



# Light from the Word

## Receive One Another

**Editor's Note:** The Bible uses the term “one another” multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the final article in this series.

**Theme verse:** *“Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.”*<sup>1</sup>

This past year we have looked at several ways in which we are called by God to relate to each other. In all ways Jesus is our example for how we should do this. Indeed the very person of God is expressed in relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In creating humankind, God extended that relationship to people, desiring the mutuality of love freely offered in fellowship, communion, and tightly-woven bonds of familial relationship. Jesus likewise commissioned His followers to follow a “new commandment” to love as He loved.<sup>2</sup> He knit it all together when He explained that the second greatest commandment—after the Old Testament imperative to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength—was like the first, to love our neighbor as ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

So just as we are constrained by the love of Christ to love as we are loved, to forgive as we are forgiven, and to extend mercy as it has been extended to us, so likewise are we impelled to receive one another.

What does it mean to receive another? We may think of some item that is given or paid to us that we may or may not accept. Acceptance is part of—perhaps the first step in—the biblical call to receive others. The Greek word for receive used in the theme verse means to take to oneself; to friendship or hospitality. Clearly it is not something that can be done from a distance nor could it possibly be the common attitude of “live and let live” that the world seems to embrace.

In Paul's discourses on how believers are to conduct themselves in the household of faith<sup>4</sup>—

how we are to relate to one another—we find words which give color and application to what it means to receive. It involves both engaging in certain actions and refraining from others as we interact in the family of God.

Romans 14 in particular is a carefully balanced treatment of this subject as it plays out in the reality of differences of conscience, conviction, and practice found in the church. Depending on which side of a particular issue we may find ourselves—and most of us we will be on either side from time to time depending on the subject at hand—we are warned not to judge when our conscience demands abstention and not to despise when we feel free to partake. Both “judging” and “despising” are at odds with “receiving” and involve the elevation of self and one's understanding above another. The elevation of self and denigration of the other is anathema to obeying the injunction to receive one another.

For centuries, Christians have struggled with the matter of judging. How do we reconcile Jesus' command that we not judge<sup>5</sup> with the clear biblical teaching to discern that which is evil, harmful, or even just not edifying?<sup>6</sup> Perhaps much of the problem can be attributed to our failure to imitate Christ. He clearly did not shrink from calling sin, sin. But he also avoided the overtone reflected in the original definition of “to judge” which carries an implication of “to try, condemn, and punish.”

In today's use of language, the word “accept” is confused with approval or endorsement. Did Jesus approve of the sinful ways of those with whom He associated? Did He endorse Mary Magdalene's demon-possessed behavior when He welcomed her into his inner circle? Was He guilty by association when He spoke with Zacchaeus, the cheating tax collector and went home with him? Was He worried about appearances in any of these associations? Or

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rather did He lovingly accept each of these, seeing them with eyes of compassion and desiring their fellowship—knowing their relationship with Him would lead to their redemption?

Indeed, the highly polarized political environment of our time has made it seem incredible that two people who don't see things the same might enjoy friendship. What a loss! As believers we are not only called to see others as made in the image of God, we are to love each other as He loves us—to truly receive one another. And that's anything but a distant, theoretical, platitudinous expression of regard. Rather it's an "up close" willingness—even desire—to "take to oneself."

We would readily agree that judging—with its inherent overtones of condemnation and punitive treatment—is at odds with building the kinds of relationships Jesus nurtured and expects us to sustain. Paul makes it clear that we

can live in a way that holds to the highest of standards, including that of avoiding offense towards another and still avoid the peril of judging, when he writes, *"Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way."*<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most telling aspect of whether we have received another is found in how we speak of them when they are not around. It is the height of hypocrisy to feign relationship and affinity with someone only to tear them down in our speech. James makes it clear that we must, *"Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge."*<sup>8</sup> Rather, may our *"speech be always with grace,"*<sup>9</sup> which will season like salt the relationships we share one with the other.

As we close, let's consider the relationship between the runaway slave Onesimus and his Christian

brother master Philemon. In his eponymous epistle, Philemon is entreated by Paul to receive this brother in faith who had so clearly wronged him. Paul did not encourage lip service to forgiveness or a relationship safely bounded by distance; rather he noted that perhaps their separation for a time was being turned by God for good so that the receiving would endure forever. Indeed that Philemon would receive Onesimus as he would Paul himself, as a brother beloved.<sup>10</sup> How like our Lord and Master Jesus Himself!

Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Rom. 15:7

<sup>2</sup> John 13:34-35

<sup>3</sup> Deut. 6:5, Mark 12:30-31

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 14, 1 Cor. 10:23-33, 1 Cor. 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 7:1

<sup>6</sup> John 7:24, Rom. 12:9, 1 Cor. 10:23

<sup>7</sup> Romans 14:13

<sup>8</sup> James 4:11

<sup>9</sup> Col. 4:6

<sup>10</sup> Philemon 1:15-17