

An Atmosphere of Acceptance

Rom. 14:1-12, 15:7

In 2011, the Denmark-based dating service beautifulpeople.com was the victim of a cyber attack that altered the software used to screen applicants, resulting in thousands of less-than-beautiful people being accepted. 30K to be exact. Beautifulpeople.com then faced a difficult decision about what to do with these undeserving new members. Founder Greg Hodge put it this way, "you can't just sweep 30,000 ugly people under the carpet." In the end, they did send rejection notices to the 30K but mercifully included the number for a counseling hotline set up to help them work through the pain of rejection. Their thinking was, we have criteria - it's right there in our name - and we can only accept beautiful people into our dating community.

In Chapters 14 and 15 of Romans Paul looks at the Christian community and he knows that a healthy church will have a lot of diversity in it. We will all be at different places in our walk with God. Some will have a strong faith, some will have a weak faith. Some will have convictions about certain things, others will have different convictions about those things. Some will believe certain doctrines, while others will hold to different doctrines. What will be the glue that holds a Christian community together? Can community only be attained when there is unanimity among all its members? Is there some kind of beautifulchristian.com algorithm that we can plug in to determine who we accept and who we reject?

Paul appeals for mutual acceptance among believers. *Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.* As a community of believers we are to cultivate an atmosphere of acceptance. As we continue looking at God's call to the church to be a community and grow in community, this morning we're going to consider the vital role that mutual acceptance - accepting one another - plays in the building up of community. I want to unpack this in three points.

- I. **The Boundaries of Acceptance**
- II. **The Basis of Acceptance**
- III. **The Beauty of Acceptance**

Let's unpack them one point at a time.

I. **The Boundaries of Acceptance**

There are always those who interpret these verses to mean that the church should judge nobody and nothing, and be accepting of everyone and everything. They seek to silence all judgments with verse 10, "You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister?" They interpret this to mean that the church should be accepting of everyone wherever they are at and whatever they believe.

But Paul is very clear: he is talking about differences and diversity over *disputable matters*. Some have called it non-essential matters. Specifically Paul discusses those whose faith is strong and eat anything, and those whose faith is weak and eat only vegetables. Notice that he is making a judgment: some are weak, some are strong in faith. That's a qualitative judgment. BTW, just a quick aside, this does not mean that all vegetarians are weak in faith. These people weren't eating vegetables because they didn't want to eat meat or for health preferences, they had a tender conscience that, because of their religious

upbringing, couldn't eat meat (possibly because they knew it might have been offered up to pagan idols) with a clear conscience. It was a religious decision, not a dietary or health decision.

He goes on to use the example of those who observe one day over another and those who consider every day the same. There were Jews in the Christian community who had come to genuine faith in Christ. They weren't legalists, they weren't Judaizers, but they had a hard time dismissing a lifetime of observing various feasts and celebrations. And there were Gentiles for whom all those feasts and religious days meant absolutely nothing. Eating meat - no matter what happened to it before it got to your table - meant nothing to them. And so the temptation for the Gentiles was to smirk at the Jews for their uptight ways. And the temptation for the Jews was to frown at the Gentiles for their lack of religious devotion. Paul says, accept each other. And not to change each other. Not to argue and debate with each other. Accept each other to live in loving community together.

Because both those who eat and those who don't do so for the glory of God. Look at verse 6:

⁶Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

We can do either to the glory of God! These are non-essential, personal conviction issues. There are hundreds of these issues in the church today.

- One church worships with organ and hymnal, another church uses band and contemporary worship songs.
- One believer has a glass of wine with dinner, another has a conviction not to touch alcohol.
- Doctrine: I have the privilege of serving on the leadership team of a local minister's fellowship. I am one of the few reformed pastors, most are of a more Arminian persuasion. There is no division because we all love Jesus, the gospel, and the word of God. Scholars have been arguing those two sides for centuries so it's kinda the definition of a disputable matter.

Here's the boundary:

We accept diversity within the framework of the gospel, but we must not accept divergence from the gospel or damage to the gospel.

Paul wrote the Galatians and warned them that if anyone preaches a different gospel (that is, if they change the gospel in any way), let them be accursed (Gal 1:8-9). There is no acceptance for any divergence from or adjustment to the gospel. None. Anything that undermines the gospel or weakens a church's testimony of the gospel is not to be accepted. Faithful adherence to the gospel of Jesus Christ is essential to our bond as a community because without the gospel there is no Christian community.

Love also cannot accept soul-damaging, relationship-killing sin and act like nothing is wrong. A church that allows everyone to do whatever, isn't an accepting church, it's an indifferent church. Doing life together means being involved in each other's lives. When we see a brother or sister doing something that isn't right, the instinct to look the other way, to act like it's not happening, isn't love and it's not acceptance, at least not the kind of acceptance Paul is speaking of.

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Gal. 6:1

Love steps in and takes the risk of speaking the truth in the hope of winning your brother or sister. There are boundaries where acceptance is no longer love, and that's where the church must draw the line. Again, this could easily be an entire message, but suffice it to say that the atmosphere of acceptance that Paul is describing here isn't a blanket acceptance of everything. Within the framework of adherence to the gospel, let there be robust diversity, but we cannot and must not accept anything that diverges from the gospel or damages a church's gospel witness to the world. Our community is built entirely upon the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that brings us to the second point:

II. The Basis of Acceptance

Over and over again, as Paul usually does, he connects our acceptance of one another to God's acceptance of us through Christ.

... for God has accepted them. ⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand...

¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister^[a]? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹ It is written:

*"As surely as I live," says the Lord,
'every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will acknowledge God.'"^[b]*

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. 15:7

The basis or foundation of our acceptance of one another is God's acceptance of us. And God's acceptance of us is at the core of the gospel and at the center of what Jesus came to accomplish. Judgment Day isn't primarily about where we will go (heaven or hell), it is primarily about where we stand with God. The eternal question that will loom over every man, woman, and child on that Day is this: will I be accepted by God or will I be rejected by God? Jesus said that on that Day many will hear him say the words, "Depart from Me, I never knew you". Those tragic words represent the Lord's eternal rejection of a human being from His presence. The greatest torment of hell will be being separated from God our Creator.

On the cross, Jesus bore our sins and endured the rejection of His Father that we deserved. At one point Jesus cried out, My God, My God, why have You forsaken me? Of course, God never really forsook His Son, He never really rejected His Son, in fact, at the very moment He was pouring out His righteous wrath over our sin upon Jesus, His heart was well pleased with His Son. While He seemingly rejected Jesus for a brief time on the cross, He fully accepted Jesus' atoning death as completely sufficient on our behalf.

Jesus faced God's wrath and rejection so that, for all those who trust in Christ, Judgment Day will not be

a day of rejection, it will be a day of complete and total acceptance.

On Judgment Day, our acceptance will not be based, even in part, on whether we ate meat or didn't, or whether we observed certain religious holidays or didn't. Our acceptance before God won't be based on whether we worshipped with hymns or contemporary songs, whether we were Baptist, Methodist, Charismatic, Catholic, Wesleyan, or Independent. Whether we homeschooled our kids or sent them to public school, whether we drank alcohol (in moderation) or abstained, whether we dated, courted, or our parents arranged our marriage at birth. Name the non-essential difference - it won't come up on Judgment Day. We will have only one plea on that Day: Jesus is my Savior. I plead the sufficiency of his blood to cleanse me of all sin.

And God will accept us. And so, based on Christ's acceptance of us and Christ's finished work making us acceptable to God, let us accept one another. Who am I to judge God's servant? They will stand or fall to their own master and they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

For the believer, accepting one another is like forgiving one another. It's not optional. Forgive as Christ forgave you. Accept one another as Christ accepted you. Acceptance is at the core of the gospel, and if we live in the awareness of God's acceptance, we won't be able to help but overflow with His acceptance of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

III. The Beauty of Acceptance

There is a deep beauty to the acceptance God has given us in Christ. God doesn't accept us the way beautifulpeople.com accepts people. He didn't assess who was beautiful enough to merit His love and acceptance. No, God demonstrated His love for us in this, while we were yet sinners - while our souls were yet ugly and deformed with sin - Christ died for us, in order that we might be qualified to be accepted. Accepted as sons. Accepted as daughters. If God had simply made it possible for us to live out eternity in a servant's quarters in heaven it would have been beautiful, but God drew us into His family and seated us at His table as His beloved children. That is beautiful!

Here's another beautiful picture of how deep God's acceptance of us goes: Jesus takes us as his bride. He loves us the way a groom loves his radiant bride. But Jesus didn't find us beautiful and captivating and irresistible. He found us dirty and stained and defiled by sin, and Paul writes in Eph. 5 Jesus *"gave himself up for her [the church] to make her holy, cleansing her by washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."* Eph. 5:25-27

Let that sink deep into your heart and mind: you are accepted in the beloved. God doesn't reject you. He doesn't just tolerate you, with all His heart He accepts you. The picture of adoption and of a bride speak of the kind of acceptance that treasures and prizes and loves with great tenderness. We don't want to miss the beauty in God's acceptance of us in Christ.

And then, we don't want to miss the beauty that is reflected in the church as we mirror that acceptance on to another. When that kind of accepting, open-hearted love is the atmosphere of the church, it is a beautiful thing.

Can I say that it is possible for a church to be ugly? There could be a website, *uglychurches.com* and there are churches that would qualify hands down! When we hold each other at arm's length because of non-essential differences, when we argue and quarrel over disputable matters. When we hold others in contempt because they don't hold to every tenet of our statement of faith. And by the way, this is a two way street: those who eat meat look down on those who don't, those who don't eat meat look down on those who do. We can all do this.

Let's remember the depth and beauty of Paul's command in 15:7 *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*

Just as Christ accepted you. Oh, to be accepted by Christ with such undeserved love and grace and mercy! The command is that we not think that belongs only to us, but to bend it outward towards other precious brothers and sisters. When we do that, when the church is accepting of one another in Christ the way Christ is accepting of us - it brings praise to God. It glorifies God. Because it reflects the beauty of the gospel and Christ's outrageous acceptance of redeemed sinners, like you and me. Let's pause and consider how the Lord might want to apply this message to our hearts.

- Is there someone that you've subconsciously been holding at arm's length because of some non-essential difference? You don't have to bend your doctrine, just open your heart. Ask the Lord to open your heart with love and acceptance.
- Are you finding yourself judgmental or critical about others, giving them less grace than you expect the Lord to give you? Bring that to the Lord and repent.
- Is there a brother or sister in serious, soul-damaging or relationship-damaging sin and you've been trying to ignore it? Ask the Lord to give you the courage to gently seek to restore them.

Let's pray.