

The Epistle to the Romans Faithful Christians living out the Gospel Romans 16:1-24

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

“Gradden”, “Here”; “Harkins”, “Here”; “Hughes”, “Here”; “Woosley” “Here”.

I guess that you can probably remember a similar daily ritual as another day at school started. It was hardly the most exciting part of the day, but at least it was not lessons! It meant something too. It meant that I was there ready to expose my sponge like mind to another day of learning. Whoever said that school days are the happiest days of your life lied!

As we start the last chapter of Romans, and consider the first sixteen verses, we come to a roll call of our brothers and sisters in the Lord who were a tiny part of the early church. Let us begin by reading about them. Remember, these are not just names from a long ago history like Pliny, Boadicea or Aristotle, but family. In these days when tracing your family tree is fashionable, as believers on the Lord Jesus, we can trace ours all the way back to the very beginning of the church!

“I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.”

“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise *greet* the church that is in their house.”

“Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ. Greet Mary, who laboured much for us. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.”

“Greet Amplias, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys, my beloved. Greet Apelles, approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the *household* of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my countryman. Greet those who are of the *household* of Narcissus who are in the Lord.”

“Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have laboured in the Lord. Greet the beloved Persis, who laboured much in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren who are with them. Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you.”

I want today to look at these verses and consider three principles that I think a passage like this is intended to teach but before that we shall consider three of the named individuals. But I shall start with a warning. It would be possible to make myself look very clever by constructing a message using the meaning of the names of the individuals mentioned here. I have to say though that I am not at all convinced about the soundness of that as a manner of biblical interpretation. Or it might be interesting to try to link people mentioned here with other passages. For example, is the Rufus here the Rufus, son of Simon of Cyrene, mentioned in Luke 23:26? However, the problem of speculation is that it is soon taken as authoritative teaching. Quite simply, we just do not know. Did the parents of Tryphena and Tryphosa really give them those names to make a point?

Now certainly, some names in the Bible are given for a specific purpose. Jesus, of course, is the supreme example of this. We are explicitly told that He was to be given this name as He would save His people from their sins. Who would not thrill at the fact that He is Immanuel – God with us. Others in the Bible, like Jacob, had their names changed for a specific purpose and again it is quite legitimate to highlight the difference and draw out the reason why.

However, I do not think that we have legitimate grounds here for such certainty, not least because it may depend upon which “names book” you go to to determine the names and their meaning. What this list of names does highlight is that the early church was made up of many nationalities. There were those from Rome, Greece and Asia. It spanned the social spectrum from the self employed business people to those who were probably slaves. There are both men and women in the list. It is only in the church of the living God that all the barriers and divisions that this world creates to buttonhole us can be removed. Indeed, they should be removed.

I know of a local church where in the fellowship are a bank manager, and a convicted financial fraudster. In this day and age which so heavily breaks down society into its myriad demographics to target them with tailored advertising etc., we need to remember that in Christ we are one! Sadly, I also know of a local fellowship where a believer was politely told that he did not really fit the type of person they were looking to build their church with. He was not a young professional and so was unlikely to be able to financially support the growth of the church to reach out into the neighbourhood. I do worry when I hear of fellowships being started for a particular type of person. This was not the church in Rome at the time of Paul’s writing!

It seems right that we begin our considerations with Phoebe, a sister from the church in Cenchrea. This was a town close to the much larger cities of Corinth and Athens in southern Greece. She was a long way from home. We do not know why she was in Rome at this time. She was clearly an important and integral part of the fellowship in Cenchrea as she is described as a servant. This translates the Greek word ‘diakonos’, from which we get ‘deaconess’. Right at the start of this chapter, we see that uppermost in the mind of Paul was this valuable sister. The church is not a males only club where only the men can do anything important! Every single believer has a vital role to play and a healthy church will be looking for situations where every member is able to develop their full potential.

But what Paul says here does not in any way conflict with what he writes to the church in Corinth, or pastorally to Timothy. We cannot infer from this verse that there was already in place a formal system of clergy that matches what we have today in some churches. These two verses simply do not say that. What they do say is that she was a servant and that is a quality that we all should want to mirror. There are too many today who want to go to church to “get something” and too few who want to “give something.” May we seek to be like Phoebe and serve the church where God has put us.

In commending Phoebe to the Roman believers, we see that Paul had a wide, and correct, understanding of what the church is. Southern Greece is a long way from Rome, and travel in those days was often slow and hazardous. Paul was probably in Corinth at the time of writing and

yet he still has a concern for what is going on far away and for a sister who was not a part of his local fellowship. It is very easy for me to be so preoccupied with what is happening in my local church that I lose a sense of the global aspect of the one true Church of God. If something is going wrong elsewhere that does not directly impact on me then I quickly lose interest. This is not the attitude that Paul displayed. He also tells the church in Rome to receive her in a manner “worthy of saints.” There is a right and proper way for Christians to behave that has nothing to do with the culture of the day. Quite simply, I treat you as if you were Jesus Himself. Anything less is not Christian. As those who are set apart for God, we are to behave in the same way that Jesus would.

Next in the list are Priscilla and Aquila. This wife and husband are always mentioned together and sometimes the wife is mentioned first, sometimes the husband. This really does seem to be a marriage where both served the Lord together. There may be situations when the Lord calls one partner to serve alone but it really is a good thing when both husband and wife are together involved in the work of the Lord. I know that our English translation says that they “risked their own necks” to help Paul. Anatomically that may well be correct but in the original Greek language, the word neck is singular highlighting just how closely they were involved in working with Paul.

The church that met in their house is also remembered. What a testimony this couple have! They move around the Mediterranean world and yet they have a church in their house. Formal church buildings would not become widespread for another 150 – 200 years and so the early believers met wherever they could – indoors and out. God had so prospered Priscilla and Aquila that they wanted the local believers to meet in their home, which they made available for their use. If God has prospered us in any way, do we have a similar desire? It would be very easy for me to segregate my church life from my work life, from my family life etc. God wants to use all my life and for me to open to Him every aspect of my life.

As we move down this list of names I think that we can learn three important principles. Firstly, accountability in service. Then availability in service and finally attitudes in service.

Accountability in service.

As I read these verses, I am reminded that God has seen fit to record the names of these faithful Christians for all time. There is a relatively small number of people from 2000 years ago that history records for us, and yet Patrobas is one of them! Little did he realise as he went about his service for the Lord that for all time his name would be a tribute to faithful service. Nothing that we do for the Lord is ever wasted.

The Lord commended Mary of Bethany saying that “she has done what she could.” This list of names reminds me that God has taken note of others who did what they could for the Lord. In this chapter we have a list of individuals who will stand before the Judgement seat of Christ and not be ashamed. It is tragic to think that so many of those that Stachys and Urbanus knew, who may have prospered much in this life are now forgotten completely and will be ashamed as their works are burnt up before His assessing eye. If there is one message to take from these sixteen verses, then let it be that we must all appear before His judgement seat, not to answer for our sins, but to give account of our stewardship and service.

It is also an example worth following that Paul positively commends so many others in his letters. We ought to look for opportunities to commend others in their service. It is so disheartening to do something in service and for nobody to notice. It is not that we flatteringly praise – that is only likely to puff up the prideful flesh. But, if someone has for example spoken at my church, then it is only reasonable that I make some comment to indicate that I have at least been listening, rather than immediately starting to talk about the weather, or football or a hundred other trivia.

There was a time in David's life when he yearned for a drink of water from the well in Bethlehem. There was only one problem. The town was in enemy hands! Three of his bravest men broke into

the town and brought a jar of water back to their king. David immediately poured out the water on the ground – as an offering to God. When I was younger, I always used to think that this was such a waste. Now I realise that this showed that David truly valued what mattered – the lives of his men. The only person worth the water that nearly cost his men their lives was God! God always values properly what is done for Him. Even if others do not, He does and so we should not become discouraged in our service.

Availability in service.

There is something that strikes me as a little odd as I read these verses. Other than their names, we really do not know anything about any of these believers, with the possible exception of Aquila and Priscilla. What on earth did Philologus and Julia do that should earn them a mention in the Bible? Why is Apelles particularly approved in Christ? If I try to answer this question, I would suggest that it is because what matters to God is not what we have done so much as who we are. It is the motive behind what we do far more than the results of our service that God is concerned about. When God asked the question, “Whom shall I send?”, He received the answer “Here am I, send me.” That is still the answer He wants.

We live in a very results driven society. Everything is judged by what it achieves. Sadly, this ungodly attitude can all too easily creep into the church. The evangelist who preaches and sees 100 souls saved is far more acclaimed than the one who preaches week in week out with no obvious signs of success. This is not right. God does not need us to accomplish His will but in grace He does condescend to use us in the building of His church. He is perfectly capable of achieving everything that He has purposed for mankind without any of our efforts. However, He does long to see obedience and humility and many other Christlike attitudes displayed in our service.

I used to have these words inscribed in the front of my Bible: “If you labour without success it is because others will succeed after you; if you succeed without labouring it is because others have laboured before you.” Only very rarely in Christian service do we do a work that is entirely novel and see immediate results as a direct result of what we do – it is just not the way I believe that God works. Unlike many secular job adverts which have a long list of requirements for the suitable candidate, the only ability that God looks for in His servants is availability. What we actually do is of minor importance to God. So let us never grow weary in His service when it seems to be without success or when it does not achieve much. It is the fact that we are being obedient that matters. The master’s commendation of his servants in the parable of the talents was, “Well done! Good and faithful servant.” It was the servant’s character that was rewarded not the fact that he was a fruitful and profitable servant.

Lastly, attitudes in service.

Did you notice as we read through these verses how often Paul says of these people that they “laboured much” or “my fellow workers” or “my beloved”? Though, so far as we know, Paul had not yet been to Rome, he has a real sense of appreciation for these believers. Are you as vitally interested in the work of the Lord in a far away country as you are in your local assembly? Paul is unstinting in his praise of their labours. Sometimes I may want to appear better than I am and so think by diminishing the role played by others I somehow enhance my efforts. Paul did not take this mistaken path. Those he commends he does so fully – they had “laboured much.” There is a real sense of unity in the work. They were all employed by the same Master, engaged in the same building project. There is a danger that I become very parochial in my spiritual attitudes. If it is not my church growing then I am not much interested, if not frankly jealous. Let us learn to rejoice gladly in any signs of growth in the Christian testimony even if it is not in my fellowship. After all there is still only one Church and one Lord and as He blesses one part so all should rejoice in that. We are not in a spiritual competition, where the winners are the biggest church, the fellowship doing the most or anything else along those lines. We are all a part of His body and we should all work towards the building up of that one body. Of course, we must never neglect our local

responsibilities. After all, I am in the local church that He has put me in and in that there is a work that He wants me to do. But I must never fall into the trap that it is just what I do that matters.

Paul ends this section with a clear request that these believers show their Christian love to each other. I know that in the UK we tend to be a bit reserved and like our own space. That's OK. A warm handshake is equally appropriate as the kiss. Paul ensures that there is no impropriety by including the word 'holy' with the kiss of greeting. For some of us, we may find it difficult to get along with everyone in our local fellowship as well as others. Realistically this is inevitable as we naturally tend to get along better with some folk and find others just not quite so easy. However, this is not to influence our ability to be polite towards all. We may not choose to go on holiday with everyone in our church but the holy kiss is one way that we can visibly display the true unity that exists between all believers. There is something terribly wrong if there is an individual in my assembly that I could not kiss in greeting. We cannot possibly expect the world to believe that God loves us and has forgiven us when we cannot get close enough to a brother or sister to kiss them. It may well be that as we prove that we can at least get along with each other that over time we may surprise ourselves by finding that we have actually grown to like each other and the Spirit has quietly been working in two hearts to draw them close to each other and to the Lord. For sure, there may be times when one or another has deeply hurt us, but never as much as we have hurt the heart of our Father with our casual attitude to sin or our hard heartedness. So let us resolve to display this right and loving attitude towards one another and clearly demonstrate to the world the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, and reflected in our love for each other.

We close then our penultimate section of our studies in Romans by reminding ourselves of the importance each one of us has in being a part of the Church. We have all been called to serve Him, albeit in a myriad of different ways. God will always take account of what we do for Him and it is fitting that His followers rightly appreciate the service of others. He is far more interested in our availability than our ability. It matters little what we achieve so long as we are obedient to our calling. And it is so vital that we appreciate each other and all that others do. His work is not a competition but rather a collaboration. Let us always seek to encourage each other in His service as we patiently await His return!

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on the epistle to the Romans chapter 16, verses 1 – 24: Faithful Christians living out the Gospel, talk number T1183.

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