

I thought perhaps we could end our study of the letter to the Romans this Palm Sunday, and how fitting it would be to wrap it up just before the resurrection message. However, as we've seen throughout this rich letter, there is so much even in Paul's closing greetings that I found the need to separate this last chapter into two sermons. While the greetings seem to be simply straight forward, there is great deal we can learn from the people and how Paul, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, refers to them.

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. Phoebe was probably carrying this letter to Rome. Paul was introducing her to the church in Rome, as early church tradition suggests. First, he says she is their sister. She is part of the family of God (1Peter 4:17).

It is a struggle in our culture to keep this familial mindset. We are brothers and sisters in the Lord. As much as we'd like to at times, we can't decide who we are related to. The rest of the family sometimes may feel their stuck with us. We can avoid some of that these days by jumping to another church, but we're probably going to face the same conflicts there. The problem is usually our own lack of humility and submission (Hebrews 13:17).

Paul describes her as a deaconess. The ESV translators decided to use the word "servant" because it isn't clear if this was an official position or simply a description of her willingness to serve. Some commentators believe this is the first mention of women deacons in the church. We have the position of deaconess in our fellowship. They are a wonderful group of women who do just what the Greek word means. They serve (Acts 6:2-3). They serve those who are shut in and the sick. They serve you by preparing communion and organizing potluck meals and special events. They organize the greeters. I'm hoping and praying that someone will soon step forward and serve by starting a women's Bible study.

Phoebe was from Cenchreae, a town a few miles south of Corinth. Paul urged the Roman church to welcome her in a way worthy of saints. In other words, act like saints and greet her like the fellow saint that she is. Believers have been made holy by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 13:12). **We're going to spend eternity together so let's treat one another like those who are special in the eyes of God, because we are** (1Peter 2:9)!

Help her in any way that she needs help because that what she has done for others. The choice of the word "patron" here is an interpretation. She may have been a wealthy

sponsor of Paul and others, or she may through her financial influence in the political realm have been a protector of the church. She is probably going to Rome on some other business and has volunteered to deliver this letter. Regardless of how we interpret the word "patron", Paul is telling the church she deserves to be helped because she has helped others.

Paul now begins to greet all those he knew were in Rome. Nowhere else in his letters does he give such an extensive list of people to whom he sent greetings. The Jews and Christians had been expelled from Rome in the recent past (49AD by an edict of Claudius). In Paul's missionary journeys, he had become acquainted with these people in exile who he knew had since returned to Rome.

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. Paul begins by greeting a couple he met in Corinth (Acts 18:1-2). It is very interesting that he mentions Prisca first. You may know her by Luke's use of the diminutive form of her name, Priscilla. Paul used a more honorable form and mentions her first in four out of the six references to the couple. In Greek, order is given for a reason. Either she was a stronger personality, or she may have been like Phoebe, an independently wealthy patron. Because Aquila and Prisca had labored with Paul in making tents in Corinth (Acts 18:2-3), I tend toward the first interpretation. It's not uncommon to find wives who are more outspoken than their husbands, even in ministry.

Prisca and Aquila had risked their lives for Paul. The Greek expression here points to a specific incident. We can't be certain, but it may have been during the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:28-29). The churches gave thanks for saving Paul and for their ministry to the churches of the area. They were Paul's fellow workers (*sunergon*). Paul uses that phrase for men and women who labor for the spread of Gospel (Philippians 4:3). Is God calling you to be a fellow worker? All our work is to be done as to the Lord (1Corinthians 10:31), but there were some who Paul saw whose labor was directly involving the advancement of the kingdom of God.

^{5a} Greet also the church in their house. The churches of the first century were in private homes (Acts 2:46). We don't have to have buildings, although they can be useful. I led a house church for four years. The nice thing about a house church is that we don't have to spend time and money maintaining the facility. In the house church we could spend more per person on missions. We may one day be forced by law or cultural conditions to return to that way of worship. Our facility is a blessing in its location and visibility and opportunity to gather more people together. We share it with the Hispanic church as well. It's a blessing, but it isn't an absolute necessity.

^{5b} Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. One of Paul's first converts in Asia was now a part of the church in Rome (1Corinthians 16:15). We don't know who or which this Mary is. There are six Marys in the New Testament. The expression "worked hard" is in Greek to labor to exhaustion. C.K. Barrett writes that this is to labor as a Christian but not necessarily church work.¹ This is said of three other women as well: Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis in verse 12.

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. Kinsmen in this passage means fellow Jews. This verse is often quoted by those who argue for women apostles or elders as it may be the only case of a woman with an official title as a church leader. However, it is a rather weak argument as Junia can be a man's name. Paul refers to these two as fellow prisoners in the masculine. In addition, the word apostle does not necessarily mean the office but can mean messengers. The ESV translates this passage as "well known to the apostles" rather than the NIV's translation "outstanding among the apostles". If they were outstanding *among* the 12 apostles, it seems there would be some other mention of them. The fact that they were in Christ before Paul would cause me to lean toward the ESV interpretation of the phrase.

This is not to say that women do not have an important role in the church. We have already seen that there were deaconesses as well as those Paul considered fellow laborers in advancing the kingdom. We saw Prisca listed before Aquilla. We see only women mentioned as those who labor to the point of exhaustion. In today's church and in much of church history we find a greater number of women than men. Some of our greatest missionaries have been women. While apostle and elder may be roles designated for men, there are plenty of essential and influential roles for women. Barnhouse writes: "There are two restrictions on women—they shall not teach men or usurp authority over men (1Timothy 2:12). But aside from this there is no service they cannot perform in the church."²

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. I don't want us to miss the expression "beloved". These are those for whom Paul feels the agape love of God. We should have God's love for everyone in the family of God.

Urbanus was another of those Paul considered a fellow laborer. Apelles was a common name of slaves. In one of the earliest Christian tombs of the late first or early second century Roman catacombs, there is one marked with his name. We can't be sure it is

his burial chamber, but many believe it to be so. **He was found to be trustworthy.** This may refer to him taking a stand by acknowledging Jesus as Lord, risking his life to do so. That was common challenge for believers in the later half of the first century. In Rome, one had to declare Caesar as lord. Christians could not do so without compromising their faith. Many Christians faced the challenge of standing for their convictions which could result in being executed. It is still happening today in many parts of the world.

Aristobulus was the name of the grandson of Herod the Great and lived as a free citizen of Rome. His brother, Agrippa 1, was a friend and confidant of Emperor Claudius. If this is the same Aristobulus, then it is no wonder Paul could later mention a greeting from those in Caesar's household (Philippians 4:22).

¹¹ Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Narcissus may be another influential friend of Claudius, Tiberius Claudius Narcissus. He was a man of extreme wealth and influence. We can see that the early church had those of extreme wealth and influence alongside those who were slaves and had nothing of their own. **The church should be a classless family of those who love one another with God's unconditional love.** We need those from every segment of society to reach every segment of society. We tend to listen to those who are like us. That is why there is a Christian actors group, Bible studies in Congress, an organization for Christian business men, and one for Christian prisoners. Jesus died for all.

¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. These are the women I mentioned earlier who labor for the Lord to the point of weariness.

¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Here we have another fascinating possible connection. Mark wrote his gospel from Rome. When Simon the Cyrene was compelled to carry Jesus' cross, Mark mentions that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). Mark would not have mentioned a person's children to identify them unless they were well-known by his readers. This Rufus may be the son of the man who carried Jesus' cross. If so, Simon's wife was like a mother to the apostle Paul. Seeing the amazing connections in our own world, I wouldn't be surprised if that was the case. Paul calls Rufus chosen in the Lord. This does not mean chosen for salvation, but prominent among the believers.

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. I read this as Paul writing to two more house churches and the leaders in those homes, and thus all who are with them would be those who attend those house churches. Paul had heard of their faith and knew many of them (Romans

1:8). What a joy it must have been to Paul to know that the church was thriving in the center of power and influence in the Roman Empire.

¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. The letters of 1 and 2 Corinthians as well as 1 Peter conclude with a similar instruction. Some think this was a familial kiss which was a kiss on the lips signifying they were all family. Others believe it simply meant to greet one another such as a kiss on the cheek. "Holy" implied this greeting symbolic of their sacred union with one another in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12). We practice the holy hug. The idea is to warmly welcome one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. His final greetings covered all those who asked Paul to give their regards to the church family in Rome.

One can go to Rome today and see the ruins of once great structures that spoke of the power and influence of different emperors. We can read the obituaries of in our newspapers of people that had a part in creating well known cartoons, or who amassed fortunes, or were politically influential. But today we have read in our passage of spiritually great people from every walk of life. The great apostle Paul loved each of them and described them in ways that are so much greater than what the world can say of its own. Let us labor to be known by these descriptions: servant, saint, patron, work hard, beloved, approved in Christ, trustworthy, a mother to me, and fellow workers in the Lord. Whatever our status in life, let us encourage and promote a family atmosphere of loving concern for one another, striving to see one another grow in Christ-likeness (Galatians 4:19).

Paul named 28 people each for whom he had a special remark. He was definitely an evangelist, but he had a pastor's heart for his brothers and sisters in Christ. When he said loving your neighbor as yourself fulfilled the law (Romans 13:9), he passionately lived it. Let us do the same. Amen?

Questions

- 1 Who is Phoebe?
- 2 Why were the Romans to help her?
- 3 Who are Prisca and Aquilla?
- 4 What is a "fellow worker"?
- 5 What is "worked hard"?
- 6 Discuss what the Bible says about a woman's role in the church?
- 7 What may "found trustworthy" mean?
- 8 What kind of people are in the church in Rome?
- 9 Review the story behind Rufus.
- 10 What does this tell you about the early church?
- 11 What comment would you like to see associated with your name?