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Sermon Notes

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Paul's Beloved Co-Laborers

Romans 16:1-16

Introduction

It's a Wonderful Life: Christmas classic, Jimmy Stewart, the climax of the movie is all the people whose life George Bailey has touched... George is able to see what the world would have been like without him; what is revealed is the amazingly intricate web of relationships that a single life touches; all the ways we make an impact on each other by our decisions, our personalities, our actions and commitments

At the end of the movie, a river of genuine friends comes in through the door to contribute money and get George Bailey out of debt... the house is full with happiness and the joy of friendships

George Bailey finds a mysterious book on the tree, a strange gift from the angel Clarence who helped show him the value of his life; he opens it up and reads inscribed inside:

Remember, George: no man is a failure who has friends.

In Romans 16:1-16, the sweet friendships of Paul and his co-laborers in the gospel comes to the fore

Paul greets at least 27 people by name, and other groups as well

Here we get a glimpse into one of the sweetest aspects of the Christian life: deep, lasting, eternal friendships

I. Commending Phoebe and Properly Valuing Women's Ministry

A. The Most Precious Letter Delivery in History

1. Almost every commentator agrees that Phoebe was most likely the one who carried the Letter of Romans to the Roman church
2. Why? Because Paul writes a letter of commendation to the church at Rome on her behalf... and she was the first person Paul mentions

Romans 16:1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea.

- a. The word “commend” is an official term referring to a formal introduction
- b. Literally: “I stand alongside her”; also means “I demonstrate her worthiness”
- c. Frequently in the ancient world, letters of introduction had to be written so that people would know who someone was and would treat them properly
 - i) These were the days before the lightning quick communication and transportation we have come to expect
 - ii) Someone sent as a messenger to total strangers would be at a great disadvantage
 - iii) Paul mentions this whole issue in 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 3:1 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?

- iv) And again, in connection with the big offering for the Jewish believers in Judea

1 Corinthians 16:3 when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.

- d. Paul here is writing his letter of instruction for Phoebe, since (it appears) she would be the one carrying this Epistle to Rome
3. It seems that Phoebe was a wealthy woman (more on that later) who was planning to go to Rome
4. Paul, perhaps hearing of her imminent departure, wrote the Letter and entrusted it to her
5. She was from the city of Cenchrea, the neighboring port city of Corinth, where Paul wrote this letter
6. Therefore she was entrusted with the most precious letter delivery in history
 - a. As she traveled to Rome, she held the world’s only copy of Paul’s great Epistle to the Romans
 - b. Martin Luther’s conversion: directly linked to Romans 1:17
 - c. In effect, Phoebe was holding Luther’s soul in her hands as she traveled

- d. If the ship had sunk in a storm or if she had been robbed by highwaymen on one of the roads leading to Rome, the world would have been deprived of this great epistle
- e. BUT God's sovereign power was surrounding that letter delivery
- f. Perhaps God dispatched a company of warrior angels to surround her and get her safely there
- g. The same God who sovereignly inspired Paul to write, who perfectly protected Paul from writing a single error, and guided his great mind in composing all of these infinitely deep and rich thoughts, the same powerful hand that preserved Paul from error and guided him to all truth would ALSO protect Phoebe on her journey, and protect the document until it was copied, then copied again and again and again, then translated and printed for us to read

B. Phoebe: A Remarkable Woman

1. Who was this Phoebe?
 - a. Well, apart from this one mention here, we know nothing else about her
 - b. Actually, this is the whole challenge of preaching this chapter... we know so little about these people other than what Paul wrote here
2. Paul's clear admiration for her
 - a. He called her "our sister"
 - i) A part of the family of God... a believer in Christ
 - ii) Tender affection for all the members of the family of God
 - b. He called her "a servant" of the church at Cenchrea
 - i) Whether this means more than simply that she had a servant heart, we'll discuss in a moment
 - ii) BUT she had taken up the role of a servant which Jesus commended so highly to us all

Matthew 23:11 The greatest among you will be your servant.

- c. He asks the church at Rome to receive her well and take care of her needs

Vs. 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

- i) Saints should be receiving other saints gladly and with hearts full of love
 - ii) This is a reasonable response from one Christian to another
 - iii) Especially so in light of the fact that there were no hotel chains back then, and private travelers had to rely on friends and friends of friends for safe, reputable shelter while on the road
- d. BECAUSE of her past ministry
- i) NIV: “she has been a great help to many people, including me”
 - ii) “Great help” comes from a Greek word which could be understood as “a patroness”... a wealthy woman of commerce or business who has used her resources to support the church, and Paul’s ministry
 - iii) Similar to Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira whom Paul met in Philippi
 - iv) Similar also to the women who helped support Jesus from their personal wealth

Luke 8:1-3 After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³ Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

It seems that Phoebe was this kind of a patroness

C. Was Phoebe a Deaconess?

1. Many have debated this very question
2. They note that the word “servant” translated here is “**diakonon**” from which we get the word deacon
 - a. The word in its original context in the Greek world simply meant “table waiter”

When Jesus changed the water to wine in John 2, this word is used to identify the servants who were serving the wedding feast

- b. Jesus Himself commanded all of us to serve one another if we wanted to be truly great in the Kingdom, and the Greek word is exactly the same:

Matthew 20:26-28 whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave--²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

c. It is not demeaning at all, for Christ Himself is called that in Romans 15

Romans 15:8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs

NOTE: This is the exact same word used by Paul here! Even to the very spelling and case ending! Yet (of course) no one argues that Christ was a deacon (still less a "deaconess")

3. So, the term "servant" is an exalted title for ANY believer in Christ, since we are all commanded to serve one another

4. Paul calls himself by this title

Colossians 1:23 This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

1 Corinthians 3:5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task.

Ephesians 3:7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.

5. If this were the only data we had, it would not be enough to prove that there were women deacons in the First Century Church

a. BUT some scholars point to evidence in 1 Timothy 3:11

^{NASB} 1 Timothy 3:11 Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.

In the flow of thought, it is possible that Paul is referring not to the wives of deacons but to women who will serve as deacons.

b. This may be weighty, that there were female deaconesses in Paul's day... women who were identified as fulfilling certain specific ministries of service in the church

c. These roles of servanthood would not involve or imply authority over men, for that would violate the clear principle Paul taught in 1 Timothy 2

1 Timothy 2:12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.

- d. BUT these roles of servanthood would involve women of dignity and respect, whose lives were worthy of imitation for other women to follow
- e. Many conservative churches have women deacons, but those churches also have elders, they are churches clearly led by men AND the role of deacon is merely one of service
- f. Other conservative churches have other textual reasons for not accepting women deacons even if there are elders and if deacons are only seen to be servants

D. The Ministry of Women in Romans 16

1. In any case, the ministry of women is clearly highlighted and greatly favored by Paul in these greetings in Romans 16
2. Seven or maybe eight women are mentioned, commended for their service to the gospel and the church
3. Look how sweetly Paul speaks of each one

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

Romans 16:12-13 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. ¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.

Romans 16:15 Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them.

4. Bottom line:
 - a. Paul was delighted to have sisters in Christ as friends and co-laborers in the gospel
 - b. Based on Romans 16 alone, it is obvious that women have amazingly vital and wide ranging ministry opportunities that are indispensable to the life of the church

II. Some Lessons from the Greetings

A. The Richness of Devoted Friendships

1. People measure wealth in various ways
 - a. Finances: stock portfolio; real estate holdings; bonds; gold; rare art or other collections

- b. Knowledge: collecting degrees and experiences; some focus on colleges attended, degrees earned, books read, scholastic achievements; skills gained from having put a new engine in a car, or redesigning the bathroom
- c. Experience: wealth of experiences, of places visited and adventures catalogued... photo albums, videos, souvenirs collected; been to Paris, been to Beijing, been to Rio, been on a cruise along the Alaskan shore, went on safari in Tanzania, took a boat up the Amazon River, lay on the beaches of Tahiti, etc., etc., etc.

2. Here Paul is displaying some of his greatest wealth: friendships in Christ

Paul's life deeply and richly transformed so many other lives; he preached the gospel that led to the salvation of countless people; then he poured himself into their lives day by day, carefully molding and shaping them more and more into the image of Christ

He deeply cared for each one of them... weeping with them, pleading for them in prayer, sacrificing for them out of genuine affection for them

The loyalty some of these people had for Paul was astonishing

The Ephesian Elders:

Acts 20:36-38 When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. ³⁷ They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. ³⁸ What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

The Church at Tyre:

Acts 21:5-6 when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. ⁶ After saying good-bye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home.

The Church at Caesarea:

[After hearing a prophecy that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem]

Acts 21:12-14 When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

- 3. Paul measured his richness in the lists of names at the end of his epistles
- 4. This is the longest of his greeting lists... a wealth of people; 29 people named specifically; many others greeted generally

5. Paul was truly a rich man!!!

B. The Family of God

1. Also striking: Paul's use of family language
2. Three senses of family here
 - a. First, Paul's own relatives
 - b. Second, Paul's sense of the "family of God"
 - c. Third, Paul's greetings of households
3. Paul's relatives

Romans 16:7 Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me.

Romans 16:11 Greet Herodion, my relative.

- a. Some commentators feel Paul is just referring to fellow Jews, and that's possible, based on Romans 9
 - b. BUT it is also quite possible that he is referring to family members
 - c. It may be that when Paul returned to Jerusalem after his conversion on the road to Damascus, the first people he sought to evangelize were his own family members; perhaps also when he returned to Tarsus
 - d. Andronicus and Junias were in Christ before Paul was... in that case Paul's conversion would have been an immense joy and blessing to them in helping to reach the rest of their family
4. Paul's "family of faith"
- a. Secondly, Paul speaks of other Christians in family terms

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

- b. Obviously this could not be Paul's own biological mother, for he would have just greeted her directly, like "Hi, Mom... I hope you're doing well! I'll see you soon... Love, your son, Saul"
- c. So, Rufus's mother has been a mother to Paul in some other ways... mothering him with tenderness, prayers, maybe a bowl of hot soup and some motherly hospitality

- d. Jesus Himself set the mentality when He established the family of God even over the biological family

Matthew 12:47-50 *Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ⁴⁸ He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*

- e. And when He promised that believers would have a worldwide family to be part of if they were willing to leave everything for His sake and for the gospel

Mark 10:28-30 *Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!" ²⁹ "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields-- and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.*

- f. Paul also uses the common “brother” and “sister” language that speaks of our kinship in the family of God

Romans 16:1 *I commend to you our sister Phoebe*

Romans 16:14 *Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them.*

5. Finally, Paul addresses other people’s families and households

- a. Church growth flourishes best along family lines
- b. Parents are the greatest evangelists in the world... more people have been led to Christ by their parents than by any other category of person... more than by friends, more than by pastors, more than by evangelists, more than by missionaries
- c. So also in this section we see the gospel flourishing along household and family lines

Romans 16:10 *Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.*

Romans 16:11 *Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.*

Romans 16:15 *Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister*

Application: Have you done all you can to bring your children to faith in Christ?

Have you urgently pleaded with them to repent and trust in Christ?

Have you prayed daily for their souls?

Have you continued to tend their souls after they made an outward profession of faith in Christ to be sure they were making their calling and election sure?

Have you saturated their daily lives with Scripture, talking about the word of God...

Deuteronomy 6:7 when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Let's widen it some: have you done what you could for your parents or your siblings? Have you shared the gospel with any that are lost?

Have you sought opportunities to talk to family members about Christ?

Have you prayed for their souls?

When you stand before God on Judgment Day and give an account for the family He entrusted to your care, will you be clear of their blood?

Charles Spurgeon heard his mother praying for him:

[Spurgeon's testimony] "I cannot tell how much I owe of the solemn words of my good mother.... I remember on one occasion her praying thus, 'Now, Lord, if my children go on in their sins, it will not be from ignorance that they perish, and my soul must bear a swift witness against them at the day of judgment if they lay not hold of Christ.' That thought of my mother's bearing a swift witness against me pierced my conscience... How can I ever forget when she bowed her knee, and with her arms about my neck, prayed, 'Oh, that my son may live before Thee!'"

C. House Churches

1. Another theme in this section: the existence of many small house churches
2. Prime examples of this: Priscilla and Aquila
 - a. Jewish tentmakers Paul had met in Corinth
 - b. Their home, however was Rome... they had moved to Corinth when the Emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome
 - c. In Corinth Paul met them and lived with them in their home...
HOSPITALITY at work!!
 - d. SO also when they met Apollos and heard him speaking accurately about Christ from the Old Testament prophecies, even though he'd never heard

of Jesus of Nazareth, they invited him to their home and there explained to him the way of God more adequately... HOSPITALITY at work again!!

- e. What's amazing here is how they also opened their home up to host a house church BOTH IN EPHESUS AND IN ROME

[Paul in Ephesus wrote] *1 Corinthians 16:19 The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.*

And here again:

Romans 16:3-5 Greet 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. ⁵ Greet also the church that meets at their house.

- 3. House churches were not separate from the central church in Rome... but practicalities moved the church to this approach
 - a. Several house churches seem to be in view in Romans 16
 - b. This points also to the power of small groups today, and the Home Fellowships going on at FBC
 - c. Intimacy, hospitality, the warmth of a home environment opens hearts to the word of God... so also there is mutual commitment and accountability
 - d. "Mega-churches" can suffer a problem if it gives people an opportunity to be anonymous in the Christian life... no one knows your name or your struggles; neither do you know anyone

Illus.: Joel Osteen's church, Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, regularly attracts 25,000 people to their Sunday services... they recently bought the Compaq Center where the Houston Rockets used to play, and they seek to be the first church in America to seat 35,000 people

Many mega-churches say that small group (home fellowship) is the key to their ministry, but according to Eddie Gibbs, professor of Church Growth at Fullerton Theological Seminary, "It is rare for a megachurch to have more than 30% participation in small groups."

- e. That would have been impossible in Rome... no way for all the believers to meet together in one place at one time

The Roman Coliseum could seat 50,000, but there was no way for the Christians to rent it! Later, Christians would visit that place only to die for the entertainment of the Roman citizens

- f. House churches were the answer... BUT there was clearly a sense of "The Church at Rome"... the people to whom Paul wrote this letter

Romans 1:7 To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

D. Hard Work

1. We also get a marvelous sense in these greeting of the immense labor and effort put forth by Paul and by his friends for the gospel
2. We already mentioned these four women

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

Vs. 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.

3. The same is true across the board for all of Paul's co-laborers in the gospel
4. Paul himself frequently mentioned the intense toil it took to advance the gospel

1 Corinthians 4:11-12 To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. ¹² We work hard with our own hands.

1 Corinthians 15:10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them-- yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

2 Corinthians 6:4-5 Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; ⁵ in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger

Colossians 1:28 - 2:1 We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

2 Timothy 2:6 The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.

5. It is not the lazy but the diligent who will make the impact for Christ that He deserves
 - a. So labor
 - b. Labor diligently for Christ!!
 - c. Labor in prayer
 - d. Labor in witnessing
 - e. Labor in your spiritual gift

- f. Labor in caring for the sick
- g. Labor in reading and studying God's word
- h. Labor in missions
- i. Labor in supporting this church
- j. Labor for the Lord

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

E. Affection

1. Note the affection Paul has for these people

Romans 16:5 Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

Romans 16:8-10 Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord. ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ.

Romans 16:12 Greet my dear friend Persis

2. These are the dear friends of his life
3. They tenderly love him and he loves them
4. Note also the expression of tender affection they should have for each other

Romans 16:16 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

III. Stories Left Untold

A. Who Are These People?

1. of the 27 people listed here, only Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible
2. Thus we know nothing more about Phoebe than what Paul says right here
3. Thus we know nothing more about Tryphena and Tryphosa, nothing more about Rufus and his mother, nothing more about Urbanus, or Stachys, or Ampliatus... nothing at all about Asyncritus, Patrobas, or Hermas
4. These people have slipped into eternity and all that is left are their names

B. Mysteries of Genealogies

1. Similar problems with the genealogies of 1 Chronicles and the names in Matthew's genealogy after the exile to Babylon

[Gadites] *1 Chronicles 5:14 These were the sons of Abihail son of Huri, the son of Jaroah, the son of Gilead, the son of Michael, the son of Jeshishai, the son of Jahdo, the son of Buz.*

Matthew 1:14-15 Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵ Eliud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob

2. Many of the names there appear only in that place
3. The rest of their lives have been lost to human knowledge: what they did, how they lived, what they loved, what was the best day of their lives, what was the saddest thing that ever happened to them... how they showed courage, how they overcame adversity... or how they failed or stumbled or fell into sin... or how they recovered from shame to rise once again

C. God the Loving Historian

1. These genealogies and greetings are indications of the eternal value of human lives
2. What we do in time echoes in eternity... and the eternal word of God gives indications of this
3. God has the entire record of our lives in heaven... and nothing is forgotten;
4. Even if generations later our names are entirely lost from view

Illus. Cemetery in Kentucky with words effaced by weather

D. People Matter, and So Do Their Lives

IV. Application

A. Will Christ Commend You?

1. Commend means to introduce favorably... Paul introduced and commended Phoebe to the church at Rome
2. A far greater introduction awaits us: to the heavenly Father

[NASB] *Romans 5:1-2 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand*

- B. Thank God for Friendships in Christ
- C. Value Each other's Ministries
- D. The Power of Encouragement
- E. Investing Your Life in Eternity