

An early church leader named Cyprian once said, "*No one can have God as his Father who does not have the church as his mother.*" Another early church father (Augustine) said, "*Look, mother church is in labor; see, she is groaning in travail to give birth to you.*"

The idea that the church is "*the mother of Christians*" was not only widely believed in the first few centuries of Christianity... it also found great traction among the Protestant Reformers. ... John Calvin [said], "*May [Christians] be guided by her maternal care until they grow up to manhood, and, finally, attain the perfection of faith .... To those whom [God] is a Father, the church must also be a mother.*"

Cyprian, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin all agree: the church provides Christians with the nurture... guidance... and encouragement necessary for spiritual development — most often associated with the role of a mother. But where did these church fathers and Reformers get the idea that the church is our mother? ... They found it in the Bible .... One of those passages is the one that we come to today in our study through Romans. To ask how the church is our mother is really to ask, "How does the church provide the nurture... care... and maturation for spiritual growth?"

God gives us the church to help us form our identity as Christians. The church helps us to endure suffering... bringing comfort and encouragement in difficult times. ... The church nourishes us with the Word and the Lord's Supper... provides godly examples for us to imitate... and disciplines us when we go astray. ... In addition... we grow and are transformed as Jesus is uniquely manifested in our worship assemblies. The church provides maternal care for us in all of these ways... helping us to grow to become more like Jesus. ... .. **[ P A U S E ]** ... ..

Most of us get impatient with repetition. In fact... if the repetition is also admonition... we get hostile: "*Why are you telling me that again? I heard you the first time. I'll get to it when I am good and ready.*" ... Children get impatient when their parents remind them to pick up the toys... make their beds... come inside from playing... or be nicer to their siblings. ... The attitude doesn't stop with childhood either. ... As adults we get impatient with repetitions from God... and find them offensive.

But the fact that something is repeated... shows that we need to hear it.

I say this here because nearly everything we will see in today's verses has been said before. ... Paul is still talking about our tendencies to judge other Christians... fighting over things that are not important... and (once again) he tells the strong to bear with the convictions of the weak. [ P A U S E ]

Let me just say that if God tells us something once... we should pay attention. - It is God speaking! ... But when He says something twice or even three times... surely we should stop anything else we are doing... focus our minds... seize upon each individual word... memorize what is being said... ponder its meaning... and seek to apply it to every aspect of our lives.

Our thrice-given message is about making sure our church is strong. (Folks!) This is about our mothering! Are we doing it the way God wants us to...?

This passage clearly pinpoints the marks of a strong church (mothering the right way.) ... Once we study this passage... none of us can ever claim we did not know our duty within our local church body. Every believer's part in

nurturing... encouraging... and teaching the weak and the young... (in essence - being a good mom) is clearly spelled out. ... (Now)... I am sorry if I am insulting the manhood of the men who are listening to me... by calling you to motherhood... Truly I am not trying to “sissify” you... because you will never be any stronger as a man (or a woman)... than when you decide to nurture and build-up fellow believers.

So today I am going to present (from our passage) five marks of a strong church. ... After each individual mark that we study (here in Romans 15)... I am going to ask a different man of our church to come up and lead us all in praying for this mark to be an obvious character of our church. (We will ask God to grace us with it.) So at four different times during this sermon we will stop and pray for our church. After the fifth mark... I will close in prayer.

Now... I don't want to give any impression that these are **THE** five marks of a strong church. There are others. (If we were studying 1 Thes. I would have a different list. And I do – on occasion – pray through that list for our church.) But **these five** are the ones that God has led us to (here in Romans)... and I believe He did so because He wants us to focus on them.

And if you are watching us on video today... or listening to an audio of this message... God has also led **you** these five marks. I believe that He wants **you** to pray for these five strengths in your own church.

Let me give you those five marks right now... and then we will dive into the scripture that presents them... Romans 15:1-13.

- ❖ **Mark #1**: (verses 1-3) In a strong church... the strong (*unselfishly*) help weaker Christians carry the cross of their weakness.

- ❖ **Mark #2:** (*verse 4*) In a strong church... Scripture is constantly studied and fuels the church.
- ❖ **Mark #3:** (*verses 5-6*) In a strong church... believers experience a unity that God gives... and depend on it for vital worship.
- ❖ **Mark #4:** (*verses 7-12*) In a strong church... Believers welcome others in the same way *they* were welcomed by Jesus... (including their harshest enemies... or offensive neighbor.)
- ❖ **Mark #5:** (*verse 13*) In a strong church... everyone is filled with an exciting and expectant hope (which nothing else can give.)

(Alright!) Let's start with **Mark #1** of a strong church (verses 1-3... please.)

### **Romans 15:1-3**

In a strong church... the strong (*unselfishly*) help weaker Christians carry the cross of their weakness. ... If you are prone to judgmentalism and exclusiveness... this is a big pill to swallow. ... If you are the kind of person who believes that you earned the spot where you are (in life) – all on your own – and others need to do the same... you will not like this at all.

In God's household... strength means obligation. ... An unwillingness to forego our rights for others... indicates we are not so "strong" after all.

A person's spiritual maturity is revealed by this: is he/she willing to give up their rights so that others might be helped...? Will they do this (*not* as a burden) but as a blessing ... just like a loving mother who makes sacrifices for her children... so the mature believer sacrifices to help weaker Christians grow in their faith...?

The **strong** have a responsibility to tolerate and support the **weak**. The Christian life centers on strengthening others. ... Selfishness has no part in the Christian life.

(Now)... Paul is not arguing here that we continually give-in to a weak brother's desires. ... Rather... we are to act in a way which will be to his/her lasting benefit. ... We help them carry the cross of their weakness.

The word “bear” in verse 1... (bastadzein)... means to carry them along as a father (or mother) would carry a child – in love... tenderness... understanding... and care. ... Or... as Chuck Swindoll advises:

*“Think of a team of backpackers heading up a mountain. All of the equipment and provisions need to be carried to the top; however, some can carry more weight than others. The strong are to lighten the burden in the packs of the weak and add it to their own.”*

Verse three points out that... of course... the great example in this... is our Lord Jesus Christ. ... He paid a tremendous price in order to minister to us. Paul quoted Psalm 69:9 to prove his point. ... Does a strong Christian think he is making a great sacrifice... or being tremendously inconvenienced...? Has he/she given up some liberty to keep a weaker brother or sister from stumbling...? Then let him/her measure their sacrifice by the sacrifice of Christ. No sacrifice we could ever make could match Calvary.

Psalm 69 (which Paul quotes in verse 3) is one of the great messianic psalms of the Old Testament. Seven of its thirty-six verses are directly quoted in the New Testament. This psalm prophesied the Messiah’s coming into the world... and what would happen to Him. Christ faced reproach and insults because He did not choose to please himself.

Instead... He chose to do what God had called Him to do. ... (Likewise) we... who are called by His Name... also need to please God rather than ourselves.

**Mark #1**: In a strong church... the strong (*unselfishly*) help weaker Christians carry the cross of their weakness.

### { FIRST MAN PRAYS }

**Mark #1**: In a strong church... the strong (*unselfishly*) help weaker Christians carry the cross of their weakness.

**Mark #2**: In a strong church... Scripture is constantly studied and fuels the church.

### Romans 15:4

In a strong church... Scripture is constantly studied and fuels the church.

Is *shouldering the weaknesses of others* often irksome? (Yes!) Are we apt to lose patience with the weak brother/sister and their scruples? (Yes!) ... But the antidote is in the Scriptures. We must get back into the Book and see how God helped others over the hard places of serving Him... and be comforted... Because God will strengthen and enable us too.

Romans 15:4 is a great verse on the purpose of the Holy Scriptures. In very simple terms it tells us why God gave us the Bible. The Scriptures were written to stir three things within believers. **a. Endurance** ...

**b. Encouragement**... **c. Hope**.

How comforting it is to know that God never fails to fulfill His promises and remains committed to His people - even when they are not as committed to

Him as they should be. ... We often stumble... we often fall. ... We persist in sinning... in failing to love others as we should... in putting too high a priority on our own pleasure and comfort. ... God is not pleased with our failures... but He is always willing to forgive and never turns His back on His Own children!

You won't find any hope in the daily newspaper... secular radio... television... YouTube... or other social media. You won't find any hope in modern literature. ... Look at any field and see if you can find any hope. There is **none** whatsoever! It is dark and dismal when you look out at this world today. ... (LISTEN!)... The only place you can find real hope is in the Word of God.

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are no ordinary writings... but the very '*breath of God*' (2 Tim. 3:16: 'all scripture is *God-breathed* "theo-pneustos"). ... Written by men '*moved by*' (picked-up and carried along) by the Spirit of God (2 Pet. 1:21).

According to verse four here in Romans 15... the Scriptures uniquely provide for 'instruction' (*didaskalia*) and also by their message of 'endurance' and 'encouragement' give 'hope' for the people of God. (Because life in the world is tough-going for most Christians... as it was for Paul and the early believers.)

Our text says that a Christian can have hope and that the way to that sound and steadfast hope is through the Bible. That road leads first through teaching... second through patient endurance... and third through encouragement.

I believe that a central focus on God's Word is a particular strength of our church right now. It is taught in our home Bible Studies and from this pulpit each week. ... But we certainly still have times as individuals... and as church leaders when we feel the need for endurance in facing our never-ending challenges. We sometimes get discouraged. And we need the flame of our hope to be fanned. ... Here is the point: We MUST remain committed to obtaining it from God's Word... and not seek it from another source. Our hope of success (for example) should never be based on the numerous promising opportunities that big business so readily offers the church today. ... Classical wisdom or modern research will never hold a candle to God's supernatural Word (His Scripture.)

How sad that so many churches that once centered themselves on... and depended on God's Word... departed from it... and are now shipwrecked. Let us... who think we stand... take heed... lest we fall.

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### { SECOND MAN PRAYS }

**Mark #3**: In a strong church... believers experience a unity that God gives... and depend on it for vital worship.

### Romans 15:5-6

Unfortunately... while the Apostolic Church had some brilliant successes regarding unity... it failed miserably in many places. The church in Galatia



was ravaged by legalism. The church in Corinth chose up sides as to what to do about one of its members who was committing incest (1 Cor. 5). Pergamum was being divided and diluted by Christians' marriages to unbelievers (Rev. 2:14). And the Lord said in effect that the church at Laodicea made him sick (Rev. 3:16). The Apostolic Church sometimes fell far short of Christ's explicit teaching and prayer.

Some scholars believe that the church in Rome... failed terribly. Several scholars believe that some of the early Christian martyrs (including Peter and Paul) were killed because of jealous strife among the members of the church in Rome! ... Rivalry was so bitter... (they say)... that some brethren turned in the names of their Christian opponents... naming them as traitors against the Empire. ... If this is true... envy among Christians helped feed saints to the lions in the Colosseum and light fires under Christians who burned in Nero's gardens.

How can a church — a church with so many diverse personalities — achieve harmonious feelings and one mind? ... Please notice that 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 demonstrates they come from God - through prayer. ... In fact... he says that God is the God of patience (endurance) and consolation (comfort). Therefore... the believer secures his strength or endurance and comfort from both the Scriptures and Prayer.

The purpose for harmony between believers and within the church is striking: that we might *glorify God* — all of us together — with one mind and

one mouth. ... God longs for our worship and praise. It is the very reason He created us and saved us.

But a divided church cannot worship God. This is exactly what is being said. A church has to be of one mind and mouth to worship God. If a people are not of one mind and mouth... God is not glorified. He is not worshipped.

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

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### { THIRD MAN PRAYS }

**Mark #4**: In a strong church... Believers welcome others in the same way *they* were welcomed by Jesus... (including their harshest enemies... or offensive neighbor.)

### Romans 15:7-12

The point is that Christ received and ministered to the most prejudicial and judgmental people in the world (the pride-filled Jews and the most

offensively sinful Gentiles.) Therefore... believers can receive one another. No one is too far gone to be rejected and cast away. We are to receive each other... as Christ also received us.

Paul tries to help the Jews accept Gentiles as their equals in the church by quoting several Old Testament Scriptures that show God had always intended for the Gentiles to worship with the Jews. ... Paul was VERY thorough with his proof. He quoted four Old Testament passages... taken from all **three** divisions of the Old Testament — the Law... the Prophets... and the Psalms. (You see)... Paul HAD to be convincing because of the sharp division between the Jews and the Gentiles. ... The Jews looked down on Gentiles as heathens. They were as despicable as they could imagine!

But into this divide... Paul wrote that no person is too despicable... and no person is too prejudicial or critical for us to receive. “Accept (welcome) one another... just as Christ has accepted (welcomed) you!”

How did Christ accept you and me? He accepted us with our many sins... prejudices... and innumerable blind spots. He accepted us with our psychological shortcomings and cultural naivete. He accepted us with our lack of sophistication. He even accepted us with our stubbornness. This is how we are to accept one another.

“Accepting” means taking people into our homes as well as into our hearts... sharing meals and activities... and avoiding racial and economic discrimination. ... We must go out of our way to avoid cliques and favoritism in the church. This is a call to consciously leave your personal comfort zone... and spend time greeting those you don't normally talk to.

God's Word is telling us - to not just seek fellowship among those who are "just like us" (our kind of people)... but to minimize differences... and seek common ground for friendship with those who are not like us.. In this way you are accepting others as Christ has accepted you... and God is given glory.

At one time... we all were on the outside. Christ is our model of what acceptance means. When we realize that Christ accepted us... as unlovely and sinful and immature as we were when we came to Him... then we will accept our brothers and sisters. The world sits up and takes notice when believers of widely differing backgrounds practice Christlike acceptance. In this... God will be glorified.

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### { FOURTH MAN PRAYS }

**Romans 15:13**

**Mark #5:** In a strong church... everyone is filled with an exciting and expectant hope.

To have hope is to look at the future optimistically. So to some extent a person must have hope to live. How can any sane person have hope in the midst of the desperate world in which we live? The frivolous can... because they do not think about the future at all. ... Thinking people find the future grim. ... Winston Churchill... one of the most brilliant and influential people of his age... died despairing. His last words were, "*There is no hope.*"

But our text says that a Christian **can** have hope. ... Hope comes as a by-product of the Holy Spirit's work. It does not come from our own senses or experiences. ... It comes through *the power of the Holy Spirit*". In other words... there is *nothing helpless* about the Christian life. We have *boundless assistance*.

God himself is our hope and has given hope to us.

Nothing else can be that or do that. If you put your hope in other people... they will let you down. If you trust your stocks or bonds or bank accounts... you will find that they can disappear overnight. ... In any case... they are not ultimately satisfying. Health will fail. Houses can burn. Jobs can be lost. Even great nations enter periods of economic and moral decline. Political parties fail us. But the one who has his or her hope from God and trusts God as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ can stand firm in anything.

Edward Mott expressed it in one of our best-known hymns:

*My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;*

*I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.  
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.*

*His oath, his covenant, his blood  
Support me in the whelming flood;  
When all around my soul gives away,  
He then is all my Hope and Stay.  
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.*

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**{ PASTOR JIM PRAYS }**