

“Accept or Except?”

Romans Wasn't Read in a Day – part #10

Romans 13:7-14

[title slide] *Welcome, prayer.*

Is it possible to befriend someone who is ideologically opposed to you?
How many of you would say yes? How many would say no?

At least one story would confirm it is possible. Let me read you an article about two former US Supreme Court Justices, Ginsburg and Scalia. This article was written on February 11, 2022, by Anastasia Boden and Elizabeth Slattery and published on pacifical.com

One of the greatest aspects of [Justice Antonin Scalia's] legacy has nothing to do with the law. It was his friendship with his ideological foe, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

The Justices eventually came to represent two branches of the Supreme Court—[Ginsburg] anchored the so-called liberals, and Scalia led the so-called conservatives.... How did these seemingly opposite Justices become the best of friends?

Their mutual devotion to the Constitution, while built on different interpretations, helped them form a mutual respect that would extend far beyond the courtroom.

Scalia and Ginsburg first served together on the powerful U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit, often called the second-highest court in the land, in the 1980s.

The pair became fast friends, bonding over a shared love of opera, good food and wine, and their childhoods in New York. Their spouses and children became friends as well, and the families often rang in the New Year together with a gourmet meal prepared by Marty Ginsburg and laughs provided by the gregarious Scalia. They remained close after Scalia's appointment to the Supreme Court in 1986, and then Ginsburg joined him in 1993.

Scalia once remarked of Ginsburg, “What's not to like... except her views of the law, of course?”

Despite their differences, or perhaps because of them, the pair maintained a close friendship that lasted most of their lives. They respected each other and understood that, though they had different approaches, they were both dedicated to the Constitution, the Court, and the country.

[They even shared drafts of their opposing judicial opinions with each other before publishing them.]

In nearly 40 years of working together, Scalia and Ginsburg traded barbs in their opinions quite a few times. But they knew how to debate and attack ideas rather than individuals and took their disagreements in stride. That’s an important legacy and something we should all strive for, particularly at a time when American society is becoming increasingly polarized.

...A former law clerk to Scalia recalled a visit to Scalia’s chambers. The Justice mentioned he had two dozen roses to deliver to Ginsburg for her birthday, a tradition that went back many years. [The clerk] remarked, “What good have all these roses done for you? Name one five-four case of any significance where you got Justice Ginsburg’s vote.” Scalia replied, “Some things are more important than votes.”

Respect, civility, and friendship are, indeed, more important than votes. Today, in remembrance of these two titans of the law, look for ways to cultivate respectful debate in your life. Break out of your echo chamber and look for the Ginsburg to your Scalia.¹

As the article points out, we see polarizing issues disrupting our country today. Pick a topic, any topic, and you can easily find two people who will go to their grave debating its merits. It’s like an old comic I once read. A group of children got together to prove what was American’s favorite sport. One said baseball, one said football, one said bowling, and another said tennis. The last one just laughed and said, “You’ve proved it yourselves. America’s favorite sport is arguing.”

¹ <https://pacificlegal.org/antonin-scalia-and-ruth-bader-ginsburgs-friendship/>

Debating and arguing might be fun for some people, but when we disrespect and harm each other with our words and actions, we are not following God’s commands. Paul says in Romans 15:7, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

You might think, “Well, OK, Pastor, but that’s just one verse.” I could share with you over a dozen other verses that teach the same command. Do a simple bible search yourself. God’s Word commands us to love and accept each other, no matter what team they play for.

Does that sound difficult? It is for me. And it was hard even for the first Christians.

In Acts 15:1-2, we read about this controversy. “Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’ This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.”

It was the Jews versus the Gentiles, non-Jews, and the Jews were the home team and favored by a touchdown...I mean, they were favored by God. The issue was over the very laws that Moses had commanded, things like circumcision and kosher food. The first Christians, and Jesus himself, were Jewish, so some members of the early church were adamant that anyone else joining them had to strictly practice these things.

At the council in Jerusalem, the apostles reached the conclusion, with wisdom and love, that the new church should accept those whom God accepts. The Holy Spirit was given to both the Jews and the Gentiles when they believed in Jesus and were baptized. This proved God didn’t play favorites. It was a tie where everyone wins.

In many of Paul’s letters, including Romans, he urges us to accept others, even those with weak faith. He even points out, in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, that God accepted praise from outsiders, from the Gentiles.

Circumcision isn’t much of a big deal in our society today, so let me give you a modern example. Are Methodists allowed to drink alcohol?

Here is the official answer from an article on UMC.org.

May we [drink alcohol]? Yes. We do not prohibit our members from doing so responsibly “with deliberate and intentional restraint.” However, The United Methodist Church has long believed that abstinence from alcohol and other drugs witnesses to “God’s liberating and redeeming love” and is part of living into the life God has prepared for us.

We start there. We start with abstinence as faithful witness and as norm for guiding our behavior.

So this question is not the one that matters most to us. The question that matters most to us is how we love our neighbors who encounter the devastating effects alcohol often has on their own lives, the lives of those they love, and the wider societies in which we live.

There is no Methodist rule that says you cannot drink, if you are of legal age. Still, I’ve known United Methodists who do not. When I’m with them, I abstain, to honor their choice and to show I love and accept them.

The central issues we struggle with are favoritism and exclusion. Remember, *accept* and *except* are essentially opposites. What kind of church do we want to be?

Let me ask you this question: Can everyone praise God? Do we truly believe that? If we say, “Well, yes, but those people with those ideals can’t be right,” we are denying the truth the Bible tells us.

Jesus always saw the inherent value of each person.² In fact, the only ones Jesus opposed were the super-religious elites who refused to accept others. Jesus loved and accepted the outcast and outsiders, including adulterers, tax collectors, lepers, and Samaritans. We should follow his example.

Let me be absolutely clear. Accepting doesn’t mean completely agreeing. Those are two different issues. The Bible says, “Be like-minded.” (Philippians 2:2, 1 Peter 3:8) That’s a command, not an option. And the reason for it is clear. Because Christ accepted me, I can accept others.

I want to open my heart to you this morning. The debates at General Conferences and Annual Conferences and the founding of the Global Methodist

²² Max Lucado

Church have been hard, really hard. I’ve cried over some of the conversations I’ve had with people in this very church.

And yet I make this promise. Those who have left our church still have my love and support, because they are my friends, not because I agree with their theology, position or church polity. I do this because Jesus commands me to think of others first. I am trying my best. And I expect them to do the same.

The last three years have been hard on this congregation. Through the pandemic, denominational splinter, and national, political rhetoric, we have lost some relationships. However, I choose to be optimistic. We have gained understanding, learned to have hard conversations, and are now seeing new expressions of faith. In this space, we’ve celebrated baptisms, confirmations, new members, VBS, small groups, youth groups, college groups, and funerals, and renewed our partnership with Painesdale. We are cultivating diversity. We are preparing for a new phase of ministry. Things are changing and will continue to change.

Is it possible to hold your own convictions and disagree with someone else, yet be their friend? Yes. To do that, we have to confront our greatest fear – that befriending someone who disagrees with me means I lose my own identity.

I challenge you to meet your fear head on. The church, our church, is facing a crucial decision. Will we accept all, or will we make exceptions? John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world,” not Houghton Grace UMC, not the majority, not the party in power, not the ones who look and act a certain way. The world. The world is a diverse place. We should be, too.

Go across the road, figuratively and literally, and meet your neighbor. (Mine is from Calcutta.) In 20 years in ministry, I’ve worked with conservative pastors, progressive pastors, single pastors, divorced pastors, married pastors, and gay pastors. And they’ve worked with me. And that tells me something. In Jesus Christ, we are all on the same team.

Let’s pray.

Memory Verse: Romans 14:19

"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."

Reflection Questions:

1. When have you felt loved and accepted by someone you might not have expected?
2. Why does Paul expressly use Jewish scriptures to describe God’s love for the Gentiles (non-Jews)? What does that say about God’s love and acceptance?
3. What does it mean to have “the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had”? (Rom 15:5) What does that look like in practice?
4. How can we, the church, show love and acceptance to others who do not expect it?