

People of the Welcome

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[0 : 00] Good evening everyone. So good to be with you. I've been excited for many weeks to be able to come and just share with you here tonight. And I hope you'll be able to endure my sweet Italian accent that I have here.

Also, Brother Derek, thank you so much for just this opportunity, the privilege to be able to stand here in this wonderful city that God's given to you and in this pulpit.

Would you pray with me for just a moment as we come to God's word? Our precious and most gracious Father, I pray right now that we might see and hear your teaching through the words of Paul that would instruct us in a call to discipleship to become that kind of church and the way that you order your people and your world, that people all around this city and this nation might be able to come to embrace to see Jesus anew.

May you build through this passage and in our hearts through clarity and teaching. May you build the Christ culture in us, the beauty of Jesus, may Christ be seen and known and may we rejoice in you so that everyone who goes from here tonight will say that we have a good God and we experienced and we knew him, we saw him, we tasted him and thank you for your precious word. Give us clarity here and in these words I pray, amen. We read in Romans 15 where Paul is speaking really in an area of the subject of love in the church and he's correcting some disputes and some struggles that they have about being judgmental with one another.

[2 : 05] Just to catch you up in the letters we come and approach this chapter here, you'll find some of those disputes and things that he's working to correct pastorally and how the church is supposed to function and work together as a community of God's people.

You can see those things in chapter 14. He changes language a little bit and he includes himself in the community, into God's people.

He says right away in the first verse, it's we who are strong. We who are, if you will, able. What does he mean by able?

This passage I've studied it and shared it with our people many different times. I found this really a call to discipleship. What do we mean by a call to discipleship?

Maybe you're here and you're exploring what the Christian faith is all about. You're just learning it. You're just learning it over time and come to understand that discipleship just means a call of how to follow Jesus together.

[3 : 07] That he's our good shepherd and that we follow and we work together in this. Paul is saying there are those who are strong, those who are able, those who are disipled, if you will, and then those who are being disipled.

In the Greek, it would be those who are unstrong, those who might be new to the faith or those who have certain opinions in the faith that may not have yet matured and they hold them strongly.

Paul is counseling and encouraging all of his people. The Romans here, probably a various mixed group of people, the early Italians.

He's speaking to them about how to be the people of the Christ community. He calls to them early and he speaks to them here and he says, you have a debt to embrace.

We know that if you've come around and you've heard anything about the Christ message, it's by grace. And that Jesus took our debt and he took our payment, but yet Paul brings a technical or a banking term and he says you have an obligation, you have a debt.

[4 : 26] But this kind of debt is a grace debt. It's a love debt. Let's look at it, if you will. We who are strong, we ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

We ought to bear. There's that word, ought. We have an obligation and that is that term of debt to carry the weight with them and bear with their indiscretions.

The failings of the unstrong, the indiscretions of the unstrong not to please ourselves. What are these failings and these indiscretions? What is he talking about?

In our society today or maybe even in our church traditions at times, over time when we accomplish certain levels, maybe we make a certain amount of money or living or we've been around our denomination long enough, we kind of get a sense that we paid our dues and that others who are coming up, well, they have to go through training and pay their dues as well.

And when you've made it to a certain level, you say, I'm here, I've arrived and that's good enough. Paul on the other hand says, don't hold that kind of an attitude of superiority, which is quite common in our culture today.

[5 : 50] That once you reach a certain level, everybody else, they can come up behind you, but you're set. Paul says don't hold that kind of an attitude, not in Christ culture, not in Christ church.

In Christ church and the way that the church functions, it is a call to say we who have grown in Christ have literally a debt of grace by what Jesus has done to turn back around and literally to lift up and carry both those who are unable to yet see the fullness of Christ and their failings and carry them right along and this is discipleship.

This is that call that he's talking about. He's concerned for those who have not yet grown in the faith that they are cared for and watched and shared with and they will not see what people are doing. It's a call to embrace the debt of grace. What debt is it? The debt that we owe back to those who are young in faith and maybe young in Christ.

So in this call to discipleship, how do we help others follow Christ? How do we create this community? We embrace this debt not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good to build him up.

[7 : 23] There is an active work of growth and discipleship in helping one another, building him up and he compares it to Christ in verse three for even Christ, how he lived.

When he lived, he didn't please himself, but as it is written in Psalm 69 verse nine, the insults of those or the reproaches of those who reproached you and insulted you have fallen on me.

There's a progression in the faith that happens that as people are growing in faith and walking and being around others and the Christian community brings them in.

There's a sense that those who are unable, unstrong or even weak will still make decisions that they bring out of their past life.

They will still not yet see the fullness of the Holy Spirit, the work of the Holy Spirit. And so there will be times where we as we all know that we will grow, that we struggle.

[8 : 29] There are times when we're discipling people even in our own church and walking with others in our church. And maybe you've experienced this too, where you work with them, you pray with people, you love them earnestly and dearly.

You share your heart with them and and you maybe open your home, you give sacrificially and what takes place. They criticize you for it.

They they you've worked with them on something and you think they've arrived and what happens they turn their shoulder and go the exact opposite way that you've been working with them maybe for months.

Or they come after you and they blame you and they say, well, it's your fault. We've had that happen before too. It's a human thing to do. Or maybe worst of all horrors, they unfriend you on Facebook.

And what it's saying here is that in the Christ culture, Jesus is saying as you're working with others, yes, that will take place.

[9 : 37] Yes, as people are growing in faith, you will struggle. There will be pain and discipleship. There is a walk with them. They might reproach you and salt you.

They might return to their ways, blame you too. But all of that you absorb. This is part of embracing the debt of carrying the young or the weak along by faith because Jesus did it.

You're absorbing it for them similar to what Jesus said to his disciples. If we see in John chapter 14, if people are persecuting and insulting you, they are actually insulting me and persecuting me.

And so you bear it and you absorb it. This is a lot like parenting, isn't it? Our kids don't understand how many of you have children. Can you wave your hand?

Can you wave your hand? How many of you have children? You know this. A lot like parenting and you just look at those kids, especially if you have boys, and they have that wild eye look.

[10 : 45] And you're saving their life every hour from destruction in your own home from burning to the ground. And you're looking at these boys and you're just saying one day you must appreciate what I'm doing for you.

Because what you're doing is you're giving your rights away so they can parent and experience your same joy of the pain that you have in that moment. It's a lot like parenting. It's a call of discipleship.

It's how God wants to order his family. Why? Because in churches and in communities there, in this world, there aren't these kind of refuges that people can find and come to.

When people have arrived, others are excluded. When you make more money, you gain more power than you get. You hide behind gates and communities and exclusivity, et cetera, et cetera. And Paul says not in Christ's culture, it's upside down. We bring and carry the week even in their discretions and absorb the reproaches because Jesus did that. It's living Jesus's life.

[11 : 55] Now look in verse four with me as we proceed. For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, it's our new Torah, if you will, the Torah of Jesus.

So that through endurance and the encouragement that the scriptures, the story of the fullness of faith that Christ bring, we might have hope. And that's why hope and faith are so linked often in scripture.

That this story is real and this growth will take place. People growing in faith. And you'll see a natural progression in the discipleship of people that are coming through as Paul is outlining it here in this passage.

So Paul breaks into a prayer now and he says, may the God who gives endurance and encouragement from the scriptures.

Paul's almost justifying, if you will, his constant use of Old Testament scripture. He says they are there to amplify, to illustrate and demonstrate this story that you are now the people that God is working through.

[13 : 00] May that God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus. So that with one heart, one mouth, you may glorify the God and her father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now this is a part of a passage that he's concerned about asking a prayer to God to solve much of what we find in chapter 14. In the Christ community, in other words, and just let I'll just be brief.

In the Christ community, what he's asking us to live and to be as we walk with people to become followers of Jesus, disciple makers. What he wants us to do is bury the disputes.

So first we embrace the debt of grace. Now he's saying we bury the disputes at the feet of Jesus Christ.

It is the God's story that becomes so great to us, so wondrous to us that everything else that others might do becomes so small.

[14 : 10] It actually gives us power to forgive others and to not hold grudge and to not ignore others. That's really this endurance and this encouragement in the Christ community.

We will see as a part of growth, people will experience encouragement and endurance and faith and hope because the scriptures are becoming real to them as they're being lived out among these people.

That's the concern of Paul. In Christ's kingdom, there will be models all around the church community that will teach us and show us how to forgive and release and bury our debts and our disputes.

It's part of discipleship. It's part of the modeling to show this world in Christ's new culture is upside down and altogether different.

Then he comes to that last verse, which has always intrigued me. Verse 7. In some versions you have the word welcome. I noticed here it's the word accept.

[15 : 21] In other versions there's the word receive. The word welcome stood out to me in I have it here in the English Standard version looking at it.

And usually you put a welcome at the beginning. If you're encouraging people to be friendly, you put a welcome at the beginning of your passages. But this one's at the end. So it's quite unique.

And when we read this about accept one another, receive one another, we often quickly look by it and we press on toward chapter 15. Or the rest of chapter 15.

But what is he saying? I believe he's building to this verse because there is a therefore or accept one another then everything that I've been saying is part of this acceptance or this this welcome. Now I come from two cultures where the welcomes and the greetings are quite unique. In the American culture that I grew up in, our welcomes are a bit short, brief, shallow.

[16:28] And they, well you walk in, you see some other guys, some other friends, and you say sup. That's kind of how we phrase it.

We don't even get the full two words what's up. What's up? You know, sup. And the guy, you know, he'll look at you and he's just kind of nods and he's like, hey, there's just like a grunt.

And he lifts his eye like that. And that's kind of our welcome. And what that means is we're going to be best of friends for the next 25 years watching thousands of football matches.

And there's a deep camaraderie. But then I moved to Italia and it's, that would be quite offensive to greet one another like that. And in Italia they're much more formal.

Well, much more involved. Let's just put it that way. In Italy, how many of you have been to Italia? I might as well ask that. Okay, so you, how many of you have experienced a full, full on professional Italian greeting?

[17:28] It involves kissing. Okay, just a nervy a little bit. And when you greet and you welcome each other, and this happens, our greeting times when we share in our church can be up to 15 minutes long.

Because that's a lot of embracing, a lot of, you know, greeting and kissing going on. And it will unnerve you at first. And I'm telling you this as a travel advisory. I'm also telling you this because if you come to Italy, we're trying to plant churches there and I'm giving you some coaching.

We don't want you to mess this up here. Okay, so when we went down, and I remember early on learning about this way that they welcome everyone. We were in our local market and we were walking and I had come across the, I was in a men's choir.

We sang a capella and we sang all the local poetry, if you will, of the region. And I came across the choir director and his wife. And so I greeted them and then I greeted his wife and his, and there's a subtle kind of a lean in, you know, to let you know the kisses are coming.

Okay. And so as I came up to, I came up to Louis Zala and I said, hi, Louis Zala. And then that, that subtle lean in came. And again, I was a novice. I was early on and I'm like, okay, here come the kisses.

[18:50] I'm ready for this one. And I went to my left and I just want to tell you that's the first mistake. Don't go to your left. Always go right. It's similar to here where they have it painted in the, on the streets, you know, look right, look left.

Same thing. I went to my left. She did too. And I was told the other day that I have a Greek nose. There was the most flattering thing I've ever said about my nose from an Italian and she had a Roman one and our bridges just cracked right there.

Just cracked and we just clocked each other just like this. I mean a bright flash and everything. And she backed up like this and she was laughing. She says, oh, Robert, what are you doing here?

And I'm like, I'm making contact with the locals. And so we had quite a time. Greeting. And you learned that. Now I just heard the other day from another Scottish pastor that Scotland was voted the most manly country in all was all the world or all of Europe.

You heard this one too, Neil. It's gotta be global. You got a 26% rating. Something like that is most manliest country. But I tell you, you stand there when another brother comes to your church and gives you a full on hug and kisses you two, three times.

[20:10] Maybe that will test to see whether you'll stay and endure or whether you're going to pack your bags and leave the country. And we often look at things like this in the way of our greetings and our salutations.

And if we read our passage like this and just the welcomes and how we say hi and greetings, that's not really the case here. And it's not just about being friendly and and although that's good, there's something more accepting and receiving is is there's something infused by the divine in this word.

I believe that Paul's coming to. The idea of receiving is not just greeting one another to the point of, okay, I've had enough talking to you and going on.

It is literally letting others press into our hearts. The word receive is in the middle voice, which means allowing them to have space in your life.

Let them come in. And I think that's the culture he's saying here that all of this is what we experienced.

[21 : 28] What is this welcome? What is this acceptance? It's all of verses one to six. It is bringing them to Jesus where those who should be exclusive come and bear the weak and the unable and bring them into maturity.

Disciple them there where those who are have have grown in the faith. They embrace the debt of grace by helping those who are growing and others who will bury the disputes and they'll bring people to Christ, people who will absorb the insults and the criticisms and the issues that people bring into the faith community so that Jesus can be seen.

And you will see people who will share the scriptures where the God of encouragement will be the God of hope, the God of endurance, people who are faithful one toward another and toward our God.

Where in this gospel community and this culture, as Paul prays, there will be a spirit of unity where people are in such harmony, not fighting about every single little dispute, but rather overlooking them, drawing them in and allowing their hearts to open and saying, yes, you can press in.

And I think that's the call about building disciples, embrace the debt, bury the disputes and walk through the differences.

[23 : 03] How will you plant churches? How will you be that Christ community that Paul is calling us? By the way, this is our command.

Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. It is realizing that somebody endured your rubbish too.

Somebody carried you. Somebody lifted you. You might think of a friend. It might be a godly grandparent, a spouse, a pastor, a shepherd, someone, an elder.

But could you imagine if here in Edinburgh, if it was an entire community that walked like this, the community of disciple makers that said, yes, come in here and we will journey and walk with you.

And I think that's what Paul is calling us to do. Get back through the cross, walk through the differences, journey with people who don't talk like you, who don't look like you, who don't come from your same background.

[24 : 17] Because all of Edinburgh is searching for a community like that.

Except one another because Christ was doing this for us. How did he do it for you? He did it through the faith community that you've been growing up in.

Amen. Is that true? He did it through those who embraced you. And he walked with you. A living, vibrant gospel community.

Yes, it will be hard. Yes, it will be. It will endure insults. But it is one that brings people to see Jesus over and over and over again.

And I think this is how Jesus is seen. Embracing grace by lifting others.

[25 : 25] And being disputes at the feet of Jesus. And being an entire community that makes a kind of welcome where people just want to stay around.

Can we pray? Lord, thank you for Romans 15 and this teaching and this call to discipleship. It is by your grace that you enable us to do this.

And by the grace of God, I pray to you, I pray to your freedom, that we can give ourselves away because you were the model. You gave yourself away to us.

And then you've parented us through the faith. I pray for all of those who might just be coming into the faith now that...

I pray that you might be able to see Jesus through those who are caring and walking with you. That there would be such a welcome here.

[26 : 26] That every person who begins to come to see Christ, that you're discipling, you're walking within your homes, they find a refuge because they are able to press into your own hearts.

So Father, continue to teach us these lessons. Continue to help us to walk in discipleship with others. Training, enduring, and bearing with them because we love you.

And oh, may Jesus be seen. And may we share from the lands of Scotland to Italy the joy of Jesus Christ in our communities together.

Over and over. Hallelujah. Amen.