

“Accept One Another”

¹Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. ²One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. ⁴Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ⁵One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹It is written: " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.' " ¹²So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. ¹⁴As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.

According to a fable, one day Abraham was sitting by his tent door when he saw coming along the way a very old man. With true Bedouin hospitality, Abraham invited the old man to a meal. At the meal, he asked the old man about his religion, and the old man said that he was a fire-worshipper. At this, Abraham grew angry that the man could be such a fool and an infidel and thrust him out of his camp. Then God called to Abraham, and said, "Where is the old man that came to you?" "I thrust him out," replied Abraham, "because he did not rightly worship you." God said, "I have put up with his foolishness for almost a century. Why could you not put up with him one night?" Thus, Abraham learned hospitality even toward those who do not have correct beliefs.

In Romans 14 and 15, Paul is dealing with divisions in the church. The church at Rome was divided over diets and days. The ones that Paul calls "weak believers" would eat only vegetables, because the meat they could buy in the marketplace was generally leftovers from offerings to pagan idols. The ones that Paul calls "strong believers" said that they could eat anything because idols were not real and meat was just meat. Again, the weak believers kept special holy days whereas the strong believers said keeping special days does not save you, only faith in Jesus can save you. But both sides in this church argument agreed on one thing. Both sides agreed to judge and despise each other.

It is obvious from the names that Paul gives them, which side he favors. He calls them the strong and the weak. Obviously, his sympathies are with the strong. Paul did not believe that there was any religious merit in eating certain foods or keeping certain days. However, he emphasizes that is not the point. The major point in any religious

disagreement is that we should not put down those who disagree with us, even when we know that we are right. Thus, Paul says, “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak” (15:1).

Have you ever tried ordering water in the restaurant nowadays? First, the waiter asks, “Hot or cold water?” Let us say you chose cold water. He then asks, “Tap water or bottled water?” Okay, bottled water. “Mineral, alkaline, ionized, carbonated, flavored, purified, or distilled?” So much to choose from! Now let us look at Bible believers. Other than the assorted denominational labels, we also have all sorts of differences or preferences. To have long hair or short hair for women? To wear or not to wear makeup or jewelries? Skirts or pants? Traditional hymns or contemporary music? The list can go on and on. How do we deal with these differences? Should we debate or divide over these issues? How do we accept the different? Paul recognizes in these chapters the unpleasant truth that believers do not agree about many aspects of the faith. So, what do we do about our disagreements? It is simple, we accept each other and bear with each other. However, many Christians are unwilling to take Paul’s advice. It has always amazed me that people in the church will fight over the least little thing.

Let me tell you a story, true story—I could name names but I won’t. There was a large church with a great ministry for God. One Sabbath, as morning worship began, the church organist was not there. The minister was taken aback by this, but he thought, all is not lost, because another lady could play the organ and that lady was there. So the minister asked this other lady to play. And she did. They did the first hymn and went on with the service. About ten minutes into the service, the regular organist arrived.

But the minister thought this other lady is already up here playing, and I will just let her finish the service. It is no big deal, right? Wrong! Over the next several weeks, controversy erupted; factions arose. One faction was the “Regular Organist” party—they said that when the regular organist came in the minister should have asked her to take over the organ and the other lady to step down. Another faction was the “Substitute Organist” party. They said the minister did the right thing; the regular organist was late and should not have been asked to play. The two parties got so mad; they had shouting matches in the church. The minister got so disgusted that he not only left the church, he left the ministry. Also, about half the church membership left, and that church has never recovered to this day. They should have consulted the Apostle Paul. I suspect Paul would have told them to get a life and get over it.

In Romans 14, those that Paul calls "the weak in the faith" were all wrapped up in rules and regulations. They were Christian Pharisees and they said that if you were a "real" Christian, that you would keep all of rules that the Pharisees derived from the Law of Moses. Now Paul does not say that these people are not Christians. He says that they are not mature Christians. The mature Christians, the strong believers, realize that in Christ, we have freedom from Old Testament law. They realize that we are not saved by keeping the law.

So, those were the two factions in the Church of Rome, and they despised each other. The strong Christians enjoyed their liberty and despised the weak, whom they called the “Judaizers.” The weak Christians kept their diets and their days, and despised the strong Christians, whom they called “libertines.” Thus, they were both wrong. For whenever we

dispute and despise, we are wrong. We may be right in the argument. We are still wrong.

In Romans 14, Paul gives us three reasons why we are wrong.

First, Romans 14:3 "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them."

In other words: The meat-eater should not despise the vegetarian, or the vegetarian the meat-eater, because God does not despise either one of them. If God has received them, so should we, even when we don't like them.

Historically, the church has found this hard to do. In Acts 10, God told Peter to go to the Gentiles. Peter's response was, "Lord, they are ritually unclean because they do not keep the law." God's said, in Acts 10:15, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." So, Peter went to the household of Cornelius the centurion, and that household accepted Christ and was richly blessed of God.

The church in Jerusalem got all disturbed about this accepting of unclean Gentiles into the church, but Peter said, "God received them, just like God received you and me. God opened the door for his people, and I am not going to close it on his people." Nor should we. We should not close any doors on people who want to come into the fellowship of Christ, even if they do not agree with us on every doctrine.

Secondly, Romans 14:4, "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand." Paul said, "Who do you think you are to judge a slave that does not belong to you?" You are not her master, so it does not make any difference what you think about her. She will be judged by her master, that is what counts, and if she believes, her

master, who is God, will find her service satisfactory, because God will help her to serve. This carries the point in V3 a little further. In V3, Paul said, “Do not set yourself up to be better than God, if God receives her, you receive her. Here he says, If she believes, God is with her, Thus, if we sit in judgment on her, we sit in judgment on God.” Now Paul is not saying here that we cannot have disagreements with other believers, for they are only people, and they can be wrong, but he is saying that we should not despise them, when they are.

V10 reads: “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” We are not going to be sitting in the judgment seat. We are going to be standing before that seat, and the Lord is not going to ask us to give an account for them. We must give our own account, and they must give theirs.

There is an interesting little commentary on this subject near the end of the gospel of John. Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me"(21:19), but Peter looked over at John and said, "Lord, and what shall this man do?"(21). Jesus replied, "What is that to you? You follow me" (22). In other words, mind your own business, Peter, and do what I tell you to do, and do not worry about John. Let him also do what I tell him to do. This is the kind of advice that every believer ought to take to heart and apply every day. Don't judge because we will all be judged.

The third reason to accept others is found in V6: “Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks

to God.’’

Paul says that we should not only consider what they are doing, but who they are doing it for. We should tolerate others, even when we do not agree them, because of God whom they serve. Again, this is not to say that we should accept their opinion necessarily. It is to say that we should accept them--because of whom they worship

So Paul gives us these three reasons why we should accept each other: God has received us all, God is Lord of us all, and we all honor God. Then Paul explains what accepting each other means. Acceptance to Paul is not something passive. It is something that reaches out to others and lifts them up. There are two kinds of people in this world. There are those who tear down and those who build up. Any lazy fool can tear things up and tear things down. But it takes wisdom and work to lift up and build up, and that is what God has called us to do. V19 says we should work at “mutual upbuilding.” Our goal should be to build up each other. And the best way to do that is by example.

Remember the problem that Paul was discussing in Romans 14. There was a division in the church—the weak Christians versus the strong Christians. We might suppose that since Paul identifies himself as a strong Christian, he would address himself to the weak Christians and tell them that they are wrong and that they need to shut up and stop causing trouble in the church. Not so. He says in V1, "Welcome those who are weak in faith." Obviously, he is talking to the ones who are strong in the faith. Paul is not addressing himself in this chapter to those who are wrong in the argument, but to those who are right, that is to the strong Christians.

In V13, Paul tells us specifically how people who are right in church arguments ought

to behave, “Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.” He said, don’t look at other people’s conduct to see what they are doing wrong, but rather look at your own conduct to see that you are not doing anything to cause them to do wrong.

It is not about diets and days, it is about people. In V15, Paul says, “If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.” In other words, Paul says to the strong Christians, you and I know that whether you eat meat is not important in a spiritual sense. Even if the meat has been offered to idols, it is still just meat. But our weaker brethren do not know that. They think that eating such meat makes them spiritually unclean, and they have a problem with coming to church with people whom they regard as spiritually unclean. Therefore, Paul says the solution to the problem is not for the strong Christians to insist that they are right. Rather they should give up the argument, even though they are right. The strong Christians should stop eating meat for the benefit of the weak Christians.

Paul said to the strong Christians, "Meat is not the issue. I do not care about meat. I care about my brethren in Christ. And I will do whatever I can to help them even if it means not doing things I know I could do." That is what Paul would say about all church arguments. It does not matter whether we are right or wrong. People matter.

I heard an old missionary story from Africa. It was the custom among the local tribes to cast out the dying because they did not want their huts to be contaminated by the ghosts of the dead. They thought that one little girl was dying, so they cast her out, but she still had

the strength to crawl to the missionary's hut. He received her with tenderness and nursed her back to health. When she was well, he asked her if she wanted to go back to her parents. She replied, "They cast me out. I want to stay with you and Jesus. I know the two of you would never cast me out." The girl probably did not know it, but she was quoting John 6:37 where Jesus said, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." The point for us here is that many weak Christians come to strong Christians, as that little girl came to that missionary. They are hurting; they need guidance and encouragement. They do not need to hear us say, "Oh you are wrong and you are weak." That is not what they need. They need for us to remember the words of Jesus. If Jesus will never cast them out; certainly we should never cast them out. Accept one another.