

“OUR FELLOW WORKERS IN CHRIST.”

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Scripture Texts: Romans 16:1-16

Introduction.

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* Scripture, even Romans 16, is God-breathed, Holy Spirit inspired and profitable for our instruction, our edification, correction, teaching and training in righteousness.

When we come to a passage of Scripture that seems so removed from our life with no possible benefit, the problem is not with God’s Word but with us. This is not just an afterward, or an appendix, like the acknowledgements some authors put in their books.

This is not just Paul’s Christmas card list, or him flipping through the pages of the Church of Rome pictorial church directory. What can we glean from this unique chapter in the NT? Paul ends a few of his letters mentioning a couple of names, but nothing close to this.

The names of people matter to God. He is a personal God, He knows us intimately. He remembers our names. Every name is a real person, this is not fiction, every name is a story, a part of God’s plan and purpose. Those who confess faith in Jesus, their names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Paul’s greetings to the saints in Rome.

First, we see the heart of Paul. Are you surprised by how Paul ends his letter. Romans is the most doctrinal and theological book in the NT, written by the greatest of the apostles, a task driven man on a mission. His greatness can make him seem intimidating, above us, not like us.

The surprise is this great man turns out to be 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.

Paul loved the church, and not just in a general way, he loved the people of the church, they were family to him, he spoke of them as brothers and sisters and mothers.

This whole section exudes tender, heartfelt love for the saints, fellow brothers and sisters who are in the yoke together laboring for Christ and serving His Church.

It is surprising how many of the saints in Rome Paul already knows. This letter really is personal. At least four times he calls beloved those who may be particularly well known to Paul, for whom he felt a special affection.

Should we be like this? Of course, that is what Paul is modeling for all of us, to be a church like this. Paul is doing Romans 12, let your love be genuine. This is a shepherd who knows his sheep by name. Fathers of the faith should be tender-hearted and gracious.

Second, we see Paul's humility. Notice Paul describes those who are not apostles but engaged in Gospel work as his fellow-workers. What humility, he doesn't parade his apostleship with some superiority, he doesn't take himself too seriously or think too highly of himself. Paul wasn't a lone ranger, he loved to work with others. Paul is not jealous of taking credit or keeping the credit for himself. He is not so proud that he can't recognize the great labors of others and praise them for it.

We are fellow-workers with the apostle, with pastors, teachers, elders, deacons. This is why I don't care for the old dominee title. I am called to a particular role, but that doesn't make me more important than those serving in other roles. You have heard me say I think most highly of those who care for our babies and children.

Fathers of the faith should be humble, something I have seen in our council here over the years.

Third, we learn how to honor. It is appropriate and good to show particular regard for certain individuals, to single them out for special attention and remembrance and thanks.

Notice how Paul connects positively with each one and commends the evidence of God's grace in everyone who is laboring for the Lord on behalf of the church and the spread of the Gospel. I have encouraged us to see the hand of God's grace in our lives, do we see it in other's lives?

Paul looks for ways to find something good to say, some way of conferring some honor. His motive was love, not flattery, not manipulative or looking for some return, but free expressions of love.

Paul wanted the church to be quick to encourage, not quick to condemn. He wanted them overflowing in praise and honor, instead of overflowing in criticism.

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, some from Rome, up to half may have been immigrants.

Paul mentions 25 individuals by name, and several others not by name, his love embraces them all. The richness and depth of the diversity of this church is incredible.

Married couples, Prisca and Aquila, maybe Andronicus and Junia. They were a ministry team, a beautiful picture of how God uses married

couples. We need older couples to mentor younger couples. Paul says Andronicus and Junia were in the Lord before him, so older members. Paul calls them and Herodian his kinsmen, most likely meaning they were Jewish. Herodian could be a government official of one of the clans of the Herod's.

Ampliatius and Urbanus were very common slave names in Rome. Other names may be freedmen and freedwomen in Rome.

Some of these names are clearly converts from the pagan Roman world. A Christian mother most likely would not have named her children after ancient gods, Hermes and Olympas.

There are generations of family members, a mother and son, Rufus. What high praise that Paul calls her a mother to him. No doubt she gave to the apostle what a mother gives to a child, love, kindness, help, support, prayer. She nurtured, cared for physical needs, treated him as a son to her. Provided hospitality. Oh the blessing to a church is one who is like Deborah, a mother in Israel. Is there a greater power in the world than a godly mother who's motherhood extends beyond her own family?

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, equally important in the work of Christ.

This is the body of Jesus Christ, all uniquely created and gifted, all needed and necessary. None who is inferior or superior. All called by God and all blessed by God.

Notice the language is the language of family. Our sister, my beloved, my kinsman, a mother to me, the brothers, greet one another with a holy kiss. We are family.

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.

Fifth, 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. Paul sees their work in the highest possible way, as in Christ.

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.

Being in Christ is what is most important. Paul refers to the least and the greatest as in Christ. From the wealthy patron Phoebe to the lowest slaves, all fellow workers in the Lord.

We are all broken sinners, we all deserved hell, we are saved from the wrath of God by the blood of Jesus, we are all forgiven and redeemed, filled with the Holy Spirit. That is how we should look at each other.

There are a lot of things that divide us and differentiate us one from another: color of skin, ethnicity, education, political leanings, wealth, loyalties of one kind or another. But the only thing that ultimately ought to matter is the one thing that transcends all other differences: we are each one "in the Lord" by faith alone. SS

Finally, notice how Paul describes and praises the work of the saints. A servant of the church, fellow workers, hard workers, workers in the Lord who worked hard for you.

But the one word he doesn't use is *volunteers*. What if we have been using the wrong word for what we are doing with our lives in the church and for Jesus? What if the word volunteer and church are actually oxymorons, they don't belong together?

Community organizations, political action committees, homeowners' associations, non-profit groups, they all need volunteers or they couldn't function.

Volunteers serve on their own terms, when they want, where they want, for as long as they want. It is about convenience, offering whatever leftover time or energy they choose to give.

But in the church of Jesus Christ it is altogether different. The church is not a volunteer organization.

God's chosen leaders were never called volunteers. Could you imagine Paul writing "Paul, a volunteer of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, " (Romans 1:1). Paul did not write. "To the volunteers in Christ who are in Colosse." (Col. 1:2).

We are members of the "family of God," the "body of Christ," and the "kingdom of the Son." (1 Peter 4:16; 1 Cor. 12:26; Col. 1:13).

Christ is our king calling us into the service of His kingdom as ambassadors of Christ. It is a calling to a lifetime of sacrificial commitment.

A servant of the king considers their time, energy, and resources belong to the king, and serving is a lifestyle rather than a casual hobby or a side gig.

Notice how Christ-saturated all this work of the church is. It is driven deep into the bedrock of Jesus. It is not we who live, but Christ who lives in us.

We serve as those who love Jesus and His Church, who believe God calls us to serve Him and His church using the gifts has given us to be a blessing.

We need a new vision. Not of programs or events but of the God who loves us. We need to kindle in our hearts a true joy in our God who is infinitely worthy of our love and worship and grateful service. Is God

amazing to you? Does what He has done for you overwhelm you and stagger your imagination?

Don't think in terms of what you can do for Jesus, or for the church. Think in terms of what God wants to do through you. Not in your wisdom or strength, but in His wisdom and strength. What is there that if you did it and God blessed it, you would know it was Him and not you?

The Pharisees were known for putting heavy burdens on peoples back, heavy demands. Jesus calls us to a serious life of discipleship and service, but with a huge difference. He promises to carry us, He promises to give us His Spirit, His wisdom, His strength. He says seek me and I will take care of the rest.

That is why the sacrifice you read about in the NT is a joyful sacrifice. It flows out of a profound gratitude for all Christ has done and continues to do, and out of a confidence He is faithful and good.

Why was Paul willing to suffer as much as he did? Because to him it was nothing compared to what Christ did for him.

Why were the Christians in Rome willing to work hard, to sacrifice, willing even to risk their lives and be prisoners for Christ's sake, to lay down their life? Because of Christ's work for them.

They were Christians who felt a deep sense of gratitude and indebtedness to Jesus for what Jesus did for them and they would do anything for Him. We can never outdo what Jesus did for us.

It's not that the word volunteer is a bad word or a bad concept, but it is too shallow, it doesn't go deep enough into what being a Christian is all about. It doesn't get to the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Jesus, a fellow-worker in Christ, an ambassador of the king with a royal commission.

I Peter 2:9-10 You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of

him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Pray about that kind of vision and heart. Pray about what God wants to do through you as a joyful response to what He has done for you. What will you not do for Him?

Implications and application.

As we ordain new elders and deacons this morning, fellow-workers, laborers in Christ, called to work hard on our behalf, I have sincere gratitude to those who have labored with me and for us.

Elders: Glen B, Blaine K, Roger P. Deacons: Tabin B, Mark T, Jason V

We were together three years. I will miss them in the council room. As Paul said of Phoebe and others, so I can say, they have been a great help to me. They have prayed for and loved you.

As we pray for our Children's Ministry let's change our vocabulary, we are not volunteers, we are Christ-followers with a high calling, serving the living Christ, enabled and equipped by His Holy Spirit.

If the Holy Spirit has men and women who are willing to be used, there is nothing He cannot accomplish.

The Wycliffe missionaries we support, Ken and Chris VW recently wrote in their newsletter:

Acts tells us that Stephen was not concerned with his own well-being, but was ALL IN when proclaiming the truth of Jesus. My Filipino friend John is ALL IN as he risks his life to bring the good news of Jesus to his own people. Edward, in Cameroon is ALL IN, doing his part to see God's word translated into his own language – even when it means riding a motorcycle for hours in the rain on slick red clay roads. Then I have to ask myself,

“Am I ALL IN?” Chris and I desire to be fully engaged in the work that God has called us to; we want to be “ALL IN.”

Being all in for Christ. Will you take a step toward being all I for Christ who went all I for you?

Prayer: Thank you Lord for the leaders here, the servants, those who give and give, who spend themselves and their money and time and life. Thank you for all you have done for us.