

# ONE ANOTHER

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*Cultivating Christ-Centered Community*

LESSON FOUR

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# THE FRUIT OF ACCEPTING & WELCOMING ONE ANOTHER

- Becoming aware of people outside of your immediate family, circle of friends, and church
- Displaying God's welcoming heart to the world by welcoming others into your group, circle, life
- Cultivating openness to people who are different from you
- Developing a hospitable community in which strangers can become known
- Providing safe places for people in an unsafe world
- Opening your home to others
- Expressing God's love through celebrating and honoring others
- Loving others with the eyes and the voice and the presence of God within us

## ACCEPT & WELCOME ONE ANOTHER

*May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept one other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory. – Romans 15:5-7*

The church is meant to be the “show and tell” of what true belonging and love look like. To accept and welcome one another is to create a space where a friend or stranger can enter and experience the welcoming spirit of Christ. Welcoming others involves becoming aware of people outside our families, our circle of friends, and our faith communities. We take a risk by reaching out, introducing ourselves, and taking an interest in their lives.

We must remind ourselves that welcoming the stranger is a gift of genuine love that we can give every day of the year, but it must be rooted in genuine, direct relationships. As we learn to “see” people in our personal lives and in the world of the communities in which we participate—our neighborhoods, societies, communities, and churches—we become able to show love and compassion more directly.

In an excerpt on the following page, Chris Webb recalls a line from the Rule of St. Benedict which has deeply shaped the character of monasteries and Christian communities for over 1500 years. In the 53rd chapter of the Rule, Benedict writes: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.” And Benedict immediately roots this idea in the teaching of Jesus (Matt 25:31-40). Like the Benedictine monks, encouraged by the teaching of Jesus, we can simply learn to see the guest as Christ among us. We don't ask, “What would Jesus do?,” but rather, “What would I do for Christ?”

Let's think about what it looks like to be devoted to one another in love, to honor one another above ourselves, and to accept one another as Christ has accepted us. Why does God call us to this, and how does living these things out in the world further the Kingdom of God?



# Becoming Like Jesus: Public Dimension of Our Witness

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As we learn to “see” people in our personal lives, so in the public arena – the world of the communities in which we participate, our neighborhoods, societies, communities, and churches – we become able to show love and compassion more directly. There are many ways of expressing this love, but I often think that one of the most powerful communal spiritual practices is that known in the Benedictine tradition as hospitality.

We sometimes think of hospitality in very simple and functional terms: providing a meal for someone, or opening our home to offer them a place to rest or sleep. But in the Christian tradition the word has always had much broader connotations. There is a brief line in the Rule of St. Benedict which has deeply shaped the character not only of monasteries but also many other churches and Christian communities for over a millennium and a half. In the 53rd chapter of the Rule, Benedict writes: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.” And Benedict immediately roots this idea in the teaching of Jesus (Matt 25:31-40).

Hospitality, then, is extending to the stranger – especially the hungry, thirsty, outcast, needy, suffering stranger – the same welcome we would seek to extend to Christ himself. For Benedictine monasteries, this meant making extraordinary provisions for a stranger who arrived at the gates. On arriving at the monastery, the visitor would be greeted with a bow, or even a complete prostration on the ground; Christ was being worshiped in the person of the guest. Then there would be prayers together, after which the abbot himself would be summoned to wash the hands and feet of the guest. Other members of the community might also wash the visitor’s feet, before a meal was prepared. It might be that the guest had arrived during a fast; no matter. A separate kitchen was maintained for guests, and food would be prepared anyway. Guest quarters would be prepared with good bedding. Even monks keeping strict silence could speak to greet a guest, politely explain their silence, and ask humbly for a blessing.

Like the Benedictine monks, encouraged by the teaching of Jesus, we can simply learn to see the guest as Christ among us. We don’t ask, “What would Jesus do?,” but rather, “What would I do for Christ?”

Jesus gives us a magnificent example of the nature of hospitality in Matthew’s gospel. As Jesus came down from the mountain, after delivering the Sermon on the Mount, he was confronted by a leper who begged him for healing. And, of course, Jesus does heal him – the leprosy is entirely cured, and the man restored to a normal life in his family and community. A wonderful miracle! But there is one small detail in the story that always catches my eye. Before Jesus heals the leper, before he even speaks to him, he does something quite extraordinary. “He stretched out his hand,” Matthew tells us, “and touched him” (Matt 8:3). This poor man had perhaps not been intentionally touched for years, other than by fellow sufferers. He was, quite literally, an outcast – shunned by society, feared and loathed by all. Jesus’ simple act had incredible healing power. Before he tackled the disease, he welcomed the man back into human society. There’s a powerful example of hospitality in this story. Few of us have the kind of healing ministry that can bring cleansing to lepers. But any of us could simply reach out and touch the untouchables.

The Hebrew word shalom is usually translated “peace” in our Bibles, but it actually carries a much richer and wider range of meaning. It implies a wholeness and integrity in human life and relationships. When we learn to “see” the people around us, instead of simply bumping from one to another as we pursue our own self-centered agendas, we experience shalom. When our communities and churches become places of welcome and hospitality, in which all people experience the loving welcome of God himself, we find shalom. This is the compassionate life to which Jesus calls and invites us.

- Excerpt from the article “Becoming Like Jesus: Compassionate Life” by Chris Webb

# ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER

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## “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you...” Romans 15:7

### Read Romans 15:1-13

Following his command to have Jesus’ attitude toward each other in spite of differences, Paul calls readers to accept one another (15:7). He turns their attention to God's presence in their midst, especially in the experience of mutual love and service between people who previously were enemies. "Welcome one another," he says, "as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

For the Christians who lived in Rome, Paul’s words would have had very concrete implications. Most scholars believe that the house churches in Rome were mixed communities comprised of Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, Paul would have known of some Jewish Christians who had returned to Rome and who, alongside Gentile co-believers, would now be facing the difficult question of how to live together as one family with those who embraced very different cultural traditions.

Paul’s words needed to be translated into concrete behavior, and for the Roman house churches, that meant in particular not thinking that some members of the communities have more value than other members. Because Christ has welcomed both Jews and Gentiles—in fulfillment of God’s promises—the Roman Christians are to welcome one another as Jews and Gentiles. Moreover, the strong are to bear with the weak (Romans 15:1), for Christ himself died “for the weak” (Romans 5:6: here, all people without distinction).

Paul knows that this will not be solved overnight and stresses that there are some practical things over which Christians can legitimately disagree, and they should not impair common worship. If Christ remains the decisive factor for the community, then the community can reach unity through its diversity and thus glorify God. Shared worship is central to Paul’s vision. He doesn’t say that one should wait to share in worship until all aspects of belief and practice have been hammered out. Instead, he sees the mutual welcome, allowing people from very different backgrounds literally to worship together with one voice, as the essence of the journey for a deeper unity. Shared fellowship should be a central means by which we travel together along that road.

Unity according to Christ also means that differences are not erased. They don’t have to conform to one particular pattern of behavior, but they do have to realize that the essential and defining character of their identity is now Christ. Using scripture, Paul reminds readers of the importance of both Jews and Gentiles.

- o Jesus came to confirm the promises to the Jews (8).
- o Jesus came to extend the mercy of God beyond the Jews to the Gentiles (9).
  - o 15:9 echoes 2 Sam 22:50 and Psalm 18:49.
  - o 15:10 echoes Deut 32:43.
  - o 15:11 echoes Psalm 117:1.
  - o 15:12 echoes Isa 11:10.

Ultimately, the welcome Paul has in mind challenges the ones who offer it. It pushes them to the edges of the community and calls them to accept those who come as they are, without seeking to first transform them so that they adapt to the dominant practice.



# ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER

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### Reflections

- "Welcome one another," Paul says. This welcome, this radical greeting, is the welcome offered to the one who does not look like myself, who is not a member of my "immediate" family. Perhaps this one dresses differently, celebrates different traditions, looks different, perhaps this one is even sick or without a home or in serious difficulty. No matter how 'difference' is defined, this one is like a Gentile (to expand the use of a scriptural term Paul employs). (D. Lange, “The Vision of the Coming Kingdom”)
- As one author observes, “This is the gospel in a nutshell. Christ has welcomed us, all of us, and brought us home to God and to each other. Let us not be sentimental about this welcome; to open our arms to those who otherwise are strangers and even enemies is nothing short of a miracle of grace.” The experience of that welcome is the way we learn that "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). (Susan Eastman, “Romans 15”)
- The “Christ-event” — Christ’s death and resurrection for the salvation of Jews and Gentiles — reveals the nature of God’s grace: it is a gift given without consideration of worth or status. The divisions that exist within the community are overwhelmed by the grace of God for all people. That grace is the foundation for the life of the community, which does not erase social difference and ethnic distinction but embraces the other.
- The way God has worked in Christ to welcome and to reconcile sinners to himself reveals the way Christians are to welcome one another. We are at a time in our country’s life in which tribalism is pulling us apart. We must grow beyond defining “one another” in such a way that really only means people like us. Together we must extend our welcome of others on the same basis as Christ’s welcome of us. The light of Christ will only fully shine on the world when the church becomes a people who better reflect the story of radical hospitality — the story of Jesus during his time on earth, the story of the Christ who has accepted all into the presence of God. (J.R. Daniel Kirk, “Romans 15:4-13”)
- Our acceptance of one another — our building of a beautiful community — gives God glory. And the foundation for that begins with understanding God’s acceptance of us. Our capacity to accept and welcome other people is rooted in God’s unconditional acceptance and welcome of us. If it’s true that Jesus entered our world through his life, death, and resurrection, and reached into our lives to welcome us and show us the way to become truly human despite all of our mess, how can we possibly not accept or welcome another human being?
- We live in a world filled with violence and hatred and looking down upon each other. But when Christ came, he taught us how to be merciful, how to look at people and recognize their dignity and worth as children of God made in God’s image. How can we refuse to accept someone when Jesus accepted us? When we accept and welcome one another, and we look for what’s best in the person, we’re doing what God does; so when we do this, we’re participating in something truly sacred. This is the kind of church we want to be. This is the kind of church the world is looking for in the life we lead.

# DISCUSSION

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1. Describe a time in which you were in a new or unfamiliar space and experienced the welcome and acceptance of others. How did you feel at first? What did the actions of the other person (or people) mean to you?
2. Name some examples of the ways in which Jesus embodied acceptance and welcome to others.
  - What do these examples teach us about the character of God? Which of these examples are most relevant to your life right now?
  - How does our accepting and welcoming of one another relate to Christ's acceptance and welcome of us?
3. Do you think it's easier (or more natural) for us to divide and draw lines than to practice acceptance? Why?
  - When you are unsure about how to respond to someone, is it better to err on the side of acceptance or err on the side of exclusion?
4. How does practicing acceptance and welcome of one another lead to increased ability to praise God? Why does God call us to this, and how does living these things out in the world further the kingdom of God?
5. What does welcoming and accepting one another actually look like for us? What practices are associated with it?
6. Spend some time in genuine conversation with a neighbor or someone outside your inner circle. Ask about their lives. Where are they from? Where are their families? What do they do? Who are their friends? What are their interests, their stories, their memories? Begin to see them as people.