

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 30, 2017**

## **GETTING PERSONAL**

### **Romans 13:1-27**

Romans 16 is exactly the kind of passage of Scripture we might be tempted to skip over, not because it is so doctrinally meaty that we fear we may not be able to digest it – it is not; but because it seems to have little or no doctrinal value and little in the way of practical instruction that might apply to our lives. Mostly, it is just a bunch of names of people Paul knows, along with a final word of counsel in verses 17-20 to watch out for and stay away from false teachers who would undermine the church and its gospel, and, as we might expect, a concluding doxology of praise to God in verses 25-27 to wrap it all up.

It would be a mistake, though, to pass over this passage or just give it a superficial reading with no thought as to its significance or enduring value. Of Romans 16, John Chrysostom (349-307 AD), one of the greatest preachers in the early centuries of the church, wrote: “I think that many even of those who have the appearance of being extremely good men [and women] hasten over this part of the epistle as superfluous. Yet,” he went on, it is wise to be “careful even about the little fragments.... It is possible even from bare names to find a great treasure.” Emil Brunner, a prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian, went further and called Romans 16 “one of the most instructive chapters of the New Testament,” because it encourages personal relationships of love and respect in the church. (Both Chrysostom and Brunner are quoted in J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 392.)

I hope you will come to a greater appreciation of its value today.

### **OUTLINE**

The outline of Romans 16 is quite simple. In verses 1 and 2, Paul introduces and commends to the Romans a Christian woman from Cenchrea (a port city about seven miles from Corinth), who most likely carried Paul’s letter from Corinth to Rome. Paul couldn’t just drop his letter off at the local post office and expect it to be delivered. The pony express was not yet operational. In Paul’s day, you had to rely on the kindness of travelers to transport and deliver your mail.

Phoebe was presumably a well-connected and wealthy businesswoman who was also a committed follower of the Lord Jesus. Paul refers to her as a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea (16:1). The general meaning of *diakonos* is “servant.” But *diakonos* is also the word for the New Testament office of deacon, first established in the church at Jerusalem in Acts 6:1-7. The meaning of Paul’s reference to Phoebe as a *diakonos* has been debated by biblical scholars and churches for the last two thousand years. Some believe Paul means that Phoebe held the office of deacon (or deaconess) in the church at Cenchrea, while others believe it is more a reference to Phoebe’s servant heart.

Whichever is the case (or possibly both), it is widely believed that Paul entrusted this godly woman with the task of delivering his letter to the believers in Rome. Which she did. And for which the church everywhere is grateful.

Verses 3-16 consist of Paul's personal greetings to believers he knows in Rome. In verses 17-20, Paul offers a final pastoral word of warning and encouragement to the Romans, urging them to be vigilant and wise, so as not to be duped or led astray by false teachers who "deceive the minds of naïve people" "by smooth talk and flattery" (16:18). It is a warning that is as relevant today as it was in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

In verses 21-23, Paul sends greetings from several of his friends and ministry partners in Corinth, before concluding in verses 25-27 with a soaring doxology of praise to God. (If you're wondering about verse 24, most of the oldest manuscripts don't include it.)

### **PERSONAL GREETINGS**

The personal greetings section of Romans 16 – verses 3-16 – contains greetings from Paul to 24 individuals mentioned by name, two more unnamed individuals (the mother of Rufus in verse 13 and the sister of Nereus in verses 15), plus two households (the household of Aristobulus in verse 10 and of Narcissus in verse 11), one house church (verse 5), an indefinite number of unnamed "brothers" in verse 14 and "saints" in verse 15. All in all, you get the idea that even though Paul had never been to Rome, he had a lot of connections among the believers in the church there. We don't know in every case how or where Paul's path crossed with theirs, but it does give a sense that mobility in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman Empire may have been greater than we might normally think. We know from his missionary journeys that Paul got around. So did others.

While we don't know a lot – or, in some cases, anything – about most of the individuals to whom Paul sends these personal greetings, we do at least know something about Priscilla and Aquila, the husband-and-wife team to whom Paul refers as "my fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (16:3).

Priscilla and Aquila got me to thinking about famous couples. Here are some I came up with:

- Romeo and Juliet
- William and Mary
- Bonnie and Clyde
- Lucy and Ricky (Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz)
- Sonny and Cher
- John Lennon and Yoko Ono
- George and Martha Washington
- Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt
- Bill and Hilary Clinton

There are lots of others we could add to this list. The Bible, of course, includes several famous husband-and-wife teams in addition to Priscilla and Aquila. Such as:

- Adam and Eve
- Abraham and Sarah
- Isaac and Rebekah
- Samson and Delilah
- Ruth and Boaz
- David and Bathsheba
- Joseph and Mary.

What we know of Priscilla and Aquila we learn mainly from Acts 18. They were living in Rome in 49 AD when Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews because of a riot having to do with Jewish arguments about Christ. Forced to leave Rome, Priscilla and Aquila went to Corinth and set up their tentmaking business. When Paul arrived in Corinth, they opened their home to him and invited him to work with them, since he too was a tentmaker by trade. Later on, the three of them worked and ministered together in Ephesus.

When Claudius died in 54 AD, the ban against Jews was lifted, and Priscilla and Aquila returned to Rome and hosted a house church to which Paul sent his greetings (Romans 16:5).

I won't mention every person on the receiving end of Paul's greetings. Let me call your attention to just these:

In verse 12, Paul mentions two women, Tryphena and Tryphosa, who were likely sisters, probably even twins, based on the similarity of their names. Their names mean "dainty," and "delicate." But they were apparently anything but dainty or delicate in their labors for the kingdom of God. Paul affirms them for their hard work in the Lord's service.

Then, in verse 13, Paul greets a disciple named Rufus, along with his (Rufus') mother. Three of the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – tell of a man named Simon from Cyrene (in northern Africa) who was forced to carry the cross of Jesus out of Jerusalem to Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified. Mark 15:21 identifies Simon as "the father of Alexander and Rufus." Is the Rufus to whom Paul sends greetings in Rome the same Rufus whose father had carried the cross of Jesus? We don't know for sure. But it certainly may have been.

### **THE DIVERSITY OF THE CHURCH**

The list of individuals to whom Paul sends greetings here in Romans 16 includes 17 men and 9 women, which, given the place of women in both the existing Jewish and Roman cultures, is a pretty remarkable thing. But it is not just that Paul greets both men and women. His greetings go out to Jews and Gentiles, Romans and Greeks, slaves and social elites. The fact that he greets such a diverse group means that the church in Rome was diverse in its composition, and that Paul himself was intentional about building relationships with people of diverse backgrounds and life circumstances. The membership of the church in Rome crossed cultural, social, and economic lines. As is God's intention for the church today.

Before he left us for his new pastoral call in Illinois, Pastor David said that our church family here at Faith has people from 14 different nationalities in it. That is pretty remarkable, isn't

it? With all due respect to Pastor David, however, I think he's wrong! I may be wrong, too, but I counted 17 in addition to those of us who are native to the USA. Here is the list of nationalities I came up with: Afghanistan, China, Colombia, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Ghana, Greece, Indonesia, Laos, Lebanon, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Philippines, and Syria. And that is not even counting California as a foreign nation!

If I have missed any, please let me know. This international diversity is a sign of God's design and intention for His church to include believers "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Revelation 7:9), and it is a witness to the world of the power of the gospel to overcome all the differences and distinctions that could and too often do divide us.

It is the nature of the church to reflect the diversity of people and people groups under the lordship of Jesus Christ, who has broken down all the dividing walls between women and men, rich and poor, young and old, the powerful and the powerless, even between races and nations. When it exhibits the diversity of all the children of God, the church really is a beautiful thing.

### **THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH**

God intends that the church be diverse in its make-up. But the unity of the church in the essentials – in its foundational beliefs, its submission to the authority of the Bible, its proclamation of the gospel of grace, and its trust in and allegiance to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord – transcends its diversity. Which only adds to its beauty.

As different as we may all be from one another, as a church, we are meant to be a family in which, as Chuck Swindoll has written, "older people" (i.e., those more mature in the faith) "train and encourage the younger, where everyone is accountable and finds security, acceptance, hope, and help." The church, he says, "must be a place where words are reliable, worship is meaningful, faith is invincible, grace is (everywhere), and love is tangible. The church," he concludes, "must be a warm, welcoming body, not a well-oiled, slick machine" (Swindoll, *Insights on Romans*, 323).

As well as we *sometimes* do *some* things, (and there are some things I think we do really well with the help of the Holy Spirit), I doubt that anyone would confuse our church or the church as a whole with a slick, well-oiled machine. That's OK. I hope that what *you* see, and what people outside our church family can also see, is that this really is a place of grace where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts. A place "where words are reliable, worship is meaningful, faith is invincible, grace is everywhere, and love is tangible." And where Jesus makes all the difference.

It was Jesus and the saving power of the gospel that motivated Paul. And it should be Jesus and the saving power of the gospel that motivates us.

## **A HOLY KISS**

One last comment about Paul's personal greetings: Notice his instruction in verse 16 to "greet one another with a holy kiss." He says the same thing at the end of 1 Corinthians (16:20), 2 Corinthians (13:12) and 1 Thessalonians (5:26). Peter says something very similar in the final verse of 1 Peter (5:14): "Greet one another with a kiss of love."

Some of us, I know, would be way outside our comfort zone if we were to institute a "holy kiss" as a regular part of our service of worship. Fortunately, it is not an essential of our faith. A kiss on the cheek had a cultural significance in Paul's day that it still has in some cultures, but not necessarily here in the US. What Paul is driving at, I think, is the value in having our verbal greetings as brothers and sisters in Christ "confirmed," as John Stott says, "by a visible and tangible gesture, although what form the 'kiss' should take will vary" from culture to culture (Stott, 398).

You may be more comfortable with a "holy handshake" or a "holy hug" or even a "holy fist bump" as a sign of your relational connection with other members of the body of Christ. That's OK with me. The holy kiss or some equivalent is simply a way of communicating that we belong to the Lord Jesus and to one another.

## **GREETINGS FROM CORINTH**

In addition to all his personal greetings to Christian brothers and sisters in Rome, Paul also includes greetings from several friends and ministry associates who were with him when he wrote the letter to the Romans. The first one he mentions is Timothy, whom he calls "my fellow worker" (16:21), the same term he used earlier in describing Priscilla and Aquila (16:3). We don't know anything definitive about Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, beyond what Paul says here in verse 21. Jason may or may not have been the same Jason who got into trouble because of his support of the ministry of Paul and Silas in Thessalonica in Acts 17:1-9.

Tertius (16:22) was technically the real writer of Romans. Tertius, whose name simply means "Third," was an amanuensis, which is the term for a professional scribe. He was a professional letter writer, who wrote down the letter to the Romans as Paul dictated it. It was not uncommon for an amanuensis to include his own greeting at the end of a letter. Tertius served Paul and the kingdom of God in a way that will never be forgotten.

Gaius (16:23), whose full Roman name may have been Gaius Titius Justus, is believed to be the man who welcomed Paul and Silas into his home in Acts 18:7 when the missionaries encountered severe and violent opposition from Jews in Corinth. Paul publicly affirms him for his generous hospitality.

We don't know anything about Quartus (16:23), except that his name means "Fourth" and suggests, as is the case with Tertius, that he had been born into a slave household in which children were "named" with numbers – First, Second, Third, and so on. Erastus, on the other hand, was a very prominent citizen and public official in Corinth. The NIV refers to him as

“the city’s director of public works.” Other translations call him the city treasurer. Regardless, what we see once again is the way that barriers of status or wealth or position are broken down by the power of the gospel.

### **THE GROUND IS LEVEL**

That is how it is meant to be in the fellowship of Jesus’ followers. Because the ground is level at the foot of the cross. No one stands higher or lower than anyone else. We are all equal in our “status” as sinners. We are all equally in need of a Savior. We are all equal in our inability to contribute anything to our salvation. We are all equal in our inability to do anything to commend ourselves to God. We are all equally helpless and without hope for salvation except in God’s sovereign mercy and grace. We are all equally welcome at the foot of the cross. Jesus welcomes us just as we are. But in His grace He does not, and will not, leave us just as we are. He changes us through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

### **DOXOLOGY**

Finally, notice how Paul wraps up his *magnum opus* with a doxology in verses 25-27. Do you know the difference between a benediction and a doxology? A benediction is a blessing. Literally, it means “a good word.” A benediction in the context of worship is a blessing *from* God for His people. A doxology, on the other hand, is more like a blessing *to* God. It is an expression of praise to God, to give Him glory. What Paul says in these final verses is all about God, about His power and wisdom and the glory of the gospel, which, as he said way back in chapter 1, is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (1:16).

God is able (16:25). And to Him, the only wise God, be glory forever through Jesus Christ our Lord (16:27).

Lord, let it be so. Amen.