

## Paul's Slideshow

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 16:1-16, 21-23

Romans 16 is a chapter that many people skim over. It's a list of names and greetings. There's no teaching about Jesus. There are no Jesus stories. Paul isn't delving into magisterial theology as he does for the 15 previous chapters of his letter. So people breeze through it. If a pastor does a sermon series on Romans, they will often leave this final chapter out. Eerdmans has published a whole book of sermons by Fleming Rutledge on the book of Romans. It's called, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, and there are no less than 51 sermons on Romans in that book. Guess how many on Romans 16? Zero.

That's too bad, because there are riches here. The Holy Spirit has multiple ways to show us God's face and his character, his will and his way. Sometimes the Spirit uses poems, like the Psalms. Sometimes the Spirit uses stories like in the gospels. Sometimes the Spirit uses teaching such as we find in the other 15 chapters of Romans, or sometimes the Spirit can teach you something about your Lord and his people through a slideshow.

That's a way to think about Romans 16. Romans 16 is like a computer slideshow of church members; as you read through the greetings the slides roll by, face after face. Sometimes it's just one person on the screen. Sometimes it's three or four together, arms over each other's shoulders, smiling. Romans 16 is Paul's slide show. And while this slide show doesn't give us much explicit instruction, it does, in its own way, paint a really interesting picture of what life was like in the church less than 30 years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven. And that's instructive.

Let's look at the slide show. I will read just the greeting part of Romans 16, not the instructions. The slides come from two different churches. The first group of names are all members of the church in Rome, the names at the end of the chapter are from the church in Corinth. So let's scroll through the slides. Read Romans 16:1-16, 21-23.

Let's start with those slides at the end. Those slides are from the Corinthian church. That's where Paul is when he writes his letter. In the picture that catches our eye, Paul is at Gaius' house. Gaius must be a relatively wealthy person, because, as verse 23 says, he has room in his house for the Corinthian believers to gather for their Sunday services. In this slide we see 5 members of the Corinthian house church standing shoulder to shoulder. They have their arms draped over one another, big smiles on their faces, and in front of them on the table is some sort of manuscript. Paul is standing at the center of the group, next to him is Gaius and beside him is Tertius, who has a pen in his hand. On Paul's other side we see Quartus and then beside him stands Erastus. They are all laughing as if someone said something funny, probably Paul.

Who are these men? Paul needs no introduction. You know him. Gaius is a wealthy businessman in town, generous with his money and host of the church. Erastus, is both wealthy and powerful. He's the director of the city's public works. He's responsible for all the roads and infrastructure in Corinth, a really important job.

Quartus is right next to him and we don't know as much about Quartus. What we do know is that he is almost certainly a slave. How do we know that? Because in the Roman world slaves had different sorts of names than regular citizens. Quartus is definitely a slave name. It means fourth. Masters didn't bother to give their slaves regular names, if you were the 3<sup>rd</sup> child they called you 3<sup>rd</sup>. If you were the 4<sup>th</sup> child, they called you 4<sup>th</sup>. "Hey fourth, make sure the bed pans get emptied." "Hey Quartus, come here and wash my feet." But in the picture Quartus isn't emptying bed pans; he's got his arm around Paul on one side, and on the other side he's got his arm around the director of public works. In this picture, Quartus is just one of the gang.

Tertius is the only one on the picture whom I haven't introduced. Tertius. Do you know what Tertius means in Latin? Any guesses? It means 'third.' That's right, Tertius is a slave too. It's possible he's a freed slave,

but his name tells us that he was definitely a slave at some point. As I said earlier, Tertius has a pen in his hand, and that thick manuscript that was on the kitchen table is right in front of him. You see, Tertius is Paul's amanuensis, he's the one who's been writing down the book of Romans as Paul dictated it. It took a long time. It was Paul's longest letter so far and they have just finished it. In fact, that was the occasion for the picture! Paul had finished his dictation, Tertius has written the last word and they're getting a group shot to remember the occasion. As part of his conclusion Paul even let Tertius give personal greetings to the church in Rome, so that for one verse, Tertius the slave becomes an author of Holy Scripture.

So there's the picture; there's the five men in Gaius' kitchen. Do you understand how revolutionary that picture would be in Roman society? Roman society was completely stratified by class. The super-rich hung out with the super-rich and kissed the feet of emperor. The rich hung out with the rich and kissed the feet of the super-rich, the poor hung out with the poor and kissed the feet of the rich. And the slaves kept their eyes down and did what they were told. But this picture shows two rich men, two slaves, and a Jewish scholar and there is no distinction between them. In this picture they are just brothers in Christ.

There is no word of instruction when Paul lists these names, nevertheless, by grouping of them together, Paul proclaims gospel truth. When you are part of the body of Christ, there is no rich or poor, no slave or free, for all are one in Christ Jesus. This picture proclaims a whole new way of living. This picture announces a new world.

That's a slide from the end of Paul's slide show, that's a slide from the Corinthian church. Now let's scroll back to the beginning of our slide show, to those slides from the Roman house churches. There's a lot of faces here. About thirty different faces show up on Paul's camera roll. Again we see smiling faces from all walks of life. Again, because of the names, we can tell that there's a mix of slaves and wealthy people. But as we scroll we notice something else. There are so many women in these pictures! Just about half of the greetings are for women: Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus' Mother, Patrobas, Hermas, Julia, Olympas' sister, all women. Not only is there a lot of women in our slide show, it's really clear that Paul holds these women in high regard.

Phoebe for instance. Phoebe isn't from Rome, she's from Cenchreae, a town only 8 miles from Corinth. She serves as a deacon in that church. That's a leadership position, probably similar to the position of a deacon in our church. Phoebe is from Cenchreae, but she's on her way to Rome. She must have some sort of business there. Many commentators think she might be involved in some sort of legal proceeding. Whatever her business, Paul puts in a good word for her. He commends her, he asks them to help her out in any way they can, and he says nice things about her: 'She has been a benefactor to me and to many others.'

But that's not even the most remarkable thing about Phoebe. Phoebe is also almost certainly the one who is carrying the letter to the Romans. Paul has entrusted her with this precious cargo. Paul has poured his heart and soul into this document, so this is major responsibility Phoebe has. It's likely that the person who is carrying the letter would be more than just a delivery person; it's likely that the carrier of the letter might be expected to answer questions about what it said. If questions came up, it's likely that she would have been given the responsibility of clarifying Paul's intentions. Could Phoebe have been the first interpreter of the book of Romans?

Then there's Priscilla, wife of Aquila. Priscilla and Aquila were a kind of ministry team. Priscilla and Paul go way back. Priscilla and Paul first met in Corinth, you can read about that in Acts 18. They ministered there for a while, and then when Paul decided to move to Ephesus, he took Priscilla and Aquila with him. There they worked side by side for a few years building the church. When a gifted young preacher named Apollos showed up in Ephesus it was Priscilla and Aquila who disciplined him and filled out his theological education. Priscilla was like his seminary prof.

Finally, there's Junia and her husband Andronicus. They are an interesting couple. Not only have they been in prison with Paul, which would obviously create a deep bond, Paul says that both of them are 'outstanding among the apostles.' Paul calls them both apostles.

Junia is an apostle. What does that mean? This is a big deal. Paul spends a good deal of time in some of his letters defending his own status as an apostle. In Galatians he opens up the letter by saying that this letter is from “Paul, an apostle.” He’s asserting his authority. “I’m an apostle, by the way. So I have the right to talk to you.” And then he spends most of the first 2 chapters of the letter asserting his status as an apostle and his right to teach them. His status as an apostle is rooted in the fact that he has seen the risen Jesus. That’s generally considered the standard for an apostle, someone who has seen the risen Jesus. So when Paul calls Junia an apostle and someone who was in Christ before he was, he is saying that she is one of the select group who saw Jesus after his resurrection and before his ascension. She carries that special role, that special status within the church.

So those are the faces: Phoebe holding the letter that will change the world. Priscilla, Aquila and Paul shoulder to shoulder in ministry. Junia and Andronicus, the two apostles, sitting together in church. As we see them, it’s hard not to be amazed by the prominence of the women, the roles of the women and the part they are playing in the church. Remember, in Roman society women weren’t even allowed to testify in court! Paul’s slideshow of the church in Rome shows us a different kind of community, a whole new possibility. In their own way, these pictures preach. Specifically, they preach Paul’s words of Galatians 3: “In Christ there is neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.”

Let’s go back and scroll through the images one more time. What a joyful group! All these people arm in arm in ministry. And what a diverse group! As we scroll through we notice another unlikely association: Jews and Gentiles are together in these pictures! Go back to that picture of Paul in Gaius’ kitchen that we started. It’s remarkable. Before his conversion Paul would have been absolutely scandalized by this picture. Jews did not consort with Gentile and they certainly didn’t eat with them. But now he gathers every week in the house of Gaius and he, Paul, a Jew, passes the bread to Tertius, the Gentile slave sitting beside him and says, “The body of Christ for you.” The old Paul could never have imagined such a thing happening; now, here he is breaking bread with this Gentile slave and calling him brother.

And when you think of it that way you realize that this slide show, this list of greetings and names, is the perfect end to the book of Romans. This slide show is like a visual representation of the message of this book! What Paul is proclaiming as gospel hope in chapters 1-15 he’s showing as gospel reality in these pictures! We see a new community saved by the blood of Jesus and brought together as one family in Christ. That’s Romans!

Here’s a 2-minute summary of Romans. In chapters 1-3 Paul says that Jews and Gentiles are both guilty of the same sins and stand guilty before him. “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” In chapters 3 through 8 he says that a new kind of righteousness has been offered to us through Jesus! A righteousness that is by grace through faith. It’s a gift of God. It’s a free gift, so no one can boast. And it’s offered to both Jew and Gentile. “There is no difference between Jew and Gentile” – Romans 3:22.

Once united in righteousness, we have a new Spirit that makes us together into a new family, the family of God. “The Spirit you received did not make you a slave that you should be subject again to fear!” We do not have that fearful cringing spirit of slaves anymore says Paul. Think of how that would have sounded to Tertius. Instead “the Spirit we received brought about our adoption to sonship and by that spirit we cry, Abba, Father”.

Chapters 12-15 describe the shape of the new family and it’s exactly the community you’d expect would be created by grace. Boasting and status are pushed to the side. “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement...Live in harmony with one another Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position.” And don’t be too severe in your judgments of one another. Make room for differences; that’s the message of chapter 14.

A community of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free, saved by Jesus, and brought together in a community of faith and mutual support and ministry. That’s the theology of Romans 1-15; that’s the picture of Romans 16. It’s a great picture. I love this picture of the early church. May it be a picture of our community too.

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