



The Importance of Ministry in the Church

Romans 16:1-23

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Now, if you have your Bibles with you, I would invite you to turn to the book of Romans. I'd like to draw your attention to the sixteenth chapter, the last chapter of this wonderful book. We are rapidly approaching the end of our time in the book of Romans. Just this week and one more week next Sunday, and then starting December 8, we will begin a new series for Advent about the coming Messiah. We'll turn to the Old Testament to the prophet Isaiah, as Isaiah prophesies who the Messiah will be, and it helps us to understand the Lord Jesus Christ...who he is and what he means to us.

This morning, we will be looking at the bulk of chapter 16, Paul's final chapter in the letter to the Romans. We'll be looking at verses 1-23. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 16, beginning at verse 1:

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. Greet also the church in their house.

Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.”

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it.

Heavenly Father, we ask this morning that you would attend the reading and preaching of your Word, that as we hear your Word, Lord, we would look to the Lord Jesus Christ, we would know what duty you require of us, and we would see the blessings you provide to us in Christ. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

This is the end of Paul's letter. It is a long ending, but it has been a long time coming. We can be tempted, because this is the ending of a letter that is so substantive, to overlook what Paul is writing here. Surely, hasn't Paul said everything that's important already? But I believe we can see something important about the ministry of the church here in our text. This is more than just a list of names. It gives us insight into the ministry of all sorts of people in the church. It tells us about the nature of real churches and real people.

So this morning, I'd like us to see two things from our text. First, I'd like us to see *community in ministry*, the community that is found in the ministry of the church. Then secondly, Paul points out to us the *truth in the ministry*, the truth that is found in God's Word and that we hold and the ministry we have as a result of it. Community in ministry and truth in ministry.

Community in Ministry

Let's begin by looking, first, at the *community* Paul describes in this sixteenth chapter. As we look at this community, I think the first thing we will see is that this is a very diverse community. We're struck by the sheer number of people who are greeted by Paul. If you haven't counted, I'll do the work for you. It's 24 individuals who are greeted by Paul. Plus, there are others who are implied by phrases such as "the household of [so-and-so]" or "of the family of [such-and-such]" or "all the saints who are with [*this* person]."

This is by far the longest list of people greeted by Paul in all of his letters. What makes this especially remarkable is that, as we've said on several occasions, Paul has never been to Rome. He has never been to these churches, has never met many of these people. After all, Paul is a man who has a very important job on his hands. We normally think of such people as being busy and having difficulty knowing and remembering many people. How many of us remember all of the people's names whom we work with or we go to church with or are in our community? It's a challenge.

Why, then, does Paul greet so many people? I think the first answer is obvious. He wants to encourage the church at Rome. He wants to encourage its members. We know from the very beginning of this letter, Paul has been describing his longing to be with these believers. They are important to him. They are personally important to him. They're also important, as we saw last week, because he seeks their support on the mission he intends to go on to Spain, but Paul does this to encourage them in the work they are already doing.

Think about it *this* way. Does it help *you* to be encouraged in your walk with Jesus? When someone, especially a leader, acknowledges you and your work, that gives you extra motivation, doesn't it? It reminds you that the difficulties and the challenges are actually worth it. So let me ask you *this*. Do you make a point of encouraging others? Do you encourage your spouse? Do you encourage your children? Do you encourage those who are around you in their walk with Jesus Christ?

Now, we shouldn't minister for the sake of recognition, but it does help us in our ministering to know that we are encouraged. It helps us to keep on. I think the second reason Paul greets this long list of persons is less obvious. He is highlighting the wide variety of diversity in the church. Consider what Roman society was like in Paul's day. It was diverse in the sense of having many different kinds of people living in different places.

There were Romans, there were Egyptians, there were people from Greek cities, there were Jews, there were former barbarians from places like Gaul and Spain, and they traveled around throughout the empire and lived in various places throughout the empire, but the thing about it is they did not mix together. They weren't in the same society. They weren't in the same community. They lived in various enclaves, separate sections of town, separate places. They didn't eat together. They didn't live together.

The great exception to this was the church. The church was not only made up of all sorts of people from different places and nationalities; they lived together. They worshiped together. So it is important for us to see that this diversity is not an accident. It is not artificial. It is not something extra or optional for the church to have. It is a part of what makes the church the church.

Going all the way back to the days of Abraham, God had promised to be a blessing to all of the nations through Abraham. Paul understood this, and that's why when he wrote to the Galatians very early in his ministry he said there was neither Jew nor Greek nor slave nor free nor male nor female in Christ. The church is designed for unity of all sorts of people in Christ. What believers have in common is Jesus. We should never make anything else the focus of the church.

Well, it's not just how many people Paul greets, but it's how he does it that shows to us the diversity in the church. It's what he emphasizes, and it starts at the very beginning with Phoebe. Paul starts by commending "our sister Phoebe." He begins by highlighting a woman. This would have been very unusual in Roman society. Women were not afforded the same rights as men. They were often, with very few exceptions, completely dependent upon the men in their lives, upon their husbands, their fathers, their sons.

They were dependent upon them for their economic support and even their safety. Women were seen but not heard. It's hard to imagine for us living today what life was like in Paul's day, but Paul starts with Phoebe, and the way he commends her gives us some insight into her significance to the church. Now, let me start first by saying that, often, when we hear about Phoebe and we discuss Phoebe, it is in the context of trying to make women to be officers in the church.

That comes about from the use of the word *servant* Paul uses here in chapter 16, verse 1. This word *servant* can also be translated *deacon*. So some look at this, and even though the Greek word that's used here for *servant* is used

in many other places in which it clearly does not apply to deacons as officers in the church, they use this to say that Paul is in favor of women being deacons, that that's what Paul is telling us here.

The truth is this word is used to describe all sorts of people and occupations. It's used for slaves. It's used for attendants to the king. It's used for Christians in general when the Scripture tells us that the greatest shall be the servant. It's even used of Jesus himself. Jesus is called a servant. All of these are beyond the official use of the term as *deacon* in 1 Timothy, chapter 3. The Bible is clear that the office of deacon has been limited by God to men.

This is clear because one of the qualifications in 1 Timothy is that a deacon be the husband of one wife. Clearly, a male characteristic. But that doesn't mean Phoebe is not important. That doesn't mean she's not significant. We need to resist the temptations to say that only the official officers in the church are important. Phoebe was a woman of means. She was a woman who used her wealth to support the ministry of the church.

Paul calls her a *patron* of himself and of others. That means she used her wealth to support the ministry of the church and, specifically, Paul's ministry in church planting and missions. She gave sacrificially for the sake of the gospel, but Phoebe did more than just write checks. Paul gives us a clue to this in the way he describes her in verses 1 and 2. He says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe...that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints."

The way Paul puts this, "...that you may welcome her," means it is very likely that Phoebe was the one who brought Paul's letter to Rome. Think about that. We get so worried nowadays about whether Phoebe gets to be a deacon that we do exegetical gymnastics. We know women aren't to have authority, so we say deacons don't have any authority. We have to change the office, because we're busy trying to make women deacons, as if somehow that makes them important.

Here we have Phoebe, and we miss the most important thing she did. Phoebe was tasked with bringing perhaps the most important letter ever written to the church at Rome. Could you imagine what the church would be like today if we did not have the book of Romans? Could you imagine our Reformation without the book of Romans? Could you imagine our doctrine of sovereign grace, of justification by faith, of adoption, of the work of the Holy Spirit if we didn't have the book of Romans?

Humanly speaking, the reason we have the book of Romans is because Phoebe was tasked with bringing it safely from Corinth to Rome. What an honor. What a responsibility she had. Now, it should not surprise us that Paul honors women, because in this text it goes far beyond Phoebe. Fully nine of the people he mentions here are women in this chapter. That is astounding. In a male-dominated culture, more than one-third of the people Paul mentions are ladies.

More than one-third of the people who are mentioned for their ministry in the church are women. We see Prisca, for example. She's called *Priscilla* in the book of Acts. Then there's Mary, who's a hard worker. Then there's Tryphaena and Tryphosa, whose names are so similar many people think they are sisters, maybe even twins. There's Persis. There's Junia. There's the mother of Rufus. There's Julia. There's the sister of Nereus.

What that tells us is from its earliest days, the church has honored and accepted women. We may say the greatest gains in equality and worth for women in all societies across the globe have come through the ministry and the witness of the church, because God values women. Jesus died to make women heirs of life along with men. We can never forget this. There are also other aspects of diversity that are worth mentioning briefly here.

As we look at these names and descriptions, we see that Paul is describing people from all over the world. He mentions that some of these people are relatives of his. They're either extended family or perhaps he's using the term *kinsmen* in the sense that they were fellow Jews. Others have Greek names. They even have names that point to pagan roots of their family. Phoebe is one such person. She's given as a name the female form of one of the names of the god Apollo, god of the sun. He's also called Phoebus.

Other names clearly point out that some are Romans. We have Urbanus. We have Gaius. Some of these names belong to wealthy people. They have means. They have houses large enough to host others and even to serve as worship areas. Others are servants. They're slaves. That's likely what's included when Paul uses language about the "household" of someone. The household of someone is typically not just his family, but it would have involved his servants or slaves as well.

One example of this is the man who is named Ampliatus. That was a common slave name in Paul's day. What Paul wants us to see here is that in the life and in the ministry of the church, there is great diversity. That is the purpose of the church: to bring together sinners from various walks of life and from various places to the unity of the family of God. Out of the diversity of the world, Jesus is forming a united community for himself.

The second thing we see from this text is the community of the church is a committed one. Now, we don't have complete biographies for each of these people, but there is enough information, I think, to draw some conclusions from them. There is a general point that can be made about these people Paul greets. They are hard workers. They labor for Jesus. We see this first with Mary in verse 6. Mary is described as one who has worked hard. The verb there means to toil, to labor on to exhaustion. Mary is a hard worker.

Three times in this passage Paul refers to people as *workers*...in verse 3, in verse 9, and again in verse 12. There's an emphasis here on the work of the church. Persis is also described as someone who has worked hard. Paul describes her as having worked hard in the past tense, which gives perhaps some indication that she has gotten to the age where physical labor is behind her. She has worked very hard, and now that is past her, but she's still recognized for her hard work.

This is important for us to see. The church needs hard work. There is a mission to be accomplished. There will be time for rest when the victory has been completed. Can it be said of *you* that you work hard for Jesus? We also see the commitment of believers to the community in the persons of Prisca and Aquila. We know Prisca from Acts 18 from her name being given by Luke as *Priscilla*. Priscilla and Aquila. We know them because Paul met them in Acts 18 in Corinth.

By the way, it is very likely that Paul is writing this letter to Rome from Corinth, that he is writing it before he is set to take off from Corinth to Jerusalem to take that relief fund. One of the hints to this is that he sends it with

Phoebe who is from Cenchreae. Cenchreae is the port city of Corinth. It is just a few miles off from Corinth. It is the port that ships came into when they came to Corinth.

Priscilla and Aquila had come to Corinth in Acts 18 because they were Jews who had been converted to Christianity, who professed faith in Jesus Christ. They had originally lived in Rome, but Luke tells us they had been thrust out of Rome, along with all of the other Jews, because there were riots in Rome amongst the Jews over a figure, we're told in history, called *Chrestus*, which most scholars believe is a reference to Jesus Christ and the conflict between Jews and Christians.

So, Priscilla and Aquila, Prisca and Aquila, are thrust out from Rome, and they land in Corinth. They're tentmakers by trade. We know this because Paul is of the same trade. Paul lived with them. They supported Paul and helped Paul for an extended period of time in his ministry in Corinth. These were the people who also came alongside Apollos, who was a wonderful speaker but who was not fully formed in his theology. They pulled Apollos aside and taught him more excellently the doctrine of Christ. They not only had their *own* ministry; they helped *others* have ministry.

So, what do we know about Prisca and Aquila? Well, we know they were so committed to the church and to Paul that they risked their necks for him, Paul says in verse 4. We don't know exactly what that means or when that happened. It could have been during the riots in Ephesus. It could have been something that happened in Corinth, but Paul thanks them, because they put their lives on the line for Paul. It's the same phrase *we* use about sticking your neck out or putting your neck on the line. It's actually the same kind of metaphor: putting your neck on the chopping block. That's what they did for Paul.

They were also so committed to the church they were well known not just by Paul but by the broader church generally. Not only Paul gives thanks for them but, he says, *all* the churches of the Gentiles give thanks for them. So Paul honors them, and he highlights them. He does something small but that I think is significant. You'll notice here that Paul calls them *Prisca* and Aquila. He does that in every occasion in which he speaks of them, but Luke, you will recall, has them as *Priscilla* and Aquila.

What is going on here? Paul doesn't use the diminutive form of her name. It's Susan, not Susie. It's Amanda, not Mandy. It's Elizabeth, not Betsy. So why does Paul do this? Paul wants to honor her. It's not just an overly formal way of speaking. He doesn't want any sense that she is less. He is lifting her up formally by using her formal full name to let everyone know she is a partner in the gospel and that he supports her.

They're also excellent examples of being committed to the mission of the church. After all, when they got thrust out of their home in Rome, what did they do? Well, they used it as an opportunity for a mission trip. They started to set up a ministry in Corinth. They had a church in their home at Corinth, Luke tells us. Then, when it was cleared up and they could go back to Rome, what do they do? They start up a mission in Rome. They form a church in their home in Rome, Paul tells us.

They are constantly looking for opportunities for ministry, because they are committed to the mission of the church. Can you say the same about yourself? Are you committed to the community of the church? Are you seeking

ways to serve others? Are you finding opportunities for ministry, even in times of difficulty? What makes the church a community is a commitment to the cause of Jesus Christ and a willingness to serve others.

Truth in Ministry

The second thing I want us to see beyond community in ministry is Paul's emphasis on *truth* in ministry. Paul is more brief in writing about this, so we will be more brief as well. He picks this up in verse 17. It's interesting how he does this. You'll notice that as chapter 16 goes on, we gain the sense that Paul is finishing up his letter. He's winding down. He's thanking people, and all of a sudden... *Wam!* He hits us with this warning.

I actually think if Paul were in a seminary class, he'd be criticized for this way of writing. You know what this is like, although hopefully you don't see it too often from me: when the preacher says he's about to conclude, and then he takes off again, and you wonder after a while when he's going to land the plane. In the most egregious examples of this, it feels like you're in the loop-de-loop. There are two, three, four endings.

That's what it seems like Paul is doing here, but Paul can't help himself. He has to give a final warning to the believers at Rome. Why? Is it because Rome is beset by false teachers? I don't think so. Paul hasn't warned the Romans earlier. As a matter of fact, the sharpest things he has written in this letter involve Christian liberty and emphasis of how to live amongst each other in Romans, chapter 14. He doesn't give great warnings about false teaching.

But Paul knows false teaching has a way of moving into the church, of spoiling ministry. After all, he's writing this from Corinth. That's exactly what happened in Corinth. That's what he was just about fixing in Corinth. While Rome was not experiencing this kind of false teaching or these problems at *this* point, they *would*. You remember that when Paul writes from Rome to the church at Philippi, he says that some preach Christ only from envy and strife, seeking to hurt him.

So he appeals to them in the strongest terms possible to be aware of the need for truth in ministry. He warns them against false teachers, and he does this by first describing what they do. Notice what the primary concern is that Paul has about false teachers. He says, "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions." False teachers are those who break into the church and then proceed to break *up* the church, to break down the unity of the church.

What Paul is doing here is he's talking again about the unity of the church. Have you noticed how often Paul talks about the unity of the church? Over and over again he brings it up in this letter. Why does he do so? He does so because to break down the unity of the church is to go against Jesus. The ministry of the church is to make one people for Jesus. That's what Jesus prayed for in John, chapter 17. He asked the Father that the Father would make the church one people, united as he and the Father are one.

So how do false teachers cause division and disrupt the church? What are we to watch out for? Paul tells us. He says they create obstacles. They put things, they put teachings between Christians and Jesus. They don't serve Jesus Christ; they serve themselves, their own appetites, their own desires, their own ease. What they do is teach contrary to the doctrine you have been taught.

So how do you combat this? How do you fight for truth in ministry? Well, I have good news for you. It doesn't mean you need to find out and learn about every possible heresy that could come up. There aren't enough books you could read. There's not enough time in the day that you can find every false teaching that's possible. What you need to do is to make yourself so familiar with the truth, with the gospel, that you can spot error.

Paul puts it *this* way. He wants you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. Know the good. Don't worry about knowing the evil; know the good. Study God's Word for yourself. Don't fall for flattery. Don't fall for smooth talk. Do not be deceived. Know the truth. I'm sure you've heard it before, that the way in which they train agents to spot counterfeit bills is not by handing them all sorts of counterfeit 100s and 20s.

What they do is they have them study genuine bills, so that as the counterfeit comes to them, no matter how it's counterfeited, they can spot that it is not genuine. That's what we are to do with truth in the church, truth in our ministry. We are to be so familiar with the gospel that when someone starts to bring something up that is askance, that is askew, we can see it for what it is: a falsehood.

Now, when we first hear about this task we have to stand for truth, it can be a bit frightening. We can be intimidated by how many different types of error there are. We can be intimidated by others who appear to know more about the Bible than we do. We can think this is a completely intellectual exercise, and we may not be up to that kind of exercise, but Paul gives us a promise of God's work in our lives.

Look at what Paul says in verse 20. He moves from warning in verse 17 to assurance in verses 19-20. "For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." He's warning the Romans, but he's warning them in the context that they are already established on the foundation of the gospel.

Do you see the *for* there at the beginning of verse 19? There's provision for them in the gospel. Your obedience is known to all, and Paul rejoices for that. It's not just that they've embraced the gospel and they love the gospel; they *know* it. Paul is simply reminding them *and* us that we always need to be on alert, that we always need to be looking to the Lord. The ministry of the church is to be committed to the truth. Believers are called to be both wise *and* innocent. We are to follow Jesus with our lives *and* with our minds. You can do this because you have the promise of God to rely on.

See how Paul puts it in verse 20: the God of peace will crush Satan. This is the foundational promise of the Bible. Beginning in Genesis 3:15, the language is remarkably similar, that the Enemy of your soul will be crushed by God. God is *for* you. Never forget that. He is at work on your behalf. You can be confident in the ministry of the church because it is *God's* ministry. He spares no effort to fulfill his promise.

We need to remember this even when our circumstances are darkest. Paul highlights this in a peculiar way here in our passage. God can bring good out of evil. Could you imagine if you were an orthodox, pious Jew and you had traveled to Jerusalem for the high feast? You had ritually cleansed yourself. You were pure, and you were ready to feast and to celebrate. Like a good Jew, you hated all things Roman.

You were just standing around, minding your own business, and all of a sudden, a Roman soldier grabbed you and took a huge wooden cross off a bleeding man and threw it on your shoulder, ruining your clothes, making it hard for you to walk, making you ritually unclean, ruining your vacation, ruining your time of worship, and made you carry that cross to the place of execution of a criminal.

I'm describing a man you may recall in Mark, chapter 15: Simon of Cyrene. You remember that Simon bore Jesus' cross. You could just imagine what was going through his mind, how miserable he would be, how it dug into his shoulder. He didn't know this criminal from anyone, and the Romans are doing this to him, and he's ruining the feast.

It's interesting that Mark mentions Simon by name. It is traditional that Mark wrote his gospel specifically for the Romans. He uses Roman terms. He uses Roman names. It's Peter's gospel, and Peter is associated with Rome. But Mark gives us a little bit more detail about Simon. He tells us that Simon had two sons, Alexander and Rufus. *Alexander* is a pretty common name. Alexander the Great. But *Rufus*... How many of you know a Rufus? Not very many.

As a matter of fact, there's only one other Rufus I know of in the whole of the Bible, and he's here in Romans 16. Rufus is called *chosen by God*, and Rufus' mother is called a *mother to Paul*. Do you see what I think Paul is hinting at for us? That Simon in the midst of his misery went home, had learned about the Lord Jesus Christ, had shared Jesus with his wife and his sons, and they became pillars in the church. His wife became a mother to the apostle Paul. A little detail Paul shares for us in this list of names.

Has your life been difficult this week? Has anybody made *you* carry a cross? Has anybody ruined your week as you see it? Maybe God is at work. Maybe God has bigger plans for you, because our God is the God who brings good out of evil. In conclusion, ministry in the church is important. It's important for every believer to be involved in ministry. Ministry brings believers together in their community. Ministry is a declaration that the body of Christ is declaring the truth of God's Word to the world.

Ultimately, ministry reminds us that we are not our own. We are bought with a price. We belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, because he paid the price on the cross for our sins. Remind yourself of *that* when you're facing difficulty. Remind yourself of *that* when you doubt whether you can push on or not. The God of peace is on your side. He will not stop even at holy violence to crush the Enemy of your soul and do away with your sin. There is hope in Jesus. Trust the Lord Jesus Christ, and his grace will be sufficient for you.