

“Welcome!”

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Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. **2** Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. **3** Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. **4** Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

5 Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. **6** Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

7 We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. **8** If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. **9** For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. **11** For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

12 So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

WELCOME

Welcome!

We use that word a lot.

We have a welcome mat in front of our houses.
On many church signs we spell out in big bold letters,

“Visitors Welcome.”

We want people to feel at home.
We want people to see us as friendly and open.

And today’s lesson begins with that word.
Paul asks the Romans to be a people who show hospitality.

They are to welcome others.

This word translated “welcome” means to let someone into your heart, and into your home.

It means to be a friend.

Some people are easy to welcome.

They agree with us.
They have a similar background.
Those visitors are always welcome.

But, what happens when we encounter people who are quite different from us?

Their lives are messed up and quite their theology is messed up as well.
Their faith is weak.

What are we to do with “those” people?

Paul tells us we are to welcome them too.
And we welcome them ... we take them into our heart ... we befriend them ...
with no strings attached.

NO QUARRELING

Paul says that there’s one thing they shouldn’t do.

They shouldn't try to correct their theology.
They shouldn't quarrel with these people of weak faith.

Instead, they should just love them.
They should just welcome them.

In this passage Paul was referring to a specific quarrel in the early church.

The early church was made up of Jews and Gentiles.

And the Jewish Christians kept their traditions concerning what was kosher ... what was allowed and what wasn't allowed.

Gentile Christians saw no need to follow those laws.

Jewish Christians said that only kosher meat should be eaten.

And it seems like some had taken the kosher idea even farther ... suggesting that they should eat only vegetables.

(Sounds like they were ahead of their time in some ways!)

Anyway these ancient vegetarians had passages from the Bible that they could quote as proof.

Take a look at Leviticus 11, and you'll learn about all the different foods forbidden by the Jewish law.

But, the Gentile Christians said,

"God has done away with all that.
There is a new definition of what's clean and what's unclean.

The Christian life is about living for Christ instead of just eating the right foods."

So who was right?
The meat eaters or the vegetarians?

To us it sounds like a debate we might have on the food channel!

But, in those days these issues were serious.

Indeed their disagreements were so strong that it threatened to divide the early church.

One of the first church conferences was over issues like this.

They asked at that conference:

Did Gentile Christians have to become Jews and follow Jewish traditions in order to follow Christ?

Some said yes and some said no.

The folks in Jerusalem came up with a compromise.

But, that didn't really settle the matter.

We know from Paul's letters that this was a very divisive issue for a long time.

What role did Old Testament faith play for those who had accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord?

NO JUDGMENT

In response to this controversy Paul said,

“What good does it do us to win the argument and lose our friendship?

Our welcome cannot be conditional.

Our welcome must come with no strings attached.

Don't argue about this!”

We can infer from this passage that people were putting their opponents in the worst possible light.

They were letting this one issue (that most of us now see as wildly irrelevant) to disrupt the Christian community.

They were judging their fellow Christians, and according to Paul, they just didn't have the right to do that.

Only God could judge.

We don't have fights in the church any more about kosher food laws. But, we do have quarrels about other things.

Some of the things we fight about really are important. And other things that we fight about ... not so much.

But, Paul tells us ... for the sake of Christian hospitality ... for the sake of welcoming one another ... we have to live with a bit of ambiguity.

We won't always be on the same page when it comes to what we believe. But, we can respect and try to understand people who hold beliefs that are different from ours.

Now don't misunderstand.

This doesn't mean that we have to agree with something that we don't really believe.

It just means that we need to lay off the judgment.

It means that we say,

"Yes, I believe this. But, I could be wrong.

In the final analysis I'm not the judge.

Only the Lord will be able to judge."

Paul applied this way of thinking to the kosher food controversy. He said,

"Some believe in eating anything while the weak eat only vegetables.

But, both groups need to abstain from judging each other. God has welcomed both meat eaters and vegetarians into the kingdom of God."

We think that the debate over kosher food is largely irrelevant today.

But, the question behind that debate was important.

Was Christianity a form of the Jewish faith or was it something new?

The church finally came to understand that God was doing something new.

The church was no longer bound by rules and regulations.

Instead, they had been freed to live by the power of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

THE MEASURE OF FAITH

The strength of a person's faith was not measured by how kosher they were.

The strength of person's faith was not measured by how well they followed rules and regulations.

The strength of person's faith was measured by the size of their heart ... the size of their welcome.

How much can we forgive?

How many slights can we overlook?

How much ambiguity can we stand in times of uncertainty and stress?

Can we trust enough to wait upon the Lord?

These questions measure the size of our heart ... the size of our welcome. All of us struggle to accept those whose faith we deem to be "weak".

Paul suggests that we reframe our way of thinking by looking at the bigger picture.

When all is said and done who will get to decide?

Are we the ones who will judge people with weak faith?

We know the answer.

God is the one who judges.

There will come a day when every knee will bow.

And on that day we will be accountable to God.

But, until that day, what do we know about the judgment of God?

The Bible tells us that the judgment of God is always tempered by grace.

There's a hymn in our hymnbook that has a terrible tune ... but the words are wonderful.

The hymn is entitled, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy."

And one line speaks about the judgment of God.

It goes, "There's a kindness in God's justice ..."

This summarizes what we believe about God.

God is gracious. God is kind.

We don't get what we deserve thank God for that!

... Instead our failings are judged by the measure of God's grace,
God's forgiveness as revealed in Jesus.

We are not God.

We cannot forgive like God does.

But, we can use the grace of God as a pattern for our life together.

Grace is not just something that we talk about.

Grace is something that we live.

We welcome fellow Christians ... especially those with whom we disagree
... as a way of showing that we understand the grace of God.

The most important job in the church is not deciding thorny social and political questions.

The most important job in the church is worship.

With all due respect to those who are steeped in the politics of the church,
the kingdom of God will not come by majority vote.

The kingdom of God will come by the power of God's grace and forgiveness as revealed in Jesus Christ.

OUR DEBT

There is one thing that will keep us together in times of disagreement.

It is a healthy awareness of our own sin.
All of us owe a debt that can never be fully repaid.

In Matthew's gospel, Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive a person who wrongs us.

Is seven times enough?

Actually, Peter thought he was being quite generous.
The rabbis of the day thought that forgiving people three times was more than enough.

Three strikes and you're out.
That's what they said.

But, Peter knew that Jesus was a bit more liberal so he went up to seven on the forgiveness scale.

I bet Peter thought
"Jesus will be impressed
by how generous I am."

But, once again Peter was fooled.
Jesus said, "Seven times isn't near enough.
I say that you need to forgive seventy times seven."

The Kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is about forgiveness on a grand scale.

And our willingness to forgive is based upon an understanding of just how much we owe God.

Jesus drove home his point by telling the parable of the unmerciful servant.

In essence a servant owed a king a zillion dollars. The king decided enough was enough and was going to put the servant and his family in jail until the debt was paid... which would be never.

The servant begged.
He said that he would try and pay off what he owed.

That wouldn't work of course.

On his salary that would take a thousand lifetimes.
Things looked hopeless.

But, then, the unexpected happened.

The king forgave the debt.
The servant didn't owe anything any more.

And how did the lucky servant respond to his good fortune?

As soon as he left the king's presence, he put a fellow servant in jail because he was owed him about a \$1,000 dollars.

The king heard about it and went back on his word.
He put the unmerciful servant into jail and threw away the key.

This story has just one point, and it is very clear.
The unmerciful servant should have considered how much he had been forgiven in his treatment of other people.

And we should do the same.

If God has forgiven us a zillion sins, more than we can even imagine... which He has

... shouldn't we be a bit more compassionate toward those with whom we have disagreements?

Indeed, this passage suggests that perhaps the only “unpardonable” sin is a lack of grace toward others.

I think it was Dante who said that judgment is simply the Father saying to the sinner,

“Thy will be done.”

The worst judgment God could give us is to let us have our way.

Those who live by the sword die by the sword,

and those who live by the letter of the law die by the letter of the law as well.

We will be judged by our own ungracious ways.

THE PROPHET

The story is told of a stranger who came into a small town and stood in the center of the town square.

This stranger seemed strangely familiar and at the same time a bit menacing.

By far the most unusual thing about the stranger was the coat he wore.

It was black and had patches on it ... patches of all sizes, shapes and colors.

The people wondered where he got such an odd coat, but they hesitated to ask.

There was just something about this stranger that made them very uncomfortable.

But, finally curiosity got the better of one person, and he asked,

“So, what do all the patches mean?
Why do you wear a coat like this?”

Well, it seems that the stranger was a bit of a prophet.

He knew the people of this town very well,
and the colorful patches on his coat stood for the various sins of the people.

The prophet began explaining each patch in embarrassing detail.

Even a small town has more than its share of scandalous behavior.

The people were aghast at what he had to say.
The prophet knew their sins so well.
Their dirty laundry was being aired in public.

It was too much for the people to bear.

Some were ashamed and hung their head.
Others angrily denied what they knew to be true and left.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the prophet finished recounting all the sins of the town in gory detail. And he turned to leave ... shaking the dust off his feet in true prophetic fashion.

It was then that the townspeople noticed a patch that they had not seen before.

It was a large black patch on the back of the prophet's coat.

The people wondered out loud what terrible sin that patch might represent since this patch was larger and more ominous looking than all the rest.

And at this point a voice rang out from the heavens.

"That patch represents his own sin.
He is willing to point out the sin of others.
But, he fails to see his own."

Jesus put it this way,

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and fail to notice the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3)

The moral of the story is this:

We are not called to point out the sins of others in the public square.

Nor are we forced to carry the black stain of sin on our own backs.

In Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven.

He does not give us what we deserve.
He gives us grace.

And because of that marvelous grace we are able to welcome others into our life ... especially those whose faith is weak.

So today in the name of Jesus I say ... welcome.
This is the heart of the gospel.
This is the heart of God.

Amen.