**Accept one another**

Text: Romans 15:7

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**Scriptures:** Romans 14:1-15:13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 211, 374, 133b, 503, 117

**Series:** The ‘one anothers’ of Scripture

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul writes to the ethnically, culturally and socially diverse saints in Rome and exhorts them all to accept one another as Christ has accepted them in order than God may be glorified in their lives together.

**Proposition:** Brothers and sisters, accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring glory to God.

**Introduction**

We have ‘greeters’ in the church lobby to welcome everyone who comes through the front door. Having ‘greeters’ meeting people who come to this place on the Lord’s Day is good and helpful. I am very thankful for all those who willingly serve in the important role of greeter in this congregation. If there is a verse in the Bible to reveal the need for church greeters, perhaps it is our text today “*welcome one another*”?

Yes, there is some truth in this, but there is so much more to this Greek word translated in the ESV as ‘welcome’. It is made up of two parts, the first means ‘to’, ‘towards’ the second means ‘to take’, or ‘to lay hold of’. Together these two parts of the word mean to accept the presence of a person with friendliness and to warmheartedly receive them into one’s home, circle of friends, or fellowship group. For example it is used in Acts 28 about the reception of Paul and the other survivors of the shipwreck. They were all brought safely to land and received a warm acceptance from the inhabitants of the island of Malta. Luke records that “*The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and* ***welcomed*** *us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold*”.

This word can be translated as ‘accept’, as it is in our text in the NIV, NASB or as ‘receive’ in the KJV. To welcome here is ‘to receive into fellowship’, ‘to accept as one of your own’. Notice that the Apostle Paul uses this word to describe how Christ receives people like you and me into fellowship with Himself – ‘*welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you*’ or ‘*accept one another has Christ has accepted you*’. Here we can see how deeply significant this welcome is. It is so much more than a friendly face and a warm greeting at the door of a church building (although these are very good things!). Christ’s kind acceptance of sinners like us is at the heart of the gospel! We sang of this earlier with the words of the hymn ‘Just as I am’ “*Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt* ***welcome****, pardon, cleanse, relieve; because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come*”.

Acceptance or welcome is, in fact, the theme of the whole section of the book of Romans from the beginning of chapter 14 through to chapter 15 verse 13. Many of us know the book of Romans as being an especially theologically rich part of Scripture where we find key doctrines such as:

* The righteousness of God (1:16-17)
* The total depravity of mankind (3:9-18)
* Justification by faith alone (3:21-5:11)
* The ‘federal headship’ of Adam and Christ (5:12-21)
* The sinful nature which wages war within the spirit filled believer (7:7-25)
* The assurance of salvation for all who are in Christ (8:28-39)
* God’s eternal decree to save some, but not others (9)
* The grafting in of the Gentiles into the remnant of Israel (11)

But did you know that another key doctrine revealed in the book of Romans is that of the acceptance, or welcoming in, of others? Brothers as sisters, this is no small thing! – occupying over a chapter of this weighty and wonderful book in the Bible.

You may well know that the last four chapters of the book of Romans, beginning with the word ‘therefore’ in 12:1 reveal how we are to live in the light of God’s saving grace, as detailed in the first 11 chapters. So the command of God before us in our text is grounded in the all-powerful work, kindness and forgiveness of our Lord in **accepting** us into His home, into His family, into His Fatherly heart. This connection between Christ’s completed work and the task we are all called to as His beloved disciples is evident in John 13:34: *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another:* ***just as*** *I have loved you, you also are to love one another”*.

Welcoming/accepting/receiving into our homes, our fellowship and our hearts is part of loving one another as our text reveals: “*welcome one another* ***as*** *Christ has welcomed you*” (Rom 15:7). We are going to see this life-changing truth under three headings this morning:

1. The acceptance of differences
2. The acceptance of Christ
3. The acceptance of one another
4. **The acceptance of differences**

Being in the company of like-minded people from the same background and with the same habits is very comfortable. We could use a Dutch word like ‘gezellig’ to describe this. Gezellig is a rich term that includes the idea of being snug, cosy, sociable, companionable and relaxed.

The church in Rome, to which the Apostle Paul wrote, was not gezellig. It was not composed of like-minded people from the same background. It was a mixture of both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). The Gentiles were from many different places in the Roman Empire with diverse languages, cultures, ideas and behaviours. The Jews had grown up with the Old Testament Scriptures, but they still had much to learn about Christ and the gospel. The Gentiles had mostly grown up in pagan religions and they still had much to learn about Christ and the gospel.

There were huge differences between different members in the church in Rome. Apart from Christ they likely wouldn’t have had much, if anything, to do with one another because they would have had little, if anything, in common. Yet here they were together as God’s family in that place. This is the wonder, the glory, and the majesty of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

She is full of many different kinds of people, from many diverse backgrounds, all of whom still have much to learn about Christ and the gospel.

What unites us in this local church? What do we have in common; coming as we do from different backgrounds, cultures, language groups and nations? First and foremost we share together in Jesus Christ, who by His blood ransomed a people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev 5:9). Is such a diverse church on this earth ‘gezellig’ all the time? Is she cosy, snug, relaxed and comfortable all the time? Well, not so much! Living with and accepting diversity is not necessarily orderly all the time, it can be quite messy, but this is part of the glory of Christ’s church. Having an orderly church is good, but it is not the top priority, the glory of God is a much higher goal.

We can see diversity in the Roman church in chapter 14. There were different opinions about things like what people should eat, or which day was better than another for worship.

* Differences of opinion can lead to quarrels – this was clearly happening in the Roman church as you can see in 14:1.
* Difference in understanding, knowledge and background can also lead to some people judging others – as was occurring in the Roman church (14:4,10,13).
* Differences in behaviour and habits can be the basis upon which some despise others – as was the case in the Roman church (10).

The diversity in the church is a glorious testimony to the power of the gospel and the great grace of God, but the differences between us can lead to great distress, disturbance and division in the Body of Christ. It can get messy! How then can we live together in gospel peace and power? By accepting/welcoming/receiving one another!

Look at chapter 14:1 “*As for the one who is weak in faith,* ***welcome*** *him, but not to quarrel over opinions*”. Now at chapter 15:7 “*Therefore* ***welcome*** *one another*’. There is a literary structure here known as an ‘inclusio’ – the repetition of language or concepts at the beginning and end of a section of literature. This was a commonly used format in the writings of the ancient world, and therefore not surprisingly we find it in Scripture. Sometimes the start and finish of the ‘inclusio’ section are called the ‘bookends’. They reveal what all the content in between is about. The ‘bookends’ at the start of chapter 14 and in 15 verse 7 show that the section in between all relates to welcoming one another.

Christ’s will for His diverse church is not quarrelling with one another, not judgement of one another, and not despising one another. Instead His will is that we welcome/accept/receive one another into the fellowship of the church with warm-hearted kindness. The reason is that this is what God has done for all His people, as Paul writes in 14:3: “*Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has* ***welcomed*** *him*”. And again in 15:7 “*welcome one another as Christ has* ***welcomed*** *you*”. The heartfelt, kind, welcome acceptance of God in Christ brings us to our second point:

1. **The acceptance of Christ**

Have you ever experienced not being welcomed? Have you ever suffered the pain of rejection, rather than the security of acceptance? Have you ever been coldly refused entry into a group of people, rather than warmly received in?

Above all, Christ was **not** welcomed by His own people Israel: “*He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him*” (John 1:11). “*He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows*” (Isa 53:3). After Jesus had read Scripture in the Synagogue in His home town of Nazareth, He spoke of the grace of God towards Gentiles like the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian. What was the response to the good news which Jesus brought of God’s grace in accepting Gentiles as well as Jews? ‘*They were all filled with wrath*” (Luke 4:28). They “*drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff*” (Luke 4:29).

It was always God’s plan to accept people of every kind, both Jew and non-Jews. The Apostle Paul explains the glorious gospel to the Romans in this way: “*For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy*” (15:8-9).Christ served and died for Jews (‘the circumcised’) thereby showing the truthfulness of God’s promises to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament through the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Christ also served and died for non-Jews (the Gentiles) so that the wideness of God’s great mercy would be revealed thereby glorifying Him.

It is possible that some of the Jewish Roman believers to whom Paul is writing this letter might then have been thinking something like – “well that doesn’t sound right! I know that uncircumcised gentiles are outside of the covenant. Therefore I am justified in not accepting these ‘outsiders’! If we let them into the church, it will be a mess, not the tidy, orderly place we like best!” So Paul quotes from the Old Testament Scriptures not once, but four times:

* In verse 9: *“As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name*." (2 Sam 22:50).
* In verse 10 ‘*And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."*’ (Deut 32:43).
* In verse 11 ‘*And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him."*’ (Psalm 117:1).
* In verse 12 ‘*And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."*’ (Isa 11:10).

You may know that the Jews divided the Old Testament into three divisions: The Law (Torah), the Prophets and the Writings (recording the covenant history of Israel). The Psalms were included in the writings, but sometimes separated out because of their particular focus on praising the Lord. By quoting from Deuteronomy, 2 Samuel, Isaiah and Psalm 117 the Apostle Paul **drives home** the truth that God’s plan has **always** been to **accept** the gentiles into the covenant community of His people.

The term ‘root of Jesse’ in Isaiah 11:10 refers to the Messiah. Jesse was King David’s father from whose line Jesus came (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). Not only would the Messiah rule Jews, He would also rule Gentiles who would hope in Him, rejoice in Him and praise Him.

Jesus accepts all kinds of people, and He does so without favouritism or partiality. This truth is revealed in Gal 3:28 “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*.” In the gospels we see the welcome that Jesus gave to everyone who approached Him for help: the sick, the rich, the leper, the demon-possessed, the influential and the outcast. Those of high social standing and those with none. The invitation of Jesus for people to be accepted by Him is an open invitation to everyone: “*Come to me* ***all*** *who labour and are heavy laden*” (Matt 11:28).

In our text Paul writes: “*welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you*”. Beloved Christian brother and sister, how has Christ accepted you? Unconditionally – just as you are – with an incomplete understanding of the gospel, with sin remaining in your heart, with all your opinions, prejudices, oddities, faults and failings. Jesus has been kind enough to overlook all these because He wants you in His church! He doesn’t love you because of your ethnic background, because you are a godly person whose life is well ordered and looks really good from the outside. He doesn’t love you because you come from a long line of church members. He doesn’t love you because you know the Bible really well. He doesn’t love you because you believe the doctrines of grace. He loves you because God has set His love on you and chosen you to be His own. That is why He accepts you, welcomes you into God’s family and receives you into His kingdom.

How do you know if you have been accepted by Christ? It’s simple! Do you believe that He was rejected by His Heavenly Father on the cross, dying there in your place for your sins so that you could be accepted by God? Do you believe that even though He was despised, rejected and not welcomed by many people, yet nevertheless He lived a perfect life of willing, suffering obedience and that you have been credited with this righteousness by God so that you can be welcomed into His family? If your answer is ‘yes’ that you are fully acceptable to God, you have been welcomed by Jesus who now calls you to warmly accept **all** your brothers and sisters in Christ without exception. This brings us to our last point:

1. **The acceptance of one another**

Accepting other people who are different from you, dissimilar to your family and unlike your close friends can be difficult because it is challenging and at times uncomfortable. It is always easier just to be with people who are just like us. This gives us a sense of belonging to ‘our tribe’, ‘our people’, ‘our group’. Why then bother to kindly accept/welcome/receive one another with a warm heart? The answer is right there in our text: ‘*for the glory of God*’. Each one of us in Christ has been created for the glory of God (Isaiah 43:7; 1 Cor 10:31). There is no higher purpose in life than this. Christ, the perfect man, lived on this earth to glorify His Heavenly father (John 17:4). He is the ‘*radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature*’ (Heb 1:3).

Brothers and sisters, each one of us is called to be like Christ, reflecting the beauty, majesty, grace, compassion, truth, love and welcome of our Saviour. You and I do this by accepting one another, as Christ has accepted us. We learn how to accept others by looking at the example that Jesus has given us. The Apostle Paul explains this to the Roman Christians at the start of chapter 15. Christ did not please Himself (15:2); He pleased His neighbour for their good to build them up (15:2).

In the words of the letter to the Philippians (2:4): “*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others*”. What is in the best interests of everyone in this local church? That we all belong, that we are all accepted by one another. Not because we are all alike, but because we, brothers and sisters, all belong to Christ. He is who we all share together in. Let’s consider some practical questions:

1. Should we warmly accept a person into close fellowship with us who is ‘weak in faith’ (perhaps someone who has recently come to Christ, or who is not yet as spiritually mature as we think we are) or should we argue with them over their opinions and views? Answer: welcome them and do not quarrel with them! (Rom 14:1).
2. Should we warmly accept a person into close fellowship with us who has a different view about eating meat or drinking wine to the practice that we follow? Answer: welcome them and be careful not to put a stumbling block in their path as you exercise your Christian liberty! (Rom 14:14).
3. Should we warmly accept a person into close fellowship with us who thinks differently to us about mask wearing, vaccinations, and/or our government’s response to the pandemic? Answer: Yes! welcome them and do not quarrel with them! (Rom 14:1).
4. Should we warmly accept a person into close fellowship with us who has a different theological understanding to ours but does believe all the Biblical doctrine which is summarised in the Apostle’s Creed? Answer: Yes! welcome them and don’t demand that they know and believe all the doctrines of grace before you do! (1 Cor 8:1).
5. Should we warmly accept a person into close fellowship who professes Christ but who dresses very differently to us, speaks differently, has very different habits, and behaves in ways that seem quite strange to us. Answer: Yes! welcome them and remember that to them you probably seem really odd to them! (Gal 3:28).

God’s clearly revealed will for us all in the midst of the wonderful diversity of His chosen family is to accept the differences between us both for the sake of His glory and so that we may be ‘*filled with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope*’ (Romans 15:13). Accepting one another is a source of great joy, peace and overflowing abundant hope. Why? Because such mutual love evidences that we have grasped the enormity of God’s grace in saving a people from every tribe, and language and people and nation. Accepting one another despite our differences, faults, failures and foibles shows that we are being changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Wholeheartedly welcoming one another shows that we know how Christ has accepted us fully just as we are.

So will you commit yourself to warmly accept one another as Christ has accepted you, for the glory of God?

AMEN.