

## **Romans: Ministry in the Family of God**

**Romans 16:3-16**

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans 16. We are continuing to work through the book of Romans on Sunday morning. Over the next two or three weeks, God willing, we'll come to an end of this book and begin an exposition of the book of James together. We started last week in Romans 16: 1-2 looking at the ministry of Phoebe and thinking broadly about the role of ministry of women in the early church. And today we come to a section in Romans 16 filled with greetings. In fact, from verse three to verse sixteen, twenty-six different people are mentioned. Greetings are given to them from several different groups, the churches in the east, the churches of the Gentiles planted by Paul in Asia Minor.

You might be asking yourself a question, "Isn't this fairly extraneous stuff. What are we going to get out of a list of greetings. Isn't this kind of like studying a genealogy or some of those tables in the book of Chronicles or Numbers?" Well, I want to assure you, this is not a futile exercise. In fact, the passage we're going to study today is filled with implicit guidance on a number of vital subjects for our own time. If we were going to outline this section, I would outline it by looking at the first three verses, three to five, or halfway through verse five, which focus on Priscilla and Aquilla. Then, looking at the second half of verse five down to verse fifteen, which contains all the other specific greetings to individuals, and then finally, verse sixteen, the third part of the passage gives a general command for the members of the church to greet one another with a holy kiss.

But I'm going to follow a thematic approach to this passage to help you pick up on some of the lessons contained in it and, in fact, reiterated in it. Indeed, if you're looking for a challenging test case for 2 Timothy 3:16, you've got it in this passage. 2 Timothy 3:16 says that "All Scripture is inspired and given by God and profitable for teaching and reproof and correction and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be adequate equipped for every good work." And you may be wondering, "How is this passage going to equip me. How is this passage going to show its quality of being profitable for instruction?" Well, I think after we study it, you will be able to say that this passage of Scripture, like all others, has come through with flying colors. So let's approach this section

thematically and let's hear God's word beginning in chapter 16 verse three.

"Greet Prisca and Aquilla, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risk their own necks. To whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the gentiles. Also, greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me. Greet Amplidas, my beloved in the lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys, my beloved. Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those who are in the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my kinsman. Greet those who are of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, workers in the lord. Greet Persis, the beloved, who has worked hard in the lord. Greet Rufus, a choice man in the lord. Also, his mother, and mine. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and brethren with them. Greet Philologus, and Julia, and Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. Amen." This is God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

*Our Lord, open our eyes to behold wonderful things, even from this passage, which is part of the inspired, inerrant, authoritative, infallible, profitable, and sufficient word of God. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*

In the midst of all these greetings, Paul teaches us something about missions and the spread of the gospel. He teaches us something about the church as the family of God, and he teaches us something about the ministry of the church, or the work of the church. And those three things are the things that I'd like to explore with you today as we look at this passage thematically, looking through the whole passage to see what the total passage teaches us about missions and the spread of the gospel, the church as the family of god, and the ministry, or work, of the church.

Let's start with the first theme, the theme of missions and the spread of the gospel. Now, let me give you a hint at the passages that we're going to draw these points from now. Look at verse 3, the second half of verse 4, the second half of verse 5. Look at verse 7, the second half of verse 10, and the second half of verse 11.

### **I. The local church as a mission sending body.**

Let's start in verse three. Here we are told of Paul's greetings to Prisca, or Priscilla, as she's usually called in the New Testament, and Aquilla. Now, the first time we meet Priscilla and Aquilla, we meet them in Acts 18:1-2. They've been in Rome, they've had to flee from Rome because of the persecution of the Jews by

the Emperor Claudius. Now they're in Corinth, and now here in Romans, they are back in Rome again. And some Bible critics have said, "Hey, aren't these people moving around a little too much to be actually the way things would have happened in those days. I mean, surely people didn't travel back and forth that long a distance over that dangerous and long a road in those days and times." Well, the fact of the matter is, our study of the pattern of Jewish trades people lets us know that people did move like that. Jewish tradesmen often relocated to major city centers in order to be more profitable in their trade. But, I want to suggest to you that there is probably another reason why we see Priscilla and Aquilla moving from these locations like they have. And that is, despite the fact that Aquilla was pressing his trade, which was tentmaking. By the way, when we talk about tentmaking missionaries today, we get that language right from Priscilla and Aquilla and Paul. Remember, Paul worked with Priscilla and Aquilla in order to support the mission. We are told this in Acts chapter 18. And we get that phrase, tentmaking missionaries, right from Aquilla, who was by profession a tentmaker. That's how he made his money.

But I want to suggest to you that as they move back and forth from Corinth to Rome and back that their purpose was not only economic, but it was missional. In other words, they had a missions goal. Their goal was to establish the kingdom. Their goal was to spread the gospel. Their goal was to plant churches. We know from the book of Acts that this couple was used to disciple Apollos, a mighty minister in the Lord, who understood the teaching of John the Baptist, but didn't understand the fullness of Jesus' and Paul's preaching. And this couple disciplined him so that he could preach the gospel with all its glory and all its power. We know that this couple had a church meeting in their home in Rome. We're told that in verse four, "Greet the church which is in your house." This couple was committed to the spread of the gospel, and we see something of the early Christian attitude toward missions in this couple.

In fact, as we look at missions and the spread of the gospel in these verses, I think you'll see several things. First of all, you'll see that early Christians were non-professionally mission-minded. In other words, they didn't leave it up to the professionals. They didn't say, "Okay, we need a missions board or agency to send a well-trained group to the spread of the gospel. They went and did it themselves. They were non-professionally committed to missions. They expected gospel success in their missions. They sent out missionaries from their local churches and Christianity generally took root below and worked up the ladder in social classes. It didn't start with the influential and the prominent and trickle down. It started with those who were the last, the lost, the least, and the limping. And it worked its way up into the very highest parts of the empire. And the Gentile mission had already resulted in much fruit. We learn all of that from these greetings.

Let me give you another example. Look at the second half of verse five. Epaenetus was not merely the first convert in Asia. Your translations are right to

put it that way. But Paul uses a special word. Paul uses the word *firstfruits*. Just like an offering was given to God from the first fruits, expecting that the rest of the harvest would come in, so also Paul calls Epaenetus not just the first convert, but the firstfruits. In other words, he was the first convert, but he wasn't going to be the last. There was a whole region of converts coming behind him. There were Gentiles from that whole area who were going to come to Christ. He was just the firstfruits. He was just a foretaste of the conversions that were to come.

It kind of reminds you of William Carey. Remember William Carey went to India and ministered seven years as a missionary before he saw his first convert. What would a modern evangelical missions agency say about that. About three about three years I think you'd probably get pulled home. When he finally got his first convert, remember what Carey said to his friends at the compound: "He may be the first, but there's a continent behind him." He was the firstfruits of the work of God's grace. By the Spirit, multitudes were going to be brought in, and Epaenetus is the first. Paul expected more to come.

Notice verse seven. Andronicus and Junias are called here *apostles*. Now, we're going to talk about this later if we get there. But, notice that they're called apostles. Now, the word *apostles* is used in at least two and probably three ways in the New Testament. One of the ways it is used is the way it is used here. That is, apostles with a little "a." That is, missionaries sent out by local churches. And so, we see again the emphasis on missions work by local churches in the very title which is given to Andronicus and Junius. They are given the title of missionaries or apostles, people sent out to do missions work by local churches.

Look at the end of verse ten and the end of verse eleven. Here greetings are given to the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus. Now, we think we know who these men were. And from what we know of them, neither of them were Christians. Isn't it interesting. We're not asked to give greetings to Aristobulus and Narcissus. We're asked to give greetings to the household members of Aristobulus and Narcissus, who are in the Lord. These were servants in the very court of Caesar. And there were apparently already Christians within their households, though they themselves were not Christians. In other words, already among the servants of Caesar, God had planted seeds of faith, and there were gospel believing Christians. It would be almost three centuries before a Caesar would bow the knee to Jesus Christ, but already in the days of Paul, God had planted Christians amongst the servants of his household.

I want to pause right there and say, it's okay for us to go out and evangelize the influential and the powerful. Nothing wrong with that. When you have limited resources you have to decide where you are going to go evangelize. But we should never think that unless we can convince the influential and the powerful the gospel won't work, because God started with slaves and in three centuries, Caesar bowed the knee. Now that should be encouraging to us because the influential and the powerful in our day and time don't like the gospel. They don't

like Christianity. That's okay. We'll be faithful and if God is willing, in three centuries their children will bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ. We are faithful.

Notice the missions-mindedness and the confidence in the gospel of the early church. Look at verse four. This phrase at the end of verse four reminds us of the importance and the success of Paul's and others' labors thus far. Notice all the churches of the Gentiles know about what Priscilla and Aquilla have done on behalf of Paul and on behalf of the gospel. Already Paul has told all these churches that have been planted by him and by others in Asia Minor and elsewhere the deeds of Priscilla and Aquilla. And we get some sense of the success of Paul's labor.

Early Christians were non-professionally mission-minded. We learn that even from these greetings. Are you missions-minded? The early Christians expected gospel success in their missions, and they were patient. They were ready for it to happen. They knew it was coming. They were patient. Are you expectant in gospel missions? They sent out missionaries from their local churches.

Let me ask you a question. Are you being called to go into the fields of mission? Are you being called to be a missionary? Has that been a burden on your heart that you've been resisting? Or have you never considered it but you ought to? The early Christians sent out missionaries from their own home churches. Christianity took root below and it worked up the social ladder. Is that our expectation? Do we really believe it can happen that way? That those who are most peripheral in society can eventually have a leavening effect. Well, I seem to remember a parable that Jesus told about the mustard seed as to how the kingdom grows. Do we really believe that? Do we believe that the gospel is that mighty, that it can start with the weakest and show itself to be strong? The early Christians did. All of these things we learned from these greetings. Lists of names and appellations.

## **II. The church as a family.**

Look with me then, at the second thing. Let's look at the church as a family. And you could look at verses three through five, eight, nine, and twelve, especially, although I'm going to draw from every verse in the passage. And as we think about the church as a family, we learn from this passage that Christians are expected to manifest the reality of the communion of the saints in their greetings, in their gratitude, in their cordially, and in their relationships. And we learn from these greetings that Christian women need never fear a lack of opportunity for meaningful kingdom service. And we learn that Christians ought to know about one another's spiritual condition and service. And we learn that we can have a close relationship with certain brothers and sisters within the community of faith without violating the general principle of all of us being brothers and sisters in

Christ. Where do we learn that? Well, let's look at some of these things.

First of all, notice the constant "to-ing and fro-ing" of greetings, from the Gentile Christians to the church at Rome. From the Jewish Christians back east to the church in Rome. Greetings from Paul to individuals. Ascriptions of what these individuals have done for the church in Rome and have done for Paul. The communion of saints is not some idealistic dream. It is an expected, practical reality in the body of Christ, and Romans chapter sixteen proves that it was experienced.

In Romans 14 and 15, Paul talked about what it meant to be the body of Christ, the family of God.

In Romans 16, he shows us that these Christians were living that out. He wasn't just talking about it in theory or in the abstract. They were living it out. They were ministering to one another. They were loving one another. They were greeting one another. They were caring for one another. They were in deep and significant and distinctively gospel and Christian relationships with one another. We're all part of one body, but every single one of us has different roles. And this is seen even by some of the things that are said about these people. If you look at verses three and four, you find out that some of these people risk themselves for ministry. If you look at verses four and five you'll find out that some of these people hosted gospel work in their homes. If you look at verses six and seven and eight you'll find that some people worked hard in the ministry. Some of them worked for the church at Rome. Some of them worked hard for the gospel. Some of them worked hard in the Lord. And you'll also find from other passages that some of these were especially beloved by Paul or were especially choice individuals. They're all part of one body. They have different roles. And we learn that even from studying the greetings.

Now let your eyes fall onto verses three through five. Let me say again that the importance of women in the early Christian ministry is here again made clear. Of the 26 people mentioned in this passage, thanked by Paul, greeted by Paul, nine of them are women. That is astonishing in a male-dominated culture and in the male-dominated background of Jewish Christianity, that nine of these 26 people are women. It shows you the expansive role of women in ministering in early Christianity. Furthermore, notice Paul's commendation of Priscilla and Aquilla. He credits them with having risked their life for him. Now, we're never told how. We're never told when. But they did. And we're also, as we usually see it in the New Testament, introduced to Priscilla and Aquilla with Priscilla's name first. Now, that normally would not have happened according to conventions of Greco-Roman writing. And they're all sorts of speculations on why. Some people have suggested that Priscilla came from a higher social class than Aquilla, so she was listed first. Others have said, well, Priscilla was more accomplished in her ministry than Aquilla. There are various speculations. We don't know why. But one thing we do know. Look at what Paul calls her. Did you notice, did your

translation change the name *Prisca* to *Priscilla*? Well, Paul didn't call her Priscilla. He called her Prisca. Now, Priscilla is the diminutive of Prisca. It would be like calling a woman named Priscilla today "Prissy" or calling a woman named Elizabeth "Bessie" or "Lizzie" or "Liz." Everybody else in the New Testament, Luke and everybody else, calls Priscilla Priscilla. Paul never calls her that. Paul always calls her Prisca.

Now, I don't want to read too much into this and I don't want to allow my imagination to go too wild, but think about this, my friend. You've got a woman who's a faithful minister in a congregation. She's serving the saints in the ways that are made available to her according to the Scriptures. And everybody knows her as "Lizzie." and Paul comes along and he just can't bring himself to call her that. To him she is "Elizabeth." Now, do you see the respect and the love that are poured into that formal name. And I want to suggest to you that we see even in what Paul calls Priscilla, the enormity of his respect and love and regard for this woman and what she has done for the sake of the early church.

Notice, also, as we look at verses five and eight and nine, that we see Paul talk about people with whom he is especially close. You see, it's possible to have an especially close friendship with certain Christians without offensively or inappropriately discriminating against other Christians. You know, we might think if we're all brothers and sisters, maybe we're supposed to love everyone else the same, and we're not to have especially favorite friends. Well, that wasn't the case for Jesus and it wasn't the case for Paul, either. Epaphroditus and Ampliatus and Stachys are all called people who are beloved to Paul. These are especially dear and close friends to him. And yet, he doesn't discriminate against the other Christians and the other Christians aren't jealous of this particular relationship. And that's something very important for us to understand, especially those of us who go into gospel ministry. There will be people with whom we have an especially close friendship. We may have to be careful about discrimination, but that's not inappropriate.

One last thing I want to mention in this passage. Look at verse 12. Tryphena and Tryphosa. Those are two female names. It's very apparent from the similarity of these names that these names have been given to two girls from one family. They're a lot alike. Even their meanings are similar. It's even possible to speculate that these were given to twin girls. You can imagine twin girls coming into the world being named Tryphena and Tryphosa. Now, the really interesting and gentle irony about this greeting is this: Tryphena and Tryphosa are names that mean something like *delicate* and *dainty*. And look at what Paul commends them for: For being hard workers. Now you can see Paul's tongue in his cheek really enjoying the fact that two women named delicate and dainty are hard workers for the Lord. Sort of like some of our sweet, diminutive southern belles who could run small Caribbean countries for the Lord, and the apostle loves the fact that these women, delicate and demurring as they are, are workers for the Lord. You see, you get some sense of the reality of the communion of the saints

in these greetings.

Do you have those kinds of relationships with one another. Paul did. Do you. And you see in these greetings that Christian women never need fear a lack of opportunity for meaningful kingdom service. And we see from these greetings that Christians ought to know about one another's spiritual condition and service. Do you? Do you know when your brothers and sisters in Christ were converted and what trials they've been through and what the Lord is doing in their lives now and their testimony and where they're growing and where they're struggling? If you don't, you're impoverished. That's what it means to be the family of God, to be in the communion of saints, to know the spiritual stories of one another. And you know what. Right now, today, is not too soon to start beginning to learn the spiritual story of one another.

One last thing—let's look at the ministry or the work of the church in this passage. Look at verses 3,4,5,6,7, 9, 12, 13, and 16. But we won't get all the way through it. In these thematic sections I want you to see that Christians are expected to work hard from the kingdom. We learned that from Paul's greetings. And that God sees all that work, and that God uses the most surprising things to advance His kingdom. And that a distinctive love for fellow-Christians is not an option, and that the local church is the discipleship plan of Jesus and Paul.

How do we get that in these greetings. Well, let's look. If you look in verses 3,6,9, and 12, you will find similar phrases about workers—*my fellow workers, worked hard for you, our fellow worker, workers in the Lord, worked hard in the Lord*. Notice how Paul notices the work of Christians. He knows about it, he notices it, he draws attention to it. If Paul knows the work of Christians, you can best believe that there is no work of a Christian which is unnoticed or unrewarded by the lord, and we see that from Paul's constant reference of appreciation to the work of Christians.

There's another thing we see, too. Turn to verse 13. God uses even dark providences to bring the generations into His kingdom and to prepare encouragement for His people. And one dark providence is hinted at in verse 13. You're looking at it and going, "What in the world are you talking about, Ligon?" "Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine." To understand this, you're going to have to turn with me to Mark 15. You will remember that Mark, we think, was written especially for the Roman Christians. Mark was the *amanensis* for Peter. It's always been assumed that Peter was the man behind Mark's gospel, and that it was written especially for the Roman Christians. And in Mark 15:21, we read that Jesus is on His way to Golgotha, and we read: "And they pressed into a service a passerby coming from the country, Simon of Cyreni, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear His cross." Now, we think that Mark included that detail precisely because he was writing to the Roman church, and because they knew who Alexander and Rufus were. And the apostle Paul, in giving greetings to Rufus, brings that to mind. We're not told



anything more about this, so I don't want to let my imagination run too wild. But it doesn't take too much to figure this one out. Simon of Cyreni is pressed into doing the very last thing he ever wanted to do—bear a cross for a condemned criminal. Here's a good Jewish man visiting Jerusalem for the feast, and suddenly he is pressed into doing the most odious thing that a Jew could possibly imagine doing—that is carrying a cross to allow the Romans to put a criminal to death. No doubt, it would have meant he would have been ceremonially unclean for the rest of the feast. And yet, apparently, in God's providence, Simon was brought to the Lord through that experience, and his son Rufus believes in Christ so that Paul can greet him as a choice servant of the Lord, part of the core group of Christians in Rome.

Now, think about it, my friends, God in His wise providence, begins to plant a core group of believers in Rome by having a man bear the tree on which His Son would die. Now, there is a story there. I cannot wait to ask Simon and Rufus and Peter and Mark and Paul about that story. There is a story there. But you see God using dark providences to build up His kingdom.

My friends, we don't have time to go on. But you get a sense here already of the ministry and the work of the church. Paul calling attention to faithful servants of the Lord in the church, calling attention to how God uses surprising and even dark providences into His kingdom.

But I can't miss this one. Look again at verse 13. I skipped over one thing. You must hear this. Notice that Paul says, “Greet Rufus and also greet his mother, and mine.” That could mean a couple of things, but it probably means that Rufus' mother had been as a mother to Paul, so that Paul himself was ministered to by this saint whose son had been brought to the Lord by this horrendous experience of participating in the crucifixion of the Savior, and Paul had received aid and encouragement and comfort through it. God is always thinking. He's always working in His church to bring about His will.

My friends, you might not have thought it, but even greetings in God's word are profitable for reproof and correction and training in righteousness that the man of God may be equipped for every good work. May God bless His word. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your infallible and Your applicable word. Help us not only to stagger at its wisdom, but to walk in its way. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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