

Welcoming One Another
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(READ Romans 15:1-7)

Do you see that *therefore* starting vs. 7? That's a key word letting us know that the summary or conclusion of Paul's argument is coming. "*Therefore*, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you." Now go look at the very beginning of chapter 14 (vs. 1), "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him." Notice how this section starts with the command to welcome one another and ends with the command to welcome one another (The section actually finishes in vs 13, vs. 8-13 only provide more support for our need to welcome one another, not further commands or explanations). So, it's pretty easy to see that providing one another a warm and kind welcome in spite of our differences is the goal that Paul has for this church. Everything we've been talking about these last number of weeks in our series called *Community at Peace* from Romans 14 and 15 has been given to us so that we might provide one another a welcome.

What *kind* of welcome should we give each other? Should we provide just a customary nod? A hearty handshake? You know, sometimes, welcomes are pretty weak. Have you ever been to a new place (like a church, for example) and nobody gives you a "hello?" IT's not like anybody is blocking the door or telling you to get lost, but they respond to you like you're not even there; like you're invisible? I think we all have had an experience like that and I can tell you how I feel... like I never want to come back. That's why it's so important for us to make sure we go out of our way to provide people a warm and inviting welcome. But the welcome that Paul is encouraging is a little bit more than that.

There are two clues that show us what kind of welcome this should be like. The first clue is the word itself. The word here for welcome can mean *to take to oneself*, or to *receive as one's companion*. It's a very warm and inviting word. In Acts 28, Luke tells of the time when he, Paul and others had a dangerous shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea; they washed ashore on an island they had never been to before. But listen to what he writes in vs. 2, "The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold." Welcomed... same exact word found in Romans 14 & 15. But it was more than a hearty handshake; the natives cared for them and brought them to themselves. So when Paul says, "welcome each other," he's wanting this church to make sure they are receiving each other in a warm and caring way.

The other clue is in the phrase found in vs. 7 when he says *welcome each other as Christ has welcomed you*. That's how you welcome each other. Look how Christ welcomed and received you; welcome each other like that. It's never a bad idea to remember how Christ welcomed us; what was that like? He welcomed us graciously. Mercifully. Sacrificially. He took rebels like you and me -rebels who stole from him, rebels who rejected him and hated him - and

he welcomed us into his family. He didn't just let us in the door, but then acted like we were invisible; he adopted us as his very own sons and daughters. He wrote us into his will and promised to give us the riches of his inheritance. We have our own room in the household of God. What a beautiful welcome he gave those of us who trust in Christ! (Do you know that loving, kind, welcome of God? I wondering if some of you here this morning know that's how God will treat you if you confess your sins and turn to Jesus. You might think God is angry with you. You might think that the things you've done are so bad that God would never welcome you, but would rather chase you off his lawn. God will welcome everyone who turns to him with all of their life. Not because you deserve it, but instead, because God is so kind and loving. That's why he sent Jesus. Jesus died for you and your sins so you could know the love of God. But to know God's love you have to turn to him and and turn away from the path you're walking. If you want to talk more about that, I'd love to spend more time with you... even today).

That kind of lavish welcome is needed for us to be a community at peace. And don't fool yourself, friends; that kind of welcome is hard. It's hard to welcome each other in that way. And do you know why? (We've talked about this before) It's because we don't agree on everything. We have differences of opinion and differences of convictions. We sin against each other, too. In fact, some of the things I think and do might put you out a little bit. And some of the things you think and do might put out others, too. It's pretty tempting to see why Paul would need to tell this church, "you make sure you welcome each other," because it's much more natural to judge, despise and ignore each other. But that falls short of God's standard. So, what does Paul say is required for you and me to welcome each other in love?

I see 4 commands or teachings from Paul in our passage today that he holds up as necessary for us to be a community at peace, or a community that provides a genuine, heart-felt welcome to one another in spite of our differences and disagreements.

The first one is found in vs. 1; it says, "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak." *Failings* might come across rather harsh; the idea is a weakness or a mistake. We ought to bear with each other, help each other, in our weaknesses. I'm struck by the word *obligation*. That's a strong word, isn't it? Obligation means requirement. If I have an obligation to do something, I need to do it. It's not really an option. The word used here is the exact same word used in Romans 13:8; look across the page to that verse: "Owe no one anything, except to love each other." So, Paul is saying this and let's summarize it as the first command from Paul: Love each other; you owe it.

Friends, this is what it means to follow Jesus. As a follower of Jesus, I owe others love. Why? I thought being a Christian was about being free from sin and free from the law! Yes, but God gives us freedom from sin and the law to love one another. Remember what Paul said earlier; we welcome *as Christ welcomed us*. So here's how it works: Since I've received the loving support and welcome of Jesus in my weakness of sin, I'm obligated to my God to share the same kind of support and welcome to others in their weaknesses. Now, don't forget the context. This kind of welcome is going to cost you. It's going to require sacrifices from you.

That's what you signed up for when you followed Jesus; that's what you agreed to when you became a member of his family.

Now, you might hear that and think: that's the Christian life, Brian? That sounds kind of miserable. Don't say it so loudly and proudly; you might scare some people off. I get what you're saying, but this the upside down nature of God's kingdom and listen to how God fixes this problem. When we are saved and given a new heart, God's Holy Spirit gives us new desires; he changes our desires so we want to love and welcome others the way Christ loved and welcomed us even at great cost. Something inside of you says, "Yes, I want to be this kind of brother, this kind of sister. I want to be a blessing to my friends in Jesus. I know there's this selfish part of me that doesn't want to make those sacrifices, but (Praise God!) that's the part of me that slowly dying and the new me, the New Creation in Christ, wants to help my brothers and sisters in their weaknesses." That something is the work of God in you changing you to love others in the name of Jesus more than you love yourself.

This transitions nicely to the 2nd command or teaching of Paul; in fact, the 1st and 2nd are meant to go together. Look at vs. 1 again and this time let's read the whole verse: "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves." Do you see how that last phrase *and not to please ourselves* is set as a contrast to bearing with others. So basically, in order to bear with others you'll have to refuse living for yourself. Paul builds on that in vs. 2 when he says, "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." So, let's sum up the 2nd command this way: Don't please yourself, please your neighbor. This is really where the rubber meets the road. This is what I was hinting at a moment ago when I said the *part of me that's dying*. Our natural tendency, our default mode as humans, is to please ourselves. Our commitment to pleasing ourselves is everywhere. It's why we demand the last piece of pizza or the last bite of a dessert we are sharing. It's why we commit adultery. It's why some of you might be tempted to rush to the front of the line at lunch time... to get your food first (I can read your minds, "I better not be the first in line for lunch!").

But living for oneself, living to please yourself is antithetical to being a part of a community at peace; or said another way: you are not contributing to peace in a community when you live to please yourself. This is how Jesus lived his life, friends. That's Paul's point in vs. 3 when he says, "For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.'" Paul is quoting Psalm 69 saying, "Look what God's word has said about the Messiah, Jesus. He didn't live for himself; he lived for others." This is our master, friends. Let's follow his example.

The third command from Paul explains how we can do that. Look what he says next in vs. 4, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Do you see what he's doing here? He's pointing you and I towards the help we need to stop pleasing ourselves and live for others. And he's saying, "You know that verse I just quoted in Ps. 69, that's there to help you welcome others the way Christ has welcomed you. In fact, everything in

the scriptures is there to help you.” What light bulb should be turning on right now, friends? Read the scriptures! That’s why we have them. So, the third command from Paul I’d put this way: Hear God’s Word.

Let’s spend a moment looking at what this verse is really saying. The end game is that we might have hope. That sounds an awful like Romans 5:3-5 where suffering produces character, character endurance and endurance hope. Hope in what? Hope that we are in Christ. So, here’s what I think Paul is saying. Being a community at peace, being brothers and sisters who provide the welcome of Christ to others who think differently than us, whose lives and consciences even create a burden for us requires us to live like Christ who did not please himself. But that’s not going to happen unless (first of all) we hear the instruction and encouragement from the scriptures. That’s what God’s word does; it strengthens and instructs us to live like Jesus. But we also need endurance. We also need some perseverance. Our flesh is going to hate us for pleasing others instead of it. So, like a musician who has learned to persevere the practicing, like an athlete who has trained her body to endure, we must also learn to endure the sacrificial way of the cross. But when we do - oh, my good brothers and sisters - our hope in Christ will soar. Do you know why? Because we’ll see the work of God in us. We’ll see together that we really are a community at peace in spite of our sins and differences and we’ll say together, “God is really working here at FBC!” So, make sure you’re enduring and make sure you are reading your scriptures. That’s where you’ll find the encouragement and strength you need to be like this.

There’s one last thing you’ll need to do: the last command is *depend on God through prayer*. Look at vs. 5-6, “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant to you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul’s really not saying anything new in these verses. The focus or goal of Paul’s words is that we, as God’s church, would be in harmony with one another. That’s just another way of saying *be a community at peace*. So, what’s this verse here for?

Did this verse sound awfully familiar to 4? In vs. 4 Paul says that the scriptures were given to us so we would endure and be encouraged through them. And then in vs. 5 he says, “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you such grace.” What’s going on? Here’s what’s going on. Paul knows that this kind of life is only going to happen by the power and Spirit of God. He tells this church the means of grace, the instruction and encouragement of the scriptures, but now he tells them where the power of this grace is going to come from... it’s going to come from God. So right after he says, “make sure you go to the scriptures for instruction and encouragement,” he says, “Now, let me pray to God for you that when you do you actually read the scriptures you experience this harmony..”

This is such a beautiful picture of how the Word of God and fervent prayer fit together. We need both. Without the word, where do we get the encouragement and strength that’s needed? How can we endure? We desperately need the word and thankfully, graciously, God

provided this for us. But the Word of God without the Power or Spirit of God isn't enough. We need God to do his supernatural work in our lives through the scriptures. Therefore, we must pray and ask God to make us a community at peace. Now, supernatural doesn't mean pixy dust; do you know what I mean? God performs his supernatural work through the faithful hearing and reading God's word. So, praying for encouragement and endurance without hearing and reading the word of God won't work either. They wonderfully fit together.

So, we will more likely be a community at peace welcoming one another even in spite of our differences of opinion and conviction when we do these 4 things.

1. Love each other; you owe it
2. Don't please yourself; please your neighbor
3. Hear God's Word
4. Depend on God through prayer

I'm happy to say that I see evidence of this in our church family. There's is great diversity of thought and conviction within FBC. That's ok with so many things. And in addition to this diversity, we have some big projects and important ministries here that require a lot of us and that threaten our peace. But by and large, I see great harmony. Praise God, FBC! God is working in your life. Let's not stop because the challenges to harmony will continue. We need to be all the more purposeful to make sure we are practicing the things we talked about today.

Key Verse: Romans 15:7

Questions for the week

- Share with others what welcoming others like Christ welcomed you would look like.
- Why is *not pleasing yourself* so challenging?
- What's the one command of the four found in Romans 15 you'd like God to help you with the most? Why?