

Hope and Hospitality

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Date: 26 June 2011

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[0 : 00] Thanks to him. Folks, let's pray. Father, Holy Spirit, we need you.

Change our hearts. Open our hearts this evening to hear your word. In Christ's name, amen. Team, my name is Aaron Roberts. If you haven't met me before, hello.

Nice to meet you. Nice to see you. Just a quick notice before I start. I'm away for the next two Sundays on vacation. I felt to tell you that, so you didn't think that all the ministers at St. John's were leaving.

So I'm leaving, but I'm definitely coming back. Okay. So this is the third week on what has been a similar topic that's taken up all of Romans chapter 14 and a good chunk of 15 here.

And as I was writing this, I was curious to know, I was thinking, I wonder what people have got out of it so far. If I kind of had to interview everyone and I said, so what are your thoughts?

[1 : 08] What have you learnt? Let me tell you what my worst case scenario would be. Okay. My worst case scenario would be this.

It would be if you came up to me and said, Aaron, I've really loved everything you've said and you're absolutely right. I need to be nicer to the new people. If that's what you thought I've been saying for the last two weeks, I'd be devastated.

Absolutely devastated. Not that that's a bad thing. It's nice to be new people. But on a scale of kind of like one to what Paul was actually getting at, being nice to new people is probably sort of about here.

Like it's good. It's better than, you know, punching new people or something like that or insulting new people. But it's still, it's not really what Paul has been trying to get at here.

And remember, we're coming to the end of the book of Romans, which is a monster book. It's huge. And this is kind of like we're arriving at the climax of Paul's argument, sort of the crescendo of his theological opus.

[2 : 18] And I think it's fairly safe to assume the great summary of this work is not going to be let's be nicer to each other.

So let's have a quick review of the last couple of weeks. So you remember, first week, beginning of chapter 14, Paul says new people are turning up in the church. Don't do what your natural inclination would be to do if they're a little bit different to you.

Your natural inclination might be to argue with them. Try and convince them of your position. Don't do that. Just welcome them in with a warm heart. Last week, Paul ratcheted that up even more.

And he said, you know, don't just welcome them. Actually adjust your life. Actually make changes in your behavior. Make space for them.

And we talked about how this is actually the opposite of tolerance, what you think it might be saying. And this week, Paul continues to ratchet it up even more because he puts this all in the context of the grand narrative of the whole Bible.

[3 : 26] So let's have a look at the text. You can see if you open, it would be helpful to open your Bibles there to Romans 15. You can see there that there's two sort of chunks, 1 to 7, 8 to 13.

We're going to look at the second chunk first. All right? All right. The second chunk first. Just have a look at that there.

For I tell you that Christ became a servant of the circumcised to show God's truthfulness in order to conform the promises given to the patriarchs, that Gentiles might glorify God.

Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles. Rejoice, O Gentiles. Praise the Lord, O you Gentiles, that all the people extol him. Even he who arises to rule the Gentiles, and him will the Gentiles hope.

When I read this, I thought, this is what Paul's doing. It's like he's grabbing your eyeballs, he's grabbing your eyeballs, and he's going, and he's yanking them up, and he's going, look, all this stuff I've been saying for the last couple of weeks, let me tell you what it's really about.

[4 : 38] It's not about you, for a start. And it's not even really about new people. It's actually about what God has had planned for the world all along.

The welcome that Christians give each other, particularly new people. The adjusting of your life. The welcoming into your hearts and into your homes. All of that stuff does not come from the idea of like, well, it's just nice to be nice, so we should do that.

It all grows out of the primary narrative of the whole Bible. The basic Christian story, which Paul is trying to get across here. And the narrative is this, that God's plan, right from the beginning, because all of these quotes here, these are all quotes, these are all Old Testament quotes here, verses 8 to 13.

God's plan, God's plan right from the beginning, is that he would have a kingdom that would be made up of all nations, Jew and Gentile, and they would all, with one voice, glorify God.

That's, that's the Bible story. That's what we're heading to. That we would glorify, praise, rejoice, and extol. That's where we're headed.

[6 : 00] And that, is why, this welcoming stuff is important. Not because, it's just a nice thing to do. Let me put it a whole, let me say it, in different words now, okay?

Alright, so there was a problem in the Roman church. These new kids were coming through, new believers, Paul describes them as weak in their faith, and Paul is concerned about the attitude of some of the stronger, more long-term Christians in the church.

He's concerned that they might act in a way which discourages the weaker ones. And so his challenge to the strong ones is this, you guys, you've got to get along with these new guys. Why?

And here's where Paul sort of puts this little local conflict, this tiny little localized conflict, in the context of the great landscape of salvation history. And he says, do this, not just to get along with each other, not because it's just a nice thing to do.

And then he quotes all this Old Testament stuff about the Gentiles being part of God's people. And he says, God is creating a people, he's bringing a people together, that's always been his plan. And why is he doing that?

[7 : 04] And the answer's in verse 6. It's quite a good summary of this whole thing. That together, they with one voice will glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is what it's all about. That is why we adjust our lives for other people. That is why we are nice to each other. That is why we invite people into our homes. That is why when we come here, we look for the people that are new, that we haven't seen before.

because it's part of God's great plan for the world. This is the big thing. And that's where we direct our hope.

And hope is a very big word in this text. It's mentioned a number of times you can see if you slide your eyes across it. I want to spend just a couple of minutes talking about hope.

The final words of Paul on this sort of topic here are a prayer. Verse 13. Let me read this prayer to you.

[8 : 12] May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Let me ask you let me ask you where you put your hope.

Like seriously, just have a think about it. Where do you actually put all your hope? Where does it reside? Because that's a really important question to ask your heart.

Is your hope found in your belief that you are capable of making good decisions? And as a result life will be okay. Is that the source of your hope?

Are you thinking yeah, I'll get a good education? I'll get a good job? I'll have interests. I'll be an interesting person. People will be attracted to me. I'll have a variety of friends.

I will eat well and stay healthy. I will achieve financial security at 55. It's going to be okay. I think if you ask most Vancouverites that's probably where they place their hope and it's a tragedy because that stuff can be so easily robbed from us.

[9 : 34] It's a counterfeit hope. It's a counterfeit for the kind of hope that only God can give us and it's counterfeit because you aren't God and therefore no matter how hard you try you can't control everything in your world.

There is no guarantee that you'll make good decisions. My old mentor back in New Zealand said you know every one of us is one step away from catastrophic moral failure. There is no hope that you'll get a really great job really.

There's no guarantees of this stuff. Economic downturn, natural disaster and death can quickly wipe those things away and of course death is the big one isn't it? That's the great equaliser.

I'm a minister right? I'm ordained. I've had the magic dust sprinkled on me and as a minister I get to do funerals and funerals are really really I love doing funerals because people are real.

They want to talk about real stuff at funerals. Weddings are wonderful. They're so happy but everyone's just really happy. It's good to be happy but funerals people really want to talk about what's going on in their hearts and I've done a number of funerals now.

[10 : 47] I did a funeral for somebody a while ago a woman and I don't know where her faith was to be honest we don't know but her husband told us that he was an atheist and it was so sad because in his mind death had the final word that's it it was all over and it's a terrible thing to have no hope in the face of death.

Now on the other hand we have this tragic situation which you can read about in the PLN Abigail Scott who was one of our congregants in the mourning congregation 26, 27 years old died in a car accident a week or so ago on the way to a wedding she used to sing in the choir beautiful girl wonderful girl on the other hand that is a tragedy it's awful and we can feel the wrongness of this this is wrong death and the Christian economy is wrong but we can we can face it with hope and so we can go to her memorial service which is I think in a week's time and we can entrust her into God's hands with great hope because she placed her hope in Christ and Christ will see her through her death.

it's a terrible thing to have no hope and so I ask you again where is your hope where have you put it in this text it's asking us to put our hope in the right thing in God and his plan for a new creation he will make all things right there will be a place it will be a place of no sin no death where people are united and worshipping God and that's a wonderful that is a wonderful thing to put your hope in that is our future hope it's where we should be putting it but we live now where there is sin and death and uncertainty we live before the new creation is complete and Paul is saying to us you know you don't just sit around and wait for it Paul is reminding us and has been for a couple of weeks now since starting talking about what Christianity looks like sort of played out in the real world

Paul is reminding us that God is inviting us into the work of renewing the world so we have this great we have this great hope and what's to come we live now he's talking about welcoming people it's not just about being nice it's God saying you know what be a part of my renewing of the whole world be a part show the world a glimpse of the kingdom that's what happens when you're welcoming somebody that's new here who might be very different to you those are kingdom moments so Paul is saying set our hearts on God's future hope but participate in the renewal of it now and how do we do that well that's verses 1 to 7 which is quite handy so let's look at 1 to 7 just slide your eyes over that really quickly again just to remind yourself of what that's about one thing that doesn't come through explicitly in the text but is true is what Paul is demonstrating through his call for unity for Paul to be saying these words and for Paul to be saying this stuff he has been for a couple of weeks now is a testimony to the radical work of the

Holy Spirit in renewing somebody's heart because you know that Jews and Gentiles haven't traditionally got on that well right and the prejudice is on both sides and Paul was a Christian killer like he would organise Christians to be killed he was no friend of the Gentiles not afraid to have somebody killed that thought differently to him and here he is saying you know what you should no like actually welcome welcome people and actually adjust your lives this is a radical work of the Holy Spirit and undoing some deeply embedded prejudices in the heart of this man let me ask you another tough question the hope one was tough right I'm sorry about that here's another tough one do you have prejudices are there people that you instinctively distance yourself from do you distance yourself from people that are older than you or younger than you that look different to you that are culturally worlds apart from you or using the example of this passage here whose faith looks a bit different to yours who isn't as far along the journey as you do you distance yourself from these people if you do then your heart needs to be submitted to the work of the Holy

[16:19] Spirit and changing that and Paul gives us several ways of dealing with our prejudices here our tendency to look down on people to sort of implicitly unwelcome them to uninvite them into our community verses 1 2 and 3 here give us a couple of really great strategies for dealing with sort of inherent prejudices verse 1 we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves let each of us please our neighbour for his good to build him up for Christ did not please himself but as it is written the reproaches of those who approached you fell on me so it's saying here you have an obligation to the weak saying this to the strong the strong being people who have a strong enough faith to realise they can actually do a lot of things which the previous religious hierarchy said you couldn't do you have an obligation to them it's kind of like debt word and then it says to bear with the failings of the weak to bear with it means to carry them to put your shoulder in there and lift them up in Luke 7 they talk about carrying a stretcher it's kind of getting your shoulder in there and carrying them that's what it's talking about so we need to we have an obligation to put a shoulder in and to carry somebody to carry people to carry the people that are different the people who are weak in faith so it doesn't mean just tolerate them it doesn't mean just put up with them it's not just humour them it means to walk with them whilst they grow understand their freedom in greater ways and this is a challenge because we come to church and we want to see our mates and we want to see our friends and hang out with them and talk about cool stuff you know talk about movies or guns

I don't know what you talk about but you know like I'm not from around here so it's it's but this is kind of urging us that we should we should talk to our mates about their faith see how they're checking see how they're going particularly the ones that we know if their faith is a bit marginal or if they're a bit on the edge check in with them ask them some tough questions be prepared to walk with them so Paul's first way of dealing with prejudice is pretty head on he says just get involved with them get involved with their lives secondly we do this in these three verses it says as we follow the example of Christ which is the way of self sacrifice which is the way of the cross and it pushes this home by saying in verse one here do this and not to please yourselves don't please yourself and I think that's one of the toughest things in this whole passage here that's a very unpopular thing to think about and want to do is because don't we want to please ourselves aren't we like really great aren't we our priority or not according to this a woman called

I think it's a woman her name is Jean actually that could go either way couldn't it really twinge couple of great names there she wrote a book in 2006 called Generation Me why today's young Americans are more confident assertive entitled and more miserable than ever before so ironically the path of self service is the path of unhappiness and according to the Christian faith eternal disaster let me read a little bit from this book here in the early 1950s only 12% of teens aged between 14 and 16 agreed with the statement I am an important person only 12% agreed with that in the late 80s it was 80% said I am an important person over and over tests have shown that narcissistic behaviour is growing in the newer generations she states narcissism is one of the few personality traits that psychologists agree is almost completely negative narcissists are overly focused on themselves and lack empathy for others which means they cannot see another person's perspective they also feel entitled to special privileges and believe they are superior to other people mass narcissism exists on a scale never seen before and I think we all know this and certainly the advertisers and marketers know it there's something called entitlement advertising you would have seen these ads on TV which always finish with the line you deserve it or it's all about you it's playing to this idea that I am the most important thing in the whole universe and this is why

Romans has been really difficult for some of us it's been difficult for me because we want our lives to be about us and Paul is constantly pushing us out of the centre of the story of our lives at the beginning of Romans all that stuff about justification right it was weird chapters weird years on justification in Romans right you know what that means it means you can't save yourself salvation it's not about you you know Jesus did that for you the stuff about election which received mixed reviews but what's that essentially about it's not about you actually you know you didn't choose God God chose you and now our relationships with other people in the church it's not about you it's not about pleasing yourself it's about the other person the Christian always asks what will build up my neighbour and this is really tough stuff

I know but I cannot avoid what the passage is telling us and I cannot soften it or take the edge off it to make us feel better about it and the reason it feels tough and the reason you think I'm being hard on you is because it bumps up against every other message you hear in the media and in the movies and on television and songs and stuff Leonard Bernstein was a famous conductor he was asked what is the hardest instrument to play and without pause he said second fiddle second fiddle he said but without it there is no harmony and this passage is asking us to play second fiddle to our friends to the new folks because the bottom line here is that there is no way for us to be a family to have unity to glorify God with one voice unless there is self-sacrifice and to see what that looks like we turn to Christ to see how

[23 : 29] Christ lived to see how Christ acted remember in the garden of Gethsemane when Christ is you know he's sweating blood and he's praying to God God if there's anywhere I can get out of this let's do that but not but not my will your will be done you guys know that passage imagine if imagine if Christ had just just walked off you know imagine if he hadn't prayed that prayer and just walked off over the Mount of Olives and into the darkness and said well I've had it with you guys it's all about me I'm going back to the Father you're on your own I mean it's just too horrible to think about right but he didn't choose that he chose the way of sacrifice and we are his followers and our way is the way of sacrifice Holy Spirit help us a reminder we will all fail at this we will all fail but we have a pretty good crack at it you know okay lastly let's have a look at verse four and then I'll finish verse four how else are we dealing with our prejudices says here in verse four that we read the word you need some endurance you need some encouragement we'll go to the scriptures go to the scriptures two reasons listed here one it reminds us of the long term fidelity of God

I mean God's been knocking on our door for you know thousands of years God has been committed to us as a people for a very very long time it reminds us of that so we are encouraged by that reminds us that inviting people into this family is a long term project the second thing it reminds us is that scriptures impart hope to us and how do they do that very quickly because they show us what we're working towards they show us what the holy spirit's doing in our hearts they show us the kingdom before us which we see glimpses of now but we don't see in its fullness yet but we will and that encourages us we experience it in part now and the way we experience it in part now the way that we see and experience these kingdom moments in our fellowship and our family here today it's by doing what this passage has been talking about what I've been talking about for 20 minutes by living the life of sacrifice by bearing with the weak getting along beside them by following the example of Christ and knowing his forgiveness when we undoubtedly fail to do this well and by keeping ahead of us the long term vision of God and by asking the Holy Spirit to deal with the prejudices in our hearts that's awesome eh these are passages contain two prayers so let's pray them together now

I'll read them for you they're verses 5 and 6 and 13 they're both prayers let's pray together I'll read them to you may the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in verse 13 may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace and believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope amen