

Welcoming One Another in 2013

January 6th, 2013

Romans 15:1-13

"⁵May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.""

I've made it no secret over the past couple of years that when it comes to preaching, my preference is the method known as consecutive expository preaching, which ensures that our diet of Scripture is well-balanced and protects me and Jason from coming each week with our own agenda of what *we* think you need to hear. But I believe there is also biblical precedent for what I would call a "situational" sermon, a sermon in which we deviate from our regular plan to address something of particular concern to the church.

I see that pattern in the writings of Paul, who wrote entire letters (1 Corinthians, Galatians) to specifically address concerns he had based on reports that had been made to him by others. And that's what I am doing today (we'll return to Luke next week), taking you to Scripture to inform and, Lord willing, see us transformed in a particular area where it's been reported to me that we are in need of some adjustment.

Please know from the outset that my desire isn't to beat you up and make you feel guilty, but to see us corporately changed more into the image of Jesus, so that the reflection of Him that our church presents is increasingly clear and vivid. To that end, I want you to see five things in this passage: an overarching goal, a call to practical action, and three ways to pursue this action in 2013 to God's glory.

Paul's Overarching Goal

Where Paul is going in this text (and where I will go very soon) is to call the church in Rome to very practical, real life, relational action. But let's not miss the overarching goal that Paul has in view. He is urging them towards unity, selflessness, a welcoming, open-hearted, hospitable spirit towards the members of the church. But why? To what end? And the answer shows up a couple of times in this text, right in the middle: "⁶...that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" and, "⁷Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, *for the glory of God.*"

So the ultimate goal in Paul's mind isn't just that people think well of us, that they feel warmth and relational care and connection. The goal is that the name of God might be praised, that the worth of God might be cherished and loved and celebrated and magnified. That is always Paul's ultimate goal, because it is always God's ultimate goal: "³⁶For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever." "³¹So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." That's why I said a few minutes ago that my longing today is that we might be changed in such a way that the reflection of Jesus that our church presents would be increasingly clear.

That is why this church, and everything in it, exists: worship services, discipleship classes, nurseries, biblical counseling, student and children's ministries, food distribution, local and global mission, Life Groups, elders and deacons meetings, prayer weeks. Everything is from Him and through Him and to Him. Would you join me in praying this week that God would make that the atmosphere at Joy? That we wouldn't simply be known as a welcoming church, but that we'd be known as a church radiating with the glory of God's perfections.

A Call to Action

With that overarching goal in place, we can consider the practical call to action in this passage. Great passion for God's glory that he has, we

can't miss that he really *does* want them to pursue very real, practical, relationally-warm, action. You can talk in lofty ways about the glory of God, but if that doesn't lead you to an acted-out passion for other people (especially people who are different from you), then all that talk is empty. It's, in the words of 1 Corinthians 13, a noisy gong. Verse 7: "⁷*Therefore* (I long that you live in harmony with one another, so that together you bring glory to God, therefore...) *welcome one another* as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Welcome one another...be other-oriented as you relate to the church. Or in the words of verse 2: "²Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." Don't be absorbed with what you feel, what you think you need, who is serving you, your preferences and desires. Look to please others, so that they might be built up. That is Paul's word to the church in Rome, and I believe it is God's word for us in 2013. When you come in, when you go out, be a welcoming people. Be a receiving people. Welcome them into the church, welcome them into your homes, welcome them into your lives.

The beginning of this text puts the emphasis on the strong and the weak (v.1) welcoming, accepting, receiving one another. People with differences on issues of conscience like food and drink and the celebration of days (chapter 14). I think, by God's grace, we're doing well in that area. But the exhortation isn't confined only to those issues of conscience, because as you move from verse 7 into verses 8-9, the issue is Jews and Gentiles: "⁸***For*** I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.""

So it's the strong and the weak, or the Jews and the Gentiles, the issue is the same: welcome one another. Welcome people who are different than you, people who you wouldn't normally gravitate towards.

"Welcome" here doesn't just mean hello, but "to extend a welcome, receive in (to) one's home or circle of acquaintances." Or, to accept the presence of a person with friendliness -- to welcome, receive, accept, to have a guest". Cross the aisle and welcome someone, welcome them into your Life Group, invite them out to lunch, arrange a playdate with your kids, let people into your circle.

And this is what I'm hearing -- and seeing with my own eyes -- isn't happening all that well. I'm hearing we're cliquish, I'm hearing that relationships are already established and I can't seem to break in to any, I'm hearing that people have been attending these gatherings for 6 months to a year and no one has made a step towards welcoming a person beyond saying, "hello". I'm hearing that our commitment to sound doctrine is commendable, but that there doesn't seem to be an accompanying spirit of love to go with our doctrine. I'm hearing that if you're not married with young children, it's hard to feel like you fit in. I'm hearing it so frequently that it seems to be characterizing us.

An Example to Inspire

Now, what should we do about this? I said I would mention three ways to pursue this, and the first is most important (the second two are really ways to do the first). I believe we should do what Paul has his readers do: reflect on the gracious welcome that we have received from Jesus Christ. Paul doesn't motivate people by telling them to pull up their bootstraps and try harder. He does call us to work (Phil.2:12), to make effort. But it's *grace-driven, Spirit-empowered, faith-fueled*, effort. And that grace, that Spirit power, that faith, comes through reminders of what Jesus has done for us:

"²Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.""

"⁷Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy..."

It's as though he is saying, "Think on this grace until you're changed into a welcoming person by the Spirit's power, moving you to see the glories of God's grace in how Christ has welcomed you. Christ's welcome of you is the pattern for your welcome of others. And what a glorious welcome it was!

For Christmas my dad bought me a book about the 1992 US Olympic men's basketball team, known as The Dream Team. It brought back some memories of a time when my life revolved around basketball, and it was interesting to read this "behind the scenes" look at the these men who I had admired and esteemed. Whether it's an athlete, or an entertainer, or an actor, have you ever found yourself watching on TV some "getting to know the real...", getting a tour of their house, or seeing them prepare for a big concert, and there is this pleasure in feeling like you're "in the know". We don't want to just admire their greatness from afar, but we want to be *in* with them.

That's what God has done for you in Christ. He is the greatest of greatneses, and if anyone ever had a reason to be cliquish, it was the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Infinite beauty, infinite wealth and glory and power righteousness and purity and authority, and infinite capacity to enjoy that together (This is My Beloved Son...). The Trinity did not need you! You're not improving them in any way!

But by grace, the Father sent His beloved Son, the Son came as a servant, bears your reproach on the cross, and takes you a stranger and alien and enemy of God, and brings you in to the glorious fellowship of the Trinity! "¹²Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the

covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." After rising He says to Mary, "¹⁷Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "" You're in (John 17:21)!

Now here Paul say again, "⁷Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." To become the kind of person who joyfully serves others rather than be served, look to Christ. We reflect God's welcome of us in the way we welcome others. Welcomed strangers -- who grasp the wonder of their gracious welcome by Christ -- are quick to welcome strangers, to help them feel the grace of Christ's welcome through us.

Seeing Jesus in the Scriptures

How will you see Jesus in 2013? You will see Him most clearly and vividly in the God-inspired Scriptures, which all bear witness to Him. After quoting from Psalm 69 and applying it to Jesus, Paul says, "⁴For 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." If the Old Testament -- with its shadows and glimpses of Christ -- was meant to give endurance and encouragement and hope, how much more will we find in the pages of the New Testament?

If you would be a self-denying servant of others' upbuilding, you will need endurance and encouragement and hope. Because this is hard. It requires time and energy and effort, it doesn't always go well, you might reach out and be rejected, you might have to put some other friendships on the back burner to cultivate some new ones. It is hard for me and my family to say goodbye to the Shields', but through the Scriptures I have hope that a day is coming in which we'll dwell and worship together in a New Heavens and a New Earth, seeing God

perfectly and enjoying Him together, with no shortage of time to celebrate Him as brothers and sisters in Christ. A sacrifice in the short term, yes, but no loss in the end, and the opportunity for ministry and mission to multiply now as we wait for Jesus.

So go to the Scriptures each and every day, to see Jesus and find in Him the endurance and encouragement and hope you need to be self-denying, lovers of other people in 2013.

It's all Dependent on Prayer

There's one final way that Paul helps us pursue this goal, one final way he shows us how to become this kind of person (and church). He shows us by his own example that if we would become this kind of people, we must pray. Paul is exhorting in this passage, and he is reminding. But right in the middle, he shifts to praying: ⁵"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The glory of God being displayed in the harmony of His people, not pleasing themselves but pleasing others, for their edification, welcoming one another as we have been welcomed, is a humanly impossible goal to achieve. We can't do it. We can't make it happen. But God can. And God must, if His longings are going to be fulfilled. It's beyond His reach, beyond His ability to persuade and exhort and remind. If God doesn't do it, it won't be done. That is why Paul prays.

God must open the eyes of our hearts to see the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Christ. God must incline our hearts to His Word, and open our eyes to see wonderful things there. God is the God of endurance and encouragement and hope, who alone can make these fruits abound in His people by the Spirit.

So let's give ourselves to this precious privilege of prayer, brothers and sisters. Not just this week, but without ceasing. In ourselves, we are helpless. But God is able, and God is willing, and God bids us to pray, so that all the glory will be to Him, and to Him alone.