

Sermon for Sunday, January 16, 2011
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The Great Reception
Romans 15:1-13, Isaiah 42, Philippians 2

One day a friend of mine went to the gym looking for a pick-up basketball game. Watching people warm up, he quickly saw that everyone was a player. He was twenty-five years old and a good athlete but he found himself in the classic “will anyone choose me for their team?” scene. He was good, but new, and while he could rebound, defend, and pass well, he wasn't a great scorer. So he waited apprehensively. After a while, one captain said, "I'll take Jack" then leaned over and said, "You're a great team player." That was years ago, but Jack remembers because he was *received*.

We have all been there – at the gym, at a party, at a dinner, waiting for a work team to be formed. We wonder, "Will anyone want me?" It's heart-warming when someone says, "Will you talk to me, sit with me, work with me?"

In Romans 15:7, Paul says we should accept or welcome or receive one another. It is the last command in his long series of words on love and community. He has told us love must be sincere, affectionate, and practical. It goes to friends and strangers, even enemies (Rom. 12:3-21, 13:8-10).

Romans 14-15 considers how we love one another when we disagree, for Christians do disagree. The church in Rome was no different. They especially debated two things: May Christians eat meat or not? Must they observe the holy days of the Jewish calendar or not? Paul took a position on both points. We *may eat* meat because "no food is unclean in itself" (14:14). And believers need not observe holy days, because every day is holy.

While Paul is interested in these questions, he is more interested in the way we handle our disagreements. We must disagree without tearing each other down. We should *disagree and retain* our unity in God's family.

We shouldn't ignore our differences or pretend we agree about everything. Paul says we should study and have convictions: "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (14:5). Yet we should know that our practical disagreements are not supremely important: "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Spirit" (14:17).

Romans 14 abounds in practical counsel. Those with scruples, the *weak*, must not condemn the strong, who have a robust concept of their freedom. The strong must not despise the rest. Paul has four positive commands, mostly for the strong, in Romans 15. They promote unity in the church. Paul says disciples must bear with each other, please each other, live in unity, and welcome each other. Behind each command is a reason, grounded in the work of Jesus.

1. Four commands for a great reception (following 15:1-7 closely)

1a. Bear with one another (15:1)

Paul begins, "We who are strong to bear with the failings of the weak." That little "we" shows he is on the side of "the strong," who grasp the freedom of the disciple. Yet he wants to exhort his group. Yes, some Christians do have a stronger faith, a stronger grasp of the relation between law and gospel, which frees them from ritual legal observances. But again, we need the right attitude.

"Bear with" sounds a bit like "put up with" or "tolerate," but Paul wants more. The Greek word has a stronger sense: we support others cf. Rom 11:18. In Galatians 6:2, Paul says we should bear or "carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." To carry the burden means that we should assume the burden that weak brothers carry. We should sympathetically enter their mind and values, instead of criticizing and judging them.¹

This is not always easy or natural to people. It is often easier to judge, condemn, sneer, mock, caricature, and belittle "the other side." That is painfully clear in politics. It can even be true of us. We need to pause, take a breath and admit that this can be true of us – you and me. We may not like it, but it's true.

Yet we often do bear with one another. We please the Lord when we each take the time to understand how the other person sees life (and let small things pass).

1b. Please each other (15:2)

As we make that effort, we can follow Paul's second command: We ought not "please ourselves" but please [our] neighbor for his good, to build him up" (15:2-3). This may seem puzzling: According to Scripture we should not be "man-pleasers," but we should please our neighbors.

To clarify, we don't "please our neighbor" in Paul's sense by doing whatever he wants us to do. The Bible says we must not "please men" in the sense of doing whatever people want us to do. The whims and wishes of others must not guide us. It's miserable to be a people pleaser, jumping from one thing to the next, trying to remove every criticism, hoping that people will like us or approve of us.

The Bible says we should aim to please the Lord, not men. Indeed Paul says that the desire to please human audiences can compromise our ability to serve God. Speaking as a man "approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel," he says, "We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts" (1 Thess. 2:4). Indeed, he says it is impossible to try "to please men" and still be "a servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10). Finally, the shallow form of "pleasing men" leads to temporary efforts to make a good impression, Paul says in Col. 3:22 and Eph. 6:6.

But we should please our neighbor "for his good, to build him up" (Rom. 15:2). We seek our neighbor's spiritual good, that they be grounded in the gospel and find spiritual and moral soundness and peace.

Paul cites the example of Jesus. "He did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me" (15:3). This sentence surprises us at first reading. We expect Paul to say Jesus did not "please himself but... suffered for our sins" – or something similar. Why does it specifically mention that he bore insults or reproaches?

Paul is quoting Psalm 69, which foretells the sweep of Christ's life, especially his betrayal and suffering. It's quoted almost ten times in the New Testament. It says:

- Jesus' enemies will hate him, although they have no cause (69:4 cf. Jn. 15:20)
- His brothers will be strangers to him. He will be an alien in his own house (69:8 cf. Jn. 7:2-5)

¹ Moo, 866; Murray, 2:197

- Drunkards will sing mocking songs about him and rulers will sit and talk about him, with evil intents (69:11-12). Surely they mocked, especially at crucifixion.

Paul means that the whole of Christ's life is an exercise in pleasing others, even us, not himself. The climax of this refusal to live for himself came at his crucifixion. As great as Jesus' physical pain was, the gospels give more attention to the mockery and insults directed at him, the blasphemy he had to hear: "He saved others... but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" Thus they insulted, cursed, or reviled him.

Chrysostom said, Jesus "had the power not to" hear such reproach, "power not to suffer what he did suffer," had He chosen his own interests. But Paul always points to Christ's sacrifice when he wants us to make sacrifices.²

But Paul asks something small - that the strong abstain from meat and wine, lest they cause the weak to stumble. The strong could complain about the loss of their rights. But giving up those rights would be nothing compared to the rights Jesus gave up. The standard is so high, yet it is blessed to aim high, to know that the Lord himself wants us to aspire to live, to become, like him.

The results can be beautiful in every way. Small acts of kindness and generosity create a spirit where people thrive. I am thankful that so many of you live this way and do so more and more, by God's grace.

We can achieve great things when we put others first. Since 1910 there was an excitement about middle distance running, as the best time in the mile run dipped to 4:10, 4:09, 4:06, and 4:01 minutes. Then it stalled at 4:01 for a decade. People wondered if a human would ever break the barrier of the four minute mile. Could humans run fifteen miles per hour, almost dashing for four minutes?

Several runners had a chance: Wes Santee of Kansas, John Landy of Australia, and Roger Bannister in Britain. Bannister broke the record in 1954, but he needed help. Santee and Landy ran alone with no real competition or teammates. Bannister had teammates, Chris Chataway and Chris Brasher. They set the pace for all but the last 230 yards of Bannister's run. They exhausted themselves running in front, providing just a bit of draft for Bannister, who ran the mile in 3:59.4 minutes. These men did not please themselves, so they accomplished things otherwise impossible.³ The same is true for us. Let's look for opportunities.

1c. Live in unity (15:5-6)

Next Paul states his prayer/wish for the church: that God grant them a spirit of unity. Literally, "may God grant you to think the same thing" (15:5). This might include a prayer that they agree more on the issues. Unity of doctrine and practice is good, but Paul is addressing people who don't agree on everything. He hopes they have one perspective, one purpose – a devotion to God's glory (15:6), even if they differ on smaller points.

² Romans Homilies, 27

³ Neal Bascomb, The Perfect Mile

1d. Welcome one another (15:7)

Finally Paul commands the Romans to welcome, receive, accept one another (15:7). Paul said this before, "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him" (14:1). Here he adds that we should welcome each other "as Christ welcomed us" (15:7). That is a high standard, for Jesus' welcome is singularly pure: He welcomes sinners, welcomes the lost, welcomes the unworthy. He welcomed Peter – proud, misinformed, and overconfident. And he welcomes us, as we can be much the same.

What a relief to us, for we know we are much the same – proud, misinformed and overconfident – and we have our own problems. I think of Jacob, who went through life, wondering if his father loved him, and reasonably sure he did not. That meant his inheritance, his security, was in doubt. Therefore he spent his life trying to steal his father's favor and scheme his way to economic security. Then God met him one night. They wrestled for hours and by the end Jacob knew that just one thing mattered – God's sovereign blessing. Jacob received it and we receive it too, in the welcome of Christ. If you long for that, you can enjoy it, by faith in the Lord Jesus.

Paul says we should extend the same welcome to others – the proud, legalist, misinformed, overconfident, annoying, schemers, the selfish, etc.

There is one caveat: Jesus does not welcome those who have no interest in his welcome. When the Pharisees demonstrated they were implacable foes, that everything he did was suspect, he stopped talking to them. When he healed a man and they said, "He heals by the power of the devil," Jesus stopped speaking openly to them; everything was in parables (Matt 12:24, 13:10-15). He said, "You will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (23:39).

I raise this because it touches a common and difficult pastoral question: Is it morally permissible to cut ties with someone who is hateful, verbally abusive, or accusatory? Can it be right to withdraw from a toxic relationship that holds no prospect of change? Does this passage mean we have to keep on trying, no matter how little hope there is of restoration or healing? No, it doesn't.

In several passages, Paul urges believers to break ties with someone:

- The man who is grossly immoral and refuses to repent: "You must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard...." (1 Cor. 5:9, 11).
- Some use doctrine as an excuse for laziness or disobedience: "Keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us" (2 Thes. 3:6, 14, cf. 2 Tim. 3:1-5).
- "Take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties... avoid them" (Rom. 16:17).
- He tells Titus, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him" (Tit. 3:10).

So there are times to refuse a relationship, including chronic dissension and contentiousness. But the norm is a warm welcome.

When I was first a pastor, right after grad school, I lived in a small town that had two groups for pastors – liberals and fundamentalists. There were no Evangelical Presbyterians for miles. A friendly fundamentalist pastor invited me to join his group. I knew I wouldn't fit perfectly, but I went. Minutes into the meeting, a pastor stood up and protested my presence. Since I didn't agree with them on one point of eschatology I was suspect, and could be no part of their group. After twenty minutes, they voted that I

should leave, 8-7. That was painful. But the pastor who invited me was kind and another pastor heard what happened and became a true friend. Their welcome meant far more than the vote.

Many of you are that one friend. May you know the pleasure of God's smile. You aren't just doing your duty, you are walking with the Lord. And may we all look to be the person who brings a loving welcome, even today.

2. The sources and results of the great reception

It is human nature to be selfish. We see it in a perfectly innocent show song: "Oh what a beautiful morning, Oh what a beautiful day, I've got a wonderful feeling, Everything's going *my way*." It's more pronounced when we are anonymous. On the faceless highway, how drivers intimidate – speeding up, cutting others off, anxious to get ahead.

Jesus was just the opposite. He came as a servant. In Isaiah 42, the Lord says, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold... I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations." He will be tender: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." Yet resolute: "He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth" (Isa. 42:1-4).

2a. The source: The example of Christ (15:3, 7)

So Christ is our example. Since Luther, Protestants worry about this. If we say we should imitate Christ, will people have an exaggerated confidence in their ability? Trust in their works? Yes, something can always go wrong, but the Bible plainly says we should imitate Jesus, morally and spiritually:

Conformity to Christ is our destiny and obligation (Rom 8:29, 1 John 3:2-3). John said, if we claim to live in Christ, we must walk as Jesus walked (2:6) and lay down our lives for others as Jesus laid down his for us (3:16). Paul says we must forgive as Jesus forgives and love as he loved others (Eph 4:32, 5:2). We must prefer the interests of others over our own, as Jesus did, both in the church and the home (Phil. 2:3-8, Eph. 5:25-27).

Jesus shows us how to welcome. Nicodemus, proud Pharisee wanted to talk to Jesus, so Jesus welcomed him and they spoke through the night (John 3). When a woman, sick for many years, longed to find healing by touching Jesus' cloak, Jesus detected her, engaged her and blessed her. "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace" (Luke 8:43-45). He even touched and blessed lepers. So let us welcome each other, as Jesus welcomed us. Welcome people at night, people who simply want something from us, people who are "unclean," as Jesus did.

The result: the glory of God (15:5-6)

The Bible presents our unity in many ways. We are the family of God, a fellowship that shares life, a body, in which each member needs the others. Paul prays, "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus." The result: united hearts lead to united mouths, that glorify him (Rom. 15:5-6). May that be our prayer.

Source, result: Christ, the servant, has invited us into his mission (15:8-13)

So then, Jesus has included both Jews and Gentiles in his mission, in his Messianic community. Romans 15:8 says Jesus did this to confirm his promise to the Jewish patriarchs. He did this because he wanted the Gentiles to know him and glorify God. He did this because he is a friend of sinners, to forgive them; a friend of outcasts, to restore them. In Isaiah 49:6, the Lord states the essence of all:

“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

Paul demonstrates that this is true and follows God's eternal plan by citing four passages from the Old Testament, from each part of the Jewish Bible: the law, the prophets and "the writings" (two). All four passages say the Gentiles will glorify God, although each has its emphasis.⁴

The first quotation (15:9) is from David. In Psalm 18:49, David says, "I will praise thee among the Gentiles, and sing to thy name." Yet it is not certain if David plans to praise God in the presence of the Gentiles, who are spectators, or if he praises in their midst, as they participate.

In the second quotation (15:10), "the nations are clearly participants. In Deuteronomy 32:43, Moses summons them to rejoice with Israel: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

In the third, the Psalmist addresses the nation and invites or commands them to praise the Lord "Praise the Lord, all Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him" (15:11, cf. Ps. 117:1).

In the fourth, Isaiah foretells the coming of a Redeemer from David's line. Most blessedly, "He rises to rule the Gentiles" not by force or power, but by love. "In him shall the Gentiles hope" (15:12, cf. Isa. 11:1). Thus Jesus is Lord of the church, the root of Jesse, and the hope of the nations.

Paul's emphasis on the Gentiles receiving the gospel shows that there is no "us" and "them" in Scripture, although it is common in the world. In World War II, the Jews, gypsies, the Koreans and Chinese were "them." To many, the unborn are "them." Note: Nazis refused to recognize that Jewish Christians were actually Christians. Pastors like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who loved the gospel and justice, defended their right to hear the gospel and be counted among God's people. It is loving to offer the gospel of Jesus to all, contrary to the charge that it is imperialistic.

To review, in Romans 14-15, Paul teaches the church how to retain its unity while its members disagree. "The weak" must not pour their energy into judging others. Let's care for ourselves, he says, and let God be judge.

He has a tougher message for "strong" believers. We must bear the burdens of our brothers, even the burden of their weak faith. Because they don't grasp the freedom of the Christian, the weak burdened themselves with needless laws and restrictions about food, drink and the calendar. Yet Paul says that "we who are strong" should not insist on our rights. We must please their neighbors rather than ourselves, live in unity, and welcome everyone. We do this because the good of the weak is more important than the right to exercise our freedom.

More important, we please others because Jesus, our hero, pleased others. We welcome everyone because Jesus welcomed everyone.

These are Paul's last words about the Christian life. He says love is the summary of the law, that love must be sincere. What better way to love sincerely: to help bear the weaknesses of a friend, to please our neighbor, to welcome everyone, to put another person first, as Christ did for us.

⁴ Stott, 373

