

**Family Matters 7: ACCEPTANCE MATTTTERS**  
**ROMANS 14:19-15:7 (AFBC 7/3/16)**

This morning, we continue the theme we began back in May: "Family Matters"—with one difference. Sandwiched between Mother's Day and Father's Day, we focused mainly on family matters *within* the home. On this, the Sunday before July 4<sup>th</sup>, and as we make our way toward our church's 195<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we're looking at "Family Matters" that extend *outside* the home.

Home is not the only place where we spend lots of time with other people. We do this here, and at work and school and out in the community; and there are right ways and wrong ways of doing this—especially if we're followers of Jesus.

Few skills in life are more important than being able to live together well. The Bible helps us with this. After all, the God of the Bible created us. He made us to live in relationship with Him and with one another. In the very beginning, He said, "It is not good that man should be alone."

Let's turn to God's word now and see what we can learn. Today, our focus is on "acceptance." God tells us that our willingness to accept each other matters to Him—so it must also matter to us!

In Paul's letter to the Romans, we learn that the church there was struggling. Some of the Christians in Rome were having trouble living together. Imagine that!

They were struggling with accepting each other. Several issues were dividing them. As we read our text, let's not forget that this is also God's word to us:

**Romans 14:19-15:7**--Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. <sup>20</sup> Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. <sup>21</sup> It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. <sup>22</sup> So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. <sup>23</sup> But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

15 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup> Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. <sup>3</sup> For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." <sup>4</sup> For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

<sup>5</sup> May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, <sup>6</sup> so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> **Accept** one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Now, that's pretty strong. God makes it clear that you and I are to accept each other. But be honest: is this easy for you?

Most of us would likely SAY that we're accepting of others. After all, this is a virtue we claim to value in America—freedom both for ourselves and others—which requires a great deal of acceptance.

Acceptance is preached all the time—and I'm not talking about in church. Acceptance should probably be preached MORE in church; but I'm talking here about media—television and the like.

We hear a lot about accepting others—accepting those who are *different*. Let a celebrity or politician use a racial slur, and we hear about it for days. Everybody wants to go on record denouncing what was said! The point is "un-acceptance" is something most of us...refuse to accept!

Football season will be here soon. Many will find their way to one of our gridiron sanctuaries and there be surrounded by lots of other people. Most of them will be strangers. We'll enjoy being with some of them, but then there will be those "others"—too boisterous, or too loud, or just pulling for the wrong team.

Maybe they'll act strange, or smell strange. Will we accept them as they are...or struggle to just tolerate them?

Bring this closer to home—literally to our homes—or our church, our community, or even our nation. Do we ever wonder who all these people are? What's wrong with them? Why can't they be more like you and me? Anybody ever wondered that?

God inspired Paul to insist that we ACCEPT one another—that life together cannot be good until we do. But what does this mean, and how do we go about actually doing it?

**1. Well, the first thing the Bible points to here is that **Acceptance Matters Enough... for Us to Acknowledge Our Differences.**** There are so many issues that divide us today--even in churches!

If you think we're the first group of Christians to struggle with differences, listen to what Paul says here. The church at Rome struggled. So did the church at Galatia, and Corinth, and...you name it. Differences are like navels—we've all got 'em!

Now, the church at Rome was not divided in their *faith*. They all believed in Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life." They believed that Jesus Christ was the only begotten Son of God. They believed that Jesus took their sins upon Himself, died in their place, rose from the dead, and someday, He'd come again.

They were together on the essentials. In fact, they were willing to put their lives on the line for these core Christian beliefs. Their faith was solid! I trust we have this kind of unity among us too.

The Christians in Rome were together in their faith, but there were other issues that divided them. Some of this *related* to their faith, but other issues had to do with the Roman world in which they were trying to *live out* their faith.

Some, for example, had strict convictions about keeping the Sabbath—the Jewish Sabbath—while others weren't concerned about that. Those who didn't observe the Sabbath were called liberal, while those who did were seen as narrow-minded.

Sound familiar? The issues have changed over the years, but not the core issue of acceptance. It's the same today as it was then. Paul tells them that their problems will persist until they stop condemning each other and start accepting one another.

Listen to Romans 15:1—"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak..." Earlier, Paul warned them against "passing judgment on disputable matters." (Rom. 14:1) What's that about?

Well, a disputable matter is an issue which the Bible does not address clearly. The disputable matters Paul refers to concern what we eat, what we drink, and how we observe the Sabbath.

Some believed that Jewish laws and customs related to the Sabbath should be strictly observed by Christians. They also held to certain dietary rules about not eating meat from the Roman markets. It came from animals used in pagan rituals so the conservatives (or legalists) said Christians shouldn't eat it.

The more liberal group, on the other hand, believed that all days were the same—that what was right and wrong on the Sabbath was just as right or wrong on Tuesday or Wednesday or any other day of the week. AND, they saw no problem with eating and enjoying meat... as long as they gave thanks to God for it.

So what if it had been used as part of a pagan sacrifice—they weren't part of that. They didn't believe in those pagan gods—Christ was their Lord! They just wanted a good meal--with meat!

Don't you see some of this same kind of debate going on today?—not the same issues, but the same strife and contentiousness—over disputable matters!

Paul says if it's not essential to the Gospel, if it's not clearly spelled out in Scripture, do what your conscience dictates, and don't worry about what other's do—that's their business!

I doubt that any of us here today could find another person among us who would agree with us on every issue. So should we dwell on these differences? Of course not!

Make peace with the fact that there are "disputable matters"—issues that the Scriptures do not speak to clearly. In such cases, we have the freedom to choose, and we must extend this same freedom to others. We grant them the right to be wrong—while having the humility to acknowledge that we *may* be the ones who are wrong (unlikely as that may be, of course).

There will always be differences, even in the body of Christ. This is the message here. There will be differences of opinion in our families, too, as well as among the people we work with, attend school with, OR go to the polls with. Get over it.

Don't be threatened by these differences, and don't look down on those who see issues differently. We and those other persons all belong to God, so it's not our place to sit in judgement. Instead, practice acceptance...and, in the process, learn from one another.

Whether we're talking church or family, the workplace, or our nation—we can learn and grow from sharing life with those who are different from us. We can't exist together otherwise—because there will ALWAYS be differences!

**2. Now, another principle we find here: Acceptance Matters Enough for Us to Aim to Please God.** I'll let you in on a little secret: I find it incredibly easy to focus on whether or not YOU are pleasing ME. And when I do that, it also gets easy for me to pass judgment on whether or not you're pleasing GOD! Follow that?

It's much harder for me to hold myself accountable by asking the hard questions about whether MY life is pleasing to God. I promise you, though, this is where God *wants* my focus to be—just as he wants your focus to be on YOUR life, rather than someone else's! Life is so much better that way—for all of us.

On the final hole of the 1961 Masters Golf Tournament, the legendary Arnold Palmer had a one-stroke lead. He hit a great tee shot, too—so things were looking good for Arnie.

As he approached his ball, though, he saw an old friend standing in the gallery. The friend motioned him over, grabbed Arnie's hand, shook it, and said, "Congratulations."

Later, Arnie would admit: "I took his hand and shook it, but as soon as I did, I knew I had lost my focus." On his next two shots, he hit the ball into a sand trap, then blasted out over the green. He chipped on, but missed the putt. He lost the Master's because, as he put it, he lost his focus. (Mann, *The 19th Hole*)

What's the point? Arnold Palmer wasn't on the course that day to renew old friendships. He was not there to accept congratulations. He was there to finish the Masters in as few strokes as possible.

That relates to us in this way: we are not on this earth for the purpose of judging how someone else is living their lives or whether they are agreeing with us on every issue that comes

along. We're here to live our lives for the Lord as faithfully and productively as we know how, with His guidance and grace.

Aim to please God. Make this your focus, your passion; and you'll be a better Christian, a better family member, and a better citizen, too. You'll be too busy dealing with your own sins and shortcomings to focus so much on anybody else's. Now, a final truth I want to share with you about this:

**3. Acceptance Matters Enough for Us to Pursue the Common Good.** Listen to how Paul begins chapter 15: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." Then he says, "For even Christ did not please himself..." (Romans 15:1-3a).

What does that mean? We shouldn't insist on doing things our way--that's the way of the world. This doesn't mean we give in or lower our standards—just that we don't always insist on our way. Paul points to Jesus as the ultimate example of someone who was willing to sacrifice His personal preferences for the good of others—for the COMMON GOOD.

It was not Jesus' preference to suffer and die on the cross. But He prayed to the Father, "Not my will, but Yours be done." Jesus didn't insist on His way, so who are we to insist on ours?

Thirty years ago, in 1986, two ships collided in the Black Sea off the coast of Russia. Hundreds of passengers died in the icy waters. The disaster seemed even more tragic, though, after a thorough investigation revealed that the cause was not a radar malfunction--nor was it the thickness of the fog.

The cause was plain old human stubbornness and pride. Each captain was aware of the other ship. Either could have steered clear of the other; but neither captain wanted to give way. Each was too proud to yield to the other. By the time they came to their senses, it was too late. (Closer Walk, December, 1991).

How sad. How tragic. How wrong. And yet, how often repeated. You've heard me say this before. We are becoming an increasingly meaner, more self-centered society. In the process, we're losing something that previous generations of Americans have had—an awareness of and concern for "the common good."

Here's our flag. Let's stand together, please, and say our pledge of allegiance: *I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands. One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.* (Seated)

Do you hear that word "United?" And the phrase, "one nation under God?" And how about that revolutionary idea of being "indivisible, with liberty and justice for *all*?"

We're not a Christian nation—never have been. But underlying so many of the principles we have held dear as a people is a Judeo-Christian ethic—a Bible-based way of life--that understands we were not put on earth to live "every man for himself." We're all in this together—by God's design.

We have an economic system that's the envy of the world. It's provided a level of prosperity beyond any other.

But if we lose our sense of the common good, if we lose sight of the need to make sure that every person can support themselves and their families in this system—that there's a basic justice and fairness in how it provides opportunities to all—without this, it can quickly come crashing down.

A lack of acceptance—and I'm talking about the kind of acceptance that results in a genuine concern for the common good of everyone—will imperil any relationships we have in life—marriage, friendships, work relationships, or being part of the same church, community or nation. Acceptance matters!

And the more we demonstrate our unwillingness to be accepting of each other's differences, the more we'll find ourselves on a collision course with disaster! We need to come to our senses, friends, before it's too late.

Let's all ask God for the grace to accept the differences we find in other people. Let's make it our aim to please God first, rather than ourselves.

Let's lend our support to all those who seek to tear down the walls that divide us—to the end that we truly are "indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Bottom line: let's learn, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, to accept one another!