

Persons & Personalities, Part 1

Romans 16:1-16 on April 21, 2024

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Please read Romans 16:1-16 before going further in this transcript. For an extra challenge, try reading it aloud.

Today's Scripture reading is quite a workout! Other than some of the genealogies that we find in Matthew and Luke, Romans 16 is one of the toughest passages in the entire New Testament.^{1 2} So give yourself a hand if you read this Scripture passage aloud today! Even though these names can be tough for us to pronounce, it's important for us to remember that these are names of everyday people, just like you and me. It's fair for us to wonder why Paul included such a long list of names at the end of his letter to the Roman Church. After all, none of his other New Testament letters come anywhere close to this many names. He specifically greets some 26 different people who are part of the church in Rome!³ But why? Why greet SO many people, and why one-by-one, in such a long list? Well, first of all, this is a good reminder to all of us, that each person in the church is important. Each individual part of the church body matters, so it's worth it for us to take the time to greet one another by name. And if we don't know each other's names, then it's worth it to try to learn them. So right out of the gate, let's allow Romans 16 to inspire us to be the kind of church that greets one another in Christian love, each time one of us walks into this building, and when we see each other around town. "Good Morning Brother! How are you doing Sister?" Let's communicate a clear and consistent message that we value one another. In fact, this leads right into our first point.

¹ Andrew Peterson has a GREAT genealogy song called "Matthew's Begats."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06XHn4D9Nzw>

² Those of us who aren't grammar geeks, may wonder how in the world we're ever supposed to know how to pronounce some of these unfamiliar names? Well, let me suggest a few Bible name pronunciation hacks: 1. Keep in mind, most of us have no clue how they're pronounced! (*So, just say them with confidence and keep moving. People will assume you're brilliant!*) 2. Listen to them on your audio Bible. (*Let the paid professionals do the work for you.*) 3. Google them. (*There are tons of pronunciation helps online, and most of them are really quite good.*) And, if all else fails, and you really want to get down to business, then... 4. Buy a book like, "*That's Easy for You to Say.*" (*This is a quick guide to pronouncing Bible names. It even comes with an audio CD, or the electronic version has audio links for each name.*) By the way, one thing you'll come to realize fairly early on, is that even these professional-grade resources, often have multiple pronunciation options for many names. Much like today, different geographical regions and people groups, often pronounce words differently. Or, as I like to say, "they often put the emPHAsis on the wrong SYLLable."

³ By 26, I mean 26 individuals, even counting a particular mom in verse 13 and someone's sister in verse 15. 26 is not counting Phoebe, who wasn't part of the Roman Church but likely delivered the letter to Rome. Nor does the 26 count the names of households like Aristobulus or Narcissus.

The early church was...

1) a loving family who enjoyed warm gospel fellowship. Somehow, even though Paul had never been to the church in Rome before, he still knew a ton of people there. This reveals that over the years, throughout people's travels around the world, many of these fellow believers had bumped into Paul in places like Corinth or Ephesus or Jerusalem. Over all his years of ministry, Paul had not only established warm and loving gospel fellowship with all kinds of different people, but he'd also maintained those relationships over time. To put it another way, he wasn't so full of himself, that he failed to take the time to maintain meaningful gospel relationships with those he'd met along the way. Friends, that's not always easy to do, because life gets so busy, but it's the right way to be.

On a practical level, Paul was also probably trying to establish some common ground with the people in the Roman Church who didn't know him. I appreciate how Bible scholar, Douglas Moo, says it: "Writing to a church that he did not found, and has never visited, he wants to make [it] clear that many of the believers there already know and trust him."⁴ In other words, the believers in Rome who already knew him could vouch for Paul's godly character, and for his ministry gifting and calling. After all, if this guy's not legit, then why should we read his letter or pay any attention to what he's saying?

Beyond these reasons though, for us believers here in Bemidji today, there's even more to be gained from Paul's greetings in Romans 16. For you and me, we get a wonderful little sneak peek into the real-life persons and personalities that made up the Roman Church.

We get to learn a bit more about these everyday people and their faith stories; we get to see how their lives were radically transformed by the gospel good news of Jesus Christ.

Romans 16:1 begins, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae."⁵ Right off the bat, Paul opens his personal greetings with familial language, "our sister." To be clear, this wasn't Paul's biological sister, or his adopted sister, or whatever else. This was his sister in Christ, and even more than that, Phoebe was their sister in Christ. So Paul says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe," meaning that Paul wanted every believer in the Roman Church to recognize that Phoebe was

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 195.

⁵ Cenchreae = "SEN kree uh" (W. Murray Severance and Terry Eddinger, *That's Easy for You to Say: Your Quick Guide to Pronouncing Bible Names* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 50.)

also their sister in Christ.^{6 7} She's not our business associate, she's not a fellow club member, she's not even just our mutual good friend, she's part of our shared family in Christ!⁸ We see this kind of intimate and familial language all throughout these 16 verses.

> In four different verses, Paul refers to his "dear friends" at the Roman Church; some Bibles translate this as "beloved."⁹

> In verse 13 Paul says, "his mother...has been a mother to me, too."

> In verse 14 he refers to "the other brothers and sisters with them."

> Then, at the end of this long list of names, Paul concludes with verse 16, "Greet one another with a holy kiss...."

Now, before anyone gets nervous, let me assure you, I'm not suggesting that we mimic this exact behavior at our church!

The modern-day, western equivalent of a "holy kiss" would be something more along the lines of a hardy handshake, or perhaps an appropriate hug. My *Study Bible* offers a helpful footnote on this: "The kiss of mutual respect and love in the Lord was evidently the public practice of early Christians – from a practice that was customary in the ancient East. Such a practice may have been used in the first-century AD synagogue – men kissing men, and women kissing women – and it would have been natural for the practice to have been continued in the early Jewish-Gentile churches."^{10 11}

¹²

Now there's no mention here of Phoebe's husband, so it's quite possible that she may have been a widow, or perhaps simply unmarried. Either way, this lends itself to the likelihood that she's a single woman in the church, who was serving in a key ministry role.¹³ 1 Corinthians 7:34-35 reminds us, "...An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord." This may very well have been Phoebe's situation, and if it was, then she maximized her singleness, with undivided devotion to the Lord. Being a happily contented single, is truly a gift from God, because it has the potential to

⁶ Phoebe = "FEE bih" (W. Murray Severance and Terry Eddinger, *That's Easy for You to Say: Your Quick Guide to Pronouncing Bible Names* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 131.)

⁷ "The term 'sister' relays the intimacy and warmth characterizing the early church so that the relationship between family members describes most appropriately the affiliation between Christians." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, 2nd ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 759.

⁸ Consider 1 Thessalonians 2:7b-8.

⁹ See Romans 16:5,8,9,12.

¹⁰ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1949 footnote on 1 Corinthians 16:20.

¹¹ "Justin Martyr (AD 150) tells us that the holy kiss was a regular part of the worship service in his day. It is still a practice in some churches." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1917 footnote on Romans 16:16.

¹² Considering the respect and love intended behind this "holy kiss," Judas' kiss of betrayal is all the more painful to consider.

¹³ See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, 2nd ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 759.

open up unbridled opportunities for service to God, for which married people simply don't have the same margin. This picture of devoted Christian service, leads right into our 2nd main point.

The early church was...

2) A hard-working, generous team of Christ-followers. Whether Phoebe was single or not, she was a force to be reckoned with, for at least 3 particular reasons. First of all, verse 1 refers to her as "...a deacon of the church in Cenchreae." Now a good number of our English translations actually translate this word as "servant" rather than "deacon." And that's fine, because the original Greek word has a range of meaning that includes both of these options. That said, the NIV has good reasons for translating it as "deacon." New Testament scholar Douglas Moo explains one of those reasons, "All Christians are servants, and this may be all that Paul means here. But the addition of the phrase 'of the church' makes it more likely that diakonos here is an official title, designating Phoebe as a 'deacon.'"^{14 15} There's a lot more that could be said about this, but for today, let me simply urge us to consider that Phoebe was a hard-working, well-respected, servant of the church. And it's quite likely that she held an official position as a female Deacon, or we could say Deaconess, of the church in Cenchreae.¹⁶

Douglas Moo goes on to describe deacons this way: "The deacon in the New Testament church is a bit of a shadowy figure; we simply don't have much information about what those who held this position did. Probably they were involved especially in the financial affairs of the community and were active in visiting the [sick] and administering the church's works of charity."¹⁷ Currently, we don't have any official deacons here at E-Free Bemidji. BUT we do have several ministries that carry out the duties typically associated with deacons. For example...

We have **Trustees**. These men and women serve the Lord by taking care of our church's finances and facilities. Their names and faces are posted out on our Foyer bulletin board.

We also have **a Servant Team**. This is a group of men and women who serve the Lord by helping with occasional work projects and cleaning,

¹⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 196.

¹⁵ New Testament scholar Thomas Schreier lends his agreement: "It is impossible to be sure, but for several reasons it is likely that she held the office of deacon. First, 1 Timothy 3:11 probably identifies women as deacons. Second, ...the term [diakonos] δῆκονος is linked with a particular local church. Third, the use of the masculine noun [diakonos] δῆκονος also suggests that the office is intended. ...women deacons were probably appointed early, especially because other women needed assistance from those of their own sex in visitation, baptism, and other matters." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, 2nd ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 760.

¹⁶ Note that the *ESV* translates it as "a servant" but then the text note adds "or deaconess."

¹⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 196.

for those who can't easily do those things themselves. If you know of someone who needs their service, please contact the church office and we'll do what we can to help.

We have multiple **Kitchen Teams**. These men and women serve the Lord by helping with meal prep, serving, and clean-up. This is right in line with what Acts 6 refers to as "waiting on tables."¹⁸

We also have our local **Food Shelf and Meals on Wheels**. Ministries like these involve men and women serving the Lord by providing food for those in need, for single folks and families alike.

Frankly, we could probably list another 10-20 more ministries right here in our own church, that would correlate with deacon ministry to some degree.

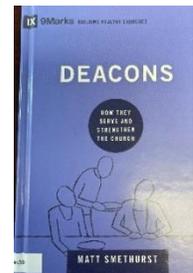
That's because deacons are simply servants: hard-working, wonderfully gracious, lovers of Christ, who serve Him by serving others. These men and women aren't so much teachers or leaders, as they are simply servants, who use their spiritual gifts to meet the material and practical needs of others. If you'd like to learn more, I'd recommend the book titled,

"Deacons," by the 9Marks ministry. You could also read Acts 6:1-7, and 1 Timothy 3:8-13¹⁹, which ends with this encouragement, "Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus."

These words are an apt description of Sister Phoebe's service to the Lord.²⁰ And her hard work is echoed by others as well:

> Verse 6 talks about Mary: "who worked very hard for you."

> Verses 12-13 mention Tryphena/Tryphosa: "women who work hard in the Lord" and Persis: "another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord." Paul specifically honors this hard-working team of Christ-followers. By the way, I'm sure there were also many men in this list who worked hard.



Romans 16:2 goes on, "I ask you to receive her [Phoebe] in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me." So the second thing that we learn about Phoebe, is that she was probably the person who carried Paul's letter to Rome.²¹ ²² You see, Phoebe is the only name in this list, who wasn't part of the church in Rome. She was sent to

¹⁸ See Acts 6:1-7 and the distribution of food to widows. The Greek verb used in Acts 6:2 for "wait on tables" is "diakoneo" (διακονέω) from which we get our noun "Deacon." So these 7 guys may have been the first official deacons in the early church.

¹⁹ Similar to 1 Timothy, Philippians 1:1 links the ministry of Elders and Deacons next to each other.

²⁰ Consider 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, "Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work...."

²¹ "Probably the carrier of the letter to Rome." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1916 footnote on Romans 16:1.

²² "Phoebe was probably the bearer of the letter, as some of the ancient subscriptions to the letter indicate [in the Majority Text]." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, 2nd ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 759.

Rome, which is why Paul asked them to *receive* her, and to give her any help that she might need. If Phoebe was indeed a single woman, perhaps even traveling alone, then Paul's appeal to "give her any help she may need from you," would include providing her with safe and private lodging. Rome was a big city, filled with plenty of troublemakers and riff raff. So Paul appeals to the church in Rome to take good care of this dear sister in Christ.

The church that Phoebe belonged to, was located in Cenchreae, which was a shipping port about six miles from Corinth, which is where Paul is believed to have written his letter to the Roman Church. So now, before he heads east to Jerusalem to deliver the offering that we talked about last week, Paul entrusts his letter to Phoebe, who will now take it west to Rome. Paul has a high regard for Sister Phoebe, who is a trustworthy deacon from the Cenchreaen Church. New Testament scholar Thomas Schreiner summarizes it well, "The main point of the text is that the Romans should receive Phoebe warmly, not only because she is a fellow believer, but also because she is well known for her service in the gospel of Christ."²³

The third thing that we learn about Phoebe, is that she was a benefactor, or some translations say, "a patron" or "a helper." Romans 16:2 concludes, "...for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me." (So *Phoebe was a deaconess, a letter carrier, and a benefactor.*) Phoebe's status as a benefactor, who helped *many* people, including Paul himself, indicates that she was quite wealthy, and she was also generous. She had the means, and the willingness, to help underwrite various gospel ministries.²⁴ We saw this pattern of generosity last week in the Gentile churches' willingness to send an offering to the poor in Jerusalem; we see this pattern of generosity continue with Phoebe. Douglas Moo explains: "People seeking to get ahead in the Greco-Roman world usually needed a sponsor – someone who could provide logistical and financial backing. Phoebe apparently was a wealthy woman who used her resources and clout to defend and sponsor Christian missionaries."²⁵

This isn't the first time that we've seen this kind of support for ministry work. After all, Jesus' earthly ministry was supported in a similar way. Luke 8:1-3 says, "After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and

²³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, 2nd ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 760.

²⁴ "The 'patron,' an important figure in the Greco-Roman world who used their money and influence to support various causes. Phoebe used her worldly advantages to help many believers, including Paul himself." (*NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2321 footnote on Romans 16:1.) Oddly, for me the Hunger Games movies come mind.

²⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 196.

diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means." The early church gave generously from their own personal funds, and they all worked hard together, as a group of Christ-followers who were committed to sharing the gospel good news with as many people as they possibly could. (*From the very beginning, Gospel ministry has been supported by people's donations, so you haven't yet begun worshipping God this way, I urge you to prayerfully consider it.*) And in their mutual gospel efforts, they were also committed to ethnic diversity, which leads to our final point for today.

The early church was...

3) An ethnically diverse yet unified group of fellow believers. In

Romans 16:3-4, Paul officially begins his list of greetings, "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. 4 They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them." We'll see even broader forms of diversity next week, but for today, let's focus on the ethnic diversity. Unlike Phoebe, who was a Gentile, Priscilla and Aquilla were Paul's fellow Jews.^{26 27} And as we work our way through this list of names, we'll find a mix of ethnicities in the church.²⁸ Priscilla and Aquilla had been Paul's co-workers for quite some time. Elsewhere in Scripture we learn that they were not only co-workers in the gospel, but they were also co-workers in tentmaking and leather work. Tentmaking was hard, smelly, physical labor, so Priscilla and Aquilla knew full well that Paul was a hard worker.²⁹ Over time, not only did they learn to value him as a trusted business partner, but they grew quite fond of him; so fond in fact, that verse 4 says, "They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them." Some translations say, "who risked their own necks for my life."³⁰ And here we see another glimpse of the ethnic diversity and unity within the early church. Paul's fellow Jews had risked their lives for him, and the Gentile churches were grateful to these Jews for what they'd done. There was a healthy interchange of mutual respect and appreciation. Now, there's obviously a really good story behind this statement about "risking their own necks," but unfortunately, we're not told

²⁶ Priscilla = "prih SIL uh" (W. Murray Severance and Terry Eddinger, *That's Easy for You to Say: Your Quick Guide to Pronouncing Bible Names* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 132.)
Aquilla = "uh KWIL uh" (W. Murray Severance and Terry Eddinger, *That's Easy for You to Say: Your Quick Guide to Pronouncing Bible Names* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 26.)

²⁷ The likelihood that Phoebe is Gentile is increased by the fact that "The name Phoebe appears... frequently in mythology," which would suggest a Gentile heritage. Merrill C. Tenney, Gen. Ed., *Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 4 M-P*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p. 777.

²⁸ Although admittedly more of them are Gentiles, likely due in part to Claudius' decree that forced many Jews to leave Rome for a period of time.

²⁹ I can't help but wonder if this job would qualify for "Dirty Jobs," with Mike Rowe!?

³⁰ See the *ESV* and *NKJV*.

what it is.³¹ Even though you and I don't know, obviously the early church knew, and it served as a reminder to them, of just how deep their love and devotion to one another went, in the early church.³²

With this in mind, we should also recall Paul's appeal back in Romans 14. He called on these Jewish and Gentile believers to accept one another, without quarreling over disputable matters. So we're not suggesting that the people in this long list of names never wrestled to maintain their unity, but we are suggesting that unity within their ethnically diverse church was a core value that they kept striving for.

Well there are still a lot of names left on this list, so it's a good thing that we still have another week to learn about their faith stories. In the meantime, throughout the week ahead, let's continue to meditate on the three distinctives we looked at today:

- The early church was a loving family who enjoyed warm gospel fellowship.
- They were a hard-working, generous team of Christ-followers.
- They were an ethnically diverse yet unified group of fellow believers.

³¹ "There is no other record of this in the New Testament or elsewhere, but it must have been widely known, as the last part of the verse indicates." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1916 footnote on Romans 16:4.

³² Consider Epaphroditus' brush with death in Philippians 2:25-30.