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Enjoying God Ministries
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Rome and Bridgeway: Diverse Spiritual Families

Romans 16:1-16

Whenever I come across a passage in the Bible like Romans 16, I can't help but think about what Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. I'm sure you know that text quite well, but let me shine a light on it again today:

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Sometimes we fail to emphasize the first word in that text, the word *all*. Did Paul really mean that, or did he only have in mind the more important, more theological, more foundational statements in Scripture? I can certainly understand how this text speaks to the importance of Romans 8, for example, or Ephesians 1. But is a passage like Romans 16:1-16 included in the “all” that Paul declares was breathed out by God and serves to build us up in our faith? Yes. It is.

But that raises yet another question. How can a paragraph like Romans 16:1-16 serve to instruct me and reprove or rebuke me? How can it correct me or train me in righteousness? I want to be a person “equipped for every good work,” as I'm sure you do as well. But how can a text like this that simply contains a list of names of people who long ago died, people who, as far as we can tell, never accomplished anything great in the kingdom of God, people whose names we even struggle to pronounce, how can their presence in the book of Romans help us in our Christian experience? That is the question I hope to answer today.

Our Common Yearning for Recognition

Before we look at these people cited by Paul, consider the universal human longing to see our names publicly displayed and preserved. Some people give immense amounts of money to universities so that their names will be inscribed on a plaque on the wall leading into some building. Others long to see their names in the newspaper. Ray Stedman, now with the Lord, was for many years a pastor in California. He tells the story of his visit to the Natural Bridge of Virginia. Hundreds of names and initials were scratched on the rocks. But high above all of them was the name of “George Washington.” Even the father of our country and our first President felt the urge to gain a sense of immortality by carving his name on the rock.

There is a nursing home just outside of Comanche, OK, on Highway 81. I know this because in 1969, the summer after I graduated from high school in Duncan, I worked for a construction company that was remodeling the facility. And to this day you can go outside to the parking lot and find the initials, CSS (which stand for Charles Samuel Storms), scrawled in the cement! I left my mark for all subsequent generations to see, as if any of them would ever care.

So, what made these people in Romans 16 so special that Paul would enshrine their names in the inspired Word of God? Were they the rich and powerful in the city of Rome? No. They were neither politicians nor military leaders. There's no indication that education had anything to do with Paul's including their names here. They weren't trend-setters or people with influence and clout. They are included for only two reasons. One, they were friends of the apostle Paul, people whom he had met at some time earlier and before they settled in Rome. Two, more importantly still, they were friends and followers of Jesus.

Many have asked how Paul knew these people given the fact that he had never traveled to Rome. But we must remember that the Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome in 49 a.d. They would have landed in cities that Paul visited in his missionary journeys. When Claudius rescinded his decree in 54 a.d., many would have returned to Rome. It is likely, then, that most of the people in this list were those he had previously met while on his many evangelistic journeys.

It will also become quite clear from the start that the church in Rome was extremely diverse: men and women, young and old, slave and free, wealthy and poor, Jew and Gentile. The church at Rome was truly a diverse spiritual family, and such is what we aspire to be at Bridgeway.

People Matter

The first thing that stands out to me in this passage is the simple truth that people matter. Even if they are unknown to us personally, the fact that Paul took the time to send his greetings to them tells me that everything he wrote in Romans up to this point was designed to be a blessing to *people*. Paul wasn't interested in abstract theological ideas. He was passionately interested in how biblical truth could bless and benefit the people who have come to know Christ as Lord and Savior.

"But Sam," you say. "These people Paul lists are just a bunch of ordinary Joes. What's so special about them that you should take an entire sermon to mention them?" I'll let C. S. Lewis answer your question:

"It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken.

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.

Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. . .

Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses”

The Weight of Glory (HarperOne, 2001), pp. 45-46.

Paul would agree with Lewis. Or perhaps it is Lewis who agreed with Paul: ***“There are no ordinary people.”*** If our time in this text does no more than awaken you to the fact that everyone in this room matters, I will consider it a successful Sunday morning. People mattered to Paul. That is why he speaks to them and about them in the way he does.

The Names of People Matter

27 people are mentioned by name. Paul also refers to numerous others without including their names. There were undoubtedly many in “the church” that met in the “house” of Prisca and Aquila (v. 5a). The families of Aristobulus (v. 10b) and Narcissus (v. 11b) are mentioned as a group. Then there is the “mother” of Rufus (v. 13a), the unnamed “brothers” in v. 14b, the “sister” of Nereus (v. 15a), and “all the saints” who are with several who are named (v. 15).

One of the greatest regrets I have about my own mind and memory is the inability to remember everyone’s name. I’ve had to ask many of you multiple times to remind me of your name, and I can honestly say it breaks my heart when I do. I wish I could remember every name and greet you accordingly.

All of us know the joy that comes when someone remembers our name. It’s so much more meaningful than being greeted with, “Hey, it’s good to see *you* today,” or “Hello, *brother/sister*. I hope you’re doing well.” When you hear your name spoken, it reinforces the first point I’ve made today: people matter; you matter. When the letter to the Romans was read aloud in their church gathering, can you envision the thrill of these whose names Paul specifically mentions?

Here’s the good news. Even if I can’t remember all your names, Jesus can. We read in John 10:3, “The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” May I encourage you to work hard at remembering the names of the people you meet at Bridgeway. To speak their name the next time you see them will bless them far more than you can possibly imagine.

The Ministry Roles and Relational Connections among those whom Paul Names

Did you pay attention when we read the text to the various designations by which they are identified? There are so many different roles that Christians play, so many different tasks that they undertake, so many different ways in which we relate one to another and to Jesus. For example, Paul refers to them as,

Sister (v. 1), servant/deacon (v. 1), saints (v. 2), patron (v. 2), fellow workers (vv. 3, 9), beloved (vv. 5, 9, 12), convert (v. 5), kinsmen (vv. 7, 11), fellow prisoners (v. 7), beloved in the Lord (v. 8), approved in Christ (v. 10), workers in the Lord (v. 12), chosen in the Lord (v. 13), mother (v. 13), and brothers (v. 14).

Do you see from this how important it is that you connect with others here at Bridgeway? Think of all the various dynamics and characteristics and blessings of these many people that you miss out on if all you do is show up on a Sunday.

The Centrality of Jesus Christ

Yet another recurring characteristic that Paul highlights, in fact, the most important one of all, is the relationship that these people have with Jesus. What unites them all isn't their ethnicity or their country of origin or their gender or their occupations in life or the size of their families or their personal wealth or physical characteristics. What unites them, and what Paul highlights is their relationship to Jesus.

Welcome Phoebe "*in the Lord*" (v. 2). Many are described as "fellow workers *in Christ Jesus*" (vv. 3, 9). Epaenetus was the first convert "to *Christ* in Asia" (v. 4). Andronicus and Junia were "*in Christ*" before Paul was (v. 7). Ampliatus is described not simply as "beloved" but "beloved *in the Lord*" (v. 8). Apelles is approved "*in Christ*" (v. 10). It is those of the family of Narcissus who are "*in the Lord*" that Paul greets (v. 11). Greet those who are "workers *in the Lord*" (v. 12). Persis has worked hard "*in the Lord*" (v. 12). Rufus is "chosen *in the Lord*" (v. 13).

The preeminent truth about each of these individuals is their relationship to Jesus. Paul understood their fundamental identity, and they no doubt understood it as well. Is this the way that we view others here at Bridgeway? Is their being "in" Christ Jesus the most important thing we see about them? It should be.

Remember that this list of Christian men and women extends to the lowest ranks of society as well as the highest. Although Paul doesn't explicitly identify any of these individuals as slaves, the names Ampliatus, Urbanus, and Stachys (vv. 8-9) were common slave names at that time. But that didn't prevent Paul from honoring them, as they were truly beloved by Paul and faithful followers of Jesus. Paul also mentions a man named Aristobulus (v. 10) who many think was the grandson of Herod the Great. If so, the gospel had clearly penetrated into the imperial, royal household.

I mention this so that you will see how crucial and central it is to our relationships with one another that we are together in Christ Jesus, regardless of social status or political influence. The foundation for our mutual affection is that we are each one delivered from wrath because Jesus died for us and rose again. There are a lot of things that divide us and differentiate us one from another: color of skin, college loyalty,

wealth, educational achievement, etc. But the only thing that ultimately ought to matter is the one thing that transcends all such differences: we are each one “in the Lord” by faith alone.

The one thing that unites us is that we are all hell-deserving sinners who stood under divine wrath until such time as Jesus died and satisfied the justice of God and the Spirit drew us in faith to trust him for forgiveness. That is the fundamental thing you should see when you look at one another.

Sisters in Christ

Back in v. 1, Paul referred to Phoebe as our “sister”. He obviously means this in a spiritual sense. Phoebe was most likely a Gentile convert to Christ, as a Jewish female would never have been given this name. Phoebe was a name derived from pagan mythology, related to Artemis, the moon goddess. But there were also physical sisters in the church at Rome. Tryphaena and Tryphosa (v. 12), were likely twins. Their names mean something like “Dainty” and “Delicate.” But they were anything but dainty and delicate, as Paul describes them as “workers in the Lord.” They expended themselves for the glory of Christ!

The Many Churches in Rome

What I find especially noteworthy is the fact that these people all knew of each other and would evidently regularly communicate with each other in spite of the fact that they were part of different local churches. My point is that there was not one large local church in Rome, that met in one large venue, but multiple smaller local churches that at this time in history met in private homes. Look at these statements.

There was a church that met in the house of Prisca and Aquila (v. 5a). The fact that he mentions “brothers” who were “with” five individuals noted in v. 14 suggests that these comprised yet another house church. Again, in v. 15 there are “saints” who “are with” the people mentioned in v. 15. In spite of the separate places where the Christians in Rome were meeting, they were all known to each other and together constituted the “church” in that city.

The Power of Greeting

I doubt if you counted the number of times Paul issues the simple command, “greet.” But I did. Thirteen times in the span of sixteen verses he tells them to greet this person or that person. We know from Romans 1:7 that Paul addressed this letter to all the Christians in Rome. But I assume he intended for the leaders of the many churches to extend his greetings to those he mentions by name.

But what is meant by the word “greet”? Surely Paul meant more than that they should say, “Paul says Hi.” Or, “Greetings from the apostle.” I can imagine the leaders in Rome would seek out the people listed here and say something along the lines of: “You’ll never believe this, but the apostle Paul himself has been thinking about you and praying for you and specifically told us to let you know that he loves you and hopes to see you soon. You mean a lot to him and the distance by which you are separated does not in the least diminish his heartfelt affection for you.”

Now, I can't prove that is what Paul had in mind, but I honestly believe it was. He was never flippant with his words. He would never have flattered people or pretended he cared about them when he didn't.

May I take this opportunity to say something about our "greeters" here at Bridgeway? Those people who stand at the door every Sunday morning and "greet" you in the name of Jesus do so because they genuinely care about you and are delighted that you showed up. And I join them in that sentiment. So, if you want to take seriously Paul's repeated exhortation to "greet" the saints, sign up to serve in this way at Bridgeway.

The Preeminence of Love One for Another

There is yet another feature that stands out in Paul's greetings. Did you notice how many times he mentions the love he has for these people in Rome. Although Paul surely loved them all, he went out of his way to refer to several of them as "**beloved.**" You know the Greek word for love. It is *agapē*. Well, the word translated "beloved" is *agapētos*. Paul uses this word four times. He refers to Epaenetus in v. 5 as "my beloved." In v. 8 Ampliatus is described as "my beloved" in the Lord. Stachys is also described by Paul in v. 9 as "my beloved," as is Persis in v. 12.

I realize that this language might not come across today as well as it did in Paul's day. For me to say to all of you, "I love you," will be warmly received. But if I were to point at Michael or Susan or anyone else and refer to them as "my beloved," it might raise a few eyebrows. And that is sad. It's unfortunate that we have reached a point in our world where biblical language like this is misconstrued as sexual.

There is one more expression that underlies the reality of the love Paul had for them and that they all have for one another. In v. 16, Paul exhorts them, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." What are we to make of this? It grieves me so very deeply that because of the prevalence of infidelity and sexual seduction and abuse in our world that we as Christians can't kiss one another (on the cheek, of course) without being suspected of having ulterior motives.

In any case, what did this gesture mean, and why was it important to Paul? I think that whatever else may have been included by Paul in the greetings he extends, this one is explicit. Greet one another with more than words, says the apostle. Do it with a "holy kiss." This isn't the only place we find this in the NT.

"All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Cor. 16:20).

"Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you" (2 Cor. 13:12-13).

"Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss" (1 Thess. 5:26).

"Greet one another with the kiss of love" (1 Peter 5:14).

Clearly this was a popular and well-known custom in the first century. You may remember that when Jesus attended a dinner party in the home of Simon the Pharisee, Simon didn't kiss him, but the repentant prostitute did. She went even further and anointed his feet and dried them with her hair. Jesus spoke to him and said:

“Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet’” (Luke 7:44-45).

Of course, there are all sorts of kisses. There is the kiss of romantic love. There is the kiss of sexual seduction. There is the kiss of adultery or fornication. There is the kiss of betrayal, as when Judas identified Jesus for his enemies by walking up to him and kissing him (Luke 22:48). But Paul clearly has in mind what Peter referred to as the kiss of love. It was an expression of the fellowship and unity and warmth of affection that exists among members of the body of Christ. Men would greet men with this kiss, and women would greet women with this kiss, and men and women would greet each other with this kiss, and no one would ever have interpreted this as sexual in nature.

That is why Paul refers to it as a “holy” kiss. It is “holy” because it is an expression of the family affection that Christians have for one another. It is “holy” because we are members of the same spiritual family because of what Jesus has done for us by dying in our place and rising from the dead. It is “holy” because it was altogether spiritual and in no way sexual. If you cannot kiss with this in mind, don’t do it.

Are we supposed to do this today? There wouldn’t be anything unbiblical if we did, but I suspect that given the circumstances in our culture, it would likely be misinterpreted and regarded as intrusive and offensive. But we still need physically demonstrative ways of showing our Christian love one for another. We typically do it with a handshake or a hug. Sadly, there are some men in the church who would use this as an excuse to touch a woman. Some want to be a member of the prayer team so they can have an excuse or reason to lay hands on a woman. May it never be at Bridgeway!

Terms that Apply to All

Another thing I would point out is that the specific terms used of certain individuals would most likely be used by Paul of all of them. All were fellow workers. All are beloved. All, not just Mary, have worked hard. All are “approved in Christ,” not just Apelles (v. 10). It isn’t only Rufus who is “chosen in the Lord.” All of them are!

Having said that, I wonder if perhaps Paul or someone had engaged with Rufus in a lively dialogue, maybe even a debate, over the doctrine of divine election. Maybe Rufus struggled with what Paul wrote in Romans 8-9 and Paul lovingly reminds him that even if he disagrees with the apostle, he is still “chosen in the Lord.”

One more thing about Rufus. Do you remember Simon of Cyrene, the man who was compelled to carry the cross of Jesus when our Lord buckled under the weight of that instrument of crucifixion (Mark 15:21)? He is said to have been the father of Alexander and Rufus. Since Mark’s gospel was primarily written for the church at Rome, this may be the same Rufus. Thus, from one momentous encounter with Jesus, Simon, his wife, and their children all became Christians! Paul refers to the mother of Rufus as one

“who has been a mother to me as well” (v. 13). Evidently, she had befriended Paul in a special way and filled a place in his life that Paul’s mother either couldn’t or wouldn’t have been able.

A Female Apostle?

The one controversial element in this paragraph is the reference to Andronicus and Junia. Some translations declare that the two are “well known *among* the apostles,” thus implying that both Andronicus and Junia were themselves apostles. There are several questions that must be addressed.

First, is Junia masculine or feminine? If feminine, then they are most likely husband and wife. Recent examination of extensive Greek literature outside the Bible gives little help. The word Junia turned up only twice as a woman's name and only once as a man's name. If Junia is a woman, do we have reference here to a female apostle? If so, it would be difficult to restrict women from holding senior governmental authority in the local church insofar as the office of apostle in the New Testament was the pinnacle of spiritual authority.

Second, how should we translate the passage: “well known *to* the apostles” or “well known *among* the apostles”? The latter would suggest that Andronicus and Junia were themselves apostles, well known in that unique circle of believers. The former would suggest that the apostles, such as Paul, knew these two people quite well. Recent analysis of the grammar of this text has suggested that this particular construction should be rendered “well known *to* the apostles.” There is, therefore, questionable support for the idea that Junia was herself an apostle. Those who are inclined to identify Junia as an apostle also suggest that she would have been so designated much in the way the ambassadors or representatives in 2 Corinthians 8:23 and Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25 were “apostles”.

Longtime Followers of Jesus

Three individuals are singled out for having been among the first to come to saving faith in Jesus. Epaphroditus “was the first convert to Christ in Asia” (v. 5), and the married couple, Andronicus and Junia, came to saving faith before Paul himself. There can only be one reason why Paul mentions this about these three individuals. He wants to draw attention to their long-standing love for Jesus and loyalty to him. When Christians together labor for the Lord over a long period, their hearts are uniquely knit together in love and commitment.

Fellow Prisoners for Christ

There is one final designation that should be noted. Andronicus and Junia had not only been followers of Jesus before Paul was saved, they also served time in prison with him. Their dedication to Jesus and to Paul was so genuine and unyielding that they were willing to forfeit their freedom and suffer the hardship of imprisonment.

Conclusion

People often ask: Why is it so important that Christians be embedded in the community of a local church? I think Paul has answered that question for us. Can you not feel the fellowship and communion and mutual affection that these people had for Paul and Paul for them and they for one another? People, we are a diverse spiritual family, just as were those in Rome in the first century. And I can assure you of this, that as the moral stature of our society continues to disintegrate and opposition to the church increases, we will need each other more than ever. And the one thing, above all else, that will unite us and provide the support and encouragement we all need is that we, like these many Romans, are “in the Lord.”