

[Rom 16:1-7 NKJV] 1 I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, 2 that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also. 3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4 who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. 5 Likewise [greet] the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ. 6 Greet Mary, who labored much for us. 7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.

I work in technology almost every day. So I get pretty good using certain programs. But I have seen a phenomena happen over and over again to the point that it no longer surprises me. Every user faces tasks a little differently. They view the world a little differently. So when they use the program, the same program that everyone else uses, they will discover something that it will do that no one else around them uses. I am continually amazed at these little quirks. It is good because it keeps me humble. About the time I think I am **the expert** in our company regarding some program, some user will show me something very useful that I had no idea about.

That is a bit like scripture. Our context seems, on the surface to be bland and meaningless. We could almost feel like we are overhearing a conversation that has nothing to do with us. But we know it exists for our example, for our good, for our instruction. So we explore the text and we find out there are things about it we would have never seen had we not looked closer. And sometimes there are truths contained in it that we would not have seen without the gifts and insights of others who have seen the things and showed them to us.

Today I think we will see a good example of this.

I have borrowed heavily from John Piper this morning. I think he has done a very good job at getting the gist of what this passage is about.

Our text, this morning, is not a teaching passage like much of the rest of Romans was. But that doesn't mean there is nothing to learn. Whenever we read scripture we have to look for examples that we should follow. In this text we get a lot of them. Our text has to do with real people. They are people that knew Paul. They were not big shots. They were not people who wrote scripture. Many of them probably never knew Jesus when he walked on the planet. They were just people. Maybe they were people like you and me, depending on what you and me are like. And we see in these people's lives things we can emulate, examples we should follow.

Before we start on the verses, let's look at the big picture of this chapter.

First, let's start with the names. There are 27 of them. All but one of them live in Rome. Phoebe, the first mentioned, is **on her way** to Rome.

We see from this that names matter. Paul wasn't looking **at numbers** when he did his ministry. He got to know people. He knew their stories. He knew their names. They were far more than a statistic. They were people.

Paul makes clear that he wants to use this church to send him to Spain. But look at the depth of relationship he already has with some of the people **in this church**.

He serves as an example for us. He calls them by name. He refers to the relationship he has. They are more than a dollar sign to Paul. They are people.

They are important enough for him to know their names, even though he has not yet been to their church. So we see that Paul's ministry is personal.

Second, let's look at how Paul defines the relationships. He did not use these words flippantly. He used them very descriptively. These are the words he uses.

sister, brother, servant, saints, patron, fellow workers, church, firstfruits, kinsmen, fellow prisoners, beloved, approved in Christ, elect, mother to me

In the body of Christ there is much diversity. As I look across our little church I see people I would describe in different ways. A few of you are like parents to me.

Some of you are friends. Many are like my children, in a good sense. Some of you **are** my children. Some of you are my comrades in arms, my co-workers. We

see that some things don't change. Paul saw the church in Rome the same way.

We will not all have the same relationship toward each other. But that is ok. It is not supposed to be uniform. It is supposed to be diverse. Because **our needs** are diverse. And the **needs of the body** are diverse.

Third, notice how Christ centered and Christ focused these relationships are. In the short reading of John Piper I came to like his term- "Christ saturated". By that he means that they are focused on Christ and absorbed with Christ.

Verse 2: "**may receive her in the Lord.**" Verse 3: "My fellow workers *in Christ Jesus.*" Verse 5: The "**who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ.**" Verse 7: "They were *in Christ* before me." Verse 8: "My beloved *in the Lord.*" Verse 9: "My fellow worker *in Christ.*" Verse 10: "Apelles, who is approved *in Christ.*" Verse 11: "Greet those *in the Lord.*" Verse 12: "Greet those who labored much **in the Lord.** (NKJV) Verse 13: "Greet Rufus, who has been **chosen in the Lord.**"

When we look at this we learn something about Paul and something about those he loves. When we write emails or letters or messages, is this how we see things? Is this how we regard believers we are writing to? Are we quick to point to the Lord as the reason for our existence and the reason for our actions and the reason for our relationships? Or, if our communications were intercepted, would it even be evident that **we are in Christ** and the **most important thing about us** is Christ

and **the thing we most encourage in each other** is Christ? We learn from Paul that this is the way **he** lived. And we certainly have a wonderful example in Paul. And then on the other hand we see that the people he was writing to were all about Christ as well. They were doing activities and relating to Paul in such a way that it was evident that they were believers.

When a person is absorbed with Christ it shows. It cannot be hidden. And it should be the center of all our relating. It is the supreme point of reference.

Fourth- is a new discovery to me. I have been reading scripture for a long time and have never noticed this before. Isn't that how it is? God's Word always has something new for us.

Look at verse 5. Notice where the church meets. It meets in Prisca and Aquila's house. Now look at verse 14. Look at the phrase that follows the list of names. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, **and the brethren who are with them.** " This is probably referring to another house church. Then look at verse 15. Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

I have often said that the biblical model is one of a single church in a city. I have been wrong. It seems that the size **of the city** may have something to do with it. Also the size of **the body of believers** would have something to do with it. We don't know if any of these churches actually had their own buildings to meet in. We know for certain that most mentions of churches are in a home setting. And a home can only contain so many people. Also transportation was likely to be an issue as well. So we see that it makes sense that there may be **many churches** in a city as large as Rome. But we can see that they were still **united**. Maybe their **leadership** met together. That had to be the case for this letter to be delivered to all of them.

The church has always had a lot of human considerations. There is always something to think about and something to decide in the best interest of the ministries of the church. So it isn't unusual that we find ourselves with some of those considerations in mind. From what I can see, that is simply normal. The church in the New Testament seems pretty pragmatic about all this. They simply did what needed to be done so the most important things would not be interrupted. We can also see that there is room for more than one church in a geographical area. So we should thank God for every Christ honoring ministry in any given location.

Fifth- Look at the most common command- Greet.

13 times in 16 verses he says to greet someone. We can learn something by this. The letter must have been delivered to the leaders of this conglomeration of churches. Then the leaders would be told to greet so and so. And greet their church. This gives us even more information about what was going on. It is another clue for how the church in Rome worked.

Sixth- Notice the love in this chapter.

Vs 5 My beloved Epaenetus

Vs 8 Amplias my beloved in the Lord

Vs 9 my beloved Stachys

Vs 12 beloved Persis

Then we read

“Greet Mary, who has *worked hard* for you” (v. 6) and Prisca and Aquila “risked their necks for my life” (v. 4).

Paul isn't talking about church structure or church positions. He is talking about **who people are**, and **what they do**, and **how what they do affects others**. It is really beautiful.

I want to make a point here. And for some of us it will be extremely obvious. But it is true none the less. The people Paul refers to seem to be doing stuff. What is Mary doing? She is working hard. What are Prisca and Aquila doing? Taking risks. All of these beloved people are probably not beloved because they are such stellar examples of human beings. They are beloved because of their involvement in Paul's life and ministry. Don't get me wrong. Paul will minister to people even though those people never respond or never show appreciation to him for what he has done. He does that because that is what Christians do. We minister, even though those we minister to may never reciprocate.

But the people we are **endeared to**, the people we are **most appreciative of**, are those who exercise their gifts toward us while we exercise our gifts toward them. If you ever feel like you are not appreciated very much, if you ever feel like you don't get much appreciation, if you ever feel like you don't get much praise, just ask yourself this one simple question. What have I done for anyone? What needs do I provide for? What comfort do I provide? What risks do I take in meeting people's needs. What of myself have I sacrificed for the good of others?

You will find that people will respond to you best when you are giving all that you have in serving the Lord by serving other people. That is not the reason to do it. We only serve the Lord because the Lord deserves our service. But you will find that generally people most appreciate those who contribute the most to their lives. And often, those who are least appreciated are those who whose **greatest efforts** are focused **on themselves** instead of others.

Paul is greeting a bunch of beloved people. And those people have been somehow meaningfully involved in Paul's life.

Seventh- You women are going to like this. Look at how many women are mentioned in this list. There are at least 8, over half of the list, who are women.

And we see by what Paul wrote that he didn't simply just **know** these women.

These women **ministered to him or to others** in a notable way. We will deal with

Prisca and Aquila soon and delve into their service. But look at Mary. She labored much for us. And look at Phoebe. She is highly commended.

There are those who parse out scripture in such a way that it makes it look as if the contribution of a woman is not as significant as that of a man. But that is mere foolishness. We can easily confuse God's **rule for order** and **what God values most**. Without a doubt God intends for mature seasoned males to provide leadership in families and churches. But that in no way says that those males and their ministry is **more valuable** than the ministry of the women those men serve. Christ was served by the contributions of many women, and so was Paul. In truth, probably every significant ministry was supported by the work of both men and women, married and unmarried.

You women, don't ever get the idea that you don't have a valuable ministry available to you. Scripture speaks highly of those tasks that you perform in your home. And as you have opportunity to reach outside of your homes to serve others, there is great value in that as well.

Now let's start into our chapter verse by verse.

1 I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, 2 that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.

The first thing we can notice about Phoebe is that she is the only person in the list that is not living in Rome. She is coming to Rome.

Paul first commends her. What he intends is for her to be met with their approval. Why is that? Well it is very likely that Phoebe is delivering his letter. When we read what Paul has to say it is clear that Phoebe will not arrive before or after the letter. She is going to arrive at the same time. And since she is the only one mentioned as coming to them, it is probably safe to assume that she is coming to them with the letter.

Now to us this doesn't seem like all that big of a deal. If I have Suz deliver a document to you, you know me well enough to know that I probably have another copy of the letter on my pc. And if she were to misplace it, it would be no big deal. I can print another copy for a few cents and very little effort.

Well the world Paul lived in was very different. First off, I read that the parchment was very expensive. So to even write a letter represented something of some value. And then, on top of this, there were no copiers. In fact there were fulltime jobs to do just that. That is where the job of the scribes came from- making copies of the Bible. You know it was not that long ago that there were no copiers. We forget that this is a very recent invention.

Anyway, to give a letter like this from Paul to the church was a very important responsibility. It represented something that was very important to Paul and

virtually irreplaceable. So what do you think it meant that he was willing to trust it to Phoebe?

A good question to ask is would you be a person Paul could trust with a task like this? Is your record of carrying through with a task good enough that he could rest easy giving you this job to do? He could do that with Phoebe.

So Paul commends Phoebe. He wants her to be received like she deserves to be received. Then Paul fills in more of her resume'

Before we go further though, look how he addresses her. She is our sister. He is basically saying, she is part of our family. She is one of us. You should regard her in this way. Regard her as an insider. Regard her as a believer. This woman is going to need protection. She will need a place to stay. She will need food. Remember there was nothing then like the hotels we are so familiar with. To stay at a strange city without protection was dangerous. So Paul is serving notice that this person should be treated like family.

who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea,

Cenchrea is a port city across the narrow land mass from Corinth. Most scholars think that Paul was wintering at that port when he wrote the letter. So it makes perfect sense that he would send his letter with this local woman.

Now the word for servant is the same word we translate deacon. A lot of scholars, and I am talking about solid scholars, believe that this is communicating to the Roman church that Phoebe was a deaconess. It is possible the passage in I Timothy³ that talks about the qualifications for **deacons** is not laying out the qualifications for a **deacon's wife**, as I have understood it, but it is talking about the qualifications for a female deacon.

Given that the work done by deacons is mainly benevolence and meeting other believer's physical needs, this would be perfectly fitting with the roles of women in the church. Jesus gave a pretty good picture of the service needed from people in the church when he described what believers would do to the least of the brothers. [Mat 25:44 NKJV] 44 **"Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?'**

This is all service type of work, whether it is official or unofficial. And it is a very noble work to do.

When Ashley and I went grocery shopping a few weeks ago we saw a woman on the corner begging for help feeding her two kids. She held out a sign. I asked Ashley if her church didn't have a ministry to people like this. She said that they did and promptly drove around the block and gave me a piece of literature to give to the lady, telling her where she could call for real help. It was wonderful to be able to refer this person to someone who was competent in discerning and meeting these kinds of need. That is a deacon ministry.

Phoebe had this kind of a ministry. She served the people of the church. She looked out for their best interest. She is a very good example for us to follow. Then Paul tells the Romans more.

2 that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints

This is not the same word for receive we have seen earlier in Romans. This word means to receive to one's self, to admit, to give access to one's self. The focus is not on the exuberance with which we receive the other person but the accessibility to us that we provide to them. Paul is essentially telling the Romans, open up your lives to this person. Let her into your circles.

Now look at the next phrase- a manner worthy of the saints. A manner worthy of the saints. This leads to a good question. What treatment is a saint worth? Well Jesus equated how we treat our brothers in need as how we treat Him in need. And there are other passages that equate how we treat our brothers and sisters in the Lord as the way we treat Christ. So what treatment is a saint worth? The same treatment Christ is worth. At least we are to serve our brothers and sisters the same way we would serve Christ if we had the chance. Surely we should never worship our brothers and sisters. But they are worth the same service that we would give to Christ. And why are they worth that treatment? Only because Christ values them that highly. It is due to **His esteem for us** that we have value. It is nothing of ourselves. It all springs from Christ.

Now here is an application point. In your dealing with your brothers and sisters how would you do with this question? Am I serving them the same way I would serve Christ? Imagine if Christ were to show up today. Would we not suddenly all want to have Him over to our houses? Would we not make sure all his needs are met? Would we not want to spend time with Him? Would we not make it a priority to do so? What would happen if we really treated each other like that? What would happen? Maybe God is prompting someone here to lead in that service. We might be surprised how God would use us if we were open to take risks and do service to each other like we would to Christ.

, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you

To assist is to place a person or thing at one's disposal. So Paul is telling these people to put themselves at Phoebe's disposal. That is no small thing. He is telling them to cater to her, to prioritize her agenda. The Romans could have responded by saying, who does Paul think that he is? I am busy. I have stuff to do. But isn't it odd that the people who are used by God the most are those that find a way to say yes, even with the demanding situations they are in? When an authority speaks and your first response **is to say no**, your first response is to **give all the reasons something cannot be done**, we would do well to give

consideration to how we CAN do this thing? How can we adjust to meet this need? How can we obey? Flesh's first impulse to authority is to say no. And we always think it is justified. We even convince ourselves that it is the authority's fault that we feel that way. You have to remember how you felt when your parents gave commands. Remember that urge in you to resist what they said, that urge to blame them for not going about this right and for making you feel the anger you feel. If the command is a reasonable command, that response isn't someone else's fault. That is our fault. It is our flesh. But look at those in scripture who were used to do great things. They found a way to say yes. So there might be several in Rome who when they hear "assist Phoebe" will say "no way". I am too busy for that. But there will be some who will say, OK Paul. Will do. And they will be blessed.

Whatever business- the word for business means that which is done or being accomplished, business, a commercial transaction. This could mean business like we would think of the word or it could mean conducting a task of some sort. I suspect Paul gave Phoebe some church business to interact. And Paul is urging the Romans to assist her in those things. Make it easy for her to accomplish these important tasks.

for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.

Helper- a patroness caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources. It is likely that Phoebe was a woman of resources. It is likely that she financially underwrote some of Paul's ministry. Just the fact that she is traveling says something about this woman. That coupled with Paul's use of the word "business" might imply that she actually had monetary business she had to do while in town. The fact that she is a patroness implies financial support. It is more than just providing a service.

I mentioned in Sunday school that I am a little surprised to find how many "people of means" are listed in scripture. And while greed is condemned, clearly not every person who has a lot of resources is greedy. But the thing we see in every instance is a willingness to give to the needs of others and to the ministry to others.

God clearly gives some people a position where they have financial resources to aid others. In Timothy, Timothy is told to instruct people who aren't working to work with their hands. To what ends? So that they have something to give to those in need. That is what our finances are primarily for- to meet needs. And evidently Phoebe is doing that.

Final application-

One day we are going to die. And when we die, we will probably be remembered for some things. But if you were to die today, how many people would miss you because you were like Phoebe? How many people would miss you because they could count on you to be the one to provide the service they needed? They could count on you to care enough to see the needs and to do something about them. They could count on you to provide whatever resources you had for the service to the saints? Will we be a person that people will look at us in our coffins and say man, that person helped me. And I knew he would help me. I counted on him? You know, if you are not that kind of person, you can be. Pray that God would show you the needs. Pray that God will lead you to ways to serve His children. I guaranty God will answer a prayer like that. It is clearly in Jesus name, in Jesus will, and for His glory.