

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

Greet also the church that meets at their house.

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

Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord.

Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys.

Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test.

Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.

Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.

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.

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

Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them.

Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them.

**Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings. Romans 16:1-16**

I hope you don't feel too guilty if your heart wasn't moved by reading this passage of God's Word. It's not very interesting, is it? It's a list, a list of greetings, a list of names, a list of strange

names! It's almost like Paul is calling the roll. I've never been to a church where they called roll.

When I took a preaching class in seminary, we all had to choose a passage of scripture and preach in front of the class. One of my fellow students ventured to preach on a passage, much like this one. He did a great job. But when he was finished, the Professor said he had to give him a "B" instead of an "A" because the passage itself was a "B." I guess you can't preach an "A" sermon from a "B" passage. So, we were forewarned, "When preaching, avoid the lists. They're deadly."

At my son's college graduation, a year ago, after the speeches and the songs, it took what seemed like an eternity to hand out the diplomas. Almost 500 names, each graduate proudly climbing the stairs and striding across the stage. It took so long there were some in the crowd who left after the one they came to watch had their moment in the sun. Others, like me, had to wait. My son was in the middle of the pack. I had to wait through what for me was a long list of nobodies until that one name was read that was a somebody to me.

As Paul reads out this list of names, some of us might want to get up and leave. It may be the Word of God, but if it's possible, God is taking a break from things that really matter here. I mean, I don't even know these people. What could this have to do with me?

But if we read between the lines, we might get interested in this list of names, even if no more than to ask, "I wonder why Paul felt it necessary to say hello to so many people, some of whom he'd never even met?"

### **Greetings are important**

Paul uses the word "greet" 17 times here. Simple greetings were important to Paul. Throughout the Bible, greetings aren't just meaningless preliminaries; they're sacred. When the angel was sent to Mary, the first words out of his mouth were, "Greetings, favored one."

Think for a minute — what would life be like without any greetings? You're coming home from work. It's been a long day. You look forward to seeing your family. But as soon as you walk through the door, nothing is said to acknowledge your arrival. Everybody knows you're home, but nothing changes. The same thing happens when you go to work the next morning. Nothing is said when you arrive. Work resumes where it left off

the day before. There's no pausing to recognize your presence. In a world like this, there'd be no good-byes either. We'd just flow in and out of one another's life, presence or absence being unacknowledged.

The hellos and good-byes of life are the punctuation for life; they bring meaning; they mark the stops and starts and places to pause. Without them, people are never really noticed. When God's people gather together, greetings are important. If our preaching, praying, and singing is not punctuated with greetings, things become cold and businesslike. No one should be able to come and go from a meeting of God's people without someone acknowledging their presence.

This isn't meaningless chatter. Paul acknowledges about 30 people here in all — 30 names we wouldn't have otherwise known.

### **Greetings involve real people with names**

Many of us here use Facebook. If I go on my Facebook page and click "Friends," a whole bunch of names and faces show up. I can scroll down and glance at all the people I know. There are some I know well, but others I can hardly recall who they are or how I know them. Chapter 16 is kind of like Paul's list of Facebook friends from the city of Rome. Some of these people he knew well; others he'd never met. Most of these names are of people we might have known nothing about if they weren't on this list. We'd have never known about Junias or Stachys, or twin sisters named Tryphaena or Tryphosa. Names were important to Paul. It wasn't enough to just greet the whole church; he wanted to greet individuals. And so he mentions names.

The amazing thing about this is Paul had never been to Rome when he wrote this letter. Some of these people he would have met elsewhere in his travels around Asia Minor. But many of them he probably had just heard about. And yet he still took time to mention them. He still remembered their names.

It seems names are important. In the third letter of John, he writes to an elder of the church named Gaius. At the very end of the letter, he says, "*Greet the friends by name*" (3 John 1:15). What an intriguing thing to say. Perhaps John had in mind something Jesus said. He said, "*He calls his own sheep by name...*" (John 10:3). Jesus calls us by name (personally, one at a time) into his flock. What kind of salvation would it be if Christ just called us en masse, with no knowledge of our name? Names are so important that the book of Revelation says one day Jesus will give us "*a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who but receives it*" (Rev. 2:17).

The church is made up of people with names. We're a flock, not a herd. If we lose sight of the importance of names, we miss our calling as a church. When we recognize names, we're saying, "You're important. I'm glad it's YOU that's here, not someone else."

### **Greetings allow us to express affection**

You see, these names meant something to Paul. These were his friends. Paul was no romantic, but several of these people he calls "beloved." He says,

"Greet Epenetus, my beloved. He was my first convert from Asia. I didn't sleep a wink that night, thinking, 'Is anyone listening to me?' But Epenetus listened, and he believed. I just love that guy."

"And greet Persis. She sure worked hard. She was there when everyone else quit. She was the one who always said,

'Now Paul, you go on home. I'll put the chairs away. I'll clean up the kitchen. I'll lock up. You go on home, Paul. You're tired.'

"But, Persis, you're tired too. "

"No, Paul, you have to ride a donkey across Asia tomorrow. You go on. I'll pick up here." "Greet Persis, we all love Persis."

Paul wanted his affection for them to spill over into an affection for one another. So he said, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." Why did he have to say that? Was the holy kiss just the ancient version of a handshake? No. It was the distinct way Christians greeted each other. It was a way of showing their love in Christ. It broke down barriers between them - Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female.

When I was training for the ministry, Ray Stedman brought me along with him to Brazil. He was in his sixties; I was in my early twenties. The gap between us in both age and maturity was wide. But when Ray woke up in the morning and saw me, he always gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and he always told me he loved me. It always made me uncomfortable, but I've never forgotten his affection. It closed the gap between us.

One scholar writes,

**"It betrays an unnecessary reserve, if not loss of the ardor of the church's first love when the holy kiss is conspicuous by its absence in the Western Church."**

When I look back at my Christian experience, I see that every time I've seen a significant move of the Holy Spirit, it's been marked by a godly kind of affection among God's people. I met the Lord during the Jesus Movement. When I first walked into a church, the thing that struck me the most was how these people loved one another; and one of the ways that love was visible was in their affection. There was a spirit of tenderness and warmth when they met together. When we greet one another with warm and godly affection, it's a lot more than just small talk. Those greetings are the mark of true Christian love.

### **Greetings allow us to express appreciation**

They're also a way of saying thank you. As you look through this list, you can see Paul honors and affirms these people by recognizing the contributions they've made.

"Greet Priscilla and Aquila. They risked their own neck for me."

"Say hello to Andronicus and Junia, why, they've been believers longer than I have."

"Greet Apelles. He's been through the fire and been approved."

"Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those twin sisters, I never could tell them apart, except for that mole Tryphosa had on her cheek. I know their names mean 'dainty' and 'delicate,' but they sure worked hard too."

"And Rufus. What a choice, man! Tell him hello too, and tell his mother hello because she's been a mother to me as well."

Can't you see it? Can't you see this woman mothering Paul? I'll bet Paul stayed in her home. I picture her as a rather large woman who always wore an apron. A lot of Kleenex stuffed in the pocket of the apron. Her hair pulled back in a bun and made a breakfast fit for a lumberjack.

Paul would say to her, "I'm sorry. I can't stay. I have to get on the road."

"Sit down and eat your breakfast and wait while I pack you a lunch. I don't care if you're an apostle. You've got to eat."

So Paul says, "Rufus, tell OUR mother, hello."

You see, Paul knew ministry was hard work. People get wounded and tired and need encouragement and affirmation. Paul refused to take people's hard work for granted. Sometimes our attitude is, "Well, they're doing it for the Lord, aren't they? Why should I thank them? Why should I affirm them? Don't they get that from God? Why should they need that from me?" Paul would answer, "Yes, they are doing it for the Lord. And yes, he will affirm them. But one of the ways he's going to do that is through YOU!" When we serve, our eyes should be on the Lord, but often he affirms us through others. And there's a domino effect to affirmation - when we affirm people, we in turn set them free from their self-doubt to affirm others. When we greet one another like this, all of a sudden, we've got a church full of people affirming and appreciating each other. People feel free from the chains of insignificance; they feel God is using them; that their part in the body is crucial to the whole.

### **Greetings allow us to remember those easily forgotten**

Apart from greetings like this, a lot of us would be forgotten. A number of these names are names of common slaves. Julia and Philologus were names given to slaves in Paul's day. Paul greets them right alongside men like Aristobulus, a leading member of the royal household. It seems that in the body of Christ, status in the world means nothing.

And many of these names are of women. In a day when women were subjected to significant discrimination, Paul recognized them right alongside the men. Phoebe is called a servant. This is

the Greek word otherwise translated as "deacon" or "minister." Junia is called an apostle. Jesus chose twelve Apostles and gave them a unique authority, but others were apostles in a different sense. That word, apostle means "sent one." Scholars argue about the proper role of women in the church. I like what F.F. Bruce says about this passage, "Whatever these women were doing, it was more than just serving tea!" These women were ministering right alongside of men.

There are people in every church who are easily forgotten, who fall between the cracks of church life. In a church with a pre-dominance of young families, it might be the unmarried, single parents, or even couples who don't have children. In a church where most people are upper-middle-class white-collar types, it might be those who don't fit that profile. And because of that, we need to go out of our way to remember them.

Maybe that's why Jesus said,

**"When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you. But, when you give a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed." Luke 14:12-14**

How easy it is to socialize with our own kind, people who can offer us something in return. Most of us feel we barely have time to cultivate the friendships we have, much less seek out new ones outside of our normal circle. But, as long as we do that, we look just like the world does, and people who don't fit our mold quietly slip away and find someplace where they feel like they do fit. When you greet one another, remember those who are easily forgotten.

### **Greetings are important because we may not see each other again**

These greetings in Romans 16 are, for Paul, extremely significant because he didn't really know for sure if he'd ever have a chance to greet them again. In chapter 15, he tells them he's planning to visit them in Rome on his way to Spain. He says he hopes they can help him out on his way, and he looks forward to just enjoying their company.

But before he heads for Rome, he needs to go to Jerusalem. He's been collecting money from Gentile churches to take as an offering for the poor in Jerusalem. For Paul going to Jerusalem was like walking into a hornet's nest. There were people there who wanted him dead. That's why at the end of chapter 15, he says, "join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea..." (15:30-31). In other words, "I really do want to see you guys in Rome, but it's not a slam dunk. I need your prayers. There are people who in Judea who want my head."

Sometimes when we say hello, we wonder if it's the last chance we'll have. On this Memorial Day, I think of the Arlington Cemetery in Washington D.C., where Lynn and I visited last year. A sea of headstones stretched out across the rolling hills, each with a name — so many names! Some walk by and look at them like that's all they are — just a list of names. Some walk slowly up and down the rows, looking for someone. A woman walks up and puts her finger on a headstone on a name. She holds a child up and places the child's hand there. Another kisses the inscribed name. What each of them would gladly give for one more opportunity to greet them.

When I came to CPC, we were a church of about 350 people meeting over at Bowditch Middle School. Lynn and I arrived here with a five-year-old daughter and another one due to arrive any day. We were about as wet behind the ears as a ministry couple could ever be. We thought we'd only stay for a couple of years and then move on to bigger and better things. But through the years, each time we thought about leaving, we couldn't do it, and we stayed. And I think a lot of the reason we stayed is because of the names.

And through the years, some of those names have become a memory. They've gone on to glory. Sometimes Lynn and I look at each and say, "Remember Mike?" Or "Remember Gladys?" "Remember Steve?" Or "Remember Donna?" On and on the list goes. There's a name for that. The name for that is church. In Christian theology, the church is traditionally divided into two different categories: The Church Militant and the Church Triumphant.

The Church Militant comprises Christians on earth who are living, who struggle against sin and the devil. You and I are part of the Church Militant. But there's another category we often forget about. It's called the Church Triumphant, comprising those who are in heaven. Although these two groups may be physically separated from each other by the barrier of death, we nonetheless remain united to each other in one Church. We call this the Communion of the Saints.

Think of these words: *"I thank my God for all my remembrance of you."* I encourage you to keep the list of names. In fact, if you move, hold on to that list. Even if you have to leave your car, computer, furniture, and everything else take that list with you. When your ministry has ended, and you leave the earth, take that list with you.

I know, we like to say, "You can't take it with you — even those names that mean so much to you. When you get to the gates of heaven, the Lord will say, "You went into this world empty-handed, you come out of it empty-handed as well." But I can imagine the Apostle Paul at the gates of heaven. St. Peter asks, "What's that in your hand?" Paul replies, "Well, it's just a list of names." "Can I see it?" Peter asks. "Well, these are just the people I prayed with, folks who helped me out along the way." "Let me see it." "You see, it's just that I don't think I would have made it without them." "I know. So, let me see the names."

Finally, he gives it to him, and when he reads the names, he smiles. "I know all these people. In fact, on my way here to meet you, I passed a few of them. They were painting a great big sign to hang over the street just for you. It said, 'Greetings, Paul. We're glad you're home.'"

So would you take a pen or pencil and start your list of names? Write down a name of someone you want to greet. Someone you care about. Someone who may need to be reminded that they are beloved in the Lord. Someone who worked hard. Someone the world might forget. Write down their names. And find some time this week to call them or write them a note. Or, if they've already moved on to heaven, remember to thank God for them.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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