

# Marion weekly update

SERMON February 25 "Keys to Kindness: Acceptance"

Romans 14:1-13, Romans 15:1-13, Philippians 4:10-13

This week our key to kindness is acceptance. The attitude comes timed well as we recently talked about something that ties directly in to acceptance, seeing things through the eyes of another. Some would call this empathy. It so often becomes easier to accept someone if we understand them, their situation, and how they came to be who they are. In order to do this most effectively we do more than listen. We try to place ourselves in a similar circumstance to relate, as best we can, to them. Doing this leads to a greater ability to accept.

To make sure we're talking about the same thing, we need to do a little defining.

Acceptance is simply seeing and acknowledging reality for what it is and embracing it. Acceptance is NOT synonymous with condoning. We can accept circumstances and people without agreeing about everything each other believes and does. The reason we are able to do this is because our faith attaches something else to acceptance, hope. We can accept even bad circumstances and people with whom we passionately disagree because we believe in the hope of a loving, transforming God.

Nothing ever stays the same. If we are seeking God, truly seeking, we are ever changing trying to be more like Christ. We have the hope that we are not stagnant and hand in hand with God we are bettering. If this is the hope we have for ourselves, we can have that same hope for others. We can accept people even in their mess and if we don't see eye to eye because Jesus accepts us even in our own mess and when He doesn't see eye to eye with us. It's in the context of accepting relationships that true accountability can be held and had. We had an entire message on this not long ago.

Allow me to share an example. When I lived in Johnstown I knew a guy named Oliver. Oliver was a drug addict who was slipping in and out of recovery. When he was clean he was great to be around, he was reliable and things were good. When he was using he'd just disappear for a while until he got clean again. When he'd disappear sometimes I'd drop some food off on his front doorstep just to make sure he had a little to eat. We'd talk about his struggles and even though he'd go back to using from time to time we had relationship. I accepted him where he was and as he was. I also held out hope that one day his recovery would stick. I didn't condone his drug use. Of course not. But I could accept him and what his reality entailed. And that allowed us to stay connected. In truth I'm not sure what happened to Oliver. I've been gone from Johnstown a long time. But when I think of him, I still have that hope.

Here's how acceptance gets us to more consistent kindness that is shown regardless of what the rest of the world around us is doing. Because acceptance acknowledges reality, our expectations adjust. If my expectations do not reflect reality, I will be disappointed frequently. When we don't get what we want, we can become angry and irritable. When we become angry and irritable it becomes easier to be unkind. To go back to Oliver, accepting where he was on his journey meant that if he disappeared I wasn't crushed or angry. Sad? Sure. Disappointed? Sure. But because I knew where he was in life it wasn't a surprise. So I could treat him with kindness and grace, all the while holding on to that hope. My expectations were set on reality.

If my expectations were that he would and should just stop using and if he couldn't do that he wasn't worth my time. That I couldn't accept him as he was, I would have been angry often and I sincerely doubt our relationship would have been what it was.

One of the hardest things to do is holding things in tension. Acceptance and hope are held in that tension.

Acceptance is all through our scriptures today. Romans 14 is very much about accepting other believers. Paul acknowledges that believers aren't going to agree on everything, even things that are right and wrong. He tells them to not let that get in the way of accepting one another. Certainly there are essentials that we need to work out to have a consistent and united body of Christ, but there's a lot that's not in that boat that we need to get over ourselves and let go so that we can have fellowship with

one another.

What might those essentials look like? Jesus gave us two. Love God. Love our neighbor. If we say we follow Him, that Jesus is Lord would be an essential. All the rest flows out of these things. Again, Jesus Himself tells us this. On these two commands hang all the Law and the prophets.

To be clear in terms of witness, this acceptance is critical. If Christians can't even accept other Christians how will the nonbelieving world ever believe we will accept them?

Romans 15 goes to a different group. Paul is talking about neighbors and the spiritually weak. This letter is written to the church in Rome, the heart of the empire. If Paul is talking about neighbors he's talking about nonbelievers. There were a LOT more nonbelievers they were contending with than believers. His reasoning is that our purpose is to uplift others not please ourselves. This goes back to agenda. Am I working with people where they are at, or am I frustratingly trying to force and drag them where I want them to be? I promise one is more effective than the other.

Verse 7 tells us to "accept them as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." We'll get more into this in a moment. Suffice it to say that this idea of accepting one another isn't only applies to fellow believers. We need to accept the reality of those who do not so we can serve and love them in ways that are applicable.

The entire point is to bring all people together, united under Jesus.

Philippians is a famous passage. How has Paul become able to do all things? Yes, through the strength of Christ. But what he is able to endure is all circumstances. He can be content no matter what. He can accept when he has much and when he has little. Hungry and full. Free or jailed. He can embrace all of those realities with a peaceful heart because he's not living for himself. He's living for God. Do we think this helped his ministry? Did it affect how his kindness was able to flow in all of these experiences? Of course! There's no other option our outcome.

To finish up we return to verse 7. Why do we need to accept one another? Because Jesus accepted us. Right where we were, right where we are, right where we will be. In all of our imperfections and sin, he accepts us and gave Himself up for us. As we accept Him we follow the Spirit to become better today than we were yesterday and better tomorrow than we are today. Just like everyone else.

Paul is emphatic to knock off the judgement. That's not our business. There is one judge, God and God alone. Our job is to love one another, encourage one another, uplift one another, all in the hopes that when we give account for our lives that account will render the verdict "well done good and faithful servant." Doing all of this together necessitates accepting one another.

Our hymns this morning fit well into this theme. How can we do all of this? How can we accept and hope for those who are so drastically different from us? How can we accept our differences and still hold fellowship together? By leaning on Jesus' everlasting arms. How do we do this? By surrendering. Surrendering all. This includes any sense that I reserve the right to decide who is "in" and who is "out". It includes rendering judgement that is left to God. It includes any sense of being better than others and feeding into exclusive cliquishness. It includes pride. It includes all of those things that separate me as a believer from those that Christ so deeply wants to come to Him.

At the end of the day, I hope that if nothing else from this message resonates it is that even on the days when we have trouble accepting ourselves, Jesus is there with open arms. He wants us. Always. Our good and our bad. Our saintliness and our sinner. He accepts us so that we can be redeemed, we can be changed, and we can change this world. In this hope we also find the humility to do the same for each other.

## 1 Samuel 9

Now that Israel has demanded a king, and God has agreed to that demand we get introduced to Saul. We're going to unpack this a little different than some other chapters by going somewhat out of order. Remember that God essentially said that if they go the way of an earthly king, they shouldn't expect much response when they cry out to God. Yet when God speaks to Samuel the message is that God has "heard their cry". So what gives? I believe that this is an instance where we need to consider that the

same word can have multiple meanings. There can be cries for help, for joy, of pain, of request, and more. Here the cry may well simply be the cry from chapter 8. They cried out for a king. Here God has heard that cry and is about to answer it.

The answer may not have been what they expected. There's no sense that they expected God to hand pick the king. The elders pushed Samuel to give them one, but there could have been multiple motivations. If there was any selfish motive they may have been thinking of each tribe nominating someone and parading them before Samuel not unlike Jesse did later when Samuel went looking to anoint David as king. No, here they are told who it was going to be. Like it or not Saul is the man for the job. They may have been pleased. Saul looked the part. He was a big, handsome man, bigger than pretty much everyone around him in his tribe. He must have had a commanding presence based on this alone. He was also from a family of some influence. Some translations say that his father was a man of "standing" while others say he was "wealthy". Either or both, the indication is that Saul didn't come from a poor or powerless family. He kind of came from where one might expect a king to come from. And this may have been the problem for how things went down the road after he took up the mantle of king.

We note frequently that the heroes of the Bible came from humble, unexpected places. David the youngest son and a shepherd. Moses the murderer who had problems speaking. Jesus, the Divine King born as a baby from a couple pregnant out of wedlock and settling in a less than noble region. There is something about scripture that takes the underdog and God uses them for mighty purposes. Saul doesn't seem to fit this mold.

The time taken to describe the donkey seeking journey serves a purpose. Saul doesn't take the initiative to go on his own accord. His father has to ask him. To Saul's credit he seems to respond well and takes a servant with him. Unfortunately there doesn't seem to have any plan for finding the donkeys. They just wander and never bump into them. Were they looking for tracks? Other sign? Bringing food to bait them in? It just seems like they move around hoping to see them. When the servant suggests they go find the man of God Saul is ill prepared. They've no food left and he didn't bring any money. The servant did! The servant was more prepared than Saul.

All of this to say that Saul doesn't strike as a highly motivated or ambitious person. Yet unbeknownst to him, he will soon be king of Israel.

There is another faith life lesson in the donkey seeking story. This is the most mundane of tasks to undertake. Chasing donkeys. Yet it's precisely this task that would lead Saul to Samuel and the unveiling of his destiny as king. No matter how routine, boring, or mundane something we do may seem, we have no idea what God could potentially be working through it. So we stay attentive and faithful no matter what business we are about so that if God drops opportunity into our lap we are ready to receive it.

When they go looking for the man of God they find him. If they've heard Samuel's name before they've never met the man. Neither recognize him. There are two things of note as we transition from donkey seeking to prophet finding.

There is this parenthetical note that prophets were once called "seers". As we discussed this in study we noted that the term "seer" for us today does not have Godly prophetic tones to it. It seems more occult, pagan, and outside of our sense of what is Godly. But this is OUR sensibility. This is our baggage from our culture, movies, books, etc. that have painted that picture. Remember, this isn't about our modern ideas. We are peaking through a window into an ancient world and it's necessary to see labels as they saw them, otherwise we imprint our own modern ideas onto them rather than seeing them clearly. One of my favorite modern examples of this is Allah. Christians get angry over the term. All Allah means is God. It's Arabic for God. This means that if you heard a Christian sermon preached in Arabic they would be talking all about Allah. We impart our own biases onto the label. The other is that it was expected to pay the "seer" for his time and wisdom. Don't show up empty handed. I can see this being used to justify through the ages the habit of charging or expecting a fee for every little duty the pastor or priest performs. "Look, it's expected!" Once again we need to

consider time, culture, and historic context. This wasn't like the modern day pastor/priest who is fairly compensated for his or her duties. Today we have a pastoral vocation. Today that kind of expectation reeks of greed and shadiness.

Finally they come face to face with Samuel and how strange must this have been for Saul? God has spoken to Samuel and so he is equipped with information to begin convincing Saul that the words coming from him are not his own but God's. He tells Saul he will tell him everything in his heart. This goes back to turn of phrase. At that time they believed that our thoughts were generated by our heart. So a more reliable expression might be he would tell Saul what was on his mind. And the very next verse he does. He shouldn't know anything about the donkey quest. He does. He knows it's on Saul's mind and so he clears the table by letting him know the donkeys have been found. He then asks Saul to join him for the sacrificial feast.

At the feast Saul is seated in the place of honor. How out of sorts would this put a body? He comes looking for donkeys and ends up the guest of honor at a feast hosted by the greatest prophet in the land. How does this happen?

Samuel also begins to drop hints about where this is headed. He tells Saul that he is the answer to the desire of all Israel. He doesn't say specifically what but Saul clearly recognizes that this is some kind of leadership position. This moment is essentially the call of Saul. It follows the standard call formula. Samuel lets Saul know he's got a new job and it's a big one. Saul tries to weasel out of it. He downplays his position, remember his family is one of means and standing yet he plays it like he's lowly. It's an attempt at a back out. Samuel is undeterred. His response is to drag him in to the feast and drop another bomb.

Saul gets the choice piece of meat. On top of that Samuel tells him that it's been set aside for him before he had even arrived. Another moment confirming that Samuel is indeed the man of God that people say he is. And his word should be taken seriously.

The next day Samuel sends them on their way...kind of. The servant is sent on ahead and Saul asked to remain so that Samuel can give him a message from God.

This moment led us to some good conversation about what Saul's reaction most likely was. We agreed that it was probably fear. Even though everything leading up to this moment in this town was complimentary and hopeful for him, fear is the most likely response. Think about most folks' reaction when asked to go to the office of the boss or the principal or the coach. It's fear. "What did I do wrong?" Now Saul is being told the ultimate authority has a message. "What did I do wrong?" Being called into the presence of a king was no small thing without the potential for great consequence. How much more into the presence of God?

The problem with this is that it indicates that we've developed a culture where criticism is given much more freely than compliment. This leads to that anxiety and fear anytime we're summoned. It's a reminder that developing healthy, strong relationships in any pathway of life also requires not only catching one another being and doing good, but also saying something about it. It's incredible the kind of change it can make to someone who is down and always feeling like they do nothing right to have someone who also notices all the good things that they do.

This chapter is all about setting up the anointing of Saul as king. It's also a fantastic reminder to look for God in all things, even the most mundane, and to always be free with praise when we see someone doing something right!

The final sadness here is when they want to “be like the other nations”. In Romans, Paul sets out that the Jewish people had two things that made them “chosen”. Chosen wasn’t a favored status. They weren’t better than anyone. Rather they were picked for two tasks to bless the world. The first they had nothing to do with. Through them the Messiah would come. This would happen regardless of themselves. And it did.

The second was that they were to be God’s people. They were to be God’s light in the world. Where the other nations lived apart from God their job was to show what it looked like to live rightly before God. They would live according to God’s design and have a full relationship with God that would be an example for the nations to follow. Sadly in this regard they fell flat. Being just like everyone else removed that sense of “chosenness”. They chose to not be what God had called them to be and so they didn’t stand out.

How tragic. How much does this still happen today? We live in a world where agendas and causes infiltrate and twist the gospel of far too many claiming to represent Christ. When this happens we relinquish our position as a beacon to the world. We are no longer leading them towards God but taking them off track with some adulteration of who Christ really is.

But here is the good news. In a world that is off track in following God. In a tradition where too many have forsaken the Christ that created them for some warped Christ that they have created there is great opportunity. We can step in and show the world what it looks like to be lived out correctly with all the warmth, grace, and humble power that comes with it. We can demonstrate what the Israelites in this chapter forgot. When God is at the center life is far better and more wondrous.