



Catalog No. 707

Romans 15:1-13

32nd Message

Brian Morgan

February 19, 1989

# THE GRAND RECEPTION

*SERIES: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ETHICS?*

One of my favorite images of the kingdom of God found in the Scriptures is that of a celebration or party. This is one of the grand themes carried from Genesis to Revelation. God has come in our midst, and he wants to eat and drink with us. When Jesus came to earth to walk among us, he ate and drank, and the invitation went out to all men to join his banquet, to celebrate with joy.

We find in Scripture that there is only one requirement for entering this celebration—humility. We all must come by way of the cross so that we might be properly dressed with clothes of righteousness. The first scene we get of heaven in Revelation is that of a banquet, a wedding. People from every nation are seated to eat and drink at this celebration. Yet Jesus will not be at the head of the table because he will be serving us. This will be our first experience in heaven.

Paul's desire in writing Romans 15 is that we know how to enter into this celebration and that our Christian celebrations on earth might reflect the heavenly party.

I would like to tell you about a little known "party" that took place during the years 1743-1747 hosted by an unknown servant of Christ named David Brainerd. Although he should have appeared at the head of his class at Yale, in 1743 he had been expelled by the university. Being a young, zealous convert in the Great Awakening, he had spoken critically of the spiritual character of one of his tutors. Even though he petitioned the board, repented of his act and humbly requested forgiveness, he was refused. Therefore, he was not ordained for the ministry. After this rejection, he was interviewed by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge who commissioned him to work among the Indians—to have a celebration "feast" for the weak.

Starting on the western border of Massachusetts and New York, he had little success his first year. He then moved to the Forks of the Delaware River and worked with those Indians for another year with no success. Because he was a man of great prayer and humility, he prayed for the outpouring of the Spirit to come upon these people. By the end of those two years, he was dejected and discouraged, especially by the opposition of the Indians to Christianity.

Then it happened! After the long, hot summer of 1745, God was pleased to respond to David Brainerd's prayers, and he struck the rock of their hardened hearts with the rod of his Spirit and out came a wellspring of eternal life. David reported, "God was pleased to display his power and grace." A revival broke out between August and October of that year that very few knew about. During that time, David Brainerd spent as much as twenty hours a week on horseback. He covered over 3,000 miles in a nine-month period. He wrote in his journal on August 8, 1745:

In the afternoon I preached to the Indians, their number was now about sixty-five persons—men, women and children. I discoursed upon Luke 14:16-23 [concerning how blessed is everyone who shall feast in heaven. The parable pictures a man who sent out invitations for a party but all his friends refused. Thus, he went to the highways to invite strangers.], and was favored with uncom-

mon freedom in my discourse. There was much visible concern among them, while I was discoursing publicly; but afterwards, when I spoke to one and another more privately, the power of God seemed to descend upon the assembly "like a mighty rushing wind," and with an astonishing energy bore down all before it.

I stood amazed at the influence, which seized the audience almost universally; and could compare it to nothing more aptly, than the irresistible force of a mighty torrent, or a swelling deluge, that with its insupportable weight and pressure bears down and sweeps before it whatever comes in its way.

Old men and women, who had been drunken wretches for many years, and some little children, not more than six or seven years of age, appeared in distress of their souls, as well as persons of middle age.

There was almost universal praying and crying for mercy in every part of the house, and many out of doors; and numbers could neither go nor stand. Their concern was so great, each one for himself, that none seemed to take any notice of those about him, but each prayed freely for himself.

It seemed to me that there was now an exact fulfillment of that prophecy (Zechariah 12:10-12—"And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born...And the land will mourn, every family by itself!")

What an amazing thing! A little known party occurred among these Indians—a feast for the weak. The weeping for their sins was like "the loss of a first-born." Later, David wrote about the Indians: "I have often times thought that they would cheerfully and diligently attend divine worship 24 hours together if they had an opportunity to do so...I know of no assembly of Christians where there seems to be so much of the presence of God, where brotherly love so much prevails."

This is why Paul wrote Romans 15. He wants us to know how to have a proper Christian celebration, to feast at the table of Jesus Christ. Our text has two sections, verses 1-6 and verses 7-13. Both are identical in structure. Paul starts with a command, gives the example of Jesus Christ, moves to the Old Testament to support what Christ did, and ends with a benediction. Instead of repeating the material twice, I will gather each of the elements together to examine the subject, How to throw a Christian celebration. We must answer four questions. First, whom are we to invite? Second, who is the guest of honor? Third, why are we celebrating? And fourth, what is the goal of our feasting?

We can answer the first question from verses 1, 2 and 7.

## I. Whom Do We Invite? (15:1-2, 7a)

Whenever Christians gather together to celebrate Christ, whom do we invite? How broadly do we extend our invitation? When a host throws a celebration, he may think he has a problem. If he opens the doors too wide, he may allow people to come who do not have the same convictions in terms of freedom of conscience. If our invitations go out widely, we will have to limit the exercise of our liberties to accommodate the weak. But if we narrow the guest list, we can have a wider expression of our liberties because everyone will be alike.

Which is the Christian's means of celebration? Do we narrow our guest list to broaden our liberties, or do we narrow our liberties to broaden our invitations? Look at what Paul says in verses 1, 2 and 7:

**Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification...Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. (NASB)**

Why does the world throw a party? They want to celebrate to please themselves. Therefore, they always invite people who are like them in terms of age and interest. In this way, they can give full expression to their liberties without offending anyone.

Paul says this is not the purpose for Christian celebration. It is not for the pleasure of the host but for the edifying of one another. Instead of pleasing ourselves, we are to build up the family of God. Therefore, whom we invite is not based on age or similar interests. Rather, we are to invite the weak and our neighbor. The term "neighbor" expresses the idea of the person in close proximity, and "weakness" reflects his need.

I think Paul includes the neighbor because he is alluding to the famous parable about the good Samaritan. Jesus gave this parable in order to rebuke the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes who were having exclusive religious parties. They invited the rich in order to show off what they owned and to put others in their social debt so that they might be invited to their homes. Jesus said the Samaritan recognized who his neighbor was—the man who was weak and in proximity. By welcoming and loving him, the Samaritan fulfilled the law. This parable was a rebuke to the Jews about the age coming when the party would go into all the world to include Samaritans and Gentiles. In fact, these Jews who were exclusive in their feasts would be excluded from the celebration.

Paul says this kind of celebration, extending the invitation to the weak and the neighbor, is not an option. We are under obligation to do this, "to bear the weaknesses of the weak and not just please ourselves."

A few years ago, my wife and I received an invitation to a surprise birthday party for a relative who was turning 70. When I called to say we were coming, the host said, "By the way, don't bring your children." I realized this also excluded my wife because she was nursing at the time. In other words, they did not want the "weak" at this party. I called back to say we were not coming because we were offended. This is how the world throws its parties. They always neglect the weak because it takes extra effort and consideration to include them.

The apostle goes on to say that when we invite the weak and our neighbor, we are to do it without inner reservations. We are to "accept one another just as Christ accepted us to the glory of God." That word "accept" is the same Greek word used in 14:1 which is found eight times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, most often in the Psalms. It is used to describe God's action when he

comes in haste and without reservation to saints in their weakness to save them from their affliction and their loneliness. When he causes them to sit with him in protection and fellowship, it tastes so sweet it is like returning to the garden of Eden. Paul is saying that what God has done for us in accepting us in our loneliness and affliction we are to freely do for one another without reservation.

Last week our north church held a party for children from East Palo Alto. I watched these forty to fifty kids who had come from poverty and weakness. Since none of them would have come to church on their own, our women sacrificed to make sure their table was open to them. The result was a beautiful scene.

In a month, the Career Class will also be having a party. Our singles will be going to Mexico to support a church that is so poor it cannot complete the construction of its building. Our group has gone there for three years and has come to love these people. They want to experience this feast with the poor. A month later, our high school students will be going to Mexicali. This requires a large amount of work and discipline on their part, but they want to spread their table wide to the poor and the needy. In this way, we celebrate on earth in the same manner that the feast is celebrated in heaven. Whom do we invite? Jesus says our doors are to be opened wide. Our invitations are not to be exclusive.

Why do we have to do it this way? Paul reminds us for whom the party is being thrown. Whose celebration is this? The guest of honor is Jesus. Because it is his party, he wants it done the same way he did it when he was on earth. Paul tells us how in verses 3 and 7-9.

## II. Who is the Guest of Honor? (15:3, 7b-9a)

**For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached Thee fell upon Me." (15:3)**

When Jesus had a table of celebration on earth, did he do it to please himself? No! His table included the Zealots, the tax-collectors, an adulteress, and prostitutes, the weak and the neighbor. He never had a party to please himself.

The apostle quotes Psalm 69:9 which refers to what Jesus did on the cross when he bore our reproach and took the strokes of God's wrath upon his heart. He took it all! He purposely did not please himself in order that all might come in and eat at his feast. As John Murray says:

It is noteworthy how the apostle [appeals to] the example of Christ in his most transcendent accomplishments in order to commend the most practical duties (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:5-8)...He "pleased not himself" to the incomparable extent of bearing the enmity of men against God and he bore this reproach because he was jealous for God's honor. He did not by flinching evade any of the stroke. Shall we, the strong, insist on pleasing ourselves in the matter of food and drink to the detriment of God's saints and the edification of Christ's body?

Our practical duties are to bring the weak to our table and to not allow the issue of what we drink and what we eat offend our brother. Paul uses a powerful example so that we might get the point. If Christ did that for us, who are we strong brothers to insist on our liberties and thus offend our weaker brothers?

Not only did Christ not try to please himself, he also accepted us. Look at verses 7-9:

**...Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy. (15:7b-9a)**

When Christ was here, his ministry was that of a servant, a servant to Israel. This ministry was limiting. As God, he became a man, limiting himself to fleshly form. But he could not be just any man; he had to be born a Jew, to the tribe of Judah. He had to be circumcised and born under the Law. Thus, he took on all the limitations of the Law in order to fulfill it. Once the covenant was fulfilled, then he could swing the door wide open. All of Israel could be accepted by faith because of the role of this servant. The promises of the fathers were fulfilled in Jesus, the blessed Savior.

But that is not all he did. Isaiah says of him: "It is too little a thing for this servant that he should just turn back the twelve tribes of Israel. He will also be what Israel was always intended to be, a light to the nations." After he fulfilled the covenant, he immediately welcomed the Gentiles. Now we have one table. The whole world, both Jew and Gentile, can come as one body into one faith with one Lord and Mediator.

Will I deny the glory of this honored guest and limit my party just so I can give free rein to my liberties? No! Rather I should honor the Lord and limit my liberties in order to extend my influence. Our invitations are to go out to all, especially the weak and the neighbor. This party is in honor of Jesus. It is his celebration. And why are we doing this?

### III. Why are we Celebrating? (15:3b-4, 9b-12)

One of the things I appreciate about my wife Emily is her ability to create family traditions. I think this comes from the fact that she came from a divorced home in which there were no traditions. I will never forget the first letter I ever received from her. I was 17 years old and was coming up to San Francisco for the weekend just before my birthday. Her note said, "Dear Brian, Happy Birthday! I want you to know that birthdays are special days and I am thinking of you on your day. Love, Emily...P.S. Don't forget to do your Economics." One of our children was born on Halloween, another the week before Christmas, and one in the Spring. Emily has made traditions for each child. As their birthdays approach, they spend a month in anticipation and excitement. They know why they are celebrating because of the past traditions.

Paul tells us the same thing is true for us. He says, "Haven't you read the Old Testament?" Look at what he says in verses 3-4:

**"The reproaches of those who reproached Thee fell upon Me."  
For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.**

He further explains that hope in verses 9-12 where he quotes from all three aspects of the Hebrew Bible—the writings, the Law and the prophets:

...as it is written,

**"Therefore I will give praise to [confess] Thee among the Gentiles,**

**And I will sing to Thy name."**

And again he says,

**"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people."**

And again,

**"Praise the Lord all you Gentiles,**

**And let all the peoples praise Him."**

And again Isaiah says,

**"There shall come the root of Jesse,**

**And He who arises to rule over the Gentiles;**

**In Him shall the Gentiles hope."**

What is Paul doing? I think it was a typical error to many Gentiles to think that the Hebrew Scriptures were obsolete. Since Jesus had come after them, they felt the texts were no longer relevant. Paul says they are. To the Jews, he is saying, "You may have missed the spiritual intent of these texts." He is telling us that all three types of writings predicted the Messianic kingdom. All anticipated this new age in which we are living. He says, "I want you to read these texts so that you might have hope and so that you might put up with the weak."

Then he tells us what this hope is. What do all these Scriptures talk about? Jesus who was God became a man and endured great limitations. He was born a Jew of the tribe of Judah in the obscure town of Bethlehem. He never travelled more than 70 miles from his home town. He was born under the Law. Could this Messianic King who never wrote a book, never entered the political world and never lead an army have any influence beyond the grave? What does Paul say? Yes! In the next generation, this one will be the world's ruler. In him, the Gentiles will hope. Every nation on earth will bow down before this Messianic King.

I have travelled around the world—Africa, Indonesia, Australia, Nigeria, and Europe. Wherever I have travelled, the orthodox Jew has looked out of place. Yet those who follow Jesus, born in Bethlehem and hung upon a tree, are found in every culture. Gentiles all over the world love to say the name of this obscure Jew. Yet, while he was on earth, he faced nothing but limitations and obscurity.

This was written to encourage you. If you will reach out to the weak and limit your liberties, you will not be denied your influence. Instead, you will be enhancing it in the next generation. We live in Silicon Valley under the great banner: "Live for your own influence, express your liberties, have worldwide dominion." Our society proclaims, "If you have children, forsake them. Don't let them keep you and limit you. They are the weak ones." I want to encourage you young mothers and fathers. Are you loving these children? I hope you are, for they do not inhibit, but rather enhance your influence.

If you find your job is limiting, you may be tempted to think, "If I could only get out of these restraints to give full liberty to who I am, then I could run the company. I could rule the world!" Perhaps God has you there to break your arrogance so that you might find influence in the next generation.

The text is telling us, "Don't be afraid of limitations. Don't be afraid to be a servant of the weak when your service is not seen and when there is no reward or praise on earth." This is what Jesus did. As a result, every Gentile nation has his name on their lips in praise. The Hebrew Bible gives testimony to this fact. This is why we celebrate. This is the Old Testament party tradition!

Now we come to the last point of our text. We have talked about the invitations, our guest of honor, and the Old Testament party traditions. What is the goal of our celebration? Why are we here? Let us examine the apostle's benedictions in verses 5, 6 and 13.

### IV. What is the Goal of our Celebration? (15:5-6, 13)

**Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

Do you know what a benediction is? It is commending a person into the presence of God who says, "This is my party. I am the guest of honor. I want this party to reflect who I am. What I ask you to

be I will be in you. I am the invisible guest at your party, and I will cause you to be who I am that this party might reflect me.” This is what benedictions do in Scripture, requesting that everything God asks of us might be done in us because he is present. He is present at every party we give as the invisible guest.

In this case, God says, “When you meet together, I do not desire your personal pleasure. Rather, I want humility that you may be of the same mind toward one another.” This does not necessarily mean that we all have the same convictions, but it does mean that each is humble enough to leave the judgement in these matters to Christ alone. In the meantime, we welcome the weak and the neighbor into the inner circles of our fellowship regardless of whether they think like us or not. Our humility welcomes others regardless of their point of view.

Once the humility is there, God’s goal is unity expressed in worship “with one accord” and “one voice.” This involves our hearts and speech. Nothing pleases the Lord more than when we sing his praises from the humility which only the cross can give and when we are united in what we sing.

I am involved in getting some hymnals published for the people we met in Eastern Europe. When I was there this past summer, I met a man who had spent 15 years of his life in prison for his faith. Alone in his cell, he composed 10,000 hymns for Christ which were smuggled out of the country and brought back in. Those hymns form the hymnal for the congregation we visited which now consists of 500,000 people. Because these hymns were written in the pit, when these people sing, their voices are unified, and their songs are lifted to heaven. I smuggled one of those hymnals home so that we might get 5,000 more published so they can continue to sing God’s praises.

That is what pleases God—unity of praise. Paul says he also wants us to have joy, peace and hope in our celebration. Do you know what kind of joy he is talking about? If you are open to the Lord, at every one of your celebrations there ought to be anticipation of whom God has sent for us to love. To whom can we be hospitable? One family in our church so characterizes this that every time I am with them I am rebuked. Their table is always open. Whenever I am in their home, there is such joy and excitement about new things God is doing. They require no organization and programs. They are just excited to open their home in celebration. This is the kind of joy and peace Paul is talking about.

Our hope is that this kind of limitation will not inhibit us. Paul knows this will enhance our ministry and our influence worldwide. If we will celebrate with open doors as a family, we will never have to have an evangelistic program. In the book of Acts, there was no organized evangelism. The believers so loved each other they did not care about their differences. Their hearts were melted by the cross. When they came to that tree, they wept for their sins. As a result, they just gave up their belongings to become one family. With one voice, they glorified God. Because of their unity and love, Acts says, “The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Their feast was so filled with life, they had to break down the doors to fit everyone in! In the second century, a man by the name of Aristides wrote a letter to the Emperor Hadrian describing these Christians:

They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have some-

thing they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They do not consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit, in God.

This is the kind of party we are to have in celebration of Jesus Christ. After David Brainerd witnessed the revival among the Indians, he rode to the home of Jonathan Edwards who was in the midst of the Great Awakening in New England. He came to the Edwards’ home on May 28, 1747. Jonathan Edwards had heard about this man, and his heart was filled with excitement to meet this vibrant, holy young Christian. What neither of them knew was that David Brainerd had contracted tuberculosis because of the harshness of the elements during his time of ministry to the weak. By the time he got to Jonathan’s house, the disease had consumed him. The family cared for him through that summer and into October until he died October 9, 1747, at the age of 29.

His “party” had lasted only four years, and Edwards said in his funeral sermon: “Oh that the things that were seen and heard in this extraordinary person, his holiness, heavenliness, labour, and self-denial in life, may effectually stir us up to endeavor that in the way such a holy life we may at last come to so blessed an end.” Even when David was dying, his only concern was that this feast might continue to spread worldwide. He said to Edwards at one point: “My thoughts have been employed on the old dear theme, the prosperity of God’s church on earth. As I waked out of sleep, I was led to cry for the pouring out of God’s Spirit and the advancement of Christ’s kingdom, which the dear Redeemer died and suffered so much for; it is that especially makes me love for it.” Later he asked the group around his death bed to sing Psalm 102, about the blessing of Zion going out to a generation yet unborn so that all the kingdoms may come and glorify God.

When David Brainerd went out in humility to give a feast to unknown servants of Christ, he did not lose his influence in the next generation. His life so stirred Jonathan Edwards, he dropped everything he was doing to pour over the memoirs and diaries of this godly man. He was so touched by David’s journals that he decided to write an account of his life. Two years later, in 1749, he published *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd*. This was the first biography printed in America to gain international recognition, and it was the first missionary biography ever to be published in this country. Generations later, everyone who read this biography was stirred. William Carey, the “Great Apostle to India,” was so impressed by it he used it to train all of his disciples. Dr. Andrew Murray of South Africa always kept Brainerd’s diary upon his desk. He said, “You will find three pages of the diary are sufficient to read at one time if you desire to be influenced by it immediately and practically.”

This is the hope for which we live. Embrace the weak. Limit your liberties willingly. Welcome the stranger. Have a party in celebration of Jesus Christ. Your influence may go unnoticed for the moment, but in the next generation the name of Jesus will be on many more lips.

[I am indebted to Iain H. Murray’s book, *Jonathan Edwards, A New Biography*, and to Walter Searle’s book, *David Brainerd’s Personal Testimony*]

© 1989 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino