

SERMON FOR 15TH JULY – ROMANS 16

When you reach the last chapter in Romans and you see the heading “personal greetings” – and then you look at a long list of people whom Paul is greeting – the temptation is to think that this is not in any way as important as what has gone before.

The names are real, flesh and blood people who were known in those first century fellowships in Rome and Corinth – but somehow these people seem less relevant to us than all the teaching of Chapters 1 – 15.

Paul wrote elsewhere these words:

“All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching – rebuking – correcting and training in righteousness – so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”

“All Scripture” – that must include Romans 16!

My hope and aim is that we will be both encouraged and challenged by spending this short time looking at this Chapter and see that it is actually a fitting finish to this remarkable letter.

How are we to do this in the time we have? The chapter is in three sections – verses 1- 16 are the personal greetings to specific Christians in the Church in Rome , then in verses 17 – 24 there are some warnings and a list of Pauls companions in Corinth where this letter was written, and then the chapter, and the book ,finishes with a Doxology in verses 25 – 27. You can tell it is divinely inspired because it is in three sections (!) – and I will look at each section separately.

So, Romans 16 verses 1 – 16 (read it)

In this section Paul sends greetings to 26 individuals – 24 of whom he names – and in most cases adding an appreciative personal reference. There are also 2 families and three house Churches mentioned.

What is both striking and encouraging is the unity and diversity of the Church he is describing.

There is diversity in race, rank and gender.

Racially – there are Jewish and Gentile believers and a mixture of races and cultures.

Socially – there are some people who obviously wealthy and influential, but also those who belong to the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus – which means they were servants or slaves.

Then there is Gender – 9 of the 26 people mentioned are woman – including Phoebe, introduced and commended right at the beginning, and who is described as both a servant (deacon) and a benefactor – which means she financially supported many – including Paul himself. She is the one entrusted by Paul to deliver the letter – a measure of her importance.

Four of the woman – Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis – are singled out for having worked very hard – while none of the men are.

I will let you draw your own conclusion on that!

Whatever, what is described is a close knit fellowship of workers that spanned the racial and cultural differences of that time – something that we know Paul regarded as essential for any community of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We know from chapters 14 and 15 that Paul deeply desired that there would be unity in the midst of the diversity – a unity that is only possible if our focus is continually on what God has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

A reminder of what Paul wrote in the previous chapter - 15 verse 6, 7:

“Have the same attitude of mind towards each other that Christ Jesus had – so that with one mind and voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

Look at the evidence of this unity being worked out in these verses.

Four times Paul describes his friends as being “In Christ”, five times as “In the Lord”, twice he uses the family language of “Sister” and “brother” and even describes Rufus’s mother as being like a mother to him too.

He describes some as “fellow workers” and others as “fellow sufferers” – Priscilla and Aquilla are described as actually risking their own lives for Paul.

So, these greetings are more than a formality – they all point to a fellowship of unity, affection and an attitude of willing sacrifice for each other – as is the will of God for His Church, for it is, or should be, an expression of His character.

Go back a few chapters to Romans 12 verses 4, 5:

“For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body and each member belongs to all the others”

That was being worked out in the Church then – so we must ask – what of us now?

Maybe we won’t have the resources of a Phoebe – but we may be like Rufus’s mother and be like a mother to many. We may not have a home like Priscilla and Aquilla where a whole church can meet – but we can offer what we have to God and ask Him to use that for His Kingdom and glory.

We are to work hard, we will be tested like Apelles was, there will be a cost in different ways for us all – but in all things, let us constantly remember that though many, and though diverse and different – we form one body and we do belong to each other – for that is an outworking of what Christ has done for us.

The Second section is verses 17 -24(Read it)

Here there is a strong warning against false teachers. I did actually cover these verses two weeks ago when we focused on Romans 14 and how to deal with disputable matters – when we, hopefully, saw that false teaching is not a disputable matter at all – but something we need to be aware of and avoid.

There is just one verse from this section I wanted to highlight now – and that is verse 19:

“Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good and innocent about what is evil”

Paul's concern from chapter 12 onwards is to explain how practically we should live holy lives and – put simply – it must involve, with the guidance of God's word and His Spirit, discerning what is good – and then pursuing that.

It also involves discerning what is bad – and knowing what is bad what are we to do?

We are to deliberately – knowingly – decisively – keep away from it.

Why?

So that it does not corrupt or contaminate our thinking and living.

Paul is effectively summing up in this verse – admittedly in a very broad brush stroke – the main theme of chapters 12 – 16 – which is the practice of Holy living.

And the fact this last chapter has a list of 35 names is, I believe, also relevant to us practically living Holy lives.

What do I mean?

If we are to learn what holiness is really all about – it must involve growing up in a fellowship of believers. Paul did not write this letter to isolated, individual Christians and we should never read it as such. If you and I are going to learn what holy living entails it essentially is worked out in our relationships.

One of the dangers that might spoil our effectiveness and fruitfulness as a fellowship – is that we just get into groups that think the same way we do – or even worse we isolate ourselves and give up Christian fellowship all together.

John Wesley declared: “The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion”.

It is a very astute observation.

The assumption throughout the whole of the New Testament is that – even when you find certain aspects of Christian fellowship difficult or demanding – it is fellowship we all need – and must have. For it is a fellowship – a congregation – a Church – whatever the label we chose – that provides the context and environment to practically grow in holiness, wisdom, discernment and above all, love.

Let's finish with the third and final part of this Chapter.

The chapter and the whole letter finishes with a doxology.

This concludes the whole letter – and Paul wants to highlight first the power of God – then the glorious gospel of Christ – and then the greatness of God's wisdom.

Let's read it – read verses 25 – 27.

When Paul talks about the gospel – the message of Jesus Christ – he begins:

“In keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past”

The reference here is the Old Testament – those books written over 100's of years. When it says a mystery that was hidden, it is in the sense that you know God is the great saviour who will rescue His people – but if you just have the Old Testament you just don't know how this is going to happen.

Yes, there are glimpses and many pointers in all the prophesies and lives of key characters and themes of the great stories – but at the end, it still remains a mystery as to how the prophecies are going to be fulfilled and a rescue is going to happen.

But then we read this:

“But now revealed and made known...”

What is revealed in the gospel is essentially Jesus Christ in His fullness - and the mystery, now revealed to us, begins - continues - and ends with Christ.

This gospel is for all nations - we gentiles are graciously included - there is no limit or boundary as to who can benefit from and receive the grace of God - for it is for everyone, everywhere.

The letter finishes with this sentence:

“To the only wise God be glory for ever through Jesus Christ. Amen”

There were many other claims to wisdom in the ancient world - many other gods who offered insight of a sort and at a cost. There were plenty of teachings as to how to live, how to think, what to believe and how to pray.

Not unlike the world we live in now.

But Paul declares that there is only one God who is truly wise.

He is the creator - He knows how the world works, what we are as humans and how we think and feel, where we go wrong and how we can be put right.

He knows that one day the whole of creation will be renewed and restored and will dance for joy in its new found freedom. This is one of the great themes of the book of Romans.

This is the hidden wisdom which has now been unveiled in the gospel - the gospel of grace and salvation and freedom which should now evoke in us - as its proper response - “the obedience of faith”.

Through this great book we glimpse something of what Paul had glimpsed of the wisdom - love - grace - power and glory of the eternal God revealed to us in Christ Jesus.

Surely in light of that, we will want to join with Paul and offer up all the praise, love, adoration and glory that we can muster!

Yes - surely - so let's do that!