



Sermon Notes | Gospel Coworkers | Romans 16:1-16

INTRODUCTION

This last chapter of Romans is not just what remains to be told, and is not an appendix, is not something added or extended. It is an entire 'inspired' chapter dedicated to the revelation of 'Gospel Coworkers', thirty-five specific names, plus unnamed people, a sister, a mother, and three households. It is a diverse company, collectively described as 'Gospel Coworkers'. They are warmly greeted as people that Paul knows in Rome, people involved in the ministry, people that are working together for the purpose of the Gospel. (Next week also, we shall study yet another group of Paul's 'Coworkers', again noting the great diversity among them.) Some are with him; others are not. There are men and women, slaves and wealthy, Jews and Greeks, the jailed and the free. Some are married couples, some are siblings, some are well known while others are not. From Herod's line to Caesar's household, these 'Coworkers' come from all walks of life, and are all shapes and sizes, yet they are 'one vast company of believers', and are all working for one cause. Paul writes of the believer:

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Let us look at the picture of 'Gospel Coworkers' in Rome. Paul writes:

Romans 16:1-16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, 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. Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 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. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as

well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

Father, as we think of these many greetings before us, we are reminded of our greeting in Christ Jesus, as well as the many greetings before us as part of Your inspired Word. What can we say, that we should be included in a 'company' of 'Coworkers'. May the testimony of these workers press into us today and the work before us. We thank You, Father, that we can look at them and reflect, and consider You. We ask that this be the case now. Amen.

And now, a few opening remarks to keep in mind before we begin. Consider:

1. The Reality of Work:

This is important because of our natural state; we are 'adverse' to work in the remnant of Adam. This is not to say that we are all lazy, only that in Adam we have a tendency to 'passivity', the habit of resisting the work that we should do.

Ephesians 2:10

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

God created good works for His servants to do, and therefore our working is not to be a 'passive' matter. No. 'Gospel Work' is a matter of 'working in Christ'. Paul writes concerning the Gospel:

Romans 1:16

...it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

It is not a matter of being busy, or of doing common things. No. We learn from this passage that 'Gospel Work' is hard work, even dangerous work. Prisca and Aquila "risked their necks" (16:3), and Mary and Persis "worked hard" (16:6, 16:12), and it meant working together, as Urbanus and Stachys did (16:9). Only doing the Work of God proves sweet and pleasing to Him.

2. The Reality of Women:

Paul is often criticized for his treatment of women. He has, among some, the reputation of being chauvinistic, based on these of his writings.

1 Timothy 2:8-15

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling, likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what

is proper for women who profess godliness with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

1 Corinthians 14:23b-35

...As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

But such attacks are betrayed by such a chapter as this Chapter 16 which contains many women, and women of good report, women tasked with important roles, official endeavours, such as in the case of 'Phoebe' (Romans 16:1-2), and 'Prisca' who was applauded, along with her husband Aquila, having risked their lives (Romans 16:4), and Rufus's mother, whom Paul regarded as his 'own mother' (Romans 16:13). The issue is not that women in the Bible do not have esteem, or value, or responsibility, but that we do not like or appreciate the roles and esteem that they are given. In fact, women are esteemed, are lauded, and are made much of in Scripture, as we will see. So then, what is the issue? The issue is that 'God's design' for women has not been embraced.

3. The Reality of Being Well Known:

We have a wrong view of being 'well known', of holding 'official' titles, and this is important, because we've all 'flirted' with the idea of being well known at one time or another. But the world's view of holding an official title, of being 'well known' is not the same as 'Gospel Renown'. These names mentioned here in Chapter 16 are only noted in the Bible. They are not 'famed' persons. You may only have recognized a few of the names, but Paul recognized all of them, as did others at the time.

Paul lived out the theology of what he taught. He was not a 'lone ranger' in the Gospel; he was one of the 'collective' belonging to the Gospel of God. We know that through Abraham's seed, all of humanity would be blessed, both the Jews and the Greeks (Gentiles), and that the 'remnant' would be called back to 'one body' through the Seed of Christ, to live as 'Gospel Coworkers' working together, living together, the underlying assumption being that they would live out 'God's Righteousness' in everyday life. (As Paul outlines in Chapters 12 through 15 of Romans.) And so we take note of the 'respected' 'Gospel Coworkers' whom Paul takes time to greet and share about.

I. THE COMMENDED: (vv. 1-2)

Romans 16:1-2

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, 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.

Phoebe:

We begin with Phoebe. Paul says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe." The word 'commend' suggests, by definition, that Paul is providing an intimate and official pledge to this woman, that he regards her highly. Literally, he is saying, 'I stand with our sister, Phoebe.' And who is this sister who Paul is 'commending' to Rome? She is only known in these two verses of Scripture, yet the given information is insightful. Phoebe is 'a servant of the church' of Cenchreae, which conveys a 'diakonos' designation, that is, she served in the role of a 'deaconess'. (NIV states outright: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church of Cenchreae." Romans 16:1) Phoebe literally served as an official servant in her designated church in Cenchreae, which was a port city near Corinth. And Paul 'commends' her and encourages that she be 'welcomed' in the Lord. Receive Phoebe. Why? Phoebe is likely known. Manuscripts support that Phoebe is a delegate, that she carries a letter, is the official letter carrier, perhaps of 'Romans' itself. Paul states that Phoebe should be helped in any way that is needed. She may have faced hostile places. Provide for her needs. Take her in, protect her, and receive what she carries. Give her food and rest. Why? Because, 'I commend her.' We also learn that Phoebe has been a patron, of Paul, and of others. Phoebe has facilitated many, including Roman believers. 'Do for her as she has done for me,' Paul encourages. 'Help the saints. Help the 'Gospel Coworkers'. Help the Body of believers!'

Many Gospel workers hold 'official' titles, and their work as missionaries may be 'commended', but even if not commended, they are working for Gospel purposes.

II. THE COUPLE: (vv. 3-5a)

Romans 16:3-5a

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 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. Greet also the church in their house.

Prisca and Aquila:

Aquila and Priscilla (Prisca) are a well known married couple. They are first met in the book of Acts while Paul is on his second missionary trip.

Acts 18:1-3

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.

Paul stays with Aquila and Priscilla for one and a half years, tentmaking. They are a 'hospitable' couple, opening their home to other Gospel saints. Hospitality was very

important to fellow believers, especially in a first century environment that was hostile to Christians. Paul encouraged the saints to be hospitable.

Romans 12:12-13

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

We read that Aquila and Priscilla laboured together with Paul, and also hosted the church gathering in their home. Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 16:19

The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.

When Paul moved on, the couple, Aquila and Priscilla, went with him as far as Ephesus, where they ministered to the Ephesians.

Acts 18:18a, 19, 21

After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila... And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.... But on taking leave of them.... he set sail from Ephesus.

During Paul's absence, we read that Aquila and Priscilla meet a passionate and gifted man for the Lord, but who was lacking in his theology. The couple pulled this man, Apollos, aside and taught him (privately, not publicly, perhaps in their home) the things about Jesus that he did not know so that he was more accurate in his own teaching.

Acts 18:24-26

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

The couple return to Rome, where Paul speaks of them, and praises them for having 'risked their lives' on his behalf (perhaps during the riot at Ephesus, as recorded in Acts 19:21-41).

Aquila and Priscilla were not adverse to work or to danger. They had resolve and commitment. The Jewish couple were 'Gospel Workers' ministering among the Gentile churches, and were beloved by all the churches. They were Jews, opening their home to Gentile believers. Before Christ, this was unheard of. Jews and Gentiles becoming one. This was the character of 'Gospel life'. The couple were 'Gospel Coworkers'. Wherever they went they opened their home to the saints, whether Ephesus, Corinth or Rome. Paul greets this couple yet again in his writings to Timothy.

2 Timothy 4:19

Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus.

There are lessons to be learned from this couple. Aquila and Priscilla are not commended as 'official' saints as Phoebe was. They were simply 'workers', saints like you and me. They were a hard working, devoted couple, doing God's work. They did not add 'official' titles to their lives. No particular ministry 'dictated' the course of their life. Yes, they made tents, but they also did work for the 'Gospel'. Their ministry was their life.

III. THE COLLECTIVE: (vv. 5b-16)

Romans 5b-16

...Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

And so we meet the group left, a diverse group, but all united in Christ, and all united in 'Gospel Work'. Two are unnamed, two are family names. All form the 'collective'.

i. Epaphroditus:

Romans 16:5b

...Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.

Epaphroditus was the first convert to Christ in Asia. His name suggests that he is a Gentile, and not originally from Rome, but possibly he may have brought the Gospel to Rome. Paul was not the one who brought the Gospel to Rome. This is known because Paul states directly:

Romans 15:20

...and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation...

The assumption is that all would have known Epaphroditus; he is named early, and is called beloved by Paul.

2. Mary:

Romans 16:6

Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.

Mary also has worked hard. This Mary is a different Mary from other Marys mentioned. We know this because of the time written about and the location of her work. This Mary 'worked hard' for the saints of Rome. This is not a reference to just being 'busy', Mary did actual work and Paul notes her efforts.

3. Andronicus and Junia:

Romans 16:7

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

Andronicus and Junia are a married couple, kinsmen to Paul, and are therefore Jews. They are well known to the Apostles and in Rome, as they were saved in Christ even before Paul was. (Paul esteems those who came to Christ before him. He notes in Corinthians that though he felt unworthy, he was the last of the Apostles granted an appearance of Christ after His resurrection.)

1 Corinthians 15:3-9

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

And so, Andronicus and Junia are to be greeted and esteemed. Like Paul, they too were 'fellow prisoners' for the sake of the Gospel, though not in the same jail as Paul. They had proven to be an outstanding couple, not afraid of danger, and were well known and thought of.

Do you follow this practice? Do you 'esteem' the saints who have gone before you? Does this practice transcend the generations? How do you respond to the 'Gospel Coworkers' who have gone before you? Do you need to sit and hear them?

4. Ampliatus:

Romans 16:8

Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.

Ampliatius was a common 'slave' name. Paul greets and loves him in the Lord. Paul does not pass him by because he is a slave. No. There is no partiality among 'Gospel Coworkers'.

James 2:1

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

Paul greets the slave of man, and the slave of Christ.

5. Urbanus and Stachys:

Romans 16:9a

Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys.

Urbanus is another 'slave' name. Stachys, on the other hand, is an imperial name. Perhaps Urbanus was a slave who belonged to Stachys, for they are listed together, yet Paul listed the slave's name first. In Christ these two persons, slave and owner, are one. Under Caesar, one of these names would not have even been mentioned, but in Christ, both are empowered, and are one.

6. Apelles:

Romans 16:10a

Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ.

Apelles is 'approved' in Christ. He is not idle; he 'works' for Christ. Maybe he has been tested, and thus is approved in Christ, but regardless, Paul has noted that he is 'approved'. He has passed the test.

Positionally, it is true that all are approved in Christ, but it should be that we are 'approved' in our work for Christ also.

7. The Household of Aristobulus:

Romans 16:10b

Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus.

It is unknown why these people are referenced as 'the family' of Aristobulus. Perhaps Aristobulus himself was deceased, or was not a Christian and the household was. Perhaps it refers to the servants of the family. Some have suggested that Aristobulus was the grandson of Herod the Great and the brother of Herod Agrippa, but it is unknown.

Many people come from bad households and dysfunctional backgrounds. God uses these people also. Christ can save all, even the most wicked.

8. Herodion:

Romans 16:11a

Greet my kinsman Herodion.

No other information is supplied here, other than the fact that Herodion is a relative of Paul. Therefore he is a Jew, and a stated 'Coworker'. Is he connected to the Aristobulus family? Is there a royal connection to Herod? We do not know.

9. The Household of Narcissus:

Romans 16:11b

Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.

We are not given direct names to be greeted in this reference, only the family name. There was a very wicked household with this name under the Emperor Claudius. We do not know if the reference is to the same one. But we do know that there were 'some' in that family, family members or servants, who were 'Gospel Coworkers'.

10. Tryphaena and Tryphosa and Persis:

Romans 16:12

Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis who has worked hard in the Lord.

Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis are three women, hard working women in the Lord. Not just couples are acknowledged, and not just important officials are acknowledged. Many different people, from many walks of life, and including women, were counted as 'Gospel Coworkers' who were expected by Paul to be greeted and appreciated for their work, their hard work.

In Christ the work is hard. 'The Collective Christians' should work hard. Not just the special ones should work hard, not just the officials, the couples, the important families, but all 'Gospel Coworkers', all Christians, should work hard and be motivated for Christ and the Gospel.

11. Rufus and His Mother:

Romans 16:13

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well.

Rufus was chosen in the Lord, and his mother also is part of the 'Gospel Coworkers'. We may well have heard of this same Rufus before, in the book of Mark (Mark was written to Rome.)

Mark 15:21

And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.

Simon came into Jerusalem, and his life intersected with Christ's when he was called to carry Christ's cross. Therefore, maybe there was a legacy after the fact. It is believed that his two sons became saved, and that Simon's wife, Rufus's mother, became saved also. Age wise, she was old enough to be Paul's mother. Paul states that Rufus's mother was like a mother to him also.

12. Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the Brothers with Them:

Romans 16:14

Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them.

Paul names five men, all with slave names, and there are others with them, brothers for whom we are given no names. But they all are to be greeted. Paul has organized these names together, and they all are counted as being 'Gospel Coworkers'.

13. Philologus, Julia, Nereus and His Sister, Olympas, and all the Saints with Them:

Romans 16:15

Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints with them.

There is no further information on this group. It is a 'collective group' within the Collective Group. Perhaps they were all from one household. We are not told, but Paul knew. And Paul wanted them all to be greeted.

Greet these workers, Paul commands, each one of them! And in summary he adds that they should greet one another with a 'holy kiss'.

Romans 16:16

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

Culturally, the kiss was a social gesture, an ancient custom (also noted in 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and 1 Thessalonians), but Paul is elevating the custom from social to sacred when he calls for a 'holy kiss'. The 'holy kiss', the kiss of peace, is not new. It is from the Spirit, filled with warm affection, and is overflowing with communion. It is commanded.

Are your greetings common or holy greetings? Do your greetings reflect Christian values? Are you excited to greet the saints? Do you have joyful relationships? Are they refreshment to the soul? Are they filled with eager and uplifting communion?

And finally, the 'Collective' expands. Paul states: "All the churches of Christ greet you." Paul is referring to all of the churches that he has worked with, and he sends one large, united, collective greeting from them all.

Romans 15:19

...by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.

This final greeting leaves us with two things to note.

1. There was a time when there were no denominations, just and only the Church of Christ, singular. In the New Testament there were still disagreements between people, as for example, there were between Paul and Barnabas, and the Church at Corinth found sin among their unity. But there were no ethnic churches. There was no Church of Paul, or Church of Barnabas. There was but ONE, the Church of Christ Jesus (Colossians 2, Ephesians 2, Romans). Now all we hear is references to 'my kind of church, your church, my church, and so many different denominations.
2. There remains ONE true Church, which is not divided, and in it we are united in Christ. Christ binds the church. We are His sheep, hearing the voice of our Shepherd. There are hundreds of references in the New Testament, and dozens just in this passage, that refer to 'in Christ' and 'in the Lord'. And in our passage today, "all the churches of Christ" greet you (Romans 16:16). One source, one church, in Christ the Lord. All 'Gospel Coworkers' named, sourced and sustained by one fountainhead, that being Christ Jesus the Lord. There are no divisions in Him. We are one in Him, and there is one church in Christ Alone. Christ the Lord binds us together.