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Romans 16:1-6 “Portraits of Some Early Christians”

Intro. When closing his letters, it was Paul’s custom to include personal words such as commendations, individual greetings, and warnings. Paul followed that custom when he wrote this epistle to the Romans. In this chapter Paul sends personal greetings to twenty-six individuals and five households or “house churches.” It’s amazing how many people Paul knew in Rome, considering he had never been there. But in Paul’s missionary journeys he made acquaintances with a lot of people, some of whom had moved to Rome.

What is the significance of this list of names & greetings? For one thing, it shows that Paul was a friend-maker as well as a soul-winner. He did not try to live an isolated life as a monk; he had friends in the Lord, and he appreciated them. We have here an evidence of the close and affectionate relations which existed between Paul and his converts & associates. Often, the servants whom God has used the most were people who could make friends. They multiplied themselves in the lives of their friends and associates in the ministry.

Another truth that stands out from this list of names is the remarkable diversity of individuals. Jewish Christians are mingled with Gentile believers. Some had common slaves names (Ampliatius, Rufus, Hermes, Philologus, Julia), and others belong to prominent freemen and may have been a part of the imperial household. What may be the most amazing is the number of women that Paul includes in his greeting. Everything hints at a fellowship that transcends all barriers of race, culture, and sex. Indeed, there was a bond of love among the early Christians like nothing else in society. The list of names in this chapter is itself a wonderful testimony of the truth of Paul’s triumphant exclamation in Gal. 3:28, that in Christ there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Does such a bond of love characterize our church?

In our message today we will take a look at the last chapter of Romans in order that we may see Christianity in action. The gospel was translated into life and reality. Here we will see the warm life of the early church with a desire that our church should become more like the church of that day.

Of the many persons mentioned by name in this chapter, we will focus on only 4 of them. Each person is an illustration of the power of Christ to change lives. We will see examples of what a Christian ought to be. Now the first person of the early church we will consider today is:

I. PHOEBE

Paul says in v.1, “I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea.” Her name means bright or radiant. Notice with me:

A. Her Commendable Description – In v.1 Paul says, “I commend to you Phoebe” “Commend” (*sunistao*) is literally “I stand with.” The best introduction takes place when someone stands by your side, and thus introduces you to others with a favorable commendation. Thus, it means “to recommend to favorable attention, to vouch for.”

Paul was introducing & commending Phoebe to the church in Rome, for some business must have taken her there. Most believe that Paul asked her to carry to the church there this letter to the Romans. What an important assignment! Letters of commendation were necessary when a believer traveled from one community to another in which he or she was unknown to the saints. A church must know that a stranger arriving and seeking hospitality is a genuine member of the Christian faith. Three credentials of her faith are notable. As we review the commendable characteristics of Phoebe, see if this would describe you:

1. Sister of the Church – She is called “our sister” (v.1a), a word clearly denoting spiritual kinship as a sister in the Lord. The fact that we are a spiritual family in Christ is also indicated in v.13, where Paul says, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.” Rufus was not Paul’s physical brother. They were probably about the same age, and his mother was regarded as a mother in Christ to Paul. Even so, I had one sister & one mother according to the flesh, but I’m happy to say that I have many sisters & mothers in Christ that are dear to me. As Christians, we are indeed members of God’s family, and we are to act like it! In fact, Paul said in v.16, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Greeting with a kiss was as common in eastern culture as a handshake is in ours. Such greeting was probably kept within one’s own gender. The main point is that we are to regard each others as brothers & sisters in Christ, and treat each other accordingly in our greetings, & in other ways.

Furthermore, she is described as a:

2. Servant of the Church – The word translated “servant” in v.1 is *diakonos*.¹ Some transliterate the word as “deaconess.” But though the word for “servant” is the same as is used for the office of deacon, yet most of the time the word is used in a general way to denote the person performing any type of service that benefits others. Since Phoebe ministered to the saints, as is evident from the last of v.2, then she would indeed be a servant of the church, and so this doesn’t necessarily mean that she occupied an ecclesiastical office comparable to that of the diaconate. However, since Paul says she was a servant “of the church,” some believe they did have a group of widows & single women who were set aside for ministry. *If* that were the case, church history shows they were not part of the male body of deacons, and they were purely ministry-oriented. They did not exercise authority in the church. Be that as it may, we are not going to change the structure of our ministry based on a possible interpretation. The main point is that Phoebe was one of the leading ladies of the church in terms of her service to the Lord, just as many of us could quickly think of certain ladies in our church that devote much time to serve the Lord and others in our church.

One specific aspect of her service to the church is indicated in the last of v.2. There Paul wrote, “for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.” A clue as to the kind of help rendered by Phoebe is indicated by the word used (*prostates*), which signifies a leading woman who helps others with protection & provision. It was used of a wealthy patron in Jewish communities, so it may suggest that Phoebe was a person of some wealth and position who was thus able to act as a patroness. Phoebe may have been to her church what Lydia was to her church in Philippi (Acts 16:15). Her services may have included caring for the afflicted and needy, visiting the sick, assisting the young women, and helping to support missionaries like Paul. What a help she must have been to many.

We see here that Paul remembered the faithful service of those who helped him. He honored those who were behind the scenes, providing for his earthly needs that he might carry on his spiritual ministry.

¹ In the accusative case it has the same form, whether masculine or feminine.

We remember in the days of David that some men went to battle and others stayed with the baggage. When the battle was over, the fighters thought that the baggage guards did not need to have any of the booty that had been taken. “But David said, You shall not do so, my brothers, with what the Lord has given us; He has preserved us and given into our hand the band that came against us. Who would listen to you in this matter? For as his share is who goes down into the battle, so shall his share be who stays by the baggage; they shall share alike” (1 Sam. 30:23-25).

There is ever a need for such help. Ladies, are you among those who minister to others in such a way? Do you use your resources of money & time to help others in a supporting role?

By implication, we also see that Phoebe was:

3. A Saint of the Church - Notice *where* she was such a servant. It was the church as Cenchræa. It was one of the two seaports of Corinth. Corinth was one of the busiest trade centers in the ancient world. The Church in Cenchræa may have been a daughter-church of the church of Corinth. Phoebe was probably won to Christ during Paul’s year and a half of ministry in Corinth. If we take into account the hideous immoralities of Corinth & other seaport communities, it is almost certain that Cenchræa was an immoral & ungodly city where evil abounded. Yet in the midst of that city of moral filth, God caused a radiant flower of moral beauty to grow. Though it was tough to be a Christian in that city, Phoebe was able to live an exemplary Christian life through the grace and power of the Lord.

Likewise, we are living in an increasingly immoral & godless society, but Phoebe shows us that it is possible to live a godly life in a godless society. Will you join Phoebe in living such a life?

So Phoebe is called a sister, a godly servant of the church, a helper of many. What an epitaph! Would similar words describe you someday in your obituary? Or, if they were honest, they would have to say, “He lived for himself.” For those of you who serve unnoticed and unknown, here is an instance and a prophecy which may stimulate and encourage. God said in Amos 8:7, “Surely I will never forget any of their works.” This is a gracious promise which the most obscure and humble of us may take to heart. It matters little whether our work be noticed or recorded by men, so long as we know that it is written in heaven’s book of works.

Now because of the kind of Christian that she was, we also see in our text:

B. Our Duty to Such People – Paul’s appeal in v.2 was:

1. Receive Her in the Lord (cf. 15:7) – When Phoebe arrived in town, they were to welcome her as a fellow Christian, a sister in Christ. That is what it means to receive her “in the Lord.” They were not to reject her, or treat her as an outsider. Furthermore, they were also to receive her “in a manner worthy of the saints.” This could mean “as a fellow believer should be received.” But it is more likely that it means “as it becomes saints to receive a believer.” This would include offering to receive her into some believer’s home for meals and lodging. Traveling Christians in the days of the primitive Church could always be sure of finding hospitality with their fellow-Christians in any place where there was a church. Paul had written in Romans 12:13 that we are to be “given to hospitality.” Now they had an immediate opportunity to practice that command. Furthermore, they were to:

2. Help Her – As we see in the middle of v.2, Paul encourages the church in Rome “to assist her in whatever business she has need of you.” This suggests a definite task for her in Rome. We can only speculate as to what kind of business she had in Rome. It may have had something to do with a commercial business, since she seems to have been a woman of wealth. Or perhaps it had something to do with the Roman government. Either way Paul hoped

that a word from some of her brethren in Rome might give her good standing. She was deserving of help because she had helped many, including Paul himself. This is a beautiful portrait of a radiant woman. She truly lived up to her name.

Are you ready to welcome another believer in Christ and help them, even though you do not know them? Or do you reserve your friendship & help to friends and family that you know? If you give heed to Paul's teaching, you will quickly welcome visiting believers & new members into the fellowship of the church, and find out how you can help them. Let's be sure to do that for our evangelist that is coming in two weeks.

Next, we will consider together:

II. PRISCILLA & AQUILA

Paul says in v.3, "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus." I must confess that in my early days as a student of the Bible, I had trouble remembering which one was the man! I expected the husband to be listed first, and Aquila sounds a little feminine to me! But I really got confused trying to imagine a man named Priscilla! Indeed, one thing that seems to stand out is the fact that half the time Priscilla is listed first in Scripture, as here in Romans. The fact that she was listed first at all seems to suggest that Priscilla was spiritually stronger, or she was the more prominent Christian worker, or perhaps the more outspoken of the two. I've known some couples where the wife was very outspoken, and the husband hardly spoke a word. I won't mention any names!

Now I want to share first of all:

A. Their Background – Though Priscilla was a Jew, she had a Greek name, even one that was inscribed as being a priestess of Zeus.² Aquila was a Latin name, meaning "eagle." It was common for the Jews to have a second name which they adopted during their residence in heathen countries. Paul first met Priscilla and Aquila at Corinth (Acts 18:2). They had just come from Italy because the Emperor Claudius had expelled all Jews from Rome. They had given Paul lodging at Corinth (Acts 18:3), and worked together in the tentmaking business. When Paul met them, their lives would never be the same! As they lived and worked together at their trade, there would be many earnest talks about the Messiah, and both husband and wife become disciples of Jesus Christ. Paul was such a great soul winner! Later, they accompanied Paul as far as Ephesus and they remained there (Acts 18:18-19). By the time Paul wrote this letter, they were back in Rome. The death of the Emperor Claudius in October in AD 54 evidently meant that it was safe to return to Rome. This friendship in the Lord lasted through the years. Many years later when Paul wrote 2 Timothy, we find him again greeting Prisca and Aquila (4:19). At that point they were probably back at Ephesus.

One lesson from this is the fact that Priscilla and Aquila did not leave their Christianity behind when they moved. No matter whether they were in Corinth or Ephesus or Rome, they took their Christian faith with them. Too many Christians fail to continue their Christian faith on the same level when they move to a new community. Unfortunately, this has been true of many college students who have moved away from home. When you move to another community, find a church that proclaims the Gospel and the principles of Christian living, and keep growing in your Christian faith.

² William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT & Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957).

Another lesson is this: think of that complicated chain of circumstances, one end of which was around Aquila and the other around Paul. Claudius, in the fullness of his absolute power, said, "Turn all these wretched Jews out of my city." And while they were coming to Corinth from the west, Paul was coming there from the east and north. He was "prevented by the Spirit from speaking in Asia," and driven across the sea. At last he found himself at Corinth, face to face with the tentmaker from Rome and his wife. They realized they were of the same trade as tentmakers and got together. What came out of this unintended and apparently chance meeting? A couple was converted who became a great blessing to many believers of the early church.

Again, when Aquila and Priscilla reached Ephesus, they formed another chance acquaintance in the person of a brilliant young Alexandrian, whose name was Apollos. They found that he had good intentions and a good heart, but a head very scantily furnished with the knowledge of the Gospel. So they took him aside and instructed him, just as Paul had taken them aside (Acts 18:26). They had no idea what a mighty power for Christ was lying dormant in that young man. They instructed Apollos, and Apollos became second only to Paul in the power of preaching the Gospel.

Why are you here today? What circumstance did God use to bring you to this place, to hear this message, to establish a relationship with one or more of the good Christians of this fellowship? I believe that God works through His Providence. Can you not see God's hand at work in your life? Don't resist his work through circumstances, but trust Him to lead you in the right way.

Furthermore, we see:

B. Their Selfless Love – Paul says in v.4 that they "risked their own necks for my life." We do not know to what Paul is referring: perhaps to that tumult in Ephesus, where he certainly was in danger. If so, they probably hid him in their home until he could escape the city. But the language seems rather more emphatic than such danger would warrant. Probably it was at the same perilous juncture in which Aquilla and Priscilla had said, "Take us and let him go." Its deepest motive was love to Christ and not to Paul only. At any rate, this incident was so notable that it had been reported to all the churches of the Gentiles, and the gratitude of the churches for this act of self-sacrifice is alluded to in the latter part of v.4.

Faith in Christ and love to Him ought to turn cowards into heroes, to destroy thoughts of self, and to make the utmost self-sacrifice natural, blessed, and easy. We are losing more and more of our religious freedoms, and the day may come when we are persecuted for Christ. Will you be willing to risk your life to save other believers?

C. Their Church – Paul says in v.5, "Likewise greet the church that is in their house." There were no church buildings at this time, nor for well over two hundred years afterwards. Therefore, the Christian congregations were dependent upon the hospitality of certain church members who furnished their homes for this purpose. So twice we read in Scripture of the fact that this couple hosted a church of believers in their home. Perhaps they had more room than most other Christians. Their church could have met in the workshop where Aquila made tents. This was the way the church began and this was the way the church spread. It was necessary and appropriate in Apostolic times, as on some occasions today, for Christians to make their homes available for the congregations of the saints. In a city like Rome or Ephesus there would be more than one such congregation. Besides Priscilla and Aquila, household churches are

associated with the two groups of five believers each in verses 14 and 15. There must have been little groups meeting every first day of the week in houses all over Rome.

It is possible that Aquila was the pastor of his house church. This also says something about Pricilla, that she was willing to open her home every week to about 25 people. Ladies, can you imagine your home being a church? If not, why not? The church meeting in a home is fitting when you consider the fact that the church is a family. How much of this unity and fellowship we have lost. Church organizations have grown so large that the family feeling has gone.

Ladies, if your home is large enough to hold a dozen or more people, I want to encourage you to follow Pricilla's example. Would you consider hosting your Sunday School class for a revival prayer meeting, or even a weekly prayer meeting or Bible study?

Finally, let's consider the example of:

III. MARY

In v.6 Paul says, "Greet Mary, who labored much for us." Mary is a Jewish name, the same as Miriam, so Mary was a Jewish convert to Christ. There are two main thoughts I want to bring out from this verse:

A. We Ought to Labor for the Lord – In v.6 we see that Mary "labored much for us." She is another instance of a woman laboring of behalf of the church. The Greek word (*kopiaio*) refers to labor to the point of exhaustion. Like Phoebe, Aquilla, & Priscilla, she was a hard worker for the Lord. In fact, several others in this list of saints are said to have labored much for the Lord. In v.9 he mentioned "Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ." In v.12 he says, "Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have labored in the Lord. Greet the beloved Persis, who labored much in the Lord." There were many hard workers in the early church.

Are you working for the Lord? Are you involved in one of the ministries of the church, and working hard to do a good job? What you do in secular employment is important for paying the bills and providing a service, but it will be forgotten before long. But what you do for Jesus will be remembered by the Lord, & you will receive an eternal reward. I challenge you to labor for the Lord like these early Christians.

Furthermore, Mary and the other Christian women in this list of names demonstrate that:

B. Women Are Valuable in the Ministry of the Church – Three of the first 4 people mentioned in this list of names were women, all of whom were hard workers for the Lord. How much the Church of Jesus Christ owes to its faithful women workers! According to 1 Timothy 2:12, there are two biblical restrictions on women—they shall not teach men or usurp authority over men. But aside from this there is no service they cannot perform in the church. We remember that a group of women followed the Lord Jesus Christ when He was here on earth to minister to Him by serving meals and so forth (Luke 8:2-3). The place of woman among the Jews was indeed free and honorable as compared with her position either in Greece or Rome, but in none of them was she placed on the level of a man. To the world in which Paul lived it was a strange, new thought that women could share with man in his loftiest emotions. Historically the emancipation of one half of the human race is the direct result of the Christian principle that all are one in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion: Try to remember everyone who has ever done anything to bring you nearer to Christ. Send them a note of thanks and greeting, as Paul does here.

Some of you have moved into the area the last few years. Have you moved your membership to a local church?

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, "God's Discipline" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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