

## Lesson 38: Paul's Personal Greetings to the Believers in Rome

### Romans 16:1-24

- <sup>1</sup> I commend to you our sister Phoebe,  
    who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea;  
    <sup>2</sup> that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints,  
    and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you;  
    for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.
- <sup>3</sup> Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,  
    <sup>4</sup> who for my life risked their own necks,  
    to whom not only do I give thanks,  
    but also all the churches of the Gentiles;
- <sup>5</sup> also *greet* the church that is in their house.  
    Greet Epaphroditus,                      my beloved,  
    who is the first convert to Christ from Asia.
- <sup>6</sup> Greet Mary,                                      who has worked hard for you.
- <sup>7</sup> Greet Andronicus and Junia,              my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners,  
    who are outstanding among the apostles,  
    who also were in Christ before me.
- <sup>8</sup> Greet Ampliatus,                              my beloved in the Lord.
- <sup>9</sup> Greet Urbanus,                                  our fellow worker in Christ,  
    and Stachys                                  my beloved.
- <sup>10</sup> Greet Apelles,                                  the approved in Christ.  
    Greet those who are of the *household* of Aristobulus.
- <sup>11</sup> Greet Herodion,                                  my kinsman.  
    Greet those of the *household* of Narcissus, who are in the Lord.
- <sup>12</sup> Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa,          workers in the Lord.  
    Greet Persis                                      the beloved,  
    who has worked hard in the Lord.
- <sup>13</sup> Greet Rufus,                                      a choice man in the Lord,  
    also his mother                                  and mine.
- <sup>14</sup> Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them.
- <sup>15</sup> Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.
- <sup>16</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss.  
    All the churches of Christ greet you.
- <sup>17</sup> Now I urge you, brethren,  
    keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned,  
    and turn away from them.  
    <sup>18</sup> For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites;  
    and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.
- <sup>19</sup> For the report of your obedience has reached to all;  
    therefore I am rejoicing over you,  
    but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.
- <sup>20</sup> The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.  
    The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.
- <sup>21</sup> Timothy my fellow worker greets you, and *so do* Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen.
- <sup>22</sup> I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord.
- <sup>23</sup> Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you.  
    Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother.
- <sup>24</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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## Introduction

Paul's concluding greetings in Romans 16 give us an interesting glimpse into the life of the early church. There are four parts to the section. We start with words of commendation for Phoebe, then Paul greets everybody he knows in Rome, then we get a final short exhortation, and we end up with greetings from Paul's associates. We will move through each part one by one, starting with the commendation of Phoebe in the first two verses of chapter 16. Let's read that.

### [Romans 16:1-2]

#### 1. Letter of Commendation for Phoebe

Phoebe is our most likely candidate as the person who delivered the letter from Paul to the Romans. And even though that is not stated specifically here, it would explain why she had travelled to Rome and why Paul mentions her in the letter. Also, she is coming from Cenchrea which was a port town 8 miles from Corinth where Paul likely wrote the letter to the Romans.

We do not have information in the Bible about the planting of the church in Cenchrea which reminds us that Paul's goal in establishing churches in major cities like Corinth was for the church there to serve as a base for the surrounding countryside. For example, when he wrote 2 Corinthians, Paul addressed it to, "the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia (1:1)." In Paul's day, Achaia was the Roman province that included the whole Peloponnesian peninsula with the central cities of Corinth and Athens. Paul's letter to Corinth was meant for the whole region. Corinth was a base for gospel ministry and apparently saw success in planting a church in the nearby town of Cenchrea.

Acts 18:18 records Paul leaving Corinth at the end of his second missionary journey. The text says he put out to sea for Syria. And since Corinth did not have a port, we would assume that he set out from Cenchrea, which the next sentence affirms. Luke writes, "In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow." Luke also tells us that Priscilla and Aquila were with Paul on this journey. These are those tantalizing details in the narrative that make you want for more. What was the church like in Cenchrea? How well did Paul know the believers there? Did Phoebe host him and Priscilla and Aquila before they left? Where did Paul go for a haircut? We do not have much, but we can imagine when Paul commends Phoebe to the Romans, she may already had at least two friends there in Priscilla and Aquila.

Paul calls Phoebe a diakonos. Some Bibles translate this as servant and some Bibles as deacon. In the normal use of the Greek, the word means servant and should apply to all members of a church. We are all servants of Christ. The trouble with a word like diakonos is that even though it had a typical use, it began at some point to carry the more technical meaning of deacon. Paul started to use the word technically in his later letters to the Philippians (1:1) and to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:8) to refer to a certain ministry role in the church. He uses it in the same context with elder, showing us that it was not the same as elder or overseer. It's a different role. In his words here in Romans, Paul connects the word to the church. Phoebe was not just a diakonos in general. She was a diakonos "of the church which is at Cenchrea." That suggests to me that she served a recognized ministry role in that church. So, the word deacon as a title could apply.

Paul says that she has been "a helper of many and of myself as well." That is another interesting word to use. The Greek noun *prostatis*, translated here as helper, is only used this once in the Bible. Paul does use the verb, which can mean to give aid to someone or can mean to preside over someone. Some scholars think this means that Phoebe performed a leadership role of presiding over the church in Cenchrea. That seems unlikely, since Paul says that Phoebe performed this function for him as well. And we do not see anyone in the churches Paul planted as presiding over Paul. Douglas Moo recommends understanding the word according to its Greek use as a benefactor or patron. He writes, "A patron was one who came to the aid of others, especially foreigners, by providing housing and financial aid and by representing their interests...Phoebe, then, was probably a woman of high

social standing and some wealth, who put her status, resources, and time at the services of traveling Christians, like Paul, who needed help and support.”

So, Paul seems to be asking the Roman Christians to provide for Phoebe in the same way that she has provided for others. She has partnered with Paul in the ministry of the gospel, and Paul wants to make sure she is taken care of.

## **2. Greetings to the Romans**

After commending Phoebe, Paul moves on to greet about 26 individuals and 5 groups. Some interpreters have pointed out the oddity of Paul knowing so many people in a church he has never visited before. Some then question whether this greeting is original to Paul or added by someone else later. It is so different from his other letters. Why does he not likewise greet a long list of people in the churches he established, for example, when he writes the Thessalonians or the Galatians?

That seems to me to be asking the question without thinking it through. We all know the trouble of communicating to groups of people, whether your inviting people to your birthday party or your wedding or you're thanking them in an acceptance speech. As soon as you include Bob and Mary, then you better not leave out Janice, Tom or Harry. But if you include them what about Roy or Harriet? It is tough to find a clear boundary. The more people you mention by name, the more likely you are to leave someone out and hurt or offend them. The safest approach in writing to a church he had planted is to mention only those absolutely necessary and just greet everyone as a group. That's what Paul does.

Here, I believe Paul is mentioning every single Christian he knows in Rome. It is a significant number, but manageable. It also serves a triple purpose. A lot of the people Paul mentions are active in ministry. So, this probably serves to build Paul's ethos, or credibility. He is not just dropping names. These are people that he has real relationship with. And if others in Rome respect these brothers and sisters as Paul does, then it will help them see Paul positively and strengthen the bridge between them and his gospel message. Because Paul feels such personal love and warmth for his partners in the gospel, his communication here also builds pathos. If I were there and heard Paul speaking this kindly about people I love and respect that would continue to strengthen the bridge between me and his message. Paul is aware how important the relational context can be for the positive communication of the gospel.

I said Paul accomplishes three purposes. Not only does he employ ethos and pathos to enable the reception of his message, but at the same time, he builds up his fellow workers. He gives them honor. He acknowledges his own indebtedness to them. He points out their hard work and commitment to the gospel. Imagine Paul writing to your church and including your name here in the list of greetings. I imagine that he does not want you to boast in anything except what Christ has accomplished through you. But this does not prevent him from recognizing your faith and love in action. Imagine how these brothers and sisters in Christ might have felt as we read through the greeting. This is Romans 16:3-16.

### **[Read Romans 16:3-16.]**

*A Glimpse of Social Diversity in the Early Church*

I love the encouragement Paul gives here. Can you imagine these words to you? You're my beloved in the Lord. You are my fellow prisoner. You are a choice man in the Lord. I see what you have been doing. I see your hard work. It just makes you want to keep it up. It makes you want to keep going for Jesus.

Another exciting thing about this passage is the glimpse we get into the makeup of the early church. Paul mentions two house churches. If Priscilla and Aquila are doing the same tent making work they were doing with Paul, then their house church was not meeting in a wealthy home. They likely had an apartment above their shop, a common practice in Rome. Jews were not allowed to assemble in large numbers and at this time Christians were generally considered a sect of Judaism. A wealthy

home may have allowed a large assembly of around 60, but I assume a gathering in an apartment above a shop would have been considerably smaller.

Paul's reference in verse 14, "and the brethren with them," and in verse 15, "and all the saints who are with them," are also probably references to house churches. Those of Aristobulus in verse 10 and of Narcisus in verse 11, refer to members of the households of these men. A household could include family and slaves. It is not clear whether there were house churches in these two households.

A study of names is not exact. A name normal for Roman citizens might also be given to a slave. Or what appears to be a Roman name might be the Latin version of a Hebrew name. Still, the variety in this list of names suggest such a mixture of male and female; Roman, Greek and Jew; slave, free and citizen. The church was not only for the low in society and not only for the educated. The early church broke through gender, economic and social barriers. You can imagine hurrying along narrow streets among white stone buildings four or five stories high with red clay tile roofs. The stone streets are worn smooth from centuries of wear. And you come to Aquila's shop and turn in at the narrow door, heading up a flight of stone steps to be welcomed in by Priscila. There are people there who you could never imagine interacting with socially, not before you came to Christ, but now you grasp hands warmly and greet each other with a kiss.

#### *A Glimpse into the Role of Women in the Early Church*

I'd like to speak a little about the prominence of women in this section. I do not want to address right now the theological issue of gender roles in church and in family. My practice through this series is to address the theological issues raised by Paul in Romans, and he does not speak about gender roles here. I still want to make a few comments because there is information here that informs the gender roles discussion.

To simplify the discussion, I will refer to three different positions regarding gender roles: complementarian, egalitarian and authoritarian. These words have different meanings for different people. Some people who call themselves complementarian really act like authoritarians. I say that because I think my position is complementarian, but on the one hand, I do not always agree with others who call themselves complementarian, and on the other hand, I do not always like the way egalitarians describe complementarians. That is okay. I am sure some egalitarians do not like the way they are pictured by complementarians. That is the nature of disagreement. Now, I know I am on dangerous ground even bringing up this subject because there is a lot of pain and frustration and injustice wrapped around gender issues. There is a lot of valid emotion and a lot of confusion. I am going to try anyway, just to say a bit.

I define a complementarian as one who recognizes equality and partnership among men and women in the family and church, while also recognizing that God has reserved certain leadership roles for men, not based on skill, or competence or value, but based on gender. An egalitarian recognizes the first, that there is an equality and partnership among men and women in the family and church but does not recognize a limitation of roles based on gender. An authoritarian does not recognize equality and partnership, but sees the man set above the woman. The woman is not beside the man, but below the man. That is the one I would outright reject.

To study this issue biblically, we would need to start by setting aside for a moment all the failure of the church. At some point we would have to address prejudice against women in the church. At some point, we would also need to address the positive and negative movements in society. But to develop a biblical worldview, we would start by trying to put those issues aside and make an attempt to renew our minds according to the teaching of Scripture.

We start from Scripture. To do that, we would need to look at places where the Bible gives us specific teaching about gender roles in the New Covenant. That means we would need to study closely 1 Corinthians 11-14, Ephesians 5, and 1 Timothy 2. And since all three of these passages refer to the creation, we would also need to go back and study Genesis 1-3. This would be a significant study because we would want to look not only at the individual passages but also at the books as a whole

in order to understand the context of the specific passages. We would also want to look at the role of women through Scripture. And I think we would especially want to look at how Jesus interacts with women and how Paul interacts with women.

Romans 16 just gives us a bit of this last task, showing us something about how Paul interacts with women. It is not going to help us develop a biblical theology of gender roles. It doesn't help us decide between complementarian and egalitarian, but it does give us some interesting information that would need to be included in a thorough study. Here are four things, as a complementarian, that I find very interesting in Romans 16.

First, I find it interesting that Paul refers to Phoebe as a deaconess of the church of Cenchrea. And I have already said that I think deacon is the right translation here, not servant. I think Paul is most likely referring to a ministry role that Phoebe holds in that church which fits with the word deacon.

Second, I find it interesting that Priscilla's name is mentioned before Aquila's name. Whatever the reason, we come up with for that, in Paul's day writing the wife's name first would have been very unusual and would have given some kind of preference to Priscilla. Paul did not feel the need to defend Aquila's honor or position by mentioning him first. Paul does mention Aquila first on some other occasions in Scripture, but it is interesting to consider why. And here he did not feel the need to do so here. Here we have Priscilla, or Prisca as he is using her short name, mentioned first.

Third, I find it interesting that the name sometimes translated in 16:7 as the feminine Junia and sometimes as the masculine Junias has much more support as a woman's name than as a man's name. While there is a possibility that it is a form of a masculine name, commentators before the 13<sup>th</sup> century all assume that it is a feminine name (Moo, 922). And while we have no evidence of its use as a Latin male name, it was used commonly as a female name. The pair of Andronicus and Junia seem most likely to be husband and wife. And the most likely translation for the rest of the verse is that this married pair were counted among the apostles. That's why this is interesting. Junia is counted with Andronicus among the apostles. The text is not suggesting that Andronicus and Junia were apostles in the most technical sense. That applied specifically to twelve men, with Paul as the lone exception in his special role as apostle to the Gentiles. In Acts 2, when the apostles replaced Judas, we see that the intention was to maintain the symbolic number 12 and that there were really strict limitations on who could even fulfill that role. But the word apostle was not a special Greek word. It had a common meaning. It just meant messenger. It is kind of like we have already talked about the word for servant which generally meant servant, or it could mean deacon. So the word for apostle, *apostolos*, is just the word for messenger. The word takes on special meaning in the New Testament in two contexts. The apostles of Jesus are the most limiting context. There are just 12 of them. The word also began to be used in the sense of missionary, those who went out as messengers of the gospel. This would be a natural way to take the word in the case of Andronicus and Junia. They were among those sent out as messengers of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, mentioning even one woman by name as a valued partner would have been a radical exception among first-century writers. You don't acknowledge women. Of the 26 valued co-workers mentioned here by Paul somewhere between 9 and 11 of them are women.

Taking these four observations into consideration, we can then ask, "What do these facts suggest about Paul's relationship to women in the work of the gospel?" The facts do not really help us with the egalitarian versus complementarian question of whether or not the role of elder or pastor is one assigned only to men or whether it can be assigned to men and women. That does not come up clearly here. What does seem clear to me is that Paul trusted women. Paul valued women. Paul respected the contribution of women. Paul envisioned a movement where women took up important roles in the building of the church and the furtherance of the gospel.

Paul concludes this section with a call to greet one another with a holy kiss. I thought that was odd until I moved to Croatia. We do not normally greet each other that way in our church, but we do on special occasions of congratulation or if you visit somebody's home on a holiday. I remember the first

time a big, partially shaven guy kissed me on each cheek at Christmas. It made me feel like I finally belonged in Croatia. You just have to be sure to lean to the right to make sure the kiss lands on the cheek. That's the only important thing to know.

Paul concludes this section with a general greeting from all the churches. All the churches greet you guys. And then he moves on to his exhortation.

### **3. A Final Exhortation**

This final warning is in 17-20. Let's read that.

#### **[Read Romans 16:17-20]**

It was typical for Paul to include a final exhortation in his letters. And this one is a warning. The warning continues to paint for us the picture of the early church. Though the church in Rome seemed healthy and well-led, Paul recognized the need for alertness against those who would introduce teaching contrary to the gospel message. Though this young movement has managed to grow despite the earlier crisis of Jewish leaders being expelled from Rome and though this young movement has experienced leadership trusted by Paul, they are still vulnerable to false teaching from men or women who rise up among them.

By reminding the Romans that he is aware of their obedience, Paul communicates that his warning is not based on any report of misbehavior. He is communicating based on his experience as a church planter and leader. In this time of new growth, he wants them on guard to the reality that some men or women will put themselves forward with a false view of the gospel. This is one more reason for Paul to write it down, so that they would have a written message to come back to. And so, it serves a clear warning to us. There will always be men and women assuming the name of Christ and calling others away from the teaching we have received. We stand firm on the authoritative word of Scripture, that teaching we have received.

To be wise in what is good speaks to our practice. That we would wisely present ourselves as instruments of righteousness. To be innocent in what is evil does not mean to be naïve in our knowledge, but innocent in our practice. It was not wrong for Adam and Eve to learn about evil, and so judge Satan. That was their job. They are supposed to rule as king and queen over the creation. It was wrong for them to seek to learn about evil through disobedience. We do not learn about evil by trying it out. We seek to remain innocent in the practice of evil. And we learn from the word of God.

So, though Jesus has conquered the powers of sin and death, we are still engaged in a struggle with evil. God has not yet crushed Satan's head under his foot. We are still in the already/not yet transition of our salvation. Jesus has already won. But we wait for the final act when he will crush the head of Satan. This is a reference back to Genesis 3:15. The snake continues to strike out at the seed of Eve, the believing remnant, trying to destroy the gospel community. We need to be wise about the real danger that exists. Still, we know who wins. The God of peace will win. And that is a strange combination of words, "peace" and "crushing the head." Being the God of peace does not mean being a pacifist. For peace to reign, Satan must be engaged, defeated, and crushed. The God of peace will bring about this final victory when the time is right, when he has completed his rescue mission of calling men and women into his kingdom.

Paul's final blessing builds on all that he has been teaching us, "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you." These are not just nice spiritual words. By God's grace we have been saved from the evil one. By God's grace our gospel community can continue to grow and thrive. And by God's grace the evil one will be eternally vanquished. And then peace will reign.

The greetings section concludes with some shout out from Paul's associates. Let's read that in verses 21-24.

#### 4. Greetings from Paul's associates

##### [Read Romans 16:21-24]

Of course, we know Timothy, the most consistent of Paul's younger co-workers. There is a Lucius in Antioch, Acts 13:1, but we have no reason to believe that Lucius is the same as this Lucius. Jason may be the Jason from Thessalonica, Acts 17:5-9. And Sosipater may be the Sopater from Berea in Acts 20:4. Paul is regularly involving others in his mission. Since Thessalonica and Berea are in Macedonia, these men could have joined Paul to take the financial gift from those Gentile churches to Jerusalem. Maybe that is why they are there.

Tertius served as Paul's secretary for writing down Romans. It's interesting to see Paul giving him the opportunity to say, "Hello!" himself. He writes it with his own hand. Gaius may have been the Gaius from 1 Corinthians 1:14, since Paul likely wrote Romans from Corinth. It sounds like he hosted Paul at his home and hosted a house church there as well. Paul describes Erastus as a financial officer. Archaeology uncovered an inscription of an official named Erastus in Corinth. Perhaps this is the same man. And Quartus, we don't know anything about Quartus. Though that is true of most Christian history isn't it. The faithful saints have lived and served and loved and struggled without us ever knowing the details. We are just getting this little glimpse here into the life of the church. We will have a lot of questions to ask and a lot of stories to share in heaven.

Verse 24 ends the greeting section with "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." We already had this up in verse 21. It seems probably that verse 24 is not original with Paul. But whether we should take both verses as original or whether we should verse 21 over 24 or 24 over 21, it hardly seems to matter. They say the same thing.

Paul liked to start his introductory greetings with a blessing of grace and peace, like, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." That's Romans 1:7. And he liked to end similarly with a blessing of grace in the Lord Jesus, so from grace to grace.

That's a good way for us to end this glimpse into the life of the early church. We come to faith through the grace of God. We are gathered into community through the grace of God. And we continue on by the grace of God.

#### Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in the greetings in the first part of this passage Romans 16:1-16 and the end 21-24?
2. What are three questions raised for you about the early church that you would like to ask? What sparks your curiosity?
3. What lesson do you draw from the diversity represented here or from the way Paul speaks to the brothers and sisters he knows in Rome?
4. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in the warning section of Romans 16:17-20?
5. What source of false teaching might threaten your community?
6. Paul suggests three or four ideas in this passage to help guard against false teaching? What should you be doing as a community?
7. Do Paul's final words in verse 20 encourage you? If so, how so?