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Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith
Message: Welcome One Another

Transcribed Message
January 28, 2024
Romans 15:7-12

What is it that you think is important to find in a church home? You're here at Covenant this morning. Maybe you've been here your whole life. But in answering that question, you would list out things that are important to you to be found in the church that you're going to want to connect to and be a part of. What do you think some of those things might be? I jotted down five things, and I would hope in some way all of these would be on any of our lists. First is the commitment to the word of God, the teaching and preaching of the word of God. Paul said preach the word in season and out. He instructed everybody that he ministered to put the word of God first. Make certain that the gospel is clear. You want to be a part of a local church, a local fellowship that understands the gospel of the grace of God, that we are saved by faith alone through what Christ did and what Christ did alone. There has to be clarity about the gospel. There has to be commitment to evangelism and discipleship. This gospel that we have been given has been entrusted to us not to keep to ourselves but to make sure that it goes out from this place and out from our lives every day. In this commitment to discipleship, we are to make certain that we're passing on to others what we have been entrusted with ourselves.

These are the kinds of things that we look for that we want to see in a church. A biblical model of leadership so that there are leaders who understand that their leadership has been entrusted to them by God in the form of being a servant to those that they minister to. It is not a celebrity but a servant. That's what we're looking for. Lastly, I think we would want to find within the membership of that church (and I'm just using that word in its broadest sense) but you would want to find within that church body, within that church family a sense of caring, a sense of love for each other, a sense of commitment to one another within that body. As you look at that list there's other things we can put on there for sure and that is not a divinely inspired list but here's

what I know. It may not be a divinely inspired list, but I know that as I read the epistles of the New Testament, those letters that the Holy Spirit had the writers of Scripture write to local churches, I find every one of those things. Numerous places in those letters to the churches. I know that the Spirit of God thinks these are the kinds of things that are important and should be a part of the local church and what we should be interested in as well. Romans chapter 15 verses 7 through 12 I think gives us that same sense that we are going to at least focus on this last one – this welcoming sense that we are to have. What we want to see in these verses this morning is simply this. It doesn't get any simpler than this. The power of the gospel is seen in how we welcome one another. The power of the gospel is seen in how we welcome one another.

Let's step into this set of verses and let's begin by just noting the context. We'll set the context once again and what we see is that we come to an end of another major section in Romans. When we hit verse 12 this morning and some people actually slide over into verse 13 and we're going to look at that one, Lord willing, next Sunday. But when we come to this 12th verse we're coming to the end of another major section in Romans. There can't be that many more major sections to go. There can't be that many more major sections to go because there's only one more chapter. But this marks the end of another major chapter. As you look at that section, what do you find?

You find that it starts off with a welcome. Back at verse 01 of chapter 14, Paul spoke the exact same words and he talked about welcoming one another at the very beginning of this section. Then he says don't cause each other to stumble. That was the issue that was troubling the church there in Rome. There were those who were causing others to stumble. In the 13th verse he said don't do that. Then he said build each other up instead. In the 15th chapter and verse 2 he talked about the need to build each other up. Make that kind of commitment to one another.

Then when we come to our section this morning, we find he does the very same thing that he did at the beginning. He ends with this idea of welcome. What you have in this section is an admonition to welcome each other and then he comes to the end of it and he says and welcome each other. It's bookends of welcome and in between we have all these other things that Paul is concerned with. What he is concerned about is this matter of unity.

Do you realize that when you look at this major section that begins in chapter 14 verse 1 there are 23 verses in chapter 14 and now 12 verses in chapter 15. That is 35 verses that the apostle Paul, under the direction and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, 35 verses that he gives to this matter. That has got to be extremely important to the Holy Spirit and to Paul's ministry to the church at Rome to commit 35 verses to this matter of how we see each other, how we welcome each other, how we treat each other, how we strive together for a spirit of unity. Paul is concerned. Whatever he's heard. Remember he's never been to the church at Rome. He doesn't personally know the people, but he's heard these reports. These reports have come to him as an apostle, as one who is greatly concerned for the church of his time. The Holy Spirit has him record these words for them and for us, but he's greatly concerned about what he's hearing. and what he is hearing are the challenges that they're facing regarding this matter of being a unified body of believers. There's a spirit of division at work. There are people who are causing other people to stumble. There's a lack of commitment to building each other up in their faith together.

What are the differences that divide? What are the differences that divide? In the 1st century we know what it was. In the 1st century, it was the racial ethnic issue between Jews and Gentiles. We might wonder how significant that was. just look at our world today. just think of the animosity, think of the anti-Semitism that we're seeing rise to the surface today. It wasn't any different in the 1st century. There was deep-seated resentment, deep-seated animosity. It wouldn't be extreme to say there was hatred that existed between Jews and Gentiles. What does God do? He comes with this wonderful, glorious gospel and he is saving Jews and Gentiles and bringing them together. He is saying to them now you have got to overcome what is the natural instinct towards one another. In the power of the Holy Spirit and by the means of the gospel that has transformed your life, you are to be changed people. That's what's happening here. This is a call in the 1st century for these believers to come together as one.

Just think of it this way. Gathered in this 1st century church in Rome as it existed around the city of Rome no doubt in many different places, there are Jews sitting next to Gentiles. These Jews know the law of the Old Testament inside and out. They have grown up keeping the law. In many respects, it was the guiding force of their life.

They're completely immersed in the Old Testament law and in the ways of the Old Testament law regarding God's people as the Jewish people. Then you've got him sitting next to a Gentile who doesn't even know what the law is. When he hears something about Moses and the law, he might ask "Who is Moses? What's the law? What is the big deal here? And that's what Paul's grappling with here. That's the burden on his heart. This gap can be bridged because that's God's intent, that's his desire, that's his heart, that's his plan.

What about the 21st century? It is not that issue anymore for us. We're largely almost exclusively a Gentile church. We can't say this doesn't relate to us. Of course it relates to us, but just in a different way. It relates to us in any of the ways that divide people up today and of course in some respects these things don't change that much. There are still racial tensions. There are still ethnic tensions. We are called a nondenominational church. Here at Covenant we are a nondenominational church. We know that in the United States of America there are over 200 denominations. Why are there 200 denominations? This is not a critique of denominationalism because sometimes in many cases it's been a good thing. It's been a necessary thing. People divide over all kinds of things. Some of them may be okay and some of them may be not so okay. But doctrine of course has divided a lot of people. How they understand and read the Bible has divided a lot of people with regard to doctrine. Tradition. Style. What they want to experience on a Sunday morning when they come together has divided people. Do you realize that there is division over the taking of communion and the order in which you take it? Did you know that there are some churches that follow Luke 22 and verse 17 and they take the cup first? And then there are churches that follow 1 Corinthians 11 and they take the bread first. That was a little take off on our communion a month ago, but most of you missed that because I reversed the order. I reversed the order for the first time but I did it on biblical grounds I found out later. No, not really. But there are all kinds of things that divide the church.

Paul's heart for the church at Rome and Paul's heart for believers to follow and certainly the heart of God for us is the same. God's desire is that we be one together because this morning it's also possible that there are people sitting here who have been sitting in a church almost from the day that they were born. Then there's somebody that

is sitting beside you or maybe near you and this is a new experience for them. They didn't grow up going to church. Maybe they have come to Christ later in life or maybe they're still on their spiritual journey, and so a lot of the things that they hear is new to them. They're called to look at some book of the Bible and you can go there in a second and they're looking at the table of contents trying to figure out where is that book. and that's the way God intends for it to be. That's what he wants. God is a God of diversity and differences. He wants us to come together and experience the unity that he intends for us to have. What we need to understand is what is God's plan for unity. That's what I think Paul can help us with in this section.

God's plan for unity. It begins with an exhortation. That exhortation comes to us in the very first part of verse 7 where Paul says therefore welcome one another. We're just going to stop right there with that first section. This is an exhortation. It's almost like Paul is saying let me say this again. Let me say this again because verse 7 is in many respects just an inference. We see verse 7 starts off with one of Paul's favorite words: therefore. He's taking us back immediately to the inference that grew out of verses 5 and 6. We looked at that two Sundays ago. Verses 5 and 6 really are a prayer of Paul for this unity that he wants to see in the church, but it's even more than that. It takes us to the overall section that is in view here. The whole context beginning back in 14:1 as we're going to see all the way through 15:12 is this matter that he brought to the forefront in chapter 14 verse 1 when he said understand that there are differences of opinion among you. Remember those opinions were things about which the Bible doesn't specifically tell us which direction to go, what to do, what to believe. There are things over which Christians can and have disagreed about over the centuries. It's not something that is declared in God's word that we're to follow. It's an area where we have freedom and that's what he is saying here.

What does he say about that? He says welcome one another. Welcome one another. Therefore welcome one another. This is a command. It's an imperative and you know an imperative. When we see imperatives in Scripture those are commands and those are God's will for our life. here we say what is God's will for our life. God's will for our life is that we welcome one another. That's what's in view here. He does not say

avoid one another. He doesn't say just give a little nod of the head to one another. He doesn't say begrudgingly say hi to each other. He says welcome one another.

This word welcome is a strong word. It's a forceful and picturesque word. It wouldn't be wrong to say embrace one another. As you welcome one another there is to be this strong sense of embrace. There is to be literally a laying hold of. We would shake each other's hands and maybe give a hug in an appropriate context. There is an empathy that we're expressing towards each other as we welcome one another. There's a kindness. When I think of that, I think of what Paul said in Acts 28 verse 2 when remember the ship was wrecked and they came ashore and he was so impressed by the way the people welcomed us, he said. They were kind to us. They embraced us. they enfolded us. They welcomed us. They drew us in.

A beautiful picture of this same word is in Philemon 17. You know the story in Philemon – how Onesimus the slave ran away from Philemon. Paul encounters him in a providential way, shares the gospel, and Onesimus comes to faith in Christ. He gets disciplined by Paul for a period of time, evidently not that long, and Paul is going to send him back to Philemon. In that 17th verse he says to Philemon: Philemon, you welcome Onesimus back. Even though he had been defrauded. Even though he had been wounded and hurt by Onesimus. He said you open your arms wide to Onesimus. You welcome him like you would welcome me if I was coming to see you, Philemon. They had a deep love and appreciation for each other. We know that would be an embrace and a hug and a welcome. That's what Paul said. That's what you do for Onesimus when he comes back.

The other picture that I have when I read this word is a picture of the prodigal son and the dad. I have that dad and I see that dad. Every day Jesus said in that story, every day that dad went out to see by chance if that son was coming home. On that day, yes, there he is. The prayers are answered. He's coming back and the dad runs to him. That is a welcoming. That's laying hold of and embracing and opening of one's heart to each other. The dad had been deeply wounded. The dad had been deeply hurt. This son had gone beyond and above what he could have done to hurt his dad, and yet here's the dad and this sense of welcome. That's what Paul is calling out to us. This is what's in view. When you look at that statement welcome one another, this is what's in

view. It is God's heart for his church. God's heart for the church is in the midst of variety, understanding all of the different backgrounds that are in this church. I don't know there's probably 20,30, 35 different denominations represented here. If we just went around the room and said what has been your experience over the years in terms of being involved in a church or a setting where there is a denominational situation, I'm sure it would be at least that and maybe more. You have all these differences of opinion, differing ideas, different choices that have been made. We have all that variety and all of those differences and yet God's heart is for us to have oneness.

Listen to what Mark Dever says in his book *Compelling Community*: “many relationships that naturally form in our churches would exist even if the gospel weren't true. That's right, good, and helpful. But in addition, we should aspire for many relationships that exist only because of the gospel. So often we aim for nothing more than community built on similarity. I want us to aim at community characterized by relationships that are obviously supernatural. And by supernatural, I don't mean the mystical, the vaguely spiritual sense in which pop-culture uses the term. I mean the very idea of a sovereign God working in space and time to do what confounds the natural laws of our world so that he brings people together that would not normally naturally otherwise be connected to each other. That's what the gospel is supposed to do in our life.”

I read another article this week. I don't know if I should share it. It's so radical. I am not going to read the whole thing but there was one idea, and it has to do with this matter of being a welcoming church. Do you want to be radicalized this morning? You want to hear? You're going to be sorry you said that. I'm just telling you right now this is what he said about being a welcoming church and some of the radical things that we could and should do as a body of believers. It has to do with where you sit. Do you want me to stop right there? This is what he said: “We are creatures of habit and we're also drawn toward comfort. In a crowded room with unfamiliar people, we're anxious and seek reassurance. Often the easiest way to do it is to sit with the people we know best. But by placing a biblical emphasis on the church as family and having a spirit of welcome find another place to sit on occasion.” Again, that would just be helpful, so you don't have to tell somebody that they're sitting in your place. Radical stuff.

How do you welcome and create that spirit of openness with each other? Look what he says next. It's based on what's been done for us. The "what" is welcome one another. Now we're going to see the "how". How can we do that? It is based on what's been done for us. Look at the next part of that 7th verse. As Christ has welcomed you. Paul loves to point us to Christ as the example. He does it all the time. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. To the Corinthians, he said, follow me as I follow Christ. I'm a Christ follower so you're going to be following Christ in that sense. He points us to the example of Christ so often.

What do we see in the life of Christ? We see Jesus as a friend of sinners. Jesus is a friend of sinners. It is pictured in the life of our Lord. He was there for the outcast and the tax collector. Jesus was just as comfortable with the religious leader, meeting with Nicodemus even though it was the night, he was willing to meet with this religious leader. He was just as comfortable meeting the woman at the well. Now he never condoned sin. He never overlooked sin. He never pretended like it wasn't there. He spoke to it. He addressed it. He did so obviously in kindness and grace, but he certainly never overlooked it. But he was always welcoming. He regularly questioned the traditions of men, and he had people constantly thinking about why they were doing what they were doing. He called out false teaching strongly, but he was always approachable. He was always gracious. He was always kind. That's what is to be our experience. That's what we have experienced as well. In our relationship with our Lord, that's what we have experienced.

Look at what he says: "as Christ has welcomed you." I look at that phrase when I read welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. it says to me welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you. Here's the "how", the manner, the means, the way. Here's what we're supposed to do. It's first John 4:19. Why do you love him? We love him because he first loved us. You welcome one another because that's what Christ has done for you. He takes us right to the doctrine of justification by faith. He takes us right back to the matter and the point of our salvation and what it is that God has done for us and how it is that Christ has accepted, how it is that he has welcomed us. He's done so openly, freely, generously, graciously. You can't add anything to what it is that Christ has done for you in terms of opening his arms and saying come. You are

welcome. This is my desire and plan for you. We have been accepted. We can stop striving for acceptance. That's what it means in terms of our salvation. We can stop striving for God's acceptance because he has accepted us just as we have come to him by faith, taken us just as we are when we came to him. That's what we need to bring in our experience. When we hold up conditions, when we hold people at arms length, we're simply falling into a spirit of legalism. We're putting conditions upon them that were never placed on us. We were welcomed openly, freely, graciously, fully and that's what God expects and intends us to do with each other. The gospel says I take you just as you are. You come by faith. I accept you just as you are. You don't need to clean your life up to come to God. God cleans your life up when you come to him. This is the way we treat each other. I accept you as you are. You accept me as I am.

Now look at the "why" of this. There is no greater motivation. There's no greater motivation. It's all for the glory of God. The last part of verse 7: for the glory of God. Let's just read verse 7: "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." The thread here is the glory of God. Paul loves the glory of God. Go back to the last part of chapter 11. It ended on that high, that amazing benediction that it is all for the glory of God. Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:31 says whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do it all for the glory of God. Paul loved the glory of God. We've talked about this. We talked about this just a couple weeks ago. It's just simply making much of God. It is seeing God for who he is and what he deserves.

Look at this thread and how it keeps going. In verse 9 there is we glorify, we praise, we sing. Verse 10 we rejoice. Verse 11 we rejoice, we praise, we extol. It glorifies God when we worship him together. It takes us right to Ephesians 1 when Paul said in that 12th verse that we might be to the praise of his glory. That's the thread that Paul lays out as he speaks of the why. There is no greater motivation for us to welcome each other than for the glory of God.

Now look at the story. The story of this is right here before us. It is to the Jew first. Paul moves in his language in these verses from the strong and the weak to the

Jew and Gentile. It plays out in a very similar way, doesn't it? Jesus came, Paul says, to fulfill the promises made to the patriarchs, made to the fathers, made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By his incarnation, by his sinless life, by his death, by his resurrection, he fulfilled all of the promises that God had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To Abraham God said I'm going to make you a great nation. From you is going to come a seed. There is going to be land. There's going to be a blessing. All that is fulfilled in Christ. That's what they were all looking forward to and that's what he's speaking of here. Through Abraham alternately would come this great blessing even to the nations.

He could've probably stopped right there except for the church that he is writing to in Rome now is a majority of Gentiles. The Jews that are sitting there are nodding their heads and going yes, these are the promises that were made to us as God's chosen people. But the church now has been transformed from starting off almost primarily Jewish. Persecution drives all the Jews out of Rome. The church becomes a majority of Gentiles. Now the persecution has lifted some and Jews are back in the church but it's still a majority of Gentiles. What does Paul say to the Gentiles? He is going to speak to them of what God has done through the promises and bringing into his plan the Gentiles as well. That's most of us. You see that at the beginning of that 9th verse. "...in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy." It takes us back to chapter 1 verse 16: I'm not ashamed of the gospel of God. It's the power of God unto salvation to the Jew first and also to the Greek. It takes us right back into the challenging chapters in Romans 9, 10, and 11. Remember in 9, 10, and 11 Paul pulled back the curtain and he said why are the Jewish people not responding to the gospel anymore? Why is it that the church is largely Gentile? Are the promises of God null and void? No, they're not. What is going on then? It is that God in his discipline of his people has now blinded their eyes to the gospel so that the gospel would rightly come to the Gentiles, to us, you and to me. God's plan is being realized. It's being fulfilled.

As Gentiles, we have no direct promises given to us. All the blessings that we have come to enjoy have come through God's chosen people. Our Bible comes to us by virtue of the Jewish people. Our Savior is a Jewish man, the God-man. That's what Paul is reminding the Gentiles of. This is pictured in a remarkable way in the life of our Lord.

It's a story that is very interesting but you'll remember in Matthew's gospel and the 15th chapter a Syrophenician woman comes up to Jesus and her daughter is being demonized. Remember that interchange that happens? She calls out to him Lord, son of David, have mercy on my daughter. He answers her not a word, the text says. He doesn't even answer her. Wait a minute. I thought Jesus was the welcoming one. I thought Jesus was the one with his arms open to everybody. And to this woman he said not a word? She continued to call out to him and remember when the change occurred is when they had the interchange – Jesus and this woman – and she acknowledged that she was a Gentile and even the Gentiles should get some crumbs from the table of the Jews. At that moment Jesus opened this conversation with her. Now why did it go that way? A lot of people assign all kinds of crazy ideas to that. It was simply this. She was coming to Jesus claiming to come through the path of the Jewish people. She was claiming that Jesus was the son of David the Messiah for her first, and Jesus rightly said no, I come first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But there's still blessing for you, Gentiles. Then he of course healed her daughter which is just a beautiful picture of what Paul is talking about here. Every blessing that we have as Gentiles comes because of the Jewish people.

Look at this last part very quickly. It's not like this was a secret. In these remaining verses, the last part of verse 9 on in to the 12th verse, listen to what he says: "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.'" What you have is this. You have four Old Testament passages that Paul quotes just boom, boom, boom, boom. He quotes from the wisdom literature of the writing. He quotes from the law and he quotes from the prophets. Why does he do that? He is basically saying this is the whole Old Testament. That's the way they would say this is Old Testament. He quotes from a couple of Psalms, from Deuteronomy, from Isaiah, and there's a progression here. I'm just going to recount it in this way. In Psalm 18 David celebrates among the Gentiles for the victories that he has achieved. In Deuteronomy 32, the Gentiles take part in the celebration. They take part in it. In Psalm

117, the shortest Psalm in all of the Bible, the Gentiles are commanded to take part in this praise to God, the God of the Jews. Isaiah 11 the Gentiles will look to the one who is in the line of David and will bring blessing to the nations. There is hope for all because Jesus is the Savior of both Jews and Gentiles.

What do we see? Right where we started off. It doesn't get any simpler than this, my friends. It is just simply the power of the gospel at work in our lives. It is that the power of the gospel at work in our lives that compels us to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us. What do we take away? Disunity robs God of his glory and skewers the power of the gospel. Unity gives glory to God and magnifies the beauty of the gospel. We need to decide every day to be a uniter and not a divider. We can be a uniter because that's what the gospel does. It is the gospel that is the power of God into salvation. It is the gospel that has said to every one of us all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It is the gospel that says to us there's nothing that we can do it ourselves. It's the gospel that says nobody's better than anybody else and nobody is worse than anybody else. We all have a need for a Savior and the need for that Savior is met through Jesus in his life and death and resurrection. What God calls on us to do is simply to believe that what Jesus did was enough. At that point God gives to us eternal life. he forgives our sin and we become a part of God's forever family, and we get to be a part of the welcoming presence of the Spirit of God in this place.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for your love, for your grace, your mercy, your kindness. Lord, thank you for how you welcomed each one of us into your family. You have called us your sons and your daughters. You tell us that Jesus is our brother. Lord, things that we can't even begin to fathom, things that we can't begin to even understand, so great is your grace, so great is your mercy, so great is your love and kindness towards us. We are compelled to call out and lift up the glory of your name and we are called out. We are compelled to welcome each other without condition into this family that you have called us to. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.