

# 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 deals with conflicts that arise in the Christian community over matters of conscience. When conflicts arise, it is easy to judge others or hold them in contempt. But we should always remember how God had mercy on us. In view of God’s mercy, Paul urges us to practice God’s love (12:1). In Paul’s time, Jewish and Gentile Christians shared fellowship together in the house churches in Rome. As long as each group’s faith was shaped by their cultural context, conflict was inevitable. These conflicts were not over essentials of the Christian faith, but over secondary issues. Nevertheless, it is not easy to overcome these conflicts because they are rooted in deeply held cultural values. Unless these issues are resolved properly, it is hard for the church to be united. So, Paul dealt with this matter very seriously. Like the Roman church, we also experience conflicts over secondary issues, such as cultural differences, views on baptism, worship attire, music, leadership styles, or character differences. Though these may seem to be small matters, they can hinder the unity of the church. So, we need to take them seriously and learn how to accept one another. In this passage we can find some Biblical principles that guide us: **“for the Lord”** (14:1-13a), **“for the sake of others”** (14:13b-23), and **“glorify God by following the example of Christ”** (15:1-13).

**First, “for the Lord” (14:1-13a).** Verse 1 says, **“Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.”** Paul refers to those of **“weak faith.”** The weak are not weak-willed or lacking self-control, but those whose conscience and practice of faith are weak. To be sure, every genuine Christian shares a common faith. We believe in the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We believe in Jesus: Though he is the Creator God, he came into the world in human flesh as our Savior; he suffered and died on the cross for our sins; he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God; he will come again as Judge of the living

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and the dead. We believe in the holy church universal, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen. However, though all Christians share this common faith, some are shallow in understanding and weak in practice. This is the reason Paul refers to them as weak in faith.

Who were the weak in the Roman church? Probably Jewish Christians who continued to observe the dietary restrictions and special days found in the Old Testament. Verse 2 says, **“One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.”** Does this mean that vegetarians are all weak and meat-eaters are all strong? No. Here Paul is talking about a matter of conscience. Even though the Mosaic Law did not forbid eating meat, many Jews living in pagan cultures refrained from doing so. They feared that their consciences would be contaminated by eating food sacrificed to idols. On the other hand, the strong Christians understood that the gospel sets them free from such restrictions. They enjoyed any kind of food, such as pork, squid and rattlesnake, believing that nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them (Mk 7:15). They enjoyed freedom which comes from the gospel. However, we cannot say that all Jewish Christians were weak, and all Gentile Christians were strong. Some of the strong were Jewish Christians like Paul (15:1).

Being weak or strong was not the issue; the issue was how they treated each other. Paul says in verse 3, **“The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.”** It is so easy for the strong to show contempt for the weak, thinking that they don’t know the secret of the gospel. Likewise, weak Christians easily judge the strong thinking that they eat everything at random like barbarians. These underlying attitudes can damage others even if they are not verbalized. Paul strongly urges that we must not show contempt for or judge each other based on these disputable matters. Rather, we should accept one another. Why? It is because God has accepted each person, whether their faith is weak or strong. Paul asks, **“Who are you to judge someone else’s servant?”** (4a) We have no right to judge. God alone is the judge of each

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person, and God is able to make each person stand (4b). If we judge others we oppose God, who has accepted them.

In verses 5-9, Paul gives another reason why we must accept one another. It is because all genuine Christians have the same life purpose and motive: it is to live for and honor the Lord. Verse 5 says, **“One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.”** Here **“sacred day”** probably refers to Jewish ceremonial days as well as the Sabbath. Some people thought that observing sacred days was an important part of practicing their faith. They judged and condemned those who did not do so. Paul says that each person should have their own conviction. The special days in the Old Testament all looked forward to the coming Messiah and were fulfilled by him. So, we no longer need to follow those practices. But some people continue to do so in honor of the Lord. We should respect them. In our time, some people criticize celebrating Jesus’ birth on Christmas, saying that it is compromise with pagan culture. But when our motive is to worship and honor Jesus, God accepts it. In verses 6-8 the phrases **“to the Lord”** or **“for the Lord”** are repeated six times. It means that whatever we do, our motive and purpose is to honor the Lord and give thanks to God (6). Instead of insisting on one’s own opinion about disputable matters, we should consider the motive. If it is for the Lord, we should respect it. If praise music is for the Lord, we should respect it. If hymn singing is for the Lord, we should respect it. If an orchestra performance or dance is for the Lord, we should respect it.

Verses 7-9 explain what our life purpose is, and how we came to have it. In the past, our life purpose was to gain honor and glory for ourselves. Whatever we did was with a selfish motive. Even giving to charity was for human recognition or a tax break. We were the owner of our lives. But when we accepted that Christ died for our sins and rose again from the dead, he became our Lord and Savior. Our life purpose and motive were changed from **“for myself”** to **“for Christ.”** Now we live for Christ and die for Christ. Christ is our Lord. We belong to him. When we experience this reality with other believers, we find the deep basis for accepting one another. One of my close staff coworkers has been a recently retired missionary. Though our cultural backgrounds are quite different, we have worked

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very closely together in one heart and mind. It is because we share the deep life purpose to glorify Christ and serve his people. I am sure that as our relationships go beyond the merely cultural and find root in our common life purpose in Christ, we can accept one another deeply from the heart.

In verses 10-12 Paul gives a further reason why we should not judge or show contempt toward our brothers and sisters. It is because we will all stand before God's judgment seat (10). God is the Creator and sovereign Ruler. He is the beginning and the end. Just as there was a beginning in history, so there will be an end. God is the final Judge. Every knee will bow before God; every tongue will acknowledge God (11). The emphasis is on "every." God judges each person individually, not as a group. We will each give an account for the specific things we have done (12). So, we should spend our energy living for the Lord instead of judging others (13a).

**Second, "for the sake of others" (14:13b-23).** Just as loving God is followed by loving others throughout the Bible, so, in this passage, living for the Lord is followed by living for the sake of others. Verse 13b says, **"...make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister."** Here **"stumbling block"** or **"obstacle"** refers to things that lead people to fall into sin. Paul himself had struggled hard not to hinder the faith of others. He was convinced and fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself (14). Though he had this conviction, he was measured in how he lived by it. He knew that some people still regarded certain things as unclean. If, in the sight of weak people, he ate meat according to his conviction, they would feel pressured, and their consciences would be distressed. Here **"distressed"** means to be grieved or hurt. It is a serious offense that can lead to the destruction of the other person. This offends Christ, who died for that person (15). When others observe the result, they speak evil of our good convictions (16). Though we are free, we should consider how our actions affect others. The use of our freedom should be constrained by loving others (Gal 5:13). Martin Luther said, "A Christian is free from all men, yet at the same time, is a slave of all." Paul confessed, **"To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some"** (1Co 9:22).

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The standard of Christian life is not oneself. It is **“for the Lord,”** and **“for the sake of others.”** Even if we have rights and privileges, we should be able to give them up for others. This is to act in love. Love never disregards those of weak conscience. Love does not dishonor others; it is not self-seeking (1 Co 13:5a). Food was not really the issue. The kingdom of God is a matter of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (17). Believers should be right with God, have peace with others, and be full of joy through the Holy Spirit. These are essential to Christian fellowship. Anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and a good influence on others (18).

Paul concludes this section with summary statements for practical application. Verses 19-20a say, **“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.”** Building up a trusting and loving Christian community takes labor, sacrifice, patience and time. But it is very easy to destroy the work of God by the careless exercise of our Christian freedom. Relationships that were built up over many years can be broken through careless words or actions. We should be very mindful of our fellow believers and make every effort to build them up in the Lord. Though we have the conviction that all food is clean, it is wrong to use that freedom to cause others to stumble (20b). It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause a brother or sister to fall (21). Though we give up our freedom for the sake of others, this does not mean to live without our own convictions. Paul tells us to keep these things between ourselves and God (22a). Blessed is the one who acts by faith without any doubt and does what is right in the sight of God (22b-23a). Everything that does not come from faith is sin (23b). In living for others, we should always live by faith.

**Third, glorify God by following the example of Christ (15:1-13).** In this section, Paul exhorts Christians with strong faith to follow Jesus’ example in dealing with those of weak faith. He tells why it is so important and how to do so. Verse 1 says, **“We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.”** Generally, in any Christian community, the strong provide leadership and influence the weak. The primary responsibility to establish a loving,

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healthy community rests on the strong. Paul includes himself among the strong. What should the strong do? **“Bear with the failings of the weak.”** Here **“failings”** is plural; those with weak faith do not fail just one time, but again and again. We can bear with them one or two times. But when they fail again and again, it is not easy to bear with them. To **“bear”** is to continue to uphold and lift them up until they become strong. A Christian community is the opposite of “survival of the fittest.” In this world, the strong take advantage of the weak. But in the Christian community, the strong **“bear with the failings of the weak.”** This is the obligation of the strong. The strong should not please themselves, but their neighbors, for their good and to build them up (2). The strong should invest themselves in the spiritual welfare of the weak. This is a hard teaching! How can we do so?

Paul reminds us of the example of Christ. Verse 3 says, **“For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’”** Even though Jesus is the Son of God, he did not exercise his authority to make others serve him. Rather, he served others. He was despised and rejected by people in order to bear our failings. While Jesus was hanging from the cross, dying for our sins, all the people around him hurled insults at him. Jesus bore this without retaliation (1Pe 2:24). When we try to serve others, we expect recognition and praise. But instead we are often insulted and humiliated. Then we can become discouraged and feel like giving up. In that moment, we need to look at Jesus. Then Jesus enables us to bear with the failings of the weak. We also need to hold onto God’s word. Verse 4 says, **“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.”** The Scriptures are God’s words to us. As we read them, meditate on them, memorize them and listen to them, the Holy Spirit breathes into us the strength to endure and the encouragement to persevere joyfully. Anyone who wants to accept others in Christ practically needs the refreshment God’s word provides.

Now Paul prayed: **“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (5-6). Paul knew it would not be easy

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for the Roman believers to practice his teaching. So, he prayed that God would give them endurance and encouragement to have the mind of Christ toward each other. The purpose of being one in mind and voice is not to promote organizational unity; it is to glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

After exhorting the strong, Paul now addresses all believers. Let's read verse 7: **“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”** Here, **“Accept”** is not just one time, but a continual, ongoing acceptance of one another. In order to glorify God, we should accept one another. How can we do so? The words, **“just as Christ accepted you”** point us back to Christ. Christ accepted us unconditionally while we were still powerless sinners and enemies of God. When we consider this, we are empowered to accept others. Without Christ, our hearts are like the eye of a needle. But with Christ, our hearts open wide like the vast Pacific Ocean. As we come to Jesus, he understands us, empathizes with us, and welcomes us as we are. Jesus forgives all our sins, clothes us with his righteousness and fills us with his Spirit. Since he accepts us in this way, we can also accept others. As Jesus understands us, we should understand others. As Jesus has had mercy on us, we should have mercy on others. As Jesus forgives us unconditionally, we should forgive others unconditionally. Here I thank God for the work of Christ who has helped me to grow in accepting others. I grew up in the Cold War era. As a boy, I was trained in civil defense drills designed to protect from Russian nuclear attacks. I thought of Russians as enemies. When I was asked to share a message at the 1992 Russian summer Bible conference, I accepted, but then began to have nightmares. When I prayed, God took away my fear and gave me the heart of Christ for Russian people. I could deliver the message with the love of God and many responded well. Since then, I have loved and served Russian brothers and sisters in the grace of Christ. Recently, I have had the privilege of sharing spiritual fellowship with Sh. Alexey Belykh through Hebrews Bible study. It has been an amazing blessing to share the love of God and the sufferings of Christ together. I have come to realize he is a great man of God, God's appointed servant to lead Moscow UBF, and a dear brother in Christ. Thank God for helping me to learn the heart of Christ even a little. This encourages me to keep struggling to accept others.

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After pointing to Jesus as the model, Paul tells how Christ unites Jews and Gentiles into one and why he does so. Jesus became a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth (8a). It was to confirm the promises God made to the patriarchs (8b). Since Jesus was still at work to fulfill these promises, the Jews have great hope, and this should inspire the Gentiles to respect them. Moreover, through Jesus the Gentiles can glorify God for his mercy (9a). There was a tendency for Jews to think of Gentile believers as second-class. However, God's plan from the beginning had always included the Gentiles. Paul quoted many Old Testament verses to support this (9b-12). The Jews should realize that God loved the Gentiles equally and accept them with respect. After explaining this, Paul prayed again with God's hope: **"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit"** (13). The fact that Paul prayed twice after exhorting the strong and the weak to accept one another tells us that it is not easy. We need God's help. So, we must pray.

Today we have been challenged to accept one another, especially those who are different from us. Let's be intentional about this. Let's pray and find people of different cultures and generations in the body of Christ whom we can engage with and get to know. I believe the Holy Spirit will be pleased to help us. As we do so, may our community reflect the amazing diversity and beauty of Christ himself for the glory of God.