

## Marks of the Church Romans 15:14

It is incredible that today we start the last section of the Book of Romans. With verse 14, Paul begins to wind down his masterful letter to the Romans where he imparts his knowledge and understanding of the gospel of Christ to these believers, and speaks about the need to be unified in our lives and message as far as living out our faith. And as we begin this section it is both thrilling and sad at the same time. It is thrilling that we have seen so many amazing truths as we have taken our time through this book. We have had well over 200 sermons on this book and spent over four years. And I hope it has been profitable. At the same time sad in that you just want to keep going in this book and proclaiming these glorious and wonderful truths, which in a sense we will keep on doing throughout our whole Christian lives, and even as we exegete and preach through other books of the New Testament.

And let us remember the two reasons Paul has in writing this letter. One is to make known his understanding of the gospel and impart that knowledge to the Romans. The other is that he plans to visit this church and these believers that he has never met. But he is not just coming to visit but hopes that they will aid him in his ongoing ministry to the Gentile people to make known Jesus Christ. And in order this to be accomplished and for there to be cooperation in ministry there needs to be that sameness of doctrine, especially when it comes to the gospel. We want to see planted for the glory of God likeminded churches. And this both of these purposes dovetail into one another. He hopes to go to places where Jesus has never been heralded or heard. And so as we start into this last section, purpose one has been accomplished. He has made known the gospel of Christ. He has shown the application of this gospel to the heart and lives of the congregation at Rome. Now he handles his coming to them and his purpose in coming to them. He plans to launch out from Rome and go to places like Spain and beyond to herald Jesus Christ.

But before he discusses his plans, he realizes that he has said some tough things about the need of unity in the church of Jesus Christ. He is not coming to take over the operation or functionality of the church but saw the need to address the situation of unity in the church because of what he has seen in other churches that he has planted and established. But he realizes that this is a fully functional and mature church that loves Christ, and seeks to manifest and be a witness of Jesus Christ in that dark city of Rome. And that is what we have in verse 14 is a commendation of this church and their love for Christ.

But what Paul says here should mark out all Bible believing churches as we strive to be a lighthouse in our dark communities, and a beacon of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And the question that we have to ask ourselves is how would others describe our church? Would they use the terms that Paul uses here? Would they see anything that would suggest a changed community that exists to make much of Christ and make him known? And there is much talk about what the church of Jesus Christ should be known for, and there is not much talk about what the Scriptures say that we should be known for. So this passage is very directional for the church to really see if these attributes describe us as the body of Christ.

The other thing we have to ask is not only does this describe the church, but as a believer in Christ, does this describe me? Would anyone else use these terms to describe my Christianity and relationship with Jesus Christ? It is many times easy to be hard and condemning of the church as a whole but not look at our own personal lives. We chase after so many other things. We find our goal or identity in so many things of this life but how often are we seeking to know Christ and seeking to make him known among those who are the household of faith and even to be a gospel witness to those who are outside of Christ? Paul describes these believers is by the fruit of the gospel. This is the fruit that should be seen in all our lives. But here is the question: does anyone see this fruit in your life? Could anyone give thanks to God because these characteristics are so evident in your life? We see three characteristics of the church and of believers in Christ that should be evident.

1. We should see the goodness of God in one another. V.14a.

It is amazing the commendation that Paul gives to these believers because some believers are very cautious not to give any believer any complement. And the reason why is that there is no good thing that lies in us. Paul even described himself as the foremost of sinners. So it is rather surprising that Paul commends these believers and this church as being full of goodness. Think even of how Paul describes humanity earlier in this book. In Romans 3:10-12, **“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”** No one is no one. If there is any goodness in us it comes from God and he deserves all the praise not us. We are sinners through and through. So how can Paul call or describe anyone let alone a church full of goodness? We know our own human heart.

And that is a great question. Look how Paul begins this verse, because it is so necessary that we see this, **“I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness.”** Paul says that he is satisfied or is content or has comprehension that this is what their character is like. And notice what he calls them, “my brothers.” What he calls them is his “brothers.” In other words, these were believers. And how does Paul know that they are believers? It is because of their character. God has justified these believers but that process of sanctification or changing them and moulding them into the image of Jesus Christ is going on and advancing in their lives as believers. Listen to what Paul says in 8:11, **“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”** What has the Spirit given to us? He has given us life - life we have never had before to live a life that is different than any that we would ever want to live or could live before. And part and parcel of that life is “goodness.” The word here means an ethical goodness to do what is right in the sight of God and of others. It is living a righteous, holy and grace-filled life before God and others. This is the life of the Spirit.

Think of even the description of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, **“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”** So

when Paul says that they are “full of goodness” he is not saying that they are perfect or sinless but that they have all the necessary marks of that new life of the Spirit. And there are a couple of applications that we can make here. So often we are afraid to complement others when we see something noble or upright, or some way that we have been blessed by them. We do not want to detract that if anything good is accomplished it is because of God’s work in them. The other thing is that we do not want to cause them to stumble by making them proud or haughty thinking they are above others. But so often the pendulum of caution causes us not to encourage other believers to press on when we see the work of God in their lives. You have grown so much in the Lord, and I am so thankful to the Lord of how God has worked in your life to be a blessing in my life. Keep looking to him. An encouraging word doesn’t always lead to pride but does what it was intended and that is encourage others that their lives are changing and God is using them. It could cause them to keep looking to God and persevere in trusting him. And praise God, we should express that thankfulness. Paul does right in this passage.

And the other application is: does anyone see the work of God in my life? Could anyone thank God for my goodness? Can others in your family, or at your work, or your spouse or the church see the goodness of God - the love of God - the grace of God in your life? I can remember meeting someone who mentioned that they knew someone at Emmanuel Baptist Church. And you know what comes next is a description of that person, and that description of that person will either be negative or positive. It will either add credence to the witness of the church and the love of Christ, or it will be a dark cloud hiding his redemptive work. On this occasion it was a very positive response. The person said that if you had a whole church of Christians like so and so, what a powerful testimony it would be of the grace and goodness of God.

But are we known by that goodness of God? Do we show a care and concern for others seeking to be involved in their lives? When things do not go right for us, how do we respond? Is there a joy in Christ and patience with others because of Christ’s great forgiveness and patience with us? Are we willing to do what is right when others are not, but do it in a humble and gentle way to depict the work of Christ? Is there anything in your life where someone outside of Christ could say you are different and not mean you are odd but you are actually good? We are to be as believers and as a church full of goodness and full of the fruit of the Spirit of God in our lives.

## 2. We are to be filled with the knowledge of God. V.14b.

We often say this and we agree with the statement that there is a real famine when it comes to a knowledge of God’s Word. We realize what used to be common knowledge about the coming of Christ or the Christmas story or the meaning of Easter is not so common anymore in our society. People do not know these simple truths, and we shake our heads in despair. But the truth is that there is not only a barrenness in our world but in the church when it comes to a knowledge of God’s Word. People often look for other things rather than biblical truth when coming to join or be active in a church. Do they have an upbeat worship team and lively services? What kind of youth program or activities do they have? Yes, biblical truth is important but it is the add-on things that people are really attracted to. Here is another one: what is the politics of the church? The problem is that none of these things are bad in and of themselves but they

have a slow deterioration on the lives of believers and the distinctiveness of the church, because the distinctiveness of the church is in the knowledge of Christ.

So look at this commendation here, “**filled with all knowledge.**” The knowledge that he is talking about here is not any knowledge. My neighbour has a great knowledge of concrete. He is in that business. He knows the density and other things and loves to talk about concrete. This is not any knowledge but more specifically the knowledge of Christ. Again, it is interesting the way that this is termed. The idea of filled is the idea of a cup that has been filled. And the meaning here is not that they know all that is needed to know, but this is a mature church. The truths that Paul has taught were known to this church. They had all the essential truths that were taught and known and loved in their midst. It is not that they were lacking knowledge of God’s ways, salvation or commands. They were people who knew God.

And I have to comment on this: these two characteristics belong together. Full of goodness and filled with knowledge belong together. You can have a whole lot of knowledge and be ungodly. Liberal theologians might have a great deal of knowledge of the Scriptures but still not walk in the ways of the Lord. But the opposite is not true. You can grow in the goodness of God, in other words - our behaviour without a knowledge of God. The Christian life is a battle of thinking right. When we are thinking, interpreting and loving what is right, it leads to the right behaviour. Remember how the last section began in 12:2, “**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**” How do you discern the will of God and do what is good, acceptable and perfect? Here it is: by the renewing of your mind. Well how do you renew your mind? You put something in there that has not been in there before. You learn the truths of the gospel of Christ. You start to see the love of God, and we start to love others who might not be deserving of that love. We start to forgive because we realize no one has been more forgiven than me. We start to be patient. God never gives up on us. And the knowledge of God, Jesus and the gospel renews our mind. The bitterness, animosity, lust and a host of other thoughts are replaced with different thoughts. As goes our thinking so goes our behaviour.

But here is the question: how is your intake of the knowledge of God? Are you being filled with that knowledge? We can get so frustrated with what is coming out of us, and say we are going to try harder or I am not going to get angry or I am not going to lust. But let me ask you: what are you filling your mind with? If it is the same old thing, you will get the same old thing. If it is not the knowledge of God then your thinking will not change and if your thinking is not changing neither will your character or your behaviour. God’s word is living and able to change and transform us through the Spirit more and more into the image of Jesus Christ. Put yourself in a place where you can hear and learn the Word so that you can be filled with this knowledge of Christ. It will change your life.

### 3. The third mark is the ability to teach. V.14c.

We realize there is a sense that we are all instructing one another in the ways of the Lord. We certainly do this by the way that we live but we also do this by opening our mouths. What we say whether to our spouse, children, church member or whoever says what we believe about God. One of the main ways we image forth God is by what

comes out of us. We were made to communicate. God is a God who communicates, so we as his image bearers who are being recreated into the image of Christ are speaking a message, what is that message?

And the word here “instruct” is an interesting word. Another word we might use would be “counsel.” We realize that counsel includes things like correcting and rebuking, or applying the scriptures to a specific situation, and also giving knowledge and also encouraging others through the grace of Christ. In a world that is in love with counsel, we realize God has given his sufficient world that is able to build us up in Christ. But there is something else that God has given in the church of Jesus Christ and that is those who are able to instruct us. Not just teach us but instruct us in the knowledge of God and how those truths impact and apply to our lives. This is the value of a biblical church is this ongoing instruction. We learn not only what forgiveness is or biblical love is but how that functions in our lives in some of the most difficult and pressing relationships that we have.

And God has gifted the church uniquely to instruct you. Paul talks about the gifts given to the church of Christ in Ephesians 4:11, “**And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.**” And when you look at all those gifts the sameness about them is that they are all verbal gifts. They are all speaking and communicative gifts. Now why would God give these gifts? Listen how the passage continues in Ephesians 4:12-13, “**to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.**” The saints are equipped through this teaching for a particular purpose, and that is to do the work of the ministry. What is the work of the ministry in the body of Christ? It is unity of the faith or the fullness of Christ or building up - constructing the lives of one another. It is maturity.

And there are so many things that can be said, but let me say this: this is why the church has been given. There is a sense that we all need to be teaching one another and as the passage says, it is not just the pastor or pastors that are involved in ministry but we are to be one anothering one another. You are to be active with believers in your local church. It is not something you just go to on a Sunday morning but you are to be active. But you are also to remember that God has given pastors or shepherds or teachers or instructors in the church for your spiritual welfare and maturity. If you could grow without the community of Christ or your local church he would not have established it. But he did. Are you placing yourself in a place where you can learn, and are you placing yourself where you can be active in that development in other members lives? That is the challenge.

And as we close this morning: as you look at these three attributes or characteristics of the community at Rome, a good question to ask is: is that what we want in a church? Do we look not for a perfect church but a church that is joyful and seeking to do the good of the Lord? Is it a church that prizes biblical knowledge? Does the membership hunger for that knowledge of God and is there a maturity in the truths of the gospel? And thirdly: what is being taught in the pulpit, in Bible studies, in the Sunday school? Is it training and instructing people in the things of God? If this is your church, if this is our church then we are truly blessed.

But another series of questions should be asked also: does this describe me? Does my life speak of a changed life? Do I seek to learn the word? Do I live such a God-centred life and do I know the membership well enough that if he or she had a struggle and needed counsel or instruction they could come to me? This should be the growing outcome of our lives. We should be able to see Jesus Christ in the church and Jesus Christ in one another.