

Accept Each Other as Christ Accepted You
Romans 15:4-13 (NIV)
December 4, 2016

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name." Again, it says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples." And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

People have a natural craving to be accepted. Everyone wants to be part of the in-crowd. No one likes being on the outside looking in. People join clubs and organizations looking for acceptance. Believe it or not, most kids, who join street gangs aren't looking for trouble. They join looking for acceptance. We are social animals. For us to feel complete, we must feel as though we are accepted on a level that's important to us.

In today's Epistle reading, the apostle Paul urges the people of God to accept each other. He writes: *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves* (Rom 15:5 NIV). A spirit of unity is a spirit of acceptance. The only way a group of people can unify, the only way they can become one single entity, is for all the members to accept each other.

Here we hit a bit of a snag. The problem, of course, is that people are sinful. When sinfulness is mixed into the concept of acceptance, things begin to break down. The root cause is that, while everyone wants to be accepted, no one wants to be totally accepting. To put it another way, when it comes to acceptance, everyone wants the benefits but no one wants to do the work.

If we are to be accepting of others, we must drop the "me first" attitude that comes so naturally to us. It means that we must give up a few of our favorite sports, like judging others, laughing at another's weaknesses, maintaining a closed social circle. To be an accepting person means you can never see yourself as even one notch above anyone else. Because, as it has been said, "At the end of the game, both the king and the pawn go into the same box."

However, for sinful people, the things I just listed as what it takes to accept others aren't just difficult – they're impossible. Sinful people, like us, don't have the capacity to put others first, to see others as our equals. We need some kind of model to follow. We

need an example of acceptance. Paul gives us that example. Paul tells us to work toward a spirit of unity as we follow Christ Jesus.

It's through the example of our Savior that we learn to accept others, that we work to achieve a spirit of unity. Jesus was accepting of everyone. Jesus didn't discriminate. Jesus helped the Roman centurion's servant. He gave life back to the Jewish synagogue ruler's daughter. Jesus showed mercy to the tax collector, the leper, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the Jew, the Gentile. Jesus even restored the ear of the high-priest's servant, when he came with the others to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane.

It's by following Christ's example of loving acceptance that we can achieve the unity Paul speaks about in his letter to the Romans. It's in Christ's example we see how to look beyond ourselves to others. Only Jesus showed us what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Now, all that I've said so far is good and right, but it's also very general. The problem with speaking in generalities is people tend to think that the points made are always about someone else, always about the other guy. Generalities don't really bring the message home.

So, let's talk about accepting others in very specific ways. To do that, let's see, if Christ were here today, how accepting we would be of him. One more thing, in the seminary we were taught to always use the plural "we" because saying "you" might make people uncomfortable. But I think we should keep this personal.

Jesus was a homeless man. Did you ever think about that? Jesus once told a would-be disciple: *Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head* (MT 8:20NIV). Jesus was a homeless man. That raises the question, "How do you treat the homeless?" Are you loving and accepting of them? Do you go out of your way to lend them a hand? It's not like we never have the occasion to cross paths with a homeless person.

Jesus was also poor. The Bible tells us that his support came from the donations of others. Jesus didn't have a paying job. His mission was important but, in the world's eyes, he wasn't a CEO or even middle management. For all appearances, Jesus was just an itinerant preacher. Jesus was poor. At one time, Jesus told his disciples that the poor would always be among us – and he was right. How do you treat the poor?

Jesus was also politically incorrect. Jesus didn't care who liked what he had to say. He spoke the truth. The truth isn't always popular. In fact, the truth can be quite abrasive at times. The truth can be quite humbling. That begs the question: How do you treat someone who always tells the truth? Do you shy away from someone who speaks a truth that makes you uncomfortable? The truth doesn't have to be about you personally. The truth can be as simple as standing with someone against abortion or same-sex marriage.

Jesus wasn't one of the beautiful people. If we look closely at what the prophet Isaiah had to say, we get a very different picture from that of the typical artist's rendering of Jesus. Isaiah writes: *He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him* (Is 53:2 NIV). We don't know that Jesus was ugly but we do know that he wasn't anything special to look at. Have you every judged someone strictly by how they look?

One more important thing, Jesus was a Jew. He wasn't white, or black, or Latino, he was a Jew. Ethnically speaking, Jesus was more closely related to the Arab world. Jesus was Semitic. I am always amazed at neo-Nazi groups that claim to be Christian and hate Jews. Christ was a Jew. So ask yourself: Do I ever treat people differently because of their race? And don't think for one minute that racism is a one-way street. Racism flows in all directions.

So here shows up a poor, homeless man. He's rather disheveled and not very pretty. He's not the same color as you and he has a nasty habit of speaking truths that you would rather not hear. Do you accept him with open arms? Quite a stretch, isn't it? When you take Jesus out of our stereotyped images and you dress him up as the Bible describes him, then you compare that image to what you see every day, you might begin to squirm a little. I know I do. I haven't led a perfect life of acceptance. But Jesus did.

Jesus led a perfect life of accepting others. Jesus never turned someone away just because that person didn't fit into his conception of the ideal person. Jesus loves without consideration to race, color, economic level, or physical appearance. Jesus loved everyone then and he loves everyone now. He even loves you and me. And if the fact that he loves you and me doesn't surprise you, it should. If Jesus used our shallow criteria to decide whom he loves, you and I would fall way short of making the grade.

We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That's what Paul says. And when you compare that statement with the fact that God loves us anyway, you see the message of the Gospel. You hear Jesus saying: *For God so loved the world* (Jn 3:16 NIV). The world, that's us. God so loved a world full of poor, homeless, sin-ugly people. In fact, God loved us so much he couldn't stand to see us stay in our condition. Instead of rejecting us, he came to us.

He took on our lowly estate so he could save us from our own sinful selves. Jesus came for us, he lived for us, he died for us, and he rose for us. Jesus has shared with us the riches of his kingdom. Jesus has given us his truth to speak. Jesus has removed the ugliness of sin from us and given us the beauty of perfection. And, even though we nothing in common with him, Jesus claims us as his brothers and sisters. Now that is the Gospel of the Lord.

I'm sure that all of us will agree that we have some work to do on accepting others as Paul urges in today's reading. That being the case, I would like to suggest that we begin practicing on each other. It's important we get the accepting thing right. Paul tells us to:

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God . . . so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy. If we here at Prince of Peace love and accept each other it will show.

People notice when other people are different, and unconditional acceptance of each other will certainly make us different. With the help of the Holy Spirit working on the hearts of the unsaved, those outside the church will see what we have and want it. They will want the love and acceptance they see at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. And that, my friends, will be our witness to the lost.

Wouldn't it be nice to hear someone say, "That's Prince of Peace Lutheran. That's the place where all the people like each other." That might be said one day, but it's going to take the work of every one of us. We are all going to have to follow in the steps of Jesus, not only when it feels natural and easy, but also when it means stepping out of our comfort zone.

That's a lot to ask but the rewards will far outweigh the work. If we can learn to love and accept each other, we can learn to love and accept the strangers who come through these doors. And, if we can learn to love and accept each other, I guarantee you there will be strangers coming through these doors.

My brothers and sisters, I urge you to dare to be different. I urge you to dare to follow the example of our Savior. I urge you to share the love and acceptance you feel from Jesus with each other and with the rest of the world. Begin each day praying, "Lord, teach me to accept others as you have accepted me."