

Building Up One Another

Message 5: Accept One Another

Rom 15:7 *Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.*

In a few weeks, our family will be driving over to my sister's place on the west side of the state. When we arrive, I expect that my sister will welcome us into her home. She'll greet us warmly, open the door, let us come in, and provide for all our needs. We are members of the same family, and it is perfectly reasonable that she would welcome us and receive us into her home.

I would be rather shocked and disappointed if, when we arrived, the door was locked and no one came to greet us. Or if we received a cold stare and unkind words. We might just get back in the car and go home.

The church is something like a family. In the church, we should extend a warm welcome and acceptance to those in our spiritual family—the local church. God commands us to “receive/accept/welcome ye one another.”

Accepting people in the church is a bit different from accepting people in our physical families. Acceptance in the church is based on the same or similar faith and practice. Our likeminded unity is based on doctrinal agreement. Because we are of the same faith and practice, we can work together in unity and harmony.

The problem is that sometimes we do not accept others even though they share the same faith and practice. If someone looks a little different or acts a little different, we may be tempted to withhold acceptance and not welcome such people. Maybe we just shy away from others, hold them at arm's length, and not even try to get to know them. It's easy to accept those who are like us and who meet our expectations and reject those who are a little bit different from us—even if we are in the same church.

The point of this passage is that minor differences among believers should not prevent us from accepting others within the fellowship.

What does it mean to receive one another?

I. The command: “accept” (KJV “receive”) (προσλαμβάνω)

Paul uses the same word in Romans 14:1 *Receive one who is weak in the faith,* 14:3 *“for God has received him.”*

- A. The word literally means “to take, to receive, to welcome.”
- B. Other texts that use the same word help us gain an understanding of this idea.

Ac 18:26 ... *Aquila and Priscilla ... **took** [Apollos] unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.*

Ac 28:2 *And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and **received** us every one, ...*

Phm 17 *If thou count me therefore a partner, **receive** him as myself.*

In each of these passages, the word “receive” or “took” implies acceptance and welcome. E.g., welcoming someone into your home. It implies warm acceptance; treating someone as a welcome guest, like a family member. “Make yourself at home.”

It’s the opposite of being cold and standoffish to others; keeping one another at arm’s length; being distant and unfriendly. Instead, we offer a warm welcome to one another like a family member or old friend.

App: The church should be a place of acceptance and welcome for Christians. Fellow believers in the same church should not alienate one another; they should not be divided. They should be unified and likeminded.

Minor differences should not divide us. The church is always going to have people with minor differences, and we have to be able to bear with one another and accept one another in spite of our differences.

Trans: The command here is to accept/receive/welcome one another, and that’s what we must do.

II. The model for acceptance: “as Christ also received us”

- A. Who is the “us”?

1. He’s addressing the members of the church in Rome. So the “us” is the church, the followers of Christ who meet together as a local church.
2. Given the context of Rom 14-15, the “us” is both the spiritually strong/mature as well as the spiritually weak/immature.

Churches usually contain both strong believers and weak believers. The church in Rome was having problems; some of the people did not accept the others. There were divisions within the church based on minor differences. That's why Paul has to tell them to accept/welcome one another.

3. People in the same church are supposed to receive/accept one another just as Jesus received/accepted them. We can accept/receive others because Jesus accepted us. God was gracious toward us, and we can be gracious toward others.

B. How does Christ accept believers?

1. He accepts us mercifully. Christ received us “while we were yet sinners” and while we were his enemies (Rom 5:8; cf. Luke 15:2).

We must extend mercy to others. We must accept others as they are—as imperfect humans, just like we are. We shouldn't expect perfection from anyone. All of us have weaknesses, blind spots, and struggles. We are all at different stages of Christian growth and maturity. Such human failures should not normally prevent us from accepting others in the church.

2. He accepts us graciously (Eph 2:8-9). We must put up with (“forbearing”) one another (Rom 15:1; Eph 4:2; Col 3:13).
3. He accepts us lovingly (Jn 13:34). Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet 4:8).
4. He accepts us particularly (Jn 1:12, 6:37). Christ accepts those who accept him, i.e., those who are saved. This acceptance/welcome is for fellow believers in the same church.

Generally speaking, we try to be friendly and tolerant toward everyone, but within the church, when dealing with people of like faith and practice, we should be especially warm and welcoming.

Quote: If Christ received us, and bears with all our weaknesses, well may we receive ... [one] another, and by so doing God will be glorified.¹

¹ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 257.

C. Implications of Christ's example in this regard

1. Our acceptance of one another is based on Christ's acceptance of repentant sinners. Salvation is the common ground that unifies believers and brings them into fellowship with one another. If someone is genuinely saved, he should enjoy at least a basic level of acceptance with other believers.
2. The church recognizes no distinctions based on ethnicity, race, or family background.

Ro 10:12 For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him.

Ga 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

Col 3:11 Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.

All believers are equal at the foot of the cross. Spiritually speaking, all believers have the same position before God. All believers have a sense of spiritual equality in their position before God.

3. We accept/receive people in spite of their imperfections. We shouldn't expect people to be perfect. Even believers are still sinners. We don't downplay the seriousness of sin, but we recognize that everyone has failures and faults. "We all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2).
4. We can tolerate difference in opinions, behaviors, preferences, and convictions—to a certain degree. Greater unity comes from greater agreement. But we need not require cookie-cutter conformity.
5. We should extend common courtesy to everyone. Even those with whom we seriously disagree deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Even if we disagree over various issues, we still must treat one another with humanness.

6. This call for acceptance is not universal. We recognize certain exceptions to this rule. This call to receive/accept one another has limits and boundaries.
- a) Paul is not calling us here to tolerate all kinds of sin. This is not a command that we include everybody of all persuasions and doctrinal positions.
- Some churches lack discernment and accept virtually anything and anyone. Churches have come to endorse and allow all manner of evil, sinful, depraved behavior and false doctrine. We don't want to do that. This is not a command to tolerate grossly sinful behavior within the church.
- b) In our modern culture, we also have to be careful about accepting people who would destroy the church. The world is full of agitators and troublemakers whose main goal is to upset the church.
- We are not obligated to retain people who teach false *doctrine* or who cause *divisions* or who are *disorderly* in their behavior.
- c) This passage calls us to accept fellow believers, and particularly those who might be somewhat different from us in nonessential matters. We make an effort to accept those who are not quite like us.

App: I think our church has a good track record in that regard. We have welcomed people of color here, people who I met in the jail ministry, some rather eccentric people, etc.

But we can always do better at being more friendly, warm, and welcoming, especially to visitors.

III. The goal of acceptance: "to the glory of God."

- A. Our acceptance of others must ultimately bring glory to God.
- B. The highest and overall goal of all things is to bring glory to God, and we do that through our accepting/receiving fellow believers within the fellowship of the church in spite of our minor differences.

- C. Our acceptance of others in the church reflects God's acceptance of repentant sinners. If God accepts those who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus, then we should do the same. If these people share our faith and practice, then we should accept them in the church.
- D. And if we fail to accept people as God does, we fail to bring glory to God. Our church is dishonorable if we disobey this principle. If we are selfishly focused on ourselves and exclude others, we are not glorifying God.

Trans: If we want to glorify God in the church, we must receive/accept one another.

IV. Errors to avoid

A. Judgmentalism

Romans 14:1 *Receive one who is weak in the faith, ...*

Romans 15:1 *We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*

A problem in the church at that time was divisions between the different people in the church—the strong were not getting along with the weak.

A common human tendency is to look down on those who are unlike us or who fail to meet our expectations.

1. Judgmentalism is a critical, fault-finding, harsh attitude that fails to take human weakness into consideration. Instead of accepting other believers in spite of their weaknesses, judgmental people focus on differences and perceived failures. Judgmentalism causes conflict over nonessential issues.
2. Acceptance of an individual does not imply acceptance of his bad behavior, his lack of spiritual maturity, or even his faulty doctrine (cf. Apollos, Acts 18:24-26). Acceptance often requires gracious toleration of differences, but it does not imply that accept grossly sinful behavior or false doctrine. Acceptance does not mean that the person is fine where he is. We welcome others and hope that they will grow and mature in the faith.

In fact, check Romans 15:14 – “admonish one another.” So that implies that there may be some things that we do not accept about one another.

3. We need to allow room for differing personal convictions. We need to tolerate people who are somewhat *unlike* us. We must allow some flexibility for different convictions and levels of maturity.

In Paul’s day, eating food offered to idols was a disputable matter that divided brethren. It should not have caused such division. One should not look down on his brother on account of such matters.

Certain matters of life are nonessential. That is, Christians hold different opinions on such things. We should seek to avoid conflict over nonessential matters. We might actually disagree about such things, but we should not get into conflict over them. We agree to disagree agreeably, without conflict. E.g., some musical choices.

We need discernment to tell the difference between essential and nonessential matters. Some people confuse these two. They make mountains out of molehills.

4. If we are truly mature in the faith, we will be sensitive toward our brothers and sisters in Christ who are less mature in the faith. We will be careful to do nothing that would cause them to stumble and fall into sin.
5. In all of this, we want to foster an atmosphere of acceptance and welcome for others. We allow some flexibility. We don’t despise others who have different convictions. We remain hopeful that people can change for the better and mature in the faith.

- B. Favoritism: showing partiality to others based on immaterial factors

James 2:1, 9 *My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. ... but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*

James rebuked the church warmly welcoming people with gold rings and fine apparel, but neglecting poor people with filthy clothes. We should not show favoritism/partiality based on minor, external differences.

Favoritism/partiality violates the very nature of the local church. We are all one. Every member is important, whether rich or poor, young or old, black or white, weak or strong. If we show favoritism, we also destroy the unity and harmony of the church.

A major problem in many churches is that the people welcome some but not others. Certain people receive a warm welcome, while others feel unwelcome and unwanted. Some churches fail to welcome outsiders, those without family connections, those who look a little different, those who wear the wrong styles of clothing, etc. Some people have a *warm welcome* for our own little group, but a *cold shoulder* for anyone else.

Trans: Judgmentalism and favoritism prevent us from accepting one another. We should be careful to avoid these errors.

V. Practical steps toward accepting one another

- A. Welcome people when they come to church, especially visitors and those who are a bit different. Make sure that everyone receives a warm welcome, especially visitors.

What if someone of a different color, economic class, or social background attends church—how will he be treated?

How do you treat others who differ with you on minor matters? We don't have to agree with everyone's opinion, but we do have to accept other believers based on our common commitment to Christ and his church.

- B. Since we are to accept others as Christ accepted us, we should be intentional about seeking others and bringing them in. E.g., Lk 19:10—seek and to save the lost. E.g., A & P with Apollos. We move toward others who may be different from ourselves. We don't give them the cold shoulder; we don't ignore/neglect them.

- C. Bear with immature believers. Do not rush to judgment when people fail or make bad decisions. Help new believers grow in the faith and to understand the culture of the church. It takes some time for newcomers to figure out how we do things and what we expect of fellow believers. Show some grace and patience.

App: How would you respond if a person in the church admitted a significant moral failure to you? E.g., alcohol, porn, gambling, etc. Would you draw closer to the person to help him overcome the issue, or would you withdraw from him because of his failure? Cf. Gal 6:1, or would we be more like the Pharisee—“I’m glad I’m not like sinners...”

- D. We must not allow minor, trivial, disputable matters to become major issues. Don’t allow the trivial to become substantial. Don’t make a mountain out of a mole hill. Secondary issues must remain secondary, and we must allow for differences of opinion and different preferences, as long as those differences do not cause conflict.

Romans 15:1 *We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*

The point of the passages we’ve looked at today is that we are obligated to welcome fellow believers of like faith and practice into the fellowship of the church. And fellow members are obligated to accept one another, even when minor differences exist.

We have to be intentional about this and work hard on it. We are all different; we disagree on various things. We have different experiences and different viewpoints. So that means that we have to be gracious and tolerant of one another. In spite of our differences, we extend a warm welcome to one another; we receive one another.

So we need to evaluate ourselves on this matter. Are we allowing minor disagreements and personal issues to prevent us from enjoying warm, personal fellowship with others in the church? Are we allowing nonessential issues to divide us? Are we allowing minor personality conflicts to prevent us from accepting one another? If so, we are not glorifying to God.

When we arrive at my sister’s house, I expect that she will welcome us warmly. I would be highly disappointed if she were distant and unfriendly. Likewise in the church we should accept one another like family and close friends. We must put aside trivial differences and extend warmth and compassion to one another as fellow followers of Jesus Christ—to the glory of God.