

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 16:1-16

As we come to the last chapter of Romans, we see a very diverse passage. Considering Paul's encouragements to greet some 26 different people, we may be tempted to give this chapter a cursory treatment.

That would be a mistake: The Early Church Father Chrysostom had this to say about Romans 16:

"... Many even of those who have the appearance of being extremely good men, hasten over this part of the epistle as superfluous ... Yet ... the gold founders' people are careful even about the little fragments ... it is possible even from bare names to find a great treasure."

One of the remarkable things about the Bible is that we often find incredible points of history, information, and spiritual insights in the most unlooked for places – including genealogies and greetings.

- **A Letter Of Reference**

Let's see what Romans 16 can tell us about the Early Church. We start with what looks very much like a reference letter from Paul to a woman named Phoebe. Paul writes:

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. 2 I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.

The Apostle Paul was a great believer in ministry partnership. A perusal of his various 1st century letters makes this very clear. Here, we have

an example of the partnership.

It appears that Paul's letter to the Romans was sent by a woman from Cenchrea named Phoebe. Cenchrea was a well-known eastern port in Corinth – so Phoebe is making a long trip to Rome.

It's unclear if this was Phoebe's only reason for going to Rome: she may have had other business there. Some scholars suggest there is a hint in the Greek that she may be going to Rome to settle a lawsuit of some kind.

Paul is sending his epistle by her – but he is evidently including a letter of reference. In the ancient world, such letters were often sent in order to verify the character of a messenger. The New Testament mentions these several times.

In sending Phoebe, Paul asks the Roman churches to welcome her and give her any assistance she may need, especially as she will be a visitor in the capital city.

Notice Paul calls her a “sister” and a “servant of the church.” The Greek word for “servant” used here, may well indicate that Phoebe is a “deaconess” in one of the churches at Corinth.

Beyond that, Paul indicates that she is a woman of financial means, as he uses the Greek word for “benefactress” when he says she has been a great help to himself and others.

- **A List Of Greetings: vv. 3-16**

What follows Phoebe's introduction is the single longest list of greetings in the entire New Testament. Paul will mention 26 Christians in total, naming 24 of them – and adding a variety of personal notes.

Scholars have asked how the apostle could possibly know so many people in Rome – considering he had not yet been there. One theory is that this list was meant for Ephesus, but there is no evidence it was

ever separated from the letter to the Romans.

Let's look at Paul's list and see the names and designations of these fellow Christians and workers. We will find some interesting information we would not have had but for Paul's greetings.

Beginning with verse 3, Paul says: "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house."

Priscilla and Aquila were well-known in the Early Church. Luke relates that they went to Corinth because of Emperor Claudius's expulsion order (Acts 18.2). Like Paul, they were tent-makers. Priscilla and Aquila worked with Paul in Corinth and later in Ephesus.

Acts 18 tells us how this couple met and mentored Apollos – a man who would become one of the most eloquent preachers of the 1st century. After Claudius's edict lapsed, Priscilla and Aquila eventually returned home, where they pastored a house church.

In verse 5 we find, "Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia." Epenetus had the distinction of being Paul's first convert in Asia Minor.

Verse 6 says, "Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you." Both Jewish and Gentile women were named "Mary", so her name does not indicate her ethnicity. However, Paul commends her service to the Church.

In verse 7, we have a surprise. Paul says, "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was."

We have some interesting facts here. First, Paul has relatives! That's something that we rarely hear about in any of Paul's epistles. Second, both Andronicus and Junia were both saved before Paul was.

Now comes the debatable part: Andronicus and Junias were probably husband and wife. Paul says they are outstanding among the apostles. Because Junia is a female name, scholars have debated how she could be an apostle. The answer seems to lie in the definition of an apostle. Let me explain:

There are two basic groups of apostles – or “sent ones” in the New Testament. One is, of course, the original 12 that we identify as Jesus’ disciples. However, the word “apostle” became synonymous with other “sent ones”, including evangelists and missionaries.

Paul is most likely expressing the fact that Adronicus and Junia were effective in spreading the gospel. This makes sense as Paul refers to them being in prison for their faith.

In verses 8-10 we have several names that are not familiar to the rest of the New Testament: Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, and Apelles. However, Paul attaches a description to each one. He writes,

Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ.

After this, Paul says, “Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.” Aristobulus was the name of a brother of Herod Agrippa I. He died in Rome sometime around 48 A.D. Paul may be referring to those slaves who continued to serve in his household.

In verse 11, we have another relative of Paul named. He writes, “Greet Herodion, my relative. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.”

Herodian may have been a freedman of the Herods or a member of the household of Aristobulus, the grandson of Herod the Great. Since Paul identifies him as a relative, Herodian was very likely Jewish.

Paul mentions three more women in verse 12, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis. All are said to have “worked very hard in the Lord”.

In verse 13 we have another gem. Paul writes, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.” Bible scholars generally identify Rufus as the son of Simon of Cyrene – the man forced to carry Jesus’ patibulum or crossbeam, as recorded in Mark 15.

Now notice the personal reference Paul makes here. He says that Rufus’ mother has been a mother to him as well. What a remarkable statement about how Simon’s experience with Jesus had transformed his entire family.

In the next two verses, we have a list of names that we cannot identify with any certainty. Paul greets, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus, and Olympas.

Paul concludes his long list of requests for greetings with one that is universal. In verse 16 he writes, “Greet one another with a holy kiss”.

In the ancient world, the “kiss” was a standard form of greeting. The Jews used this rather specifically among themselves. By the time of the second century Church, the “kiss of peace” had become a standard part of the Christian liturgy.

- **A Great Diversity:**

Having seen 26 different people that Paul identifies as a part of the 1st Century Church, something should stand out: There is both great diversity and unity in this list.

Rome was, of course, a very diverse population, with both residents and visitors from all over the known world. Still, it is remarkable to see how the Church reflected such a great ethnic and social diversity.

The Roman Christians represented every race, rank and gender. As we have seen throughout this epistle, the church in Rome consisted of both Jewish and Gentile members. Paul's list of people that should be greeted only confirms this.

We also detect a great diversity in social status. While some of the names, such as Ampliatus, Urbanus, Hermes, Philologus, and Julia were common slave names, others indicate much higher social status.

As J. B. Lightfoot puts it: "We seem to have established a fair presumption that among the salutations in the Epistle to the Romans some members at least of the imperial household are included."

Along with the indications of race and ethnic diversity, Paul also expresses the inclusion of both genders. As Stott points out, "Nine out of the twenty-six persons greeted are women: Priscilla, Mary, probably Junia, Tryphena and Tryphosa, who may have been twin sisters, and Persis, Rufus' mother, Julia and Nereus' sister.

I think its worth noting that, even in a thoroughly male-dominated 1st century world, Paul had a great appreciation for the contributions his "sisters" in Christ made to the spread of the gospel and the work of the ministry.

In our 21st century context, some seem to have a "hard and fast" disinclination to include women in the ministry. Neither Jesus nor Paul held such views.

If, in fact, Junia was Paul's relative and an apostolic missionary or evangelist, she would be the "case in point" when it comes to women who contributed to the life of the Church in the first century.

Paul greets four women who were "hard workers in the Lord's service." Priscilla was one of Paul's "fellow-workers". Junia was a notable evangelist or apostolic missionary, Phoebe was more than likely a deaconess and benefactress.

- **A Great Unity:**

We have seen the early Church's great diversity of ethnicity, social status, and gender. We also should recognize that this diversity did not impede their unity. If anything, this diversity was transcended their unity.

Now, we are not imagining perfect harmony. That is never possible among humans. The New Testament is not blind to the disagreements and debates that happened among Christ's followers. The epistle to the Romans is proof of the ongoing differences between Gentile and Jewish Christians that took place.

Still, there is a remarkable sense of solidarity in the Early Church. In Galatians 3:28, Paul wrote, "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus." The historical evidence seems to verify that this was the real view of the early Christians.

As for Paul, his list of people to be greeted includes those he calls "friends". Five times he notes individuals who are "In the Lord". Twice he uses "sister" or "brother" in Christ to describe people. In addition, he speaks of Rufus' mother as being a mother to him.

The day-to-day life of the Church in Rome makes us reflect on this unity despite their diversity. Local churches met in homes or household churches. Paul refers to this six times: Romans 16:5, 10, 11, 14, 15, 17.

These churches were not characterized by exclusivity. Believers of all ethnic backgrounds, social status, and gender met together for worship and the preaching of God's Word. As John Stott puts it:

"How could the church members 'accept one another', and how 'with one heart and mouth ... glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' if they worshipped in different, ethnically segregated house churches?"

Perhaps we could use a reminder that God never intended for His people to worship in totally heterogenous groupings. How can we agree with Paul that Christ has “broken down the dividing wall between us”, while at the same time rebuilding walls to restrict others from our worshipping communities?