



GRACE CHURCH

Welcoming

Romans 15:7

Grace Church | 8.27.23

In his book *Strong and Weak*, Andy Crouch opens with two questions that he says “haunt every human life and every human community: ‘what are we meant to be?’ and ‘why are we so far from what we are meant to be?’”.

The first is a question of purpose, which you might phrase like this: “what is the church for?” For the next two weeks, as we do every year, we are going to answer that question this way: we exist to *Make Jesus Known*. That is, our primary purpose is to outwardly display the identity of Jesus Christ, and to call all people to both know him and follow him. In a nutshell, this is what every church is for—it’s what Jesus meant when he was about to ascend back to Heaven after his resurrection, and before he sends his very Spirit to empower his disciples—he tells his followers to “go and make disciples of every nation”. Our belief is that when the true Jesus is truly known in a place, not just with lip service but with a heart to follow him, then that place will experience real flourishing of the soul, stability and peace and joy and purpose. It’s why we gather together every week to hear the gospel of Jesus. It’s why we disciple our children, meet in homes during the week to encourage each other, host groups on campus and study the Bible. It’s why next week we will send out leaders and members for the work of planting a new church in Robinson.

For our church, if the answer to the question: “what are we meant to be?” is “a church who makes Jesus known”, then the second question of “why are we so far from what we are meant to be?” could be phrased this way: “why doesn’t everyone know Jesus”? In other words, there is a significant gap between the ideal mission of our church and the reality of the world. We exist to make Jesus known, but there are thousands of hearts and places in our city and hundreds of millions in our world where Jesus is not known, followed, or loved.

So, as Crouch says in his book, the reality is that this second question exposes “the gap between our aspirations and our accomplishments, between our hopes and our reality, between our reach and our grasp.” Every once in a while we just have to stop and notice that God’s mission to make disciples of all nations is a bit daunting. We can barely keep up with our jobs and our kids and our schoolwork. All around us, there is a lot of evidence that could crush us, making the gap between mission and reality even bigger in our minds.



A new comprehensive study from a book called *The Great DeChurching* shows how nearly *forty million* people have left the American church in the last 25 years and have not returned, what the authors call “the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country.”¹ People are not flocking to hear about Jesus, follow Jesus, and know Jesus. They are flocking *out*, disillusioned, hurt, unwelcome, or just simply no longer interested.

Is the church a failing institution? Should we give up and go home? And is this preacher ever going to give me good news, or just point out the bad I already know? What do we do with the gap between our mission and our reality? Jesus has promised: “I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not stand against it”. What might it take to believe that, and continue in the mission with confidence?

This week and next week we want to propose two practices that are simple, but not simplistic. And our hope is that they can help us fill the gap between mission and reality. That these practices, rooted in the good news of Jesus, can be a way to move forward with confidence into the promise of Jesus that *he* will empower us for his mission, and that by his grace, his mission will never fail. The two practices are *welcoming* and *sending*. If we can be a church defined by both welcoming and sending, then we will be well positioned to stay true to our mission and hold fast to Jesus no matter how bad it gets out there.

So let’s read again one simple verse, which summarizes with stunning clarity the practice of welcoming, or what we might call hospitality.

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

This is a simple passage, so I have a simple outline for you this morning: 1) How we have been welcomed; 2) Why we welcome; 3) How we welcome.

How we have been welcomed.

What is hospitality? In the language of the New Testament, hospitality means “the love of strangers”. It’s the practice of showing warm relational welcome, especially for those who are unlike you.

Sometimes we get hospitality confused with customer service, because the restaurant business is often called the “hospitality business”. But while customer service is something we feel entitled to—a right as a consumer—hospitality is like grace, completely undeserving, since it is not a right but a choice of *love*. Hospitality is relational, not transactional. It’s a two way street, a dialogue not a monologue. It’s not about receiving something from someone, but opening yourself up to

¹ *The Great Dechurching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?*, Jim Davis, Michael Graham, Ryan P. Burge.



love and be loved. A loving host may fail to give hospitality because the guest fails to receive it. The exhortation in Romans 15 then is not to put up with one another, but the verb means to “take in”, “receive”, literally to “lay hold with initiative”.

The first lesson in hospitality is that we cannot practice it until we know what it feels like. We can't lay hold of others in love until we have been taken in through love. How have we been welcomed? Well the first question is actually “who?” Who is the host? Look at verse 7. *Christ* has welcomed you. **We have been welcomed by Christ.**

In Romans 15, the welcome that is being encouraged is towards “one another”, addressed to the members of the church. We might think this is different from hospitality, since if they are in the same church, surely they aren't strangers? But the important context here is that the book of Romans is all about making strangers into family. The singular issue of the Roman church is that there were both Jew and Gentile believers trying to serve God together under the same roof. Notice where we are in Romans: the second to last chapter.

And notice the first word in our verse: *therefore*. Paul has a few more things to say, and then a huge litany of greetings in Romans 16. In that chapter, he will greet men, women, Greeks, Jews, all united in ministry. But this verse is the final summary statement, the last piece before his closing remarks. It's not an exaggeration to say that this verse serves as shorthand for the entire pastoral heart of the book. It's as if Paul is saying, “therefore, because of *all* I have said up to this point...”

So look, I believe that the book of Romans is *the most comprehensive* treatment of the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ in history. No one has written it better. Paul summarizes his reason for writing in Romans 1:16 (by the way, the verse which sparked the Protestant Reformation), “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed...” The Gospel, that is the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, *is* the power, not just tells the power, of salvation, the bringing back from the dead, the making alive, the rescuing from death and sin and Satan and hell, for *everyone* who believes. Why? Because the gospel reveals the righteousness of God, the gospel tells of Jesus Christ, the righteous one, who comes to die for the unrighteous and make them righteous.

And the point of that staggering truth, the great goal of the great doctrine of Romans and of the gospel, the point of the *power* of God and the point of the revealing of the righteousness of God, is to create the kind of new humanity where people who are supposed to hate each other and avoid each other and go their separate ways are now, by the power of God, *welcoming* each other.

Just earlier in Romans 14, Paul has been laboring to convince the Roman church that regardless of their convictions, the great point of Christianity is not to please themselves, but please God, and **verse 2**, please one another. They were divided in their culture and the way to approach the



Mosaic law which was so dear to the Jews and so foreign to the gentiles. They couldn't get along, because to use modern examples, they had different convictions. They couldn't agree which movies to watch or not watch, who to vote for and not, whether to drink alcohol or not, whether to vaccinate or not or, we all know the feeling of this, whether to mask up or not. And *that* seemingly mundane disunity is where the great gospel power of God is aimed. Nothing could be more important to the kingdom of God and the mission of God than the radical, hospitable love of the church for one another.

It's so important that the hospitality and welcome of the church must not have any other source than the gospel. Nothing and no one else but the work of Jesus can bear the weight of hospitality for sinners. Your personality, no matter how outgoing, can truly welcome those far from God and different than you> The size of your living room or your dining room table cannot, even the kindness of your hearts for outsiders and strangers. Only God can do the work of welcoming sinners and enemies and making them family. Christ has welcomed us. He is the one who comes in to eat with us.

That's the who question answered. But how has Christ welcomed us? **First, Christ's welcome is glad.** In two weeks we will start our study in the Gospel of Luke. One thing to know about Luke is that it has a very strange theme that is often overlooked—the theme of eating. There are over 50 references to eating in the Gospel of Luke, and Jesus himself is depicted as eating 10 times, often in detail, a meal, not just a snack. Jesus was into feasting, he even uses that language to depict the kingdom of God. It's a great feast, a great supper, and in that supper we eat with him and *of* him, a meal with God where we partake in the righteousness of God!

Luke's emphasis on Jesus' eating habits also tells us about Jesus' purpose. Our friend Tim Chester (member at Peak Trinity) has a wonderful little book called *A Meal With Jesus*. In it he reminds us that there are only three ways the New Testament completes the sentence "the Son of Man came..." 1) "The son of man came not be served by to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45); 2) "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10); and 3) "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking..." (Luke 7:34). "The first two are statements of purpose. Why did Jesus come? The third is a statement of method. How did Jesus come? He came eating and drinking".

This was said *about* Jesus. He was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton, because the people he ate with the most were sinners, outcasts of society. Now because of his perfect deity, we know he wasn't those things—but someone who never has any fun would never be accused of that. Peter Leithart says it this way:

For Jesus "feast" was not just a "metaphor" for the kingdom. As Jesus announced the feast of the kingdom, He also brought it into reality through His own feasting. Unlike many theologians, He did not come preaching an ideology, promoting ideas, or teaching moral maxims. He came teaching about the feast of the kingdom, and He came feasting in the



kingdom. Jesus did not go around merely talking about eating and drinking; he went around eating and drinking. A lot.²

Jesus is the perfect example of hospitality: his gospel is that he comes in to feast with strangers, those far from God, and welcome them into the family of God where they belong. He doesn't send a messenger, he doesn't send a salesman, he isn't into advertising. Jesus' method of evangelism is to eat and drink with those far from God himself.

One fear we have of welcome is that the welcome we receive will be begrudging. A half hearted welcome may as well be no welcome. There is a reason that sometimes thanksgiving with the extended family feels less than homey: often we feel obligated to eat with our family. It's just what you do. But Jesus is not obligated to dine with anyone. His welcome is not begrudging: he is not into awkward dinners with the in-laws, he is into feasting with his honored friends. If you are in Christ, God has welcomed you **gladly** to his table.

Second, **Christ's welcome is unending**. What feeling could be worse than the feeling of being welcomed, only to be rejected again? But notice how text is past tense: Christ *has* welcomed you. This means the welcome of God in Jesus Christ is definitive. It's not wavering, there are no strings attached. It's done, it's assumed. Or, in Jesus' words: it is finished.

A few months ago I had the privilege of visiting the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis. A powerful experience, both to mark the horrors of slavery, racism, racial prejudice, and things like Jim Crow laws, but also to celebrate the heroism of men and women who marched and rode and spoke and wrote in non-violent protest, most of them in the name of Christ and the justice of the kingdom of God. One thing that shocked me was the endurance of many of the civil rights leaders. What they faced was the dark opposite of hospitality—hatred for strangers, not love—and they endured. I watched videos of how places that should be known for hospitality, diners and restaurants, were no places of hatred where “no blacks” signs were posted. And in these videos I saw how college students part of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) were harassed, beaten, spat on, thrown to the ground, and persevered, never fighting back. The reason they endured this persecution was not so that they could eat sub-par diner food. That would be a small victory. They did this because they hoped for a day when they could be welcomed in society, a day when the question of “do I belong” would be answered definitively for their children and grandchildren. They dreamed of a society where black bodies would be welcome, not just tolerated, where the welcomed was assumed, definitive, unending.

We have not yet eradicated racism or hatred for the “other” in our society or our own hearts. But what made those students goal so noble was that what they desired was what is true of heaven to be true on earth. The kingdom of God is a place where our welcome is never questioned, where before God, because of the finished work of Jesus, the sign on the door to the table with Jesus is “sinners welcome”. And we never have to doubt or fear that will change, because like the

² Peter Leithart, *Blessed Are the Hungry: Meditations on the Lord's Supper*.



students of SNCC, Jesus took violence on himself, as **verse 3** says: “he bore our reproach”, in order to usher in a culture in his kingdom of welcome for the outcast.

Why we welcome.

Let's go next to how the text ends, with a why. *For the glory of God.*

A kind of hospitality is actually quite popular in our day, but it goes by a different name: inclusivity. Inclusivity is a welcome of those who are different from you, but willing to share with you in a particular purpose. That purpose is usually political or social power. Workplaces are inclusive so that they can avoid HR problems that limit productivity or so that they can appeal to their consumer base. Interest groups promote inclusivity so that they can extend their reach and their voice to promote their agenda.

But Jesus doesn't do hospitality like that. He says: “come to me, all who are weary”, but he also says “take up your cross.” For Jesus, hospitality is not about being repaid with social or economic capital, or even a feeling of belonging. Hospitality is for the glory of God who sees and repays all.

He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”³

Paul says earlier in Romans to “let love be genuine”. When our hospitality is for some other purpose than the glory of God, people notice. They begin to feel like tools to be used instead of guests and family to be loved.

The point of welcome is not to grow our church. The point of the mission is not our own agenda. Get rid of your external agendas. We all feel the gap between our mission and our reality, a gap that can be discouraging and depressing. But don't lose hope. If our goal was to do all the work, we should quit. But if God's glory is the goal, then his power is the way.

How we welcome.

So this finally leads us to the “how” for us. Imagine a church that is so welcoming it feels a little like what you would imagine Heaven would feel like. How do we get there? We must welcome *like* Jesus.

³ Luke 14:12-14



In other words, if the way Jesus welcomes us is through the power of the gospel, then we also welcome through the power of the gospel. The point of our welcome is not to sell Jesus as some sort of add-on to life, but to welcome people into the family of God. We recognize that our welcome is not for strangers to come in to look like us, act like us, or conform to our image, but the welcome we extend is the welcome of God in Jesus, as Paul says in **verse 5**, we welcome “in accord with Christ Jesus”.

If we want to welcome like Jesus, our welcome must be *glad*. If Jesus came “eating and drinking”, then so must we. Jesus ate with the outcast of his society—who is that in your heart? Who’s door would you be afraid to grace, who would you cringe when you realized they were coming to *your* house? That is who Jesus is calling you to welcome. We are going to need bigger tables, more feasting. It cannot be done out of duty, but must be done out of delight. We must love because we have been loved. We need to learn to break out the good china, to not begrudge the nice wine. And this isn’t just for those with wealth and means! Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, and she gave everything to welcome Jesus when she wiped his feet with her tears. The gladness of our welcome is not gauged by the extravagance of our possessions but by the extravagance of our love. Rosaria Butterfield, an author who has a marvelous story about how she came to faith from radical feminism by being welcomed to dinner at a neighbor’s home, calls this “radically ordinary hospitality”.

Our welcome must also be unending. In other words, it must be definitive, with no strings. We shouldn’t expect anything in return. There should be no fear of future rejection. Often I think we are afraid of hospitality, of radical welcome, because we know the cost. But hospitality in accordance with the gospel destroys that fear. Jesus gave up his very life—and with that hospitality towards us he also promises to give us all things. As Rosaria Butterfield says: “the gospel comes with a house key”. There is nothing that we could give up in hospitality that God will not provide again for us. When he welcomes us in, he gives us the key. He spares nothing.⁴

Here are two practical ways we can be about this as a church:

In a few weeks, when we start the gospel of Luke, I want you to think intentionally about this. We have cards and door hangers today for you to invite your neighbors or co-workers. But don’t just invite them to church—invite them to a meal. Invite them to your CG, or to your home. Show them the radical welcome of Jesus which cannot be overturned. I love this, because it’s a whole family thing. Kids, you have a role in this! Singles, you have the ability to show how the gospel welcome of the community of God in the church is real and active and familial. We are all in this together, like **verse 6**, “one voice glorifying” God. In the gospel, we are invited to God’s Trinitarian life; called by Father, in the Son, by the Spirit. Hospitality, therefore, is the work of the community, not the work of the individual. Everyone plays a part for the body to operate.

⁴ Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes With A House Key*



Next week, we are soft launching a new church in Robinson. You heard me right: a new church. Church planting is for everyone. This week we are calling you to fast and pray with your CGs, and consider how you might be involved through prayer, giving, and going.

Imagine again the church that is so welcoming it feels a little like what you would imagine Heaven would feel like. What might that look like? Jesus came to fill the gap between our mission and our reality. He brought heaven to earth, and one day the earth will be no more and will be swallowed up by heaven. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

