

This morning, after beginning with the first seven verses of Romans 1 on the first Sunday of January, we are now looking at the last chapter of the book of Romans. While it would be my natural instinct to use this Sunday to talk about our text for today in the context of the entire book of Romans – I will refrain from doing so this week because next Sunday Pastor Eric will be sharing a message on a complete overview of Paul's letter to the church on Rome, in order to bring together everything we have looked at over the last eight months. In our text for today, as he closes his letter, the apostle Paul repeats a couple of the more significant themes and issues he had previously written about. The immediate context we are looking at - is that as Paul finishes his letter, he has already succeeded in preaching the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Albania and Yugoslavia), and he now believes God is calling him to share the gospel in Spain. And as he ends his teaching and correspondence with the saints in Rome he takes time to first both greet and thank those whom he has been working with as an apostle of Jesus Christ. In the first 24 verses Paul mentions 33 names; he also speaks of two families, and two unnamed women, several churches and some unidentified brothers and sisters in Christ. It is significant that he does so in that it supports his previous teaching on the essential importance of the unity we are to have together in Christ - and also of the truth that we were created for community.

*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 Epaenetus, 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.* Romans 16:1-16

In these words the apostle Paul expresses his appreciation for the saints who have partnered with him to fulfill his ministry to proclaim the "gospel" which is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). He begins by speaking of "Phoebe" a member of the Cenchreaen church, who we know is the one who delivered Paul's letter to the church in Rome that we have been studying over the past eight months. He encourages the church in Rome to take care of her because she had been a "patron" (assistant) in helping spread the gospel. Next he greets "Prisca" and "Aquila" who we read of in Acts 18. They were Jewish tentmakers by trade who were driven out of Rome by the decree of the Emperor Claudius and in making their new home in Corinth they met up with a strange young Jew named Paul, who also a tentmaker. He shared Christ with them and they came to faith. "Prisca" and "Aquila" are mentioned five other times in Scripture as they served with Paul in Corinth and Ephesus. He also mentions the time recorded in the book of Acts when they "risked their necks" for him in Ephesus, as the whole city was upset with Paul about his faith in Christ, and a mob was intent on killing him; "Prisca" and "Aquila" were there for him. Paul then sends his greetings to his "beloved Epaenetus" who was the first one to believe the gospel when Paul came to the province of "Asia." We never forget how blessed we are when God uses us to help others come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Paul then sends his greetings to “*Andronicus*” and “*Junia*” who were fellow Jews like Paul who had come to faith in Christ before Paul and who had also been with Paul in prison for their faith in Jesus. He then goes on to send his best to “*Ampliatius*” and “*Urbanus*” and “*Stachys*” and “*Apelles*.” We know nothing about these folks, but they were clearly significant people to Paul who did significant work for the kingdom, working without notice behind the scenes. He then says: “*Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus.*” It is believed that “*Aristobulus*” was the grandson of King Herod the Great, who worked behind the scenes politically for his close friend Emperor Claudius. When Aristobulus died, as was the custom of the day, his “*family*” (relatives, servants and slaves) would have become the property of the emperor – which at that time would have been Nero, who succeeded Claudius by having Claudius murdered. We do know that there were relatives, servants and slaves of Nero’s “*family*” who became Christians – which would have included the relatives, servants and slaves of “*Aristobulus*.” This belief is supported by the next mentioned name of “*Herodion*” who Paul calls “*my kinsman*” which means that he was a fellow Jew who had also become a follower of Christ while he was a member of Nero’s household. And this is supported further when the apostle says: “*Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.*” The most famous Narcissus we know in Roman history was a former slave who became the personal secretary of the Emperor Claudius. And when Claudius was murdered, Nero also took over the “*family*” of Narcissus. History tells us that shortly after Nero came to the throne, he forced many of those in the families he inherited to commit suicide - Narcissus included. Whether Narcissus came to faith, we do not know, but we do know there were some Christians in his family: “*Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.*”

Next, Paul sends his greetings to three women who gave their all to serve Christ: “*Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.*” And then Paul sends his regards to “*Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well.*” There is almost universal agreement that this “*Rufus*” was one of the two sons of Simon of Cyrene, who is spoken of in the gospel of Mark as the man who was pressed into service by the Roman soldiers to help Jesus carry his cross to Calvary. We also know that Simon of Cyrene’s two sons – Rufus and Alexander - became outstanding men in the Christian community. We also know that Alexander helped rescue Paul in the city of Ephesus and that Rufus ministered to the apostle in Rome – and it’s also clear that Rufus’ mother blessed Paul in ways that he deeply appreciated. Just imagine the stories that family shared with each other!

“*Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them.*” Here Paul sends his best to a group of men who were of Greek origin and who had come to faith in Christ. Again we don’t know anything about them *except that they had a significant part in the apostle Paul’s life and ministry.* “*Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.*” Again these are people we know little about, except that they meant much to Paul, which means they had an essential part in bringing the gospel into our lives today. What is noteworthy is the name “*Philologus*” which literally means “a lover of the word.” Whether this was a nickname or a real name, doesn’t matter. But what a great name: *Philologus!* “*Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.*” These words once again commend us to a common unity that we are to have together in Christ - and also affirm the truth that we were all created for community. But Paul also uses these words as a bridge to give us a warning.

*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. Romans 16:17-20*

Here the apostle Paul reminds us about the things he spoke of back in Romans 14 where he told us that there will be disunity among God's people when personal preferences, opinions and convictions become more preeminent in the body of Christ than the biblical principles of God. He now warns us to "watch out" and not to allow individuals with personal preferences, opinions and convictions to "cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine" of the Word of God. In this warning Paul instructs us to identify and avoid those who do cause division so that the church's "obedience" to the truth of God's Word will be "known to all." He reminds us of the promise that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan" under our your feet and that "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" will be with us when we are obedient to God's call and commands. This reflects Paul's words in Romans 14 that revealed to us that God builds His church through the sacrificial decisions of his people, as we love each other as God loves us - revealing that Jesus died on a cross so that people with all kinds of personal preferences, opinions and convictions will unite together under his lordship and reflect the love and grace and glory and joy of Jesus Christ.

*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. Romans 16:21-24*

Paul now sends greetings from those who have been obedient servants of God's call and God's commands. Most of us are quite familiar with Timothy who labored and served at Paul's side throughout his ministry. We read of Timothy often in the book of Acts and we studied his two letters in the New Testament together in the spring of last year. Again Paul speaks of people we don't know anything about by sending greetings from three fellow Jews who had become Christians who served with him: "Lucius and Jason and Sosipater." Paul then allows the man who had been writing down his words in his letters: "I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord." It was quite common in Paul's day to have someone do this and the author would sign the letter when he was finished. He then sends greetings from "Gaius" who was the man in whose home Paul was residing at Corinth. Gaius had come to faith through Paul's ministry and had baptized him when he planted the church in Corinth. He ends this section by sending greetings from "Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you" reflecting how the gospel had penetrated all levels of society, from public officials like "Erastus" and relative unknowns like "Quartus." All distinctions disappear when the gospel of Jesus Christ is truly shared and received.

*Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. Romans 16:25-27*

The apostle Paul ends his letter to the church in Rome by pointing them to God. He begins by proclaiming words that again remind us of what God had called Paul to so as an apostle Jesus Christ back in Romans 1:16-17: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" The purpose of Paul's life, the purpose of every follower of Jesus Christ, is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ – and Paul pronounces God's blessing on us to do so: "Now to him who is able to strengthen you (us) according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of (our) faith— to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen."

*“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ.”* Jesus is the gospel! God the Father sent His only begotten Son Jesus Christ into the world to die on a cross to provide the divinely required payment for sin that leads to eternal death, so that those who surrender their hearts and lives to Jesus, and receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior can be forgiven and cleansed and redeemed and restored back to God forever and ever and ever. Jesus said, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14:6). In all the history of all the religions of the world, there is no one that is equal to Jesus. No one and nothing in all the world can be remotely compared to him. Jesus is the central figure of all history, of all of time. Jesus is life! He is love. He is hope! He is joy! He is glory!

*“According to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations.”* The *“mystery”* Paul speaks of here is how God intended to unite Jews and Gentiles into one eternal family through the gospel of Jesus Christ. For that to happen, the Jews needed to reject Jesus as Messiah, in order that the Gentiles would be allowed to come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. When Christ died on the cross, he did so in order that the gospel might be proclaimed and *“known to all nations.”* There are on this very day thousands of places where people are meeting like we are here today. They are singing songs and reading the Bible and praying to God and listening to sermons just like we are doing here today. And yet, in thousands of churches, there is nothing of kingdom value happening - *because the “mystery” of the gospel is not being lived out or shared or proclaimed.*

*“According to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith.”* God has called us to obediently live out the righteousness of God we receive when we truly embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In Romans 12-15 God has called us to obedience: obedience to God, obedience to serving others, obedience to loving one another, obedience to loving our enemies, obedience to all those in authority, obedience to the Law of Love for the sake of unity in the church and so that we might be living witnesses of the joy of the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are lost in the world around us; and obedience to making sacrificial decisions, as we love each other as God loves us - revealing that Jesus died on a cross so that people with all kinds of personal preferences, opinions and convictions will unite together under his lordship and reflect the love and grace and glory and joy of Jesus Christ.

*“To the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”* After connecting the *gospel* of Jesus Christ with the *mystery* of God to reach all the nations when followers of Jesus Christ *obediently* live out the righteousness of God we receive when they truly embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior - the apostle Paul focuses his praises on the author of it all who is the *“only wise God.”* God’s wisdom is wonderfully displayed in creation and stunningly revealed in the gospel *“through Jesus Christ.”* All of the glory that will rebound to God through the ages of eternity, from the salvation of sinners to the return of Christ to the end of the age - proceeds through Jesus Christ. God is the One who has intervened on our behalf. In His wisdom He devised a glorious blending of mercy, grace, love, sacrifice, justice, holiness, forgiveness, redemption, healing, reconciliation, restoration, hope, joy and glory – through the death, resurrection and second coming of Jesus Christ, the Promised Messiah, Savior of the World, Lamb of God, Lion of Judah, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. In Ephesians 1:7-10 Paul proclaimed: *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”* May the God of endurance and encouragement grant us to live in such harmony with one another in Christ Jesus, that together we may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 15:5-6). *“To the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen!”*