

## Following Christ the Lord

Romans 16:1-27

November 20, 2011

We have come to the end of our tour through Paul's letter to the Romans. We have been reminded of the primacy of the gospel. We have seen how God's forgiveness of our sins, and the freedom He has given us from the bondage of sin is to affect our lives and guide our behavior. We have seen Paul's desire to finally visit those to whom he was writing and to speak with them face to face, to delight in what God was doing in their midst, and to encourage them and be encouraged by them. Now, Paul ends his letter, as he often does, by offering greetings to those in the Roman church he does know and those he knows about, giving a last little bit of advice and instruction, and offering greetings from those who are with him.

Paul begins by commending to the congregation a woman named Phoebe. He calls her a servant, or a deaconess, of the church in Cenchrea. Since Paul introduces her, and expects the church to receive her, it seems she is the one who was to deliver the letter to them. It is telling that Paul would entrust this important task to a woman. As much as people often malign Paul as having a low view of women, and even of being misogynistic, he had a higher view than many people of his day. Here, he tasks the delivery of one of his letters to a woman from a part of Corinth. He placed his trust in her to make the delivery. He called her his sister, just as he viewed the male believers as his brothers. He spoke highly of her service to the church in her home town. Indeed, Paul instructed the believers in Rome to receive her in a way

deserving of a fellow believer, and to give her any help she may need. Paul thought highly of her and her service to the church, including himself.

Paul then went into a series of greetings that is remarkably long, especially when we consider Paul had never visited the church. In part, there was a lot of traffic in and out of Rome and so many people Paul knew had moved there. At the same time, Paul probably wanted to show that he was not completely unfamiliar with them. Since he expected them to follow his instructions, it was good he was able to greet so many by name as a way of showing he knew them better than they might think he did.

We begin with the first two names—Priscilla and Aquilla. Here, again, we see an unusual respect for women as the wife is listed before the husband. While Priscilla is usually listed first when Paul talks about them, it was very rare to list the woman first in the ancient world. The fact that Paul does reminds us that he is the one who wrote, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" (Galatians 3:28) This does not mean that Paul thought all positions or roles were open to both men and women. It does mean that he had a higher respect for women than most, and that the early church saw women as equally valuable as men and as equally made in God's image. There is something for which to be thankful this week. God has demonstrated that all who are His have equal **value** in His eyes, regardless of how the world views them.

This married couple were two of Paul's friends from his missionary journeys. They had worked alongside him and likely spent many hours talking about work, Jesus,

and the gospel. He counted them as great friends and fellow laborers for the Lord.

The other people on the list are basically unknown to us. Some of the names were common, others almost unknown. Some of the names usually belonged to the lower classes and slaves, while others were usually given to the children of the rich and upper classes. The names are generally Gentile names, including the ones for those Paul calls his kinsmen, suggesting they were Jews. The most remarkable thing about the list, again, is its length. In no other letter to any of the churches Paul founded or had visited is the list of greetings this long. Paul longed to have this congregation know the connection to them that he felt.

With each of the names, or sometimes groups, Paul adds a note about their service or the Lord's love for them. Paul may have known most of them. He certainly knew at least something about all of them. He knew about their struggles. He knew about their hard work for the Lord. He knew that they were people who had strengthened and extended the work of the church in Rome.

As Paul ended the greetings to the church he called on them to greet each other with a holy kiss. This was a Jewish practice and not something Gentiles generally did, though it was continued in the early church. It was the fond greeting of family. It was part of what it meant to be brothers and sisters in Christ. It points to the ways in which we are to treat each other.

The **church** is called to be a warm fellowship of brothers and sisters working together to carry out the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. We are to know one another, to love one another, and to work together the

ways families are to know, love, and work together. Perhaps we have a difficult time with this in part because families are falling apart all over our society and we are losing the good models for what it ought to look like. Perhaps we have failed to realize the truth that we really are brothers and sisters, united by Jesus blood. With so many churches and so many different understandings of how the church is to operate, it can be difficult to see past the divisions to the underlying truth of Jesus' blood that unites to Him, and to each other, all who have faith in Him. Paul understood and expressed that connection even with people he had not met. We have a hard time expressing it and living in it with those with whom we worship every week.

Indeed, aware of this connection in a world that threatens to tear it apart, Paul next gave a warning to the church in Rome. *“I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.”* (vv.17-19) Both Jesus and Paul warn strongly and more than once about people who come into the church and cause division by trying to lead the church away from the path God wants the church to take. Some people want the church to follow them instead of her true head, Jesus Christ. They say things that make sense and with smooth talk they pull the church away from serving Jesus. They talk about what can't be done.

They talk about what should be done, but without reliance on the scripture or the Holy Spirit. Without reliance on the Holy Spirit, they cannot see the power of God and so they call on the church to rely on the power of men. We were reminded yesterday that this leads to the death of our motivation to serve God and eventually leads to the death of the church.

The cure for this is **faith** that is firmly rooted in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and obedience to God's call to the congregation. Paul had already commended the Romans for their faith. In light of those who would cause division in their midst he then commended them for their obedience to God's call. They were doing what they were supposed to do and so Paul was full of joy. We are to be wise about what is good and innocent about what is evil. We are to be full of experience of what we ought to be doing—prayer, worship, service to God and others. We are to have no experience in division, fighting, and the other things that damage our witness and pull us away from God.

In case we are tempted to forget how things will work out in the end, Paul added, "*The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*" (v.20) God **wins!** He shares that victory with us. If God's enemies are His footstool, and those who are His will enjoy eternity around His throne, then it just follows that God's enemies will be under the feet of His people. In the Middle East one of the greatest insults to can make against a person is to show them the bottom of your feet. That is the dirtiest part of you. It is always beneath you—literally. This is why Saddam Hussein placed President Bush's picture on the floor in the middle of the lobby in the busiest hotel in

Baghdad. In our country it might be an honor to have your picture in such a prominent place. In Iraq, Saddam could think of no greater way to insult him.

Satan has his way in this world, with a few limitations set on him by God. Yet his end is sure. There's something else for which to be thankful this week. Satan has been defeated already, but he is getting in his last gasps before he finally goes down. We need not **fear** him, though we must remain vigilant so his lies and manipulation do not pull us off our mission and make us ineffective for our Lord.

Paul next offered a brief benediction of peace before offering greetings from those who were with him. This is a list with which we are a little more familiar and which teaches us about Paul's ministry. Of course, we know Timothy. This was a young man Paul was grooming to be a pastor. They traveled together and Timothy was a great help at times to his friend and mentor. Paul also mentioned his relatives, who interestingly have Greek names.

Verse 22 lists something we might take as odd. There we find, "*I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.*" Right about now some of you are thinking, "Wait a minute pastor, you've been saying this whole time that Paul wrote this letter!" You're thinking this again if you caught this phrase the first time through. It was common in the ancient world, even for educated people who knew how to write, to use a scribe, a sort of secretary, to write letters. We know from here and most of Paul's other letters that this was his practice. The words and thoughts are Paul's. He dictated them, but someone else, probably with better handwriting, wrote them down.

Indeed, Paul often wrote a short greeting or sentence at the end of his letters, pointing out that the handwriting was different because it was his own. The last section of the letter to the Galatians actually begins, *“See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!”* (Galatians 6:11) Here, at the end of the letter to the Romans we learn that the man who put pen to paper for the letter to the Romans was named Tertius, and he stuck his own greeting in for the church at Rome.

Not only Paul’s traveling companions, but also the church in Corinth, which was hosting him, sent their greetings to their brothers and sisters in Rome. The leaders of the Corinthian church, some of whom were also leaders in the city, shared Paul’s warm regards to their fellow believers in the center of the empire.

From these greetings we learn that Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles, did not and could not do his ministry **alone**, nor did he expect to. We often find him both thanking people for their help and asking them for specific things. We are not equipped to do the ministry to which God calls us alone. We need each other, all of us, from the pastor to the regular visitor. We are each dependant on the others answering God’s call and carrying out their part of the mission if the church is to be all she can be and do what God is calling her to do.

With these last greetings out of the way the letter to the Romans comes to an end. Paul closed with one last benediction. *“Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so*

*that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.”* (vv.25-27) There is a lot here. Paul offers praise to God. He calls for God to be glorified, but that call is almost lost in his declaration and praise for who God is and what God has done.

God establishes His people. God uses the gospel, the proclamation of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, to give life to His people and to hold them firmly in His hands. It is the gospel and God’s faithfulness that hold us secure and so we need not fear or fret.

And this news is not new. It was hidden in the past, but it was still there. Jesus has always been the way to God. He has always been God’s plan since the Garden of Eden. He was hidden, a mystery, under the former covenants, but He is revealed in the last and greatest covenant. Jesus is the one to whom the prophets looked. He is the redeemer Job proclaimed. He is the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent. And He has now been revealed! He was made known through what the prophets wrote as they were commanded by God. Written about before He came, the words are there for all to see and believe that there is a God, the Father of Jesus Christ, who calls all people to repent and believe the gospel that they might be saved. To this God, and no other, the only wise God, be glory forever for He created us and He has redeemed His own through Jesus Christ! This receives Paul’s “Amen,” his, so let it be, and it receives ours as well. There is something for which we can be thankful! Jesus saves us. Jesus guides us. Jesus calls us to live for Him. **Jesus** reigns and has taken His place as Lord of lords and King of kings!