

Romans 16

Over the past several years our pastor has been faithfully preaching through the book of Romans. Matt has done an amazing job of delving into the truth of each chapter of this amazing letter. He has explored the concepts of grace, salvation, atonement, and many more. There is an astounding amount of truth in the pages of that book, and studying that truth closely is a valuable education.

It is now time, however, to bring our study to a close. We have reached the last chapter of Romans and the end of our incredible journey is in sight. Soon it will be time to move on to something else – a different book and a different topic.

Matt has graciously allowed me to preach the final sermon in his series on Romans. I've been looking forward to this opportunity. The last chapter of Romans is a fitting conclusion to its material and has some interesting things to say. It contains a number of verses that tend to be overlooked and yet can speak volumes to our lives. We need to hear what this chapter has to say.

Before we begin, though, we need to take a step back and understand what Romans actually is. We tend to call it the “book of Romans”, but in a way that is very misleading. This is actually a letter that Paul wrote and sent to the church that was in Rome. Calling it the “book of Romans” would be like if you sent an email to Knoxville and people started calling that email the “book of Knoxville”. This is a *letter*, and believe it or not this letter is actually personal. Paul had specific people in mind when he wrote it. This isn't a generic treatise on theology that was sent to a bunch of strangers; there are personal elements here. In a very real way, what we have been doing the past few years is reading someone else's mail.

Romans 16 is where Paul starts to get personal. Since Paul knows it's time to close the letter and put it in the mail, he wraps things up by taking the time to greet people. If you think about it, we tend to do the same thing. When we're on the phone talking to someone and the conversation is nearly over, we'll say things like “Oh by the way, say hello to Bob for me.” We want to greet people and tell them that we appreciate them. That is what Paul is doing here in this chapter.

Now, Paul does say a few other things as well. For example, in verses 17 and 18 Paul warns the Church against false teachers – and we could easily do a whole sermon just on that. The Bible has a lot to say about false teachers, and none of it is positive. But since I don't think you need me to tell you this morning that false teachers are bad and we should avoid them, we're not going to go in that direction today. The overwhelming focus of this chapter is on personal greetings, so that's what we are going to focus on.

The tricky part about studying chapters like this is that they don't get very much attention. This is exactly the sort of chapter that people tend to skip over when they are studying the Scriptures. After all, take a look at some of these verses:

Romans 16:14: “Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them.

15 Salute Philologus, and Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them.”

What we have here is a list of names. However, none of us have ever heard of any of these people. Do you know what we tend to do when we come across lists of names in the Bible? We ignore them. After all, what is there to gain from verses like this? Romans is a book that is rich in theology, but what we have here are names. What good is something like that?

One fact we need to realize is that the whole Bible is the Word of God. Every verse in the Scriptures is there for a reason, and all of the verses matter. The Bible is very clear about this point:

2 Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:
17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

What portions of Scripture were given by God? *All of it*. What portions are profitable to us? *All of it*. There are no passages that we are allowed to skip, ignore, or pretend that they don't matter. Every single verse has a point and a purpose.

Still, let's be honest. If you were lying in the hospital and were gravely ill, and you desperately needed a word of hope and encouragement, I don't think you would ask for someone to read you Romans 16. After all, Romans 16 is just a list of names. How could that possibly encourage anyone? How could that lift up a person in their darkest hour? For that matter, how could this chapter possibly make a difference to anyone?

Believe it or not, Romans 16 actually *is* an incredibly uplifting chapter! It has a message of tremendous hope and encouragement, if only we have the eyes to see it. That is the whole reason I asked Matt if I could teach this chapter to you – so I could show you what this chapter is *really* all about. This is not boring material, nor is it dull; it is actually full of hope. You just need to know how to look at it.

One interesting thing that you may not realize is that although *you* may not have heard of these people, that doesn't mean their identities were lost in time. This letter is only about 2000 years old, and although that is pretty old it's *not* so old that all knowledge of that time period has been lost. History actually has a lot to say about the Roman era. Not only that, but Paul's letter to the Romans is not the only letter that survives from the early Church. We actually have mail from other people as well, and that mail tells us some very interesting things.

Let's take a look at those names again:

Romans 16:14: "Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them.

15 Salute Philologus, and Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them."

For example, in verse 14, the first person Paul salutes is Asyncritus. It turns out that history actually records the identity of this person. He was not some random nobody; he was actually the bishop of Hyrcania. On top of that, he was also one of the 70 disciples that Jesus hand-picked and sent throughout Israel to prepare for His arrival (Luke 10:1). This person was not one of the 12, but he was one of the 70. This means that he knew Jesus personally and he worked with Him during His time of earthly ministry. He was a significant leader in the early church.

The next person who is mentioned in verse 14, Phlegon, was also one of the 70. The next person, Hermas, was the bishop of Philippi. Oh – and the last guy mentioned in verse 15, Olympas? Not only was he one of the 70, but he was also a martyr as well.

If you do a little digging you can actually find out who these people were. To us they might appear to be random, unimportant names, but in reality these were key people in the early Church. Some of these people knew Christ before the crucifixion and served Him during His earthly ministry. Others gave their lives for the faith. These are remarkable people with remarkable stories. Some of them wrote letters and other material that survives to this day. If you want to read it, that is actually an

option. As I said earlier, Paul's letter to the Romans is *not* the only letter from the early Church that survives to this day. There's a lot of other mail that you can read too, if you're interested in learning a bit more about the people that God used to lay the foundation of His Church.

Even if all we had to go on was the material in Romans 16, though, there's enough here to indicate that this is a remarkable group of people. Look at what Paul says about Phebe:

Romans 16:1: "I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea:

2 That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also."

Paul highly praises Phebe – a woman. That's rather remarkable, if you think about it. At this point in history women were rarely praised or held in high esteem, and yet the very first person Paul mentions is a woman. On top of that, look at what he praises her for: Phebe has gone out of her way to help Paul and the other apostles.

This may seem like a small act of kindness to us, but it's far more significant than that. Remember, the apostles were considered to be criminals during their day. In fact, the only one who wasn't executed for preaching the gospel was John, and he was sent into exile at Patmos. As far as the authorities were concerned Phebe was harboring dangerous fugitives, and that's the sort of thing that could have easily gotten you put in prison or executed. But that did not deter this remarkable woman. She faithfully served the Lord by trying to meet the needs of the apostles. Therefore, Paul praises her highly.

Would you have done what she did, if you were in her position? Would you have harbored the apostles if you knew it could get both you and your family killed? Would you have taken this risk for the gospel? Phebe did. She helped others at her own expense – and so Paul urges the church at Rome to do whatever they can to help Phebe.

This woman is not the only person who has risked a great deal to help the apostles. There are others who also risked a great deal:

Romans 16:3: "Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus:

4 Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

5a Likewise greet the church that is in their house..."

Priscilla and Aquila risked their lives for the sake of Paul. There's actually a fascinating story behind these two people. As it turns out, this is not the only time this couple is mentioned in the Scriptures. This is what we find in the book of Acts:

Acts 18:2: "And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them."

This couple originally lived in Rome, but were driven out of the city by Claudius Caesar. They then went to Corinth where they met the apostle Paul. In fact, the apostle actually lived with them for a while, because they were fellow tentmakers. Acts tells us that the couple followed Paul to Ephesus,

where they met a man named Apollos. Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos the gospel, and Apollos became a mighty preacher of the Word.

There's no telling how many times this couple risked their lives to help Paul. They were with him for some time, and they traveled with him for a while on his missionary journeys. I am sure they did a great deal for Paul that is not recorded. What we do know is that they were there when the apostle needed them, and they were willing to lay down their lives in order to save him. They were also active in the early church and were instrumental in the conversion of one of its most prominent leaders, Apollos. And if all that was not enough, we find that they had a church in their home. These were remarkable people.

But Paul has only just begun. There are more people he wants to greet:

Romans 16:5b: "Salute my well-beloved Epaphroditus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ."

Who was Epaphroditus? He wasn't just the first convert in Achaia; he was also one of the 70, and became the bishop of Carthage.

By this point it should be obvious that the people in this chapter are not "nobodys". We know that Hebrews 11 contains the "heroes of faith" - the noteworthy people God worked through in mighty ways. What we have in Romans 16 is another list - a list of prominent people in the early Church who lived amazing lives and sacrificed a great deal for the gospel.

This chapter has leaders. It has people who knew the Lord personally. It has bishops. It has martyrs. It also has prisoners:

Romans 16:7: "Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me."

Being a Christian was a dangerous thing to be at this time in history (and in many parts of the world it remains a dangerous thing today). These two people had been Christians for a long time - in fact, they knew the Lord longer than Paul himself had. Apparently they had done remarkable work, for not only were the apostles familiar with them, but they had also been put in prison for their labors in the gospel.

History records that these people were not apostles themselves, but messengers. They had the dangerous job of going from city to city and relaying messages from church to church. Remember, back in those days if you wanted a copy of Romans you couldn't just go down to the local bookstore and buy one. Someone had to copy it by hand, and then someone else had to make the long and perilous journey to bring it to you. (Email was simply not an option.) People had to risk their lives to bring the words of God to the churches, and those people were held in high esteem. It was dangerous work - but it was work that Andronicus and Junia willingly did, and it enriched the lives of many.

But the list goes on:

Romans 16:8: "Greet Amplias my beloved in the Lord.
9 Salute Urbane, our helper in Christ, and Stachys my beloved."

Who was Amplias? He was the bishop of Odysseus. Urbane was the bishop of Macedonia, and is thought to be one of the 70. Stachys was the bishop of Byzantium and was also one of the 70. Note that Paul was very close to these people; they were dear friends of his.

As you can see, this is *not* a list of random, unimportant strangers. Instead these are key people

in the early Church. This is the A-team. These people risked everything for the sake of the gospel, and some of them gave their lives. They are heroes of the faith, and their stories are still with us today.

There's something I'd like to point out, though. In verse 9, Paul calls Urbane "our helper in Christ". I don't know about you, but I would be *thrilled* if one of the apostles called me a "helper in Christ"! Wouldn't you? How amazing would it be if one of the leaders of the early Church took the time to call you out *by name* and thank you for your service to the Lord?

Imagine how uplifting that would be. It's rare enough to be thanked for the work that we do, but to be thanked by someone of such prominence – someone held in such high respect – well, that would have been an incredible experience. If that thanks was then recorded in the *Bible itself*, that would really be a life-changing sort of thing. It's one of the greatest honors you could imagine, isn't it? I think if I had the choice between receiving a Nobel prize, and having one of the apostles thank me in the Word of God, I'd go for the second option.

That is *precisely* what God did for these people, isn't it? God took the time to stop and thank these amazing, devout people for their service to His kingdom. On top of that, He chose to do it in the Word of God itself, and thus give them an everlasting testimony to their faithfulness and devotion. You see, the Word of God will abide forever:

Matthew 24:35: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

The Word of God is *everlasting*. Nations may fall and cities may collapse into ruin, but the Scriptures will endure forever. When the great Day of Judgment is over and the Lord has put a final end to sin and wickedness, the Word will still endure. It will be there for all the ages of time – which means that God's praise of these people will also last forever.

Paul took the time to thank these men and women for what they did. But what about us – do we ever thank those who are around us? There are so many people in this church who have done so much for the Lord. Have we ever thanked them for it? Do we show our gratitude? The Bible itself takes the time to thank people and recognize their service. Shouldn't we do the same?

Let's be honest, though. While it *is* nice to have the praise of men, it's much better to have the praise of God. There are so many times when we serve the Lord, and make sacrifices, and do the right thing, and it seems that our actions went unnoticed. No one ever thanks us for it or even acknowledges what we did. We work hard in the service of God and we simply aren't recognized. It just seems like no one notices and no one cares, and that can make it hard to keep going. We know that we shouldn't do our good works in the sight of others, and we know we shouldn't live in order to be praised, but encouragement really *does* make a difference. It can be hard to keep going when it seems that we're not appreciated.

Wouldn't it be nice if our names were listed in Romans 16? Wouldn't be amazing if we made that list of remarkable people? How happy would you be to see *your* name there, recorded forever in recognition of the things you had done? Of course we all know that is never going to happen – but it turns out that you did make *another* list.

We all know about the Book of Life. All those whose names are written in that Book will live forever with the Lord. They will not be cast into Hell and suffer the wrath of God; instead they will inherit eternal life and everlasting joy. That is one list that all Christians are on, and that is a very important list to make. You want your name to be on that list.

But what many Christians do not know is that there is *another* Heavenly book. In Malachi 3 we are told that the people had a complaint. There were those who faithfully served the Lord and did what was right in the midst of a wicked time and a wicked people, and yet their service was seemingly being

ignored. The wicked were prosperous and happy and the righteous were suffering and oppressed, and it just seemed so unfair. Did God not see their righteous acts? Did God not care about their sacrifice and their service?

In response to their complaints, God did something. He created the Book of Remembrance:

Malachi 3:16: “Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name.”

What is God remembering? Not the *names* of the righteous, for those are recorded in the Book of Life. No, this is a different book and it has a different purpose. The reason the righteous were complaining was because they thought their deeds were being forgotten. So God commissioned a book *to record them*.

In Romans 16 we have a list of the A-team of the early Church. That list, however, is a small subset of a much greater list that can be found in Heaven – a list that *you* are on. You may not have made Romans 16, but if you are a Christian and you have served the Lord then your deeds are recorded in the Book of Remembrance as an everlasting testimony to your service to God. The Lord is never going to forget what you have done for Him. Your righteous acts and your sacrifices have been recorded, and they will be there for all of eternity as a testimony to what you have done. The good things that you have done will *not* be forgotten.

Interestingly, it appears that the Lord is recording something else about your life. The book of Psalms makes a passing mention of another book that God is keeping:

Psalms 56:8: “Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?”

We know that there is the Book of Life, which records the names of the saints of God. There is the Book of Remembrance, which records the righteous acts of the saints. This verse hints that there may also be a Book of Tears, which records the trials, pains, and sufferings of the saints.

What all of this means is that *God has not forgotten about you*. You may think that you have been overlooked and that no one cares about you. It may seem like your deeds are unappreciated and your sacrifices have gone unnoticed, and that all of your work is in vain. But that is an illusion. Your sacrifices, your good deeds, and even your tears are being recorded and will *never* be forgotten. They will remain as a testimony to your life for the rest of time.

In fact, interestingly enough, these books will come into play on the Day of Judgment. On the last day the Lord will be seated on his Great White Throne and will perform the final judgment of mankind. During that judgment we are told that this event will take place:

Revelation 20:12: “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.”

One thing that a lot of people miss is that although the Book of Life is mentioned, there are other books mentioned as well – books that are clearly said to *not* be the Book of Life. I guess now we know what some of those other books are, don't we? We now know which books are going to be

opened. We can even see in this verse that those other books record *your works* – the things you did in life.

Now, the Book of Life will be used to determine whether you inherit eternal life or eternal damnation. The works that you have done will *not* play any role in that. You are not saved by your works; you are saved by the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But your works *are* recorded. For the lost that is a bad thing, because God is going to condemn them for every sin that they have ever committed, and will punish them for every wrong they have done. The Bible even says that they will be condemned for every idle word they have spoken (Matthew 12:36).

For the saints of God, though, it's a different story. What was recorded for them was their righteous acts, and they were recorded so that God could reward them for what they have done and praise them. For them the judgment will not be about pain and suffering; it will be about an eternal glory that will never fade away.

Romans 16 is a glorious chapter. Is it a list of names? Yes, it most certainly is – the names of amazing people whom God worked through in astonishing ways. It is a place where God has taken the time to thank these people and recognize their service. What is so encouraging about this chapter is the knowledge that these are not the only people whom God is going to recognize, nor are these the only people whose deeds were recorded as a memorial for them. God is also recording our righteous acts and our sacrifices. Those are also being written in a book that will last forever.

When we act and when we sacrifice, we can know that what we are doing is not in vain, nor is it unappreciated, nor will it ever be forgotten. It is all being written down. God is paying close attention to what we are doing, and the day will come when we will stand before Him and He will praise us. In fact, Jesus even went so far as to say this:

Luke 12:35: “Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning;
36 And ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately.
37 Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.
38 And if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants.”

Jesus said that when He returns, if He finds His saints watching for Him and serving Him, He will bless them richly. In fact, Jesus actually said in verse 37 that He would *serve them*! That is truly amazing. This means that when Jesus returns, you really, *really* want to be caught working. You want Jesus to catch you in the middle of watching for His return and advancing His kingdom. That is the sort of life you want to be leading, for that carries great reward and blessing.

But there is another side to this. If Jesus returns and catches you in sin, well, there are consequences for that too:

Luke 12:45: “But and if that servant say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to beat the menservants and maidens, and to eat and drink, and to be drunken;
46 The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at

an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.”

It works both ways, doesn't it? If the Lord returns and finds you faithfully serving Him then He will reward you in astonishing ways. However, if Jesus returns and catches you leading an incredibly wicked life, oppressing others and doing great evil, then you will not face reward but wrath. The return of Christ will be a great day for the saints of God, but it will be a terrible day for the wicked.

It is encouraging to know that God is recording our righteous acts and our sacrifices, and that our deeds will remain as a memorial for all the ages of time. But that brings up a question: just what *have* you done? Have you actually done anything worthy of recording? It doesn't take much, you know. Jesus said that even giving a cup of water in His name was enough:

Mark 9:41: “For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.”

Not everyone can be an apostle, or one of the 12 disciples, or one of the 70. We can't all be the bishop of Smyrna. But we *can* serve Christ wherever we are, in whatever position He has given to us. Even small acts of service are held in great esteem by God and will not be forgotten. But I have to ask: what acts of service have you actually done? How have you worked to advance the gospel and the kingdom of God? When people turn to your section of the Book of Remembrance to see how you spent your life, what will they find?

It's something to think about, isn't it?

So the next time you read Romans 16, don't see it as a list of random names. See it as a list of heroes that God took the time recognize for what they had done – and don't forget that *your* deeds are being record as well. One day *you* will be the one who is recognized for your service, and that is a most encouraging thought. Let Romans 16 forever remind you that *God really does care about what you have done for Him*.