

“God’s New Society”
Romans 16:1-16
January 7, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

Bible passages like the one before us today are easy to skip over. After all, it’s essentially just a long list of names, most of whom we know nothing about beyond what’s written in these verses. It was not unusual for letters in Paul’s day to include a list of greetings at the end. But it is unusual for the list to be as long as this one, in which Paul greets 26 named people. What makes this even more striking is that Paul had not yet even been to Rome. Though it’s likely that Paul didn’t personally know all of these named people, he obviously knew quite a few of them. The value of a passage such as this one is that it gives us insight into the kind of community the gospel creates. Paul has been giving instruction about that since the beginning of chapter 12, and now, through these names, we are provided with an example of such gospel community.

Before considering the marks of gospel community that we can observe in these verses, I want to point out the significance of this for our political moment. Though Paul was writing to a church located in the capital of the Roman Empire, and though there was much about that Empire that was at odds with Christianity, Paul says nothing along the lines of correcting these wrongs. Admittedly, this was not a democracy in which the citizens had a voice. And we should also recognize that there are times when we need to speak out about the wrongs of the nation in which we live. But it is also clear that of far greater significance is that the church be the kind of gospel-formed community that we see here at the end of Romans. There is an interesting verse in the passage Blake will be preaching next week. **“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet”** (v. 20). Satan is crushed under whose feet? Though God provides the power, he uses our feet to do the deed. We don’t just stand back and watch God crush evil, we get close enough to evil to crush it with our feet. And we do so simply by being the church that is described in the verses of our text. The Bible has a two-kingdom view for our present life, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. It is the kingdom of God as seen today in the Church that should occupy our greatest effort. Jesus has come to form a new society, and we are that society, a people called to be an outpost of the coming kingdom. One of the most important things we can do to bless our nation is to be the kind of church reflected in these verses. So let’s look now at three features of such a church.

I. Mutuality

Deep in the American psyche is the idea of the solitary hero. A popular television show of my childhood was *The Lone Ranger*. This masked man would ride in on his white horse and with his silver bullets and right the injustices he encountered. We can easily have that view of the apostle Paul, seeing him as this heroic and highly competent missionary who comes into town to plant a church. And at the end of the day, through his singular giftings and after much suffering, a church is planted. Paul did fight evil through the planting of many churches, but he didn't do so alone.

The first verses of our text speak of those upon whom Paul depended for assistance in his work, beginning with Phoebe. It is widely agreed that she was the courier of Paul's letter to the Romans. She was from Cenchreae, which was a port city just a few miles from Corinth, where Paul was living when he wrote Romans. Phoebe was likely a woman of wealth who had business in Rome. Paul asked the Christians there to welcome her and to assist her in her business in Rome. And then Paul refers to her as **"a patron of many."** It is likely that Paul was one of those benefiting from her financial support. So we see a mutuality with Paul and Phoebe. She was of benefit to him in carrying his letter and supporting him financially, while Paul was of benefit to her in commending her to the church in Rome and using his relational capital with the church there to help Phoebe.

The same mutuality is evident with Prisca and Aquila, a husband and wife team who labored with Paul both in his tentmaking occupation and in his work as an apostle. They appear elsewhere in the New Testament, with Luke referring to the wife as Priscilla rather than Paul's more formal "Prisca." They were Jewish and had been forced to leave Rome when the emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews living there. They went to Corinth where they met Paul and labored together in a common trade. That trade is often referred to as "tentmaking," but more precisely was the making of the awnings that were widely used to provide shade in a variety of settings. They worked with Paul both in Corinth and in Ephesus, the latter place being the likely reference to the risking of their necks for Paul. Now they are back in Rome, where they host a gathering of the church. This couple had likely benefited from their long association with Paul, learning from him to the point that they were able to instruct another teacher named Apollos.

The bottom line here is that we need one another. No one is asked to go it alone in serving the Lord because no one is able to go it alone. In our pride, though, we don't want to admit our need of help. I can offer a personal example. For the first several decades of serving as a pastor, I thought that it was all up to me to come up with a vision and mission statement for the church I pastored. This included the first several years of serving as pastor here at AVPC. I thought this could be achieved by scheduling personal prayer retreats to seek the Lord about this, expecting that my experience would be like that of Moses when he went up Mt. Sinai and God gave him the Ten

Commandments. I would go up the mountain, figuratively speaking, but was never able to bring down the tablets with me. The vision and mission statement you see printed on the back page of your bulletin didn't come about until help was sought from other leaders in the church. Working together with others is usually messier and more time-consuming than working alone, but it is also more fruitful.

II. Unity

The ancient Roman world had strict practices in the observance of social barriers. There was a clear hierarchy of power and preference that the observance of these barriers sought to maintain. At the top of the hierarchy were men of wealth and influence, followed by successful members of the merchant class. At the bottom would have been slaves. This culture sought to maintain social stability by insisting on each class knowing its place and staying in its place. Slaves were required to be deferential to freedmen and would not have been allowed to act as free men and women would act. As a group, women were viewed as having less standing than men.

This passage would have brought great offense to the ancient Roman world. For example, in verse 16 Paul commands, **“Greet one another with a holy kiss.”** The kiss in this culture was roughly equivalent to a warm handshake of greeting in our culture. Such a gesture would have been inappropriate in Roman culture between those of differing social standing. But in the church, all such stratification is both inappropriate and offensive to our faith and to our God. It is contrary to the unity we share in Christ, a unity that leads Paul to refer to Phoebe as his sister and to Rufus' mother as serving as a mother to Paul.

The unity of the church in Rome was to be expressed in the presence of a diversity that would have divided those outside the church. There were both Jews and Gentiles among those Paul names, a racial divide every bit as sharp as the one in our era during the Jim Crow years. This unity in the presence of diversity can also be seen in the fact that Paul includes slaves among those he greets. Several of the names of those he greets were common names of slaves. Ampliatus and Urbanus (v. 8-9) are two examples. There was economic diversity in this church. While slaves would have been among the poorest, others were more middle class if not upper class. Prisca and Aquila were wealthy enough to have a home in which the church could meet. Phoebe, being called a patron, was likely a woman of significant wealth. But all were one in Christ.

We also see this unity transcending diversity in the way Paul spoke of women. Note, for example, the value he assigns to Phoebe. He wants her to be welcomed and assisted by the Roman church. He refers to her as a **“servant of**

the church at Cenchreae.” The word that is translated “servant” is the same Greek word describing deacons—*diakonos*—leading many to recommend the translation “deaconess.” Cranfield, in his classic exegetical commentary on Romans, regards the translation “deaconess” as not only “very much more natural” but as “virtually certain.” While we believe that women are not biblically authorized to be ordained ministers of the gospel, it is significant that Paul didn’t relegate women to an inevitable lower status but acknowledged the valuable contribution they made to the work of the church.

We see this too in the way he speaks of Prisca, naming her first over her husband, Aquila. This couple is mentioned six times in the New Testament, always being named together. In four of the six times their names appear, Priscilla is named first. This was likely a reflection of the fact that her labors on behalf of the work of the gospel were more significant than her husband’s. When our grandchildren were visiting over the holidays, I was talking to our three-year-old granddaughter, and she referred repeatedly to “Nana’s house.” I asked her who else lived in Nana’s house, and she said she didn’t know. Clearly, at least in her mind, there was a prominent figure in our house.

The gospel brings unity where the world brings division. Paul’s greetings are simply the application of the truth he stated in Galatians. **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”** (3:28).

III. Generosity

When we think of generosity, we normally think of it in terms of money. To be generous is to give freely of our money. That is clearly an important gospel trait, but it is not the only kind of generosity. We are also called to be generous with our time, particularly with the time we invest in people. It is clear from this long list of names that Paul invested significantly in other people. Though Paul likely didn’t know personally everyone he names here, he did know many of them personally. To be generous with our time requires the same thing as generosity with our money. It requires that we deal with the selfishness lying in all of our hearts. When we give away money, we are giving away the ability to please ourselves with that money. When we give away our time, we are giving up the use of our time to please ourselves. Both require self-denial.

When we give away our time to people, we need to do so in a way reflected here. Paul’s naming of people means that he sees them. One of the most significant ways we can love others is simply to see them for who God has made them to be. We see their gifts, their potential, as well as some of the obstacles blocking their potential. We learn, as Paul had written back in chapter 12, to **“rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”** (12:15). George Bernard Shaw wrote, “the worst sin towards our fellow

creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity." In his book, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, David Brooks writes, "There is something in being seen that brings forth growth. If you beam the light of your attention on me, I blossom. If you see great potential in me, I will probably come to see great potential in myself."

Brooks goes on to contrast those he calls Diminishers and Illuminators. Diminishers make people feel small and unseen. They use people for their own selfish purposes. Illuminators, on the other hand, listen well, ask questions, and exhibit a persistent curiosity about others. He tells the following story of an Illuminator at Bell Labs.

Many years ago, executives there realized that some of their researchers were far more productive, and amassed many more patents, than the others.... They wanted to know what made these researchers so special. They explored every possible explanation...but came up empty. Then they noticed a quirk. The most productive researchers were in the habit of having breakfast or lunch with an electrical engineer named Harry Nyquist... Nyquist, the scientists said, really listened to their challenges, got inside their heads, asked good questions, and brought out the best in them.

Paul saw people, and biblical love requires us to do the same. Do you, like me, need help in this area? The gospel provides us with a powerful resource for growth in this area. It is the fact that God sees us. As I was thinking about this this week, I thought about the Lamb's book of life. It is a book containing far more names than Paul's list in our passage, for it includes the name of every redeemed person. Revelation 20:15 says, "**And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.**" How can you know that your name is written there? It comes when you realize that God sees you. He sees you in all your sin and messiness, and he sees you in all your potential. When you come to understand both of these truths, you are broken by sin and lifted up by Jesus. You come to believe that it is true of you what Paul wrote in verse 10 of a man named Apelles. "**Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ.**" Your only hope of approval is in Christ, and that is enough.

CONCLUSION:

The gospel creates a community of mutuality, unity and generosity. May God help us all grow in these things that we as a church might more and more be that outpost of the coming kingdom God calls us to be!

Discussion Questions
Romans 16:1-16

1. What lessons can we learn from the fact that in his letter Paul never speaks of the evils of the Roman Empire, but focuses all his attention on needs within the church in Rome? What does this teach us about our own priorities? When does God call us to speak out against the evils of our nation?
2. It is clear from the examples of Phoebe and Prisca and Aquila that there are times when we all need help. Review how these three, together with Paul, all needed or provided help. Are you reluctant to ask for help? What is the source of that reluctance?
3. Can you think of a time when you needed help, asked for it, received it, and were able to fulfill the task needing to be done?
4. One of the striking things about this list of names is the significant diversity of these people. There were Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and freedmen, rich and poor. While it is common for these things to divide people from one another, the church is to be marked by unity. What are the main sources of division in the church today?
5. What are some practical ways these divisions can be healed and unity can be strengthened in the church?
6. The fact that Paul names so many different people indicates his generosity with his time, taking time to invest in people. What is the main challenge you may have in doing the same?
7. Paul took the time to see people. What does it mean to be seen? Can you think of someone who “sees” you?
8. When you close in prayer, ask God to help you grow in this area of seeing others.