

Romans 16:1-16 "Ordinary People Doing An Extraordinary Work In Christ"

As we come to our text this morning it's worth noting that this may appear not to be a very exciting portion of God's word as Paul begins to end this letter with greetings to people he knew in the church at Rome.

Some might compare it to watching someone else's home movies. And there might be the temptation to take a snooze during this time, until Paul gets the names of his friends out of the way, so we can get on with more important things.

That would be a tragic mistake. Remember what Paul told Timothy in 2Ti 3:16-17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Even this portion of scripture is important for our edification as the Spirit of God uses it to teach us. So, may the Spirit teach us this morning as we consider some of Paul's friends and fellow servants in the Lord.

Rom 16:1-2 "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. 2 I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me."

Paul begins by commending a woman by the name of Phoebe to the church in Rome. In this way Paul is putting his stamp of approval on her as she is faithful to serve Christ. And the way in which she appeared to be serving Christ in this instance is that she was delivering the letter which Paul was sending. By the way, this was about a thousand mile trip. No UPS overnight delivery in those days.

They didn't have an official Postal system either and so communications were hand delivered by people who may have been traveling to another part of the world, either by boat or over land, often through trade routes.

But it wasn't uncommon to send your own courier and in this case Phoebe was the one sent, though she certainly may have had traveling companions for her protection.

But, she is specifically mentioned because of her willingness to go where she was needed. And because she was a willing servant of Christ Paul refers to her as a servant. In the Greek the word servant is *diakonos*. It's where we get our English word deacon. In the context here Paul is calling her deaconess; servant.

The word deacon or deaconess does not always denote an official office in the church. In fact, it would be appropriate for all Christians to be deacons and deaconess' to the degree that every Christian should be a servant.

If a servant will only serve if he or she has an official title, then their service should be suspect. I should add, however, that the word of God does address those who rule in the church as elders and deacons. And whether it's the book of Acts or the epistle to Timothy or Titus, the Lord has ordained that godly, Spirit-filled men be responsible in those ruling positions and the tasks that go with them.

It's not that God is a chauvinist. And it's not as though women don't play a vital part in the Body of Christ as servants. But in the area of ruling or governing over the Body under the direction of the Head, Jesus Christ, godly men are appointed for those positions according to the word of God, as the Spirit of God calls them out and gifts them for the work in the Body.

Now, having said that, women still participate in the areas of service where the Spirit of God uses them. A woman may be used by God, as one using the authority of God's word, to encourage someone in the Body, where she may be using the same types of gifts that an elder would have.

Consider another couple we'll be looking at in a moment by the name of Priscilla and Aquila and you'll see this very thing happening.

In Act 18:24-26 "Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor in the Spirit and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. 26 He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately."

Both Priscilla and Aquila took the lead to instruct this man. Some might say, 'Oh no, Priscilla must be quiet while Aquila teaches this man according to the scriptures'.

No, Priscilla was only using her gifts as the Spirit of God gave them to her. And so she and her husband were not only qualified to teach, but they had a duty to use their gifts to honor God and encourage the saints.

Priscilla, was not assuming to rule over the church with her gifts. But simply because she's a woman doesn't mean that she can't use her gifts any more than a man should. All elders may be men, but that certainly does not mean that all men can or should rule over the church, simply because they're men.

I know some women who have great teaching ministries. Many of these women are very gifted by the Holy Spirit to teach both men and women. Does that automatically mean that a woman teacher in the church is necessarily ruling over the Body of Christ? Not at all.

I was a teacher in the church for many years. But, I was not given the privilege to minister in a ruling capacity over the church, because that's not what God called me to do during those particular years in my life as a Christian. That's changed, but only because God changed it.

And so we shouldn't be frightened by women who are godly women doing what God has called them to do according to the parameters and guidelines which God has laid out in his word. And whether we're men or women, God's word is still the final authority.

Likewise, women who are *serv*ing in the capacity of *deaconess* should be recognized for their gifts. Again, that doesn't mean that a woman servant or deaconess, is necessarily ruling over the church in that capacity.

But it does mean that women are important and we need godly women, just as we need godly men to have a servant's heart desiring to reach out to people to meet needs and be available when and where Christ wants us.

Phoebe was a vital part of the church in Cenchrea. She was a godly servant there. Cenchrea is actually a seaport in Corinth which is where this letter to the Romans was penned. And so, Paul

saw first-hand how this servant of the Lord was useful, not only to the church in Cenchrea, but also to Paul in his ministry.

And so he goes out of his way to commend her and he continues in Rom 16:2 "I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me."

Praise God for all the Phoebe's in the world and for the Phoebe's in this congregation. But, Paul is only warming up.

Rom 16:3-4 "Greet Priscilla [Greek Prisca, a variant of Priscilla] and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. 4 They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them."

The first time we met Priscilla and Aquila, and for that matter the first time Paul met them, was in Act 18:2-3 "There he [Paul] met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, 3 and because he was a tent-maker as they were, he stayed and worked with them."

The year when the Emperor Claudius ordered the Jews to leave Rome was A.D. 49. And so it was around this time when these three met each other in Corinth which is where Phoebe is from.

Both Priscilla and Aquila then ended up ministering in Ephesus with Paul. But at the writing of this letter to the Romans, which is now around A.D.55., Priscilla and Aquila are back at Rome which was their former home, because the Emperor Claudius had died the year before and the ban on the Jews was lifted and it was safe for them to go back to Rome.

And so, Paul mentions them and greets them. But he also greets the church in verse 5 which was meeting in their home. Today, when the church meets in a home it's viewed as somewhat odd according to some and yet this is where most Christians in the early church met.

It wasn't the only place they met, but it was certainly an acceptable place. The apostle Paul met with these churches and often found himself in someone's home to worship God and be built up with the preaching of the word to do service for our Lord and Savior.

It's also obvious that since not all of the church in Rome could fit in one house, that in all likelihood they had many small

fellowships and home bible studies where those of the Body of Christ would gather. And here it appears that Aquila and Priscilla opened their home for those Christians who lived in that area and enjoyed the teaching and fellowship of Aquila and Priscilla.

Keep in mind too that Aquila was a tent maker like Paul and quite possibly had large enough tents where quite a few Christians could get together for worship and fellowship.

Also in verse 5 Paul continues by saying, "Greet my dear friend Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia."

Of course the province of Asia is our modern day Turkey. You might remember, that Paul wanted to go into Asia to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ but the Holy Spirit forbid him (Acts 16:6). Instead, the Lord directed him to Macedonia where he met another woman by the name of Lydia in Philippi. And she and her household came to Christ and were baptized.

But in our text Paul somehow found out who the first convert in Asia was, and now this man Epaenetus, after all these years, is still going strong for the Lord and serving in Rome, probably a couple thousand miles from his homeland. And Paul calls him beloved.

Rom 16:6 "Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you."

As you'll see as we go through this list, we will never know anything about many of these people until we see them in glory. Mary was a common name, but she was not a common servant. She worked very hard to meet the needs of the saints. In the Greek, the phrase "worked very hard" could be translated worked to the point of exhaustion.

Rom 16:7 "Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was."

The NAS puts the first part of this verse as... "Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners." The name Junias is believed by many commentators to be better translated Junia which is a feminine form.

And so, these two could very well have been husband and wife or brother and sister. Nevertheless, they were fellow-prisoners of Paul's, which means that when Paul found himself in jail for his

faith in Christ, Andronicus and Junia shared that space with him on at least one occasion for their faith.

This shows us how these two were willing to put their faith on the line for Christ. In fact, their service for Christ was such that they were even regarded very highly among the other apostles which probably means they spent some time in Jerusalem where most of the other apostles were. And evidently they've known Christ for quite a few years since they were in Christ even before Paul.

Some suggest that since Paul was not a believer at the time of Stephen's death, by stoning, and since these two were believers at that time, they may have even been in Christ right around our Lord's Ascension. They may have seen the risen Christ.

So, far we've got quite an interesting group of people who make up this church in Rome. But we've got a few to go.

Rom 16:8 "Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord."

Again, we see the affection and deep respect he had for many of the saints there in Rome, some of whom obviously had personal contact with Paul and his ministry. Ampliatus was a common Roman name. But again, it was common people who made up the church and many common people who did remarkable things for Christ by His grace and strength.

Rom 16:9 "Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys."

The name Urbanus means belonging to the urbs or the city. Stachys means 'ear of grain'. We'll hear their story when we see them in glory. They too worked closely with Paul at one time.

Remember, that Paul had been all over many parts of the known world at that time in history. And yet he had never been to Rome. In his journey's he may have shared how the church at Rome was growing and how people were serving Christ and being used of the Lord there. And I'm sure many people headed in that direction to be a part of that work in the heart of the Gentile world.

Rom 16:10 "Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus."

Apelles was evidently a man who had a record of showing that he was a faithful workman for Christ. He was tested and approved not only by men but by the Lord.

Paul encouraged Timothy with similar words.

2Ti 2:15 "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."

And in 1Th 2:4 "On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts."

As far as Aristobulus is concerned Paul greets his whole household. William Barclay makes an interesting observation about this man. He says, "In Rome "household" did not describe only a man's family and personal relations; it included also his servants and slaves. In Rome there had lived a grandson of Herod the Great, [*the one who killed the children two and under to try to eliminate the new born King of the Jews*]; his name was Aristobulus.....

.... He had lived always as a private individual and had inherited none of Herod's domains; but he was a close friend of the Emperor Claudius. When he died his servants and slaves would become the property of the Emperor, but they would form a section of Claudius' establishment known as the household of Aristobulus.....

.... So this phrase may well describe Jewish servants and slaves who had once belonged to Aristobulus, Herod's grandson, and had now become the property of the Emperor."

It would not be all that unusual for people connected with the Roman government and different prominent families of Rome to find themselves in contact with Christians who would then share the gospel of Christ with them.

And this is believed to be the case with Paul's next friend mentioned in our text.

Rom 16:11 "Greet Herodion, my relative (my kinsmen). Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord."

The name Herodion in the city of Rome would certainly be associated in some way to the family of Herod. And here Paul calls him kinsmen, a close associate who serves the living Christ.

"Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord."

Not unlike the household of Aristobulus, the household of Narcissus may have included many slaves and other servants who

were now Christians. There was a very famous Narcissus in Rome about this time who was the secretary to the Emperor Claudius.

All correspondence addressed to Claudius had to pass through Narcissus' hand. He became very wealthy as a result of this because if he didn't want to give Claudius certain pieces of mail or correspondence he would simply destroy them.

And so, as a business man or a lower politician, if you wanted to guarantee that your mail got to the Emperor you would have to pay off his secretary to insure delivery.

When Claudius was murdered and Nero came to power Narcissus survived for a short time until he committed suicide. At that point all of his slaves and servants would have become the property of Nero but would still be referred to as the household of Narcissus.

Again, we don't know if this is the same man. But if it was, many in his household were believers and active in the church at Rome.

Rom 16:12 "Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord."

Tryphena and Tryphosa were not unusual names in Rome but put together like this suggests they were sisters because both names have the same root Trypha; and it's very likely they were twins.

But what's interesting about these two is that Paul must have had some fun with them in addressing them this way as women who work hard in the Lord. You see their names mean Dainty and Delicate respectively.

William Barclay says, "It is as if Paul were saying, 'You two may be called Dainty and Delicate; but you belie your names by working like Trojans for the sake of Christ.'"

Paul had a sense of humor. And it shouldn't be lost here. But, so as not to forget another hard worker for Christ he mentions another woman named Persis which suggests that she was from the region of Persia.

Some have accused Paul of being anti-women. It's just not the case. Women have always played important roles in furthering the Kingdom of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ and Paul labors this point by elevating many women in a way that places them in the very word of God which we know will last for eternity.

^{NAU} **Isaiah 40:8** The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.

Rom 16:13 "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too."

Rufus and his family, particularly his mom, were very close to Paul. In fact, Paul greets this woman as his own mother. I'm sure most people here have known a woman like this growing up.

Usually as a young man or woman out of the home for the first time, maybe away at college; your best friend's mom is like a protector who's always looking out for you, making sure you eat well when you're at their house. When you're in their town you always look up the mother of your friend who was like a mother to you.

This is what Paul refers to here. But who is Rufus? There is mention of a Rufus in the Gospel of Mark.

Mar 15:21 "A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross."

Notice that Mark identifies Simon as the father of Alexander and Rufus, bringing special attention to these two. Mark would have done this if his readers were already familiar with these two sons. In fact we know that Mark's Gospel was written and directed to the Christians in Rome in the late 50's.

Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome around A.D.55. The Christians in Rome would have been very aware of who Paul meant if he were addressing this same Rufus whose father carried the very cross of Jesus Christ Himself.

It's very tempting to believe that this is that same Rufus who was there in Jerusalem with his brother Alexander some 20 plus years prior when their dad Simon was pressed into action to help the Savior meet His appointed time to redeem you and me from the penalty of our sins. Whoever, this particular Rufus is we'll get the chance to meet him one day in glory and thank him for him for his service in Christ.

Rom 16:14-15 "Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them. 15 Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them.16

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings."

The saints in Rome were very appreciative of Paul and his involvement in the lives of some of the Christians there. And it just goes to show how being faithful to God does not go unnoticed.

It's true that other people may not notice all that we do as unto the Lord, but here in the pages of God's word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, a group of regular people who just loved the Lord as they served Him, are forever inscribed in the heart of God who just wanted to let you and me know that He was aware of their work.

And He's very aware of your hearts as well and the work you do as unto Him. However, great or small you may think your accomplishments are in Christ's Kingdom, if you will seek His grace and strength, He will be faithful to use you to His honor and glory.

I'll end with two of my favorite verses which encourage me and I hope they will encourage you.

Col 3:23-24 "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

Gal 6:9 "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."