

## “SISTERS, FELLOW WORKERS, MOTHERS TO US.”

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Scripture Texts: Romans 16:1-16

### Introduction.

Some might be thinking, what is the point of a passage of Scripture like this, what can it possibly say to us two thousand years after it was written? Isn't this just the apostle Paul exercising a little personal privilege by saying hi to 27 friends he sees in the Rome church picture directory. Is this just some cultural formality having no edification or benefit to us who are so far away from this in time and distance?

Let me take this opportunity to remind you of what Paul wrote elsewhere:

**II Timothy 3:16-17** *All* Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Did you notice that little first word? *All*. This is the benefit of having the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for our instruction, our edification, correction, teaching and training in righteousness.

When we come to a passage of Scripture that seems so far removed from our life with no possible benefit, the problem is not with God's Word but with us. If this was merely human, then we could dismiss this passage.

God is up to something here that is intended for all the church in all the ages and for all Christians in all ages, even us. Or should I say especially us.

Paul ends many of his letters with lists of names of people to be greeted, but this is by far the longest list. Let me draw your attention to four truths or lessons here for us.

**First, we see the heart of Paul.** Are you surprised by how Paul ends his letter. This is the most doctrinal and theological book in the NT, written by the greatest of the apostles, a man of great stature, wise, brilliant, educated, battle scared, a task driven man on a mission, a great man of courage, a man's man. His greatness can make him seem intimidating, above us, not like us.

The surprise is this great man turns out he is a people person, a man with a big heart full of tender affection and genuine love for others. We hear him being effusive with love, showing kindness and encouragement, expressing gratitude, praise and thanks. Naming names.

**I Thessalonians 2:7 -8** We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. 8 So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. Paul loved the church, and not just in a general way, he loved the people of the church, they were family to him, as brothers and sisters and mothers.

Should we be like this? Of course, that is what Paul is modeling for all of us, to be a church like this. People matter, names matter.

**Second, we see Paul's humility.** Paul wasn't a lone ranger, he loved to work with others. Paul is not jealous to take credit or keep the credit for himself. He is not so proud that he can't recognize the great labors of others and praise them for it.

**Third, we learn how to honor.** From the Spirit-inspired Paul it is appropriate and good to show particular regard for certain individuals, to single out for special attention and remembrance and thanks.

Paul didn't worry about offending or slighting or leaving anyone out, Paul looks for ways to find something good to say, some way of conferring some honor. His motive was love, not flattery, not false or manipulative or looking for some return, but free expressions of love.

Notice all the different ways Paul describes his relationships.

Phoebe supported me, Prisca and Aquila risked their lives for me, Epaphroditus is much loved by me, he was the first convert in Asia, the first fruit of the Gospel of Jesus, Mary worked hard. Andronicus and Junia were fellow prisoners, Urbanus was a fellow worker. Tryphaena and Tryphosa and Persis were all hard workers in the Lord.

Greet them, Paul says. What does that mean? Is Paul just saying to them, "Say hi for me?" No, he means for them to convey his love. Four times he says beloved. Paul loves these people and he wants that communicated.

"You'll never believe this, but the apostle Paul himself has been thinking about you and praying for you and specifically told us to let you know that he loves you and hopes to see you soon. You mean a lot to him and the distance by which you are separated does not in the least diminish his heartfelt affection for you." (Sam Storms).

Greater ministry is almost an apostolic ministry, "I greet you and welcome you in the name of Jesus. I am glad you are here."

**Fourth, who to honor.** The church at Rome was an incredibly diverse church. Men and women from all walks of life, young and old, married and single, rich and poor, slaves and free, those of Greek and Roman descent, from Rome, up to half may have been immigrants.

Did you notice the remarkable inclusion of ten women? There is Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena and Tryphosa possibly sisters, maybe even twins, then Persis, Rufus' mother, Julia and the sister of Nereus. Sisters, fellow workers, mothers of us all.

### **Women in the church.**

Women are unbelievably important in church. Paul shows the kind of man and kind of Christian he is in his tender kindness toward women and his affirmation of the valuable role they play in his life and in the life of the church.

It is often pointed out and affirmed that among the religions of the world, Christianity by far and away honors and respects and elevates women more than any other. Wherever the Gospel has penetrated, women have fared far better than where it hasn't.

There are several reasons for this.

**First**, the doctrine of the image of God is unique among religions. God created men and women in His image, both equally bear the image of God. We are equal in dignity, value, worth.

**Second**, both men and women are redeemed by the blood of Jesus and restored to reconciliation with the Father and receive adoption as sons and daughters by grace through faith.

**Third**, both men and women upon believing in Jesus are indwelt with the Holy Spirit of God.

**Fourth**, both being indwelt, are given by the Spirit spiritual gifts to be used in the body of Christ for the sake of each other. There is no discrimination between the sexes, no superiority or inferiority.

**Fifth**, the value of the sexes is further emphasized in our different roles and responsibilities given by God. We are not identical or interchangeable, rendering one unnecessary. Because of our complementary roles and responsibilities both are needed and necessary.

In the time that remains, I will focus on the first two women.

### ***Phoebe.***

Notice Paul doesn't say greet Phoebe, but he commends her to Rome. She is not of the church in Rome, but rather the one sent by Paul to carry this letter from Corinth to Rome.

Paul uses three terms to describe her, sister, servant, and patron.

Our **sister**, part of our spiritual family. Your sister and my sister. We are family. She has the same Father as me and you. She has the same inheritance of eternal life as you and me.

When we are adopted into the family of God we become sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters in Christ. We are to be to each other all the best that those terms imply. There should be a strong bond of love, affection, care and compassion. We should be willing and ready to do for each other whatever we would for a close family member.

The ground of our Christian fellowship is our union in Jesus Christ. The family of heaven is a stronger and more lasting bond than our family of earth.

The terms for human relations are given to our new spiritual relationships since we have a new nature as children of God.

**I Timothy 5:1-2** Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, 2 older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

Christian men, sexual immorality with a Christian woman is not just fornication (or adultery); it's incestuous. Every female believer in this church family is your sister in Christ. Protect her and treat her only with love and kindness.

**Second**, he calls her a *servant* of the church. The word servant here is diakonon, from which we get deacon or deaconess. Deaconesses were an official office in the church especially appointed to minister to the needs of women. Phoebe is serving the church in some sort of officially recognized capacity.

She held an honorable and holy office in the church which she exercised faithfully. For this reason Paul holds her up for honor, one who is worthy to receive any help or assistance she needs. She devoted her life to serving God's people and God's special servants.

**Third**, Paul calls her a *patron*, one who was a great help. She used her wealth for the sake of the church, the body of Christ. Paul has no hesitancy or shame in acknowledging his need for assistance and support. He is not a strong independent man who needs nothing from anyone.

She went above and beyond and contributed to the needs, the support, the suffering of the saints and especially Paul. Phoebe may be widowed, or maybe never married. She uses her social status and material means for the glory of God and the good of the church.

### ***Prisca and Aquila.***

Paul lifts up another example of a kind of ministry in the church, a married couple.

We know this couple from several of Paul's letters. They are well known for their hospitality and using their home and marriage for ministry. They were a ministry team, a beautiful picture of how God uses married couples. We need more couples to mentor younger couples.

They were tentmakers like Paul and were from Rome until the emperor Claudius kicked all the Jews out and they went to Ephesus where they met Paul. Later they were with him in Corinth. Later when the edict was lifted they returned to Rome. They served wherever God moved them.

Paul gives them high praise, calling them *fellow workers in Christ Jesus*, in the yoke with him. Notice how Christ-saturated all of Paul's praise is. Paul speaks of others as fellow workers in the Lord, who work hard in the Lord, are approved by the Lord, chosen in the Lord.

What in this world is eternal, what is truly lasting and enduring, what will survive the great fire at the end of time? What are you working for, what are you investing in? Only the church is eternal, only what is done for the Lord is lasting.

Women, don't waste your life, don't give yourselves over to worthless or trivial or just temporal pursuits. Think about what is Christ-centered, Christ-serving, Christ-exalting, church-building, Gospel-spreading and use your spiritual gifts for His glory.

Women, give your God-given femininity to God, and all the gifts that come with it in the service of your Lord. Give your feminine strength and authority to the church for the glory of God.

They *risked their necks* for Paul. They didn't spare their own lives in seeking to save Paul's life. Paul may be saying, "I am alive today because of Prisca and Aquila."

Phoebe gave financially, Prisca and Aquila gave physically. They were all in and in it together, they were ready and willing to die for the sake of the Gospel, to take a risk for Jesus. The two became one in sacrificial service for the church.

Husbands and wives, become students of God's Word together, grow in this grace of knowing God and His Word. Grow in prayer together. What is the mission or purpose of your marriage? How can you as a married couple be a fellow worker in Christ Jesus?

One quick side note. Think about how different this risky business is today.

In how many churches across our country are there members who are telling their pastors to back off, cool down, change your tone, soften the message, you might catch more members with honey, don't say things that will get you in trouble? And if he ends up in jail or persecuted or forced out, well maybe it is his own fault, or at least partly to blame.

You never hear anyone say that to the apostles as they proclaim the Gospel.

### **Implications and application.**

Let me make two applications from the example of Paul.

#### ***First, rise up and call her blessed.***

Notice how effusive Paul is with praise and gratitude, with acknowledging ministry and giving thanks to God and to them for it.

Let us be quick to praise and give thanks, both publicly and privately, in the church and community and in our homes.

Did Paul get in trouble for naming names? Did he avoid doing it so no one got hurt?

Never be ashamed of honoring women, praise them, affirm them. Wives of elders and deacons and staff members sacrifice a lot, a lot of evenings alone. Remember their service and sacrifice and thank God for their work for the Lord.

Think about the people in your life who have most helped or influenced you, perhaps especially those who have been spiritual mothers on your spiritual journey. Thank God for them and if possible thank them. Rise up and call blessed those gifts of God's abounding grace in your life.

**Proverbs 31:31** Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

When you think of the spiritual sisters and mothers who have been pillars of our church, who do you think of?

The Scholtens, Van Beeks, Van Dykens, Jennie Bakker, Bea Vreugdenhil, Rena Steensma, Nella Boxum, Helene Blankers, Bertha Meenderinck, Gussie Berendsen, Mini DeKoekkoek, Clarice Blankers.

I could go on, so many quiet, strong servants of the Lord.

What would happen if I started naming the living? Some of you would be embarrassed, you would decline being honored, others would wonder why I didn't name them. There are many who have been a particular blessing to me, a huge support, prayer warriors.

I can get away with naming the staff, after all we work the most closely and the most frequently, day in and day out. Kara and Susan, Nancy, Stephanie, Nelda, all, so gifted, hardworking, serving with a willing spirit. They have a great attitude, this church is blessed and I am. I know not only do I give thanks but so does the whole church.

***Second, don't be afraid to be tender, loving, kind, gracious and grateful.***

Use terms of endearment freely as Paul did. The Dutch have a sad history of being emotionally stoic/repressed. Many here in the older generation speak of not hearing the words "I love you" from their parents, or receiving hugs. In some cases, not even any words of encouragement.

Phama says the hardest thing she had to do each year was pick out a Mother's Day card that said something remotely appropriate for the kind of mother she had, one who never expressed any kind of tender affection.

Let's break those old patterns, let's break down the walls of coldness, indifference, reserve. It's not really an ethnic issue or a personality issue, it's a heart issue. When you are Christ-saturated as Paul was, the words of love flow freely. Let's be a warm, affectionate, caring church.

Is there love in our hearts for Jesus? Is there love in our hearts for others? Does it leak out of our hearts and into our mouths, at home and at church. Men, if a man's man like Paul can do it, you can.

Tenderness and affection should not be lost among Christians.

Remember back in the old days people wrote letters that started with Dear and ended with Love? Have you noticed how that has gone away? Especially with social media and email. I just realized this and I am starting to reverse the trend. Don't be afraid of terms of endearment, we are family.

I close with a reminder of why it is so important to for Christians to gather often for worship, fellowship and mutual encouragement and affection. God intended for us to be a family and we are not a family if we forsake the gathering together of ourselves. We can't experience what Paul talked about and praised. I can assure you of this, as the moral fiber of our culture continues to disintegrate and opposition to the church increases, we will need each other more than ever. And the one thing, above all else, that will unite us and provide the support and encouragement we all need is when we, like these many Romans, are together "in the Lord."