

Romans 16:1-27

We're in the last chapter of Romans today, a chapter that for many people is never read—it gives us a list of people who mattered to Paul in the course of his long and fruitful ministry, at the same time he also throws in a few bits of sound advice, and to round the epistle off, the benediction at the very end is a real thriller.

If these verses teach us anything, it is that Paul had a diffusive love for ordinary people. The word 'greet' appears nineteen times, and seventeen of them are by Paul. The text features thirty three names [twenty four were in Rome: seventeen men and seven women].

On top of that, the apostle mentions two households, the mother of Rufus, and the sister of Nereus. Allied to that, nine of the people mentioned were with Paul in Corinth [eight men and one woman]. It seems fairly obvious to me that, in the midst of a busy schedule, this guy Paul maintained a remarkable amount of deep loving relationships.

Yes, without doubt, Paul was a people person. He enjoyed the company of others, he thrived on personal friendships, he felt so much at home with those of kindred spirit. In spite of all his eccentricities and oddities, Paul excelled when he was in the presence of friends—they brought out the best in him. People were incredibly important to him. Networking was alive and well in the first century Christian church.

The first couple of verses are devoted to one of Paul's special friends, a lady called Phoebe. She was rock solid, the epitome of dependability. In fact, Paul was so impressed with her that he assigned a hugely important task to her—she was given the responsibility of delivering this epistle to the church in Rome. That's an indication of how much Paul valued her as a friend and colleague. She has a servant heart. Actually the word translated here has the thought of deaconess associated with it. Maybe she was, maybe she wasn't—it doesn't really matter, she was getting on with the job anyway! Titles mean little or nothing if the work's not being done!

The word also means someone who executes the commands of another. In other words, someone who did what they were told. It was frequently used to refer to household servants. A visitor at a leprosy hospital watched as a nurse tenderly cared for the ulcerated sores of a leper. With a shudder, the visitor said, 'I wouldn't do that for a million dollars!' 'Neither would I,' the nurse replied, 'but I do it for Jesus for nothing!' I reckon that is the same mindset that our sister Phoebe had. Nothing was too much trouble when she was doing it for Jesus!

Phoebe also displayed a considerable amount of courage when she trekked to the city of Rome. Rome wasn't just around the corner—she was travelling from Cenchrea, a town that served as the sea port for Corinth towards the east on the Saronic Gulf. It was an arduous journey and one that had many uncertainties linked with it, it was full of risk; the dangers were obvious and, especially for her travelling as a woman, they were higher than average. And yet, with God's help, she took it all in her stride, she simply got on with it! She was venturing forth into the great unknown for it seems that she didn't have family or friends in Rome, that explains Paul's comment for them 'to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and [for them] to give her any help she may need.' This woman has backbone, she is made of sterner stuff, she is a woman of grit.

Paul inserts a throwaway line when he speaks of her generosity. That's in the phrase 'she has been a great help to many people, including me'. In other words, Paul and many others had been on the receiving end of her big hearted goodness—as a woman of some means, she shared her blessings with them.

Well, folks like Phoebe are priceless in any local congregation; to tell you the truth, most churches I know could do with a few more of them!

I think we'll take a short music break at this point and, when we come back, I want us to work our way through the long list of names—I can assure you, we're in for a real treat!

MUSIC BREAK

What we need to remember is this—these are more than just a handful of names, they are people, real people. People whose lives have influenced the biblical ministry of the apostle Paul, people who have stood by him through thick and thin, people who have been closely associated with him on the frontline of gospel ministry—there's a lot of people here from a wide range of backgrounds and situations.

That says something about Paul for it implies that not only were his friendships intimate, they were also broad—this guy had quite an assortment of friends.

Sometimes we make the mistake of establishing relationships only with people of like mind. The fact is, carbon copy friends are seldom beneficial to one another. There is real benefit and challenge to be had when we engage in fellowship with others who are not 'yes' men.

And that surely includes non believers, albeit our relationship with them will be different than it is with those who know the Lord. The won't-go-away fact is that salt does no good so long as it stays in the salt shaker. The take-home lesson is, the man is a wise man who develops friendships that are both broad and deep.

Verses 3 and 4 are given over to that wonderful couple we met in the book of Acts, Priscilla and Aquila. Like Paul, they are in some kind of ministry. Paul is enormously grateful to the Lord for them for 'they risked their lives' for him. We have no idea where and when they did it, but we're glad they did! We're not alone, for all the Gentile churches feel that way too. That's a nice tribute from Paul because all too often people are inclined to forget those who went beyond the call of duty for them. Life goes on and so do we and sometimes the true heroes are left out of the picture.

When Paul wrote this letter, the two of them are living in Rome and, true to form, there's a church meeting in their house! That is often the way it was back then—church buildings just didn't exist, so they

met in each other's homes—that proves the point that you can have a church without a building!

Paul recalls in verse 5 his dear friend Epenetus: the chances are, up to this point, you had never heard of the guy. I can tell you, there's no way that Paul could ever forget him—he was his first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. That first convert is so special, it brings with it an unusual bonding and, as a result, in most instances, a real friendship is forged that lasts for a life time.

We read of Mary in verse 6 of whom Paul said 'she worked very hard for you.' What she did we have no idea but she gets a mention in Paul's roll of worthies. It's just so lovely a touch when people remember us for all the right reasons. Her work was certainly noticed and appreciated by Paul. Not that she did it for that reason, far from it—but it was such that it must have impacted Paul and been a blessing to him.

Paul refers to a couple of his relatives in verse 7, men by the name of Andronicus and Junias. I'm assuming they are blood relatives not just those from the same Jewish tribe of Benjamin, whatever, they have all done time with him in the slammer. In the midst of persecution, relationships become stronger and so much more meaningful.

Paul gives them a wonderful accolade when he speaks of their outstanding contribution to the gospel—here's a guy who isn't afraid to tell people how much he values and appreciates them, he believes in handing out bouquets when people are alive to enjoy them! It's also worth noting that these men were saved before Paul was—that's the thought behind the phrase: 'they were in Christ before I was'. Even though they were older in the faith, they have a warm respect for each other in the family of God. And that's the way it should be!

Ampliatus is endearingly spoken of in verse 8 as a believer for whom Paul has a special place in his heart. A couple of fellows are mentioned in verse 9, Urbanus and Stachys, and they come with different tags—the first is a 'fellow worker', the second is a 'dear

friend'. You see, again it underlines the point, that Paul has time for people for who they are—if you're a worker or just a close friend, Paul has lots of time for you.

Apelles, in verse 10, is acclaimed as one who has been 'tested and approved in Christ'. I'm assuming that means he has been through a rough time and has emerged unscathed – he has come through some particular trial with his faith proven and tested, as a result of that harrowing and distressing experience, his life is the richer and better for it.

Herodion is singled out as a 'relative' in verse 11, alongside the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus. It appears some of these folks were enjoying the blessing of household salvation, and the testimony of that event should not be underestimated in the first century. When entire families trust Jesus as Lord and Saviour, people sit up and take notice.

Three hard working dedicated women are addressed in verse 12 - they are Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis. By the sound of the names, the first two are sisters, they may even have been twins.

The names actually mean 'dainty' and 'delicate'. Someone has said that 'dynamite comes in small packages!' The man's a bit of a fool who writes off a couple of petite, pretty women!

In an age when women were publicly underrated and seriously undervalued, Paul's resounding praise for these ladies says more than we can possibly imagine. This macho man is more than happy to give credit where it was due!

Some things never change, the role of women in mission and church is hugely significant. The facts speak for themselves, they're often the backbone of much of what is happening today in the evangelical scene. The missionary statesman, Norman Grubb, said on one occasion that when it came to mission, his best men were women!

An interesting inclusion in verse 13 is Rufus. We can't be sure, but there's a fairly good chance that he's the same one we read about in Mark 15:21. If so, then Simon's experience at Calvary led to his conversion and that of his household.

Paul's reference to his mother 'who has been a mother to me' is a common term that we often use among ourselves. It means no more than she 'mothered' him. His mother treated Paul as if he was one of her own sons, she looked after him the same way she looked after Rufus!

The next couple of verses give us a total of nine persons whom Paul is keen to pass on his personal greetings to; not only them, but their family members and all the others who worship with them in their house church. So far as Paul is concerned, we're all part of one big family and, whether he knows them or not, he senses something of an affinity with them. There's a bond among those who profess faith in Jesus Christ.

He draws this section to a close with a word of encouragement in verse 16 for them to 'greet one another with a holy kiss'. In his day, that's the kind of thing they did; in some cultures today it may be a handshake, a hug, a slap on the back—whatever we do, we need to make sure it's real.

It's our way of saying to one another: 'Look, I care about you, I love you, you are special to me.' It's the kind of thing we need to do often and it's something we should never take for granted. What a difference authentic Christian affection can make to all of us in a cold, indifferent world.

We'll take a break there and that'll give you time to catch your breath, when we come back I want us to look at Paul's warning to them in verses 17-20.

MUSIC BREAK

No matter how good it was in the early church, Paul isn't naïve, he smells a few rats! Paul knows there are some people milling around who are up to spiritual mischief. And he labels them in these next few verses. He wants us to keep our eyes skinned for them and when we meet them, we are to avoid them like the plague!

These folk are sowing seeds of discontent among God's people, they're up to no good, they're only in it for what they can get out of it. If first impressions are anything to go by, they look ok. On the

face of it, they sound fine. But, says Paul, you can't judge a book by its cover! Paul blows their cover when he says in verse 18: 'by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people.' In other words, they have been warned, well warned! It seems to me that Paul has no sympathy with theological sleepiness. I reckon, we are to make a mental note of those who are off-base, and have no truck with them! That's the gist of Paul's off the shoulder comment in verse 17.

It's clear from what Paul says that the church at Rome has a good testimony in the region—people talk about it for all the right reasons. Their 'obedience' is legendary and, for Paul, it is a cause for thanksgiving and celebratory joy. He is thrilled to bits when he sees how well they're going on with the Lord. It does his heart good!

At the same time, he doesn't want their progress to be hindered or hampered by a few devious intruders. Paul's heartfelt plea in verse 19 is couched in different terminology, he wants them to be 'wise about what is good and innocent about what is evil'. This is an echo of Jesus' saying in Matthew 10:16 where we read: 'be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.' This is superb advice because our tendency is to be as wise as doves and innocent as serpents! This shows me that Paul's love for them is a protective kind of love—he wants the best for them, at the same time, he puts it on the line when he warns them of some of the pitfalls and dangers they are sure to face. Victory is theirs in Jesus, there's no reason why the devil should get one over them! And, to crown it all, God's grace will be there for them in their hour of need, that's verse 20.

Before Paul gives the benediction, he wants to single out a few more honoured friends—good folks who mean so much to him. Men like Timothy and Gaius we've come across before; men like Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater are not quite so well known to us, but very well known to Paul. You see, it takes all sorts in the kingdom of God! Men like Tertius who was obviously the gentleman who acted as Paul's scribe, and Erastus who held down a plum job in the local

authority, and the Gentile Quartus, all of them are highly rated by Paul.

The book ends with the longest benediction Paul ever penned. It is one of those God focused moments that takes your breath away. Every word is pregnant with meaning. Basically, Paul is eloquent and lavish in his praise of the living God: he sees him in verse 25 as an all powerful God, the omnipotent one; he sees him in verse 26 as the everlasting God, the infinite one; he sees him in verse 27 as the all wise God, the omniscient one!

An amazing doxology, full of praise for God's work and God's wisdom. No wonder Paul finishes with a loud 'amen'—in light of all that he's talked about in the previous few chapters, so much ground has been covered, so much teaching imparted, so many insights given—he knows that God is the only one who can see it through to the very end, and beyond the end, into the countless aeons of eternity itself.

At the end of our series of studies in the great book of Romans, we join hands with Paul and we declare with one voice: 'To the only wise God be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen.'