

Romans: Vessels of Mercy Displaying God's Righteousness

Kenwood Baptist Church Spring Sermon Series

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TEXT: Romans 16:1-27



Good morning, Beloved. Are you good with names? Some of you are secretly thinking, "Boy, I wish that for the rest of life everyone would have a name tag." Jesus Christ is good with names, and the Scriptures teach us that our names are written in the Book of Life.

I remember vividly at the end of college attending a worship service in Washington, D.C. and coming forward to receive communion. My best friend who shared Christ with me in high school was kneeling down next to me. I remember feeling so incredibly grateful that the gospel had been shared with me through him. As I was preparing to receive the communion elements, I thought our names must be next to one another in the Book of Life.

Jesus Christ knows us by name, and Christians become good with names. I use the phrase "become good with names" because being good with names is not something you are born with, as in "I happen to be good at math or music." But names really do matter a great deal to us. Can you imagine not remembering the names of your children? That would be odd. Or not remembering the name of your spouse? "I feel like I've seen you a lot." That would be rather disruptive. Names matter. So I want us to all receive this initial challenge this morning: that as Christians, as followers of Jesus, I am called, you are called to become good with names.

We are almost to the end of this spring series. Next Sunday we are going to preach through the whole letter in one sitting, as a reprise. But this morning, we look at chapter 16. The way that Romans ends is with a roll call of gospel servants—twenty-nine names. It is the longest list of

names in all of Paul's letters. Many things about this list of names are very striking. One of the most obvious is that of these twenty-nine names, ten of them are women. So we see that the nature of Christian workers includes men and women. We will see that in this list of names there are Greek names and Latin names. There are Hebrew names. There are names that are commonly given to people who are enslaved, and there are names of people who are at the highest levels of Roman society. They are all listed together in a description of the church family.

At the end of the letter, as we will see, Tertius greets us. He is the one who is writing everything down. Some of you may have encountered that verse and thought, "I thought Paul wrote Romans." But at the very end of Romans it says, "No, Tertius wrote it." Tertius is the man writing it down as Paul is speaking it and dictating it. But as he completes the letter, it is entrusted to a faithful gospel worker. In the case of Romans, it is a woman named Phoebe.

Phoebe is introduced as the first of these twenty-nine names in Romans 16. She is commended as "our sister," a familial bond of affection. She is also identified as someone who is a deacon or someone who is serving in a recognized role of church leadership in the neighboring city of Cenchreae. Paul is writing this letter from Corinth and he hands the letter to her. She is a leader of this neighboring town.



When people go to Greece and visit the sites of the New Testament, everyone goes to Corinth because it is so well preserved, and it's exciting. Not everyone goes to Cenchreae, but I love to stop there. This is the ruins of the Roman port of Cenchreae that is jutting out into the waters. When you stand there and reflect on this scene and this Roman port going out into the waters, you have to take a deep breath and reflect that it was from this spot, from this port, that this letter which has impacted millions of people

went out into the world. It went out into the world in the hands of a woman who took it to Rome. It is important to recognize that it is not given to her because she just happened to be going there. She is entrusted with the document because she is serving in leadership in the neighboring town. She is also described in verse two as a patron of Paul and of many others. What does that mean?

Phoebe is a benefactor, just like Theophilus in Luke's Gospel. The book of Acts benefited from the patronage and the sponsorship of Theophilus, who paid for the research time and the assembling of the documents and their distribution. Paul is commending Phoebe as someone

who is dedicated to Christ, someone with a track record of advancing the Kingdom, and someone whose giving financially made ministry possible. In some ways, she is representative of the very response that we hope to have in reading the letter. Remember that the letter conveys a vision of gospel ministry and of the missionary task as yet unfulfilled.

We saw last Sunday that the climax of Romans in chapter 15 is a call for us to participate in sending missions to places where there are not yet thriving churches. Phoebe embodies this kind of commitment. Not only would she carry the letter, but she would be the public reader of the letter. Can you imagine hearing Romans for the first time as a gathered congregation? “Does anyone have any questions?” “Is there anything in this letter that you would like to hear a little more about?” Who would be the person to do that? It would have been Phoebe. She would do that not because she had in her other bag a set of commentaries on Romans. She did it because she had actually watched and seen the teaching of Romans applied and lived out for years in the church at Corinth. So I think it is fantastic to imagine Phoebe as not only the courier, but she is also the first commentator on this majestic letter. She was a trusted gospel worker. She is the first person named in these verses.

The next group that is mentioned is a husband and wife team. Prisca, sometimes called Priscilla, and Aquila. This husband and wife are ministry partners, long-term friends of Paul. They were tent makers. They were introduced in Acts 18. It is interesting that Priscilla is usually mentioned first. She may have been someone of a higher social status, or she may have been—this happens—she may have been smarter than her husband, and she may have been a better public teacher than Aquila. *Aquila* means “eagle” in Latin and *Priscilla* means “pristine” or “beautiful.” So I like to think of them as “beautiful” and “eagle.” We see them in Acts as teaching and helping Apollo, who understands the gospel in part, and they instruct him. I think of couples in our church who have a ministry of teaching others and raising them up. What a powerful example of a husband-wife team. Not only do they teach publicly, they are lifelong partners and encouragers of Paul. He also says of them that they “stuck their necks out for me.” What does that mean, to “stick your neck out” for someone? “They stuck their neck out for me,” he says, and helped protect his life, probably, in Ephesus. Not only that, but they are a couple who host the church in their home, a beautiful example of gospel service.

The next named person is a man named Epaenetus. *Epaenetus* in Greek means “commended” or “praised.” Another example we have of a man with this name was the author of a gourmet cookbook in the ancient world. It may not be the same Epaenetus, but it might be, and so this man, whose name is at least associated with gourmet cooking, is described as the first fruits of Christ. He is the first believer in the Roman province of Asia.

In Romans 16:6-7, Paul tells us:

“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.”

Andronicus and Junia, another husband and wife team, are said to be “my kinsmen.” So they are ethnic Israelites. They are also a husband-wife couple who knew the experience that Paul had on several occasions of being imprisoned for the gospel. It does not mean necessarily that they were imprisoned at the same time or location as Paul, but they knew what it was like to be incarcerated for the sake of the gospel. They are also a couple, Paul says, who are distinguished, or well-known, among the apostolic group. The word “apostles” can be used in a narrow sense in the New Testament to mean the twelve apostles, but in a broader sense, “apostle” just means missionary. I think that is how it is to be used here. Paul said in Romans 1 that we receive grace and apostleship through believing in Christ, so we share in this missionary task. Paul says that Andronicus and Junia are a husband-wife team who are dynamic and well-known and recognized among this early group of people who are making Christ known. He says that they were believers before he was. That means that this couple goes back to the absolute beginnings of the church. Some scholars think that this couple was present on the day of Pentecost. So shout out to the work of the Holy Spirit among us to move us into mission. Some scholars think that they are instrumentally involved in the gospel’s reaching the city of Rome.

In Romans 16:8, Paul says:

“Greet Ampliatus ...”

Have you ever known anyone named Ampliatus? If you think of “amplitude,” which means to get bigger, then Ampliatus is a nickname related to “amplitude.” No one actually names their son “Big Man,” but it is a nickname or a name that is given to the big, strong guy. And this name is attested within the imperial household of the Roman emperors at this time as a slave name. So it is the big, hardworking guy.

He is accompanied by a man named Urbanus, in whose name we see the word “urbane,” meaning of the city. This is another slave name for someone who works in tasks that are associated with tutoring or other not necessarily manual labor. Some slaves were employed in the imperial household as teachers.

Stachys is another slave name. What is fascinating about this is that these three men are named together; they are attested in inscriptions. Ampliatus is attested with a funeral monument from the early second century. Some scholars think that these imperial slaves were responsible for

bringing the gospel message into the Roman imperial household. Paul knows them and greets them by name. In the Orthodox church tradition, Stachys becomes later the first leader of the church in Byzantium, in the city.

In Romans 16:10, Paul tells us:

“Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ.”

Appelles is a famous name in the ancient world for artists. A man named Appelles of Kos was the official painter of Alexander the Great. He was dedicated to the task of painting and developing his skills. He had a line that he often quoted. It is often repeated in the Latin translation: *nulla dies sine linea*, which means “no day without drawing a line,” meaning practice your craft every day. For disciples of Jesus, “no day without growth and discipleship.” But Paul says this man “is approved in Christ.”

In verse 10, Paul greets those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. We might be tempted to let these names pass by us, but this name is also an astonishing inclusion. Aristobulus is the grandson of Herod the Great. Aristobulus grew up in Rome so he could hobnob with his fellow up-and-comers to rule the world. Aristobulus, though, has died at this time. And what is remarkable is that a number of Herod the Great's great-grandchildren are believers in Jesus. Just let that wash through.

In Romans 16:11, Paul tells us:

“Greet my kinsman Herodion.”

Here is another person associated with the Herodian family.

And completing Romans 16:11:

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

Have you ever had to interact with a narcissist? It's tough. It's tough sledding. Remember Narcissus in Greek mythology was the exceptionally handsome young man who rejected all romantic advances, and as punishment, was cursed to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Entranced by his own image, he just wasted away and died. It's a pretty sad story. Some of the mythological stories are depressing. But that is the ending of all narcissists. They are so in love with themselves that they don't see anyone else, and just waste away to nothing. Notice that this is a pagan name. No Jewish family names their son Narcissus.

The next group may be twin sisters. Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa. These are Greek names that mean “delicate” or “soft fabric.” I love that Paul describes these two ladies whose names are

“delicate” as extremely hardworking in the Lord. It’s as if the fair Tryphaena and Tryphosa have calloused hands for ministry.

Greet the beloved Persis, who also works hard in the Lord. This is a name often given to someone of Persian origin. It was often a slave name. Yet this woman is called beloved and working hard in the Lord.

Greet Rufus. Now this is a great name. This is a Latin nickname. Rufus means redheaded. If you compare this with the Gospel of Mark, which is a summary of Peter's preaching in Rome, at the ending of the Gospel of Mark, in chapter 15, we read that Simon of Cyrene had two sons, Alexander and Rufus. Simon of Sirene was the man who was conscripted to carry the cross of Christ. Here is his son who is commended as chosen in the Lord, and his mom. And Paul says that she has been a mother to me as well. Isn't that beautiful? Christian moms have so much love that they are able to give that to their own children and they are able to share the love of Christ even with their non-biological children, with their children in the Lord.

I like to imagine these men introduced in Romans 16:14 as the youth ministry volunteers. They are mentioned together in a pack: Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. These guys, they go together. They show up together. They're named together. They serve together. They don't get any other attribution other than the fact that they just show up together. Beautiful. There's another group serving together mentioned in verse 15.

This list of names reminds us not just that names matter, but when we listen to the names, we see a picture of what the church actually is. The church is comprised of men and women, of people of the highest social standing and the lowest, and people who together are of diverse ethnic backgrounds. They are there together not just on display as a church; they are there as a church functioning as a missionary presence in the city of Rome, the imperial capital.

In Romans 16:16, Paul asks and invites his readers to greet one another with a holy kiss. This is the Mediterranean kiss on the cheek. It's not a full lip on lip at the greeting time. It's cheek to cheek once, twice, depending. Some places I've visited, depending on the level of affection and relationship, you go cheek to cheek to cheek to cheek, and it's wonderful. It is a wonderful greeting.

We have early attestation of the greeting time from early Christian writers. Some contemporary churches in the United States have done away with the greeting time because, they say, “Well, you know that makes people uncomfortable.” Well, if you get uncomfortable with the greeting

time, remember the sermon comes after that, and the Word of God makes us all a lot more uncomfortable than the greeting time. So if you think of the greeting time as getting you a little out of your comfort zone, think of that as sermon preparation. What is really happening is the love of Christ is being shown to one another. It is interesting that in the two earliest sources for this, in Justin Martyr and Augustine, they both say that the greeting time happens right after the offering.

Then Paul, in Romans 16:16, reciprocates this. He says:

"All the churches of Christ greet you."

The greeting is moving back and forth. James Dunn says Paul speaks for all these churches, that they are behind him in the mission. This greeting that flows in Romans 16 gives us a vibrant picture of the church in action.

In Romans 16:17, what might seem like an abrupt transition actually is not:

"I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them."

I think of verse 17 as telling us whom not to greet. In verse 17, we are reminded to watch out for people who like to create divisions and to put stumbling blocks contrary to the gospel teaching that we have been taught. This is true in the first century, and it's true in the 21st century. People like to create followers of themselves instead of reproducing followers of Jesus. So that is something to always look out for. Do not give your following lightly to others, but follow people who are seeking to follow Christ. Watch out for people who are making a big deal about something that is not a big deal. And if you move something that is a secondary topic or a tertiary topic into the center, it's going to throw everything off balance.

We heard a great sermon on that two weeks ago from Pastor Scott: Keeping the main thing the main thing. And what is the main thing? The main thing is the transformed life, our obedience being known to all. Paul reminds his hearers that people who are seeking to create those kinds of divisions are not in fact serving Jesus, but their own appetites, and with smooth talk and flattery they are deceiving people.

But what's really on display for us this morning, and a challenge for us, is to let the Word of Christ and the gospel message, which we have been listening to this spring, that gospel message that announces righteousness for all who believe in Christ, the gospel message that offers us a new family history in Abraham, a new identity in Christ, the last Adam, the presence of the Holy Spirit changing our lives, being grafted into God's great redemptive story, a people called to offer our lives as living sacrifices, transformed by grace and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit,

that is the gospel goal. The gospel goal is seeing our life change, where it is all about Christ. It is all about sharing Christ. And that's it. That is what we talk about the most. He wants us to be wise as to what is good and innocent to what is evil, and He promises that the God of peace will crush Satan underneath our feet.

This image brings to mind Genesis 3:15, where the first announcement of the gospel is that a descendant of Eve would crush the head of the serpent; the victory of God over evil. We need to make sure this is close at hand for us, because when you see evil, evil is boastful and appears to triumph, but the Scriptures teach us that evil does not triumph, that God defeats evil. The way God defeats evil is through the death and resurrection of Christ. That is how He does it. Even the most violent opponent of Christianity, like Paul, can become a dedicated, gentle, humble missionary. God triumphs over darkness through the light of the glory of Christ, through His grace.

The last list of named people sending greetings are Roman believers. Timothy, like a son to Paul, Paul describes as his fellow worker. Lucius may be Luke the evangelist or another Luke. Jason was the leader of the church in Corinth. Sosipater was from Veria in central Greece. They are all named as Paul's kinsmen.

I have a soft spot in my heart for Tertius in verse 22. I love this guy. Can't wait to meet this man. I want to ask him, "Take me on the inside. What was that like? When Paul was dictating Romans and you were writing it down, did you know 'This is good.' Did you ever pause and say, 'Wait a minute, I lost you. Can you say that again?' I've got several questions."

This man is special to me as well because Tertius in Latin means "three." So he's kid three. I'm a kid three in my family. I've mentioned before, Romans are not particularly creative in naming their kids. They have Primis, Secundus, Tertius: kid one, two, three. So Tertius, kid three, grew up with a lot of people around him, could listen well, had good penmanship, and he wrote it down. This is the only time we have an example of this role, and Paul attests this is his habit. Paul mentions in the end of Galatians that he writes a couple of words in his own hand, but his own handwriting had overly large letters. So it wasn't particularly well suited for publication. So he worked with other people. That is another one of the large impressions that we are to get from this list: that gospel ministry never happens alone. We were challenged at the beginning of the service today to envision what it takes for Kenwood to happen on a Sunday morning, the partnership and involvement by many people.

Gaius is hosting Paul and the whole church of Corinth. He sends his greetings.



Erastus sends his greetings. The city treasurer. Erastus is named in a monumental headstone that still sits there in ancient Corinth. It says on the top, in Latin, “Erastus the city treasurer with his own funds laid this marble sidewalk.” This stone is still there. This man was led to faith through Paul's ministry, and he's there, named, giving greetings to the church.

And our brother Quartus, kid four, gets a shout out.

The letter ends in Romans 16:25-27 with a sublime blessing:

“Now to Him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

In many ways, this final blessing—which we are going to unpack in more detail next Sunday—recapitulates the whole letter. It is right that the gospel leads us to praise, and it is an expression of praise to God as the One who is able to strengthen you. We get stronger, Beloved, through the gospel message and the preaching of Christ. We get stronger as we comprehend the revelation of God's mystery. The mystery is not a secret that God keeps hidden, but it is an announcement that He has held until the perfect time of His Son to come into the world. The mystery is out in the open now. It is disclosed, or promised, through the Scriptures, but it has been made known now to all nations. This is God's command, His decision, God, the missionary God who aims to bring about transformed lives among all nations. That is what we saw in chapter one, that we receive grace and apostleship, or mission, to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His Name among all nations. In Romans 16:27, Romans ends with an exclamation of praise:

“... to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ.”

And that's the end.

This morning I have three challenges for us:

The first challenge: I want to apply this catalog of named gospel workers to us and challenge myself and all of us that Christians **become good with names**. The unity of the church is known by name. One of my dear friends, Pastor Ken Atchison, who served at Kenwood for many years and is now with the Lord, used to say that shepherds count by name, not by number. And that's true. Ken used to roam around Kenwood, and he maintained a document. not just of greeting people, but Ken maintained a document of who was here by name. Then he would know if someone was missing.

Christians become good with names because Christ is good with names. So I want you to abandon, or identify as a non-Christian sentence or a not-yet-sanctified-in-Christ sentence, saying, "I'm not good with names." We tend to default into it, but Christians *become* good with names. They learn to do that. One thing I do is when I first meet someone, I try to take a mental picture of them when they tell me their name. I give them my full attention, try to picture them, and label that picture with their name. If you can do that, great. That is something I try to do. It doesn't always work. When I meet someone with a name that I don't know or recognize—maybe it's from a different language—I love to ask them, "Can you tell me the meaning? Does your name have a meaning?" And that allows me to hear the name a couple more times. If I still don't have it, I'll offer my business card or write my name down. Then I'll ask them, "Can you write yours down?"

It is a beautiful habit to notice the names of people around you, not just at church, but as you live and represent Christ around the community. I think it is a profoundly Christian act to greet people by name who are serving you at a restaurant or bagging your groceries or serving you at a bank, and to greet them by name and be in the habit of introducing yourself by name. I want to challenge you before you leave today to meet two or three people whose names you didn't know when you walked in. Introduce yourself by name and learn their names.

The second challenge: The second challenge for us in this passage is **that we would be known by the modifying words that go with these names**. When Paul introduces these people, he doesn't only give their names. He adds these descriptors: "beloved," "fellow worker," "servant leader," "benefactor," "patron of gospel ministry." So of all of the words that we might think to modify names, let's receive the New Testament's descriptions of us with these words.

The third challenge: **Talk about other people in the way Paul models talking about other people**. I call this positive gossip. He speaks of other people, and what comes to his mind is a short description of their service to Christ: "Worked hard in the Lord." "Dedicated to mission." "A generous giver to unreached people groups." What comes to mind for you when you think of other people? What comes to mind for him is an expression. It's not long, but it is a short

description of their faithful service to Jesus. I think Romans 16 challenges us that that is how we talk about our brothers and sisters.

Gossip is always destructive. It creates division and hurts people. It is simply a terrible expression of false power. That is what it is. But speaking as Paul does of other people builds people up and reminds them of their service to Christ. There is within that habit a final challenge tucked into it, a question: "Where am I being drawn to serve Christ here?"

Even with Paul's list of people, we don't know how large the church gathering in Rome was at this time. Most house churches were seventy people, ninety people. You have to have a pretty big house to have ninety people over. But some first century Roman houses, you can have ninety people over. But what is really remarkable is that the named people are probably at least a third of the gathered church. So the people who are there, named, are present and are serving. That is a good ratio.

So, if you're not plugged in, if you're not serving, heads up, the summertime is a time when we ask a lot of people to serve in formal ways. So when you get that call, don't say, "Let me think about it." Just say, "Happy to serve there." It's a vibrant part of a healthy church.

Isn't this list of names wonderful? I'm so glad that the letter ends this way. Jesus Christ is good with names. He knows your name. He knows the names of your brothers and sisters in Christ. And He also sees and recognizes your gospel service in whatever form it takes. Let's respond to God by offering ourselves to Him in worship.

Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank You for this stirring list of names and we thank You for the nature of the church represented in it. We pray this morning that we would leave here taking time to learn the names of two or three of our brothers and sisters in Christ. I pray, Lord, that You would use us, use our gifts, to expand the missionary movement of the gospel, and, Lord, that You would help us to greet and know one another with a genuine affection as family in Christ. Thank You God for including this list of names in Your Word. We love You, Lord Jesus, and we praise Your Name forevermore.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.