

The Global Church and the Glory of God

Romans 15:7-13

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Today we are back in our exposition of Romans. It has now been three years since we started. We are in the home stretch, and our teaching schedule concludes Romans in May. I have done many reviews over the three years to keep us up-to-date. I'll not do another today but I will remind us of one very key theme in Romans. We saw it Paul's theme verse, Romans 1:16 (ESV), *"The gospel...is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the [Gentile]."*

Like a tree, the Gentiles have been grafted into the promises made to Israel (Romans 11). Romans 14 addresses these two ethnic groups in the church at Rome who were so different in liberty and lifestyle choices. Over and over Paul urges them to prioritize loving each other for the glory of God. *Paul, why is this so important? Why not just divide into race-specific congregations? That way, everyone can have church the way they like it. This unity thing is so hard, why go to the trouble?*

"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 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." And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." 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" (Romans 15:7-13).

Verse 7 is one of those essential Romans verses. *"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."* The repeated word is "welcome." The Greek lexicon shows this to mean "a genuine receiving of someone into your fellowship and into your heart."¹ The opposite is to shun, to reject, to separate. *Receive into your heart one another, as Christ has received you into his heart.*

Welcome those Christ welcomes. Otherwise, we find ourselves NOT welcoming people Christ welcomes. Imagine a Christian drawing a line of fellowship more restrictive than the Son of God? Who are we to act so high and mighty? We have far more in common with the worst criminal imaginable than God has in common with us. Yet, Christ welcomed us. How can we not welcome anyone that Christ has welcomed? Died for? Intercedes for? Is returning for? Will spend eternity with?

This verse goes even further. One commentator makes the point that the Greek word for AS is causal. We are to welcome one another BECAUSE Christ has welcome each of us.² It's essentially, any friend of his is a friend of mine. Or the friend of my friend must be my friend. Any true Christian is a child of God and must be welcomed into warm Christian fellowship.

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *The New American Commentary: Romans* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1995) 261, footnote 143.

² Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 478.

Then he adds this motivation, "for the glory of God." I take that to mean that when God's people welcome each other into their hearts across boundaries of class, race, status, preferences, etc., God is glorified by it. What if we don't welcome in this way? We fall short of God's glory. And what does Romans 3:23 call falling short of God's glory? Sin.

Dear God, I'm Mr. Jewish Christian and I'm wondering why I should do this awkward welcoming of Gentiles? I was raised not to be very fond of the Gentiles and I'm not real comfortable hanging out with them much less worshiping with them.

And I'm Mr. Gentile and I agree. These Jewish Christians have some pretty weird views on things and I don't feel comfy around them. I'd rather be around my kind of people. People who look at the world the way I look at it. So Mr. Apostle, you better make a good argument.

And of course, he does. He gives three reasons that Christians must love any who Christ has loved.

Three Reasons Christians Must Love Those Whom Christ Loved

The stunning example of Jesus

"For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness" (Romans 15:8).

Many of us are so accustomed to these concepts that the shock and awe is lost. Christ became a *servant*. *Diakonos*. The Greek word from which we get "deacon." To serve. To put others' needs ahead of your own. And who did Jesus serve? The circumcised. That's Old Testament language for the Jews. And if you read the Old Testament, are these Jews amazingly worthy of the Son of God serving them? The story of Israel has a few bright spots, but overall, it's Groundhog Day over and over. Unfaithfulness. Idolatry. Failure. The Jews were so chronically spiritually corrupt that God largely wiped them out.

It's not just the Israelites; humanity at its best is far beneath the Son of God. Yet Christ bridged that gap with servanthood and love.

Most significant to the Roman church was the ethnic and racial differences. We must realize that race is not a biblical concept. There is only one race, the human race. What we call race, the bible calls, Greek word, *ethne*. We see it in verse 10. *Rejoice O Ethne!* Nations. Ethnicities. People groups. The story of animosity between human ethnicities is horrible. Listen to scholar D.A. Carson as he takes a quick walk through racial history:

"The phenomenon of racism is disturbingly rampant. Quite apart from the black-and-white variety engendered in the West by the tragic history of slavery, racism surfaces all over the world. Most Chinese parents would not want their daughter, for instance, to marry a European-American lad; most Japanese think that Koreans are a step down. The list is endless. Add the tribal conflicts in Africa, of which the genocide in Rwanda is merely the most notorious recent example; add the myth of Aryan supremacy that demanded not only Lebensraum, precipitating World War II, but issued in the Holocaust; add the slaughter of a million and a half Armenians at the beginning of the twentieth century; add the Russian slaughter of Ukrainians and widespread non-Russian Slavic distrust of Russians; add the horrors of apartheid, now abolished in law but a long way from being totally overcome; add the treatment of Aborigines by Australian Caucasians;

add the treatment of "Indians" in the Americas (North, Central, and South) by Canadians, Americans, Brazilians, and the Hispanic countries. The list is endless."³

The atrocities that have been done by humans against humans because of their racial difference staggers the mind. We are not a different race; much of this is simply a different skin color.

My fun read right now is a book entitled, *The Body* by Bill Bryson. It's a book about all the strange and extraordinary things about the human body. Did you know if you flattened out your lungs, they would be the size of a tennis court? Who knew? In his chapter on the skin, Bryson relates one of his most astounding discoveries. He was with a skin doctor who took a small slice of skin from a cadaver. He gently peeled back a sliver of skin about a millimeter thick. It was so thin it was translucent. He said, this is where all your skin color is. That's all race is: a sliver of epidermis.⁴

In the story of humanity, that millimeter might as well be a mile. A millimeter of skin determines skin color. We are often divided racially by a millimeter.

But the gap between us and God is infinite, YET Jesus welcomed us. We are to welcome and serve brothers and sisters essentially the same as us LIKE Jesus welcomed we who are infinitely different than him. That is a powerful point.

The reason Jesus was Jewish

"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" (Romans 15:8).

Why didn't Jesus come as an Indian or Eskimo, or preferably, a Dutchman? Because God promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that through them salvation would come for all the world.

"I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 22:17-18).

This and other promises God made meant Jesus had to come as a Jewish man. From Abraham. The Lion of Judah. The Son of David. The suffering servant of Isaiah 53. His incarnation as a Jewish man and his earthly ministry to Jews made him a servant of the circumcised and confirmed all those promises. But there's way more to it than just that!

The mission of Jesus' mission: salvation to all the "ethne"

"...and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Romans 15:9).

For the sake of time I'll note that Paul then quotes four Old Testament passages that each describe not the Jews, but the Gentiles praising God. These words are applied to Gentiles: *praise (twice), sing, rejoice, extol, and hope*. The Jews had largely missed these references

³ D.A. Carson as quoted by Andy Naselli, "What the Bible Teaches about Ethnic Harmony," *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 19.2 (2020), 27-28, <https://andynaselli.com/wp-content/uploads/2020-What-the-Bible-Teaches-about-Ethnic-Harmony.pdf>.

⁴ Bill Bryson, *The Body: A Guide for Occupants*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2019), Kindle Ed., Location 342. Page Unknown.

to Gentile worship of God. Paul points out that Jews and Gentiles praising God is right there in their holy Scriptures too. The gospelized church, ethnically different but united in praise, is the fulfillment of the Old Testament too. Jesus once warned the Jews, *"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits"* (Matthew 21:43).

What people would he be referring to? Look what happens in the story. In Acts, the Holy Spirit comes and the gospel reaches the Jews, but quickly in Acts 8, the Samaritans believe and are saved. Right after that in Acts 8, Phillip shares the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch. Who was he? He was an African. Presumably dark-skinned. Think of it, the first non-Jewish believer in the gospel was an African. Then later Cornelius the Roman in Acts 10. Then Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles and away the gospel goes to the whole world. Including you and me here in Indiana today.

We are the fulfillment of *"that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy"* (v. 9). We are the *ethne*. The nations. We are the outsiders that God welcomed into his family.

Three Implications for Bethel Church

The more racialized our world becomes, the greater the opportunity for the church

The church at Rome was missing out on an incredible opportunity to display the power of the gospel to bring people together. They were dividing within the church along the lines of race and religious tradition. They were failing to love and welcome each other. Imagine if there was social media back then. What kinds of media posts and snarky articles might each side be promoting? Each side insinuating they were right and the other group in the church was wrong. Romans 14 shows they were argumentative, condescending, and self-righteous toward each other. In other words, they were acting like everyone else in Rome. And they were missing a powerful opportunity.

Are we missing an opportunity in our day? As a church, we are trying not to. Many years ago, we set a course to be an ethnically-diverse church. We presently have a Chinese Mandarin congregation. A downtown Gary campus. We have ambitions to minister to other Northwest Indiana ethnicities. Why? Romans 15. God's glory. Christ's gospel. Christ's example. Welcoming into our hearts gospelized people who see some things differently.

But this requires a culture in our church of welcoming. Welcoming people with different perspectives and traditions and language and looks and stories. Not diversity on essential doctrines. But with all these other non-essential things, can you welcome those who Christ welcomes?

- If your politics keep you from accepting a true Christian politically different from you, your politics are an idol.
- If your skin color keeps you from accepting a Christian ethnically different from you, your ethnicity is an idol.
- If your preferences keep you from accepting a Christian preferentially different from you, your preferences are an idol.
- If your _____ keep you from accepting someone Christ accepts, your _____ is your idol and identity.

"Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (v. 7).

The kicker is that the world doesn't have an answer for this, we do. Let's not blow it! This requires each of us to conduct ourselves in a welcoming manner and collectively the culture of the church looks like verse 7. The gospel is the only power in this world to bring the *ethne* together.

"This is the most fundamental reason why programs of "diversity training" usually backfire in their attempt to foster mutual respect among ethnic groups. They focus major attention on what is comparatively minor, and virtually no attention on what is infinitely, gloriously major – our common, unique standing among all creation as persons created in the image of God." (Naselli)⁵

God is glorified in ethnic diversity in loving unity

How do we know this? What does heaven look like? *"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"* (Revelation 7:9-10)

Our welcoming one another will be complete when we stand with the diversity of *ethne* praising God. That is both the endgame and paradigm of what we should aspire to now. God delights in diversity in unity. He is a Tri-unity after all. In the world, race divides and fractures but in Christ we are united. We need to be on board with that goal. How?

We must love God's image everywhere

Humanity focuses on that one millimeter of epidermis. We see something way more important: every human being is an image bearer and therefore worthy of respect and love. I've read so many books and articles this past year on race and justice and these themes that are so dominant in our culture right now. But where are worldly philosophies taking us? Deeper divides and more animosity and more cancel culture. Further and further apart. The opposite of racism isn't non-racism or anti-racism. The opposite of racism is love. *Any solution to the racial divide that produces pride or hatred of the other side is NOT a Christian solution.*

Christianity is based on and built on love—a love that not only loves those who disagree with us, and are different from us, but loves even our enemies.

You may be familiar with the name Corrie Ten Boom. Corrie was a Dutch Christian, whose family hid Jews in their home during World War II. They were discovered, and Corrie was sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Her father and sister died there. She was released due to a clerical error 10 days before all the women in her group were sent to the gas chambers.

After the war, she wrote *The Hiding Place* and spoke around the world about Christian forgiveness. One night, just two years after the war ended, she spoke in Germany, and after her talk a man came up to her. He didn't recognize her, but she remembered him as a brutal guard at her concentration camp. She remembered being forced to walk naked before this man.

⁵ Andy Naselli, "What the Bible Teaches about Ethnic Harmony," *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 19.2 (2020), 18, <https://andynaselli.com/wp-content/uploads/2020-What-the-Bible-Teaches-about-Ethnic-Harmony.pdf>.

He came up to her, extended his hand for a handshake and said, *"You mentioned Ravensbrück...I was a guard there. But since that time I have become a Christian. I know God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there.... Fräulein, will you forgive me?"* Corrie shares how she, the speaker on forgiveness, suddenly did not want to forgive. She prayed, *"Jesus, help me!"* She forced her hand up and into his.

"And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother!' I cried. 'With all my heart!'"⁶

That is the power of the gospel to bring former enemies together and to turn hate to love. *"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God"* (Romans 15:7).

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⁶ Corrie ten Boom, "Guideposts Classics: Corrie ten Boom on Forgiveness," Guideposts.org, <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-on-forgiveness>