

## Accept One Another

Romans 14:1-15:7

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According to LifeWay Research, when asked about their most significant struggle this past year, pastors pointed to the disunity in their congregation caused by COVID and the various protocols put in place. Many factors no doubt play a role in this problem, but one statistic may underscore a significant contributor to division: *“On any given day, evangelical Christians are twice as likely to open Facebook as their Bible.”*

- 66% use Facebook at least once a day
- 49% are on Facebook several times a day
- Almost 40% watch a YouTube video at least once a day
- Only 32% of evangelicals say they read the Bible every day

Many Christians are being shaped more by social media than by Scripture. Social media has not made us more social; it has made us more anti-social, angrier and more divided.

I came across this example of “How Social Media Works.”

ME: *“I prefer mangoes to oranges.”*

RANDOM PERSON: *“So basically, what you’re saying is you hate oranges? You also failed to mention pineapples, bananas, and grapefruit. Educate yourself. I’m literally shaking.”*

As we’ve been learning in our “One Another” series, we’re called to care for and be united with one another. Last weekend, we established this truth: *Jesus is praying for us to be a community of unity.* It’s so easy for us to divide, isn’t it?

I’m reminded of the story of a man stranded on an isolated island. He was alone on this island for many years, so he made himself a hut. Eventually, the island was discovered, and the man was rescued. Before they left, the man decided to give a tour of his island.

He showed the people his hut, proudly saying, *“This is the home I built.”* Then he showed them another building and said, *“This is the church I built.”* As they

continued to walk, one of the people noticed another building and inquired of the man, “*Hey, what’s that building over there?*” The man answered, “*Oh, that’s where I used to go to church.*”

Today, our focus is on accepting one another from Romans 14-15. Here’s what I’m hoping we’ll learn: “*Since we are accepted by Christ, we must accept one another.*”

Chapters 12-16 contain the practical part of Romans where Paul speaks more about the matter of accepting one another than any other topic. If we separate from those who differ from us on minor matters, we will soon be left all alone.

Paul is introducing us to two distinct groups of people in the church at Rome: the weak and the strong, or as one pastor refers to them, the “weak” and the “weaker.”

These believers were divided over special diets and special days. The big problem was whether it was OK for a Christ follower to eat meat which had been offered to an idol before it was sent to Bob the Butcher. Some had no issue with it at all, while others felt by eating meat a person could become spiritually contaminated. This group followed a special diet and felt some days were more spiritual than others. The second group had just one big hang up: group #1. They knew they were free to eat Beef Wellington and worship on any day they wanted.

Most of us struggle with two tendencies: we like to compare, and we long to control others. We can easily fall into thinking the way we view life or the way we do things is correct, and therefore those who differ from us must be wrong. It’s so easy for us to elevate our personal preferences to moral matters by which we judge others.

Chuck Swindoll tells the true story of a missionary family who was forced to leave the mission field because of peanut butter. This young family served where peanut butter was difficult to get, so they arranged to have friends in the U.S. send them some.

What they didn’t realize was the other missionaries considered it a mark of spirituality for a missionary to *not* have peanut butter because they couldn’t get it there. Their strong belief was for every missionary to give up peanut butter.

The newer missionary family considered this a simple difference of opinion, so they continued to receive peanut butter shipments. Unfortunately, the pressure to

conform was so intense, the family finally gave up, packed their things, and left the mission field, disillusioned and cynical.

If the older missionaries would have studied Romans 14-15, they might have been able to keep this young family on the field.

### **Avenues to Acceptance**

There are at least six avenues to acceptance found in these two chapters. They spell out the word A.C.C.E.P.T.

**1. Avoid passing judgment (1-4).** Those who clung to the Law condemned those who enjoyed their liberty, while the more mature Christians despised the immature ones. Paul tells both groups to chill out and not be chilly toward each other: ***“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.”***

In other translations, the word, ***“welcome”*** is translated as ***“accept”*** and means, ***“to take to oneself, to kindly receive in one’s company.”*** We’re to do more than just put up with each other; we’re exhorted to extend warm fellowship and not turn a cold shoulder. We’re to allow others the freedom to hold convictions which are unlike ours and to welcome them in spite of that difference.

The word ***“opinions”*** refers to what is debatable or doubtful. It’s those “gray” areas of the Christian life. There are three categories specified in Scripture:

- Things that are right. It’s always right to do what’s right. Here’s one example from Romans 13:1: ***“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.”***
- Things that are wrong. Romans 13:13, which comes right before our text, says, ***“Let us walk properly in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.”***
- Issues of freedom and preference which involve secondary matters.

A disputable matter is an honest difference of opinion between Bible believing Christians on how to best apply a biblical principle.

We’re told not to ***“quarrel”*** over opinions. The Bible has a lot to say about disagreements. Interestingly, the problem isn’t so much about disagreements. Quarreling is identified as the problem. 2 Timothy 2:14: ***“...Charge them before***

***God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.”***

Many years ago, Beth and I received some marriage advice we still use today. It goes like this. When your spouse is doing something which bugs you, say this phrase to yourself, or even out loud: *“Not wrong, just different.”* That was free of charge. You’re welcome.

Look at verse 2: ***“One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.”*** This could be referring to the saved Gentile who feels he can eat whatever he wants, while the Jewish convert, raised on the Old Testament dietary laws, wants to avoid any possibility of dishonoring God by eating something that is not kosher or had been sacrificed to an idol.

Verse 3 helps us see the real problem had nothing to do with meat; it was an acceptance issue: ***“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.”*** Those who liked Angus burgers looked down on the vegetarians while the Boca Burger crowd condemned the carnivores.

***“Despise”*** is really strong. It literally means, *“to utterly despise with scorn and regard as nothing; to throw out like trash.”* It also refers to *“pushing someone out.”* To ***“pass judgment”*** has the idea of sitting in judgment and refers to the punishment reserved for those who have broken God’s laws. When we condemn, we often make assumptions which are exaggerated, erroneous and even damaging to someone’s character. Both groups had become polarized because they had taken a “disputable matter” and turned it into a moral issue.

Notice, the key phrase at the end of verse 3: ***“God has welcomed him.”*** Brothers and sisters, we have grace in the gray areas! I love how Peter summarizes God’s attitude toward people who have different backgrounds and viewpoints in Acts 10:34: ***“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality.”***

In the heat of the Civil War, one of President Lincoln’s advisors mentioned to the President he was glad God was on the side of the Union. Lincoln replied, *“Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.”*

Since God accepts both viewpoints, we must avoid passing judgment on those who believe and behave differently than we do. Verse 4 makes it clear we must not

take the place of God in someone's life: ***“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.”*** God is God and we are not. He's perfectly capable of directing the lives of those who follow Him.

J.D. Crawley has written a very helpful post called, “12 Principles for Disagreeing with Other Christians.” A link has been posted on Sermon Extras if you'd like to read it. Here are just a few sentences: *“You are not the master of other believers. When you look down on someone with a weaker conscience or judge someone with a stronger conscience, you're acting as though that person is your servant, and you are his master. But God is his master. In matters of opinion, you must let God do His work.”*

This is fairly easy to do when it comes to eating meat because it's far removed from our culture and context. But let's bring it closer to home. We need to avoid passing judgment in “disputable matters,” or taboo topics today. We've had 2,000 years to add to this list.

Some of these topics are non-starters for you, while others probably light you up a bit. The principle still stands – we're called to accept one another even when we disagree about debatable topics. The call is for both sides to respect the freedom of the other by giving them the right to be different.

Before I mention some current topics, Christians disagree about, let me quote a pastor named Brian Bell: *“Your love may be tested more by Christians who disagree with you, than by unbelievers who persecute you...sometimes disputable matters turn us blue in the face, which makes our Christian friend see red, but Paul points out it should be gray.”* Here are some I thought of.

- COVID-19
- COVID Protocols – mask wearing and distancing
- Gathering for worship in person or online
- Styles of music
- Bible versions
- Spiritual gifts
- Calvinism or Arminianism
- End times
- Alcohol
- Medical marijuana

- Politics
- Parenting styles
- Schooling of children – Home schooling, Public, Parochial, or Christian

There's almost an endless supply of things to disagree about today. The problem is not THAT we disagree; it's more about HOW we disagree. You don't have to agree with someone's opinions, but don't look down on those whom God has accepted. Since you are not better than anyone else, nor are they better than you, don't turn the disputable into the dogmatic.

*Since we are accepted by Christ, we must accept one another.*

**2. Commit to live for the Lord alone (5-12).** The best way to avoid passing judgment is to live for the Lord alone and to recognize we're all at different points in our spiritual journey.

Verse 5 tells us each believer must be ***“fully convinced in his own mind.”*** We're not to automatically adopt the convictions of others but instead to give careful thought and prayerful consideration to all the principles taught in the Word of God. As we commit to live for the Lord, we should strive to see fellow followers of Christ as members of the same team, growing in grace just like we are.

Sometimes, we launch assaults on people by putting a label on those we disagree with: *“I don't think he's really a Christian.”* Or we might secretly think, *“If she was really growing in her faith, she would do this or that.”*

Verse 6 serves as a great reminder that no one has a corner on commitment and therefore we should be careful about questioning another believer's motives: ***“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.”*** The one who enjoys Johnsonville brats, *and* the lover of legumes eats to the Lord and gives thanks to the Lord. Both thank God for the food they receive, and both live out their convictions as an expression of their devotion to Jesus.

I love how generous Paul is to both sides by assuming everyone is exercising their freedoms or restrictions for the glory of God. Wouldn't it be amazing to be in a church where everyone gave each other the benefit of the doubt on differences of opinion, instead of putting the worst possible spin on everything?

Verse 10 tells us why we shouldn't judge or look down on others: ***“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.”*** When we evaluate another person on disputable matters, we place ourselves in the position of judge over that person. In other words, when we judge, we are usurping God's role. Jesus warns us in Matthew 12:36: ***“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.”***

The phrase, ***“judgment seat”*** comes from the place where the judges sat at athletic contests. Those who broke the rules were disqualified and the winner was given rewards. Only the judge was allowed on this elevated seat; everyone else was down below, at the same level. Likewise, you and I will appear before the exalted Judge of the world, and only He has the right to judge the thoughts, intentions, attitudes, motives, words, and actions of every human being.

The last time I checked, God doesn't need any help judging people. He's doing just fine on His own.

I've observed the people with the greatest number of faults are often the most merciless in their criticism of others. I heard about a group of 53 residents from a town in Connecticut who signed a neighborhood petition to stop reckless driving on their streets. As soon as it passed, the police set up a patrol and pulled over five violators. *All five had signed the petition.*

Our responsibility is to make sure the Lord is #1 in our lives and not to worry too much about the preferences of other people.

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**3. Control yourself in love (13-18).** If we want to accelerate our ability to accept one another, we must avoid passing judgment and commit to live for the Lord alone. The third avenue is to be controlled by love. Verse 13: ***“Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.”***

My goal should not be to get everyone to agree with me. My desire is to pursue peace, to welcome others, to avoid causing them to stumble, and to help believers mature in Christ.

Our liberty must always be tempered by love as we recognize our attitudes and actions often have an affect on others. Verse 15 is more specific: ***“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.”*** The word “grieved” has the idea of mourning when a loved one dies. I am out of bounds if I use my freedom in such a way it causes another believer to mourn. I shouldn’t flaunt my freedoms in Christ, nor should I try to fence others in with my rules and regulations.

Picture a married guy named Joe who’s been taught all his life if he ever takes off his wedding ring, he would be breaking his marriage vows. This belief has been passed down in Joe’s family from generation to generation. As a result, he never took off his ring because to him it would be tantamount to trashing his vows.

Imagine Joe has a friend named Randy who’s never heard of this belief. They get together on a Saturday to work on Joe’s car. As they get ready, Randy takes off his wedding ring and puts it in his pocket, so he doesn’t get any grease on it. Can you imagine Joe gasping as Randy takes off his ring? But to Randy, there’s no correlation between his ring and how much he loves his wife.

That’s similar to what the food laws were to some newly converted believers. In their minds, to eat meat violated their vows to God. When they saw other Christians munching on filet mignon, they were aghast, because to them it meant unfaithfulness to God.

Now, let’s go back to Joe and Randy. Imagine Randy pressures Joe to take off his wedding ring. Joe gives in to the pressure and takes it off, but in his heart, he feels as though he’s broken his marriage vows, and been unfaithful to his wife. When he goes home, he feels guilty because for the first time in his life, he’s crossed the line, at least in his mind.

If we’re really serious about pursuing love, we’ll think about how our liberty will affect someone else’s spiritual growth. Once Randy knows about Joe’s beliefs about wedding rings, love would dictate he keep his ring on – at least when he’s with Joe. Verse 16: ***“So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.”***

The bottom line isn’t whether someone feels the freedom to eat meat or abstain, or takes off a ring or leaves it on, or wears a mask or doesn’t. The key is to remember the kingdom of God, according to verse 17, is ***“not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”*** If we major

in a godly life, we won't fight over minor matters and we won't look down on those with differing views.

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**4. Edify everyone you can (19-21).** Look at verse 19: ***“So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”*** The word **“upbuilding”** or edify, is a construction term used to describe the process of making a building stronger. It's the idea of retrofitting a structure to improve its usefulness and extend its longevity.

The opposite word **“destroy”** is used in verse 20 and is also a construction term for tearing down a building: ***“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.”*** In disputable matters, don't fight to prove you're right because you could end up wronging someone by leading them down a wrong path.

Are you a constructor, or a destructor? Do you edify, or would you rather erase those you disagree with? Are you building up believers or blasting away at them? Our actions either strengthen or weaken the church. My highest priority in relationships with others should be their edification, not their demolition.

Kevin DeYoung wrote a post entitled, “Distinguishing Marks of a Quarrelsome Person.” I'll only mention five because it's too convicting to read all of them.

- You defend every conviction with the same degree of intensity.
- You are quick to speak and slow to listen.
- You have no unarticulated opinions.
- Your first instinct is to criticize; your last instinct is to encourage.
- You never give the benefit of the doubt.

Don't be like this person:

*Believe as I believe,  
No more, no less;  
That I am right,  
And no one else, confess.*

*Feel as I feel,*

*Think only as I think;  
Eat what I eat,  
And drink but what I drink.*

*Look as I look,  
Do always as I do;  
Then, and only then,  
Will I fellowship with you.*

If that means we abstain from something for the sake of a brother or sister, or hold back on expressing an opinion, then that's what we do. Do you love people more than you love being right? The question is not, "*Can I do this?*" but rather, "*If I do this, how will it affect my brother or sister?*"

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**5. Personalize your convictions privately (22-23).** There are certain truths all believers must accept because they are explicitly taught in Scripture. However, some of us may feel like we have to tell people what we've decided about different debatable topics. Actually, according to verse 22, the way of wisdom is to keep some things private: "***The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.***"

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**6. Treasure people like Jesus does (15:1-7).** Chapter 15 begins with a call for us to be more like Christ: "***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.***" This is very similar to Philippians 2:3: "***Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.***"

Are we making a huge sacrifice when we give up something for the sake of another believer? Compared with what Jesus did for us, nothing is too great for us to do.

According to verse 7, Jesus is both our model and motivation: "***Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.***" Since Jesus accepts us unconditionally, we should therefore accept others the same way.

Let's review.

Avoid passing judgment.  
Commit to live for the Lord alone.  
Control yourself in love.  
Edify everyone you can.  
Personalize your convictions privately.  
Treasure people like Jesus does.

### **Our Covenant Commitment**

Last weekend, we ended by reading the relationship covenant established by the *Navigators*. This week, I pulled out the Edgewood church covenant and was moved by its depth and its clarion call for us to accept one another. Listen as I read it.

**SECTION 3. COVENANT.** As a **bond of unity** among us, this church accepts for its members the following covenant:

(A) Having been led by the Holy Spirit to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior and on profession of our faith in Him, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant **with one another as one body in Christ.**

(B) We promise that we will **watch over and counsel one another** in the spirit of brotherly love, that we will remember **one another** in our prayers, and that we will aid each other in sickness and distress.

(C) We further agree, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, **to walk together** in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; to give it a sacred pre-eminence over all institutions of human origin; and to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations.

(D) We further covenant to maintain family and private devotion; to religiously educate our children; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to live carefully in this present world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment; to avoid all tattling, backbiting, and excessive anger; **to abstain from**

**everything that will cause our brother to stumble** or that will bring reproach upon the cause of Christ; and to strive to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, that amidst evil and good report we will humbly and earnestly seek to live to the honor and glory of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

In summary, by God's grace and our commitment to accept one another, we, the members of Edgewood will put our face in God's book more than Facebook and we will deal diligently with disunity by guarding the sweet unity Christ has given to us.

*Since we are accepted by Christ, we will accept one another.*

## **Membership**

### **Saturday night**

Brian and Andrea Kozak  
Brian and Sarah Daggett  
Mary Ellis  
Roxanne Daugherty