

July 3, 2016 by Steve Brandon



## Accept One Another

### Romans 14:1-15:7

This summer, I have been trying my hand at painting. Painting not with canvas and paint, but with descriptions of a picture that I have in mind of the church that God calls us to be. I'm picturing a church living in harmony with one another. A church where each is seeking to build up one another. A church where people are praying for one another. A church where people are serving one another and loving one another. A church where the stranger is welcomed and all are honored.

Now, in order to have such a church, like we talked about last week, we need to forgive one another. Because any time that a group of people seeks to live this closely with one another, sparks are sure to fly. Sin is sure to be present. Feelings are sure to be hurt. Damage will be done.

And the only way that such a group can ever survive is when there is a healthy reservoir of forgiveness ready to be dispensed when the need arises. It's the only way. It's the only way that a marriage will last. It's the only way that a family will stay together. It's the only way that a church will be unified; when forgiveness is practiced often.

Well, as I continue to paint this portrait of the church that God calls us to be, this morning we will be looking at the entire idea of accepting one another. Like we discussed last week, forgiveness has to take place if ever we would find unity and happiness and joy our church.

See, there are two ways to establish unity in a church. One way is through uniformity, where everyone is the same. Everyone believes the same thing. Everyone wears the same thing. Everyone speaks the same way. Everyone acts the same. The church has a position on everything! They have a position on music and alcohol and dating and movies; on clothing and smoking and gambling and speeding; on tattoos and hair length; on debt and diet and drugs and drama. And everyone falls into rank.

At that point, we really aren't Christians, we are clones. When I was a teenager, there was a Christian rock star named Steve Taylor, who wrote a great song entitled, "I Want to be a Clone." The song is a satire of how many who become Christians, simply become like everyone else in the Christian community.

I asked, the Lord into my heart, they said that was the way to start  
But now you've got to play the part, I want to be a clone

Be a clone and kiss conviction, goodnight  
Cloneliness is next to Godliness, right  
I'm grateful that they show the way 'cause I could never know  
The way to serve Him on my own, I want to be a clone

They told me that I'd fall away unless I followed what they say  
Who needs the Bible anyway, I want to be a clone  
Their language, it was new to me  
but Christianese got through to me  
Now, I can speak it fluently, I want to be a clone

Now, obviously, that's not what the New Testament Church is called to be. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 that there are a variety of gifts in the church. There are varieties of service and activities. He said, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:4). And Paul pictures the church as a human body with many members, like hands and feet and eyes and ears; each serving different functions, but each being no less a part of the body. In other words, God gives different people to the church with differing gifts to make the church a place of unity through diversity.

But, if ever this church, comprised of different people with differing gifts, is going to know and enjoy unity, there must be an acceptance of one another. See, we don't achieve unity through uniformity. We achieve unity through accepting of one another.

Now, obviously, I'm not advocating this morning a pluralism that would accept anybody into the church, regardless of what they believe or how they live. Nowhere does the New Testament advocate such a practice. There are boundaries to the church.

First of all, there are doctrinal boundaries. These are things you must believe to be a part of the church--like the Trinity, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and so forth. And there are behavioral boundaries as well. You cannot be a part of the church while living in open sin--like immorality and idolatry and drunkenness.

And so, when I talk about "accepting one another" this morning, know that there are boundaries. But, the boundaries might just be a bit bigger than you think.

Let's go to the Bible. I invite you to open them to Romans, chapter 14. Our text this morning will cover all of Romans 14 and the first 7 verses of chapter 15. And the place where I want to begin is at the very end, because, this is Paul's main point. It is what he has been aiming at.

Romans 15:7

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

The title of my message comes from verse 7. In the ESV, it says, "Welcome one another." The New American Standard Version translates this, "Accept one another" (as does the NIV). The King James Version translates this, "Receive one another." J. B. Philips paraphrased it this way, "Open your hearts to one another."

This is the idea of this section of Scripture. It's a call for us to accept others as they are and welcome them into our lives, even if they have some opinions that differ with you, even if they have some lifestyle convictions that differ with you. In fact, this is how Paul begins chapter 14. Look at chapter 14 and verse 1, ...

Romans 14:1

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

Too often those in the church can spend their time arguing and quarreling over opinions over preferences. And it's OK to discuss matters where we disagree. In fact, I would argue that it is very healthy for us to do so. But, it must be done in a spirit of accepting one another. It must be done in a spirit of love, where winning the argument isn't the end goal. And too often, a division comes as a result of opinions.

Last week, I had a long discussion with a friend of mine from out of town. He's looking for a church, but struggling with the style of music where he goes. We were on the phone for over an hour, going back and forth about the content and the style and the volume of the music used in the worship service. Our phone conversation had a few follow-up emails. But, eventually, we reached a point where we agreed to drop the issue for the sake of our unity, because I'm not sure that we are going to agree on these matters. And that's OK, because music style in a church is not an essential issue to split us.

Rather, we are accepting one another. This is Paul's command in verse 1: "welcome him." That's the same word used in chapter 15 and verse 7: "accept him," "receive him," "open your hearts to him." He is a dear friend. He will continue to be a dear friend. We simply agreed that we are, "not going to quarrel over these opinions."

Now, when Paul brings up this command to "accept one another," he puts forth two issues that were pertinent to his day. The first issue deals with diets; the second deals with days. Look at verse 2. He says this, ...

Romans 14:2-4

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Apparently, in Rome, there were some vegetarians whose practice it was that they would eat only vegetables. And there were others in Rome who believed that they may eat anything. Now, the background to this is difficult to know exactly. But, in light of Paul's discussion of similar matters in 1 Corinthians 8-10, my guess is that all of the meat in town had been sacrificed to idols, and there were Christians--genuine believers in Christ--who had come out of the pagan idolatry where they simply couldn't handle eating the meat sacrificed to idols. So, they abstained from eating this meat.

Now, Paul was clear in 1 Corinthians 8:8 that, "Food will not commend us to God" (1 Corinthians 8:8). We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. Paul also knew that Jesus had "declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19). But, for some reason, these people who are identified as being "weak in faith," only ate vegetables.

And what is instructive here in this passage is what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't say, "Hey guys, you can eat the meat. It doesn't matter. It's not going to help your relationship with God. It's not going to hurt your relationship with God. Just eat the meat! When you don't eat, you demonstrate how weak you are in faith. You need to grow up."

No, none of that. Paul recognizes that there are religious practices that are best left alone. Rather than trying to conform the vegetarians to be meat eaters, he said, ...

Romans 14:3

Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

If God has accepted him, then we ought to accept him as well. And this is the great theological backing of why we accept one another. Because, that's what God has done for us in the gospel! I passed over this before in chapter 15 and verse 7. Look at it again, ...

Romans 15:7

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

In other words, think about how God has welcomed you, foibles and all, into his kingdom! Think about how God deals with your weaknesses. He is patient with you. He was patient with you before you came to him. "Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4).

And he was gracious to you in your sin. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). And he showed his love to you when you were a sinner. "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). And certainly, God is calling us to change and walk more devoutly towards him. "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11).

But, here's the thing. God has still welcomed us, sin and all. Our acceptance before God isn't dependent at all upon our sanctification. And when it comes to us and Rock Valley Bible Church, the same standard applies! If God has accepted you into his kingdom, we accept you as well.

Romans 15:7

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Now, that doesn't mean that we throw doctrine out the window. Or that we allow any teaching calling itself, "Christian," to reign in our church. But, it is to say that on a personal level, we are called to accept those whom God has accepted.

One of the reasons why I am excited about preaching through Romans in the fall is the sort of fruit that it may create in our lives. As we think long and deep and hard about the reality of what God has done in our salvation, which is what Romans is all about. It should create in us a longing for God (Romans 12:1-2); a love for others (Romans 13:8); an evangelistic zeal to make this gospel known (Romans 15:14ff); and, as we are considering this morning, a rightful acceptance of others (Romans 14:1-15:7).

Romans 14:3

Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

I think that Paul understands how difficult it is to change one's culture. Whatever is in the background of these people eating only vegetables is OK with Paul. Because, changing one's culture and changing one's religious practices is difficult.

Do you remember when Peter was praying on the roof of his house? He saw a vision of how ...

Acts 10:11-16

... the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Here was the audible voice of God telling Peter to eat these animals. And Peter said, "No way! I have never eaten any unclean animal." And God says, "Eat." And Peter says, "No." And God says, "Eat." And Peter says, "No." This happens three times in verse 16.

This is Peter, the leader of the apostles! This is Peter, who had walked with Jesus for three years. This is Peter, who had seen the resurrected Christ! This is Peter, who heard that Jesus declared all foods clean. And yet, his Jewish heritage was preventing him from exercising his freedom to eat. And in this regard, he was weak in faith.

Now, the reason why God was pushing Peter to eat was because of a greater lesson that he was teaching him about the inclusion of the Gentiles into the covenant promises of God. But that's not what God calls everyone to do. That's not what God calls us to do. As Paul is speaking to a New Testament church.

Romans 14:3

Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

God is calling us to accept one another even when we have differing religious practices. Some are weak and won't eat. Others are strong and have the freedom to eat. And Paul says, "Don't despise one another." "Don't pass judgment on one another." "God has accepted you." "So, accept one another."

Again, it's not that these things are unworthy of discussion. It's not that these things are unworthy of persuasion. But, be careful in your discussion not to "pass judgment" upon others.

Let's continue on to see how Paul deals with the next issue. He just dealt with diets. Now, he is dealing with days, but he mixes in diets as well. Verse 5, ...

Romans 14:5-9

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Again, it's a bit difficult to know exactly what Paul is referring to here. It may be the Sabbath day. It may be the feast and festival days prescribed in the Old Testament. But, the principle is easily understood. Rather than casting judgment upon others for their scruples, Paul says that "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."

What is particularly interesting here is that Paul had the opportunity to solve the Sabbath issue once and for all. But, he doesn't even take a side. He doesn't say whether or not one day is to be esteemed above another, or whether all days should be esteemed alike. He doesn't say whether or not we should "keep the Sabbath." Instead, he says, "Be convinced in your own mind" (14:5).

The thrust of the entire passage is this: You are convinced in your mind that you should keep that Sabbath. Without clarity, the battle rages still today. I'm convinced in my own mind that every day is alike. And we are both honoring the Lord. Live in harmony and accept one another (Romans 14:1). Don't pass judgment on one another.

In fact, this is what Paul continues to say, ...

Romans 14:10-12

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written,  
"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,  
and every tongue shall confess to God."  
So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

In other words, we will all stand before God, and give account to him. You don't need to play God and pass judgment in his place before his time comes. And I just say this: this is hard! Because when you come to the Scripture, and see what it teaches, and act upon your convictions in faith, it is difficult not to turn and judge those who have chosen a different path.

Let me give you a testimony of my Sabbatarian days. There was a time in my life when I was heavily influence by a group of people who believed that the Sabbath still applies today. Oh, in a bit different way than the Old Testament Sabbath. But, the principle of making Sunday a day completely dedicated to God. Sunday morning service; afternoon rest, with no work allowed; Sunday evening service. I was attracted to the glories of dedicating the day to worshiping God, to praying, to reading about God. I liked the idea of committing every week to rest in him and to enjoy him on that day.

It was a day to forget the rest of the week, with all of its pains and sorrows and troubles. This day is God's day! It's a day to rejoice in him!

But, here's what I found. As my convictions about this day ran deep, I found my judgmental spirits rise within me. I began to see all of the people who were defiling the Sabbath! I saw people shopping on the Sabbath. I saw people mowing their lawns on the Sabbath. I saw people working on the Sabbath. And I was angry with them. I was angry with them because they were disobeying the Lord's command. And I totally missed the heart of Paul here.

Romans 14:10

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;

And I say this--it is hard, when you come to some conviction about some matter of Christian living, not to pass judgment upon others who don't share your conviction. And when you are passing judgment upon others in this way, you are not accepting one another. I encourage you to work hard to separate what is Scripture and what is your conviction and what is your opinion. Work hard to separate between the essentials and the non-essentials.

For Paul, the essentials are huge. They are the doctrine of sin (Romans 1-3). They are the doctrine of justification (Romans 4-5). They are the doctrine of sanctification (Romans 6-7). They are the doctrine of security (Romans 8). They are the doctrine of sovereignty (Romans 9-11). They are the doctrine of walking as a living sacrifice before God (Romans 12-15).

And then there are issues like eating meat, and like keeping the Sabbath day, that simply don't fall into the "essentials" category. And may God give us the discernment to know the differences between "essentials" and "preferences."

Beginning in verse 13, Paul brings out his own beliefs and his own convictions, and puts them in perspective regarding how we should deal with these things in the church. He writes, ...

Romans 14:13-14

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

Paul's conviction is that "nothing is unclean." You can eat what you want. But, Paul points out the bigger issue that's at stake. It's your brother who doesn't have this conviction. That's the issue. See, the issue isn't the issue The diet or the days isn't the issue. It's your brother that is the issue. He continues, ...

Romans 14:15-23

For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Do you see what Paul is saying here? He says that your convictions take second place to your love for the brothers. You don't need to judge them. You need to love them and build them up.

Though Paul was convinced that he could eat anything (14:14), he also understood that others didn't have this conviction (14:20). And so, he walked in love. Because there is something bigger than your conviction. Verse 17 says, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Augustine has wise words: "In essentials, unity; In non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." We should be united in the essentials. How appropriate for us to have recited the Apostles Creed this morning, laying out the essentials of Christian belief.

I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth:

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord,  
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
Born of the Virgin Mary,  
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
Was crucified, dead, and buried:  
He descended into hades;  
The third day he rose again from the dead;  
He ascended into heaven,  
And sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost;  
The holy Christian Church;  
The Communion of Saints;  
The Forgiveness of sins;  
The Resurrection of the body,  
And the Life everlasting. Amen.

Few statements are clearer than on the essence of the Christian faith. But there are some other things outside of this scope that people can believe and still be Christians. Like the application of baptism. Like the timing of the rapture in God's prophetic plan. Like the nature of the millennium. Like the role of women in the church and in the home. Like the form of church government. Things like homeschooling, the consumption of alcohol, entertainment, dress, hair length, tattoos, and many other things are all non-essentials. Let us have liberty in those. But let us have charity, or love, in all things.

Romans 15:1-7

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on July 10, 2016 by Steve Brandon.  
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