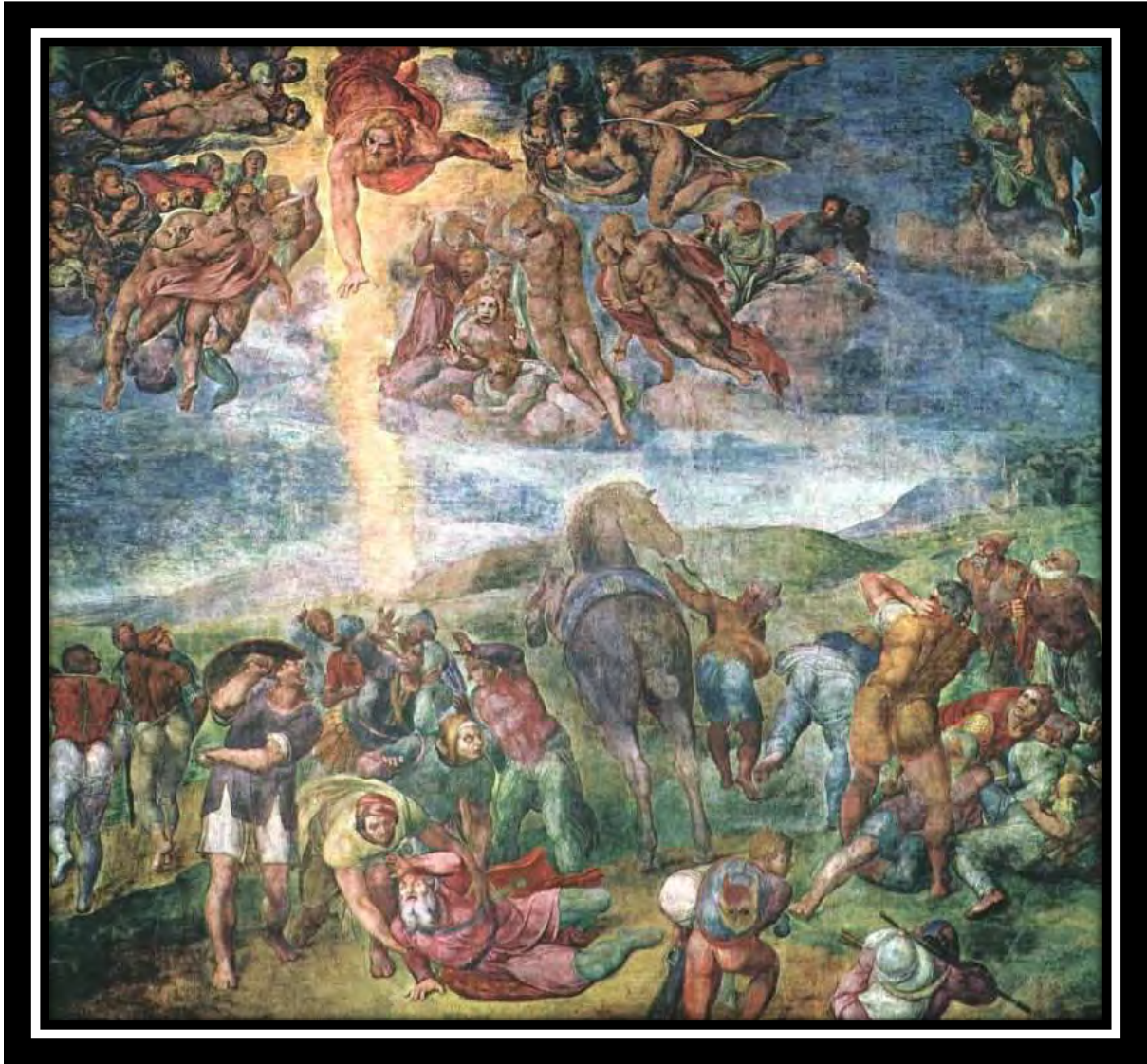


ROMANS—WEEK 14

ACCEPTING WHAT COMES OUR WAY



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Paul admonishes his readers to accept one another, even the weaker brother. They should appreciate the fact that, as gentiles, they are incredibly fortunate to be brothers at all. Thus, this letter is just a reminder.

Paul's happy with them and hopes to visit soon. He should have already, but plans change.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

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Romans, Week 14 — Accepting What Comes Our Way

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1 Romans 15:1–6 (NKJV)

We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.” For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew Henry, in his legendary Bible commentary, explains this beautifully— *“The design of Christianity is to soften and meeken the spirit, to teach us the art of obliging and true complaisance ... Christians should study to be pleasing.”*

But there’s a problem with this. After almost a chapter and a half of admonishing us to *bear with the scruples of the weak*, Paul’s starting to sound legalistic. He says that we, *“ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”* Verse 14:18 is also troubling. *For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.* (NKJV)

Surely the man who wrote, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith,”* can’t be saying we have to do these things to be acceptable to God, can he?

*May genoitaw!*¹ He’s telling us what we should do, but not for our sake. No, we’re supposed to be focused on team goals. Everything is for God and His purposes. Paul quotes Psalm 69:9.

But notice the whole verse — *Because zeal for Your house has eaten me up, And the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me.* — Psalm 69:9 (NKJV)

Salvation isn’t what motivates Christians; it’s *zeal for Your house*.

Like so many of the lessons of the Bible, this one traces directly back to the central organizing principle of Christianity—Jesus is Lord—which is our confession of faith. When we declare fealty to the Lord, we need to be serious about it.

We’re not saved through the actions we take because we’re serious; we’re saved through serious faith.

But peel back the onion another layer and we get to the real heart of the issue. It’s not even all about how we’re saved, because it’s not all about getting saved. It’s about truth.

If we confess that Jesus is Lord and serve Him faithfully, but the reason we do all that is so that we’ll get into heaven, then our faith is still all about us, and not *zeal for Your house*.

That’s just pretending to be serious.

¹This Greek phrase is explained here: <https://www.ailbe.org/columns/thedeep/item/15395-the-trick>

2 Romans 15:7–13 (NASB)

Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written,

“Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, And I will sing to Your name.”

Again he says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.”

And again, “Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, And let all the peoples praise Him.”

Again Isaiah says, “There shall come the root of Jesse, And He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, In Him shall the Gentiles hope.”

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The expansion of the gospel to the gentiles is one of the greatest plot twists in history. The Jewish messiah turned out to be everybody’s messiah. No one saw that coming.

Actually, it’s not quite right to say, “No one saw that coming.” The prophets saw it coming. It just felt like no one saw it coming. So, Paul has to back this up by quoting the prophecies (2 Samuel 22:50, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 117:1, and Isaiah 11:10).

Modern Christians are taught this from birth, so we aren’t surprised, but this hit first century folks like a bolt of lightning. So, Paul uses this awesome plot twist to support his argument that we all just need to get along. *Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.*

But notice Paul’s deliberate, two-step logical construction. First, he says that *Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers*. Then comes the plot twist, *“and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy.”*

We’re in—and it was all planned from the beginning. Through an incredible plot twist, we get to be part of God’s covenant.

That feels like hitting the lottery.

So, as fellow lottery winners, we need to put aside our differences and *accept one another*. Sure, we’re going to have disagreements, but let’s not get confused about what’s important.

The Lord commands us to even forgive our enemies, yet we have trouble accepting fellow Christians.

That’s just wrong.

3 Romans 15:14–16 (ESV)

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Wow, what a shift. Paul has been admonishing the Romans for two chapters. He commanded them to accept one another, to not pass judgement on the weaker brother, to not despise the stronger one. He even told them *that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep.*

But now he says, *“I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.”* What? Is he suddenly having pangs of guilt about his style, and second thoughts about the harshness of what he wrote?

No. The next sentence explains it. *But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, ... so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*

I wonder if this “*way of reminder*” would work with modern Christians. I know I don’t take harsh criticism well. By the time Paul got around to saying, *“I myself am satisfied about you,”* I would have already tuned out. I’m not unusual either.

Modern communication techniques are optimized for defensive and closed-minded people. One such technique is the “sandwich method,” which is taught by Toastmasters International.

Toastmasters meetings involve people giving speeches and others evaluating them. They teach that the evaluation should have substantive constructive criticism, but that criticism must be sandwiched between two complements. The evaluator should first complement the speech, then explain how it could be improved, then give another complement. Like many things Toastmasters teaches, this is good advice.

But I suspect that Paul didn’t need to sugar-coat his message up front because first century Christians weren’t so quick to take offense. There are lots of possible explanations for this, but that’s not what’s important. We simply need to take this into account when communicating.

Remember, we’re to *be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.* — Matthew 10:16b (NIV)

This isn’t just about communicating with unbelievers either. We need to strategize more about how to encourage our fellow Christians. Good technique helps us teach and grow one another.

Serious fellowship—where we can call each other out—is essential and all too rare nowadays. Simple tricks (like using humor) can help us form real, meaningful friendships. Be intentional.

The command to love one another isn’t about syrupy feelings. It’s about substantive encouragement.

4 Romans 15:17–22 (NIV)

Romans is Paul's magnum opus. He's been on a roll since Chapter 1.

Picture how all this came together. Paul is living an incredible roller-coaster life. Despite his shameful beginnings, he's been privileged to do great things. He has witnessed the power of God flowing through him. He has seen the world turned upside down and has been in the thick of things the whole time. Compared to Paul, Batman is a couch potato.

How would you feel if all that happened to you? Paul must have been in an almost manic state when he wrote this.

And it shows. His excitement over the spiritual state of his church plants just oozes out of this passage. He has never lost the wonder of his unexpected calling and can't stop sharing it.

Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand."

This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.

OK, so why has Paul *often been hindered from coming to you*? Is there something about Paul's *ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known* that explains his not coming to Rome?

Yes, he's been busy. But it's more than just that; it's about Paul's whole crazy roller-coaster life. Paul never knows what's around the next bend. Often, Paul thinks he's going one place and the spirit sends him somewhere else. He'll eventually come to them in Rome but that will be even crazier—arrest, plots, trials, appeals, storms, shipwreck, vipers, you name it.

So Paul puts in a tag line to say, "Sorry I haven't visited, but this road trip has just been crazy.

"But hey, it's all good."

Paul's life was full of pain and trials but also full of significance. How'd you like to have a life like that? That's the question every Christian should ponder. Would you be willing to give up your normal life for a life of service that's filled with uncertainty and excitement?

I wish I could say yes, but I can't. That bothers me. I have lots of excuses, all related to family commitments. Saying yes affects more lives than just my own.

There's a word for people who answer yes to that question—missionaries.

5 Romans 15:22–29 (NKJV)

For this reason I also have been much hindered from coming to you. But now no longer having a place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come to you, whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while. But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things. Therefore, when I have performed this and have sealed to them this fruit, I shall go by way of you to Spain. But I know that when I come to you, I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ.

Paul never got to Spain. He eventually got to Rome, but as a prisoner, not a traveler. Of all the amazing, spirit led Christians who ever lived, Paul ranks near the top. So how could he have gotten this so totally wrong?

We don't know, but it's a lesson in how Christians should plan. Our plans are always subject to revision, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't make them. Paul's plans on this journey kept getting revised too. That's why he had *been much hindered from coming to Rome*. But he just took it in stride. He never thought, "Something's wrong here." The word "*hindered*" isn't meant to convey frustration or discouragement; his plans were just OBE (overtaken by events).

This is what vision is all about. Vision doesn't require prophetic insight; it just requires plans (well-made ones, anyway). That means thinking strategically and making plans that fit the strategy.

Paul's plans were constantly being *hindered* but his goals stayed on track. He knew what he was doing, and why he was doing it. It was the details that kept flopping around like a trout in a fishing boat.

The takeaway here is to expect, even enjoy, the curveballs that the Lord throws at you. Vision provides context for interpreting His response. That helps you see God.

Hmmm. That's weird. "Vision" helps you see.

Prayer does the same thing. Without prayer, things seem random, but in the context of prayer God's actions take on meaning.

Imagine if Gideon hadn't prayed (Judges 6:36-40). The inconsistent dew on the fleece would have just been annoying. Maybe he could have done a scientific study on the effects of temperature on humidity.

Instead, his prayer made sense of everything. He made contact with God and knew what to do next.

But notice that his prayer was about his vision. That's the secret sauce.

By combining prayer with vision, and letting God direct his plans, Gideon discerned God's will.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What is "zeal for your house?" Why "house?"
2. Does your undeserved place in the kingdom trouble you?
3. What's the most encouraging thing anyone has ever said to you?
4. Have you ever felt the tug to be a missionary?
5. When have you been sure of God's will?

Items for prayer: