that I don't remember from my elementary school grammar lessons.

But one thing I never have forgotten is the rule against using a double negative in a sentence.

A double negative occurs when two forms of negation are used in the same sentence.

Expressing a negative sentiment in two different ways in one sentence, as in "I did not do nothing," may make a sentence unclear.

For the sake of clarity, it is better to replace one of the negatives with a positive, as in "I did not do anything."

Today, the use of double negatives is considered to be the mark of an uneducated speaker.

It would seem that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews never got no instructions about this grammatical no-no.

In the passage that was read for us today, there are two double negatives.

At the beginning of the passage, it is written, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers ..."

The expression "do not" and the word "neglect" are both negative terms that stand side by side, totally snubbing any sense of proper grammatical social distancing.

A little further on we read, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

Another pair of double negatives going hand in hand in a single sentence!

In all fairness, I must say that in ancient Greek, (the language in which this message was composed) there existed no problematic prohibition against the use of double negatives.

But it is still an interesting choice of words.

I was taught that two negatives in one sentence cancel each other out to form a positive.

So, “I did not do nothing” would really mean “I did something.”

If the double negatives in these sentences cancel each other out,

then the intent of “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers” might be, “show hospitality to strangers.”

Likewise, “do not neglect to do good” would actually be saying, “Do good.”

So why doesn’t it just say that?

All the verses in between those two double negative sentences

are instructions for Christians to follow, but none of them are double negatives.

What is different about these two instructions?

Well, there are exceptions to every rule, and it turns out that it is OK to use a double negative if you want to place a special emphasis on something you are saying.

And so, the double negatives in these verses serve as red flags; they alert us to something important that we might otherwise overlook.

You knew I had to be going somewhere with this grammar stuff, right?

Just like the story of the minister who began her children’s message by talking about frogs.

After a couple of minutes of that she asked the kids, “Do you know what frogs remind me of?”

A little boy raised his hands, and in an almost bored tone of voice answered, “God.”

The minister asked the boy how he made a connection between frogs and God.

He said, “I don’t know. I just know that you didn’t call us up here to talk about frogs.”

Well, rest assured that you did not come here today just to hear about English grammar.

OK, so the first double negative is preceded by the admonition to “Let mutual love continue.”

That expression “Mutual love” refers to the kind of love shared among family members and close friends.

I’ve seen evidence of that kind of love over and over again in this church.

When someone here is sick, or going through a difficult time, people here are quick to express their compassion by praying for them, by preparing meals for them, or driving them to appointments.

The author of Hebrews is affirming that that sort of mutual love is good, and should continue.

But doing so much good for those we know can distract Christians from doing good for strangers, which is also important.

Caring for someone who is right in front of us often comes more naturally than caring for an anonymous stranger far away.

So we are reminded, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.”

It might have said, “Keep taking good care of people in your own community, AND take care of strangers.”

The fact that it is written in the form of double negative alerts us to the importance of not letting ministry to our neighbors detract from our ministry to strangers.

We are called to both forms of mission.

The second double negative comes right after an instruction to continually praise God with our lips.

What follows is this: Do not neglect to do good and share what you have.”

It pleases God for us to give glory with our speech.

But in our talking the talk, we are not to neglect the importance of walking the walk.

God seeks people who practice a balance between the two good things without one negating the other.

Jesus understands that sometimes there is so much good we want to do but only so much good that we feel we can do.

Sometimes the need that is not right before our very eyes can be neglected in the face of more immediate needs.

Jesus asks us to be with those who need his presence, even when they are strangers to us.

The author of Hebrews tells us that we can experience the same solidarity with strangers in need that we find with neighbors in need, by identifying with their circumstances.

We can put ourselves in their shoes, and in doing that, overcome the tendency to put them out of mind and be less diligent in responding to their needs as we would be to meeting the needs of someone in our own community.

What follows are some examples that model the very definition of “empathy”?

You are encouraged to remember those who are in prison, not as someone remote and anonymous, but as though you were in prison with them.

And to remember those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured.

The same principle of identifying with those who suffer would apply to other issues like poverty, homelessness and persecution.

That level of empathy can be quite a challenge to us in our relatively secure and affluent society.

One way that we are able to be present with Jesus in the lives of brothers and sisters today is through One Great Hour of Sharing.

We are given the chance to join in sharing Christ's concern for God's children by getting them the help they urgently need.

Through our confidence in God's promise that "I will never leave you or forsake you," we can boldly witness through our generosity without being deterred by the natural human fear that our own needs might not be met.

What is special about mission opportunities like OGHS is that our help is sent specifically in Jesus' name.

We share not only the material goods that people need to sustain life, but we also enrich those lives spiritually because the recipients know that the help comes from the Church.

It is a reminder to them that they are not alone.

They can then say, as did the writer of Hebrews, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid."

We are empowered to demonstrate Christian commitment to those who are near and to those who are distant; to express Christian love with the words we speak, and the actions we take.

This year, of all years, One Great Hour of Sharing presents us with an opportunity to meet the Greatest Hour of material and spiritual Need in most of us have ever and will ever, witness in our lifetimes.

And that, my friends, turns out to be a double positive.

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