

# "What is Ministry?"

## Romans 16

As we come to the last chapter of Romans – a list of names of people, most of whom we don't know – we're tempted to skim or even skip these "unimportant" parts of Scripture. But when we come to lists in the Bible, we have to approach them with the proper attitude and presupposition rooted in 2 Tim. 3:16-17,

*<sup>16</sup>All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

Let's pray this verse over Rom. 16 this morning so we come to it with the proper attitude:

*Our Father who dwells in heaven but also in our hearts by Your Spirit, enlighten our minds and hearts to understand how useful this is to us. That we will learn from it as You help me by Your Spirit teach it, that we would be open to loving rebuke and point us in the way of correction and help us to be trained up by these verses so we can be fully equipped for the good work You've called each one of us to do. By the power and authority in Christ Jesus the Lord.*

When we come to lists in the Bible there are always two general things to observe; what's repeated over and over and what breaks the pattern or stands out from the rest. Our initial observation for Romans 16 is we see its primarily Paul extending greetings to many people he knows who are in the city of Rome. As we look closer we see Paul is commending Phoebe to the Romans and also sending greetings from his ministry associates who are with him. We also see different people are described or commended for different ways they ministered to or with Paul. There are two small sections that are different; a warning against false teachers in v.17-20 and a closing (and lengthier than normal) benediction. Unlike most of the letter, Paul is not prescribing any behaviour we are to practice or expounding on some knowledge we need to understand, rather he is describing by way of these greetings in his day how to encourage the people of God. What then do we take away as application from this list? We get a good idea of what ministry is from how Paul greets his Roman brothers and sisters in Christ.

So, what is ministry then? Because the most prominent aspect to this passage are the names of people we begin developing our definition of ministry by saying,

### *Ministry is about People*

There are 27 individual names mentioned in this chapter as well as references to 6 groups of people; a few churches and members of households. There are 20 males and 7 females noted here. There are Greeks and Jews. There are two married couples and a pair of sisters. Even though Paul has never been to Rome he knew these people by name; many of whom he worked with in ministry.

It's hard to do ministry without people. Almost every letter of Paul's begins Paul and \_\_\_\_\_ to the church of . . . Paul travelled at different times with Luke, Barnabas, Mark, Silas, Timothy, Sosthenes and others. Paul was not a Lone Ranger. Ministry was with people to help people. We teach people, we serve people. The gifts God's Spirit gives us are meant to be used for "*the common good*" of the people of Christ (1 Cor. 12:7). They are not meant to be a means to exalt ourselves. If

you're only purpose in ministry is to have people say how good you are, then you don't understand ministry. Are we ministering to God when we make it about ourselves?

Most of the names of these people we don't know. And so similarly many of us minister in relative obscurity – except to God and to those we minister with and to. That's all that matters. God sets aside the Paul's and the Billy Grahams and the Chuck Swindolls and Charles Stanleys to minister to larger groups of people, many of whom they don't know their names because they simply can't. I think some of the people in this letter were encouraged that Paul remembered their name. That tells us a lot about Paul; people were not a means for his 'success' but genuine partners in ministry. So that's another aspect of our definition of ministry:

### *Ministry is about Partnering with People*

Note the way Paul describes many of his ministry partners: Phoebe was a great help to Paul. Priscilla and Aquilla were fellow workers, as were Urbanus and Timothy. Some are mentioned as having done hard work (Mary for the Romans), Tryphena and Tryphosa. Priscilla and Aquilla risked their life for Paul. Andronicus and Junias were in prison with Paul. Apelles was tested and approved. Relatives, dear friends, whom I love, chosen, a mother to me, with them, sisters, brothers. This is the language of relationships and partnerships.

Think about your own ministry experiences, past and present. Who would say of you that you made a sacrifice for them, or that you worked hard with them or that your partnership in ministry is like a 'family'? It's interesting that Paul mentions that Rufus' mother (v.13) has been like a mother to him also. Would anyone call you a spiritual mother to them or someone who has experienced your care and concern for them as if they were one of your own children? It's always encouraging to see young families become friends and their children are in your house and your children are their house often as many of ours were in each other's houses. You develop a concern and a love for other people's children and what's especially neat is when they get older and they become partners in ministry too.

If we partner in ministry we are less concerned with the attention being on ourselves and more on what God wants to do through us. And then . . .

### *Ministry is about Partnering with Christ-Centered People*

Next to the word "greeting" the most repeated word/phrase is "in the Lord" or 'in Christ'. Priscilla and Aquilla were 'fellow workers in Christ Jesus' as was Urbanus 'our fellow worker in Christ'. Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. Those in the household of Narcissus were in the Lord. Tryphena and Trphosa worked hard in the Lord as did Persis and another unnamed woman. (v.12).

Sometimes 'in the Lord' simply refers to their spiritual connectedness to Jesus while others refer to their devotion or their examples of faith. Phoebe was commended by Paul to the Romans because she was a prominent leader in the church at Cenchrea. The Greek word describing her being a great "help" to Paul was a term that inferred financial help. Phoebe was most likely the carrier of the letter to Rome and Paul gives a glowing spiritual recommendation of her and exhorts the Romans to do likewise 'in the Lord.' Paul did not just send anyone to deliver the letter, he wanted someone spiritually mature and would consider this as a service to the Lord.

Ministry is about partnering with people in the Lord's work so we all need to be Christ-centered if we want to see the gospel advance and our church grow spiritually. Would your ministry involvement be more described as a 'we' ministry (serving God with others) or as a 'me' ministry

(mostly you serve alone with little help from others)? Paul knew the importance of partnership and spiritual maturity in ministry. As he lay dying in his cell in 2 Timothy<sup>4</sup> he laments that most of his ministry partners and friends had deserted him. “Only Luke is with me” (4:11) he wrote and one of his requests to Timothy was for Timothy to send Mark to see him. It is not God’s plan to see us to serve Him alone.

So, Ministry is about Partnering with Christ-Centered People, for what purposes? Three we see here.

### *To Encourage Them*

Paul’s greetings and use of people’s individual names as well as recounting specific examples of faithfulness would have been an encouragement to those people. They heard ‘Paul noticed’ what I did. ‘Praise the Lord I was able to be used to partner with someone in ministry.’ When Paul said of Phoebe ‘I commend to you our servant Phoebe’, what do you think that did for Phoebe? When Paul said he was ‘grateful’ for Priscilla and Aquilla who risked their lives for Paul, how do you think Priscilla and Aquilla felt? Encouraged I’m sure that their ministry was appreciated. Not that we live for or seek man’s acknowledgment, but we need encouragement. We are actually commanded to be encouraged in Heb. 3:13

*<sup>13</sup> But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.*

That’s a daily command. We are commanded to encourage people everyday so that they are not hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. What does he mean by that? In the context of the passage the author of Hebrews is warning his readers don’t be like the nation of Israel who grumbled in the desert and didn’t recognize God’s miraculous provision in their life. We all have a tendency at times to not see God’s blessings in our life. We encourage each other by pointing out the different ways God has blessed us through each other. If we don’t hear that on occasion its easy to allow sinful thoughts of unappreciation creep in which make us feel unworthy or unloved and makes us draw back from people all the more and draw false conclusions about ourselves and each other and God’s work in our life.

A few times Paul points out people’s ‘hard work’ in the Lord. This last chapter was an encouraging chapter for the recipients, especially those who heard commendations and their name mentioned. Too often we have good intentions to encourage someone. Be sensitive to the Spirit when He randomly brings people to our minds and then we’ll at least pray for them or if it works to give them a call or see them. Don’t ignore those promptings of the Spirit. If we’re commanded to encourage one another daily, it shouldn’t surprise us that the Spirit will bring people to our mind daily.

The particular way we need to encourage one another is . . .

### *To Encourage Them to Stay in the Truth* *(16:17-20)*

We’re not sure why Paul chose to put this here. In almost every letter he addresses the need to stay close to sound doctrine and to be on the alert for false doctrine and teachers. Perhaps there was no natural place earlier in the letter to put this in. These are people who “*cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them for*

*such people are not serving our Lord Christ but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people.”*

The assumption here is these were people who were already in the churches. They often put on a good initial act of friendliness through smooth talk and flattery. Flattery is an insincere form of compliment that is intended to take you off your guard. We always have to know what the Word of God says so error is easily spotted. Paul encourages the Romans to stay in the truth and use the truth of God’s Word as your standard. Don’t be fooled by empty niceness and flattery and the self-centered zeal of people who want to ‘get right there in the work’ only so they can bring naïve (ungrounded in the Word) people over to their way of thinking that contradicts Scripture. The best defense is a good offense, so know the Word and you’ll more readily see those who pretend to be truth followers who are not.

Paul is encouraged by the Romans obedience to the Word even full of joy over them but he knew from personal experience everywhere he went false teachers always had a way of seducing Christians from being obedient to the Word of God. *“I want you to be wise about what is good and innocent about what is evil”* (v.19). And then as a reminder he affirms and assures them that even if the enemy wins an occasional battle, God wins the war: *“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet”* (v.20).

Ministry, we’ve learned from Paul’s example here, is

***about partnering with Christ-centered people to encourage them to stay in the truth  
and to serve for the glory of God  
(16:25-27)***

Paul ends the letter with this great doxology very fitting for the end of perhaps his greatest letter, Romans:

*<sup>25</sup> Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, <sup>26</sup> but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—  
<sup>27</sup> to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*

Probably because he has spent so much time in Romans expanding on the gospel and its implications for daily living, Paul doesn’t simply say *Now to Him . . . be glory forever through Jesus Christ, amen!* He ever-so-briefly reminds them of some key parts about the gospel. Faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ establishes us. It confirms who we are in Christ. It affirms the power of God to accomplish His purposes for us. Paul began the letter saying he wants to come to Rome so that he could *‘impart to them some spiritual gift to make them strong’* (1:11). Paul knew that the key to an effective church was spiritual growth and continued strengthening. Lack of time in the Word leads to doubt and being easily manipulated by false teachings. Lack of encouragement from other believers leads to discouragement which can lead to withdraw from fellowship and potential sin.

Paul reminded them here that the gospel was revealed in the Old Testament through the prophets but wasn’t fully understood until the fulfiller of the promises, Jesus Christ, appeared in the flesh. God is so awesome, Paul says, that it is His desire to see the nations believe and obey Him. Something Paul was committed to doing and was his future purpose to do in Spain, when he came through Rome on a future missionary trip. He never got to Spain but he did get to Rome where he

would be imprisoned one final time under Nero, who probably thought that getting rid of Paul and Peter (the same day according to church tradition) would bring down the church.

That of course never happened because believers everywhere took Paul's words seriously and grew in the Word and served the Lord, causing the church to grow spiritually, numerically and geographically – as you and I are proof here thousands of miles away from Rome and almost 2 thousand years later.

So this initially unexciting list of names, when studied as the Word of God, brought out some golden nuggets of truth. We need each other to do the work the Lord has given to us. We need to encourage one another in the work God has given us to do. We need to partner with each other and do our part so people are won to Christ and are established in the gospel. Paul shows us in this final chapter that

*Ministry is about partnering with Christ-centered people  
To encourage them to stay in the truth  
And serve for the glory of God.*

Each of these statements has its own application. Are we doing our part, partnering with others in ministry? Are we good candidates for partnership because we are Christ-centered people? Are we daily encouraging someone, recognizing their hard work, their risks, their family like love for people? Are we regularly in the Word, growing spiritually, seeking to share the gospel? Are we serving for God's glory? All good questions we need to take away from this.

But there is one specific and practical application I think we can do this morning. Paul wrote down the names of people he wanted to encourage because he was aware of how they had served God. We used to have notes in the pew pockets to encourage one another in their ministries. I've printed some new ones and put them in the pew pockets again. Why don't we take some time after the service to write down some encouragement to some people in the church and put that in their mail box. Take a few extra home in case you need to give it more thought and prayer and I'll try and keep a stack available on the back table for any time you want to encourage someone in their ministry.

When Paul wrote his letters, there weren't initially hundreds of copies available. They would first be read out loud to the individual congregations. Imagine hearing your name at the end of the letter as one who Paul said was 'a hard worker' or 'like a mother to me' or 'risked their life for me' or is 'tested and approved'. That would have been very encouraging. But even if we are not recognized by people, we're always recognized by the Lord. Most of these names are unknown to us but known to God. Jesus said in John 10 that He knows His sheep. He doesn't forget our name nor anything we did for Him and His Father's glory. The Bible itself is God's constant word of encouragement to us. He daily encourages us if we are daily in His Word. Lists of people in the Bible is God's way of saying 'I don't forget anyone's name. As we finished going over this exciting chapter in the Bible I trust we learned a few things, sensed God's gracious rebuke and correction and want to do something about it, and now feel a little more equipped to serve Him and others than when we came in.