



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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As Christ has Welcomed You Romans 15:7-13

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This morning we'll be looking at Romans 15:7-13. This is the end of Paul's theological argument. He'll round out Chapter 15 with a personal reflection and then go on in Chapter 16 to give some personal greetings and instructions. But this is the end of the main body of Romans. This is where Paul—if we haven't figure it out yet—this is where he reveals his purpose for writing the letter. If you didn't figure it along the way, don't feel bad. Even great theologians and Bible commentators have missed Paul's point. It's very common to see Romans as sort of Paul's great systematic theology treatise and that his reason for writing was to leave it for posterity. That's not to say that Romans isn't full of theology. It most certainly is. But the problem is that we've often come to Romans looking for answers to *our* question and as a result we dip into it here and dip into there and end up missing the big picture. People who treat it as a theological treatise tend to detach these last chapters from the rest, as if it's just some practical advice that Paul tacked onto the end.

The reality is that Paul wrote Romans as a whole. There are themes that weave their way all the way through, from beginning to end—threads that might disappear for a chapter or two, but then come back. Paul uses those threads to weave some beautiful designs in the earlier chapters, but here at the end is where he brings them all back and weaves the design he's been working towards all along. This is the application. This is where the long theological sermon that's been working its way through a biblical text finally applies its truths to

ordinary people in everyday life. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is why all that theology, all that talk of sin and righteousness, why all that talk of Israel and Gentiles is important. And here it is, finally, in verse 7:

Therefore welcome one another...

"Therefore welcome one another." Paul didn't write his magnum opus as a text for systematic theology classes. He wrote it to make a very simple point and to give a very simple instruction—but one that generation after generation of Christians has struggled with and made difficult. That "therefore" is there to point back to the long line of reasoning he's led us through over fifteen chapters. It's there pointing back to the last couple of paragraphs we've look at most recently, in which he warns the "strong" brothers and sisters, who have worked through the implications of the cross for things like eating and drinking, not to exercise their liberty in ways that become stumbling blocks for the "weak" brothers and sisters who haven't worked through these issues. In light of everything he's told us, now: Welcome one another.

Remember the context in which Paul was writing. It's important to ask *why* he had to explain to the Roman believers their need to "welcome one another". A number of years earlier, the Emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome. There had been some kind of civil unrest. We don't know the details. It might have been an issue that arose within the Jewish community over those who had become followers of Jesus. Not long before Paul wrote Romans, Nero had reversed that edict and allowed the Jews back. Jewish Christians returned as well. But something went wrong. There wasn't a big church building in Rome. People met in houses. But instead of welcoming each other, the Gentiles worshipped in certain groups and the Jews worshipped in others. Reading between the lines here in Romans, it sounds like the Gentile

believers—during the time when the Jews were gone—got used to doing things their own way: eating meat regardless of where it came from and not observing the Jewish holy days that they might have when their Jewish brothers and sisters had been around or when there'd still been connections with the synagogues. Paul says that there was nothing inherently wrong with eating meat that wasn't "kosher" and days were just days. But these things were a struggle for Jewish believers. Paul had worked through what *torah* meant in light of Jesus, but many others hadn't. Some had probably been subject to the sort of bad teaching he rebuked the Galatians for. The end result was a church split down ethnic lines. Paul has been stressing: This is wrong. This is not what God promised. This is not what Jesus died to accomplish. This schism was putting the Roman Christians at loggerheads with Jesus himself.

Now, that situation may seem distant and irrelevant to us. The Church, for the most part, eventually worked through this problem and for most of the last two-thousand years the problem of Jewish and Gentile believers forming separate communities hasn't been a major issue. (Although how the predominantly Gentile church has related to unbelieving Jews *has* often been an issue and there's a lot we could have avoided had we listened to other things Paul has said in Romans.) That said, it does seem that this problem has been reintroduced in the last forty or forty-five years with the rise of the Messianic Jewish movement, which has resulted in just the sort of split down ethnic lines that Paul condemned. That said, for *us*, this problem is more likely to play out in other ways. Two things reminded me of this over the past two weeks. The first was a woman I run into pretty regularly. She and her husband moved here a couple of years ago and our conversations started when I asked if they attended a church. "No," she said. "When our kids were teens they

got busy and we quit going and we've just never gone back." She keeps telling me that they've been "fine" since quit being part of a church, so they don't see any reason to go back. That's a common story I hear.

Brothers and Sisters, there's no such thing as a loner Christian. From the time that God called Abraham, the covenant family has been just that: *a family*. Families are interdependent. And it should go without saying that the mission God gave to his covenant people was one they were meant to fulfil as a people—not as Lone Rangers. Paul has stressed this even more strongly with his language of the body these last couple of chapters. The body only functions properly when all of its parts are present. One of the greatest failures of the contemporary North American church has been its capitulation to our consumerist culture. We live our lives evaluating everything in terms of what it does or provides for us—including the Church. In light of everything Scripture has to say about what we do or provide as members of the body of Jesus, it's stunning how many people think about the church or evaluate a church primarily in terms of what they get out of it. As a result, our churches are no longer gospel-driven, but programme driven. As a result, worship has been turned on its head. People have been taught to evaluate worship based on how it makes them feel, not on how it glorifies God.

It's very troubling. If Paul was concerned about Christians splitting down ethnic lines, how much more concerned would he be about Christians just plain splitting. At least these split Jewish and Gentile believers were still active in the body. Today the problem is people abandoning the body of Jesus altogether. Dear Friends, you cannot claim to love Jesus while forsaking his body.

Another friend called to mind another of today's problems. He mentioned a

particular denomination and asked me what its distinctives are. We talked about divisions within the church and the way new schisms and denominations proliferate. I was somewhat taken aback when he said he thought this was a positive thing. "All these different denominations appeal to different sorts of people so everyone can find a comfortable place." It's not the first time I've heard someone say that, but it's a very recent way of approaching schisms in the church. Brothers and Sisters, divisions in the church are not good things. Over and over Paul has stressed our unity. The church should be the most diverse organization on the planet: young and old, rich and poor, people from every nation. People who like one kind of music and people who like another. People with all sorts of different gifts and callings. People with all sorts of gifts and temperaments. My friends said, "But if you're a heart, you won't fit in with a church full of brains. Some people just want to go to a church that's all hands or feet." But that's not a body. A church that's all brains or all hearts or all hands or all feet is deformed. It will never fulfil the mission Jesus has given us. Denominations exist for a variety of reasons. Some of them are cultural: in a country of immigrants, everyone brings their own ways of being church with them. Eventually those ways of being church need to find some kind of unity, but it's rare that they do. Some of the divisions have happened as a result of sin, plain and simple. Those divisions need to be healed and unity restored through repentance and forgiveness. Sometimes there are mutually incompatible doctrinal differences. That's not good, but practically speaking, it's reality. We need to seek to live in charity and with as much unity as we are able.

Bodies don't function when parts are missing. Bodies don't function when they're made up of all the same part. Both unity and diversity are key. It's not always easy. The body of Jesus is

made up of people and people are sinners. It's easy to demand our own ways. It's easy to be offended by people who are different. It's easy for the strong to get frustrated with the weak and it's easy for the weak to get frustrated with the strong. But Paul says: Welcome one another.

But he doesn't leave it at that. He goes on:

Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Jesus is the reason for our unity and Jesus is the one who makes our unity possible. People in the church have fallings out. I talk with them. They say, "How can I be there with So-and-so after what he did?" "How can I go to church with So-and-so there and everything that happened. I can forgive, but I can't live with the awkwardness." I've heard more variations on that than I can count. Brothers and Sisters, we need a gospel perspective. You and I sinned against God. We rebelled. We offended. We stole his glory and gave it to idols. But he loves us anyway. He values reconciliation so highly that he gave his Son as a sacrifice so that we can be restored to his fellowship. There is no one on this planet who can possibly offend you as much as you have offended God. If he has forgiven you and takes joy in you being restored to his fellowship, we ought to forgive each other and take joy in our restored relationships with each other. It's hard to do, but this is why Jesus has poured God's Spirit into us. Yes, hard hearts find it difficult—sometimes impossible—to love God and to love our neighbours, but the work of the Spirit is to turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh—to fill them with love for both God and our neighbour. This is why St. John writes that love for each other is evidence of our love for God.

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who

does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:19-21)

We love, we forgive, we reconcile, we live in unity because that is what God has first done for us in Jesus and we love, we forgive, we reconcile, we live in unity because that's what he's given us his Spirit to do.

And doing that gives glory to God. We don't think about that often enough, but that's the key that runs throughout Paul's letter to the Romans. The good news about Jesus reveals the righteousness of God.

To make this point to the Roman Christians Paul quotes a string of verses from the Old Testament that hit right at this issue of Jews and Gentiles. Look at verses 8 and 9:

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, and 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."

God called Abraham. He made a promise to him. And the promise was that through Abraham's family the whole world would know the redemptive mercy of God. God made a promise. We see his faithfulness in Jesus the Messiah, who came to the circumcised—to Abraham's biological family—in order to fulfil the calling and mission God had given to them. He quotes David from Psalm 18. The God of Israel had given David a great victory over his enemies that moved him to praise—and not just to tell of the greatness of God amongst the people of Israel, but to shout it to the Gentiles as well—because Israel's

calling was to make God known to the nations.

Paul then quotes Moses in Deuteronomy 32:

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

Moses was celebrating God's sovereign victory over and his just judgement on rebellious Israel and the pagan nations. Moses didn't just call Israel to rejoice in God's righteousness, but he called the nations to rejoice with them.

Paul quotes a third time from the Old Testament in verse 11:

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him."

This takes us back to the Psalms—Psalm 117, to be exact—where the Psalmist, knowing Israel's God-given call, exhorts the nations to praise the Lord, the God of Israel.

Finally, Paul quotes the Prophet Isaiah:

"The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."

This is the chapter of Isaiah where the Lord promised his people at one of their darkest times that he would set all things to rights. Jesse was King David's father and David's royal line, to all appearances, seemed to have been cut off. It looked like Israel's enemies had won. But the Lord promised that a new king would arise. Paul quotes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In Hebrew there's nothing special about that word "arise", but the Greek word is the word for "resurrection".

Paul reminds us of the key he's been singing all through Romans. Think back to Romans 1. The gospel reveals

the righteousness of God. Jesus was powerfully declared to be God's Son, the promised Messiah and the living embodiment of God himself, through his resurrection from the grave. In raising Jesus from the dead, God declared him to be Creation's true Lord. The gospel is the royal summons, not just to Israel, but to the nations to come to Jesus, to worship him, to submit to him in faithful allegiance, and—Paul stresses here quoting Isaiah—to hope in him. Jesus will not just rule with a rod of iron, bringing judgement on the wicked, but he will give hope to the whole world.

Paul quotes this string of triumphant passages for a reason. The welcome that Christians are to give to one another is the outgrowth and fulfilment of the story of the people of God from the beginning, going all the way back to Abraham. Jesus has brought that story to its climax. God promised to work through his people to bring redemption to the world. God promised that he would give his own Spirit to fix the hard and rebellious hearts of his people, enabling them to love him and to love each other. Jesus and his gift of the Holy Spirit are the fulfilment of God's promise. In Jesus and the Spirit we see the righteousness—and for Paul that means the covenant faithfulness—of God as it went out from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and eventually to the entire pagan, Gentile world. Jews and Gentiles worshipping together in Rome revealed God's righteousness and gave him glory. The same is true today as we welcome one another, despite our differences, our backgrounds, our likes and dislikes, and even despite the hurts we have done each other. Brothers and Sisters, when the Church lives the life we were redeemed by Jesus for and regenerated by the Spirit for, we reveal God's faithfulness and righteousness and give glory to God. This is why Paul said in Chapter 12, as he introduced this part of the letter, that we are to present ourselves to God as living sacrifices. This, he says, is

our worship. Think on that. Our living and loving together in unity as the body of Jesus is our worship. Singing is worship. Praying is worship. Hearing God's Word is worship. But all of that is easy. The rubber meets the road where we put it into practice and live *together* as the Church. That's a far more significant act of worship. And note, we can't do it by ourselves. It only happens as we live together the common life Jesus and the Spirit have given to us.

Paul, finally, ends with something of a prayer in verse 13:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, God raised Jesus from the dead to declare him to be Lord of all. Paul now invokes that same power for the sake of the little church in Rome. May the power of the Holy Spirit equip and enable these diverse people to be united in Jesus, filling them with joy and peace rooted in their faith in the God who fulfills his promises. And may they abound in hope as a result. Paul knew that there were dark days not far ahead. Persecution was coming, but this little group of believers would be ready to face it if they would only live the life that Jesus and the Spirit had given them. They would face the wrath of might Caesar who claimed to be lord and the son of God, but there they would stand, firm in faith to witness Creation's true Lord.

Brothers and Sisters, we're called to follow in their footsteps. As they followed Jesus, so must we. Living together and being the body of Christ as we love and serve and forgive and exhort each other. As we embody the promises of God, fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit, to create a new people. It's a diverse people with different backgrounds, different likes

and tastes, different temperaments, different abilities, and different gifts—but we are brought together and our common life is characterized by unity. We can't do it on our own. It's not a unity we create. It's a unity forged by the Spirit who transforms hard and stony hearts, filling them with love for God and love for each other. Think on that as you come to the Table this morning. The bread and wine remind us that Jesus gave his life for us and that we are one with him. But the bread and the wine—the one loaf and the one cup—remind us that as we are in Jesus, so we are also united with each other. As Jesus said, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we pray now as Paul prayed, asking that you, the God of hope, fill us with joy and with peace in believing, that we may abound in hope by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.