

Servant Phoebe
Romans 16:1-2
ABC 9/10/17

In some ways Romans 16 appears to be one of the least-interesting chapters of the NT. It consists mostly of Paul's greetings to a long list of people in Rome. At 1st glance it doesn't seem to offer much we'd be interested in as the names are hard to pronounce & even harder to spell. To make matters worse, we don't know who most of these people were because most of them are never mentioned anywhere else in the NT. As we come to this long list of names, it's good to keep in mind Paul's words in 2 Tim 3:16-17, **All Scripture is inspired by God & profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that we may be adequate, equipped for every good work.** These vss are inspired by God for our spiritual profit to equip us **for every good work.** So rather than skip over them quickly, we need to think about what is here for us. We have to dig a bit, but as we do we come up with some nuggets that make the search worthwhile. Paul isn't deliberately teaching here but greeting his friends in Rome & sending greetings from some who were with him in Corinth. But the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write these words to teach us. What we find is a snapshot of these 2 churches that teach us much about what our church ought to be. & the individuals greeted here can motivate & encourage us to be all God wants us to be. We learn that the church is made up of ordinary, diverse people who know the Lord, are growing in Him, serve Him, & love one another. Here we also see that Paul was very interested in people. The number of names Paul remembers & greets is impressive, especially since he'd never been to Rome. The truth is we all like our name to be remembered. How would you feel if Paul knew your name & included it in Scripture? But even more amazing & encouraging is that God knows our names. According to Rev 20:15, all those who've been redeemed by faith in Christ alone have had their names written in the Lamb's book of life. It's also intriguing that not only will our names be known, but every service for Christ, every deed done in His honor will be rewarded by God. The writer of Hebrews encourages us by saying, **For God is not unjust so as to forget your work & the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered & in still ministering to the saints** (Heb 6:10). God knows who you

are, He knows your name, & He'll remember everything you've done in His name. Nothing, no matter how small or unimpressive, slips through unnoticed by God. So Paul comes to the close of this masterpiece describing & defining the gospel, he begins to pour out his heart in gratitude & love toward these saints. Paul refers to the names of some 35 people, 2 households, a mother, a sister, brethren, some churches, & all the saints in Rome! These are people Paul probably has met on his journeys or led to faith in other areas but who now live in Rome. He's evidently kept track of them & is aware of their service. Paul had a deep love & concern for the saints of God. He greets men, women, freedmen, Jews, the well-to-do, the well thought of, as well as Gentiles & slaves. Paul makes personal comments that include praise & gratitude. He speaks of several women & commends them for working hard for Christ. He commends one couple for risking their lives for him & applauds several house churches. Paul specifically remembers & greets by name the 1st person he led to Christ in Asia. He refers to people as brothers & sisters, beloved, fellow workers, & outstanding Christians. Then he encourages them all to give each other a round of hugs & kisses on his behalf. This isn't some stodgy theologian or a dusty bookworm who cares more about his ivory tower than he does about people. Rom 16 is the declaration of God through the personality of Paul that He knew who they were & where they were & He knows who & where we are too! Rom 16 is God's way of saying,

People matter, including you! I know your name. I see what you're doing for My cause. You are My fellow-laborers & My beloved. I've got you in My book. No matter how often you've moved, I know exactly where you are.

No one slips through the cracks with God.

James Black was calling the roll in his SS class one morning in 1880. The students answered the roll call by quoting the vs for the day. One of his 14 year-old students didn't respond when her name was called. She'd fallen ill &, as things would turn out, she would die from pneumonia 10 days later. He made the comment in class that it was one thing to miss the roll call of SS, but he hoped & prayed that all his students would answer the roll call when it came from heaven. That afternoon, with this thought in mind, he sat down & wrote these lyrics:

*When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound,
& time shall be no more,
& the morning breaks, eternal, bright & fair;
When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore,
& the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.*

On that bright & cloudless morning,

*When the dead in Christ shall rise,
& the glory of His resurrection share;
When His chosen ones shall gather
To their home beyond the skies,
& the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.¹*

Rom 16 assures us that God doesn't forget His children. God knows, God sees, & God cares. So while we might be tempted to think this chapter has no profit to us in terms of day-to-day Christian living, that would be wrong because there's much to learn, not only from the commendation we see today but also the greetings & the words of appreciation & expressions of gratitude that this chapter is filled with. In our 2 vss this morning, we'll find guidance on an important subject for our own times & important principles for daily Christian living. **1-2 PRAY**

Father, we come before You to learn from Your Word. We ask that You'd teach us that every part of Your Word is inspired & is profitable for our instruction & correction. We ask, that by Your Spirit, You would open our eyes to behold wonderful truth from Your Word. & that You'd apply that truth to our hearts in such a way that we'd acknowledge its authority & live in its light.

1. Commendation Paul begins with a very special commendation of a woman named **Phoebe**. Her name tells us some things about her. **Phoebe** is the feminine form of Phoebus, one of the names given to the Greek god Apollo. It would've been a mark of honor for pagan parents to name their daughter after one of the major gods in the Greek pantheon. Apollo was one of the twin sons of Zeus & was regarded as the god of music & poetry. He was also a god of light, known as Phoebus, which means *radiant*. The feminine form of Phoebus is **Phoebe**. The parents of **Phoebe** were evidently thrilled with the birth of their daughter & considered her birth to bring to them music & light. As a result, they named her in honor of their pagan god. Since loyal Jews usually avoided the names of pagan deities, we assume her parents were Gentiles. We have no record of Phoebe's conversion to Christ, but we can assume it occurred, given the fact that she was connected to the church in Cenchrea, at the eastern port of Corinth. How's your geography of ancient Greece? (SLIDE) Corinth was located next to an isthmus connecting different parts of Greece, with a port on the west & a port facing east. The church at Cenchrea would probably have been a daughter church of the one in Corinth. It's possible Phoebe heard the gospel from Paul himself, as he served in Corinth. Paul certainly knows a lot about her, so it seems likely they

¹ Kenneth Osbeck, *101 More Hymn Stories*, p 310-11

knew each other & had worked together. Paul introduces her by saying, **I commend to you our sister Phoebe**. Because of the way vs 1 & 2 stand out, separating Phoebe from those who are to be greeted & those from Corinth who are sending greetings to Rome, Phoebe probably was the one who actually delivered this letter from Paul to the Roman believers. Phoebe is traveling to Rome & is to be received by them. She would have to have been a woman of wealth to travel, as only the wealthy could afford to do so. She more than likely had others traveling with her, as a female traveling alone would have been rare. & it's quite possible she was either widowed or single. If we put the clues together, Paul is finished with his letter & Phoebe has business in Rome, so Paul sends the letter along with her. Embedded in his letter is this special commendation for the church to help her, show hospitality to her, & welcome her warmly. This converted Gentile, raised in the luxury of a pagan Greek culture by devoted idolaters is now Paul's emissary to Rome & she carried the future of Christian theology. Donald Grey Barnhouse says,

*Never was there a greater burden carried by such tender hands. The theological history of the church through the centuries was in the manuscript which she brought with her. The Reformation was in her luggage. The blessings of multitudes in our day was carried in those parchments.*²

When she left Paul at Corinth to go to Rome, she carried with her the greatest declaration of Christian doctrine the world has ever received. Obviously, she was a trusted worker in the early church & in the eyes of Paul. Paul refers to Phoebe with 3 different descriptive words.

A. Sister The 1st is **sister**. Paul's reminding the church in Rome that while we might come from many fathers in the flesh, we have one Father in the faith. She's not just *my sister*, but *our sister*. Since we're sons & daughters of God the Father, we are brothers & sisters of each other. There should be no strangers in the family of Christ. Paul told Timothy to, **Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, & the younger women as sisters, in all purity.** (1 Tim 5:1). Has it ever occurred to you that your biological family is temporary, but your spiritual family is eternal? This should have an impact on the way we treat each other. The trouble is the church can become a closed society

² *Romans*, vol 4, p 124

where people who come in from the outside get the definite impression they aren't wanted nor welcomed. *Don't you dare park in my spot or take my seat!* Thankfully, you aren't that way. But as a reminder, Paul tells us, *Make room in your assembly & in your hearts for one more!* Maybe he was slightly concerned that Phoebe wouldn't get the hospitality she needed. Paul didn't know 1st-hand the temperature & personality of the church in Rome. He does know, however, that they're having some trouble with Jews & Gentiles getting along in the area of debatable things. Now this woman is going to show up, carrying a letter from Paul, wearing the clothing of wealth & bearing the name of a pagan god. All heads are going to turn & everyone's going to stare. So Paul says, *Let me introduce to you my little sister & yours too! She's part of the family.* Notice his strong words in vs 2 again. **Receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, & ... help her in whatever matter she may have need of you.** Paul wants them to welcome & help her in whatever ways they could. According to Paul, we're to receive one another just as Jesus received us (Rom 15:7). & here we have a Jew recommending a Gentile to a group of Romans. Only the grace of God can do that! Be sure you remember how important it is for Christians to open their homes & to give to meet needs & to care for other Christians. In our individualistic, self-indulgent times, we need these reminders of the value of reaching out in relationships in the body of Christ.

B. Servant The 2nd word Paul uses to describe Phoebe is **servant** (1). This word comes from the Greek word which can also be translated *deacon*. It's a general term for a servant. The word is used of the household servants who drew the water that Jesus turned into wine (Jn 2:5-9). In Rom 13 it's the word used for secular government officials who serve as **ministers of God to you for good**. It's also used of men appointed as deacons within the church (1 Tim 3:8). The question this brings up is was Phoebe a deacon? Was she an appointed officer of the church at Cenchrea? As we've seen, the word itself is ambiguous. Only the context can determine how it should be translated & there isn't enough here to be decisive. Therefore, a judgment on this question has to be made on other grounds. In my opinion, based on 1 Tim 2:12, there are 2 limitations placed on the function of women in the church. Those would be an authoritative teaching position &

exercising authority over men. But aside from those restrictions, there's no service in the church in which women cannot perform. Again, Barnhouse puts it this way:

*What we owe to women in the SS & in the work among women, is shown by the devotion to the Lord of those whom He has called to direct His work. We remember that a group of women followed the Lord Jesus Christ when He was here on earth, for we read that, in addition to the 12, there were **certain women which had been healed of evil spirits & infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven demons, & Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, & Susanna, & many others, which ministered unto him of their substance** (Lk 8:2-3). & to this day, the faithful ministrations of such women makes possible a vast amount of the missionary activity of the church throughout the world.³*

Every one of us, female or male, is called to serve God & each other. Peter tells us this clearly when he says, **As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God** (1 Pt 4:10). The church works & advances & progresses when everyone is a servant, a *deacon*, no matter their title. The church isn't advanced by a few mighty pushes of great people but by many little pushes of ordinary servants of God. Phoebe was a remarkable servant in her home church. We don't know what she did, but we do know she humbly served the church at Cenchrea, meeting the needs of her spiritual family.

Let's just wade in to this. What is the biblical role of women in the church? As we approach this subject, we should pause & recognize that there are wonderful people whom we know & love with whom we disagree on this matter. We do so in a spirit of charity & humility, but we also do so with determination knowing God's Word is clear. & more than anything else, we long to be faithful to His Word. Many would say, *Why even talk about this issue? It's not important to the gospel & it's insulting to our society.* Let me ask you this: Is the dependability & truthfulness of the Word of God important to the gospel? Obviously! With that being said, the real issue here is the authority of Scripture. From the Bible's perspective, there's no question that women are to be involved in the ministry of the church. The question is: how? We're going to believe & do what the Bible says on this matter even if it's uncomfortable & is politically incorrect. Women have a major ministry role to play in the church but the NT clearly restricts church leadership to men who meet the qualifications Scripture gives. So when Paul says Phoebe is a deacon in her church, what does he mean? Is she an elder? Is she a deacon? Does she preach? Is she in charge of the

³ *God's Glory*, pp 123-124

deacons? Paul clearly answers these questions in other places in the NT. In 1 Tim 2:11-15 Paul writes,

A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was 1st created, & then Eve. & it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. But women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith & love & sanctity with self-restraint.

It's hard to imagine 5 vss that evoke a more visceral & adverse response from our generation than these. Paul's words can be uncomfortable to read in our day & age. But Paul is making 2 things crystal clear. 1st, he's making it clear that women are to receive instruction in the gathering of the church. 2^{ndly}, he's emphasizing that women aren't to teach or exercise authority over men in the church. Paul makes it clear that the headship of men & the authority of the elders aren't to be challenged by the women while teaching the congregation. They're to receive the teaching of the elders rather than give it. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is explicitly restricting the teaching & ruling ministry of the church to qualified men. He gives his rationale in vss 13-15. In those 3 vss he makes it clear that Adam's priority in creation has an impact on male headship in the church. In other words, he's saying there's a significance in the fact that Adam was created 1st. He speaks of the deception of woman in the fall as one of the reasons why men are to lead in the church. This doesn't mean Paul believes women are more gullible than men; it means we recognize the effects of that role reversal that occurred in the fall. When Eve was tempted by Satan she was the one who carried on the conversation. Where was Adam? He was right there. She doesn't have to go looking for him. She turns & gives him a bite. Where was Adam? Why wasn't he speaking up? The roles were reversed & Paul says that's what happens when we fail to keep the creational roles in the life of the local church. Vs 15 is notoriously difficult to interpret & I won't try today. But I will say this: Whatever the difficulties of understanding its specifics, the general point is clear; Paul believes the role relationship of godly, gifted qualified male leadership in the church is for the well-being of women. As much as our society wants to wipe away all distinctions between God's obvious design of male & female, the Bible is clear that men & women are created equal but different. Paul says there are role

distinctions in the ministry of the church. Yes, women are going to be involved in the activity & ministry of the church, but there are going to be role distinctions in regard to the offices of teaching & ruling & preaching in the church. Men & women have different roles just as there are different roles in the Trinity. As God the Son, Jesus submits to the God the Father & similarly God the Holy Spirit is sent out by the Father & Son. But those different roles & function do not mean the 3 Persons of the Trinity aren't equal. In the same way, the different roles & functions of women do not mean they are not equal with men. It simply means that God has different plans for good & needed purposes. Men & women use their gifts in different ways for complementary blessings to each other & to children & to the church & to the world. Paul consistently teaches that the ministry of the Word & rule in the church is to be exercised by qualified male leadership. In 1 Cor 14, where Paul reiterates this very thing, he says,

the women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is improper for a woman to speak in the church (34-35).

That sounds harsh, like a gag order on females. But if you look at it in its context, it's clear. If you scan back from vs 34 to the list of things Paul says are done in the church in edification, it's clear that this command not to speak in the church relates to teaching. Paul is not issuing a universal gag-order on women. I don't even think he's saying that women can't ask questions. I suspect he's saying something like this: *Don't use a question to try & teach the congregation what you want to teach.* He's saying he wants women to respect the order that's been established by God in the church of elders teaching & preaching in the congregation. Again, this isn't a gag-order. It's a restriction against women preaching or teaching men. Paul's saying there's to be a role distinction in the ministry of the Christian church. Yes, women participate in ministry; no, they don't preach. Yes, women participate in ministry; no, they don't rule over the church. Though the NT is clear that women aren't to hold the office of elder or pastor or overseer, that doesn't mean women don't matter. It's not a matter of status; it's a matter of service. & those who are concerned to serve in the church aren't anxious to grasp for status, especially when the Word of God restricts certain activity or roles in the church. Staying true to Scripture causes us to

understand the offices of the church are for qualified male leaders, but that women will be comprehensively involved in the ministry of the church. Service is a necessary function of all those who call themselves Christians & every Christian is a deacon in this sense.

Ladies, I pray that as females at ABC you don't think in terms of what you're prevented from doing. I hope you are eager to find God's calling to give your life away in ministry to family, church, neighborhoods, schools, city, & nations. Women can & should have significant ministries in the church & in missions in biblically appropriate roles. For those who may still be wondering what you can do since the Bible calls for male leadership, let me direct you to John Piper's book, *What's the Difference*, where he lists dozens of ministries where God is ready to bless the sacrificial service of women.⁴ It's free to download & I encourage you to take a look. May God continue to help us stay true to His Word & swim against the stream of unbiblical gender blurring as we exult in our equality before God & our complimentary differences in calling & roles & the God given distinctiveness between male & female. We want every Christian to be committed to the church serving because that's what the biblical model is. There's one more word Paul uses to describe his sister in the faith.

C. Supporter Phoebe is a sister, servant, & supporter. Notice vs 2 again, **for she herself has also been a helper of many, & of myself as well**. The Greek word translated **helper** is the word *prostatis*, which corresponds to the Latin word *patronus*, or patron. This word, in both Greek & Latin, refers to someone who was a financial supporter of another. Paul is saying Phoebe has given financial support to many, including himself. Phoebe apparently used her wealth to help the church & to support its & Paul's ministries. Without fanfare & without expecting anything in return, Phoebe served & supported the cause of Christ. She helped Paul & she helped others. She was unselfish, not self-centered. She placed the needs of others 1st & made a difference in their lives for the glory of God. She took her life & placed it on God's altar for His use. She did what she could. We still need today women & men who will do what they can do! Not everyone can teach or sing or write or lead or whatever. But everyone can do something, especially by

⁴ <https://document.desiringgod.org/what-s-the-difference-en.pdf> pp 80-81

praying! That something that you can do is what you should do for the Lord & for His church. So look at the opportunities God has given you to serve Him & come to the understanding that He's opened areas of service to you that no one else can fill. You are needed at ABC. This commendation of Phoebe pulls back the curtain of time & gives us a foretaste of the day when every sister & every servant & every supporter of Christ & His cause will be called by name & recognized by none other than Jesus Himself. Our greatest encouragement might be to remember that God will not forget.

2. In the Church The church of Jesus Christ is meant to be one large & very caring family. The word **church** in vs 1 is used for the 1st time in Romans. It occurs 5x in this chapter (1, 4, 5, 16, 23), where Paul is writing about individual members of the Roman & Corinthian congregations. It's in the church that Phoebe served. This doesn't mean she didn't have ministry outside the church. It does mean her local church is where she focused her service. Why? Because Christ died for the church (Eph 5:25) & every Christian is commanded to be a committed member of a local church where they actively serve God & others (Heb 10:25). If you're a Christian & are NOT involved in a local church on a regular basis, you're sinning. We need each other functioning as God commands in the church together. Phoebe was under the authority of the local church. Whatever kind of service she rendered, whatever place she held in the church, she was a servant. & she was to be received by the Romans **in a manner worthy of the saints** (2). Paul didn't set her apart from or above or below other saints. He urged the church in Rome to receive her as a sister, a **saint**, a fellow-believer. All the believers Paul mentions in this chapter belong to each other & serve each other selflessly, just as members of a happy & well-functioning family do.

Rom 16 reveals the truth that your service, support, deeds, & patronage will never be erased or fade from God's memory. One day, when the roll is called up yonder, the Savior will say, *Well done, good & faithful servant*. James Black's 3rd vs of *When the Roll is Called Up Yonder* made me think of Phoebe & Paul's challenge to all of us.

*Let us labor for the Master from the dawn till setting sun,
Let us talk of all His wondrous love & care;
Then when all of life is over, & our work on earth is done,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.*

When the roll is called up yonder, that's exactly where we'll want to be. Whatever your gifts & calling, the most important thing is that you know that Jesus has saved you from eternal damnation because you've put your trust in Him as Savior & Lord. Then look for ways to serve Him as these people of Rom 16 did. If you don't know God as Your Father, let me assure you that He loves you & wants to adopt you into His family through His Son, Jesus Christ. If you need to meet Him, talk to me or someone here after the service.