

“Accept Each Other”—Fully Connected (4 of 4)

The vision of Sunrise Church is to **“Lead people in a growing relationship with Jesus Christ,”** and our strategy for doing that is presented in our three words: **Connect, Grow, & Serve.** That all comes from what Jesus said in Matthew 28, the passage called “The Great Commission.”

And so we’re taking a month on each of these words: Last month we looked at what it takes to be **“Fully Alive.”** That was a CONNECT series. This month we’re looking at what it takes to be **“Fully Connected”** to each other as followers of Jesus Christ. This is a GROW series. Next weekend we’ll begin our SERVE series, appropriately called, **“Fully Engaged.”** *Perspective!*

Now, in this message series called, **“Fully Connected”** we’re looking at what it takes for followers of Jesus Christ to become “one with each other.” Sounds kind of New Age doesn’t it?

Actually, it’s Jesus’ greatest desire for us. We’ve seen in John 17 this prayer of Jesus: *“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.”* John 17:20-21 (NLT)

Jesus’ desire for us as his followers is to be as connected as he is with the Father. Jesus wants us to achieve perfect unity, and that unity will send a message to the world. But too often, the church is often just as messed up as everyone else—and we do a poor job of showing Christ!

If you look at the history of the Church, more often than not—the Church hasn’t acted like Jesus!

We’ve been the ones who have possessed Grace, but gave out Judgment. We who have received so much grace and mercy have forgotten to show it to others.

But for those of us who are followers of Jesus Christ, our Heavenly Father calls us to live under a standard that we are to unto others, not as they’ve done unto us, nor are we to do unto others as we think they deserve, BUT, we are to do unto others as has been done unto us by God.

We have been invited into this incredible relationship whereby God has shown us incredible, undeserved **Love.** And if we struggle with showing that kind of love, then we’ve simply forgotten the love that was shown to us by God.

Today I want to close our series by looking at **“Accepting Each Other.”**

Now, what happens when someone disappoints you? What happens when someone doesn’t live up to your expectations for them or if they hurt you intentionally or not? What do you do?

What happens when life deals you a hard blow? It could be friends, it could be family, it could be work, it could be your dreams...but somewhere along the way, people fail our expectations.

People don’t do what we think they should do—and then we want to push them out of our lives—until they come to their senses and come begging for forgiveness and let us know that we were “right!”

The only problem with this is that when you become a Christian you are invited into a relationship with your Heavenly Father that is built on unconditional love, forgiveness and acceptance.

You are now included into a family that you did nothing to deserve. And God says to you and to me, *“All that I’ve done to you...you go do to others. I’ve modeled it for you to follow. Go do it.”*

We love—not because people deserve love—but because he first loved us. We forgive—not because people deserve forgiveness—but because he first forgave us. We reconcile—not because people deserve reconciliation—but because he reconciled us to himself. We accept—not because people deserve acceptance—but because God, through Jesus Christ accepted us.

In Romans 15:5-7 we read: *“May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Explain)”*

“Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.” Romans 15:5-7 (NLT) That mirrors so perfectly Jesus’ prayer in John 17! **(Explain)**

Illus: Accepting means *“receiving someone to ourselves.”* (Show “hi,” “handshake,” & a “hug.”)

God “receives us to himself” and sets the model with how we are to receive others. Accepting is the hard work we do to make sure other people around us “feel” accepted.

So, here’s the question: Who is “unacceptable” to you? It could be a person of a different **skin color**, a person with a different **social background** than you have, a person who lives life on a lower **economic scale** than you do, it could be someone who’s **hurt you**, it could even be a person who has **not performed** up to your standard.

Have you ever rejected someone that God has put in your life? I know I have, and it’s wrong.

Acceptance is a basic human need; when someone senses our acceptance, it draws them to us, enabling us to influence them with God’s love. But when we reject them we can’t influence them toward God. We can either “attract” or “repel” people by our “acceptance” or “rejection.”

Our lives have been shaped by the amounts of acceptance or rejection that we have received from the people around us. Just think back to those days of Jr. Hi. and H.S.! Were you in the “in crowd” or an “outcast”? We naturally gravitate toward those who accept us!

Now here’s an important statement—please bear this:

We are far more open to the influence of people who accept us than people who judge us!

Think about your friends, think about your marriage, think about your children: Is there acceptance or rejection in the relationship? If it’s acceptance—then you have a voice. If it’s rejection—then you’ve lost that voice into their heart and lives. *You heart follows acceptance!*

As a former Youth Pastor I can’t tell you the number of times a mom or a dad came to me and wanted me to explain “the situation” to their son or daughter. “*Tell them I’m right!*” My answer was usually simple: “*How will that help,*” and “*What’s going to happen after that?*”

I grew up with very little church background. But with the background I did have one thing was very clear: God will only accept me if I do what he says. I have to perform right, or God is going to judge me. If I do good things, then God loves me. If I do bad things, God will judge me.

Most people get their idea of God by the amounts of acceptance or rejection they have growing up. It took until my late twenties to move from the house of fear to the house of love.

One of the books that deeply impacted me back then was Brennan Manning’s *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. Listen to these words: “*My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it.*” Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

I wept like a baby when I first read those words. All my life I had been trying to earn the acceptance of God—when he had already accepted me! Jesus did not accept us based upon our performance. Jesus did not come into this world to be “right” and tells us how “wrong” we are!

Donald McCullough writes: “*Grace tells us that we are accepted just as we are. We may not be the kind of people we want to be, we may be a long way from our goals, we may have more failures than achievements, we may not be wealthy or powerful or spiritual, we may not even be happy, but we are nonetheless accepted by God, held in his hands. Such is his promise to us in Jesus Christ, a promise we can trust.*” Donald McCullough, *Waking From the American Dream*—————

Using the model of God’s acceptance of us through Jesus Christ it is clear that we are to accept people “before” they are acceptable! Acceptance does not depend upon performance.

But sometimes our “*sociology of comfort*” becomes a “*theology of comfort.*” **(Explain)**

When we create these theological boxes we end up building “walls” instead of “bridges.” Walls make us feel safe and secure, but they lock us in and close us off from the very ones Christ died to accept.

When you became a Christian you were not very acceptable. God accepted you and then he started making the changes in you. God did not expect you to clean up your life in order to become acceptable to him. He just reached down and accepted you—warts and all.

God accepted us—he “received us to himself”—based not on our performance, but on his grace.

Remember Ephesians? “*God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.*” Ephesians 2:8-9 (NLT)

So God doesn't wait for us to be cleaned up! He stepped down from heaven and entered our sin-filled world and showed us his grace and mercy. He accepted us before we were acceptable!

Willowcreek Article: Isn't that exactly what Jesus did for us? He came into our world—we who were filled with sin—and accepted us. He could have easily come to point a finger of judgment at us, but he didn't—he came and accepted us, and pointed us to his Heavenly Father.

Jesus came to offer grace—not condemnation. It was the religious people of Jesus' day that looked down on the sinful people with condemnation and judgment—is it any different today?

How could we forget the words of John 3:16-17? *“For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.”* John 3:16-17 (NLT) Our job isn't to condemn the world, but to point the world to Jesus Christ so that they, too, can be saved! We should be bringing people to Jesus and letting God clean them up!

I love how The Message puts it: *“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.”* John 3:16-17 (Message)

We need to get into the habit of accepting people before they change. Before they become acceptable! This isn't condoning of sin, but accepting of sinners!

Brennan Manning writes in *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, *“Something is radically wrong when the local church rejects a person accepted by Jesus - when a harsh, judgmental, and unforgiving sentence is passed on homosexuals; when a divorcee is denied communion; when the child of a prostitute is refused baptism; when the unlaicized priest is forbidden the sacraments. Jesus comes to the ungodly, even on Sunday morning. His coming ends ungodliness and makes us worthy. Otherwise we are establishing at the heart of Christianity an utterly ungodly and unworthy preoccupation with works.”* Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

Let me share with you an email I received this past week from Sandy Smith: *“When I told you tonight how much Sunrise and it's people saved my life, it is so true. When I walked into Sunrise about 2 1/2 years ago I was lost and so broken. I knew my sins were too great and I wouldn't be worth anything. Many people have helped me along the way, but Earl and Pearl Deskins took me under their wings and made me understand that I was loved and worth something to God.*

“I have always believed in God, but I never KNEW Him. What a difference. I can not explain how much peace, joy and comfort I feel since I've been coming to Sunrise. It's like an addiction, I guess. I have to be in church on Sat night (or Sun, depending on when NASCAR is running) and Thursday Abundant Life. It is all so important to connect not only with Jesus, but the fellowship I soak up every week from others at MY church. I am going to miss everybody so much.”

Illus: (LOVE WINS sticker)

APPLICATION: Who offends you? Who has disappointed you? Who has rejected you? Who has hurt you? Will you step out and accept them (not because you necessarily want to, but because God accepted you when you were entirely unaccepted).

It could be your spouse. It could be your child. It could be your friend. It could be your parent. It could be your co-worker. It could be someone here in this church.

Will you commit to being there for them as Jesus was there for you—long before you ever deserved it?

Let's pray: PERFORMANCE PLAN VS. GRACE PLAN