

Being Accepting

RECEIVING ONE ANOTHER



LARRY DEASON

Loving Relationships That Last Series

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*“Accept one another,
then, just as Christ
accepted you,
in order to
bring praise
to God.”*

To the *wife of my youth* Helen,
Affectionately known to me as “Muffie,”
Who, through the years, has stood by my side
and has been
The wind beneath my wings.

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Life, Living, And Acceptance

From infancy, through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood, we are continually involved interpreting and adjusting to reality. In this process of personal growth, some of us are faced with greater handicaps and challenges than are others. There are, however, certain inevitabilities with which all of us must come to terms, death and taxes being the most infamous.

Life's pressures and demands can become so heavy that some of us are tempted to simply "opt out," refusing to accept the daily load of responsibilities and problems that life lays on our doorsteps. Drunkenness, drug abuse, divorce, and suicide are only a few of the more popular ways that many are choosing as they turn away from life's relationships and responsibilities.

"Make The World Go Away..."

I write to encourage those who have discovered how tiring and difficult it may be to walk the straight and narrow every day. Circumstances can batter us

until we are almost senseless. A consistent commitment to “doing the right thing” may become quite burdensome. Yet, Jesus Christ calls us to follow Him in embracing not only the personal responsibilities and challenges which God places before us, but also the problems and concerns of others:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”¹

I write also to encourage those who have fallen beneath the load that life has laid upon them. The circumstances of our lives are in the hand of the all compassionate King of the Universe, who works all things after the counsel of His own will.² If life has given us a burden too heavy to bear, perhaps it is only that we might learn to cast it upon God. There is no Atlas except Christ. The shoulders that bore the sin of the world to Calvary’s cross are the only shoulders broad enough to carry all of our personal concerns and human problems.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”³

The Dilemma Of Acceptance

The real crux of the issue of acceptance is this: There are certain realities that we must accept, whether we choose them or not; there are certain responsibilities that we freely choose and know we ought to accept. *Apart from God*, we don't have the resources to accept life's inevitabilities and obligations. We should, we must—we can't!

The modern English word “accept” and its biblical Greek equivalent (*lambano*) share common basic usages:

1. a: to receive willingly
 - b: to be able or designed to take.
2. a: to give admittance or approval to.
3. a. to endure without protest or reaction.
4. a. to make a favorable response to.⁴

The common denominator in all these shades of meaning is that of *personal responsibility in a relationship*. Something is being held out to me; something (or someone) is being submitted for my personal examination and response. How can I properly “receive” what is offered? How will I be able to “endure” this person or situation “without protest” or critical reaction?

Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who endured the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, learned a monumental

truth from his terrible experience: People can endure almost anything as long as they maintain a sense of purpose. Life's circumstances and relationships become overwhelming and unbearable when we no longer have any reasonable assurance that they are meaningful. Job, the patriarch, maintained personal integrity throughout this painful ordeal because he knew the God who permitted calamity to befall him, though neither Job nor his friends could understand God's reasons:

“Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him...”⁵

God does not offer us exhaustive, detailed explanations for every experience He allows life to present to us. Rather, He has clearly revealed His steadfast love and His glorious eternal purpose in Christ. On the basis of that clear revelation, God expects us to trust Him and to accept whatever cup He may place in our hands.⁶ He is the God who brought forth the universe out of nothing, order out of chaos, life out of death, glory out of humiliation.⁷ And He wants to bring us to wholeness through brokenness, because there is no other way to wholeness in a broken world.

The Difficulty Of Acceptance

Acceptance hasn't always been the problem it is today. There was a time when the will of God and

the will of man coexisted in a harmonious relationship of mutual love and trust. Man lived in a paradise and was content with life as it came to him from the hand of his loving Creator. Hadn't God provided every physical necessity and aesthetic delight that made life so wonderful for man? Even his own female counterpart had been lovingly fashioned by the Creator from the man's flesh and bone. The human problem of acceptance began when the Serpent suggested that perhaps God had been holding out on our first parents; maybe His provisions were inadequate?

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” “You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also

gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.⁸

The Tempter's strategy accomplished its destructive objective with deadly accuracy and precision. Seeds of doubt were sown; discontentment was cultivated; desire was inflamed; disobedience was produced; death and discord were harvested in abundance.⁹ From that point on, human history (both individual and collective) has been a painful, frustrating cycle of nonacceptance, with all its unhappy results: discontentment, insecurity, self-assertion, confusion, conflict, and death.

We find it difficult to accept our location, our vocation, our station, our position, our situation, our limitations. We pronounce ourselves "unacceptable" in every category, from sex appeal to income level, from golf score to I.Q. rating. Beneath all the discontentment with our lot in life, there lies a nonacceptance of our very persons. No self-improvement psychology or "power of positive thinking" can ever finally resolve the underlying problem of self-acceptance, for the problem is not merely psychological (though it has psychological symptoms). Our problem is ultimately spiritual, and our attempts to *make* ourselves acceptable only aggravate the situation.¹⁰

The True Basis Of Acceptance

The acceptance of total reality for each one of us must begin with an acceptance of one's own particular self. The true basis of a person's self-acceptance must be God's acceptance of each of us, as individuals. But several misconceptions must be corrected before we proceed further.

True self-acceptances is *not* "selfism," or egoism. Neither is it merely wishful thinking or psychological repression. Rather, it is an honest, soul-searching confrontation with ourselves as we really are, insofar as we are able to clearly see ourselves in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must come to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ the God-Man, and frankly confess that we fall short of that glory.

*"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."*¹¹

*When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"*¹²

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there

is no darkness at all. If we claim o have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another; and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.¹³

...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...¹⁴

God created us in His own image that we might reflect His glory. In our self-centeredness, we departed from right relationships with God and our fellow human beings; we have sinned and no longer express the original high purpose for which God created us. We are burdened with a sense of guilt, some of which is merely psychological confusion and some of which is authentic, objective guilt. But whether based on false guilt or true guilt, all self-rejection stems from the fact that we are not what we were meant to be; we have all failed to measure up to God's standard of flawlessly right relationships. Since one's self is the most immediate element in anyone's personal perception of reality, it is crucial that a rational and realistic basis be found for accepting that self; otherwise, acceptance cannot be extended to other people and external circumstances.

The Man we know historically as Jesus of Nazareth transcends history. He has *always* perfectly reflected the image of God the Father.¹⁵ He entered human history to make our human nature what God had originally intended it to be. Our human nature was combined with God's nature by the incarnation of God in Christ.¹⁶ By His sinless life, atoning death, and glorious triumph over the grave, Jesus has forever reconciled God and man within Himself.¹⁷ God has decreed that anyone who will respond in obedient trust to this divine work of reconciliation is *justified by faith in Christ*.¹⁸ All offenses against God and man are forgiven by God in Christ. Justified means that, in His Son Jesus Christ, God regards me "just as if I'd never sinned": I am restored to right relationships again. I am accepted. This Good News of what God has done for us in Christ is the true basis of self-acceptance. The challenge of faith is to personally accept God's acceptance of oneself in Christ (both initially and moment by moment), and then to extend that acceptance to all the situations and people in one's life.

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them...God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*¹⁹

Accepting Your Circumstances

In the biblical account of the Fall, it is clear that God had provided abundantly for the man and the woman. Moreover, in His test of man's love and trust toward Himself, God allowed the maximum and forbade the minimum:

*And the LORD God commanded the man,
“You are free to eat from any tree in the
garden; but you must not eat from the tree
of the knowledge of good and evil, for when
you eat of it you will surely die.”²⁰*

As we have seen, the Destroyer's strategy was simply to lead the First Pair into an attitude of discontentment with God's provisions and non-acceptance of His prohibitions. Acceptance of our circumstances in life is still one of the greatest spiritual challenges we face. A relationship of love and trust toward God depends upon accepting the circumstances He provides. Yet, how few of us really accept the circumstances and limitations God has imposed on our sexuality, physical appearance, bodily health, financial status, family background, age, and personal abilities! “I never asked to be born” is a frequently heard protest, often used to rationalize irresponsible behavior.

“Sex change” operations and sexual perversions demonstrate an underlying rejection of one’s true, God-given sexual identity. Suicide speaks of the failure or refusal to come to terms with the fact of one’s own existence as a *unique* creation of God. Nonacceptance of God-given circumstances is a Satanic philosophy, an egocentric attitude which not only keeps us out of heaven; but even makes this present life a “hell on earth”:

And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness...²¹

This philosophy of egocentric control over our circumstances, rather than trusting the Lord to order our steps, has plunged the human race into misery and ruin ever since the Fall. “You will be like God” is still a powerful incentive. It is the motivation behind every manifestation of evil in our world, from the scientist’s attempt to genetically re-make mankind into his own image, to the modern revival of occult mysticism and magic: the New Age philosophy. In contrast, the Bible teaches that we will become like God only when we become like Christ:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made

in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient [submissive; accepting the Father's will-L.D.] to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name...²²

Accepting The Unexpected

Life seems to consist of a curious mixture of order and chaos. There are predictable patterns that give us a sense of security (such as the cycles of days, weeks, months, seasons, and years). There are also abrupt and unexpected disruptions, delays, disasters, and changes that interrupt the usual flow of events in our lives. Job transfers, surprise parties, financial windfalls and setbacks, heart attacks and cancer, tragedies and emergencies—these are only a few of the unexpected elements that make our lives not only “interesting,” but exciting—even stressful. The most distressing interruptions with which we must deal in life are those which mark a permanent and irreversible loss: foreclosure on a home; dismissal from a job; divorce from one’s spouse; death.

The Ultimate Interruption

This last interruption—the ultimate disruption of life—is, of course, the most distressing of all. This

is especially so when death comes unexpectedly: prematurely, accidentally, or violently. I cannot even begin to discuss the heartbreak, the crushing sense of grief and anguish that engulfs those who must pick up the pieces of their shattered lives after the death of a loved one. Nor can I adequately convey the sense of utter frustration, loneliness, and fearful anxiety with which the terminally ill and the dying must struggle.

As one who has personally encountered death at close range more than once, I am convinced that only those who have truly faced death can speak with deep understanding to the dying, and to their survivors. Others may sympathize and help in different ways, but each of us must die his or her own death. We can, however, draw strength and encouragement from those who have faced death triumphantly in Christ.²³ Above all, we can learn from the Man who tasted death for every man, whose death was so lowly and common, yet so glorious and unique.²⁴ How did Jesus face death?

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with Him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and

keep watch.” Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”²⁵

William Barclay once remarked that nobody wants to die; nobody wants to die at only thirty-three years of age; and nobody wants to die by slow torture. Jesus, the Man, faced all of this with anguish—yet, with acceptance.²⁶

Dealing With Interruptions

There are at least three possible responses to life’s major and minor interruptions. Most commonly, interruptions are received *resentfully*. Irritation and anger are usually involved. Attempts at evasion or escape are a common manifestation of resentment, taking such forms as sulking, drunkenness, aggressiveness, and even suicide. Failure to accept and accommodate life’s circumstances is the most common source of resentment. This attitude of unyielding resistance in dealing with challenging relationships and situations can only result in brittleness (and finally, brokenness) of spirit.

The first automobile tires were designed to resist the shock of contact with the road—and ultimately

ended in shreds, cut to pieces by the indifference of the rugged terrain. Then a pneumatic tire was designed that would “roll with the punches” of the road. The resilience feature is still used in tire manufacturing. Human behavioral studies indicate that the key to a longer and more fulfilled life is not the way of resistance and resentment, but of resilience and responsiveness. Of course, there are principles that should never be compromised, evils that must never be accommodated, and conflicts that are unavoidable. But, as a basic approach to life and human relationships, the way of resistance yields only bitterness and brokenness.

At the opposite extreme, we may try to face life’s obstacles and interruptions *stoically*. Stoicism was a Greek school of philosophy which claimed that supreme wisdom was to be found in personal detachment from all human passions. Stoics commended absolute submission to both the favors and cruelties of nature. Obviously, this philosophy is opposed to the biblical view of mankind as lord of nature under a divine stewardship:

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”²⁷

The Stoic's approach to life is evident in platitudes such as:

“Grin and bear it.”

“Stand up and take it like a man.”

“Bite the bullet.”

This fantastic pessimism about life produces a hard, calloused breed of men and women. Life is seen as a matter of “survival of the fittest.” Compassion is weakness. Emotion is an irrational waste of time. Life is to be neither loved nor hated; it is only to be experienced and endured. Think of *Star Trek*'s Mr. Spock, and you'll get the idea.

The way of Christ is the way of the cross. This way of dealing with life is neither rebelliously resistant nor dispassionately indifferent. It is the way of *creativity*. Christ certainly did not enjoy the cross, but neither did He merely endure it. He *used* it to accomplish the will of His heavenly father: human salvation. Likewise, Paul did not choose for himself the chains of imprisonment; he submitted to the circumstances presented to him by the Lord of Life, *using* them to preach the gospel and strengthen the church.

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served

to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to every one else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly...The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this, I rejoice.²⁸

This way of creativity has been called “making the best of a bad situation”—and let’s be honest: some situations really *are* bad! But, as Corrie ten Boom learned in a Nazi concentration camp, there is no pit on this earth so deep that God’s love cannot penetrate the darkness and despair. God lifted the Hebrew patriarch Joseph out of Pharaoh’s dungeon and set him on the throne of Egypt, second only to the Egyptian monarch himself.²⁹ He took Daniel and his three friends from a Babylonian king’s slave stable and made them high officials of the world’s mightiest empire.³⁰ And He raised up His Son, condemned by men to die a criminal’s death, and placed all things under His feet.³¹

Fold Up, Or Fly?

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you

know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything..Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.³²

In a world which has fallen under the power of deception, sin, and death, we cannot escape the winds of change, opposition, and disruption that break in on all of us. We find ourselves in all sorts of circumstances that we never chose, and cannot change or control. Becoming a Christian doesn't diminish our concerns and responsibilities; indeed, we find ourselves with a deeper consciousness of the problems and needs surrounding us. We are more concerned than ever to fulfill our responsibilities, and more acutely aware of the impact of our choices and decisions. Christianity is not escapism. Jesus had to carry His cross; you and I will have to carry ours—if we follow Him. The difference is that, in Christ, we are not left to struggle alone under the weight of our problems and responsibilities. Jesus will make our burden easy and our yoke light. In fact, He will make them His own. Our greatest challenge will be to leave our personal concerns to His care, and to make His concerns our top priority. God Himself will provide for our bodies and protect our souls:

“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”³³

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.³⁴

When a storm strikes, the rooster responds by wrapping its wings tightly about itself, protecting itself as best it can. The eagle, however, spreads its wings and rises above the storm. We cannot always choose the circumstantial climate in which we must live. We can, however, choose how we will respond to the climate in which we find ourselves. We can *fold up* like the rooster, withdrawing into ourselves in a futile attempt to avoid life’s storms. Or, we can *fly* like the eagle, rising above the storms of life by seeing things from heaven’s perspective, trusting in God’s power and providence. Fold up or fly—the rooster, or the eagle—which way will you choose?

Accepting Relationships

It has been said, “You can choose your friends, but not your relatives.” But that is only true in a qualified sense. In modern Western culture, it is customary for men and women to choose their own partner in life’s most intimate relationship: marriage.

If course, along with that choice comes an assortment of individuals whom we do not personally choose, but who are nonetheless part of the “package deal”: children and grandchildren (if the Lord so blesses), in-laws of all kinds (mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister), and each spouse’s collection of relatives and trusted friends from their personal pre-married lives. All of these are a part of the spouse by whom we promise to stand faithfully, “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, ’til by death do we part.”

Leaving all others and cleaving only to one’s spouse is an important biblical principle of marriage: the “one flesh” relationship of husband and wife is exclusive of all others. However, a wedding ring is not a social tourniquet, cutting off our circulation among those whom we have known and loved.

Rivalry and interference from “outside” are not to be tolerated in a marriage relationship. On the

other hand, if accepting your mate “for better or for worse” means anything at all, it should include an acceptance of all the legitimate, God-given relationships in his or her life. Marriage means a blending of two individual personalities into a higher kind of unity in which individuality (not individualism) is retained by both partners, but is expressed in a relationship of self-sacrifice and sharing. And “sharing” includes accepting one another’s friends and relatives, whether or not they happen to be one’s personal “cup of tea.”

Warts And All

In Christ, God accepts me “just as I am.” He knows that only this kind of total and unqualified acceptance will motivate and empower me to become “just as He is.” The Holy Spirit, through Paul, said that “the grace of God teaches us,” but we seem to be slow learners.³⁵ God’s grace in Christ is His *activated love*, His unqualified acceptance of each Christian. Activated love *accepts*. Activated love *accepts people*. Activated love accepts people *as they are!* This acceptance does not encourage sin.³⁶ It does not imply God’s approval of everything the accepted person has done, is doing, or will yet do. Rather, this gracious, active acceptance causes us to love God, hate sin, respect ourselves, and care about others. It creates in us a desire to change, and encourages us to look to God for the power

to do so. God's acceptance of each one in Christ is the pattern after which Christians are to model all human relationships, especially those within the home and wider Christian community:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.³⁷

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.³⁸

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...³⁹

God's whole plan in Christ assumes that the transformation of character that He desires for each of

us will be affected, not by the demands of sheer power and legal authority, but by the attraction of His gracious, unconditional love. He is not afraid that extending His grace and acceptance to sinners will encourage them to despise His law of love. He knows that when His love takes root in good and honest hearts, it bears the fruit of the Spirit, a harvest of holiness and love.⁴⁰ We tend to pre-judge others, assuming that their hearts are not good and honest, but rather, malicious and hypocritical. Even if such judgements were true (and they are almost certainly colored by our own self-centered attitudes), they are hardly expressive of the nature of Christian love:

*If you love someone you will be loyal to him no matter what the cost. You will always believe in him, always expect the best of him, and always stand your ground in defending him.*⁴¹

Idealism And Realism

Love is neither naive nor cynical about human nature. Rather, it is compassionate, understanding, patient, and accepting of others. It neither ignores nor approves faults; it forgives them. As God has accepted me “just as I am” in Christ, and as I have learned to love myself as I am, so must I learn to love and accept each person God entrusts to my

life. Has God's acceptance of me (warts and all) caused me to become licentious and careless about my faults and sins? Has it not rather strengthened and encouraged me to progressively put off my sins and put on the character and conduct of Jesus? Christ's holiness is sufficient to expose my faults. His life is an unspoken sermon of judgment on my sins; His love is a silent summons to change. I am under no misconceptions concerning Christ's view of my sins. I am clear about the way He wants me to go. Why, then, would I think my acceptance of another human being implies that I endorse his errors, commend his faults, or approve his sins?

As C.S. Lewis put it, God doesn't accept us because we *are* lovable; He accepts us so that we can *become* lovable. He has full-grown spiritual maturity in mind for us, but in the meanwhile, He genuinely loves and accepts us as we really are in the present. This is because His love and acceptance of us is not based upon our personal characteristics and accomplishments, but upon the redeeming life, death, and resurrection of His Son on our behalf. This trusted Good News of God's acceptance in Christ is able to bring about not only a change of external conduct, but a whole revolution in personal values and motives:

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.⁴²

Let us honestly ask ourselves: Does my attitude and behavior toward those closest to me speak more of Good News, or bad news?...love, or hate?...God's righteousness, or self-righteousness?...liberation, or manipulation?...sensitivity, or insensitivity? The grace of God teaches us that acceptance motivates change, and not vice versa.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.⁴³

Love is the intent; change is only the by-product. Acceptance should never be used as a reward or

inducement to bring about change in a person. Nevertheless, communicating a message of personal rejection to another person will prevent the close personal contact and mutual interaction through which God works to change human lives.

Acceptance And Marriage

Let us focus our attention more closely on the necessity of acceptance in the marriage relationship, since nonacceptance often strikes closest to home. Whether a married couple is newlywed or years into their marriage, because of changes that occur in life there is an ongoing need to keep the concept of acceptance current. The marriage “engine” cannot efficiently meet today’s demands on the fumes of yesterday’s commitment. The commitment to love and accept one’s marriage partner must be renewed continuously; it is a vital aspect of the cross of Christian discipleship, which we are called to take up “daily.”⁴⁴

There is a striking similarity in one’s acceptance of a marriage partner “for better or for worse,” and Christ’s attitude of acceptance toward each disciple:

“...whoever comes to me I will never drive away.”⁴⁵

The covenant bond between Jesus and His disciples will never be broken by Christ. He will never drive us away; if the covenant is broken, it will be from our side, not His. Our personal devotion to Christ might waver; He remains steadfast.⁴⁶ The church is not always a beautiful bride; our apathy, bickering, and worldliness can be quite ugly—even by the standards of the world! Yet Christ, “whose eyes are like blazing fire” in their ability to penetrate to the truth beneath our ecclesiastical cosmetics, continues to patiently love and accept us, even while He calls us to repent and be transformed.⁴⁷

The Hindrance Of The Hardened Heart

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate.” “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because

*your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning..."*⁴⁸

It is no coincidence that when people's hearts are hardened to God and His Word, they are also hardened toward their spouses (and vice-versa!). These rejections naturally go together but they are *unacceptable*. Whatever else acceptance may be, it is certainly *not* fatalism, complacency, resignation, compromise, or surrender to sin. God promises us power to grow out of what we've "always been," and into what He wants us to be: spiritual replicas of His Son.⁴⁹

I do not believe that hard-hearted hypocrisy is the greatest deterrent facing the church in its march toward spiritual maturity. I believe indifference is our greatest internal enemy. Regardless of what anyone else may do, each disciple must take the Lord seriously whenever He makes a claim, grants a promise, points toward a goal, or enjoins a command. Jesus says we must grow and change into His likeness; we *must* love, forgive, and accept others "even as" He does. And He says that, by His grace, we *can!*

The Hindrance Of Harshness

*Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.*⁵⁰

Christian wives are called to accept a submissive position in their marriage relationships. This responsibility does not hinge on the husband's behavior, but on the wife's higher submission to Jesus as Lord. The wife's acceptance of this subordinate role will be challenged by such factors as her own ego and the "spirit of the age," which finds any type of submission degrading. But I believe that the toughest hindrance wives face in accepting their God-given role in marriage is the husbands' failure to submit to Christ in relating to their wives. I must emphasize: The wife's responsibility does not depend on the husband's behavior. However, the husband's behavior goes a long way toward making his wife's role easier or harder for her to accept and fulfill.

I confess that I have personally struggled against this tendency toward harshness, and not always successfully. In the world, I had learned to be cruel and malicious in the use of my tongue—to verbally slice, lash, and hack other people in order to hurt them. In developing this vindictive, harsh spirit, one may reach a point of almost total insensitivity to the pain he or she is inflicting upon another person. Often, there was no conscious intent to be harsh; nonetheless, people were hurt and offended. I am learning, in Christ, not only how to stop being harsh, but also how to avoid even giving the impression of harshness in relating to other people.

Insensitivity is a problem closely related to harshness, and apparently also more characteristic of men than of women. How can a husband kick his dirty boots off in the middle of the living room floor, drop his jacket in the hall on the way to the bathroom, and then complain to his wife that she is a sloppy housekeeper? Such insensitivity toward the human being with whom he is “one flesh” will not be regarded lightly by the Lord:

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.⁵¹

Acceptance: Unconditional And Unqualified

The difficulty we face in learning to accept our spouses, relatives, brothers and sisters in Christ, and all others is the problem of appreciating the reality of our own acceptance before God. I use the word “appreciate” in its fullest meaning: not only to *comprehend* the basis and value of our acceptance before God, but also to be appropriately *thankful* for it. God has fully accepted each believer in Christ on the basis of Christ’s perfect redemptive work: His sinless life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection.

In Christ, God accepts me without additional qualifications and conditions. My relationship with God is not a matter of reading the fine print, searching for legal loopholes, and hoping to “squeeze by” on technicalities. It is a *personal* relationship: He knows me as I really am, in all of my sins and imperfections and weaknesses. He sees me at my best and says, “It’s not nearly good enough.” He sees me at my worst and says, “I love you so much that I will give My Son—My very Heart—to you, so that you can be acceptable before Me.”

Now I know, from intimate personal experience, the real meaning of love, forgiveness, and acceptance. I know its liberating and life-changing power. It has set me free from the slavery of self-centeredness: I can love; I can give. I can accept and forgive myself because God knows all my secrets and my sins; yet He will never stop loving me. He’s proven it at Calvary! His arms are always open to forgive me as I come to Him confessing my sins, ready to make a new beginning with Him. But God insists that, if I truly know His loving acceptance in Christ, I will be willing to pass on to others the acceptance He has freely extended to me:

“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”⁵²

“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”⁵³

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”⁵⁴

Husband, accept your wife as God accepts her in Christ: with all of her frustrating frustrations, irrational fears, unexplainable tears, and incomprehensible “logic” that no man can seem to understand. Wife, accept your husband in all of his Neanderthal boorishness and insensitivity. Christian, accept your brothers and sisters in the Lord, with all their hang-ups, idiosyncrasies, personal convictions, and individual peculiarities. Accept them all, each one, as God has accepted them—and you—in Christ Jesus.

Acceptance, If?

Conditional love and *qualified* acceptance have nothing to do with life in Christ. They have no role in a Christian marriage. It is no coincidence that, as our culture moves farther from its biblical foundations, adultery has become a way of life, divorce rates soar, and traditional life-long marriage relationships are an endangered species. This is because

unconditional love and unqualified acceptance are unknown outside of God's revelation of Himself in His Word.

The traditional marriage vows, based on Christian love, called for commitment to the covenant relationship and to one's spouse "for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til by death do we part." Many people today are writing their own "marriage contract," complete with highly individualized demands, stipulations, and qualifications that represent a total repudiation of the biblical view of marriage. Our whole society is paying the price for these innovations: weak families, broken homes, delinquent children, and domestic violence.

Each of us, as husbands and wives, must seriously consider our own position and responsibility. Do I accept my spouse with a big "*IF*," or do I accept her/him with "no strings attached," no fine print escape clause, no qualifications and conditions tacked on to my original vows of love and loyalty? Perhaps he is no longer the sensitive, charming Romeo that once "swept her off her feet" (if indeed he ever really was). Maybe her face and figure no longer retain the youthful beauty that originally caught his eye. Now what? How can one continue to accept a marriage partner as she/he changes (or fails to change) with the passing of time?

I have seen women whose psychological health has been smashed to pieces on the rocky shores of their good intentions and dashed hopes for their husbands. “I know there are some things about him that I can’t stand, but I’m sure I can change him eventually.” Incompatibility should be taken seriously *before* entering into marriage so that it may never be offered as an excuse for divorce. It is deceitful to enter into a contract with undisclosed intentions; it is dishonest to break the vows that we freely took upon ourselves when we entered into marriage. Marriage deserves a serious “look” before a decision is made to “leap.”

I have seen another evil under the sun: a man accepts a woman to be his wife as he would accept a precious gift from the hand of God. But when the gift has been opened and has become tarnished with years and disheveled from life’s inevitable “wear and tear,” the present is neglected, perhaps even abused—and eventually thrown out in favor of a glittering trinket. But a gift from God is still a gift from God, whether or not it is still in its original wrapping. Men must learn to get beyond the external wrapping, and view their wives with spiritual eyes that can appreciate the inner qualities of true womanhood; and let wives learn to cultivate that inner beauty, because they will not always retain the outward beauty of youth:

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.⁵⁵

Be Accepting!

Human beings are free moral agents. We are not merely the products of genetic programming and environmental conditioning. We can reason and choose to adopt or abandon the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior patterns that are presented to us. This is not to deny that there is a certain amount of conditioning to overcome in each person's search for abundant life. I would urge you, the individual reader, to choose the way of acceptance for the following reasons:

1. “*Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord*”.⁵⁶ Circumstance is not lord; Jesus is Lord of all of our circumstances.
2. *Joy and peace come from acceptance*: If we will not accept what we cannot change, we are doomed to lives of frustration, resentment, and anxiety.

3. Acceptance of what has really happened is the first step to overcoming the consequences of any tragedy: Denial is a normal reaction to traumatic experiences and losses, but healing begins with acceptance of the present reality.

4. It is not what one has lost, but what one has left that must now take priority: Responsibilities continue in the present situation; the present moment matters. By God's grace, we can pick up the pieces that tragedy has shattered and begin to rebuild our lives.

5. By making adjustments to the limitations and changes of the new situation, you can live your life to its fullest potential in this world, in God's care and under His control.

6. No matter who you are or what has happened to you, God is faithful: In Jesus Christ, you are more than a conqueror:

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or
famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As
it is written: "For your sake we face death all
day long; we are considered as sheep to be
slaughtered." No, in all these things we are
more than conquerors through him who loved
us. For I am convinced that neither death nor*

*life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*⁵⁷

7. *I may not know all the answers, but I know God's hand is involved in every detail of my life:* We should not expect to escape from the adversities of life in a fallen world. Our Lord was not immune from the tragedy and pain; the slave is not above his master. We can, however, accept any cup from the hand of the Lord of Life, for his loving purpose toward us is clearly revealed in Christ:

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*⁵⁸

8. *The omnipotent Creator of the universe is our loving Father:* “I may not know what the future holds, but I know Him who holds the future.” And He is *my* Father!

When no immediate answer to life’s many problems is forthcoming, *be accepting*, for acceptance

develops trust, dependence, and patience in the human character. Receive, with humble consent, the people and circumstances that God provides, for He is preparing for each of us a life of incomparable meaning and fulfillment in Jesus Christ, His Son.

*God grant me the serenity
To accept the things
I cannot change,
The courage
To change the things I can,
And the wisdom
To know the difference.⁵⁹*

Scripture Index

(Passages quoted in the text are in boldface type.)

Gen. 1:28	17	John 3:26-30.....	29
2:16-17	12	6:37	28
3:1-6	8	11:1-44	16
3:7ff.....	8	12:37-41	9
Ch. 39-47.....	19	16:32-33	15
Job 13:15	6	21:18-23	15
Ps. 8.....	17	Acts 2:36.....	19
46:9-10.....	39	10:34-43	11
139:1-16.....	4, 39	13:38-39	11
Isaiah 6:5	9	20:22-25	19
46:10	4	Rom. 1:1-4	11
Jer. 2:1-4:2	29	3:21-30	11
Ezek. 16.....	29	3:21-31	25
Dan. 1-2.....	19	3:23	10
Hosea.....	29	4:17-25	6
Mal. 2:13-16.....	30, 33	5:1-5	19
Matt. 5:38-48.....	24	5:1-8	6
6:12	33	5:1-11	11
6:14-15	33	5:6-8	27
6:19-34	4	6:1ff.....	23
6:31-33	21	7:1-4	29
11:28-30	4	7:21-24	8
13:44-46	27	8:1-4	11
16:21-23	13	8:28-29	39
18:21-35	24, 33	8:28-39	4
19:3-8	29, 30	8:29-30	30
21:43	25	8:35-39	39
Mark 8:34	4	9:16-24	4
9:35	27	12:14-21	24
11:25	34	14:8	37
14:32-36	16	14:17-18	25
Luke 5:8	9	15:7	24
7:47	34	1 Cor. 10:13	21
8:4-15	25	13:7	25
9:23	28	15:24-28	20
12:22-34	4	15:47-49	11

2 Cor. 1:8-11	15
4:4	11
4:6	10
4:16-18	34
5:14-21	24
5:18-19, 21.....	11
11:2	29
Gal. 2:21.....	25
5:22-23	25
Eph. 1:4-5.....	30
1:9-11	39
1:11	39
1:18-23	19
2:1-10	27
2:1-22	11
4:20-24	30
4:32; 5:1, 2.....	24
5:22-33	29, 30
Phil. 1:12-14, 18.....	19
1:19-26	15
2:5-8f.....	11
2:6-9.....	14
2:9-11	19
3:7-9.....	27
4:6, 19	4
4:19	4, 21
Col. 1:15f	11
1:19-23	11
3:5-11	30
3:13	24
3:18-19.....	30
1 Thess. 5:23-24	21
1 Tim. 1:12-16.....	27
2 Tim. 1:10	15
1:12	6
4:1-8, 16-18.....	19
4:6-8, 16-18.....	15
Titus 2:11-14	23, 27
3:3-8	27
Heb. 1:3	11
2:5-9	15, 17, 19
2:5-10, 14-15	15
2:5-18	11
2:9, 14-15	19
2:10	30
5:7f	16
6:7-8	25
12:1-2f.....	16
12:1-11	19
12:7-11	19
James 1:2-4	20
1:12	20
1:13-15	8
3:17-18	25
1 Peter 1:3f	15
1:3-7	20
2:21-24.....	24
3:3-4.....	34
3:7	32, 34
3:21-22	19
5:7	4
5:10	19
2 Peter 1:12-15	15
2:4	13
1 John 1:5-8	10
2:15-17	8
3:1-3	30
3:16	24
4:7-11, 19-21	24
Jude 6	13
24-25	21
Rev. 1:17-18	15
Ch. 1-2.....	29
19:7-9	29
21:2, 9-14	29

Notes

¹Mark 8:34.

²See Ps. 139:1-16; Isa. 46:10; Rom. 8:28-39; 9:16-24; Eph. 1:11.

³Matt. 11:28-30. Compare Matt. 6:19-34; Luke 12:22-34; Phil. 4:6, 19; 1 Peter 5:7.

⁴*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1983), p. 48. Compare standard Greek lexicons.

⁵Job 13:15.

⁶See 2 Tim. 1:12. Compare Rom. 5:1-8; 8:28-39; Heb. 2:5-10, 14-15; 12:7-11.

⁷See Rom. 4:17-25.

⁸Gen. 3:1-6. Compare James 1:13-15; 1 John 2:15-17.

⁹A careful reading of Gen. 3:7ff reveals the immediate alienations and separations that resulted from the first sin: *spiritual* (man in relation to God), *psychological* (in relation to personal conscience and awareness), *social* (in relation to fellow human beings), and *environmental* (in relation to man's physical body and natural environment).

¹⁰See Rom. 7:21-24.

¹¹Isa. 6:5. Compare John 12:37-41.

¹²Luke 5:8.

¹³1 John 1:5-8.

¹⁴Rom. 3:23. Compare 2 Cor. 4:6.

¹⁵See 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15f; Heb. 1:3.

¹⁶See Rom. 1:1-4; 8:1-4; Phil. 2:5-8f.

¹⁷See 1 Cor. 15:47-49; Heb. 2:5-18.

¹⁸Read carefully Acts 10:34-43; 13:38-39; Rom. 3:21-30.

¹⁹2 Cor. 5:18-19, 21. Compare Rom. 5:1-11; Eph. 2:1-22; Col. 1:19-23.

²⁰Gen. 2:16-17.

²¹Jude 6. Compare 2 Peter 2:4. Jesus recognized Satan's philosophy in Peter's rejection of the cross that God had appointed for Him (Matt. 16:21-23).

²²Phil. 2:6-9.

²³See 2 Peter 1:12-15 (compare John 21:18-23); 2 Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18 (compare Phil. 1:19-26; 2 Cor. 1:8-11).

²⁴See John 16:32-33. Compare 2 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 2:9, 14-15; 1 Peter 1:3f; Rev. 1:17-18.

²⁵Mark 14:32-36. Compare Heb. 5:7f; 12:1-2f.

²⁶Jesus displayed the same attitudes of distress and acceptance in the death of His friend, Lazarus (see John 11:1-44). However, as both God and man, Jesus emphatically refused to accept death as man's natural and ultimate end.

²⁷Gen. 1:28. Compare Psalm 8: Heb. 2:5-9.

²⁸Phil. 1:12-14, 18. Compare Acts 20:22-25.

²⁹Read Gen. 39-47.

³⁰Read Dan. 1-2.

³¹See Acts 2:36; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Eph. 1:18-23; Phil. 2:9-11; Heb. 2:5-9; 1 Peter 3:21-22.

³²James 1:2-4, 12. Compare Rom. 5:1-5; 2 Tim. 4:1-8, 16-18; Heb. 12:1-11; 1 Peter 1:3-7; 5:10.

³³Matt. 6:31-33. Compare Phil. 4:19.

³⁴1 Cor. 10:13. Compare 1 Thess. 5:23-24; Jude 24-25.

³⁵See Titus 2:11-14.

³⁶See Rom. 6:1ff.

³⁷1 Peter 2:21-24. Compare Matt. 5:38-48; 18:21-35; Rom. 12:14-21.

³⁸Rom. 15:7. Compare 2 Cor. 5:14-21; 1 John 3:16; 4:7-11, 19-21.

³⁹Eph. 4:32; 5:1, 2. Compare Col. 3:13.

⁴⁰See Luke 8:4-15; Matt. 21:43; Rom. 14:17-18; Gal. 5:22-23; Heb. 6:7-8; James 3:17-18; compare Rom. 3:21-31; Gal. 2:21.

⁴¹1 Cor. 13:7. Paraphrased by Kenneth Taylor, *Reach Out: The Living New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House

Foundation, 1967).

⁴²Phil. 3:7-9. Compare Matt. 13:44-46; Mark 9:35. See also my brief study of Kingdom paradoxes in *Losing Life and Finding Life* (Clifton Park, NY: Life Communications, 1988).

⁴³Rom. 5:6-8. Compare Eph. 2:1-10; 1 Tim. 1:12-16; Titus 3:3-8.

⁴⁴See Luke 9:23.

⁴⁵John 6:37.

⁴⁶Read Jer. 2:1-4:2; Ezek. 16; also, the entire Book of Hosea. Compare John 3:26-30; Rom. 7:1-4; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2, 9-14.

⁴⁷See Rev. 1:3.

⁴⁸Matt 19:3-8. Compare Mal. 2:13-16.

⁴⁹See Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 1:4-5; 4:20-24; Col. 3:5-11; Heb. 2:10; 1 John 3:1-3.

⁵⁰Col. 3:18-19. Compare Eph. 5:22-33.

⁵¹1 Peter 3:7. Compare Mal. 2:13-16.

⁵²Matt. 6:14-15. Compare Matt. 6:12; 18:21-35.

⁵³Mark 11:25. Compare 1 Peter 3:7. According to ancient tradition, Peter was Mark's primary source of information about Jesus. Jesus' teaching that our attitude toward others directly influences the efficacy of our prayers is echoed in Peter's admonition to husbands.

⁵⁴Luke 7:47.

⁵⁵1 Peter 3:3-4. Compare 2 Cor. 4:16-18.

⁵⁶Rom. 14:8.

⁵⁷Rom. 8:35-39.

⁵⁸Rom. 8:28-29; compare Pss. 46:9-10; 139:1-16; Eph. 1:9-11.

⁵⁹*Serenity Prayer* (Anonymous).

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