Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Love for the Saints, Part 1
Scripture: Romans 16:1-16
Code: 45-119

Let's open our Bibles tonight for our study of God's Word to Romans chapter 16...Romans chapter 16. As we begin this chapter, I just kind of draw your attention to the fact that it is very likely a chapter that you have never studied. It may be a chapter that you can't even remember reading because as soon as you started it and saw all those names, you just skipped them over. It's not one of those most favorite chapters of those who preach and teach the Word of God and yet in many ways it ought to be. It is sad that it's neglected by many, in fact by most Christian teachers, because it is by far the most extensive, the most intimate and the most specific of all the words of personal loving greeting ever to come from the inspired heart and mind of the Apostle Paul. It's a rich and thrilling chapter. And it appears almost as an addendum to such a tome of theology that it gets overlooked. And so what I want us to do is take a good look at it, it may be the only time in our whole lives we'll do this, and I believe with all my heart it will be extremely rewarding for you as it has been in preparation for me. In fact, I've been locked up with this chapter in isolation for several days this week, much to my own great blessing and benefit.

Now in this closing chapter Paul continues what he really began in chapter 14...pardon me, in chapter 15 verse 14, what he began in 15:14 was to reveal his heart, to give you a little bit of personal insight into the man himself, the nature of his ministry, how he viewed the role that he was to play and his gifts and callings within the will of God. And here in 16 we again look into something of his own heart, his theology he gives us through chapter 15 verse 13, and then he wraps up that great theological treatise and now he wants the Romans and us to know him as much as possible, as well as his theology.

Now as he began in chapter 15 verse 14 to unfold a little bit about himself, he started with a view of his ministry and now in chapter 16 he focuses on his relationship with people...chapter 15, his relationship to the Lord in ministry, chapter 16 his relationship to people in ministry. And you will notice in this chapter a myriad of names of given, specifically identifying people who were a part of his life and ministry. Now the emphasis of the chapter is to show his love, his mutual accountability and his dependence on people within the loving community of the redeemed. In many ways, this chapter is sort of a living illustration of the love he talked about in chapter 13 verses 8 to 10. So as he signs off this great epistle before a final benediction that comes from verse 25 to 27 which is his actual closing sign off, he ends things with a look at relationships that tell us a lot about his accountability and his love and dependence upon the saints.

Now let's focus, if we might, on the idea of Paul's love for his fellow brother and sister believers. And as we focus on that we will see his love revealed in three ways in the chapter...first, by his commendation, secondly, his cordiality and thirdly his caution. We know that love warns and we shall see that later on in the chapter.

To begin with let's note Paul's commendation. We see in the first two verses the commendation of Paul given toward a certain individual, look at them for a moment. "I commend unto you Phoebe, our sister, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchreae that you receive her in the Lord as becometh saints and that you assist her in whatever business she has need of you for she has been...literally...a succorer or a helper of many and also of myself."

Now we begin the chapter with a name and the name is the name of a lady, Phoebe. In someways I suppose the names in the chapter are incidental because we don't know these people and for the most part we don't even know who they are. Phoebe, we have a little of information about, some of them we have absolutely no information about. The names are then somewhat incidental if interesting, still incidental. The real insight that I want you to see here is the character of Paul's love and the networking of loving relationships that make ministry possible. This chapter provides for us one of the clearest insights into the community of believing people in the early church and how that community functioned together. And we'll see that as we go through.

Now let's look then back at the commendation in verses 1 and 2. This masterful later, the epistle to the Romans, when completed was taken to Rome by a very special Christian lady by the name of Phoebe. And that is why Paul commends her to them. There is little doubt in the mind of those who study this epistle that she is the one carrying the Roman epistle to the church at Rome. Now remember, Paul is writing in Corinth. Corinth is in what we now know as Greece. Rome is in what we now know, of course, is Italy. And that is a significant journey. And this great epistle would be carried as a very delicate and a very valuable message to that church in Rome. There was no Xerox machine in that day, there was no way to copy what was penned and to maintain it in case of some disaster or loss, so Phoebe is given a very sacred trust to handle the Word of God and reach the destination of Rome and give it to the redeemed saints there in the church.

This special lady in arriving on Rome will give that letter and they will as they look at it note that in the beginning of the sixteenth chapter she is commended to them as one worthy of their hospitality, worthy of their care, worthy of their fellowship. And so at the very beginning we sense in the commendation of Paul the expression of love toward this faithful Christian lady to whom he entrusted this great epistle of Rome. And on that epistle did not only hinge his plans, he wanted them to read about his desire to come to them and to find there the resources to go to Spain, but the articulation of the great truth of justification by grace through faith. And so to a lady that he trusted greatly, a lady that he loved in Christ greatly, he gives this wonderful ministry.

Then in verse 1 look now and we note the word "commend." It basically means to introduce, only it's a richer word than that, it isn't just to introduce in a casual way, but to introduce with an affirming statement of commendation. Now this is a very common thing in the early church. Letters of commendation were written, that was a well-worn custom in Paul's day, when a believer, for example, would be traveling to another city and would want to go and fellowship with that church, that believer could carry a commending letter from the church in their own home town which would ensure to that new congregation that this was indeed one of the children of God, a brother or sister to be loved and received with hospitality. The reason for that was the need for a place to stay. In those days inns were nothing short of brothels. They were places where there would be perhaps looting and stealing. They were not safe places. And as Christian people traveled around in the Roman world, the letters of commendation allowed them to be received with love in to varying Christian communities and shown hospitality and care for whatever matters of business they needed to carry on.

We find such letters of commendation referred to throughout the New Testament and I would just direct your thinking to several passages. We won't take time to read them all, but you can note them all. In Acts chapter 18 and verse 27 it says, "When he was disposed to pass into Achaia the brethren wrote," and he's speaking here of Apollos, "exhorting the disciples to receive him." A very common thing. Here is Apollos moving along in his journeys, a mighty preacher of the Old Testament and a servant of God and he is commended in a letter so that the saints will know to receive him and to demonstrate to him hospitality, not be fearful but be responsible for his care. In 2 Corinthians chapter 8 and verse 18, "And we have sent with him the brother whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches and not only that but who was also chosen of the churches to travel with us with this grace which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord and to show our ready mind, avoiding this that no man should blame us in this abundance which is administered to us, providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord but also in the sight of men, and we have sent with them our brother whom we have often proved diligent in many things but now much more diligent upon the great confidence which I have in you, whether any do inquire of Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you or our brethren being inquired of, they are the messengers of the churches and the glory of Christ, wherefore show you to them and before the churches the proof of your love and of our boasting on your behalf." So in commending Titus and those who came with him to the Corinthians comes this part of the eighth chapter of the second letter as a commendation of them so they will be granted a certain amount of hospitality and grace by those who are to receive them.

We have a similar note to call to your attention in 3 John where it says, "I wrote unto the church but Diotrephes who loves to have the preeminence among them, receives us not." In other words, the indication is...I wrote, there's a commendation, there's an affirmation of my coming but a refusal to receive me...and he goes on to speak about the evil deed of one Diotrephes. So it was common to give advance notice of a certain saint coming, either in a biblical letter or in a private letter of commendation.

Many such letters, by the way, according to archaeologists, have been found, particularly in the Egyptian desert sands that provide for us in rubbish heaps some insight into the character of those ancient letters of commendation.

Now Paul in commending Phoebe to the church at Rome expresses his love for her and his desire that she be properly treated. The idea here is that they are to receive her. He says in verse 16, "Because she is our sister, because she is a servant," and in verse 2, "because she is a succorer," which is an old word for a helper. He has a loving commendation for this gracious woman. By the way, her name means "bright and radiant," and perhaps that was true of her testimony.

Notice first of all that she is commended because she is our sister. That is not to say our sister in a physical sense but our sister in a spiritual sense. She belongs to the family of God. She is your sister, she is my sister. She is a member of the body of Christ. She is united to all Christians in the common resurrection life of Christ. As we know from Ephesians 2:16 to 22 and many other passages, all who love Christ are a part of His family and they belong together. There is one body, no separate bodies of Christ, and she must be received as one who belongs to that body. We are one family, we are all the children of God and we must fellowship with one another according to the common eternal life. And so based upon her identity as a believer, belonging to the family of God, she is to be received. That's a good word for us to remember. Anyone who comes naming the name of Christ and belonging to His family is family to us as well.

Secondly he says, she is not only our sister but she is a servant of the church which is at Cenchreae. Now Paul is writing from Corinth and about nine miles away, eight or nine miles, on the Saronic Gulf was a port city, really the seaport for Corinth, known as Cenchreae. Any shipping that needed to be done from Corinth would be done at Cenchreae. It's very likely that the church in Cenchreae was founded as a result of the ministry of the church at Corinth, that church spawning, if you will, a daughter church in that seaport town. This dear lady, Phoebe, no doubt had some particular role of service that she rendered in this congregation. Now note that the word "servant" is the word diakonosfrom which we get our familiar word deacon. Now that word knows no gender. It is neither a masculine word nor is it a feminine one. Diakononndefies that kind of gender distinction, thus it refers in very general terms to one who serves...to one who serves, be he male or she female. And its use in the New Testament is very broad and very general. I try to point this out in a little book I've written called "Deacons," what the Bible teaches about deacons. It is a very broad and general term. Now frankly it doesn't necessarily mean anything official. There are many many uses of that word which originally meant to serve a table, to wait on a table and came to mean any kind of simple humble service, or any kind of ministry in general.

It's not until 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 8 that there comes to be a very specific title of deacon in the local church. Up to that point all the biblical uses in the gospels, the book of Acts and even the

epistles are very general about those who serve the church. As Paul at the end of his ministry, after his first Roman imprisonment, writes to Timothy, there has formed a sort of formal office of deacon within the church that is now recognized, you might say, with a capital "D" as an official title for those who serve in a very unique way, who are recognized as special appointed servants of the church. It is likely and very possible that Phoebe was one of those special servants who had been identified as such. Which is to say there were women deacons which we come to know as deaconesses.

Now some people want to debate whether there was such an office as deaconess. It is my conviction that in 1 Timothy chapter 3 you have elders very clearly defined called bishops there, then in chapter...that's 1 through 7, then in verse 8, likewise deacons, and then in verse 11, likewise...and it uses the word women. Now the likewise takes us back to the likewise of deacons which takes us back to verse 1 and the bishop and the fact that those two "likewise" are there indicates to me there is a sequence from elder, or bishop, which is the same thing, to deacon, likewise another office, if the first two are offices officially recognized as such, the third must be as well. Some people say no it's just deacons' wives. Well why would there be very clear definition for the character of a deacon's wife and not the wife of an elder? That makes no sense. So I'm convinced that the text is saying there are to be in the local church elders, or bishops, pastors, overseers, all the same, deacons and deaconesses.

You say, "Well why didn't it say deaconess?" Because that word has no gender and has no feminine form. Therefore the only word that can be used is the word woman, and that's why it's used. So I believe that in the early church there came to be a formally recognized group of women who served in the church in an official capacity and it's my conviction that this dear lady was one of those recognized as a servant among the women as a deaconess, if you will.

Now what was their role? Well you could look at 1 Timothy chapter 5 and probably get a little bit of an idea because there you have some qualifications in verses 9 and 10 for someone who is taking on the roles of the church as a widow to be supported. What kind of women is the church to support in their widowhood? Here are the kinds of women. They are to be women who have reached the age of 60 so that they're no longer desirous of marrying again. They are to have been one-man women, that is women who were not unfaithful to their husbands. They were well reported of women for their good works, women who had brought up children, who had lodged strangers...and again we're back to the fact that hospitality was very important in that world...women who washed the saints feet, who relieved the afflicted, who diligently followed every good work. Now that would be sort of the characteristic of deaconess, and surely those widows put on the list would function in that capacity as a deaconess.

As we look in the history of the early church we find that the role of those women in the first few centuries was to care for the sick, to care for the poor, to minister to strangers, to show hospitality, to serve martyrs in prison, taking them supplies and needs and providing for whatever might be

desperately needed because of the exogensies of imprisonment. Those deaconesses were used to instruct new women converts in the discipling process, to assist in the emersion of women and to exercise a general supervision over ministries to the needs of women in the churches. Now that was the role of a deaconess and this was such a woman, a sister in Christ and a servant of the church who was no doubt recognized as one worthy of commendation.

Notice in verse 3 it says, pardon me, verse 2 and thirdly it says, "That you are to receive her in the Lord as becomes saints and assist her in whatever business she has need of you for she has been a succorer, or a helper of many and of myself also." We can use the word succor which is to say she has been a helper of many. The word actually means a benefactor. Now when I say the word "patron" do you know what that means? Do you know what a patron is? If you ever read any of ancient European history you understand the word patron. A patron was someone who financially supported someone else. Many artists had a patron. They would paint and they would do their sculpture and they would do whatever they needed to do. There were people who were researchers and students and scholars and people like that would find a patron who would support them. Apparently this woman had enough means to provide a patronage for not only the Apostle Paul but for others in the church. The term is prostatisand it basically in the Jewish community came to refer to a wealthy supporter. So this dear woman was a wealthy supporter, no doubt, of the church at Cenchreae. It may well have met in her home. She may have been to that church what Lydia was to the church at Philippi. And she also offered some support in some way to the Apostle himself.

So here is a lady distinguished for those three reasons. And because of her godly ministry she is entrusted with the epistle to the Romans in her care on her journey to Rome. And she is commended by Paul. And look at verse 2 again, the church is told to receive her in the Lord as becometh saints. Now what does that mean? Well it means to accept her as one who belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ, accept her in the sense that you accept Him. You remember the words of Jesus...that whatever you do to the least of these My children you have done it unto Me...anyone of us who is in Christ when treated by any other one of us is in a sense receiving the treatment that Christ Himself is receiving. She was no alien to spiritual intimacy. She was no alien to the spiritual community. And she was to be received in the love bond of fellowship and union with Jesus Christ. Receive her in the Lord. Then he says, "As becometh saints." That is to say fitting for the way Christians should receive other Christians. True to our sainthood...and you know the word saint means one set apart to God, as those who have been set apart to God, as those who are different than everybody else, as those who are distinct from the world around us, we are to receive one another with a measure of love and hospitality the world doesn't know anything about. The obligation of love is an obligation to hold no strangers, it is an obligation to love to all those who name the name of Jesus Christ, it an obligation to embrace into our arms, into our compassion, into our care and to supply needs for all those in the body of Christ. When a stranger in Christ comes among us, we are to receive that stranger with an open heart. And so he says receive her in the Lord in a way that fits the way a saint ought to act toward another saint.

And...I like this...you assist her in whatever business she has need of you. She was on her way to Rome for some business, if indeed she was a wealthy patron it's obvious she was probably going with some special business in mind. The word, by the way, there is not specifically the word business, it is a Greek word pragmateiafrom which we get pragmatic, she was there for some pragmatic reason, for some transaction would be the technical translation. She had come to Rome for a transaction of some sort, perhaps a legal matter related to her business and he tells the church assist her. Now isn't that an important thought. When someone comes to us, a stranger, we are in the church to provide not only love and spiritual affection but assistance in the matters of finance or business or whatever other matters that person might have in view that are not necessarily related directly to the Kingdom of God. In other words, we're to provide all of the resources necessary for bidding God's speed and allowing that person to accomplish whatever objectives are in mind.

And it's a wonderful thing for the church to do that, to assist each other in these kinds of things. Whatever she did, Paul said, whatever her business might be, whatever transaction she enters in, you know the people in Rome, you know how things are, you know who to see, you know who to talk to, you expedite that situation on her behalf.

Now whatever she had done for Paul, whatever she had done for the church at Cenchreae and we really don't know specifics, it was sufficient for him to commend her in love to this congregation. And in a very real way, to memorialize her forever in the pages of God's eternal Word because of her devoted service.

Now you're looking into the heart of a man and you're seeing his love for people. There are some people who reach a plateau and a plain of sort of self-glorification who reach a place where they really lose touch all together with those who have assisted them in the process and have little thought for them, but not the Apostle Paul. It should thrill us, frankly, to find him so gracious and so generous and so commending of this dear woman. She bears the gospel of God. I mean, let's face it, in the book of Hebrews it tells us that the law of God was brought to men by angels. And here is something for this age and this dispensation more important than Old Testament law, more important than the Mosaic legislation, here is the gospel of the living God not entrusted to angels but to one faithful lady. What a commendation of the kind of woman she was...to bear the message of the gospel of grace to the center of the Gentile world, the city of Rome.

And may I encourage all of you ladies that are here tonight that God has always used women and still does and uses them mightily in the advance of His Kingdom. And though He did not use a woman to write a book of the Bible, He used a woman to transport that book, that most important perhaps of all books in terms of its presentation of the gospel. And therefore demonstrated that within the bounds of biblical definition and function designed by God for women, He uses them in marvelous and glorious tasks that do not violate His holy design for them. And so this woman is emblematic of all

those women who within the framework of God's design have borne a place of honor. And we see in the love of Paul the commendation of one woman that no doubt would extend to many other people who served him so well.

So, the first insight into His love and into his relationships with people, his accountability, his dependency is related to this commendation. Now let's look at the second one and that's his cordiality. And that takes us from verse 3 all the way to verse 23 with a little break in verses 17 to 20 which we'll probably pick up next time. But starting in verse 3 we begin a list of names that runs down to verse 16 and then stops where there's a greeting. And then we pick up more names in verse 21 to 23. Now all of these names really extend to us insight into Paul's love because it's a whole lot of cordiality, a whole lot of loving greeting to everybody. It is a real display of open love. He greets the saints. I love the fact that he knows who they are. I mean, they're not a lot of nameless folks. This is not a man who is so isolated from reality, who is so into his own thing, who has reached such a level of esteem in the minds of everybody and in himself that he just loses touch with everybody. Not at all.

We see here...Paul knew who was his helper. Paul knew who stood by him. And he loved them and they were an essential part of his life. The breadth of his ministry, the sweep of it can be seen in the fact that though he has never been to Rome he names here 24 individuals, 17 men and seven women, and he names two households along with some unnamed brothers and unnamed sisters in the Savior who are at Rome. Though he had never been there he had been instrumental in winning so many to Christ who had gone to Rome and were now there as a part of that church in that great city. Undoubtedly what we have in these 24 individuals and two households and unnamed sisters and brothers is a catalogue of very choice Christians.

Now as I said at the beginning, we don't know very much about them. But there are a few fascinating highlights to examine. And we could just read names and say...well, we don't know who they are...and go on, but there are some in history who couldn't do that and we're grateful to them. A great exegetical commentator by the name of J.B. Lightfoot seemed to be preoccupied with finding out who all these people were. And he has some fascinating data. William Barclay also personally preoccupied with trying to find out who all these people were add some very important and interesting data and I want to intersect with a little bit of that, anyway, as we go through because I want you to see that these are flesh and blood real people. And some of them, even the New Testament, gives us a little information about.

So let's enter into the greeting, the cordiality section which gives us Paul's heart for individuals who served alongside of him. Verse 3, "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my helpers," or better, "my fellow workers," my sunergos, from which we get the word ergo which has to do with work, sunergo, my fellow workers. Now he names Prisca and Aquila. They were not apostles. They were not prophets. But they were his fellow workers.

You say, "What were they?" Well, they were tent makers. You go back to Acts 18:3 and they had the same profession that Paul did. And when he went to Corinth he went to the synagogue, you read about it in the first part of the eighteenth chapter, he went to the synagogue and when he went to the synagogue he met them. How did that happen? I remember when I was studying Acts 18 I got a little bit into the structure of the synagogue and found out that it was customary for people in the synagogue to sit in this fashion...men on one side and women on the other side. And the men sat not just on one side but they sat in the area of their profession. So it would not be uncommon for Paul to take his seat with the tent makers and therefore strike up an acquaintance with this man named Aquila and as a consequence meet his wife whose name actually is Prisca, Priscilla is a diminutive form which is used by Luke. Luke favors the diminutive forms on many names whereas Paul favors the more classical formal forms. This is true not only of Prisca and Priscilla, but of Silas and Silvanus. That tends to be a difference between Luke and Paul.

So they were tent makers. And like the Apostle Paul who just used his tent making to support his ministry, apparently Aquila and Priscilla used their tent making to support their own ministry of the proclamation of the gospel as well. So they had that in common. It is also interesting that this couple is mentioned six times in the New Testament, three by Paul and three by Luke, and Paul, as I said, always uses Prisca and Luke always uses Priscilla, favoring that diminutive form. In the six uses four of the times she is mentioned first. Now that's a little unusual that a woman would be mentioned before her husband in that ancient world. Some say it has to do with the dominant personality. And we all know that there are couples where the woman dominates. In fact, in all couples there are times when the woman dominates...in some couples there are just more of those times. And so some say...well she just had...she just had the effusive personality, she because of the nature of her personality was a dominant factor. Others say that it was to do with her social ranking. Some feel she was a noble Roman and he was a humble Jewish tent maker and this noble Roman lady marries the humble Jewish tent maker and so by virtue of her nobility she is named first. We don't know the answer. It's just a matter of speculation.

Paul met them, as I said, in the Corinth synagogue and they struck up a marvelous friendship because of their common love of the gospel, their common desire to see it proclaimed. They had originally lived in Rome, they were thrown out of Rome because Claudius banished all the Jews from Rome. And if a couple had one Jew, it is true that she was a Roman and he was a Jew, that would be enough to be banished. In their banishing they had gone to Corinth and that's where Paul met them.

Two years after their original meeting they moved to Ephesus. And when they moved to Ephesus they, of course, established the proclamation of the gospel there. Now Paul finds them in Rome. And they had returned to Rome because of the death of Claudius, so the banishing of the Jews was a past matter.

Later on they will appear again in Ephesus when Paul writes 2 Timothy, he greets them in 2 Timothy 4:19 because they're back there. They are best known, this couple, for instructing the great Old Testament preacher Apollos in Acts 18:24 and following. And they are also known for having a church in their house in Ephesus, 1 Corinthians 16:19. So they were a very active involved Christian couple. They used their tent making business as a way to support the proclamation of the gospel.

Now we even sort of capture that concept today. Do you know what I mean when I talk about the world of missions from a tent making viewpoint? We're talking about someone who goes to the mission field but supports himself in his own employment. And that comes from the tent making of Paul and people like Aquila and Priscilla. They must have been skilled in the knowledge of the Word of God to instruct someone who was mighty and eloquent in the Scripture like Apollos.

I want you to see what these dear people did for which Paul greets them. He first of all says they're my fellow workers, that we've labored together, through the years of ministry we have shared much. Now these dear friends are in Rome and in verse 4 he says this about them, "They have for my life laid down their own necks." Now I want you to know, folks, that loyalty. I mean, that is loyalty. That's a sort of symbolic way of saying they put their head on the chopping block for me. I mean, they were willing to die to preserve me. They would have given their lives that I might carry on my ministry. Wow, what loyalty, what wonderful friends...everyone could use friends like that. They put their lives in danger for Paul's sake. There must have been some specific incident, we don't know what it is, in which the life of Paul was on the line and they stepped into the gap and were willing to die for his sake and he, of course, was delivered and were so they by God's mercy and grace. And Paul is so thankful and so in verse 4 he says, "Unto whom not only I give thanks but also all the churches of the Gentiles." Why are they thankful? Because they're all a product of Paul's ministry, right? And a dead Paul means the end of everything.

So it's not only that I'm thankful for them, everybody else is thankful for them. I mean, we don't know that story. We say, "Oh the Apostle Paul, the Apostle Paul, isn't it marvelous, what a man." But do we need to be reminded that it may have been that there would have been nothing but a dead body had it not been for these two rather obscure dear people who were willing to lay their head on a chopping block to spare the life of that man they knew God had anointed? That's great devotion...great devotion.

Now you begin to get a feel, don't you, for the life of the church. This dear Phoebe and these wonderful friends, Aquila and Priscilla. And again I remind you that here was a woman, a woman who rendered noble service to Christ...again obviously in accord with her God-given limits and directives prescribed through Paul himself as to the role of a woman but honored and respected and commended and beloved.

William Hendrickson, the commentator, has an interesting paragraph. He writes, "During his missionary career, Paul had colleagues and fellow workers. But he deemed it necessary to oppose Peter to his face, with Barnabas he had such a sharp disagreement that the two parted company, there was a time when Paul refused to allow Mark to remain one of his companions. He was going to reprimand Euodia and Syntyche and Demas was going to desert him. But even though Priscilla and Aquila in a sense stood closer to him than any of those others, for they were his companions in trade and in faith, as far as the record shows between Paul on the one hand and Priscilla and Aquila on the other, there was always perfect harmony," end quote. So there was a wonderful relationship.

Notice verse 5, to show you the breadth of their ministry, likewise he says, "Greet the church that's in their house." Now here they are in Rome and their house is open to house the church. Oh this is a magnanimous couple. On the one hand they have laid down their life for the great Apostle Paul, on the other hand they have opened their home to the church. Now you'll get a flow as we go through here and you'll find out that the church in Rome met in several places. The church in Rome was not always meeting in one place, they had no building. So they were meeting in varying homes. They were really a whole lot of Flocks, a whole lot of home Bible studies and since the church could only come together in a public place, perhaps outdoors for maybe the Lord's table or a love feast or a communion or a great celebration of some kind, its weekly meetings would have to be held in the homes of those who were gracious enough to open them for the use of the church. And I am always blessed and thankful to God for those in our congregation who open their homes for the flock of the Lord to meet in fellowship.

And so we meet then Aquila and Priscilla and they live and they breathe and they're real and they loved Paul so much they would have died for him, and he loved them as well, for their loyalty to him and to Christ and His church. Let's go back to verse 5 again.

And he says, "Greet my well beloved Epaenetus." Now who is Epaenetus? He is the first fruits of Asia unto Christ, the first convert in Asia Minor, which is now modern Turkey. Asia Minor had the city Ephesus and all the other cities mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3, the cities of Laodicea, Philadelphia, Smyrna, Sardis, and Thyatira, Pergamos and Ephesus, they were all there in Asia Minor. The first convert in Asia was Epaenetus and now he is in Rome, a part of the church at Rome...moved there for whatever reason. He calls him, and here you get to see the love of Paul, "My well beloved." There's little doubt in my mind that there was something significant about the first convert in Asia, don't you think? The first one that came to Christ, Epaenetus, had a special place of affection in the heart of Paul. And he is the first fruits. Now the fact that he was the firstfruits means that many others followed, right? He doesn't say he's the only fruit, he says he's the...what?...the firstfruit. "The firstfruit not unto me, but the firstfruit unto Christ."

And you know, don't you, that he is the one to whom all the firstfruits are offered. Go back to chapter 15 verse 16, how Paul says that he offers up the Gentiles to God as a sacrifice, an offering, and the first...the firstfruits of his ministry in Asia that he offered to Christ is none other than Epaenetus who has a special place in his heart, we know nothing more about this man at all. But Paul loved him greatly and Paul knew where he was, I like that, he knew he was in Rome. He followed these people, he understood where they were because they were so deeply ingrained in his life.

And then would you notice verse 6? "Greet Mary who bestowed much labor on you." The manuscript evidence indicates that the last word is "you" not "us." Greet Mary. Now there are six women in the New Testament who have the name Mary, a very common name. This one is known to Paul, we don't know who she is, because she has bestowed much labor. The word is a strong word, it means to labor to the point of weariness, it's that very familiar verb kopiao, it means to work to sweat and exhaustion. And he says greet her who bestowed much labor on you. Now how did he know about her? How did he know she had given much labor to the church at Rome? Well the best idea is that Aquila and Priscilla who had come from Rome would have informed Paul about her and this dear lady that had given so much labor to the church was known to him through the testimony of Aquila and Priscilla. And the idea of much labor expresses the fact that she probably had been an early part of the church at Rome. The fact that it's in the past tense indicates that by now she may have been very old and her labor was much behind her. And he commends with a loving greeting this woman who in the past rendered much labor to the establishing and the developing of the church of the believers in Rome.

Then we come to verse 7 and we meet another twosome, "Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners who are of note among the apostles who also were in Christ before me." Andronicus is a male name, Junias could be male or female, we have no way to know. So either this is two men or it is a couple, and there's no way to know which. But he does specify four reasons why he wants to greet them. Look at them. Number one, they're my kinsmen. You say, "Does this mean that they are Jews?" Well certainly it does, it means they were Jews because Paul was a Jew. But I believe it means more than that because there are other Jews mentioned in the list. No doubt many of them who are not identified necessarily as my kinsmen, it's my conviction that they were actual relatives of Paul. In verse 11 Herodian is my kinsmen and in verse 21 he mentions Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. So he seems to identify those who have some actual relationship to him in an earthly way. They are Jews and perhaps it is fair to say they were related to Paul. So he wants to greet these who were related to him who were in Christ.

That must have been a wonderful thing for him to have, right? Coming out of a Jewish family, being of the tribe of Benjamin, being a Hebrew of the Hebrews, to know that some in his family had embraced the same Christ that he had embraced as well. And so we get a little feel that his family may well have been involved in the extension of his ministry. Secondly, he commends and greets them in love because they are "my fellow prisoner." Somewhere along the line, and we don't know

where, Paul spent a lot of his time in prison, read 2 Corinthians 11:23, he says "in prisons often." We don't know where it was but in one of his imprisonments or another they were there also. They had paid the price of imprisonment too for their faith in Christ, for their love of the Lord Jesus. And so he greets them who had shared prison with him. And I want you to know, my dear friends, that it wouldn't take much imagination to come to the realization of the fact that if you in that day and age had spent time in prison with someone, you would get to know them very well...very intimately. And no doubt that had happened. And so there was a deep bond with Andronicus and Junias and the Apostle Paul. They were relatives and they were fellow prisoners.

Then he extends this commendation by saying "They are of note among the apostles." Now this could mean that they are apostles with a small "a," not like the Twelve and Paul who saw the resurrected Christ. It could mean that they are messengers. There is the statement of apostles of the churches as opposed to Apostles of Christ. The apostles that we know were the Apostles of Christ but the churches also had apostles...the word apostole, translated "sent ones," it could be that they were missionaries or messengers or sent with the gospel from the church of lesser stature than Paul and the Twelve. But the better idea here is that what he is saying about them is they were of note among the apostles of the Lord. In other words, they were highly esteemed for their spiritual life and service among the apostles. What makes you believe that? The last commendation who were also in Christ before me.

Now Paul was converted in the process of persecuting the church, right? On his way to Damascus from Jerusalem, if he was persecuting Christians early in his life and they had already become Christians, they must have become Christians through the ministry of the church in Jerusalem. Therefore they would have been known by the early apostles and probably of note among those apostles as those marked out for unusual spiritual character. And so, fourthly, as I just mentioned, he greets those who were in Christ before me. It may well have been that had he given...been given the opportunity he would have killed them, had he been given the opportunity he would have imprisoned them and punished them severely for their faith but he was never given that opportunity and perhaps even they prayed for him because they were his kinsmen, his relatives.

And so we know a little bit about these wonderful people as well...be they husband and wife, or perhaps a more likely thought, two men related to Paul, perhaps they are brothers. And so we begin to see this circle of expanding relationships emanating from Paul's words here that give us a feeling for the intimacy that this wonderful Apostle had with many people who touched his life...Phoebe, Priscilla, Aquila, Epaenetus and particularly these two, Andronicus and Junias who were of his family, who shared prison with him, who were notable among the apostles and they had been saved even before him, which is to say they no doubt contributed to the richness of his own personal experience, for they had known Christ longer than he.

Then in verse 8 would you notice there are more saints at Rome that he wants to greet. He mentions Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. And again we see this word beloved for the second time. This is a loving man, as I've been saying, and he demonstrates his love and there's no fear of saying that. You know, some people find it hard to say "I love you," or to call someone a "beloved friend," not Paul. He had no problem with that and he greets Ampliatus in this way.

Now let me say a little about Ampliatus. We don't know who he is. But let me just give you some fascinating things to think about. We do know this. That Ampliatus is a slave name because in history we can find it among the slaves and slaves did not bear the name of free men or noble men. So it is a slave name. In fact it is a very common name in the Imperial household of Rome, that is in the household of the Caesar. And there is a cemetery at Domatia(?) the earliest of the Christian catacombs. One of the most fascinating things I've ever done is to wander through the catacombs of Rome. They were the burial place of Christians in the first century. And the oldest of those, the earliest of the catacombs is at Domatia. And in that early catacomb there is a very decorated tomb and on that decorated tomb is this large name Ampliatus...which is quite interesting. Because single names were unique. A Roman nobleman or a Roman free man would have three names, but a slave would only have one name. And Ampliatus was a slave. The fact that at his burial, if it be the same Ampliatus, he is given a large and rather decorated tomb and his name is placed there for all to see indicates in comparison with the other burial places in the catacomb that he was set apart as high ranking in the church, which is a wonderful insight because what it tells us is that while the world may have ranked people according to their economic status, the church didn't do that. And a slave could rise in the church of Jesus Christ to a place of recognized prominence to be given unique honor in his burial. It may well have been that in the church in many cases and in many places slaves were actually the elders teaching their own owners the Word of God. And so we see in the early church that even a slave could reach the place of prominence and social strata was not a barrier or even an issue in the church, certainly this brings to hear the word of Paul in the Galatian letter chapter 3 verse 28 that in Christ there's neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free...but all are one in Christ. We don't know if it's the same Ampliatus, but likely a slave, perhaps this one, perhaps another one. And then he calls him "my beloved in the Lord." Great personal affection.

Let's go to verse 9 and here we meet two other interesting fellows that we don't know anything about, Urbanus, our helper in Christ, and Stachys, my beloved. Now Urbanus is a very common Roman name. It suggests that he was a native Roman, probably a Gentile. He calls him "our helper," that is to say he helped me and he helped the Roman church. I don't know how or where but Paul knew and he had been in assistance to Paul as well as the Roman church and he says greet him. Say hello for me, give him my love, tell him I'm concerned. I mean, this is...this is marvelously intimate. And then he mentions Stachys. That is a very unusual Greek name, it means ear of corn. It would be like naming your son Cob, basically. It's a very strange name, even in that culture. He says, "Greet, Cob, my beloved," and again he doesn't have any compunction about expressing his deep love to this believer in the Roman church. I don't know where he met him or how he knew him, but he did...he

did.

Then notice verse 10, he says, "Greet Apelles," and I love this, "dokimosin Christ." Tried and proven true, tested and proven trustworthy, a tried and tested and proven brother faithful and dependable, Apelles...approved in Christ. Oh what a commendation that is to have that said about you, wouldn't that be wonderful? Tried and proven true, trustworthy, worthy of confidence. We don't know anything about him...that's all we know but, boy, that's enough.

Greet, he says, and this is very interesting, greet them who are of the household of Aristobulus, or literally in the text, greet those who are of Aristobulus. Now he doesn't greet Aristobulus, we assume that Aristobulus is not a Christian, not a believer, not in the church. But some of his household and the King James translators and the Authorized Version did write "putting in the household of" because it's implied...greet those who are of Aristobulus, those who belong to his household. If he was a Christian he would have greeted him, too, but he's not a Christian. So here we have the fact that the gospel has divided a family, it's divided a household. It may have been his wife or his children or part of his servants or all of the above. Aristobulus not being a believer but in his household there were believers. And we learn something else about the early church, that it was divisive, that Jesus said, "I come to bring a sword to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and to divide a family, I came to do that."

Lightfoot, the classical Greek commentator suggests something interesting about this man. In studying history around this time we find that it's likely that this man may have been the brother of Herod Agrippa I and the grandson of Herod the Great. So that Aristobulus was in the family of the Herods. He would therefore have been an intimate ally with Emperor Claudius, who at the time was the Roman Emperor. When Aristobulus died, Lightfoot says, his household, that is his wife and family and slaves and possessions would become the property of the Emperor and they would all be absorbed within the Emperor's Imperial household. So in the Imperial household you would have those of Aristobulus...it would be known as the household of Aristobulus.

Now the reason this view may have merit is due to the name Apelles who may be part of that. Apelles being a Greek name similar to the name Abel and Lightfoot suggests that a Jew named Abel wanting to identify with Roman culture would simply say his name was Apelles which would be the equivalent. And so very possibly this would be a Jew taking on that name.

Further, look at verse 11, he follows by saying, "Greet Herodion, my kinsman," here is a Jewish relative of Paul who definitely has some relationship to the family of Herod. So it could be that Apelles is a form of Abel taken by a Jew who belonged also in the household of Aristobulus who was a descendant of Herod of the Great. And Herodion obviously would have had some connection to the family of Herod so it's very possible that the household of Aristobulus was a group of people who actually came from Herod the Great and though Aristobulus was not a believer, at his death that

family had been absorbed into the Imperial household and many of them had become believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. And so we can perhaps speculate, we can't be certain, that there was within the very Imperial household a growing congregation of those who loved the Savior. What a wonderful thought..what a wonderful thought.

Then verse 11, we mentioned Herodion who is related to Paul, then he says another household, "Greet them that are of the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord." Not all of them are in the Lord, greet the ones in the household who are in the Lord. Narcissus again is not identified as a believer, but there were believers in his household.

Now who is Narcissus? Well William Barclay has done a little bit of looking into this and he suggests and agrees with Lightfoot who holds the same view that the household of Narcissus can be defined in this way. Narcissus is a common name but the most famous Narcissus was a free man who was secretary to the Emperor Claudius. And he exercised a tremendous influence over the emperor. In fact he is said to have amassed a private fortune of inestimable wealth in Barclay's terminology, four million pounds. But he had a tremendous amount of wealth. His power had lain in the fact that all correspondence addressed to the emperor had to pass through his hands and never reach the emperor until he allowed it to do so. So he made his fortune from the fact that people paid him large bribes to make sure their petitions and requests reached the emperor. Not a bad business.

When Claudius was murdered and Nero came to the throne, Narcissus survived for a little while. In the end he was compelled to commit suicide and all of his fortune and all of his household of slaves passed into the possession of Nero. It may well be his one time slaves which are here referred to. It may have been those who once belonged to Narcissus who now have been redeemed. And Barclay says if Aristobulus really is the Aristobulus who is the grandson of Herod, and if Narcissus really is the Narcissus who is Claudius' secretary, then this means that many of the slaves at the Imperial court were already Christians and the leaven of Christianity had reached the highest circles of the Empire. Wonderful to think about. We remember, don't we, in Paul's letter to the Philippians at the end he says the believers in Caesar's household greet you.

Then in verse 12 would you notice, these are interesting names of three ladies. "Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa," next time you have twins, there you go. They mean delicate and dainty, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. "Who labor in the Lord." And what he is using there is a strong word for labor, again it's that kopiaoword. And what he is saying is maybe a little play on word, you may be dainty and delicate but you sure work hard for the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. We don't know anything about them except that they labored in the Lord and that's enough, I suppose.

And then he mentions Persis, another female name. In fact, it literally means a Persian woman. In the church at Rome there was a Persian woman who loved Christ. We don't know how he met her but she labored much in the Lord. Now you say, "Was she better than Tryphaena and Tryphosa?" I

don't know. God keeps the records and I'm sure there are some saints who will commended for laboring and some who will be commended for laboring much. Would you agree to that? It may well be that she was older. It is interesting that Tryphaena and Tryphosa, present tense, who are laboring in the Lord, and the beloved Persis who labored in the Lord again an indication that Tryphaena and Tryphosa may have been young and Persis much older so that it is the volume of labor on the basis of years rather than the quality of it. She labored much, perhaps because she was older.

And then I love this little touch, "Greet the beloved Persis," now back in verse 9, "Stachys, my beloved," verse 5, "Epaenetus, my well beloved." Now that's okay when you're talking about a man, but you don't want to go around saying, "Greet my beloved Persis," and refer to a woman unless you're pretty serious because the word will get out. So Paul is very delicate and he replaces that possessive pronoun with just the definite article, the. Very discreet.

Notice verse 13, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord." Now he's the only one of whom that is said and some have suggested he was the only Calvinist in the church at Rome. Now I'm not sure we can make that conclusion. But I'm not sure, in fact, that we can even conclude that this is to say His choosing in terms of salvation. All Christians are chosen in the Lord. It may well be that he's just focusing on that. He's identifying him just for the sake of varying his pace. You say hi to Rufus, he knows Rufus, he loves him, he says Rufus is chosen in the Lord. It probably means more than just his salvation. It probably has the idea that he is chosen in a unique way for service to Christ.

And then he says, "Greet also his mother and mine." You say, "Wait a minute, is this Paul's brother?" No, no, this is not literally his mother, but what Paul is saying is the mother of Rufus was to me on some occasions a mother indeed...a mother indeed. We don't know anything about Paul's mother, but here was a woman who became in a personal loving way like a mother.

Now do we know anything about Rufus? Oh yeah. You want to know about Rufus? Look at Mark 15:21 and you'll never believe who Rufus is. Mark 15:21, Jesus is on the way to the cross and his cross is becoming very heavy. And in Mark 15:21 the soldiers compelled a man by the name of...what?...Simon of Cyrene, North Africa, who was...who happened to be passing by." Here's a guy who comes out of North Africa, comes to visit the city of Jerusalem for the Passover, he happens to be walking along the street and the next thing he knows he's immortalized as the one who carried the cross of Christ. And just...it says here in Mark...he is the father of Alexander and...who?...and Rufus. You know who Rufus was now? He's the son of the man who carried the cross. It may well have been that his brother wasn't a Christian and that's why Rufus is called "chosen in the Lord," to set him apart from Alexander who was not. We don't know that. But how fascinating it is that Mark wrote his gospel very likely from Rome. All right? And Mark wrote his gospel with the Romans in mind. Now if Mark was writing from Rome and had in view a Roman audience to read that gospel, then how wonderful for him to make a connection between the Roman church and the man who carried the cross. And so to make that connection as he writes about Simon of Cyrene, he simply says, "By the

way, he's the father of Rufus in your own fellowship...in your own fellowship." And we remember, don't we, that the book of Mark, the gospel of Mark, was written after the epistle to the Romans, and so Mark, no doubt, identifies this Rufus who is the same Rufus here greeted by Paul who is famous. And can you imagine how he was asked to repeat the story of how it was when his father carried Jesus' cross? These are real people...real people. And his dear mother who obviously came to faith in Christ through this passing incident and a whole family, perhaps even Alexander, we don't know, all have come to know Christ through God's grace in asking their father to carry the cross.

And then in verse 14 five men that we don't know anything about. "Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas," and those names will be on the quiz spelled correctly, "and the brethren who are with them." Now what this says is here were five men who had a church in a home. And he says say hi to those guys out there, those five who are leaders of an assembly within the whole Roman church. He's probably pointing out some leaders, some elders who are pastoring or shepherding one group of the Christians in Rome. As I said, they met in many places. We don't know anything about any of them.

And then in verse 15, "Greet Philogus and Julia, Nereus and his sister and Olympas and all the saints who are with them." They were little branch fellowships. And he says greet all the rest of these folks, men and women...greet them all.

Now just a moment on Nereus as we draw this to a conclusion. Who is Nereus? William Barclay again says, "In A.D. 95 there happened an event which shocked Rome. Two of the most distinguished people in Rome were condemned for being Christians. They were husband and wife. The husband was Flavius Clemens, he was the consul of Rome, the wife was Domatia and she was of royal blood. She was the granddaughter of Vespasian, a former emperor and the niece of Domitian, the reigning emperor in 95 A.D. In fact, the two sons of Flavius Clemens and Domatia had been designated Domitian's successors in the Imperial power. Flavius was executed and Domatia was banished to the island of Pontia(?) where years after Paula(?) saw the cave where she drew out a long martyrdom for the Christian name.

And now the point. The name of the treasurer of Flavius and Domatia was Nereus. Is it possible, says Barclay, that Nereus the slave had something to do with the making into Christians of Flavius Clemens the ex-consul and Domatia the princess of the royal blood? Perhaps...perhaps. "Greet Nereus and his sister and Olympus and all the saints who are with them."

And then the end of this section. "Greet everybody with a...what?...with a holy kiss. Greet everybody in the customary mode of the church and all the churches of Christ greet you."

Now we're going to stop at that point. But may I suggest to you that you're probably feeling in your heart what I felt that all of a sudden that early church has come to life and it lives and breathes just

like our church does. And we're not so far away, are we? We could as well describe ourselves here. Some of us who are laboring in the Lord, others labored much in the Lord, those who have endured hardship, those who are willing to give their lives, those who are beloved and well beloved, those who have been used by God to reach others for Christ, these are just people and Paul knows them and he loves them and if he could he would kiss them. I mean, we've all gotten letters from mom through the years with X's and O's on the bottom. We've gotten letters that say kiss everybody in your family for me. This is Paul, this is family, this is intimacy. This man knew what it was to stand for the truth but he also knew what it was to love his people. And that's the mark of the uniqueness of his wonderful character.

Well we'll pick it up that way next Lord's day. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we do thank You tonight for the wonderful joy of sharing in this time, for the insights that we have so enjoyed as we have seen Paul as he shares his heart with those he loved. We thank You for the example that is to us. Help us to demonstrate such commendation, such cordiality to show our love. We thank You that this man is such a model to us, who was so strong in doctrine, so unwavering in his teaching, so firm in conviction and yet so tender and so gracious and so thoughtful of the people around him. Help us to be so, help us to express in the way that he did our love to one another and help us even as that final exhortation rings in our minds to greet one another with a kiss of peace, a kiss of love, an embrace of affection that speaks perhaps in a physical way of what we feel in our hearts for those of like precious faith. And thank You, Lord, for what we have learned by way of the example of these who labored diligently, who labored much, who sacrificially gave their lives, who were well-known for their spiritual reputation, help us, Lord, to be the kind of people who if there was still being written a book of the New Testament might just find our names in such a list to the glory of Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.

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