

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans -
Part sixty-two - Sunday, November 15th, 2020 - 6:30 p.m.
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A CHURCH IS MORE THAN THE TOTAL NUMBER OF ITS CONVERTS

Romans 16:1-16 - “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, [2] 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. [3] Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, [4] 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. [5] Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. [6] Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. [7] Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. [8] Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. [9] Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. [10] Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. [11] Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. [12] Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. [13] Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. [14] Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, and Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. [15] Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. [16] Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.”

It would be hard for us to imagine how painstakingly labor intensive it would have been for Paul (or his scribe) to list out all of these names. There are 27 of them listed in these sixteen verses. And I think we should see something significant in the fact that, without any word processing, or even a pencil or ball-point pen, all of these names are scratched out.

I went down to see the Dead Sea scrolls at the Royal Ontario Museum a few years ago. I said to those with us it is humbling to see the sheer effort that has been expended to get you and me the Bibles we carry to church. These old manuscripts are tiny and detailed. There were written with steady hands in very poor light. It would have taken hours for Paul to list these 27 individuals. It makes we wonder, *why Paul didn't just say "Greet*

the Saints in Rome for me?"

So I **do** think there is something important for the church to learn from this list of names. In fact, I think there are several things of high significance:

- 1) **THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN US THROUGH HIS SPIRIT IS BIGGER THAN WHAT IS HAPPENING IN ANY ONE INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN**

There is something going on in this text that you might not notice if you race over the list with a quick glance. Actually, you have to go back to **Romans 1:7** - “To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The letter is addressed - intended for - ***all*** the Christians in ***all*** the churches in Rome. Remember that as you read.

In chapter sixteen Paul takes the time to single out specific individuals and congregations: **Romans 16:3-5** - “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, [4] 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. [5] **Greet also the church in their house....”**

Then look at **Romans 16:14-15** - “Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, **and the brothers who are with them** [15] Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, **and all the saints who are with them.**” So Paul sends out greetings to other specific ***Christians*** and ***groups*** of Christians ***after already saying his letter was for all the Christians in Rome.***

What's that all about? If I am talking to Chris Micks I don't say, “***Greet Chris***

Micks!" So when Paul writes about passing on greetings to specific people, after already telling us this letter was for "**all the saints in Rome**" it means it's important to him that **other** Christians in the churches in Rome **know** he is passing on greetings to those he specifically names.

So when he writes "**Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord....**" (13) it means he's not primarily saying that for **Rufus**, but for all the **other** saints who will hear about Rufus when this letter was read. Apparently **they** need to hear Paul's mention of greetings to Rufus.

And all of this makes me ask "**Why?**" Why is it important for all the churches to hear about Paul's greetings to Rufus? And I think it's important because Paul wants all the **other** Christians - the ones he **doesn't** name - to know what's going on in the rest of the church.

Paul wants to create a **big picture** for these unnamed Christians he's not yet met. He doesn't know what they may be going through. We know that Rome wasn't a friendly place for Christians at this time. So Paul wants these Christians to know they are part of something bigger than themselves. They **experience** Christ individually, yes, but they're also involved in a **movement**. There's a **flow of history** that is sweeping the whole world.

In other words, no matter what they're going through, while it's true they need to know Jesus died for each **individual**, He doesn't just **deal** with them as individuals. He creates a **church**. And it's a **world-wide** work that He's doing. Each individual Christian is part of something much bigger than himself or herself.

This is the whole reason for Romans chapter sixteen. When Paul includes little

details about people - like that fact that **Persis “has worked hard in the Lord”**(12), or that **Prisca and Aquila “risked their necks for my life”**(4), he’s not telling Persis and Prisca and Aquila anything they don’t already **know** about themselves. He wants the **other** Christians to know that **they too** can keep working hard for the Lord. And that it matters greatly that they do.

He wants these **other** Christians to know that there are those who, because their faith is more precious than life itself, **risk their necks** for the spread of the gospel. Paul’s reminding all of the Christians at Rome that all sorts of credible, intelligent people, find Christ so real and compelling that they are willing to **risk their necks** for the gospel. And Paul wants to inspire the unnamed Christians to spill out their hearts in the same way!

So get the **names** of Christians who live life **flat out** for Christ. Read their biographies. Learn their secrets. Spread their fame. Follow their example.

2) **PAUL WANTED ALL THE CHRISTIANS IN ROME TO SEE THE REALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS BEING STAMPED AND SATURATED BY THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST JESUS**

To me, this is unavoidably emphasized. Just take note of the words Paul uses in most of the introductions of the names he lists: **“Welcome her in the Lord”**(2). **“My fellow workers in Christ”**(3). **“The first convert to Christ”**(5). **“They were in Christ before me”**(7). **“My beloved in the Lord”**(8). **“My fellow worker in Christ”**(9). **“Apelles, who is approved in Christ”**(10). **“Great those in the Lord”**(11). **“Great those workers in the Lord”**(12). **“Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord”**(13).

This isn't just a list of names. This is the way a person saturated with Christ comes to see relationships. This is Paul's way of reminding these Christians that Christ didn't just change **them**. He changed the way they relate to **everyone else**. Jesus didn't just die to forgive **you**. And He didn't just die to forgive **me**. He died to transform the relationship **between** you and me. He didn't just make **you** new and **me** new. He made **us** new.

This has incredible ramifications for life in the church of Jesus Christ. I often wonder how much sexual brokenness and scandal and pain could be avoided - let alone the moral confusion and stained consciences - if every man and woman remembered that all these interpersonal relationships are **in Christ Jesus**.

Seriously, Paul (and the Holy Spirit) is calling every single man and woman - young or old - who is outside of the marriage relationship, to remember that you're not **just** out on a date with a member of the opposite sex. And you're not **just** out with your boyfriend or girlfriend. There is something else to factor in. If you're both Christians, you're **also** out with a **brother** or **sister** in the Lord.

I know our culture will simply laugh at that thought. But it's true. In addition to all the other dynamics of the deepening of relationships between the sexes in the church, this is **another** reality that simply can't be forgotten or ignored if Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

Does this **Christ-soaked relational element** get reflected in all your emails? Is it in the text messages you bang off in such a hurray? Is Christ in your talk and your phone calls? Remember, out of the abundance of the heart the mouth - or posts, or tweets, or texts or emails or phone - speaks.

3) **PAUL COMMENDS RISK-TAKERS FOR CHRIST JESUS**

Romans 16:3-4 - “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, [4] 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.”

I'm so pleased that the ESV goes with the very literal translation, including the idea of risking the ***neck***, which is surely carried in the original language. In fact, to this day, we still talk about someone "***sticking his neck out***." We mean he's taking a huge chance. He's committed to the point that someone can chop his head off. He's at a point where he's in with both ***feet*** - and his ***neck!*** He's ***created his own vulnerability*** rather than sit on the fence over some issue or cause.

It's a glorious thing to see Christians - especially ***young*** Christians - who aren't afraid to "***stick their necks out***" for Christ. If you pride yourself on being ***cool*** and being ***detached*** then forget about following Christ. The kingdom, especially in the next decade, will be built by ***risk takers***.

I fear we have fewer and fewer Christians who have found in Christ Jesus something bigger than their own life. We have more and more people ***talking*** about how great Jesus is, but fewer and fewer ***sticking their necks out*** for Him. North American Christianity is becoming far too ***pre-occupied with personal satisfaction***. It's too ***boring***.

Paul would have us all know that Christ is really only taking on the ***adventurous***. He wants to create his own ***militia*** in this fallen world. We don't know for sure just what ***Prisca and Aquila*** did for Paul. We ***do*** know that they were used to living life on the edge for Christ. We're told they were at one time Roman citizens, but were

forced to flee when Emperor Claudius drove Christians out of Rome (**Acts 18:2**).

And we **do** know that they were probably involved in helping Paul escape from certain death in a huge riot in **Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41)**. This is likely the incident to which Paul refers when they “**risked their necks**” for him.

And Paul sang their praises. He lived to see people whose devotion to Christ wasn’t keep secret. He loved to see people **not** saving their lives somewhere on the shelf.

And I want to close with this question. **When did you last really risk something for Christ?** When was the last time following Jesus gave you the same adrenalin rush you get from downhill skiing or hang-gliding or playing your best round of golf or game of hockey? When was the last time you felt like your commitment to Christ **mattered?**

Get out into the deep end of following Christ. Jump off the edge sometime soon. Let your friends know - **finally** let them know - it’s just too boring to live life as small as they do. **Prove** that Jesus is Lord of all. **Prove** you don’t just belong to a church, but that you’re sold out eternally to Christ Jesus. And prove that they’re missing the greatest adventure of all!