ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER

Romans 14:1–15:13

Key Verse: 15:7

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

 Today’s passage concludes Paul’s teaching section in Romans 12–15 on practical Christian living. In chapter 12 he first taught how the gospel transforms us as living sacrifices, humble, loving servants. In chapter 13 he taught how the gospel transforms us in society, living as obedient citizens, loving neighbors and spiritually alert persons who abstain from wild living. Now in chapters 14–15 Paul finally addresses head on one of the major practical issues among the believers in Rome. Some of them used to be immersed in traditional Judaism, and some used to be idol-worshipping Gentiles. Their backgrounds were so different that, even though they’d become Christians, they found it hard to get along. So in these verses Paul encourages them in some very practical ways to build a loving Christian community. Truly believing the gospel of Jesus always leads to such an authentic community. We may not have the same specific struggles these early Christians had, but in these verses we find some important principles that still apply to how we relate to one another. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

 Read 14:1. In this verse Paul sounds the major theme of this section: acceptance. In any Christian fellowship, it's only natural that some people have strong faith, and others, especially those new to Christianity, have weak faith. In helping these people, Paul didn’t coach them based on methods of conflict resolution or cross-cultural communication. He started on the basis of faith in Jesus. In this way he helped them see each other not humanly but from God’s point of view. It teaches us to accept people into our community, regardless of their religious, ethnic or social background, simply on the basis of their faith in Jesus. It also teaches us that our main task is to always build people up to become stronger and stronger in their faith in Jesus.

 We also see in verse 1 that among sincere believers in Jesus there can be a tendency to quarrel about “disputable matters.” Among these Roman Christians what were they? They were not abstract or finer theological intricacies we might expect, but very practical matters. When they got together to eat, some of them refused to eat meat, and others ate it without any reservation (2). Some would observe certain holy days, and others ignored them totally (5). These differences caused the ones who refrained from eating meat and observed holy days to judge the ones who didn’t. And they caused the ones who didn’t refrain from eating meat and who didn’t observe holy days to despise the ones who did (3,10a). Judging and despising each other in their hearts wasn’t healthy, practical faith in Jesus, and it wouldn’t build a healthy community among them.

 It’s a bit hard for us to understand how eating certain foods or not, or observing certain holy days or not, could be such bones of contention. During his earthly ministry Jesus clearly declared all foods clean (Mk7:17–19). So what was the problem? We can understand it when we think about the religious realities these people experienced. At that time people were worshiping many kinds of gods; in every city there were many temples to these gods, and most meat would be sacrificed there, a small portion used in temple worship and the rest sold at the market. So when shopping for meat, it was hard to know if it’d been sacrificed to an idol or not. In urban places people couldn’t raise their own cattle for meat, so scrupulous Jews probably made it a practice to avoid eating meat altogether, so as to be kosher. Jews who had just converted to Christianity were probably not free to eat such meat. But new Gentile Christians also were choosing not to eat that meat. Why? In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul talks about this. These Gentiles in their past lives had been accustomed to eating meat sacrificed to idols. They knew from firsthand experience what that idolatry was all about. Often such temple worship also involved sexual immorality, so the temple meat conjured up all kinds of bad images from their past. Eating such meat in the presence of young Gentile Christians would “wound their weak conscience” (1Co8:12).

 How might this apply today? In every generation, those who are weak in Christian faith are those just coming out of an old life of sin. They’re struggling to hold onto the gospel, overcoming a guilty conscience and deeply ingrained bad habits. Those strong in Christian faith are free in Christ, but sometimes what we do can cause those weak in faith to stumble. It might be drinking alcohol, wearing somewhat revealing clothing, watching certain movies or TV shows, or other things we’re unaware of. New Christians tend to create strict rules for themselves so they don’t fall back into their old lives as they struggle to take hold of the gospel. Sometimes, strict rules still become sources of conflict among Christians.

 To resolve this, Paul teaches several things. Read verse 4. First off, we need to learn to view one another as the Lord’s servants. To do that, we need to get past our natural racial, religious, moral and social prejudices. Even though somebody may currently be a weak servant, that doesn’t mean we should despise or take advantage of them; Paul says, “…for the Lord is able to make them stand.” Next, Paul teaches us to respect one another’s convictions. Look at verses 6–9. Whether it’s observing a special day, eating or not eating meat, fellow believers, Paul says, are doing these things “to the Lord.” They’re trying to live for the Lord. That’s what we’re all trying to do, if we’re sincere Christians. Paul incorporates the gospel to help us understand this. Read verse 9. Paul is teaching us here to acknowledge that each believer has a relationship with Jesus as Lord. So we should respect one another’s faith and not insist on others becoming exactly like us. Finally, Paul warns us strongly not to judge one another. Read verses 10–12. Here, the cure to judging others is to keep the focus on living before the eyes of God myself, in accountability to him.

 But Paul doesn’t just say, “Don’t despise,” or, “Don’t judge.” He also gives a positive direction. Read verse 13. Here, the “stumbling block or obstacle” is the eating of meat or drinking of wine or observing a special day (14–21). Paul says we’re free to eat and drink whatever we want (14a,20). But if what we eat or drink becomes a stumbling block or obstacle to a weak brother or sister, then, he says, we’re no longer acting in love (15). Paul says we need to “make up our mind” not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in others’ way (13b). It means that, in love we have to refrain from doing things that cause our weaker Christian brothers and sisters to be “distressed” (15a). To do this, we need to remember that actually, Christ loved them so much that he died for them (15b). Because of Christ’s love for them, we also need to love them and be willing to sacrifice our personal preferences for them. In doing this, we put the focus on Christ himself and his kingdom, where there is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, and we take the focus off less important things like food (17,20). To “make up our minds” we need to make a personal decision to accommodate ourselves to the weaker members of our community, for the sake of peace and mutual edification (19). "Mutual" means that even those weak in faith can edify those strong in faith, so we shouldn’t cause them to stumble over rules or drive them away from fellowship. At the end of this chapter, Paul again encourages us to create an environment of personal faith that respects one another’s convictions (20–23). It means we need to be very prayerful to encourage people to do things, whether in their personal lives or in church, only if they have the personal faith to do them.

 These verses challenge us in two main ways. First, we need to get to know our brothers and sisters in Christ more personally. We shouldn't assume things. We need to know where they’re really at in their faith, what issues they’re struggling with. That’s the only way we can really build them up. That’s also the only way we can really refrain from doing things that might cause them to stumble. One of the greatest problems in building community is that we don’t really know or understand one another. The other challenge here is to shape all that we do among each other based on real love. We need to constantly be asking ourselves, “Am I really thinking about this other person? Am I really doing or saying this based on love for that person? Or is this really for me, so that I’ll feel more comfortable or enjoy myself more?” May God help us to mature in the image of Christ, so that we can truly be more and more mindful of one another.

 Read 15:1–2. Here Paul puts the responsibility for building Christian community squarely on the shoulders of the stronger Christians. It’s because they’re the ones who set the tone for the ministry. Usually in the world, the strong beat up on the weak. But in the Christian community it needs to be different. The strong are supposed to “bear with the failings of the weak.” We tend to focus on pleasing ourselves, especially in this culture. But in building Christian community we need a new focus: pleasing others to truly build them up (2).

Here, “failings” can be anything from typical mishaps of human weakness to moral and even spiritual failings. Frankly, it’s hard to live in community with weak people. Their failings are chronic. I know because I was one of them. For many years many people had to bear with my chronic failings. My wife is still bearing with my failings, and so is my son. Paul suggests in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 that the failings of the weak may be that they are chronically idle, disruptive or disheartened. Yet they’re brothers and sisters in Christ. So we need to “bear with them.” Here, to “bear with” literally means “to pick up with your own hands, to uphold or support.” It means to take others’ failings and weaknesses as if they’re ours. We tend to complain about the failings of the weak. We need to “bear with” their failings. There was a popular song with these lyrics: “The road is long/With many a winding turn/That leads us to who knows where/Who knows when/But I’m strong/Strong enough to carry him/He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother/So on we go/His welfare is of my concern/No burden is he to bear/We’ll get there/For I know/He would not encumber me/He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother/If I’m laden at all/I’m laden with sadness/That everyone’s heart/Isn’t filled with the gladness/Of love for one another/It’s a long, long road/From which there is no return/While we’re on our way to there/Why not share/And the load/Doesn’t weigh me down at all/He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother.”

 To help us do this, Paul reminds us of Jesus. Read verse 3. Even Christ didn't please himself; he came to sacrifice himself to build us up. He didn’t come to be served, but to serve, and to give his own life as a ransom for many (Mk10:45). Though he was rich, for our sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich (2Co8:9). Paul says here in verse 3 that on his cross of mission Christ even bore with insults. Paul mentions this because insults may be the hardest thing to bear. No matter who does it, when we feel insulted we can get extremely angry. I once knew a guy working as an LPN who had to serve elderly bedridden people. I asked him if he had sympathy for them. He said he tried to, but usually, no matter what he did for them, all they would do was complain and insult him. Sometimes that happens in ministry, too. Weak brothers and sisters may lash out and insult the strong. But like Christ, we need to bear with those insults. How can we? Read verse 4. We gain strength and encouragement to bear with one another as we keep on reading the Scriptures. As we read the Scriptures, we gain God’s hope for the weak.

 Suddenly Paul breaks out into a prayer of blessing on them. Read verses 5–6. Here, the main blessing is to have the same attitude of mind that Christ had. What was it? It was his humble mind. Jesus was so humble and lowly that anyone could be with him and feel comfortable. He was genuinely interested in each person. He valued each one, thinking of them, not of himself. It’s the opposite of our sinful attitude of mind. What’s that? It’s our selfish ambition and vain conceit. It’s our always looking out for ourselves (Php2:2–5). It’s our judging each other and treating each other with contempt (14:3,10a). But when we each grow in the same attitude of mind toward one another that Christ had, we contribute to building a truly beautiful, heavenly Christian community among us.

 Paul didn’t just give some wishful thinking; he gave a practical direction. Read verse 7. Here, the word “accept” means to welcome into one’s heart. It's what our Lord Jesus did with the tax collectors and sinners of his day who were repenting—he welcomed them and ate with them (Lk15:2). He enjoyed their company and deeply accepted them. In verses 8–12 Paul emphasizes with many Scripture quotes to accept sinful Gentiles into the community of God's people.

Acceptance. It’s really hard. There are people who’ve been with each other for many years, even married people, but never really accepted one another. True acceptance isn’t about what we do or say; it starts in our hearts. It’s hard to accept people different from us. It’s especially hard for the strong to accept the weak and bear with them. But it’s possible, Paul says, when we really want to bring praise to God. When we have a strong desire that God be glorified, we can deeply accept anybody. Many ministries are segregated by ethnicity; all whites, al blacks, all Hispanics, all Asians. Many are segregated by age: all singles, all young couples with children, all elderly. Many people go shopping for a church that feels comfortable to them, where they feel their needs will be met. It’s so easy to give up on trying to accept people different from us. But a ministry where all kinds of different people truly accept one another really brings praise to God, revealing his multicolored wisdom (cf. Eph3:6,10).

But how can we accept one another? Read verse 7 again. It’s when we remember how Christ accepted us. I was an arrogant, conceited, rebellious and sinful person. But through his servants Christ accepted me, and for years he bore with my self-righteousness, pride, laziness, lust and despair. I need to remember his amazing grace every day so that his love becomes real and fresh in my heart. Then I can easily see others as dear brothers and sisters that I’m happy to carry. May God remind us of how Christ accepted us, so that we can truly accept our brothers and sisters in Christ. Read 15:13.