

## LESSON 5

# They Welcomed One Another

## *Whom has Christ already welcomed?*

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*Therefore accept one another, just as Christ also accepted you, to the glory of God.*

— *Romans 15:7*

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## Introduction

The first part of our study focused on what is happening inside the Christian. The way we see one another. The genuine care that refuses to perform. The correction that aims at restoration. The encouragement that keeps hearts soft. None of that is busywork. The heart of a congregation must be shaped before its hands can be trusted. But the heart was never the destination. Paul moves from the mind to the hands without taking a breath, and so does this study.

Today, we begin here with a verb. Welcome.

The first time the early church put its love on display, it was not by mounting a program. It was by opening a door. A Jewish believer ate at a Gentile's table. A wealthy woman like Lydia welcomed traveling preachers into her home. A Philippian jailer washed the wounds of the prisoners he had been guarding an hour earlier and brought them upstairs for a meal. None of that happens unless a heart has already been remade. But all of it happens with hands, in real time, on someone's threshold.

Romans 15:7 sets the pattern for the rest of the quarter. The command is to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us. The grounds and shape of every other practice we consider over the next few weeks are already in that one sentence. What Christ has done becomes what the church is. The hands of the body do what the heart of the Master has already done.

## The Strain in the Roman Church

To feel the weight of Romans 15:7, it helps to know what was happening within the congregation that first heard it. The church in Rome was not a single gathering with one identity. It was a network of house churches, scattered across a city of perhaps a million people, with members from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. By the time Paul wrote, the makeup of those gatherings had been disrupted in a specific way.

In AD 49, the emperor Claudius issued an edict expelling Jews from Rome. Luke notes the moment in passing, when he tells us how Paul met Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth (Acts 18:2). For about five years, the Roman congregations operated without their Jewish members. Gentile leadership formed. Gentile

habits and customs set in. When Claudius died in AD 54 and Nero permitted the Jews to return, Jewish Christians came home to congregations that had reorganized in their absence.

Now stir into that the standing differences over food, days, and conscience that Paul has been walking through since chapter 14. One brother eats anything. Another eats only vegetables. One observes a day as holy. Another treats every day alike. Both belong to Christ, and both think the other is wrong about something that feels central to him.

This is the room in which Romans 15:7 was first read aloud. It was full of real people who had real reasons to keep their distance. Into that room Paul sets a sentence that has been doing work in every congregation since.

## A Welcome That Does Not Audit

THE VERB PAUL REPEATS

### Take to Yourselves

"Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted you." (Romans 15:7)

**προσλαμβάνω**

*proslambanō* — to take toward oneself

- *pros* — "toward"
- *lambanō* — "to take"

WHERE THE WORD SHOWS UP

Welcome the one weak in faith  
*Romans 14:1*

God has accepted him  
*Romans 14:3*

They took Apollos home  
*Acts 18:26*

Not endure. Not accommodate. Take to yourselves.

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The verb has already been doing duty for two chapters. Paul began the section in Romans 14:1: "Accept anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters."

The phrase "but don't argue" deserves a long look. Paul does not say the strong should welcome the weak after the weak has come around to a better view of food. *The welcome*

*comes first.* The argument over disputed matters is set aside, not resolved.

Two verses later, Paul names the deepest reason. "One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him" (Romans 14:3). The decisive welcome has already happened, and it was God who issued it. The church's welcome is not the church's to grant or withhold. It is the recognition of a welcome already in place.

That changes the question. The question is no longer whether the brother across the room measures up. The question is whether the church will extend its arms around someone whom God has already taken to himself.

A welcome that audits is not a Christian welcome. It is a transaction wearing a friendly face.

## ***Proslambanō*: Taking to Oneself**

The Greek verb behind "accept" in Romans 14:1, 14:3, and 15:7 is the same word in each verse: *proslambanō*. The Christian Standard Bible renders it "accept." Other translations choose "welcome." Both are within the field of meaning, and the title of this lesson uses "welcome" because the warmth of the Greek leans that way.

ROMANS 14:1-3

## A Welcome That Does Not Audit

The welcome comes first. The argument over disputed matters is set aside.

A WELCOME THAT AUDITS	A CHRISTIAN WELCOME
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Waits for the brother to measure up</li> <li>• Makes acceptance contingent on progress</li> <li>• A transaction wearing a friendly face</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comes first, before the matter is settled</li> <li>• Rests on God's prior acceptance (Rom 14:3)</li> <li>• Reaches around the one God has taken in</li> </ul>

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*Proslambanō* is a compound, *pros* (toward) plus *lambanō* (to take). To take someone toward oneself. To draw a person in. Greek writers used it for receiving a friend into a household, for taking a person aside for a private conversation, for embracing someone after a long absence. It is not a passive recognition. It is an active reaching out.

The same verb describes what Aquila and Priscilla did with Apollos when they recognized he needed more careful instruction. "Priscilla and Aquila...took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately" (Acts 18:26). They did not put him in a class. They took him home.

That is the verb Paul uses when he tells a strained congregation how to treat one another. Not endure. Not accommodate. *Take to yourselves.*

## As Christ Has Welcomed You

ROMANS 5:6-8

## The Shape of the Welcome

Notice the order. None of these words describes someone earning admission.

STILL HELPLESS	STILL UNGODLY	STILL SINNERS
Unable to save himself. <i>"Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6)</i>	No case to make for entry. <i>"At the right time, Christ died" (Rom 5:6)</i>	Yet Christ died for us. <i>"God proves his own love" (Rom 5:8)</i>

Brought near by his blood; the dividing wall torn down. (Ephesians 2:13-14)

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The pattern Paul invokes is the welcome Christ has already extended.

That welcome cost. Paul has set it out earlier in the same letter. "While we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For rarely will someone die for a just person—though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. But God proves his own love for us in that while

we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8).

Notice the order. Helpless. Ungodly. Sinners. None of those words describes someone earning admission. Each describes someone unable to mount a case. Christ's welcome was extended toward people who could not pay for entry, did not deserve entry, and in many cases did not even know yet that the door was open.

Paul writes the same theology to the Ephesians. "But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of the Messiah. For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:13-14). The welcome of Christ does more than receive an individual. It dismantles a wall.

When Paul tells the Romans to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed them, he is asking the church to extend exactly the welcome it has received. This is not a watered-down version. It reaches the same kind of people the church itself once was. People were brought near because Christ chose to bring them. A church that has grasped this welcome cannot keep it small.

## To the Glory of God

The verse closes with a phrase that is easy to skim past. "To the glory of God." Paul does not let it sit alone. The next two verses unpack it.

"For I say that Christ became a servant of the circumcised on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises to the fathers, and so that Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy" (Romans 15:8-9).

Welcome is doxological. When the church receives one another as Christ has, God receives glory for what only mercy can do. A Jewish believer breaking bread with a Gentile believer is not a sociological achievement. It is a sermon. The dividing wall is down, and the watching world sees something it cannot explain in any other terms.

This is why Christian welcome is never about good manners. Manners can produce a polite room. Only mercy produces a body of people who do not belong together by any earthly logic and who, by a deeper logic, belong to one another forever. The church on display is the gospel on display. The hands of the body do their first sermon at the door.

## Where the Welcome Still Has to Stretch

The lines in Rome were Jew and Gentile, vegetable and meat, sacred days and ordinary days. The lines in our congregations run elsewhere, but they run.

The visitor who walks in and does not yet know where to sit. The new believer whose questions will sound naive for a while. The brother whose politics get under your skin every November. The sister whose parenting choices look strange to you, or whose career choices do. The family that does not dress the way the room dresses. The single member surrounded by couples. The widower with too much time on a Tuesday afternoon. The college student passing through. The member who left in a hurt three years ago and has been quietly attending again for six weeks.

The honest test is not whether welcome happens at the front door on a Sunday morning. It is whether welcome moves beyond the lobby into the conversation that starts the friendship, the meal that opens the home, the phone call on a Wednesday, the seat saved at the table.

Where Christ has already welcomed someone, the church has no standing to keep the welcome smaller.

## Looking to Jesus

Jesus is the welcome of God in person. The pattern Paul invoked had already been in place for three years before any apostle wrote a letter.

Consider how he welcomed the children. The disciples shooed them away. Jesus rebuked his own and gathered the children in. "Let the little children come to me, and don't stop them, because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14). The least useful guests, by any practical reckoning, were the ones Jesus made room for first.



Consider how he welcomed Zacchaeus. A tax collector, a collaborator with Rome, a man whose neighbors had every reason to despise him. Jesus saw him in the tree and called him down. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, because today it is necessary for me to stay at your house" (Luke 19:5). The crowd grumbled at the choice of house. Jesus chose it anyway. Salvation came that day to a home most of the town had written off.

Consider how he welcomed the Samaritan woman at the well. A woman, alone, of the wrong people, with the wrong history, drawing water at the wrong hour. Jesus broke three social rules in one sentence and gave her living water. By the end of the conversation she was running back to her town with a question that turned into a sermon (John 4:7-30).

Consider how he welcomed the criminal on the next cross. The man had nothing to offer and not enough breath to offer it for long. He asked Jesus to remember him. Jesus did better. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). The first person Christ welcomed into glory after his crucifixion was a man the world had condemned.

Consider how he welcomed Saul on the Damascus road. A man on his way to drag Christians back in chains. Jesus did not strike him down. He commissioned him. The persecutor of the church became its missionary, and the disciples in Damascus had to learn to welcome the very man who had set out to harm them.

This is the pattern. Costly, surprising, unembarrassed welcome of the people the room had already counted out. The church that follows him learns the same instinct. There is no one Christ has welcomed whom the church can afford to keep at arm's length.

## A Final Encouraging Word

Most likely, your congregation already does the work of welcome in many corners. There are members who notice the new face on a Sunday morning, members who keep an eye on the visitor who came twice and then stopped, members who pull a stranger into a conversation and a meal. That kind of welcome is grace at work, and it is one of the most beautiful things a congregation does.

The calling is not to invent it. The calling is to extend it across every threshold the gospel has already crossed. There is always a further door. The friend who does not yet know Christ. The brother whose drift has put distance between him and the body. The sister whose season of life has quietly moved her to the edge of the room. The visitor who came once and has been waiting to see whether anyone would call.

The grounds for that welcome will not move. Christ welcomed you when you had nothing to bring. He welcomed you while you were still helpless, still ungodly, still a sinner. He brought you near at the cost of

his own blood. He tore down a wall to do it. The welcome you live inside is older than your knowledge of it and deeper than your performance.

A church that knows that welcome cannot help giving it. The hands of the body open because the heart of the Master has already opened. To the glory of God.

## For Discussion

1. Romans 15:7 concludes a long argument about food, days, and conscience in Romans 14–15. What does it change about the verse to read it as the conclusion of that argument rather than as a free-standing slogan?
2. The Greek verb *proslambanō* means more than tolerating someone. It means taking the person toward oneself. Where does the difference between tolerating and taking-toward show up in everyday congregational life?
3. Romans 14:3 says God has already accepted the brother whom we may be tempted to keep at a distance. How does the prior welcome of God shape the welcome that the church is called to extend?
4. Paul tells the Romans to welcome one another "just as Christ also accepted you." Looking at Romans 5:6-8 and Ephesians 2:13-14, what is the shape of that welcome, and what does it cost when extended to others?

