

Culture Bible Study 3: **The Theology of Welcome**

If we were to characterize Jesus today, we might say he was a partygoer! He seems to always have been on his way to a banquet—or inviting himself to one. It is hard to distinguish a pattern in his choice of people with whom he celebrated, rested and talked. Except perhaps that they represented every possible social and cultural stratum—rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, pious and prostitute.

One of Jesus' most delightful characteristics is his ability to draw people in, to welcome everyone (especially the morally and socially outcast) to his table. The image of Jesus "at table"—so common in the Gospels—is significant, for in Jewish culture to eat with someone was to accept him or her as family. And Jesus' table never lacked people, people of every conceivable "type." All felt embraced. All acknowledged their need for him.

In Jesus we see Yahweh's fulfillment of his desire for unity across all barriers. As we seek to "be Jesus" to our world, we must welcome all sorts of people. Our table should look like his table.

Read John 4:1-26.

1. From verse 9 we know that Jews are not to deal with Samaritans. In addition a Jewish man (particularly a teacher) is not to address a woman—particularly a Gentile one. With this in mind, why do you think Jesus approaches the Samaritan woman, inviting her into conversation and relationship?

2. How do you think the woman feels about Jesus' approach?

3. As their conversation progresses, Jesus makes it clear that he knows her moral struggle and failures. Do you sense that the woman feels condemned by Jesus? Why or why not?

4. How does Jesus take notice of this woman's cultural norms (v. 22)?

Read Romans 15:5-13.

5. What does "a spirit of unity" look like in the church (v. 5)?

6. In response to the conflicts raised by the presence of Gentiles in the church, Paul exhorts his friends to accept each other as Christ accepted them (v. 7). How did you first experience Jesus' acceptance of you?

7. As Jesus beckoned you into his family, how did he enter into your culture, affirming you and speaking truth? (Think of how he has spoken to you through certain types of music, literature or films.)

8. How do you feel when you and a friend come to love the same things—a sport, movie, author, artist, food?

8A. How do you respond when your friends don't appreciate the things you love?

9. How is it that the welcoming of Gentiles by Jews (and vice versa) can "bring praise to God" (v. 7)?

10. Based on your experiences of Christ's and friends' acceptance of you, how can you embrace people you do not naturally encounter? List two or three specific steps you can take.

11. Verses 10-13 talk of rejoicing, joy, praise and singing. God's life comes alive in other cultures and sets people free to express their thankfulness for his grace. Describe ways that people unlike yourself express their praise and gratitude to God.

12. As you begin to practice Jesus' model of acceptance and welcome, some people (including those you are learning to embrace) may ask questions about your new behavior. What response can you give that will encourage people to focus on Jesus and his winsome character?

13. Response: Are there people or types of people (drug addicts, "computer dweebs," the emotionally or physically disabled, or particular racial groups) in your community who might not come to you, but would be better welcomed if you ventured onto their turf? Brainstorm sensitive ways to communicate care and humility.

This study is available online at: www.intervarsity.org/ism/article/8214
For Further Study: John 4:27-54