

## **Romans: Greeting to the Church and Glory to God**

**Romans 16:21-27**

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 16. Today we come to our last study in Romans for now, a study that began April 2, 2000, a little longer than 100 sermons and two and one quarter years ago. I do want to say, though, we haven't scratched the surface. And I hope that this study has been somewhat of an *hors d'oeuvres* and an appetizer to you to go back and truly plumb the depths of this great book.

Isn't it interesting that Paul closes this great book, a theological treatise, a practical, pastoral exhortation, an exhortation to unity. Isn't it interesting that he closes this book with greetings and prayer, specifically a prayer of adoration to God that simultaneously serves to encourage God's people. Paul's love for and his concern for God's people comes out in the greetings. His awe of God, his sense of the greatness of God, comes out in this prayer of adoration as the only suitable response to the glorious plan of salvation revealed in this letter.

We're going to study this passage today then in two parts. We're going to look at the greetings and the repeated benediction in verses 21 through 24, and then we're going to look at the doxology, or the word of praise, in verses 25 through 27. Let's turn to God's word and hear that word in Romans 16:21 and following.

Timothy my fellow worker greets you, and so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen. Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

Amen, and may the Lord add His blessing to this reading of His holy and inspired

word. Let's pray.

*Our Lord, speak to us, we pray, by Your word, by Your Spirit applying it to our hearts and causing us to obediently submit ourselves to its teaching and to be conformed to the image of Your Son. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

How would you have ended the greatest theological masterpiece ever written? Augustine ended his 22-chapter 1,100 page epic, *The City of God*, with these words, "It may be too much for some, too little for others. Of both these groups I ask forgiveness." Now, maybe some of you are thinking that should be my statement at the end this sermon series. Well, Paul ended this letter with greetings and doxology. Does that surprise you? Does that surprise you that he would end a letter with this sort of exalted material in it in that sort of a mundane way?

## **I. The glory of Christian community**

Well I want to suggest to you that two grand messages come through in those greetings and in that doxology. First, the message of the glory of the communion of the saints comes through loud and clear. In the greetings here in verses 21 through 23 to be sure, but also in the greetings that we've already seen in this chapter from verse 3 down to verse 17, the glory of the communion of the saints comes through. And then in the doxology, the greatness and the glory of God comes through loud and clear. And it's on those two messages that I would like to dwell with you for a few moments.

The first one you will see in verses 21 through 23. Here we have more greetings and then six passing comments made about the people who are sending the greetings and then in verse 24 an identical benediction to the one that we saw in verse 20. And here in verses 21 through 23 we see something of the glory of Christian community. There is a distinctive and unworldly, other worldly, fellowship of all true believers and that comes through in this set of greetings. Whereas the previous greetings in verses 3 through 17 had been focused on people in the Roman church who were receiving greetings, these greetings list the names of people in the Corinthian church who are sending greetings. So, if you wonder why Paul would have separated these sets of greetings that seems to supply a rationale. The first set of greetings are greetings to people, they are greetings being received by people in the Roman church. The second list of people are people in the Corinthian church sending greetings to the church in Rome.

And in the course of these greetings we catch something of the community of spirit of the Corinthian church and the Roman church. You get the feeling at the end of this letter it's almost as if a crowd is around Paul and Tertius as they are

finishing the final words of this letter saying, "Paul, would you tell them that I send them my greetings." Now, we don't know whether all of these Christians listed in verses 21 through 23 had any personal knowledge, had any personal relationship with anybody in the Roman church. We know that Phoebe was going to be in Rome, and she was going to carry the letter. We know that Priscilla and Aquilla had knowledge of people in Roman church. They had worked there for a period of time. But we don't know whether any of these folk had personal knowledge of the people who were being greeted. As far as we know, the only thing that they may have shared in common with the Christians that they were so anxious to greet in Rome was the fact that they were fellow believers in Jesus Christ. They were united to Christ and therefore they were united to these fellow believers who were also united to Christ, and so they were anxious to give their greetings. And I think that shows you something about the quality of Christian community which existed in the early church.

And there's one other example, if you'll look at verse 23, that I want to draw your attention to. I could talk about Timothy, I could talk about Paul's kinsmen, I could talk about Tertius and Erastus and Quartus but I want to focus on Gaius for a minute. Gaius, we're told in verse 23, had shown hospitality not only to Paul, or maybe this means that he had shown hospitality to Tertius. Maybe Tertius had stayed at his home, but we're told that Gaius had shown hospitality to the whole church. Now, either Gaius had a really large house or the Corinthian church was a really small congregation, or maybe it was some combination of both. But here was a man whose quality of hospitality is highlighted by the apostle as this letter is sent to Rome and it is indicative of the sense of community in the early church that such a high price is placed on hospitality.

Why is hospitality lauded? Why is it drawn attention to here? Because Christian community is important. Christian fellowship is important. And you're seeing something here of the glory of Christian community as Paul ends this grand letter in greetings from Christians to Christians because of the importance he places on community and unity in the church. Christians love one another and care about each other because of the communion that we have which flows from our union with Christ. And the greetings at the end of this letter actually help foster that unity in at least two ways.

First of all, those greetings show the practical love of one group of Christians to another group of Christians and so enhance their sense of fellowship. I'm sure it would have been very flattering for the Roman Christians to see all of these Corinthians so anxious to greet them. Secondly, the greetings at the end of this letter also let us know that the Corinthian Christians were in agreement with the contents of the letter being sent to the Roman Christians. And the Roman Christians would have said, "You know, this isn't just Paul's opinion, apparently this whole Corinthian church agrees with the teachings which Paul has given to us in this letter." And so the unity was not only fostered by a sort of common sense of fellowship but it was also fostered by the embrace of the truth of this

letter by the Corinthian Christians and their willingness to attach their names and greeting at the end of it so that the Roman Christians would have said, "Well, they believe this too. This is a truth that we hold in common when we receive this letter." And so the unity of the church was foster not only in the expression of love in these Christian greetings but also in the Roman church's realization that the Corinthian church was aware of the content of the letter and in agreement with it.

Now we have a lot of community at first Presbyterian Church, Jackson. Not everybody at first Presbyterian Church, Jackson, senses that community. And there are a lot of reasons; there are many reasons for that. But I want to urge you, though we do know much about community, and a lot of that just comes to us inherently, we're in a part of the country where community is more important. Many of us grew up with the people that we're sitting in the pews with. Many of us went to the same school and had the same network of friends with the people that we're sitting in the pews with. And community in that setting is very easy. But Paul's not just calling us to a natural or inherent or cultural unity; he's calling us to a uniquely Christian unity and community here. And that means that the distinctive thing about this community is that the one thing that establishes its basis is our common union to Christ. And I want to urge you to express and to have an agenda to express that kind of community and family and fellowship in this congregation but seeking to reach out to those people that you don't know, that you don't have natural ties and common bonds with because you went to school with them or you been friends with them for a long time, but simply because you share the same savior and you desire to express the reality of the family of God in fellowship. And if that happens there won't be anybody in the congregation of first Presbyterian Church who does not feel like they are not part of this community.

But as we are right now there are many who often feel excluded and peripheral. We need to work at community, Christian community, gospel community, community that is based on our commonality in the gospel. One thing that will happen if that kind of community exists is that we won't all be like one another. There'll be more and more different kinds of people here that are united to us simply because of their common bond in the gospel. And that's a sign that God's spirit is at work in a fellowship when that kind of gospel-oriented unity manifests itself in a church. That's the first thing I want to draw your attention to in verses 21 through 23, the glory of Christian community that is seen even in those greetings.

## **II. The goal of God's glory.**

Secondly however, if you look at the doxology in verses 25 through 27, you'll see a concluding, indeed you'll see a climactic word of praise and glory from Paul. Here, Paul focuses us on the goal of God's glory and we with Paul need to be

overwhelmed at the greatness of God. The greatness of God is at a discount in our generation. Man the sinner is big and God the Savior is small in our generation. Man is central. God is peripheral. Man is important. God is way down the list of important things in life in our culture today. And Paul is drawing our attention to the greatness of God in this doxology. And we, with Paul, need to be overwhelmed at the truth of the greatness of God.

Now let me, by the way, show you the difference between a benediction and a doxology by asking you to look at verses 24 through 27. The benediction is in verse 24. Paul normally will end his letters or somewhere close to the end of his letters with a benediction. The doxology is verses 25 and 26. I want to show you the distinction because people get these things confused. I've seen preachers that pronounce benedictions that are doxologies.

A benediction is from God to you. A doxology is from you to God. A benediction is towards God's people from God. A doxology is towards God from God's people. A benediction is when God blesses His people. A doxology is when His people bless God. A benediction is God's blessing on us. A doxology is our praise to God. But we often confuse those.

You see the benediction in verse 24. "The grace of our lord Jesus Christ be with you all." That's the blessing from God to you. And then the doxology, the praise from you to God, and in this case the praise from Paul to God, comes in verses 25 through 27. "Now, to Him who is able..." So the focus is to God, it's to Him who is able. The benediction to us. The doxology to God.

Now let's break down this doxology into its four essential parts. There are four parts to this doxology. It is a praise to the mighty God. It is a praise to the wise God. It is a praise to Him through Jesus Christ. And it is a praise of glory, it is an inscription of glory to him. Let's look at it together. The first part you see in these words, "Now to him who is able." Those words show us the might of God. They show us the mighty God. They draw attention to the power of God, "Him who is able."

Now you may ask, "Able to what?" Well Paul tells you immediately. He is able to establish you, and that is vitally important in light of what Paul has been talking to us in this letter about. He's been talking to us about being established in the faith. He's been talking about us enduring and persevering in the faith. And Paul is saying that God is able to make us endure. He is able to establish us in the faith. The sight of the greatness of God, the sight of the goal of all things in His glory grounds us in assurance. We are comforted that we will be established, not because we have the ability to establish ourselves, but because God has the ability to establish us. And so Paul begins by praising God for His power.

Now, isn't it interesting, that here at the end the book in this final doxology, Paul is going back to themes which he had explored much earlier in the book. For

instance, in Romans chapter 1, what did Paul say the gospel was? The power of God to salvation. Now what does he praise God for in the very last words of this book? For His power to establish us. And, by the way, he'll say explicitly, to establish us in the gospel.

He'll later on in this doxology praise God for His wisdom. Where had he talked about that before? Do you remember the doxology at the end of Romans 11, in which he praised God for the wisdom of His plan to bring both Jew and gentile into one kingdom? What does Paul praise God for here? His wisdom. And so we see Paul summing up great things in this book, in this final word of praise to God.

The only wise God. The wisdom of God is the second thing that we see in this doxology. Paul is acknowledging, and indeed glorying, in the wisdom of God's plan. That plan is set forth in verses 25 and 26. We are established according to preaching, according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that had been kept secret for long ages past but is now manifested. In other words, Paul is saying that the gospel that he has proclaimed is about a redemptive event that God had been working on from eternity past, but had only revealed fully in Jesus Christ. Yes, the Scriptures of the prophets had witnessed to it, he makes that clear in verse 26, but, it had not fully been revealed, it couldn't fully be understood except in Jesus Christ. The people of God looked at Jesus Christ and they said, "Oh, now I understand what that passage in Isaiah 53 means. Now I understand what that passage in Jeremiah 31 means. Now I understand what psalm 118 and what psalm 110 and what psalm 2 means. Now that I see what God has done in Jesus Christ. Now I understand what the prophets were talking about." And Paul says, in this we see the wisdom of God revealed. This plan, we never would have guessed this plan. If you had asked somebody to sit down in the days of Abraham and say, "okay, now just explain it to me. What's the plan of God going to be?" nobody would have said "Well, here's how it's going to happen. God is going to send His only begotten Son into the world. He's going to be infleshed. He's going to die in our place. He's going to assume our guilt and our sin. He's going to bear that sin and guilt on our behalf. He's going to die. He's going to be buried. He's going to be raised again from the dead. He's going to ascend on high and He's going to take us with Him."

Well, nobody could have given you that kind of full disclosure of the gospel. The prophets, even as they wrote, Peter tells us, strained to see the truth that they were writing. It was beyond their full comprehension. Nobody would have guessed this plan. The wisdom of this plan is overwhelming. He is the only wise God. Calvin says, "If angels themselves regard the treasures of heavenly wisdom with wonder, then no human being can admire them enough." You can't be impressed too much with God's wisdom. And unless you are impressed with the wisdom of God, you will not be able to be confident in those experiences in your life where you scratch your head and you wonder, "What in the world is going on?" Because if you can't believe in the wisdom of God, as it is displayed in the

plan of God, you won't be able to believe in the wisdom of God in your own life when the lights go out.

And so isn't it interesting that this very praise to God for His power and for His wisdom ends up establishing us in confidence and assurance, because when we realize that it is this great, and powerful, and wise God who is at work in the plan of salvation, and who is also at work in our lives, then we don't have to have the answers to all the questions in our lives. We just need to know that the wise and powerful is behind them, working them for our good, Romans 8:28 and following. And so even this doxology results in comforting and strengthening the people of God. Paul says that this praise is given to God through Jesus Christ, that is, through the mediation of Jesus Christ. And he says that this glory is God's glory, to Him be the glory forever.

Now, what's the believing response to that doxology at the end of Romans 16? Well, Paul actually has outlined for us the believing response. There are five parts to it. In the greetings we see that the right response to the doctrine of Romans is love for the brethren. That's one of the right responses to the doctrine that Paul has taught in this book. It's to love one another, it's to have real Christian community.

The second right response is prayer. Isn't it interesting that Paul ends this book in prayer. What is the right response to understandings the teaching of the word of God? To drop to your knees in prayer.

But not only prayer, but thirdly, praise. Not just prayer of intercession, not just prayer of supplication, not just prayer of asking God for something else, but for thanking God for what He's already given us. For adoring him for who he is. Paul ends this book with adoration. He ends this book with praise. And that's the right response to the doctrines that are set forth in the book of Romans.

Fourth right response, confidence. Him who is able to establish you. If your confidence is based on your ability to establish yourself here's some bad news. You're never going to be confident. But if your confidence is based upon the fact that you believe in the power of Him who is able to keep you from falling, then you can have confidence in this Christian life.

And of course the fifth and final response is consecration, living for the glory of God. To Him be the glory, forever, amen, Paul says. The whole goal of life is to glorify God.

How would you end the greatest theological treatise ever written? Paul ends it by emphasizing love for the brethren, prayer, praise, the confidence that the Christian can have in God, and consecration to work for His glory. Let me give you the rest of that Augustine quote that I didn't finish. At the end of *The City of God*, after 1100 pages and 22 chapters of wrestling with how God is at work in

the world, Augustine says, "It may be too much for some, too little for others. Of both these groups I ask forgiveness. But of those for whom it is enough I would make this request, that they do not thank me but join with me in rendering thanks to God."

I think that is entirely consonant with the spirit of Paul at the end of Romans 16, and it is certainly consonant with my spirit as we come to the conclusion of this great study. May your response be to thank God for rendering to you the kind of great mercy that He has revealed in this great book.

Let us pray. *Our lord and our God, we thank you for your greatness and for the greatness of your mercy. And we pray that this would result in us loving you and loving one another as Christians. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

The grace of our lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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