

Romans 15:7

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray again, let's join in prayer. Lord, we do ask this evening that you will just write that promise on our lives, write into our thoughts and the way we think about life.

His love endures forever. There are times we doubt this and question it. There are times when circumstances suggest to us that it can't really be true because we feel unloved or insecure or disappointed or hurt by the things that are going on in our lives. And so we pray that when we go through times like that, that this great, abiding, eternal truth will just be there to help correct our thinking. His love endures forever. And we thank you that this is a promise that is repeated so frequently in the Bible, that your love never fails, that your love cannot change, that your love cannot be broken, that your love cannot be turned back. And so we ask that we will understand the heart of the living God, that we will know your character, that you are the God who is love, and that you cannot be anything other than love. And so may your love be our great comfort, our joy, our delight. May we open up our own hearts to be receptive towards it because sometimes we don't want to be bothered by your love. We want to walk our own way and do our own thing. But we pray that your love will keep calling us back and overwhelming our hearts and our senses and our desires so that we will be overcome by the beauty and the wonder of Jesus Christ crucified for sinful people like us. We pray for anybody who's never tasted and seen that

God is good, people here who perhaps haven't known your love other than as an idea that other people talk about or that the Bible tells them of, but who've never felt the power of that love, who've never known the warmth of that love, who've never had their hearts broken by that love. We just pray for these people here this evening that your love will be theirs this evening. We pray for those who need your love in a special way at this time because they feel broken, because they feel frightened, because they are in turmoil, because they are anxious, because they are lonely. Well Lord, may the Holy Spirit do His great work of pouring your love into those hearts so that those people may delight and be strengthened by the power of your love. We ask for those with us who are suffering through sickness, those who are suffering because of unemployment, those who are dealing with difficult family situations, those who are dealing with difficult financial situations. Lord, we have a huge variety of needs and so we are confident though that you can address and meet every single one of them. For you're a great God, sovereign, wonderful, powerful, your resources are without end. You can supply our every need. We pray that you'd remember your church across the world that's a delight to belong to the church of Jesus, which is an amazingly diverse body, ethnically and culturally and socially. We thank you that we are part of the church as it meets round the globe today in many different languages and worshipping in many different ways and yet united with one mind, worshipping one God. Pray for your church where she's in trouble, where she's afflicted, where she's persecuted, that you would protect her.

We pray for your church where she is flourishing and growing and multiplying and we are rejoicing that so in so many places around the world the church is on fire and there are millions and millions of people coming to faith in Christ and wonderful and dramatic and in quiet and in subtle ways also. Lord, we pray that the same great wonders of the spirit would be seen among us, that the same great outpouring of grace would be here in this church and in our city Edinburgh and in our land Scotland. We pray for our city throughout this festival time that it will be a welcoming place, that it will be a joyful place and a happy place and a blessed place and we pray that as Christians we would love the city and serve the city well and that this city would flourish not only economically or socially but especially spiritually. Thank you Lord for the gospel. We pray once more that it would work powerfully and mightily among us and that it would come home and take root in our hearts, that it would influence the way we live day by day, that it would change us and that we would change most of all because we meet you here and that we meet you the living God in your word

and among your people. Amen. We are going to return to Romans 15 and we read there the first 13 verses of the chapter and we're going to look this evening at verse 7 especially so that just is quite a simple clear straightforward verse so Romans 15 verse 7 says accept one another then just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God. So there's a very clear instruction to the church in Rome about how they live together and as they live together there has to be a really clear acceptance of each other just as Christ has accepted them and the motive and all of that of course is the glory of God. I've been to the beach several times this summer I can't make up my mind what kind of relationship

I have with beaches so it's a sort of love hate relationship. Beaches are beautiful and wonderful and yet sand is irritating and annoying especially when you get back to the car and the sand kind of discorges itself for the next few months but I've been to the beach several times I know lots of you have been at the beach over the summer and take your shoes off roll up your trousers and walk along the shore in the water paddle away enjoy the splashing and make footprints in the sand and it's really easy of course to make an impression in the sand as you walk along as we walk even if you're quite light you tend to see your footprints left behind and so on the beach our weight leaves an imprint and then of course the tide will come in later on and wash away our footsteps our presence there will be forgotten very soon. One of the key themes in this passage is glory and when we speak about God's glory we're talking about something that is weighty. We're talking about God's majesty we're talking about God's authority and we're talking about God's power we're talking about God's influence we're talking about God's holiness his goodness his purity his truth and all of those aspects of God's character come to us with power and with force and weight and that notion of weight is always there behind the Bible teaching on glory and that means that when you meet with God in his glory the weight of that meeting the weight of that encounter will leave an impression on your life it's going to leave a mark and it leaves an indelible mark an impression that doesn't go that can't be washed away. Meeting with the living God meeting with God in his glory is such an incredible experience a profound experience that it cannot leave you unchanged. Now we see that in scripture we see for instance Moses and the burning bush or Jacob at Bethel with the ladder ascending into heaven or we see it with the disciples and Peter in the boat or Isaiah in the temple every time somebody in the Bible encounters God in his glory it's an absolutely devastating experience that leaves its mark on them forever and the Christian faith is a faith that brings us into that kind of encounter with God. Not a trivial encounter not a shallow encounter not a kind of fleeting encounter but rather when we really do meet with God in his power his holiness and his majesty it leaves its mark on us. So in verse 6 Paul writes about how we glorify God by our unity we give weight to God we ascribe significance to God by his power and then in verse 7 he says that Jesus accepts us why in order to bring praise or glory to God so that God's weight and majesty would be seen and known and then in verse 9 he talks about how the promises of salvation made to the patriarchs about the salvation

[11 : 29] of the Gentiles or non-Jewish peoples have been fulfilled so that God would be glorified for his great mercy. So God is a God of glory who leaves his mark in our lives and in our worship we want to make our mark we want to sort of give weight to God and say yes our God is great and our God weighs upon us mightily. In verse 7 that the weight of God in our lives is seen in this idea of acceptance. Jesus' acceptance of us brings glory to God that's the fundamental theological truth in here so that's the doctrine you want to grasp. Jesus has accepted me Jesus has accepted you why because in that great act of mercy he brings honor and glory to his father in heaven and that's the great desire the great passion the great longing of his life to make much of his father in heaven to give great prominence and praise to his father in heaven and Jesus does that by the way that he reaches out to people like me and you with mercy he sees our need and he has compassion with forgiveness he sees our guilt and he's ready to take our guilt away with love he sees our loneliness and he comes to embrace us in the gospel with grace he knows we don't deserve any of his goodness but he pays the cost he goes to the cross he suffers for us and he does that so that we can be accepted and Paul says think about what it meant for God to accept you and for Christ to accept you and in the same way you need to accept others even when it's costly even when it's hard and you need to accept them with just as much grace and love as God has shown when he accepts us. This is as I said already about a community that's struggling to live with itself a community where some people are more welcome in the church than others and Paul is saying we need to get past that and to become a much more inclusive community where acceptance of others is central to the way that we think, act and behave and I want to apply that into St. Columbus and to

ask how we accept others and how we act towards others and react towards others in the church who are different from us or who are difficult for us and I especially want us to think about how we act towards the outsider because summer's coming to its close and a nice blaze of sunshine for the last week or two. Schools are back, unis are coming back in the term time soon, there will be people moving to the city, there will be students returning, there will be new people in church, there will be people thinking will this be the church that I want to become a part of and sometimes we think about bringing friends to church and we want people to come to our church, we've never been to church before and all of these people we've got to ask ourselves if they come what kind of welcome are they going to get in this church, what is our attitude towards the newcomer, the outsider, the visitor, what kind of heart

do we have for those people and how do we express that in the way that we behave and so acceptance is a great idea in the Bible, the word that Paul uses here for acceptance is used several times in the Old Testament, sorry New Testament, okay let's go Greek not Hebrew, so in the New Testament there is a man called Philemon, Philemon has a slave Anesimus who has run away, now this is a great source of annoyance and grief and inconvenience to Philemon and Anesimus becomes a Christian, he's a friend of the apostle Paul and Paul writes to Philemon and he plays with him, he says I want you to accept Anesimus back, I want you to accept him back not just as a friend but as a brother, in fact Philemon my challenge to you is this, I want you to accept Philemon, Anesimus your run away slave in exactly the same way you would accept me if I came to your house and so to the run away slave Paul expects the acceptance that would be shown to the closest friend and brother, it's also used in Acts chapter 18 about a young man called Apollos who was preaching about Jesus Christ but didn't really understand the Christian message in its depth as doctrine was shaky as theology wasn't really mature, so there's a couple in that church there, Priscilla and Aquila, they see this young guy, they see his potential, they see his passion, they see his weaknesses, what do they do, they take him home and they sit him down and they explain the truths of the gospel to him much more clearly and that idea of taking Apollos home and sit him down and talking things through with him, it's the same word, accept, it's the same thing. The other place where it's used in the New Testament is in John chapter 14, John chapter 14 is a dark chapter for the disciples really because it's the evening of the crucifixion and Jesus is explaining to them what's about to occur, the havoc that's about to be unleashed and he understands the brutality of the events and how that will hit these disciples and he has to reassure them about what's going to happen to him and what's going to happen to them and so in John chapter 14, at the beginning of John chapter 14 of verse 3 he says, listen, you know, in my father's house or in my father's mansion it used to be, there are many mansions, many rooms, in my father's house there is plenty of space, in my father's house there is a home for you and it's the same word again, in my father's home in heaven you don't need to worry because in my father's home in heaven there is a place, there is acceptance for you. So that's what the Gospel does, the Gospel just opens out this amazing acceptance of God to us and of us to others. Now finding acceptance is really important, that's one thing we need to be really clear about and sharing acceptance is really important, that's the second thing. Why is acceptance so important to us as well of course because rejection hurts, job applications get turned down, uni places, you might not get the place you've applied for, relationships don't work out, we feel rejected, we feel humiliated, we feel vulnerable, we question ourselves, we wonder what other people think of ourselves, we want to be, we long to be accepted, to be part of things, to be at the heart of things and we often long for acceptance with God as well and yet sometimes we think maybe God doesn't want me either, we look at our lives, we look at the evidence, we see how our lives are going and it's not going the way we hoped and we're saying where's the evidence of God's love and we feel rejected also by God. Well we were saying about God and his love in Psalm 136 and there it says that God thought about us in our need. It's an interesting idea, this idea of God thinking about me, Neil McMillan here in St. Columbus on Sunday the 19th of August and it's an interesting thing to think that or to know or to understand or reflect on that God is thinking about you at this very moment, whether you're thinking about him or not and God thinks about us in an accepting loving way. I heard a story in a sermon I was listening to this week about Tim Keller's wife, Kathy and Kathy, Tim Keller's a minister in New York, he's very well known amongst some people, he is a kind of very large church of thousands of people in Manhattan and his wife when she was a little girl, so Tim's in his 60s now, his wife is probably in her 60s, when she was a little girl she used to write letters to

C.S. Lewis because she just thought C.S. Lewis was the most incredible, amazing writer in the world, so she lived in America and she would think and she penned these letters, sent them to C.S. Lewis and you know what, C.S. Lewis wrote her back, pretty nice for a 10 or 11 year old girl and she has got four letters still that she received from C.S. Lewis and she reads them from time to time and the last letter she got from C.S. Lewis was written 11 days before he died and he knew he was dying, he was very ill, he couldn't type anymore and yeah 11 days before he died he took time to write to this little girl and he took her very seriously, her concerns and her thoughts and her ideas and he wrote her this beautiful letter and she found it very moving to think that he, although he was sick and struggling and had very little time left in this world, he gave up some of that precious time to write to a young girl he'd never met, what an amazing, thoughtful man and how amazing is it then that God thought about us and gave up his life, not just his time, gave up his life on the cross for us and it costs Jesus doesn't it to accept us, he had to experience rejection and loneliness as well, he knew what it was to be single and celebrate, celebrate with no place to lay his head, he understood feelings have been broken and lonely and misunderstood, he knew what it was to be falsely accused, to be unjustly condemned, Jesus suffered all of those things and much more because he knew that that was the only way that you and I could be accepted by the Father in heaven because our rebellion, our sin, our failure to love God, our failure to obey God, our failure to worship God as he deserves, all of that sin is a rupture, what can we do about that sin while the Bible says nothing and so Jesus has done it for us, that's the great news of the Christian Gospel isn't it, you're trapped in sin, you're bound by sin, you're addicted to your sin, you cannot free yourself from your sin but Christ comes and in his suffering, in his pain, in his loneliness, in his rejection, he breaks you free from sin, he sets you free so that once again you can know the love of the Father in heaven.

[24 : 18] And so if you're not a Christian there's a question there isn't there, if Jesus has done this so that you can be accepted by the Father in heaven, the question is do you want what Jesus has done for you, will you accept what Jesus has done for you, will you accept Jesus himself or is Jesus going to face rejection here this evening as well, from some of us as we close our hearts towards him.

To be accepted by Jesus then is core to our identity as Christians. It shapes who we are. We are adopted by the Father in heaven.

We belong to the family of God. We are children of the great King. The Lord we know loves us. The Lord keeps us safe. The Lord holds us in His right hand.

The Lord is with us. And because we are secure in this way, because we know we are accepted in Jesus, then that security that we have in Christ frees us so that we're no longer afraid of people.

But rather we are free to love people. We no longer see other people as a threat, but rather we see other people as the ones that we are called to love and serve.

[26 : 03] And that's why our acceptance of others is rooted in God's acceptance of us. Because only once we are secure, only once we are resting in the fact that our identity is in Jesus Christ, will we then really be free to love and accept others as we should.

And so I want to thank for a moment or two just about sharing the acceptance we've found. If God has accepted you, then you accept others. Now, don't if you like London, don't if you went to London for the Olympics, some of you might have been there.

But apparently London was for two weeks the friendly city and all the Olympic volunteers were just amazing. If you looked at a map standing in the middle of London, then somebody would come up and ask you, can we help you and where do you want to go?

So that's great, isn't it? Imagine being made to feel that welcome, wondering about a great city that you don't know. And we want our church to be like that. We want it to be a welcoming place where people's needs are noticed.

And where help is offered in a thoughtful, generous and sensitive way. To those who are moving back to the city, to those who are new to the city, to those who are outsiders, we want to say to them that we care.

[27 : 27] And that we are concerned. And that means, of course, that we do need to care and we do need to concern about, be concerned about those who are outsiders in one way or another.

And that's a really important thing because sometimes I believe we aren't really bothered by outsiders or we can't be bothered with outsiders.

Or we're indifferent to them. People come in, new people and they go away. Every week happens all the time, doesn't it? Hundreds and hundreds of people every year come through into this church

for the first time.

And we get so used to it and so blasie about it and maybe perhaps indifferent. Well, indifference is a form of hatred.

You don't care about that person, you're saying they don't matter. They have no significance to you. And so indifference to people is a betrayal of God and gospel.

[28 : 37] And so we cannot be indifferent to people who come into our church. We can't just say, I'm not bothered about them.

We can't turn our backs on them and face inwardly into our cliques.

Some of us probably don't want our church to change. Some of us probably don't want new people. Some of us don't want the church to grow. Some of us don't want our relationships to have different dynamics or our friendships to be interrupted in any way.

Because we're here worshipping ourselves and our own comfort. And if that's our attitude to the outsider, we really need to hear God's rebuke, don't we?

Because God says, how dare you? I bleed and die for you while you're my enemy.

[29 : 44] And you will turn your back on the stranger and the visitor or the outsider and the needy and the broken.

So don't pretend you don't see people. And don't pretend you're not aware of who the visitor is. And don't pretend you haven't got time for them.

Because God brings these people into this church. It's no accident. And if you walk through the door into this church, the Holy Spirit brought them.

And so we have to be sensitive to them. And welcoming and loving and compassionate. That means we need to create space for others.

We have to adjust our own expectation and behavior. We need to look outwardly to see the stranger and the new person, to offer them a welcome and a smile.

[30 : 52] Sometimes it's just saying hello. Sometimes it's giving up your seat if the church is crowded and people are struggling to find somewhere to sit. Sometimes it's sharing your Bible if somebody can't follow what's going on.

Sometimes it's explaining our quirks of worship. Sometimes it's inviting to a coffee down the stairs.

Sometimes it's inviting to lunch. Sometimes it's inviting into your friendship circle.

Sometimes it's inviting into your home. Sometimes it's sharing your resources. And we don't always feel like doing that for other people. But we are called to do it.

And we need to treat each new person as someone wonderful, unique, that deserves our attention, that deserves our listening, and our thoughtfulness.

Welcoming people is not a technique. It's not just an automatic sort of, yeah, yeah, yeah, here's another new person, switch on the smile, give a quick handshake, and so on.

[31 : 56] Every person deserves to be taken seriously as another human being, made in the image of God, brought here by God, and into this community.

It might be for an hour, it might be for a week, it might be for a year, it might be for many years, how do we know? So please, I'm really encouraging you to be practical about this.

Look out for new people, if they need information about the service, the creche, the kids church, the youth fellowship or anything else, let them know what's going on, explain things.

If you see them again the next week, go back and say hello again. Don't just think, oh, I spoke to them last week, I don't need to speak to them this week. I'm off the hook.

If people want to make sense, seize their church, then help them to assimilate into the life of the church, introduce them to other people, introduce them to your city group, introduce them to the church family, and don't leave it to others.

[32 : 59] That's the easiest thing in the world to do. Now how can we do this? How can we really have a heart, not just a behaviour, but a heart and a mind that is open to others?

Especially if they're different from us, I was kind of annoyed, I was looking on Facebook for something tonight, couldn't find it, it was a Facebook post from Smithden Free Church, and they've created a new welcome page.

I don't know if any of you have read it, a lot of people seem to like it. I couldn't find it this afternoon, but it's brilliant if you can track it down anywhere. And I can't repeat it all because I couldn't remember it all, and it's quite lengthy, but it is absolutely fantastic.

And it just says something along the lines of, listen, are you homeless, or have you got several homes? Are you divorced, are you gay, are you married, you're welcome in our church. Are you single, are you young, you're welcome, are you old, and are you fun, you're welcome. Have you lost all your money at the bookies? You're welcome at Smithden.

[34 : 01] Have you lost your sense? You're welcome at Smithden. Have you lost your direction in life? You're welcome in Smithden. And it just goes through this amazingly long comprehensive list, and it's very kind of articulately put, of all the messed up, screwed up, wasted, lost kind of people who might drift into the church, and it just wants to say to every single one of them, you're welcome.

Now what Smithden is doing on its welcome page is dangerous, because unless that's more than words, you know, it's going to backfire.

But who, you know, are the broken people welcome here? The divorced, the lonely, the gay, the straight, the guy who's lost his money at the bookies the night before, the guy who's been out drinking all night, the couple who've broken up, the people who are lost and hurting, whoever they are, whatever their background, their ethnicity, their class, are they welcome?

What I found in the past is every church says you're welcome to everyone, of course they do. But there are subtle codes of behaviour in churches, where some people are more welcomed than others, because we recognise who's like us, and those who are like us get more easily accepted than those who are different from us.

And I've seen that at work in churches in very insidious ways. It's never overt, but it's working away in the fabric of a church.

[35 : 55] If you're like us, you're on the inside track, if you're different, you're going to struggle. Nobody will be nasty to you.

Nobody will say anything rude to you. But their hearts won't really be open, and their homes won't really be open.

So how are we going to welcome people with their differences? Well the only way is if we have God's heart in us, isn't it?

We have to remember we are loved by God, despite the fact that we are so unlovely ourselves. We have to let the Holy Spirit pour His love into our lives day by day.

We have to remember how great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we are called children of God. The only way that you will love people as you should is if you love God as you should.

[36 : 58] And so you need to focus first on your relationship with God, and let that be a relationship of mighty love.

And if your relationship with God is one of great love, then that will overflow in your life until loving others, whoever they are.

So let's accept what God offers, and what does God offer? Well through the Gospel, God offers us Himself.

And so let us receive Him this evening. And then what do we offer to others? We offer ourselves. Father in heaven, we just ask that this will be a church where we take these kind of things really seriously, where we take people seriously, where we take your work and your kingdom seriously, where we take your gospel seriously and your word.

[38 : 04] And so we ask that we will know what it is to be accepted by you this evening. If anybody doesn't know that, we pray for them now at this moment. God help them to accept Christ if they have never done so.

Help them to see that Jesus is worth more than anything in life itself. And help them just to pray to you at this moment that you would be in their life also, and that they would be accepted by you.

And we pray that we will love others too, and that we will accept others in this church, no matter who they are and how different they may be.

In Christ's name, amen.