

THE MARKS OF A STRONG FELLOWSHIP WITHIN THE CHURCH

ROMANS 15:01–13

Introduction

This passage is a continuation of the former chapter. It clearly pinpoints the marks of a strong church. Once studying this passage, a believer can never claim he did not know his duty within the church. Every believer's part in building and making the church strong is clearly spelled out.

- I. Mark 1: the strong bear the weaknesses of the weak (vv. 1-3).
- II. Mark 2: everyone studies the Scriptures (v. 4).
- III. Mark 3: everyone works for harmony (vv. 5-6).
- IV. Mark 4: everyone accepts one another without discrimination (vv. 7-12).
- V. Mark 5: everyone is filled by the God of hope (v. 13).

I. *Romans 15:01–03 Ministry, Brotherhood and Weaknesses*

In a strong church, the strong bear the weaknesses of the weak. The weak believers are described in Chapter 14. They are...

- those who judge, grumble, complain, murmur, and criticize (see Rom 14:2-3, 10, 13).
- those who still trust in a legalistic behaviour, a do and don't behaviour (Rom. 14:1, 14-15).
- those who disobey God's Word and go against the explicit commands of God (Rom. 14:10-12, 16-23).

The word *bear* (bastazein) does not mean to bear in the sense of putting up with and forbearing with an attitude of begrudging. It means to *bear the weak along*, to support them, to carry them along as a father or mother would carry a child — in love and tenderness, understanding and care.

1. How can such an attitude ever prevail in the church? Scripture clearly gives the answer: "Each *of us* should please his neighbour." It is that simple: let us not please ourselves, but let us please our neighbour — let us live for his good and edification. No matter what we may wish...

- the place we may want to go,
- the drink we may want to drink,
- the food we may want to eat,
- the film we may want to see,
- the thing we may want to buy,

...if it is going to be a stumbling block to our brother, we do not do it. We please, help, support and live for the good of our brothers and sisters so that they might be edified and built up in the faith.

2. The believer has the greatest pattern in all the world for denying self and living for his neighbour: Jesus Christ Himself. “For even Christ did not please himself.”

⇒ The insults that were cast against God — the cursing, dishonour, unbelief, denial, hostility, all the shame and rebellion against God — cut the heart of Christ. Therefore, Christ set out to bear the insults against God: He came to earth and bore the sin of the insults and made it possible for all persons to praise God instead of insulting His glorious name. The zeal to remove all the dishonour cast against God consumed Christ and fell upon Him. (See Psa. 69:19-20.)

Note the point: Christ did not live to please Himself. He did not pray, “Father, remove this cup of sacrifice and denial from me — no matter what.” He prayed: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Mt. 26:39). Jesus Christ is the believer’s pattern for pleasing others instead of self.

***Phil 2:5-8** Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 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 to death — even death on a cross!*

***1 Pet 2:21** To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*

***1 Pet 3:18** For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.*

Isa 53:5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Thought 1. What a glorious spirit would prevail in the church if this was really practiced as Scripture says: by “each of us.”

***Acts 20:35** In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’*

***Gal 6:2** Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.*

***Heb 13:3** Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*

***James 1:27** Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

Thought 2. Note how *life-changing* this point really is. The serious believer no longer asks if questionable behaviour is right and moral, but if it is good for his brother. Will this thing edify and build up his brother?

Mark 12:30-31 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

John 13:34-35 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Rom 13:10 Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

Rom 14:19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

2 Cor 13:9 We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection.

Gal 5:14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Eph 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

James 2:8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right.

II. Romans 15:04 Study of Scripture

In a strong church, everyone studies the Scripture. This is a great verse on the purpose of the Holy Scriptures. In very simple terms it tells us why God gave us the Bible.

1. The Scriptures were written to *teach us* (didaskalian): to instruct, direct and guide us.

John 20:31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Acts 17:11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

Rom 15:4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

1 Cor 10:11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.

2 Tim 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

2 Tim 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

1 John 5:13 *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

2. The Scriptures were written to stir three things within believers.
- a. Endurance: Trials stir endurance, fortitude, steadfastness, constancy and patience (Rom. 5:3-5). The word is not passive; it is active. It is not the spirit that just sits back and puts up with the trials of life, taking whatever may come. Rather it is the spirit that stands up and faces life's trials, that actively goes about conquering and overcoming them. When trials confront a man who is truly justified, he is stirred to arise and face the trials head on. He immediately sets out to conquer and overcome them. He knows that God is allowing the trials in order to teach him more and more endurance.

Luke 21:19 *“By standing firm you will gain life.”*

Rom 12:12 *Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.*

Heb 10:36 *You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.*

James 1:2-4 *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.*

James 5:7 *Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains.*

- b. Encouragement (parakleseos): consolation, solace, help, exhortation, supplication. Whatever is needed to comfort the believer, the Scripture gives him.

John 8:51 *“I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”*

John 14:15 *“If you love me, you will obey what I command.”*

John 14:16 *“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever.”*

John 14:23 *Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”*

John 16:33 *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

- c. Hope: Endurance stirs character, integrity and strength. And character stirs hope (elpis): to expect with confidence; to anticipate knowing; to look and long for with surety; to desire with assurance; to rely on with certainty; to trust with the guarantee; to believe with the knowledge. Note that hope is expectation, anticipation, looking and longing for, desiring, relying upon and trusting. But it is also confidence,

knowledge, surety, assurance, certainty and a guarantee. When a justified man becomes stronger in character, he draws closer to God and the closer he draws to God, the more he hopes for the glory of God.

***Rom 15:4** For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

***Rom 1:16** I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*

***1 Pet 1:20-23** He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*

III. Romans 15:05–06 Unity and Brotherhood

In a strong church, everyone works for harmony. When there are so many differences and different ideas among people, believers must be constantly striving to be of one heart.

1. How can a church — a church with so many diverse personalities — achieve harmonious feelings and one mind? Note: these two verses are a prayer of Paul. He has just said that the endurance and comfort necessary to live for God comes from the Scriptures. Now he says they come from God. In fact, he says that God is the God of endurance and encouragement. Therefore, the believer secures his strength or endurance and comfort from both the Scriptures and God. If he wishes to stick — to endure to the end — he must study the Scriptures and pray, asking God to give him...

- the strength and endurance
- the comfort and encouragement

Now, note the point. If we know the endurance and comfort of God, then we are bearing the weaknesses of each other; we are constantly supporting and helping and caring for each other. We are living in harmony and being of one heart.

2. The pattern of endurance and encouragement and of harmonious feelings with God and man was Christ Jesus.

=> He was faithful to God, sticking ever so close to God and fulfilling His ministry to the ultimate degree.

=> He experienced the comfort and the encouragement of God, possessing an unbroken relationship with God.

=> He never held any ill feelings toward God or God's people. He was of one heart with God and was always working to bring every person into harmony with God.

The believer could have no greater pattern than the pattern of Christ Himself. Christ was always working to bring men together with God so that they could have the endurance and comfort to live through all the trials and sufferings of life.

3. The purpose for unity between believers and within the church is striking: that we might *glorify God* — all of us together — with one heart and one mouth. God longs for our worship and praise. It is the very reason He created us and saved us. Note a significant point: a divided church cannot worship God. This is exactly what is being said. A church has to be of one heart and mouth to worship God. If a people are not of one heart and mouth, God is not glorified; He is not worshipped.

The point is clear. Every one of us must work for the unity of the church so that we may be of one heart and fulfil the very purpose for our existence: to glorify God.

1 Cor 1:10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

2 Cor 13:11 Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Eph 4:3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Phil 1:27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.

1 Pet 3:8 Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.

IV. Romans 15:07–12 Unity without Discrimination

In a strong church everyone accepts one another. There is no discrimination whatsoever in a strong church. The word *accept* (proslambanesthe) means to take to oneself; to accept a person as a friend; to treat as the closest of friends with the most caring kindness. Believers are to accept one another in the closest of bonds.

1. The believer has the greatest pattern imaginable: Christ Himself. Christ accepted us, and note why: that God may be glorified. Therefore, believers must accept each other so that God may be glorified through their lives and church. Just look at how far Christ went.
 - a. Christ accepted the Jews and ministered to them. He did it for the truth of God: to confirm and fulfil the promises made to the Jewish nation. Think how discriminating, prejudicial and judgemental the Jews were; yet Christ came to them and received and ministered to them. Why? For the truth of God — to fulfil the Word and praise of God.
 - b. Christ accepted the Gentiles and ministered to them. He came to bring them the mercy of God, that they might praise God for His mercy. Remember He received and

ministered to the Gentiles when they were living the most licentious and indulgent life-style imaginable (see Rom. 1:18-32).

2. The Scripture proves the point. Scripture foretold...
 - a. that the Gentiles would have the gospel preached to them (v. 9; see Psa. 18:49).
 - b. that the Gentiles would rejoice with God's people (v. 10; see Dt. 32:43).
 - c. that the Gentiles would praise God and trust Christ as their Saviour and Lord (v. 11; see Isa. 11:1, 10).

Believers are to accept one another even as Christ has accepted us. No person is too prejudicial or critical, too weak or base for us to accept. The point is that Christ received and ministered to the most prejudicial and judgemental (the Jews), sinful and base (the Gentiles) people in the world; therefore, believers can accept one another. No one is too far gone to be rejected and thrown aside.

=> We are to accept each other, as Christ also accepted us.

Acts 8:14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.

Acts 10:47 "Can anyone keep these people [Gentiles] from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."

Acts 11:18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Acts 15:19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God."

Gal 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Eph 2:13-14 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.

=> We are to accept each other for *the glory of God*.

Rom 15:6 So that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Cor 6:20 You were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.

2 Th 1:12 We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

V. *Romans 15:13 Church Filled with Hope*

In a strong church everyone is filled by the God of hope. God is the “God of hope”...

- the Author of our hope
- the Foundation of our hope
- the Builder of our hope
- the Finisher of our hope

Note that this is a prayer. The things mentioned cannot be possessed apart from God, and we can possess them only as He gives them to us.

1. There is joy (charas): an inner gladness; a deep seated pleasure. It is a depth of assurance and confidence that ignites a cheerful heart. It is a cheerful heart that leads to cheerful behaviour.

John 17:13 “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.”

1 Pet 1:8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

Isa 61:10 I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

2. There is peace. Note that peace comes through believing. No man has peace apart from God. Peace is the first result of justification is with God.
 - a. The meaning of peace with God is striking. Peace with God does not mean escapism, a quiet atmosphere, the absence of trouble, the control of situations by positive thinking, the denial of problems, the ability to keep from facing reality. Peace *with* God means the *sense and knowledge*...
 - that one has restored his relationship with God.
 - that one is no longer alienated and separated from God.
 - that one is now reconciled with God.
 - that one is now accepted by God.
 - that one is freed from the wrath and judgment of God.
 - that one is freed from fearing God’s wrath and judgment.
 - that one is now pleasing God.
 - that one is at peace with God.
 - b. The source of peace is Jesus Christ. Men can have peace with God only because of Jesus Christ. It is He who reconciles men to God. He has made peace by the blood of His cross.

Eph 2:14-15 *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace.*

Col 1:20 *And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

Isa 53:5 *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

John 14:27 *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”*

John 16:33 *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

Phil 4:6-7 *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Psa 29:11 *The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.*

Psa 119:65 *Do good to your servant according to your word, O Lord.*

Isa 26:3 *You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.*

3. There is hope (see note 2. c., Rom. 15:4, page 4).

Acts 24:15 *And I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.*

Rom 8:24 *For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?*

Col 1:5 *The faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel.*

Titus 2:12-13 *It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.*

Heb 6:18-19 *God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain.*

1 John 3:1-3 *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.*

Prov 14:32 *When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down, but even in death the righteous have a refuge.*

Again note: these great qualities come only through the power of the Holy Spirit. God and God alone is the source of the things that give life. ■