

A Long Goodbye

Romans Session 54
(Final Session)

Romans 16:1-5

1 I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea,
2 that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.

Greeting Roman Saints

3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,
4 who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.
5 Likewise *greet* the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ.

I must begin this sermon by observing the prominence of women set forth in this passage. Here at Gray Avenue, we believe the Bible teaches male leadership in the basic church structure. But let me be quick to add that ministry work is not the sole province of men.

Phoebe, in *verse 1-2* serves her church in Cenchrea, and had been dispatched to Rome representing her church's official business. And the leaders of the church in Rome were instructed to cooperate with her.

And then you have a married couple—Priscilla and Acquilla—being mentioned next. Nothing is by accident in Scripture. All is inspired by the Holy Spirit, word for word. And I want you to note who is mentioned first in *verse 3*. Was that mere politeness, or a natural way of noting things by Paul?

The order of mention is significant in the Bible. During the early years of Paul's ministry, he was a partner with a man named Barnabas. Back then Paul was known as Saul. But they are mentioned together 4 times in Acts as "**Barnabas and Saul**." Until *chapter 13*.

About halfway through that chapter, Saul's name is changed to Paul. From that point forward, the order is reversed. From then on it's "**Paul and Barnabas**".

Obviously, Paul had become the leading figure in their partnership. But when it comes to this married couple Aquila and Priscilla, their order as a couple goes back and forth. Half the time one way, half the time the other way.

They are mentioned several times in the New Testament. Now I have to observe that not once was this sort of equal partnership highlighted in the lives of the married Apostles.

No mention of Peter and his wife having a ministerial tag-team approach in any context. But it was undeniably the case with these two.

It would appear that Priscilla and Aquila had equal amounts to contribute to the teaching ministry they had.

As evidence of that, allow me to reference some discipleship that went on between them and Apollos, who was one of the premier preachers of the day.

Acts 18:24-26

24 Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man *and* mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus.
25 This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John.
26 So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

Now I want you to notice a word that occurs in both *vs. 25 and 26*. It is the word "**accurately**".

In vs. 25 we are told that Apollos taught the things of the Lord "**accurately**". But in vs. 26 we are informed that he was taught the way of God "**more accurately**" by Aquila and Priscilla. What is the point here?

It was not a matter of correcting errors that Apollos had been preaching. It was simply a matter of increasing his depth of understanding. They brought him to a point of greater clarity in his understanding of the gospel.

Apollos was good to begin with. He was even better when they finished teaching him. And let's not miss main point here for our study this morning: this man Apollos—who ultimately ends up functioning on a high level of authority in the church—he was taught deeper matters of the faith by a woman named Priscilla.

And let me also emphasize that this phase of discipleship in Apollos' life was accomplished by a husband and wife team. It would not have been appropriate for Priscilla by herself to engage in his discipleship.

And because of the way they are portrayed in the New Testament, I must conclude that the respective contributions to ministry from Aquila and Priscilla were viewed by Paul as equally valid and valuable.

Now I don't want to overlook the obvious: I am well-aware that there is a verse or two where Paul says he will not allow a woman to teach in the church.

I believe that has more to do with the issue of pastoral oversight than what we have before us today.

My only point is this: men do not have a corner on the market when it comes to sharing their understanding of Bible doctrine.

Such a ministry activity is not the same thing as occupying a shepherding office within the church. That office is for the guys, end of discussion.

But women in the church have the potential of making major contributions to the spiritual and theological growth of others, be they male or female.

I'm reminded of John Wesley's mother Susanna. She was married to a pastor, Samuel Wesley, and together they had nineteen children.

As was common in the day, many of the children died in infancy, but the ten who survived received a good education at the hands of their mother.

Six hours a day—over a span of 20 years—Susanna devoted herself to the education of their children, both boys and girls.

A child's formal education in the Wesley household began the day after their 5th birthday, with the expectation that on that first day the child would learn the entirety of the alphabet. All but two of them succeeded in that task.

They were expected to become proficient in Latin and Greek, and to memorize large portions of the New Testament. They were well-tutored in the Classical Studies that were traditional in England at that time.

Susanna did all of this without much in the way of support from her husband. He was away from home so often that his contribution to the children's upbringing was minimal.

On one occasion, when Samuel was called away to London for an extended period of time, he had to bring in a substitute preacher to take care of the Sunday morning services.

For whatever reason, this preacher felt compelled to preach on the same topic every Sunday—*the repaying of one's debts*.

My guess is that there was someone in the congregation who owed him money. In any case, the man's sermons were dry and uninspiring. And church attendance began to suffer.

Before long, Susanna Wesley decided to hold afternoon services with her children and servants, so that they might have some actual spiritual input on Sundays.

Word of these family services spread around town, and a number of townsfolk who had stopped attending church in the morning began showing up to participate with the Wesley family in the afternoon.

At one point there were over 200 people who would attend her Sunday afternoon services.

It was through her consistent and unrelenting influence that John Wesley obtained a thorough spiritual foundation for his life. He wasn't converted yet. But after his own spiritual awakening had occurred, much of what his mother taught him

helped give direction and structure to the Methodist revival.

And say what you will about the Methodist church nowadays—and there is much that gives a person pause—but in those early years it was a powerful force for faith and righteousness. Literally millions found Christ through its various ministries.

Susanna Wesley eventually garnered the unofficial title of “*The Mother of Methodism*”. A fitting tribute for a woman who—as Jesus said of one other lady—“*She did what she could.*”

It is indisputable that the Bible portrays the husband as the head of the family. It also consistently sets forth male leadership in the church as being the standard we are bound to observe.

But nowhere does it say that women are relegated to having only a minor influence in ministry affairs. Nor does it imply that they have little to contribute to the spiritual development and theological vitality of the church as a whole.

Priscilla and Aquila were quite a pair. And they hosted the church that met in their house, as Paul notes in verse 5 of Romans 16.

Romans 16:5a

Likewise greet the church that is in their house.

Then Paul goes on to mention a number of other folks. names are listed.

Romans 16:6-13

6 Greet Mary, who labored much for us.

7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.

8 Greet Amplias, my beloved in the Lord.

9 Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys, my beloved.

10 Greet Apelles, approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus.

11 Greet Herodion, my countryman. Greet those who are of the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.

12 Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have labored in the Lord. Greet the beloved Persis, who labored much in the Lord.

13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.

Rather than spend time on the names and their definitions, I think it will be more helpful to spend time on the descriptive words Paul uses regarding these folks. These are the Roman church members he's talking about.

- *Mary* “labored much for us.”
- *Andronicus and Junia*...4 things he notes:
 - my countrymen, fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.”
- *Amplias*, “my beloved in the Lord.” Also, “*Stachys*, my beloved.”
- *Urbanus*, our fellow worker in Christ.
- *Tryphena and Tryphosa*, who have labored in the Lord.
- *the beloved Persis*, who labored much in the Lord.
- *Rufus*, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.

So what does this tell us about these individuals, and what does this tell us about Paul? Several things all at once. First of all, it is a window into Paul's mind, and the things that he values:

- Relationships, first and foremost. Terms like, “beloved” and “Mother”.
- Hard work. “Fellow worker” “Labored in the Lord” “Labored much in the Lord.”
- Personal gratitude. “Labored much for us.”
- Remembers his roots. “My countrymen.”
- Divine sovereignty. “Chosen in the Lord.”

And I got to wondering as I was going over this list and the things these people were known for. When it comes to us, when people think of us, is there some distinctive thing that comes to mind? Something we are known for? What are the distinctives in our lives? Just a thought.

And in line with that, or perhaps in contrast with that, is the idea that there are a couple of verses of folks mentioned here who have no distinctives that Paul brings up.

Romans 16:14-15

14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren who are with them.

15 Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

Now when you look at the commentators, Matthew Henry, Albert Barnes, Adam Clark, Thomas Scott—many of the commentators pass by these verses without any special remark.

For what were they distinguished? Absolutely nothing, or that trait of character would have been brought out by the apostle.

They were ordinary people, moving in an ordinary sphere, attending to ordinary duty, and meeting ordinary responsibilities.

And would I be mistaken to extrapolate from that, that Christianity is a faith for ordinary people?

Let's for the moment turn our backs on the distinguished and conspicuous people of the Bible and consider the place of these seven ordinary folks.

To be honest, I grow a bit tired and even bored with extraordinary people. Truth be told, most of the useful work of the world is done by unpretentious people who do not get much approval, and no one seems to say, "*Well done.*"

Today we salute all of us ordinary folks, who muddle along somehow. "*Good and faithful servant*"—that is the only title we care about. In case you missed it, this is not a religion for superstars.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called.*

27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty;

28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,

29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.

30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—

31 that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord."

Come to think of it, regarding that list of ordinary folks, I can think of one distinctive that most of them have in common. Their names are hard to pronounce.

Asyncritus, Phlegon, Patrobas, Philologus and Nereus.

At any rate, "*The ground is level in front of the cross*", as your former pastor used to say. Which leads us to our next verse.

Romans 16:16

16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you.

In our culture, it's more of a hearty handshake. But genuine affection is the main thought here. Across all boundaries, we are one in Christ. With genuine affection for our brothers and sisters.

And then Paul's attention shifts to the all-too-common problem of division in the church, and one of the main causes of it.

Romans 16:17-18

17 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.

18 For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

Just a couple of quick thoughts here:

According to **verse 18**, these folks have an agenda in mind. A self-serving frame of mind, not an honest pursuit of the truth.

We must therefore exercise the discernment to recognize these individuals when they are around us. To think for ourselves, which will enable us to keep these kinds of operators at arms length.

Because they can be charming:

...smooth words and flattering speech...

Their targets are the naïve and overly-trusting. I've had to confront these types many times. Pastors and elders have the additional responsibility to call them out, and guard the flock against wolves in sheep's clothing.

Romans 16:19

For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.

Knowledge is a wonderful thing. But the pursuit of knowledge regarding the details of evil—simply for the sake of curiosity—can be an exceptionally dangerous thing.

A curious fascination with the dark side of life can lead to temptation, or at the very least to being desensitized to what should be repulsive.

If you work in certain fields of law enforcement or psychiatry, such knowledge might be viewed as part of the job. That is one thing. But morbid curiosity is not a justification for wide-eyed exposure to the depths of evil.

Stay simple about such things, and let your focus be on the good.

Philippians 4:8

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

That is a one-verse prescription that has the potential to make a major contribution to a person's mental health.

And don't stop with just your thought life. Apply this to the kind of music and videos you indulge in.

Now you've got to love the seeming incongruity of the next verse.

Romans 16:20

20 And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you. Amen.

...the God of peace will crush Satan...

Satan will be crushed. Under our feet, no less. Not sure how that will play out ultimately. It sounds amazing.

But for the moment we can content ourselves with this much:

- We can resist the devil.
- We can wrestle successfully against his spiritual forces.
- We never have to view ourselves as helpless victims.

And then Paul starts to close out by letting his fellow workers add their greetings.

Romans 16:21-23

21 Timothy, my fellow worker, and Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, my countrymen, greet you.

22 I, Tertius, who wrote *this* epistle, greet you in the Lord.

23 Gaius, my host and *the host* of the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the treasurer of the city, greets you, and Quartus, a brother.

Four verses with closing thoughts and we are at the end of the book.

Romans 16:24-27

24 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you all. Amen.

He repeats the last half of **verse 20**, about the grace of Christ being with us. Remember the thing about repetition and the importance of things repeated in Scripture.

25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began

God is able to establish us. How?

We're established according to the gospel, which is the message about Jesus, and that message is the unveiling of a primordial mystery.

Please realize the value of what you possess within the pages of this book. Men fought and died for it. Kings would have given all they possessed to have it in their hand.

26 but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith—

By these Scriptures the mystery is made known all around the world. And to what end?

FOR OBEDIENCE TO THE FAITH.

27 to God, alone wise, *be* glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.

God's wisdom—the only true wisdom—has brought and is bringing all these wonders to pass. And to Him will be the glory through Jesus Christ forever.

It is finished!

Thank you Lord. And thank you Paul. Romans has definitely been worth the effort.