

ACCEPTANCE OF DIFFERENCES IN CHRIST

PASTOR MARC D. WILSON, ST. PATRICK'S CHURCH, LAS CRUCES, NM

Romans 14 (Romans 15:1-13)

As we conclude our study of Romans, it is helpful to keep in mind that a main idea for Paul is that the Gospel unifies us, as God's People, in sincere love. Therefore, we can graciously "accept" one another, despite our differences; because, we are all "accepted" in Christ by grace. This is Paul's primary argument in Romans 14-15.

In our study of 1 Corinthians, we addressed issues about eating food in relation to one's conscience. We understood how love for one another takes priority over our liberties as Christians; therefore, we gladly restrict our freedom so that Christians weaker in faith may not stumble. We also understood the importance of our consciences and of not doing anything that would compromise our moral principles. These concepts are also present in Romans 14-15. So, today we will look at the biblical Acceptance of Differences among Christians, which is grounded on our prior gracious acceptance in Christ.

1. Accept the One Whose Faith is Weak (READ Verse 1)

a. "Accept" (NASB) "Welcome" (ESV) "Receive" (NKJV)

i. What this does NOT mean...

1. ...Unconditional Affirmation. While in Boston, many churches had rainbow flags with signs reading, "All are welcome. We are an affirming congregation." I fearfully wondered to myself how welcoming and affirming these congregations would be toward me and my views if I expressed them. See, we live in a shaming culture. We also want to be accepted by others in our society; because, we are communal beings. But, what do you do if you want to identify with something that is predominately shameful in such a culture? You change the culture. You slowly

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work to make what is shameful acceptable, and that is done by affirming someone willing to identify with shameful behavior. It doesn't stop there, however. Then, the table must be turned by now shaming those who affirm what was once acceptable. As a result, one's social acceptance becomes based on affirming their identity without any conditions, and, if any reservations or conditions are voiced, then one will be shamed for not unconditionally affirming that person's identity. Once shamed, we are now unaccepted by the larger society that promotes unconditional affirmation. However, biblical "acceptance of differences" is not this politically correct unconditional affirmation which has become the condition for social acceptance; a compromising condition to which many of these churches have succumbed.

- ii. So, what does "acceptance" mean biblically?
 1. It means that our acceptance of one another is based on God's acceptance of us in and through Christ. **READ 14:3b-4, 15:7.** Christ is the condition of our acceptance by God for His praise. Christians are servants of God to Whom, alone, we are accountable and Christ, alone, is able to make us stand before Him. Do we seek our affirmation in Christ with whom we identify and in whom we are accepted before God, or do we seek the conditional acceptance of the world by unconditionally affirming individual identities associated with certain behaviors that violate our consciences?
- iii. What does biblical acceptance of differences look like?

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1. It looks like NOT arguing and being disagreeable over “disputable matters”.
 - a. What are disputable matters? Abstaining from certain food and drink. Observing certain days or festivals. At Paul’s time, these things would have marked out the difference between Jew and Gentile; both of which made up the Church in Rome now unified in Christ. These differences between Jew and Gentile would have been significant, and they would have had a role in Jews’ consciences that Gentiles would have had difficulty grasping. Here’s some context: **READ 1 Maccabees 1:7-10, 20, 24b-28, 41-49, 60-64.** I read this to highlight three points.
 - i. The first is simply to show the context behind why so many Jews were committed to observing the Mosaic Law regarding the eating of clean foods and observing certain feasts. These events at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanies were very much in the minds of Jews at this time. This episode in their history was fresh. After all, these tyrannical atrocities intended to force Jews to violate their consciences had occurred more recently than our own nation has been in existence.
 - ii. Secondly – This illustrates how public policy can become a tyrannical force for people to compromise their consciences.

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iii. Third - Knowing this context should reveal the foolishness of many Christians today who make lesser things the subject of disputes and divisions.

iv. What else does "accepting" one another, especially the weak, mean? It means we...

2. ...Avoid Judgment and Contempt (14:2-3, 10-12)

a. So, what, as Christians, do we do instead? **READ 15:1-2**

b. How do we do this? **READ 15:3-5**

i. We look to Christ; because, we can do this only by God's grace in and through Him Who did not seek to please Himself. Jesus did not use His freedom as God to take advantage of us. Instead, He humbled Himself as a servant and died for our shameful unrighteousness. Jesus identified with us in our fallen shame so that we could identify with Him in dignity and honor. This enables us to stand before our Father in heaven.

c. Why do we do it? **READ 15:6** And we can only bring praise to God because we have first been welcomed, accepted and received in Christ Who endured our shame so that we could stand before God. **READ 15:7-9** God loves us and wants to mercifully take away our shame, and that is very different than unconditional affirmation. God's love meets His own righteous conditions for our acceptance in and through Jesus. God's love says certain behaviors are shameful as children of wickedness, but God's love then offers us a new honorable identity in Christ as His children with a wonderful inheritance.

d. So, while Paul has primarily asked the strong in faith to patiently bear with the weak, **15:7** makes it clear that both the weak and the strong are to accept one another; because, we are already accepted and unified in Christ. This acceptance and unity is grounded on Jesus' work for us; not because of

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anything we do or because of any racial, cultural, national or gender identity. Our differences are not to cause divisions. Instead, we must graciously and mercifully...

3. ..Acknowledge Our Own & Others' Consciences (14:5-9, 13-23)

a. Our love for one another as Christians is a love that submits to and serves one another. We are more than willing to forgo our rights and liberties so that we may avoid causing someone else to stumble by violating their consciences. Whatever we do, we do it with a loving desire to glorify God.

i. This does not mean that our consciences, our moral scruples, are always well-informed. We must "Calibrate Our Consciences" by hearing God's Word so that our minds may be renewed and our lives transformed rather than being conformed to the politically correct image of worldly unconditional affirmation.

ii. While Paul identifies with the strong in faith, He wants us all to grow in our maturity as disciples of Christ; able to test and approve God's good, pleasing and perfect will.

iii. So, as we have considered Romans 14-15, we may conclude that differences unessential to the Gospel should not be the source of arguments nor the cause of divisions among Christians.

1. Therefore, let us pray: **READ Romans 15:5-6, 13. AMEN.**