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ACCEPTING THOSE WHO ARE DIFFERENT

Romans 15:7-12

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Romans, Lesson 100

Accepting Those Who are Different Romans 15:7-12

As you know, in the late 1960's there was a lot of cultural upheaval that resulted in a wide gap between the younger and older generations, both in attitude and appearance. Hudson Armerding was the president of Wheaton College at the time. He had fought for our country during World War II, and as a member of that generation, was conservative in his grooming and attire. He also despised the counter-culture movement, because to him it represented unpatriotic draft-resisters, flag burners, and the like. So he did not like it when students dressed in the grubby counter-cultural fashion. Also, he thought that it was biblically inappropriate for men to have long hair. But the staff at Wheaton was trying to permit a degree of liberty among the students on this matter.

One day Armerding was scheduled to speak in chapel. Just before the service, they gathered for prayer. Just before they began, a young man walked in who had a beard and long hair, and was wearing a sash around his waist, with sandals on his feet. Armerding looked at him and was sorry that he had come in. Worse yet, the student sat down right next to the president. When they started praying, Armerding did not have a very good attitude.

Then the young man began to pray: "Dear Lord, you know how much I admire Dr. Armerding, how I appreciate his walk with you. I am grateful for what a man of God he is, and how he loves you and loves your people. Lord, bless him today. Give him liberty in the Holy Spirit and make him a real blessing to all of us in the student body. Help us to have open hearts to hear what he has to say, and may we do what you want us to do."

As Armerding walked down the steps to go into the chapel, the Lord spoke to him about his attitude. After giving his message, he asked the young man to come to the platform. A ripple of whispering went through the students, many of whom thought that the president was going to dismiss the young man from school as an example to the rest of the students. But rather than rebuking him or dismissing him, everyone including the young man was surprised

when Dr. Armerding put his arms around him and embraced him as a brother in Christ. It broke up the chapel service, as students stood and applauded, cried and embraced one another.

God used that simple act of one man laying aside his prejudice to turn the mood on campus to greater love and acceptance of one another. Dr. Armerding later learned that this young man had adopted his appearance in order to reach some of his generation who were alienated from God and the church (Hudson Armerding, *Leadership* [Tyndale], pp. 166-168).

Dr. Armerding put into practice what Paul tells us all to do (Rom. 15:7), "Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God." Paul is concluding his appeal to the (mostly Gentile) strong and the (mostly Jewish) weak factions in the church of Rome to show the love of Christ to each other. In 14:1, he told those who were strong to accept those who were weak in faith, but here he extends the command to both sides.

As a side note, in 14:3 Paul told the weaker believers not to judge the strong because *God* has accepted him. Here he tells both sides to accept one another because *Christ* has accepted them. For Paul, Christ is clearly God. But Paul's goal in the section we are studying here is that the Gentile and Jewish believers in Rome would not only genuinely accept one another in their daily relationships, but also that they would join together in fervent worship to God for His mercy in accepting us through Jesus Christ.

Accept others (especially those who are different than you) for the glory of God because Christ accepted you and all peoples for the glory of God.

Verse 7 is the summary of what Paul has already said and the topic verse for this final paragraph of this section:

1. We are to accept one another to God's glory just as Christ accepted us to God's glory (15:7).

Scholars are divided over whether the phrase, "to the glory of God," modifies Christ's acceptance of us or our acceptance of one another. I agree with those who say that it applies to both phrases. God was glorified when Christ accepted us and He is glorified when we accept one another. Also, there is a textual variant where the NASB reads "us," but most scholars prefer "you" (plural). It

doesn't make much difference as to the meaning of the command. The idea is that both Jews and Gentiles or whatever other different types of people are in the local church are to accept one another. "Accept" means much more than merely to tolerate. It has the notion of warmly welcoming others, especially those who are different than you are, into the fellowship of the local church.

- A. The "one another" that you are to accept is precisely the one who is different than you are.

If you look for a church that is made up of people who are "your kind of people," people who are just like you in their cultural background, their appearance, and their likes and dislikes, you're missing the radical nature of Paul's command here. In the context, the "one another" represented those from conservative, religious, Jewish backgrounds, who ate only kosher meat, who carefully observed Jewish holy days, and who had been taught from childhood not to defile themselves with any contact with "Gentile dogs." It also included Gentiles from pagan, idolatrous backgrounds, who formerly "worshiped" with temple prostitutes, who had no problem eating any kind of food set before them, and who thought that the Jews were a bunch of legalistic, hyper-religious prudes. In other words, the other person whom you are to accept is precisely the person who is radically different than you are in almost every way!

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to accept your own personality quirks and habits? Comedienne Merrill Markoe observed, "It's just like magic. When you live by yourself, all of your annoying habits are gone" (*Reader's Digest* [2/07], p. 107). But then you get married and discover that your mate has some rather annoying quirks and habits that you hadn't noticed when you were dating! And then you have little kids who somehow picked up their mother's most irritating quirks and habits! If only everyone in the family could be just like I am, things would go much more smoothly!

And then you join a local church that is made up of hundreds of weirdos! Where did all of these crazy people come from? Sometimes you can identify with Achish, king of Gath, when David faked insanity in front of him to protect himself. Achish told his servants (1 Sam. 21:14-15), "Behold, you see the man behaving as a madman. Why do you bring him to me? Do I lack madmen, that

you have brought this one to act the madman in my presence?" But Paul tells us to warmly welcome and accept those who are different from us in the local church. He isn't talking about accepting those who are in unrepentant sin, of course (1 Cor. 5:9-13). But he is talking about the more mature believers accepting the immature and the immature accepting the more mature who may seem very strange in their eyes.

- B. The reason for accepting one another is that Christ accepted you when you didn't deserve to be accepted.

Several scholars (Cranfield, Moo, Schreiner) say that the Greek word that is normally translated, "just as," should here be translated "because." If so, Paul is giving the reason why we should accept one another, namely, because Christ accepted us. But we can't divorce the *fact* that He accepted us from the *way* that He accepted us. He died for us while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8). We were His enemies (Rom. 5:10). We were not seeking after Him (Rom. 3:11). He came looking for us in our lost, helpless condition (Luke 15:4). He didn't require that we clean up our lives or make vows to change or do anything to deserve His love. Like the father of the prodigal son, Jesus ran to us, embraced us, and welcomed us into His family, in spite of our smell and dirty rags! He promises (John 6:37b), "... the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." That's how we are to accept one another.

- C. The goal of accepting one another is the glory of God.

As I said, I think that the phrase, "to the glory of God," applies both to Christ's accepting us and to our accepting one another. If Christ had only accepted those who had achieved a high level of righteousness, no one would marvel. That's how the world system works. You earn your way. You get what you deserve. But the fact that Christ accepts sinners who come to Him for mercy and forgiveness glorifies God and His abundant grace. When God converted a proud, self-righteous Jew, who hated Gentiles and killed Christians, and turned him into the apostle to the Gentiles, that glorified God! When God opened your eyes and mine to see that our own self-righteousness is worthless trash so that we embraced Christ as our righteousness, that glorified God!

Now, we are to extend the same mercy that we received to other sinners, some of whom may already be saints in the local church. Granted, they may not yet be as sanctified as you are. True, they may have a long list of shortcomings and defects. But when we show the love of Christ to one another, even when the other person doesn't deserve it, God gets the glory. That's the aim behind accepting one another. It's not just so that we all get along, as wonderful as that is. It's so that God gets the glory!

Ligon Duncan (fpcjackson.org, "Accept One Another") points out that we often think that to glorify God, we must go to the mission field or perform some exceptional spiritual feat. But Paul says that to glorify God we should accept those who are different than we are. Leon Morris puts it (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 503): "God's glory was promoted when Christ received us sinners, and it is further advanced when we who are by nature sinners and wrapped up in our own concerns instead receive our brothers and sisters in Christ with warmth and love."

Paul goes on to show how Christ accepted both Jews and Gentiles, and then to back it up (especially the Gentile part, which would have been difficult for the Jews) with Scripture.

2. Christ's servant ministry to Israel and His mercy to the Gentiles serve as our example of what it means to accept one another (15:8-9a).

Romans 15:8-9a: "For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy" Verses 8 & 9 explain how Christ accepted both Jews and Gentiles: He became a servant to the circumcision (the Jews) to confirm the promises made to the fathers (15:8); and, He became a servant so that the Gentiles would glorify God for His mercy (15:9a). Verse 8 is a reminder to the Gentiles in Rome that God had given priority to Israel, as Paul explained at length in chapter 11. The Gentiles are grafted in to the olive tree and so must not become arrogant (11:17-20). The following quotes (15:9b-12) from the Old Testament remind the Jews that the promises to the Jewish fathers included the reception of the Gentiles. Thus neither group should look down on the other.

- A. Christ's servant ministry to Israel shows that God faithfully keeps His promises on the basis of grace, not performance (15:8).

Paul uses the word "circumcision" to refer to the Jews because it was the sign of the covenant to Abraham (Rom. 4:11). The "truth of God" here refers to His covenant faithfulness by which He remains true to His promises to Israel through the patriarchs (as Paul has already discussed in chapters 9-11). God did not fulfill His promises to Israel because of Israel's faithfulness to God. He did it on the basis of grace, not performance.

In like manner, we are to extend acceptance to others in the church family on the basis of God's grace. If you think, "Yeah, but he doesn't deserve to be accepted," the reply to you should be, "Neither did you!" I'm not suggesting that we overlook or not confront sin in other believers. If they have sinned against you, you should go in a spirit of humility and gentleness and seek to restore them (Gal. 6:1). But God's grace demands that you go as a sinner who has received mercy and point the other sinner to the same source of mercy, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Isn't it amazing that our Savior came as a servant! He easily and rightly could have come as the conquering King, wiping out His enemies. He will do that when He comes again. But in His first coming He came as a humble servant (Mark 10:45). As His disciples, we are to serve one another, especially those who are different than we are, in love.

- B. Christ's mercy to the Gentiles leads to God's glory and shows us that the basis of acceptance is God's grace, not performance (15:9a).

The Gentiles did not receive any covenant promises from God in the Old Testament, yet He graciously included them in His promises to the fathers (Gen. 12:1-3) and in many other Old Testament references (Rom. 15:9b-12). When we receive God's mercy rather than His deserved judgment, it causes us to glorify Him. Now we are to demonstrate God's mercy in our relationships with those in the church who are different than we are. We all deserve His judgment, but the church should be a place where everyone can find and experience God's abundant mercy. This means that

we are to be gracious and merciful towards one another, especially when someone has offended us or acted insensitively toward us. Thus Christ's servant ministry to Israel and His mercy to the Gentiles serve as our example of what it means to accept one another.

3. The Scriptures confirm that God's mercy to the Gentiles brings glory to Him, along with joy and hope to all sinners (15:9b-12).

Paul knew that the Jewish believers in Rome would be likely to be judgmental towards their Gentile brothers (14:3b). So he backs up his claim that Christ's ministry will lead to the Gentiles glorifying God for His mercy with four Old Testament quotes. The first quote (15:9b) and the third (15:11) come from the Psalms. The second quote (15:10) comes from the Law. The fourth quote (15:12) comes from the prophets. The Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (or Writings) constitute the three major divisions of the Hebrew Bible. Thus Paul is showing that all of God's revealed Word has always predicted that the Gentiles would also be included in God's people, to the praise of the glory of His grace. For Paul, an appeal to Scripture settles the matter, because Scripture is authoritative.

- A. Messiah (through David) gives praise to God among the Gentiles (15:9b; Ps. 18:49).

Romans 15:9b cites Psalm 18:49: "Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, and I will sing to Your name." David wrote this psalm to thank the Lord for delivering him from all of his enemies. Towards the end of the psalm, he declares not only that he will praise God *to* the Gentiles, but *among* them, implying that they will be praising God along with David. But David's declaration also points ahead to Messiah's declaration (God's Anointed, Ps. 18:50). Christ will praise God among the nations gathered around His throne, as they praise God for His mercy.

- B. The Gentiles are invited to rejoice with God's people (15:10; Deut. 32:43).

Romans 15:10 cites from the song of Moses (Deut. 32:43), "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people." Paul has already cited from another verse in this song (Rom. 10:19). This verse advances on Psalm 18:49, where David (and Messiah) was praising God among

the Gentiles. Now the Gentiles are called on to rejoice along with the Jews, because God has brought the blessings of salvation to both groups (Morris, p. 505).

C. The Gentiles are invited to praise God on their own (15:11; Ps. 117:1).

Romans 15:11: "And again, 'Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him.'" This quote from Psalm 117:1 advances on the previous two in that Israel isn't even mentioned. The psalmist directly calls on the Gentiles to praise God for His great lovingkindness and enduring truth (Ps. 117:2).

D. The inclusion of the Gentiles is because the prophesied Jewish King also offers the hope of salvation to the Gentiles (15:12; Isa. 11:10).

Romans 15:12: "Again Isaiah says, 'There shall come the root of Jesse, and He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles hope.'" This prophecy refers to Jesus as the promised descendant of David. We might expect "root" to refer to the origin of Jesse, rather than to his descendant. But the root in Jewish thinking referred not only to the root itself, but to that which springs from it (Morris, p. 506). Paul began Romans (1:3) by referring to Jesus as God's "Son, who was born of a descendant of David." God kept His covenant promise to David when Jesus was born of David's descendants in Bethlehem, the city of David.

At first glance, the fact that Jesus would rule over the Gentiles might lead us to think the next line should read, "And under His rule, the Gentiles will chafe." But rather we read that under His rule, the Gentiles will hope! They hope in Him because He is the perfect, gentle, just, and loving ruler. When Jesus is your Ruler and Lord, you hope in Him. And, as we'll see in verse 13, God's faithfulness to all of His promises in Christ are so that we may be filled with all joy and peace in believing, so that we will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. These Scriptures confirm that God's mercy to the Gentiles brings glory to Him, along with joy and hope to all sinners who trust in Christ.

Conclusion

I conclude with another powerful example of what it means to accept one another to the glory of God. Rebecca Manley Pippert

concludes her book, *Out of the Salt Shaker & into the World* [IVP, 1979], pp. 177-178) with this story. When she first went to Portland, Oregon, to work with a campus ministry, she met a student named Bill. He was always disheveled in his appearance and he never wore shoes. Rain, sleet, or snow, Bill was always barefoot.

Bill became a Christian, but his appearance didn't change. Near the campus was a church made up of mostly well-dressed, middle-class people. One Sunday, Bill decided to worship there. He walked into church with his messy hair, blue jeans, tee shirt, and barefoot. People looked a bit uncomfortable, but no one said anything. Bill began walking down the aisle, looking for a seat. But the church was quite crowded that day, so he got all the way down front without finding a seat. So he just plopped on the carpet, which was fine for a college Bible study, but a bit unnerving for this rather formal church. You could feel the tension in the air.

Suddenly, an elderly man began walking down the aisle toward Bill. Was he going to scold him about how you're supposed to look when you come to church? People thought, "You can't blame him for what he's going to do. His world is far removed from that boy's world for him to understand."

As the man kept walking slowly down the aisle, all eyes were on him. You could hear a pin drop. When the man reached Bill, with some difficulty he lowered himself and sat down next to Bill on the carpet. He and Bill worshiped together on the carpet that day. There was not a dry eye in that church.

That elderly man was practicing what Paul is talking about here. He was accepting a young man who appeared to be very different than he was because he recognized that Christ had accepted him. When we do that, God is glorified.

Application Questions

1. Some churches go so far in accepting others that they accept those who are in open sin (see 1 Cor. 5:9-13). Where is the balance between accepting sinners, but not those in sin?
2. What are some contemporary examples of cultural differences that tend to segregate churches? How can we overcome these?
3. In rearing children, it is important to distinguish between a child's immaturity and his defiance. How can this distinction help with reference to accepting an immature believer?
4. Why is it crucial to keep God's glory as our primary aim in our relationships, rather than our happiness as the primary aim?

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