



# Paul's Letter to The Romans

## Former Strangers, Now Servants... Romans 15:7-13

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 15:7**...Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup> For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, <sup>9</sup> and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." <sup>10</sup> And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." <sup>11</sup> And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." <sup>12</sup> And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." <sup>13</sup> 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.

A motif is a recurring subject, theme or idea.

Literary motifs are images, symbols, or themes that are repeated throughout a piece of literature or across more than one piece of literature so as to form a pattern.<sup>1</sup> For example, the shepherd motif or shepherd theme or idea is repeated time and again both in Scripture and in other literature. You can see it in the life of Moses, and in the life of David, and even more importantly in the life of the Lord Jesus.

In the Bible, Moses, David, and the Lord Jesus are shown to shepherds or shepherds in training with the result that over the course of the narrative they

become the literal fulfillment of the symbol itself. They are pictured symbolically as shepherds, and they become shepherds indeed. That is, they become deliverers or kings or redeemers. Moses trained on the backside of Sinai and there learned patience and endurance herding a bunch of scraggly, obdurate sheep which in turn enabled him to become the great shepherd deliverer of the people of Israel.

The shepherd motif in the life of David is even more pronounced and even easier to see. He was a faithful shepherd who guarded and protected his father's sheep and he became a faithful shepherd who guarded and protected the God's people or sheep. He was chosen for the task because he possessed a nurturing heart like unto God himself. That is, he was a man after God's own heart.

You can see that idea in David's own thinking in places where he himself alluded to the Lord God of Israel as being his shepherd, places like Psalm 23 and Psalm 28.

And the Lord Jesus, who was not as far as I can tell ever an actual shepherd in reality, is often spoken of in terms of being a shepherd. He was greeted in his birth by a number of shepherds sort of offering the indication early on that shepherds always know another shepherd when they see one. And the Lord Jesus often applied the term "shepherd" to his life and ministry. In fact, he did so over and over again. Listen to a few passages:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 2:6...**"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 25:32**..."Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 26:31**..."Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 10:16**...And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

I could go on, but I think you see what I mean. Jesus was and is the ideal shepherd with the result that he is thought of by the church as the very embodiment of the term...so much so that whenever anyone says, "Consider the good shepherd" everyone knows to whom they are referring without even asking.

That is what I mean when I say that there is a shepherd motif that runs throughout Scripture. Obviously there are countless other motifs or themes as well. I bring that up because there are, in fact, two literary motifs in our passage this morning. There are two other motifs or allusions used and they are both repeated often in Scripture.

The first is the stranger motif. You see it the phrase, "Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you."

I am not sure exactly how many times the idea of unknown "**stranger**" or a "**stranger in a strange land**" comes up in the biblical text, but it is pervasive. You

can see it as early as the life of Abraham as he travelled through the land of Canaan with God's promise that, "Whoever blesses you, him will I bless."<sup>2</sup>

And you see it all through the law passages of Exodus through Deuteronomy where God takes a special interest in strangers and the treatment strangers receive.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Numbers 15:14...** And if a stranger is sojourning with you, or anyone is living permanently among you, and he wishes to offer a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD, he shall do as you do. <sup>15</sup> For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner shall be alike before the LORD. <sup>16</sup> One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you."

<sup>ESV</sup> **Leviticus 19:33...**"When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. <sup>34</sup> You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

You can see in the book of Judges as well where a prophet passes through the land of Gibeah and is treated with so much contempt as a stranger that it reminds the reader of the contempt with which Lot and the two angels are treated in Sodom.

Still, I think the one of clearest expression of the stranger motif occurs in the New Testament where Jesus relates God's concern for strangers in Matthew 25. In the passage, which I think will be familiar to everyone here Jesus tells his disciples about the judgment at the end of time. This is what he says:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 25:34**...Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? <sup>38</sup> And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' <sup>40</sup> And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' <sup>41</sup> "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?'

The stranger motif is also used in the book of Hebrews where the writer says:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Hebrews 13:1**...Let brotherly love continue. <sup>2</sup> Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

You can see what I mean. Paul's command to "welcome one another" used here in Romans 15 invokes the stranger motif. Paul tells the Romans to welcome or accept one another as if they are strangers in each other's midst. It is a repeated theme in Scripture and was often used as a basis for a charge of judgment. Now in our day, social gospel advocates want to apply the passage to dealing with aliens or illegal immigrants but that is not the context of the passage at all. It is instead a reference to those who have come from far away to seek the kingdom of God. The context, I think, argues for the upcoming inclusion of the Gentiles.

Of course in the context of Romans 15:7-13, the issue of acceptance...of welcoming...is related to the conflict between the "weak" and the "strong." Still,

understanding the idea of welcoming a stranger or Paul using a “stranger motif” makes the idea all that easier to understand. You see that has been the point of Paul’s discussion all along since chapter 14. Paul has been arguing that Christians ought to welcome or accept one another in spite of their preferences or personal opinions. We are to accept Christians with differences, Christians we may actually know pretty well, just as we would accept strangers coming to worship our God.

And, of course, there’s the rub. That is, there’s the hard part. We know them and we know their opinions and preferences and sometimes we don’t like some or any of their ideas. It reminds me of that great tongue in cheek poem Dr. Magee used to quote all the time:

To be above with saints we love,  
Ah won’t that be glory.  
But to stay below with saints we know,  
Well that’s another story.

But Paul has been developing that idea for such a lengthy period of time that really Romans 15:7 is just the beginning of the end of his argument...a fairly tightly organized, tightly developed argument that goes all the way back to Romans 14:1.

Starting here in Romans 14:1, Paul argued:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 14:1**...As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

But here in Romans 15:7, Paul is coming to the conclusion of his overall argument and repeats his point forming a sort of ring composition or literary bookends.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 15:7**...Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Romans 14:1 was the beginning of his argument. Romans 15:7 is the end.

In Romans 14:1, Paul argues that the Romans ought to welcome each other but not to quarrel over opinions. In the verses between Romans 14:1 and Romans 15:7, Paul goes on to argue that the greater responsibility falls on the stronger brothers to accept or welcome the weaker brother simply because they are the stronger brothers. Here in Romans 15:7, Paul concludes his thought by adding that we ought to welcome one another but as he brings his argument to a close he adds a completely different reason or point for welcoming one another.

Look at what Paul says in Romans 15:7:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 15:7**...Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Now I want us to parse that a bit.

The “therefore” at the beginning of the verse tells us that everything that has been argued from the beginning of chapter 14 is to be taken into account. That is we are supposed to welcome the weaker brothers taking into account that they have been welcomed by the Lord, and that it is the Lord that will make them

stand. We are to take into account that their weakness is still an attempt to honor God and that they do what they do, or even better they are unable to do all that stronger brothers can, because their consciences won't permit them. We are to remember that we are not to be judgmental but rather to leave judgment to God who will require of all of us an accounting.

That is what the "therefore" refers to, and what Paul says is that because all of that is true we are to "accept" or "welcome" one another as strangers...just as Christ has welcomed us. And you can see I think how all of that connects to the idea of a stranger motif. Christ accepted us and welcomed us when we were desperate sinners far away. He accepted us Gentiles when we were "without hope and God in the world." And we are to accept "weaker brothers" in exactly the same way...the same way he accepted us.

Now I think we ought to take a moment and let that sink in.

We are commanded by the Holy Spirit through the pen of Paul to welcome or accept one another in exactly the same manner that Christ has welcomed or accepted us.

So let me ask you, "How has Christ welcomed you?"

When I answer that question, I have to say things like:

"He has condescended to welcome me."

"He came out of heaven and condescended to my world to welcome me."

"He gave selflessly to welcome me."

"He bore with my weaknesses; and he bore my weaknesses."

“He prayed and prays for me.”

“He loves me in spite of my unloveliness.”

“He has showered me with gifts.”

“He has made himself to be my friend.”

“He has made himself to be a go between between me and those who are angry with me.”

“He sustains me with his words, his food, and his life.”

“He keeps me in his thoughts, his plans, and his heart.”

Now I know there are a lot of generalizations there, but I suspect you understand everything I just said and that your list looks pretty much like mine. So let me ask you, “How are you doing in welcoming others that same way?” I have to tell you I am not doing too well. Of course, I have an excuse. I live a long way away from the church and that makes it hard to be very welcoming. To which you will no doubt say, “But Tom didn’t you say Jesus came down out of heaven to welcome you?” To which I would have to respond, “Yes, I...I see what you mean.”

Of course, all of us have our reasons why we are isolated or withdrawn and yet there is uncomfortable reality of the truth that Jesus welcomed us...actually welcomed us when we were sinners and aliens to the kingdom of God and He commands here through the words of His apostle to do exactly the same.

I will never forget my good friend Ken Gregson. Ken was the President and CEO of Tandycrafts back in the day that I worked for Joshua’s Christian Bookstores. He developed the company and built the company and helped provide a living for thousands of people across America only to be forced out of his job in a

political *coups d'état* by a bunch of spineless corporate vermin that attempted to steal his money, his reputation and his position. Anyway, right before Ken died called me and he asked me to come and visit him in the hospital because he wanted me to preach his funeral. So I did. And as we visited we talked about the gospel. We talked about his faith and confidence in Christ's atoning work on his behalf and we talked about the good old days and Tandycrafts and finally I just asked him, "Ken how was it that you managed to keep going after you were forced out? How was it that you managed to forgive the guys that did what they did to you and to your company? How was it that you manage to still live with a measure of joy and contentment? How was it that you managed to treat such men with a measure of civility and grace"

I don't think I will ever forget his answer to me, "You know Tom, I just thought about what Christ had done for me and I realized that I really didn't have any other choice."

You see that's what we are to do. We are to welcome one another and we are to do that just as Christ welcomed us and drew himself to us and included us. And we are to do all of that in order that God might be praised or glorified.

He is the one who initiated the welcome we have in Christ; He is the one who accepted us in Christ. So whenever we bring those in who were far away and welcome them in Christ we bring honor and glory to God.

Now I mentioned early on that there are two literary motifs found in the section in Romans 15:7-13. The first one is the "stranger motif." The second one is found in verse 8 and is the "servant motif."

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 15:7**...Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup> For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, <sup>9</sup> and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

Now you and I both know already some of the many times Christ is called the "servant of God." It is an idea that is repeated over and over again in the life of Christ and is taken originally, I think, from the idea of the great suffering servant in Isaiah.

Still you see it many times in the New Testament. Perhaps nowhere more clearly stated that in Mark 10:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Mark 10:45**...For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

And nowhere more clearly illustrated that in John 13 where Jesus washes the feet of the disciples demonstrating how is their servant in the great work of atonement that he is about to complete.

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 13:1**...Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup> During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, <sup>3</sup> Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, <sup>4</sup> rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. <sup>5</sup> Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. <sup>6</sup> He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." <sup>8</sup> Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." <sup>9</sup> Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my

feet only but also my hands and my head!" <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." <sup>11</sup> For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean." <sup>12</sup> When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" <sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. <sup>14</sup> If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Isn't that about the most beautiful thing ever written? And that is what Paul though the Holy Spirit calls us to in Romans 15 when he connect the dots between welcoming one another as Christ has welcomed us because Christ acted as God's servant.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 15:7**...Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup> For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, <sup>9</sup> and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

Now I don't think it is difficult concept to understand. We are to welcome one another in spite of our preferences or strong opinions. The stronger are to accommodate the weaker and we are to keep in mind that Christ has indeed welcomed us and given us a pattern that we are to emulate or copy in our dealings with one another. He did what he did as God's faithful servant and we are to copy that too. In other words, if we are to be faithful servants we must follow His lead.

Now I want you to notice something particularly interesting about verses eight and nine.

Verse eight says that Christ became to the servant of God in order to fulfill the covenantal promises given to the patriarchs. That is, he became God's servant to fulfill the promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. If I could say it another way, "Jesus was the servant of God to fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant." That was his ministry to Judaism. And since the Abrahamic Covenant promised that Abraham would be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth Christ also became the servant of God, and you can see this in verse nine, in extending mercy to the Gentiles and in the end the way you can see the fulfillment of that is whenever a Gentile reaches out to claim God's mercy in Christ.

Now that raises the question, "Why is Paul focusing on Christ's servanthood in terms of Jews and Gentiles?" I think he is doing so because the overall conflict between the weaker and the stronger brothers was probably based along Jewish and Gentile lines. That is, most of the conflict over food and certain holidays and all that probably occurred because Jewish Christians found it a difficult breach of conscience to eat this or that or to give up this day on the calendar or that day and Paul expected the Gentiles, whose consciences were not nearly so sensitive with regard to such things to take the lead in accommodating the weaker Jewish brothers. In other words, Paul expected the Gentiles to give way to the Jewish believers whose consciences were overly sensitive and he expected them to do that in light of the great mercy of God they had been shown.

Now why was that so important? It was important because the promise of God was Gentiles and Jews would sing the praises of God in each other's midst.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 15:9**...As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." <sup>10</sup> And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles,

with his people." <sup>11</sup> And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." <sup>12</sup> And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."

So you see Paul's point is that Jews and Gentiles must learn to sing God's praises together in order to fulfill all that Scripture has promised and the only way that can happen is if they welcome one another...accept one another...just as they have been welcomed by Christ. Of course the predominate appeal or focus here in the text to the Gentiles seems to support the idea that the stronger group was, in fact, the Gentiles.

So what's the message to us this morning? I mean most of us are Gentiles. Well the message is the same I think. Whether we are young or old...whether we are rich or poor...whether we are part of an ethnic majority or minority...whether we are newly converted or lifelong Christians...we are to welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us. We are to accommodate each other's foibles and idiosyncrasies. We are to accommodate each other where we can, when we can, because we are all Christ's servants in this place. We are to find contentment and encouragement in the act of believing in Christ and we are to find contentment and encouragement in seeing our great common salvation being worked out in each other's lives. Look at Paul's closing word in verse 13:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 15:13**...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 close with this. Back in 1999 or 2000, I was invited by a number of Wycliffe missionaries to come over to Niamey, Niger to speak at a mission's conference. While I was there I proclaimed as clearly and passionately as I knew

how something of the beauty of the gospel and how Christ's atoning work makes us to be at peace with God and how it breaks down barriers between different groups. At the end of the conference, the leaders of the conference decided they wanted us to take communion together and a wonderful French Reformed pastor led us in the meal. He fenced the table, and read the words of institution and then we passed along a loaf to one another. I remember there was along circular line with a French Christian passing the loaf to a Swedish Christian, and the Swedish Christian passing it to an African Christian, and the African Christian passing it to an Irish Christian, and the Irish Christian passing it to me and I passed it on to a Korean Christian who passed it along to another American and in that moment I realized that all those countries involved were simply adjectives modifying a common noun, Christian. And it is the same thing here I think on Sunday morning. Oh we have lots of families and lots of different types of people but when we sit under the preaching of God's word or some and line up for communion we are really just one people. That is one of the reasons that I so love seeing families reach out and grab single people in the line or people who are visiting by themselves and say, "Come and commune with us. Don't take communion alone, take it with us. We are one here and you are most welcome." When we do that we are beginning to do what the Holy Spirit through the pen of the Apostle Paul is calling us to do and really in light of all that Christ has done for us how we can we do otherwise. Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 224.

<sup>2</sup> **ESV Genesis 12:3**...I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."