

UNCOMMON VIRTUES: ACCEPTANCE

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

Some years ago I was with a group of missionaries who had come together on what promised to be a refreshing spiritual retreat. They served together on the same field and generally had cordial relationships. That all came apart at breakfast one day.

The conversation had turned to politics. One of the missionaries there was bright, good-humored, articulate, thoughtful, and by all accounts godly. He was also a Democrat. He didn't endorse the entire Democratic platform, but he had a reasoned appreciation for many of their stands on social issues.

Another of the missionaries was a died in the wool, religious right Republican. The conversation quickly became animated, then agitated, and finally livid. A one-sided shouting match ensued. Frankly, even though I was politically more aligned with the Republican, I was drawn to the grace and demeanor of the Democrat. It was disconcerting to watch the relationship between these ministry partners unravel over American political decisions being made half a world away.

Even missionaries, those we put on pedestals as the most spiritual among us, occasionally struggle with the uncommon virtue of acceptance.

The Apostle Paul wrote: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7). Paul was writing in a specific context which we'll talk about shortly, but he expresses a significant biblical truth: who we are in Jesus overshadows the many distinctions, trivial and otherwise, we impose on each other. Greater than all the differences that wedge their way between us lies the overwhelming reality that Jesus has accepted us—he has welcomed us into his Kingdom. On that basis, we are urged to welcome each other, to accept each other for the glory and praise of God.

This is a difficult thing to talk about, in part because we all have issues about which we may feel deeply, but about which the Bible has not spoken definitively. We also struggle because the idea of acceptance carries a whole boatload of cultural baggage for us. In America, acceptance gets confused with the dominant cultural virtue of tolerance.

Rightly understood, tolerance is a good thing. Tolerance implies difference, disagreement. There is something in the other we find objectionable, wrong or odd. To be truly tolerant means we are not going to coerce the other to be like us. We will extend courtesy and common respect in spite of our disagreement. That's true tolerance.

Tolerance today has come to mean something very different. Tolerance means that we do not speak objectively or openly about our differences. Everything's equal and it's all good. Tolerance is no longer putting up with disagreements. It has become a mix of acceptance and affirmation. It confuses legal protections with moral distinctions.

Bethel College professor Dan Taylor says: “You do not have to tolerate that which you accept or affirm. ... Too much of what passes for tolerance in America is simple moral indifference.” Quoting G.K. Chesterson, Taylor observed: “...tolerance is the virtue of those who don't believe in anything.”

When we talk about the biblical virtue of acceptance, we are not describing the cultural value of tolerance. “I accept you” is vastly different from “I will tolerate you.”

What we are talking about is how open and welcoming we are of one another in spite of our differences. Are we appropriately receptive and non-condemning?

Jesus said: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye” (Matthew 7:1-5).

Jesus does not deny that people have specks in their eyes. Nor does he forbid helping one another get rid of the specks. Nor is he against making wise and discerning judgements. He will go on to say that some people are the spiritual equivalent of dogs and pigs. We have to learn to recognize them and deal with them accordingly. John Stott observes, “‘Don’t judge’ does not mean ‘Don’t think.’”

In fact, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote about two situations where they were *commanded* to judge. One involved persistent, overt sin. The other involved legal disputes between church members.

Jesus is not forbidding all kinds of judgement—just wrong ones. He says we are fit to serve other flawed people with mercy and gentleness only when we have allowed God to do a personal plank-ectomy. As we experience the kindness and grace of our loving heavenly Father, who does not treat us as our sins deserve, we learn to become like him in our treatment of others.

What Jesus does forbid here is harsh condemnation—the assumption that we are competent enough and wise enough and just enough to take the place of God and do what only God has the right to do: judge rightly. The judgement Jesus forbids is arrogant, cruel, picky, distancing and shaming. It is the polar opposite of accepting.

This kind of judging manifests itself in at several ways. The first is what we might call:

- *Absolutizing Personal Convictions*

That’s what Paul was writing about in the Romans passage we referred to earlier: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7).

In First Century Rome, some of the meat sold in the markets was left over from pagan sacrifices. Many Christians felt it was morally tainted by its association with idolatry. Other believers thought it was a good bargain. The non-meat-eaters were offended by the meat-eaters, and the meat-eaters showed open contempt for the non-meat-eaters as unlearned and immature.

And, some in the church strictly observed Sabbath regulations. Others treated every day the same. They fought over that.

Understand, neither of these are clear-cut, biblical imperatives. They are issues about which sincere believers had come to different conclusions. Paul doesn’t even spend a lot of time taking sides. The greater issue was the relational meltdown.

Both meat-eaters and non-meat-eaters were trying to please the Lord. Those who kept certain days special and those who didn’t were trying to honor God. The Lord has accepted both. “Whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God” (Romans 15:22). Accept each other as Christ has accepted you.

We have different situations but we face the same divisive issues. For instance:

- Some believe God created the universe in seven, twenty-four hour days. Others, equally committed to the inspiration and authority of the biblical text, believe God made

all there is but allow for longer periods of time.

- Some believe one political party is on God's side and the other has gone to Gehenna. Others are persuaded otherwise.
- Some believe the best way to educate your child is at home. Others choose a Christian school. Still others choose public education.
- Some are convinced that only music that has stood the test of time ought be heard inside the church. Others get bored by anything that wasn't written in the last six months.
- Some drink alcoholic beverages in moderation. Others strictly abstain.

The Lord has accepted all of these. "Whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God" (Romans 15:22). Accept each other as Christ has accepted you.

A second way in which Christians judge each other inappropriately is by making:

- *Social/Class Distinctions*

James writes: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts" (James 2:1-4)?

Human beings are always sorting each other. Our sensitivities emerge in pre-adolescence, are finely honed in high school, and follow us all our lives. We look for similarity and difference, people like us and people not like us. James talks specifically about the money filter that privileges some and handicaps others. We use beauty, body shape, clothing, status symbols or the lack thereof, age, speech, accent, race, gender, grooming, education and a thousand other markers to pick those we like and might consider as potential friends, and those we don't like and want to avoid.

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7). There's only one tribe in God's Kingdom—the tribe of the redeemed: those who have humbled themselves before the cross, repented of their sin and received the mercy and grace of God. When you find somebody else like that, be welcoming. They may not enter your inner circle of close, personal friends, but they must be accepted fully in God's house as members of God's family.

- *Moral Superiority*

James gives us another category of judgments that alienate us from others when he writes: "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor" (James 4:11-12)?

"Love always protects" (1 Cor. 13:7). It doesn't seek to expose the weaknesses of others to public censure. When we slander each other, we use what we know about them, or think we know, against them. We seek to get others to share our contempt and agree that they are unacceptable.

Slander is arrogance posturing as virtue; contempt posing as concern. "Solomon wrote:

“There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers (Prov. 6:16-19). Slander wraps up five of the seven sins God detests and offers them in one nasty package.

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7). We cannot accept someone we slander. Our words push us apart and create ruptures in relationships that can be irreparable.

In September I’ll resume having breakfast once a month with a handful of pastors. Most of us have been meeting for over a decade. We are Baptist, Wesleyan, and Free Methodist. We have vastly different gifts, churches and theological perspectives. We don’t share any of the same recreational interests. But we accept one another as true brothers in Christ. And it’s really, really good.

Because we sort others relentlessly, acceptance is an uncommon virtue. It requires of us a robust discernment to know when to let go of inappropriate judgments, and reservoirs of mercy and grace to welcome into our lives Christ-followers who may be very different from us.

It’s hard to believe that the popular sitcom *Cheers* went out of production sixteen years ago. *Cheers* was a bar in Boston where the cast met and played off each other. The lyrics of the theme song struck a chord: “Be glad there's one place in the world / Where everybody knows your name / And they're always glad you came / You wanna go where people know / People are all the same / You wanna go where everybody knows your name.

Shouldn’t that be the church? Make it so. Be uncommonly accepting.