

The Dedicated Servants At Rome

When you come to church week after week and the pastors minister to you faithfully through teaching the Word and prayer, you probably feel fed and encouraged. Do you ever wonder who feeds the pastors? Who builds them up and encourages them? Where do they get the spiritual energy to keep going?

Well God places within each congregation people with gifts that minister to the pastors. Some of you have the gift of encouragement and that bolsters your pastors more than you can know. Today we learn from Paul about some of the people who served that function in his life.

In this closing chapter Paul continues what he really began in chapter fifteen, verse fourteen, where he began to reveal his heart. He gave us some personal insight into the nature of his ministry, how he viewed the role that he was to play, and his gifts and calling within the will of God. Here in chapter sixteen we again look into Paul's heart. Beginning in Romans 15:14, Paul gave us some information about himself and his ministry. Now in Romans 16 he focuses on his relationship with people and exactly how so many have been supportive of him and assisted him, even to the point of risking their lives for him.

The emphasis of the chapter is to show his love, his mutual accountability, and his dependence on people within the loving community of the Church.

In many ways this chapter is sort of a living illustration of the love he talked about in Romans 13:8-10, where he wrote:

*8 Pay all your debts, except the debt of love for others. You can never finish paying that! **If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill all the requirements of God's law.***

9 For the commandments against adultery and murder and stealing and coveting—and any other commandment—are all summed up in this one commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

10 Love does no wrong to anyone, so love satisfies all of God's requirements.

So as Paul ends this great epistle, he talks about relationships that tell us a lot about his accountability, his love, and his dependence on other saved believers. Let's focus now on Paul's love for his fellow believers. As we focus on that we'll see his love revealed in three ways:

- 1) By his commendation
- 2) By his cordiality

3) By his caution

Paul's Commendation

We see the commendation of Paul toward a certain person in Romans 16:1,2:

*1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae,
2 so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.*

In some ways the names in this chapter are incidental because we really don't know very much about any of them.

The real message we need to get out of this chapter is the character of Paul's love and the networking of loving relationships that make ministry possible.

Paul, over and over, expresses appreciation for the hard work of so many people, who did not become famous, but without whom Paul's ministry would not have been nearly so effective. Note how many times Paul comments about the hard work these individuals performed for the sake of the gospel.

This chapter provides one of the clearest possible insights into the community of believing people in the early church and how that community functioned together. Now let's take a look at this commendation in Romans 16:1, 2.

This incredible letter, the epistle to the Romans, when completed was taken to the church in Rome by a very special Christian woman by the name of **Phoebe**, and that is why Paul commends her to them. If you recall, Paul wrote this letter to the Romans while he was in **Corinth**. Corinth was in what we now know as Greece. Rome of course is in Italy and that is a journey of over 600 miles by land and sea. So Phoebe was given a significant responsibility. So we see at the very beginning of chapter sixteen a commendation and expression of love for this faithful Christian woman to whom he entrusted this great epistle to the Roman church.

In verse 1 we see the word *commend*. It basically means to introduce. Only it is really a richer word than that. It isn't to just introduce in a casual way. It's to **introduce with an affirming statement**. Letters of commendation were very common in the early Church. They were written when a believer would be traveling to another city. They could carry a letter of commendation that would allow them to be welcomed into the fellowship of the church in the city to which they were going. The reason for that was because of a need for a place to stay. In those days the Inns were nothing short of brothels where there was looting and stealing. They were not safe places and would be dangerous for any Christian traveler. So when traveling, Christians would carry these letters of commendation they would be warmly received by members of the church in other cities, and provided with

food and lodging. Many such letters have been found in the Egyptian deserts.

In verse 2 Paul tells them to receive Phoebe as one who belongs to Jesus and who is a servant of the saints. This is how Christians should receive other Christians. True to our sainthood, which means we are set apart to God and are different from anyone else in the world around us.

We are to receive one another with a measure of love and hospitality that the world doesn't know anything about. The obligation of love is an obligation to not view any brother or sister as a stranger. It is an obligation to love all those who are believers in Jesus Christ. It is our obligation to supply all the needs of anyone who is in the body of Christ. When a stranger who is a believer shows up among us, we are to receive that stranger with an open heart.

Then Paul tells them to assist Phoebe in whatever business she might have while in Rome. When a servant of God comes to us from another location, we in the church are not only required to provide love and spiritual affection, but assistance in the matters of finance, business, or whatever other matters that person needs to deal with, including those that are not necessarily related directly to the kingdom of God. In other words we are to provide the resources necessary for that servant of Christ to accomplish whatever objectives they have in mind. That is a wonderful thing for the church to do. But notice Paul's explanation here. Phoebe is deserving of this help because "*she has been a helper of many*" (verse 2). Phoebe was not a freeloader. She was a hard worker and as such Paul calls on the Roman church to help her as she may need it.

Now the second way we see Paul's love revealed is by his:

2) Cordiality

Paul sends his greetings to 29 individuals plus a number of groups. Starting in verse 3 we see a list of names that runs down to verse 16. All of these names give us insight into Paul's love because it is a whole lot of cordiality, a whole lot of loving greetings to everybody. Paul knew the saints by name. He knew who stood with him and he loved them. He wasn't so into his leadership role that he lost touch with the workers. **They were an essential part of his life and a great encouragement to him in his ministry.** In fact, without some of these people, as we shall see, Paul's ministry would have been cut short and have been less effective.

Paul had never been to Rome but he names here twenty-four people, seventeen men and seven women, and he names two households along with some unnamed brothers and unnamed sisters in Christ who are at Rome. Paul had been instrumental in winning so many people to Christ who had gone to Rome and were now there as a part of the Roman church. These people are undoubtedly very devoted and faithful Christians. Now many of us when we come to a section like this just surf right over it because we consider a list of names pretty inconsequential. An exegetical commentator (an explanation or critical

interpretation of a text) by the name of **J.B. Lightfoot** (1828-1889)¹ seemed to be preoccupied with who all these people were and he has uncovered some interesting information. **William Barclay** (1907-1978)² also researched who all these people were and he also adds some interesting information. We're going to look at some of this because we believe it important for you to see that these folks in Romans 16 are real flesh and blood people. So let's read Romans 16:3:

*3 Greet **Priscilla and Aquila**. They have been co-workers in my ministry for Christ Jesus.*

They were not apostles. They were not prophets, but they were Paul's fellow workers. If you go back to Acts 18:3 you'll see that they were tent makers. They had the same profession as Paul did. When Paul was in Corinth he went to the synagogue and that's where he met Priscilla and Aquila. This couple is mentioned six times in the New Testament, three by Paul and three by Luke. When Paul met them they became good friends because of their common love of the Gospel. They had originally lived in Rome but were thrown out of Rome because the emperor, Claudius, banished all the Jews from Rome. Two years after their original meeting Priscilla and Aquila moved to Ephesus. When they moved to Ephesus they established the proclamation of the Gospel there. They then returned to Rome upon the death of Claudius when the ban on Jews had been lifted. Later they will again appear in Ephesus when Paul writes 2 Timothy. There we see Paul greeting them in chapter four, verse nineteen.

This couple is best known for instructing the great preacher **Apollos** (Acts 18:24ff.). They are also known for having a church in their home in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:19). So they were a very active and involved Christian couple and they used their tent making business to support their ministry as did Paul. In that way Village Church is very much like the first century churches. I hope that we are like the first century churches in other ways as well because that is one of our goals.

Let's now see why Paul sends them his love. Romans 16:4:

*4 **In fact, they risked their lives for me**. I am not the only one who is thankful to them; so are all the Gentile churches.*

Paul first of all says that they are his fellow workers and they have labored together through the years. They have also risked their lives for Paul. Now that is loyalty. We don't know the details but we know what they did. And not only is Paul grateful but so are all the churches Paul founded on his three missionary journeys. Because they felt that without Paul they may not have heard the Gospel message.

And don't you agree that when we read any of Paul's letters we think, "*Oh what a man that Paul must have been to have accomplished such things.*" Well, Paul was an exceptional man called directly by Jesus Himself, but we need to be reminded that Paul

¹ *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, The Early Christian Church.

² *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, The Biblical Period, P.38.

could have been killed on a number of occasions if it had not been for these two people who were willing to die to protect Paul and his ministry. I hope this helps you get a feel for the life of the church. We have this wonderful woman, Phoebe, and these two dear faithful servants, Priscilla and Aquila. Let's continue now in Romans 16:5:

5 Please give my greetings to the church that meets in their home.

So we see Priscilla and Aquila in Rome and their home is open to house the church. Now you will see as we go through this chapter that the church in Rome met in several places. They didn't have a single building which was the church as most of our churches exist today. This is another way in which Village Church is like a first century church. Any resources we have go first to cover our minimal expenses and the rest is available for those that we see have a legitimate need. Priscilla and Aquila were two people who loved Christ and who loved Paul and **helped make Paul's ministry possible**. Then also in verse 5 Paul writes:

*Greet my dear friend **Epenetus**. He was the very first person to become a Christian in the province of Asia.*

Epenetus was the first person to be converted to faith in Christ in Asia Minor which is modern Turkey. Just as a point of information, Asia Minor was the home of all the churches that are mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3. Now Epenetus is in Rome, a member of the church in Rome. To give you an idea of just how much Epenetus means to Paul, in many translations Paul refers to him as his "*beloved Epenetus*." The first person to come to Christ in Asia had a special place in Paul's heart. Based on the twisted perspective of our culture today it's probably necessary to clarify that the term "*beloved*" as used here means to have a special place in one's heart. We know nothing else about Epenetus. Then in verse 6 we read (Romans 16:6):

*6 Give my greetings to **Mary**, who has worked so hard for your benefit.*

Now there are six women in the New Testament who have the name Mary. This Mary is known to Paul because of the very hard work, to the point of exhaustion, she has provided for the church in Rome. Now how did Paul know how hard Mary worked for the church in Rome? The best explanation is that, if you recall, Aquila and Priscilla came from Rome and it would be entirely possible that they told Paul about the tireless work that Mary provided. Then we come to verse 7 and we meet another twosome (Romans 16:7):

*7 Then there are **Andronicus and Junia**, my relatives, who were in prison with me. They are respected among the apostles and became Christians before I did. Please give them my greetings.*

Adronicus is a masculine name and Junia is a feminine name, although her name has raised some varying opinion among scholars. In some translations her name is listed as Julia, which is unquestionably feminine. Early Church scholars, that is, those who lived

within the first thousand years or so after Christ, all believed Junia was a woman. An important principle in Biblical interpretation is to consider what those individuals closest to the time of the original writing believed. John Chrysostom, commenting on Romans 16:7 somewhere around 400AD, said,

“Greet Andronicus and Junia. . . who are outstanding among the apostles’ (Romans 16:7): To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles—just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.”

Origen of Alexandria, who lived near the end of the second century, and Jerome (340-419 AD) also agreed that Junia was a woman. Peter Abelard (1089-1142 AD) also wrote that Junia was female. The change in this interpretation came about around 1298 under the reign of Pope Boniface VIII. His contemporary, Aegidus, was the first to say that Junia was a man. Aegidus was very likely the Archbishop of Bourges who helped Pope Boniface write one of his major papal decrees. Aegidus made that statement about Junia in 1298, the same year that Pope Boniface VIII issued the *Periculoso*, a papal decree that declared that no nun could ever venture outside her monastery, thereby turning nuns into virtual prisoners. The commentary written by Aegidus was the one that Martin Luther depended on heavily, and that is how the transmission of that error regarding Junia was perpetuated into Protestantism.

Today there are a number of evangelical scholars who have corrected the misinterpretation by Aegidus and now also recognize that Junia was a woman. They also feel that Andronicus and Junia were married. Paul refers to them as his **relatives**, which **means they are Jews** of course, but could also mean they were blood relatives or perhaps related by the tribe they belonged to. This must have been very comforting to Paul, knowing that he had come out of a Jewish family as a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and that some of his family had accepted Christ as he had. **We therefore get the feeling that Paul’s extended family, or tribe, could have also been involved in his ministry.**

Paul comments that Andronicus and Junia were “*of note among the apostles.*” In other words, this couple had worked so hard that others considered them outstanding among the various apostles. In the early church a person was considered to be an apostle if they met one of four possible qualifications: 1) They were one of the original twelve who walked with Jesus; 2) They had seen the risen Lord and had been commissioned by Him; 3) they were a missionary successful in church planting, labor and suffering; or 4) They were an emissary or missionary sent out by a particular church to perform specific tasks. We know that Andronicus and Junia did not meet qualifications 1 or 4, but it is entirely possible that they met either condition 2 or 3.

Paul also mentions that they were his fellow prisoners. Somewhere along Paul’s missionary journeys, during which he was often imprisoned, he had run into Andronicus and Junia. Paul goes on to say that they were respected among the apostles. This means

they were highly thought of for their spiritual life and service. You'll note that Paul also mentions they became Christians before Paul did. Paul, of course, was converted on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus where he was in the process of persecuting Christians. So it is very likely that Andronicus and Junia became Christians through the church in Jerusalem some twenty-five years earlier. Therefore, they would have been known by the original apostles. If indeed Andronicus and Junia were married, just as Priscilla and Aquila were married, we see that husband-wife ministry teams were prominent in the New Testament and were appreciated by the Apostle Paul. Village Church then would also fit nicely into that model with its husband-wife ministry team.

We should now be getting a feeling for this circle of expanding relationships showing the intimacy that Paul had with so many people that touched his life.

In verse 8 Paul mentions Ampliatus (Romans 16:8):

*8 Say hello to **Ampliatus**, whom I love as one of the Lord's own children.*

Paul is a loving man and he expresses his love without any fear of expressing it. Some people find it hard to say "I love you," or to call someone "a beloved friend." But Paul had no problem with that. Now we don't really know who Ampliatus is, but we do know that Ampliatus is a slave name. In studying the history of this time we find this name among the slaves and slaves did not bear the name of free men or noblemen. So Ampliatus is a slave name. In fact it was a very common name in the imperial household of Rome, that is the household of Caesar. There is a cemetery in Rome at Domatilla, the earliest of the Christian catacombs (burial places for Christians). In that cemetery there is a decorated tomb, and on that tomb is the large name, *Ampliatus*." This is interesting because single names were unique. A Roman nobleman or freeman would have three names. But a slave would only have one name. The fact that he is a slave and is given a large and well decorated tomb for all to see indicates he was set apart as high ranking in the church. This is a wonderful insight because it tells us that while the world may have ranked people according to their economic status, the church didn't do that. So a slave could rise in the church of Jesus Christ to a place of recognized prominence to be given unique honor in his burial. It may very well have been that in the church in many cases and many places **SLAVES WERE ACTUALLY ELDERS TEACHING THEIR OWN MASTERS THE WORD OF GOD**. This brings to mind Galatians 3:26-29:

26 So you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

27 And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have been made like him.

28 There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians—you are one in Christ Jesus.

*29 And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and now **all the promises God gave to him belong to you.***

That is yet another reason why Village Church is like the first century church. Now let's go to verse 9 (Romans 16:9) NRSV:

9 Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys.

Here we meet two other interesting men, Urbanus and Stachys. Urbanus is a very common Roman name which suggests he was a Roman and most probably a Gentile. Co-worker would mean that he had helped both Paul and the Roman church at one time. We don't know when but we know he did. Stachys is a very unusual Greek name. It means "ear of corn." It's kind of like naming your son, Cobb. We don't know where Paul met him or how he knew him, but he did. Verse 10:

10 Give my greetings to Apelles, a good man whom Christ approves. And give my best regards to the members of the household of Aristobulus.

Appelles was obviously tried and proven true. He had been tested and proven trustworthy. Wouldn't it be great if you felt you were a person of whom Christ approved? **He was worthy of trust and confidence.** We don't know anything else about him but isn't that enough? Then Paul tells them to give his "best regards to the members of the household of Aristobulus." Paul doesn't say to give his regards to Aristobulus, but rather to his household. This could possibly mean that Aristobulus is not even a member of the church at Rome. Perhaps he's not a Christian. If he was a Christian, Paul would probably have sent him his regards as well. It may well be that the Gospel has divided this household, perhaps a family. It could be his wife, his children, or his servants, or all of the above. This confirms something else for us about the early church. It was divisive. Jesus said in Matthew 10:32-38:

32 "If anyone acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will openly acknowledge that person before my Father in heaven. 33 But if anyone denies me here on earth, I will deny that person before my Father in heaven. 34 "Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! No, I came to bring a sword. 35 I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 Your enemies will be right in your own household! 37 If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine. 38 If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine.

J.B. Lightfoot, who we mentioned earlier, suggests this man may have been the brother of Herod Agrippa I, and the grandson of Herod the Great. Aristobulus may well have been in the family of the Herods. We don't know for certain but there is evidence which suggests it. He would have therefore been an intimate ally with Emperor Claudius, the Roman Emperor. When Aristobulus died his household would have become the property

of the emperor and they all would have been absorbed into the emperor's imperial household. So in the imperial household you would also have the family of Aristobulus. They would there be known as the **household of Aristobulus**.

Look now at verse 11 (Romans 16:11).

*11 Greet **Herodion**, my relative.*

Here is a Jewish relative of Paul who definitely has some relationship to the family of Herod. Herodian would have obviously had some connection to the family of Herod. So it is very possible that the household of Aristobulus was a group of people who actually came from the imperial household of Herod the Great. We can perhaps speculate, we can't be certain, that there was within the very imperial household a growing congregation of those who loved the Savior, Jesus Christ. Then continuing in verse 11:

Greet the Christians in the household of Narcissus.

Again we see that Narcissus is probably not a believer but there are believers in his household. Now who is Narcissus? Well, William Barclay has looked into this and he suggests and agrees with Lightfoot who holds the same view, that Narcissus is a very common name, but the most famous **Narcissus was a freeman who was secretary to the emperor, Claudius**. He had a great influence over the emperor, thus having provided him tremendous wealth. His power had been built on the simple fact that all correspondence with the emperor had to first pass through his hands. People would therefore pay him large bribes to make sure their petitions and requests reached the emperor.

When Claudius was murdered and Nero came to the throne, Narcissus survived for a little while. In the end he was compelled to commit suicide and all of his fortune and all of his household and slaves came under the possession of Nero. The household of Narcissus referred to here could well be the slaves who once belonged to Narcissus and have now been redeemed. Barclay says that if Aristobulus was really the Aristobulus who was the grandson of Herod, and if Narcissus is really the Narcissus who was Claudius' secretary, that would mean that many of the slaves in the imperial court were Christians and the leaven of Christianity had already reached the highest circles of the empire. This reminds me of the verse in Philippians 4 where Paul writes (Philippians 4:22):

*22 And all the other Christians send their greetings, too, especially those who work in **Caesar's palace**.*

Then in Romans 16:12, Paul requests greetings for three ladies:

*12 Say hello to **Tryphena and Tryphosa**, the Lord's workers, and to dear **Persis**, who has worked so hard for the Lord.*

The first two names, Tryphena and Tryphosa mean "delicate" and "dainty." We know

nothing else about them except they worked hard for the Lord, and as mentioned earlier, what more could be said about a person that mattered? Persis means “*Persian woman.*” In the church in Rome there was a Persian woman who loved Christ. We don’t know how Paul met her but she worked very hard for the Lord as well. Verse 13:

*13 Greet **Rufus**, whom the Lord picked out to be his very own; and also his dear mother, who has been a mother to me.*

Now the Lord has accepted everyone who comes to faith to be His very own. But this verse probably suggests some special kind of service that Rufus had been selected for. Then we see that his mother had such a loving relationship with Paul that **she became like a mother to him**. That’s a pretty special kind of relationship. Now do we know anything about Rufus? Look at Mark 15:21:

*21 A man named **Simon**, who was from Cyrene, was coming in from the country just then, and they forced him to carry Jesus’ cross. (Simon is the father of **Alexander** and **Rufus**.)*

Cyrene is in North Africa. So here we have a guy who comes to the city of Jerusalem for the Passover. He happens to be walking by, and the next thing he knows he’s immortalized by being the one who **carries the cross of Christ**. He is also the father of Rufus. How fascinating it is that Mark very likely wrote his gospel from Rome, and that he wrote his gospel with the Romans in mind. If Mark was writing from Rome and had in view a Roman audience, then how wonderful for him to make a connection between the Roman church and the man who carried the cross. So to make that connection as he writes about Simon, he says, “*By the way, he’s the father of Rufus who is a member of your church.*” And the gospel of Mark was written after the epistle to the Romans. So Mark no doubt identified Rufus who is the same Rufus greeted by Paul. Imagine how the people would have perked up as they listened to Rufus tell how his father had carried the cross of Jesus. These are real people. Then in verse 14:

*14 And please give my greetings to **Asyncretus**, **Phlegon**, **Hermes**, **Patrobas**, **Hermas**, and the **brothers and sisters who are with them**.*

These names will be on the quiz and proper spelling is required. Here are five guys who had a church in someone’s home. It’s possible they were leaders who were pastoring or shepherding one group of Christians in Rome, who as we mentioned earlier, met in many different places. Then in verse 15:

*15 Give my greetings to **Philologus**, **Julia**, **Nereus** and his **sister**, and to **Olympas** and all the **other believers who are with them**.*

These folks could very well be leaders pastoring another branch of the church in someone else’s home. Paul wants to send his greetings to all the faithful servants in the church in Rome. Now we do know a little more about Nereus. William Barclay writes that in A.D. 95 an event occurred that shocked Rome. Two of the most distinguished people in Rome

were condemned for being Christians. They were husband and wife. The husband's name was **Flavius Clemens** and he was the consul of Rome. His wife's name was **Domatilla** and she was of royal blood. She was the granddaughter of **Vespasian**, a former emperor, and the niece of **Domitian**, the reigning emperor at the time. The two sons of this couple had been designated as Domitian's successors in the line of imperial power. Flavius was executed and his wife was banished to the island of Pandateria. The name of the treasurer of Flavius and Domatilla was **Nereus**. Barclay asks if it is possible that Nereus had something to do with the conversion to Christianity of Flavius and Domatilla?³ Then finally, Romans 16:15-16:

16 Greet each other in Christian love. All the churches of Christ send you their greetings.

We'll stop at this point and we hope you're feeling a little bit of what we felt after studying this passage as we prepared the message. This early church came to life. It had something that we don't see enough of in the church today. These people worked diligently for the Lord, endured hardship, were willing to give their lives for Christ. They risked their safety and security in order to reach out to unbelievers. Paul knew each of these people individually by name and what they had done for the Lord Jesus Christ.

You've probably received letters in your life from family members that end with a bunch of X's, or with the closing, "*Kiss Everyone for Me.*" That is pretty much the same way Paul is ending this letter. Paul knew what it meant to love each of the people in the church and that without that kind of love there is no church. Next week we'll finish this marvelous book. I've learned a great deal from this study and I believe I have made some life changes because of it. I hope you feel the same way.

³ Who's Who In Christian History, Domatilla Flavia.