

Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 11 of 13)

The People Around the Table

Romans 16:1-16

Mark Vroegop

¹ I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, ² that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well. ³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. ⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. ¹¹ Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. ¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphæna and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. ¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. ¹⁵ Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you (Romans 16:1–16).

There are some passages in the Bible that you might consider “speed-reading” or doing a “fly-over” as you read through the Bible or participate in a Bible Study. There are certain sections of Scripture where a person might be inclined to think, “I’m not sure why this is important.” Perhaps you read ahead in Romans in preparation for this Sunday and wondered, “What is Mark going to do with this text?” Or maybe the question was even deeper and more theological: *Is this list of names as inspired or as spiritually helpful as Romans 8?*

I’ve chosen to spend a Sunday on this text for four reasons:

- 1) I believe that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is true: ¹⁶ *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,* ¹⁷ *that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.* Romans 16 is Scripture, and it has been given to us for a reason.
- 2) I want to help you see that there are passages in the Bible that require you to read them over and over and over. And as you do, glorious things begin to emerge that you did not see in the first or second or third reading. I want you to read the Bible more carefully because of this text.

- 3) There is surprisingly more here than just a list of names. Within these 16 verses is a beautiful tapestry of theology, love, commendation, and mission, all of which are set in the framework of relationships.
- 4) One of the focal points for our Elders and our entire church in 2016 will be relationships. I hope to show you today how vitally important it is that you are constantly thinking about and working on your connectedness to people in this body.

My prayer is that you will leave today more in love with the Bible, more enamored with the church, and more committed to building gospel-centered, mission-oriented, and people-impacting relationships. I want you to see how the gospel is lived out through relationships.

The Importance of Relationships

The book of Romans has been filled with propositional statements. Paul has embedded theological meaning and truth into statements that are meant to be understood, embraced, and lived. In Romans 8:1 he said, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." There were sweeping implications of that truth proposition, including how the church viewed their own lives (Romans 12:1-2) and how they welcomed one another despite their differences (Romans 14:1).

There is a direct connection between theology and relationships. What you believe about grace, God, sin, forgiveness, and the cross has very important effects on the relationships around you. Something is terribly wrong if there is a disconnect between your theology and your sociology. In other words, your view of God will surface very evidently in your relationships.

Now there are other places in the Bible where we are told about this theology-relationship connection directly (e.g., Rom. 12:10, 1 John 3:10 and 4:20, John 13:34-35). But in this text we see it illustrated by Paul as he begins to close the book of Romans.

When you first read verses 1-16, you cannot help but notice all the names. There are 26 people who are mentioned specifically. Before we look at specific people in this list, it is important to notice the personal nature of Paul's ministry. Even though he has never visited Rome, there are specific people that he has on his mind and heart as he writes the book of Romans. He is not merely writing a theological treatise on justification, righteousness, and God's sovereign purposes. There are real people who he knows and loves that are going to receive this letter, and I am sure that shaped why and how he wrote this wonderful book.

The best theologians, pastors, teachers, small group leaders, and disciplers are those who connect their content to real people. Gospel ministry always involves content and context. Whenever you are involved in ministry you must always ask 1) What needs to be said? and 2) To whom am I speaking? Effective ministry flourishes when the minister knows the depth of the content and the needs of the people. Gospel ministry takes place in the context of relationships with real people with real names.

The second thing to notice is the number of times that Paul uses the word "greet." Seventeen different times Paul uses this word. Sometimes it is used for an individual and other times it is used for

a group or a house church. Sometimes there are longer statements connected to the person, and other times there is simply a list of names.

When you read these greetings, however, you need to see them as more than a “tell So-and-So I said hello.” These greetings were a product of the love that Paul had for the people in Rome. Jesus told his disciples in John 13:35 that *“by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* Paul’s affectionate greeting of these individual people, along with the short affirmations that he gives, are a by-product of a mutual love that Paul had for these people and they for him. He greets them because he loves them.

The beauty of the gospel is the way that it changes people and unites them to other believers. Notice the kind of qualifiers that are connect to the names:

- v. 1 – Phoebe: “our sister” and “a servant of the church”
- v. 2 – Prisca and Aquila: “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus”
- v. 7 – Adronicus and Junia: “my kinsmen . . . well known to the apostles”
- v. 8 – Ampliatus: “my beloved in the Lord”
- v. 9 – Urbanus: “our fellow worker in Christ”
- v. 9 – Stachys: “my beloved”
- v. 10 – Apelles: “approved in Christ”
- v. 11 – “those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus”
- v. 12 – Persis: “beloved”
- v. 13 – Rufus: “chosen in the Lord”

In sending greetings, Paul is doing more than just acknowledging these people. He is illustrating the way in which the gospel creates a love the people have for one another. A relationship with Christ changes the relationships that you have with other people. There is a special bond that is created between people who share a common relationship with Jesus.

For some of you, this Sunday is a place of refuge after spending some time with family, where it was unusually difficult because it was just another reminder that you and certain members of your family are headed in very different directions. Your values, your views, and what you live for are increasingly different. One of the things that makes the church special is the gathering of people who love the same Lord, share the same values, and have the same vision for the world. The church was designed to be a place of refuge where the gospel could be celebrated in the context of loving relationships.

That is why when you read the New Testament, there are many “one another” commands, including “love one another” (John 15:12), “be devoted to one another and honor one another” (Rom. 12:10), “live in harmony with one another” (Rom. 12:16), “accept one another” (Rom. 15:7), “serve one another” (Gal. 5:13), “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2), “forgive each other” (Eph. 4:32), “encourage

one another" (Heb. 10:25), "pray for each other" (Jam. 5:16), bear with one another (Col. 3:13), and many more.¹ That is a fabulous list, isn't it?

What's noticeably absent from the list are the countless ways that our relationships are marked by less than loving actions. Pastor Ray Ortland gives us another list that is often more typical:

*Sanctify one another, humble one another, scrutinize one another, pressure one another, embarrass one another, corner one another, interrupt one another, defeat one another, sacrifice one another, shame one another, judge one another, run one another's lives, confess one another's sins, intensify one another's sufferings, point out one another's failings. . . . The kind of God we really believe in is revealed in how we treat one another.*²

The beauty of the gospel is how it changes you, how it changes other people, how it changes your relationships, and how it changes an entire people. In 1 Timothy 5:1-2, Paul identifies some very specific applications as to how the gospel changes our relationships: ¹ *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.* The gospel changes how we relate to one another.

Finally, it is also important to notice that throughout the list Paul frequently refers to people who are fellow laborers, workers, servants, and even fellow prisoners. There is a very clear sense that they are all part of the same mission, and that the advance of the gospel is something that they are doing together. Throughout church history the gospel has most often advanced through teams of people who were in relationship with one another. It is very rare that you find a solo-operator having a great influence. A friend of mine who is a student of revival movements says it this way: "History is transformed among friends." Some notable examples would include the following: Jesus with Peter, James, and John; Paul with Barnabas, Silas, and John Mark; John Calvin with John Knox; The Holy Club at Oxford with John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield; the Second Great Awakening with "The Five Wild Men of the Cumberland"; C.S. Lewis with J.R. Tolkien, greatly helping one another in the writing of the *Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. God usually works through the relationships of His people as they come together for a common purpose. The gospel is usually spread with friends.

Is that how you think about church or the ministry in which you are involved? Do you see the value of relationships around you? Do you see the value of people knowing you and the value of knowing others? Or are you a solo-operator? Do you keep people at a distance and merely come to church with the goal of making as few connections as possible? I think Romans 16 illustrates a better path – a journey together that makes relationships the fertile ground for the demonstration and the spread of the gospel.

¹ For a complete list see:

http://storage.cloversites.com/wakarusamissionarychurch/documents/59one_another_scriptures.pdf

² <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/rayortlund/2014/05/24/one-anothers-i-cant-find-in-the-new-testament-2/>

The Variety of Relationships

Now that we have big picture view of the connection between relationships and the gospel ministry, let's dig deeper into some of the specifics situations and circumstances that are inside this list. There are a number of observations that we can make.

First, the list includes people from all walks of life. The list of names includes people with Jewish, Roman and Greek backgrounds. It includes married couples (Prisca and Aquila), people that we would assume are single, and both men and women. There are wealthy people (Phoebe) and slaves ("those who belong to the family of Aristobulus"). There are individuals and house churches addressed ("and all the saints with them"). So part of the beauty of what is here and what should characterize every church is the diversity of the people involved in gospel ministry. It reminds me of Galatians 3:26-29 - ²⁶*for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.* ²⁷*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.* ²⁸*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* ²⁹*And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.* Romans 16 includes people from all walks of life.

Second, the list shows us the significant role that women played in the life of the church. Phoebe is a wealthy woman who delivered the letter from Paul to the churches in Rome, and she is identified as a "servant," which can also mean that she was a deaconess in the church at Corinth. Prisca is the wife of Aquila (more on them in a moment). She is normally listed before Aquila, which is likely due to her socio-economic status. Seven other women are mentioned in the list, and four of them are followed with the Greek word for labor, which Paul normally used to describe his work or that of other missionaries or ministry work (1 Cor. 15:10, Gal. 4:11, Phil. 2:16, Col. 1:29). It seems that these women were actively involved in the work of the ministry. While Paul clearly identifies the role of Elder or Pastor for men (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1), there is an equally clear affirmation of the importance of these women in the work of the ministry in other, non-pastoral roles.

Third, it is fascinating to consider the different words that Paul uses to describe his connection or his partnership with the people who are on the list. He uses the terms sister, servant, fellow workers, fellow prisoners, church, first convert, kinsman, beloved, approved, workers, those who belong, chosen, a mother to me, and saints. The variety here is stunning! The extent of Paul's relationships is part of the beauty of what it means to be engaged in the lives of people. In other words, the more you connect with people, the more different and the more enriching are the ways that they bring blessing in your life.³

Fourth, there are some very interesting and note-worthy people on this list. Let me highlight a few of them and spend some time with the most notable, Prisca and Aquila.

- Verse 5: Epaenetus was one of the first converts in the province of Asia, perhaps part of the household of Stephanas mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:15.

³ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/commending-and-welcoming-radical-risk-takers-for-christ>

- Verses 10-11: Aristobulus may have been the grandson of Herod the Great, Narcissus may have served Emperor Claudius, and Paul's words may be written to those who are a part of these famous households – as servants or as family members.
- Verse 13: Rufus may be one of the sons of Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21) who carried the cross of Jesus prior the crucifixion, and his mother was especially significant to Paul.
- Verse 7: Andronicus and Junia were Jewish believers who came to faith before Paul ("in Christ before me"), were well-known to the apostles, likely because of their joint missionary efforts,⁴ and were fellow prisoners with Paul.
- There are five house churches that are mentioned by Paul: (vv. 14-15) – the list and reference to others probably indicates two house churches, (vv. 10-11) – the identification of the two houses of Aristobulus and Narcissus probably includes two more churches, and the most obvious is in verse 5, with the church that met in the home of Prisca and Aquila.

These two believers need some additional comment because we know more about them than anyone on the list. We first read about Priscilla (the informal version of Prisca) and Aquila in Acts 18.

¹ After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. Acts 18:1–4 (ESV)

Paul was in the middle of his second missionary journey when he met this wonderful couple. They became dear friends and trusted co-workers in the ministry. Romans 16:4 is telling: *"... who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well."* Priscilla and Aquila became a relational bright spot for the apostle Paul, and they traveled with him to Ephesus (Acts 18:18). While in the city of Ephesus, they heard the eloquent Apollos speak, and they helped him more fully understand the life and ministry of Jesus (Acts 18:26). While they lived in Ephesus, a church met in their home (1 Cor. 16:19). At some point they moved back to Rome and once again opened their home for a house church (Rom. 16:5). At the end of Paul's life, as he wrote 2 Timothy, Priscilla and Aquila moved back to Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:19).

What do we make of this couple? They were unique and greatly used by God. From what we can tell, they were dearly loved by Paul, they were willing to take great risks for the gospel, they were mature in the things of God, they were willing to go wherever they were needed, and they were generous with their homes. Everywhere they went, they were used by God for ministry purposes. That doesn't happen by accident! Priscilla and Aquila were special people to the apostle Paul.

One of the great joys and benefits of being involved in the life of the church and ministry is the people with whom you are able to connect and minister. Granted, the relationships can also be complicated and painful when things do not work or when sin takes hold. But I am telling you that there is something really sweet, meaningful, and deeply rewarding when you get to serve together with

⁴ For a very helpful explanation of this verse, in contrast to the assertion that Junia was a female apostle similar to Paul (a common argument with those who hold to egalitarianism), see Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998.

people you love. There is something uniquely powerful about participating in the advance of the gospel with brothers and sisters in Christ. The providential combination of ministry and meaningful relationships is part of God's plan, and it presents an amazing opportunity for great joy.

The Leveraging of Relationships

As I've spent time in Romans 16 this week, the critical importance of relationships has emerged and gripped me. There is something special in this text and something commendable to think about and pursue, especially as a church in 2016. So, by way of application, let me ask you to consider a few questions.

1. Do you see the spiritual value of relationships?

One very significant application from this text is to realize that relationships are far more central to the life of the church, gospel ministry, and even our spiritual growth than what we often realize. Sometimes we can think of relationships with other believers as something that would be really nice to have, but that are not entirely necessary. This text, along with the "one another" commands, shows us that ministry is not just about what we do, but also with whom we do it. Spiritual growth is not just about what you know about God and your spiritual maturity; it is also about whose life you are impacting and how you are helping others to grow.

Therefore, the goal is not just to come to church, to grow personally, and to serve God effectively. The goal is come and connect, to grow and to share, and to serve together. One of the reasons that we started a campus in Fishers was to make this a part of the conversation of our entire church. Starting new congregations requires more people, creates new relationships, and opens new opportunities to serve. But here's the thing: don't forget that our goal is not just to serve. The goal is to serve *together*. That's true for Fishers, and it is also true for North Indy.

You've may have noticed that over the last few months we've been emphasizing finding new ways to connect. Part of the reason behind this emphasis is the acknowledgement on the part of our Elders that a large church, for all its strengths, can be a place where it is easy to come and go without getting connected. Our Elders and Pastors believe that spiritually-oriented relationships are a central part of what it means to be a church and a critical context for spiritual growth. In other words, spiritual growth and effective ministry takes place in relationships.

2. What value do you add to the relationships around you?

The final application relates to what someone would say about you if your name made the list in Romans 16. Imagine Paul or one of our pastors writing a series of greetings to people in our church. Put your name in this sentence and complete it: Greet _____ because he/she is _____. What would people say about you? What would they affirm? There is an important passage in Hebrews that we need to keep in mind:

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)

I've said this before, but it is a fact that as Pastors and Elders review the names of people in our congregation there are some people who make us sigh and others who make us smile. There are some people whose lives are a joy, but there are others whose lives are a grief. I want to encourage you, exhort you, and plead with you to be the kind of person who makes our pastors and Elders smile because that is actually good for you.

3. What relationships might God want to use?

The second question that I want you to think about relates to the existing or potential relationships around you. Who are people that God has already placed in your life? If you are married and have children, what are you doing to maximize the relationships in your home for spiritual influence? Next year we are going to be using the Fighter Verse Memory System from Children Desiring God.⁵ Along with a weekly memory verse, there is a wealth of resources, including a family devotional.

Maybe 2016 could be a year that you find new ways to leverage your family relationships for spiritual growth. If you are single or in a serious relationship, what could you do this year to pour into the people around you for spiritual good? If you are serving in an area of ministry, how could you use serving together to not just "do ministry" but also to "do life" with other people? Or maybe God is calling you to use your life experience and the Word to disciple someone, get involved in our Soul Care ministry, or find creative ways to get deeper into the lives of the people in your Small Group. The point is simply that God providentially placed people in your life. Don't miss the opportunity to leverage those relationships for the sake of the gospel.

Do you see how relevant Romans 16 actually is to our lives and our church? Do you see how important relationships are to the life of the church? This passage ends with two final greetings: "All the churches of Christ greet you," a relational connection to all the other churches, and "Greet one another with a holy kiss," a personal relational greeting.

The church was meant to be a place where we are connected to something bigger than ourselves and to the people around us. The gospel is lived out through relationships.

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⁵ See www.childrendesiringgod.org