

Christian Friendship Romans 16:1-27

At first glance, this text doesn't look very significant, does it?

- It's like Paul's list of *Twitter followers*, or *Facebook friends*!
- I doubt you'd direct a person new to the Bible to Rom 16 first!
 - "Hey, I'm interested in reading the Bible, where should I start?"
 - "I think you should start with a lot of names that are hard to pronounce!"
- **There's actually gold here.**
- I love Romans 16.

Romans 16 **highlights the gift of Christian friendship and provides a case study on it.**

Keller: "Christian practice to a great degree is an exercise in friendship."

Where do we go to find strength in the midst of stress or discouragement?

- We go to **the gospel** and we go to **Christian brothers and sisters.**
- All of it, made possible through Jesus Christ, who is the Friend of Sinners like us.

Christian Friendship

Let's think about Christian Friendship in general before looking at Rom 16 in particular...

Christian friendship is a gift of God's grace.

- **James 1:17**
- Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, "For it is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brothers and sisters."
- I hope you value friends who have your back and who lift you up!
 - **Doc Holiday**, "Wyatt Erp is my friend... I don't."
- **Saying good-bye** to your friends is difficult, and at times agonizing.
 - If someone offers you a job in Europe, what's your reaction? **It could be many, but what I would be thinking about is "what about all my friends here?"** (Okay, I may ask about if they **play cricket instead of baseball there.** That's a big issue, but then it's about my friends!)
- **Being hurt** by a friend can be devastating.
- **Saying hello** to a friend is much sweeter.
- **Spending time** together refreshes the soul.
 - Hanging together, laughing together, playing together, eating together, praying together, weeping together, thinking together, dreaming together, planning together, and worshipping together.
 - That's what the community of saints do; that's what Christian friends do.

In the book of **Acts**, it was amazing to see **how often Paul spent with his friends...** and how **intentional** he was in spending time with them. It took sacrifice to be with them.

Paul wasn't a one-man band!

Barnabas, Titus, Silas, Luke, Priscilla and Aquila, Lydia, Onisiphorus, Epaphroditus, Ephesian elders, and more.

- Paul swam in friends. Ethnically diverse friends. Jew/Gentile. Weak/Strong. Slaves/Free. Men/Women.
- He *traveled* with them.
- He *stayed* with them.
- He *visited* them.
- He *worked alongside* of them.
- He *got beaten* alongside them; *was imprisoned* with them.
- He sang in prisons with them
- He encouraged them
- He – at times – disagreed with them
- He also – at times – reconciled with them

Paul's constant contact with friends wasn't due to a weakness in his life!

It wasn't the result of an *extroverted* personality!

Even the mighty apostle Paul needed friends!

Why? Let me remind you of **what we share in common with Paul:**

(1) He's an image bearer of God, and therefore made for community.

Think back to Genesis 2. There's only one **exception**. What wasn't good? Adam was *alone* (Gen 2:18). Keller notes:

Adam was not lonely because he was imperfect, but because he was perfect. The ache for friends is the one ache that's not the result of sin.... God made us in such a way that we couldn't even enjoy paradise without friends ... human friends.... Adam had a perfect "quiet time" everyday, for twenty-four hours a day. Yet, he needed friends.... If you are lonely, you aren't dysfunctional, you're fine. You're lonely because you're not a tree. You're lonely because you're not a machine. You're lonely because you're built this way.... Now I have to be careful about this because one of the reasons you may not have friends is because of *sin*, but the passion for it, the need for it, the sense of lack of it, is not wrong at all.... To need and to want deep spiritual friendships is not a sign of spiritual immaturity, but of maturity. It's not a sign of weakness, but a sign of health."

Death Bed – "Bring me my diploma" You don't want to see their accomplishments; you want to see people.

(2) He's a justified sinner in need of strength.

Romans 1:11-12, "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen (*stērikthēnai*, the same word as in 16:25 – gospel and community strengthens us) you — that is, that we may be **mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.**"

Jesus' sufficiency is often expressed through others.

2 Corinthians 7:6-7a – “But God, who comforts [parakaleo] the downcast, comforted [parakaleo] us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort [parakaleo] with which he was comforted [parakaleo] by you.”

- Paul says **when we were downcast [hurt/crushed/low], God sent Titus to lift him – and his lifting was the result of the church’s lifting of Titus!**

“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (**Ps 34:18**). And the way he often expresses His sufficiency is through His people.

We need to give and receive encouragement.

Watch out, brothers, so that there won’t be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that departs from the living God. *But encourage each other daily*, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sin’s deception (Heb 3:12-13).

- **Our hearts are prone to wander**
- **Sin never sleeps**
- **Satan rages because he knows his days are short**
- **In light of this war, we need come alongside of fellow soldiers with gospel encouragement.**

Romans 16: A Case Study on Community

Paul (1) sends greetings **to his friends** in Rome (**1-16**), and then (2) he sends personal greetings **from his friends** in Corinth (**21-23**). He has a word of warning and hope in between (**17-20**). He concludes with a doxology in **25-27**.

3 Observations

1. How Christian friendship is **emphasized**
2. How Christian friendship is **established**
3. How Christian friendship is **experienced**

#1: How Christian Friendship Is Emphasized (1-23)

... The number greetings to and from diverse individuals and churches

Individuals

- **There are over 30 names listed in ch 16!**
- There are more greetings in Romans 16 than every letter of Paul’s **combined!**
- Paul is likely trying to **strengthen the familial bonds** between them as they form this partnership for his work in Spain.
- Paul probably doesn’t know all of them directly, but he does know many of them, and has labored alongside of many of them.
- Some great names! **Your favorite?**

Diversity

Terms: sister, brother, servant, saints, patron, fellow workers, church, firstfruits, kinsmen, fellow prisoners, beloved, approved in Christ, elect, mother to me.

Race/Gender:

- Most are **Greek**
- Some are **Jews** (Herodian, Apelles, Pris/Aquil)
- A few **Latin** (Urbanas, Ampliatus)
- “the household of Narcissus” probably referred to **slaves!**
- Some in the list were probably members of **Caesar’s household**
- Aristobolus – some believe as the grandson of Herod the Great

Yet, these were brothers/sisters!

Galatians 3:28:

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.

The gospel gets *clarified* when there's a mixture of cultures in a church, because you have to sort through what is *essential* and what is *not*.

The gospel gets **magnified as a result** of that experience.

Churches: A Network of Friends

- Many of these people represented entire churches. At least 5 household churches:
 - The house of Priscilla and Aquila (**16:5**)
 - The house of Aristobulus (**16:10**)
 - The house of Narcissus (**16:11**)
 - Asyncritus and his brothers and sisters (**16:14**)
 - Philogus and the Lord’s holy people (**16:15**)
- Paul views them **partnering together in the gospel; a network of friends on mission together.**

Those are some important matters to consider as we run through Paul saying,
“Say hello to my little friends.”

A. Paul’s Commendation of Phoebe (1-2)

1-2: Phoebe – She heads the list.

- She’s the first of about **8 or so women** mentioned (a big number for that time).
- She probably **carried the letter to Rome**.
- **patron** – “**benefactor**.” She was a person of **means and maturity**. She had the money to travel to Rome.
 - ***She’s a great example of how a wealthy Christian should use their resources: for the good of the church and the expansion of the gospel.***
- The first person to probably **to teach Romans** was probably Phoebe!

- In delivering the letter, she would also have conveyed Paul's wishes to the church. And if they had questions, then she would have answered them. (Bird)
- She's not the only lady mentioned here, the next one **Prisca** also was a teacher, along with her husband (**Acts 18:26ff**).

• **Regardless of your views on women in ministry (conservative to progressive), you have to agree that women were vitally important in ministry in the early church.**

- We reserve the office of pastor for **men** (cf., 1 Tim 3/Titus 1), **but women should be equipped to disciple people from the Scriptures.**
- **We hold that women can do anything outside of the office of a pastor.**
- **I thank God for our women at IDC**, who are doing some amazing gospel ministry.
- **We thank God for women on church planting teams, who are partners in the mission; for women who are making the gospel known overseas; who are serving here at IDC in a variety of ways.**
- **Women shouldn't feel that their jobs are only with the **kids and in the kitchens!** Some may have unique ministries there, but that shouldn't feel like that's the only place they belong.**

- **Deacon?** The word can be **general** or **specific**. So it's impossible to know for certain. But the addition of "**of the church in Cenchræ**" (the eastern port in Corinth) probably indicates some time of position in the church.

Moo: "**Phobe is probably a 'deacon,' serving the church by ministering to the financial and material needs of believers.**"

Schreiner also agrees based on several other factors (like 1 Tim 3:11, the masculine noun *diakonos* suggests an office is in view), and then states, "**Women deacons were probably appointed early [in the church], especially because other women needed assistance from their own gender in visitation, baptism, and other matters.**" (787).

- **At any rate, she's an exemplary saint and Paul wants the church to receive her warmly.**

B. Greetings to More Friends and Churches (3-16)

3-4: Priscilla/Aquila

3: They were a great team! Like Paul, Aquila was a **tentmaker** (Acts 18:1-3).

- The couple went with Paul to **Ephesus** (Acts 18:18), and remained there when he went on.
- They were able to instruct the mighty **Apollos** in the faith (Acts 18:26).
- They had a **church in their house** in more places than one (v. 5; 1 Cor. 16:19).
- Paul refers to them here as his "**fellow workers**," noting their great labor in the gospel.

4: They "risked their lives" for Paul, so **he thanks them.**

- He adds that "**all the churches of the Gentiles**" share his gratitude. (4b)
- How did they risk their lives? We're not told.
 - On one occasion in Ephesus, occasion Paul was in danger in Ephesus (1 Cor. 15:32; cf. Acts 19:23, 30-31). They may have done something for him then.

5b: Epaenetus

- He is called “**the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.**”
- Probably Paul’s first convert in **Ephesus**.
- Paul’s word means “**firstfruit**” rather than “first convert”; it carries with it the **thought of a greater harvest**.
- **If you’ve read missionary biographies, you know that first converts are important, but because of what it represents: God has broken through, after a lot of sowing and plowing.**
- **It represents great hope.**
- **One day we pray that we will hear of the first convert among various people groups where our missionaries are serving.**

6: Greetings are sent to **Mary**.

- Probably **Jewish**.
- She’s **not** one of the Mary’s in the gospels.
- Paul says, she “worked very hard for you.”
- **We don’t know what that was, but Paul is aware of it – aware of something that happened in Rome.**

7: Next come **Andronicus** and **Junias**.

- NIV thus makes the second name that of a **man**, but this seems **unlikely**.
 - The **patristic** commentators seem understood **the pair to be man and wife**.
- Paul calls them his “**kinsmen**”, which probably means “**fellow Jews**” (as in 9:3).
- They were “**fellow prisoners**” of his, which may mean that they were **in jail together** or more likely that they had shared **the same kind of experience**.
 - Paul was in prison often (Clement of Rome says **seven times**)
- They were “**outstanding among the apostles**,” which probably means the apostles held them in **high esteem**. It could also mean that they were “apostles” in a general sense (they were messengers, sent ones, ambassadors)
- “**in Christ before me.**” Paul’s conversion must have taken place within a few years after the crucifixion, so they would have been **some of the first converts**. They were probably Jews from Palestine.

8: Ampliatus is also loved by Paul.

9: Urbanus is a common **slave** name, common in the imperial household.

The name **Stachys**, also loved by the apostle.

10: Apelles was “**approved in Christ.**” Apparently a man of tested excellence.

“**the household of Aristobulus.**”

- This is the name of a **grandson of Herod the Great**. Scholars debate of this likelihood.

11: The name **Herodion** is connected with Herod, probably a freed Herodion slave, and may even have been a member of the household of Aristobolus (Morris).

“The family of ***Narcissus***” was the name of a **wealthy and powerful freedman**.

He was influential under Claudius, but was forced into suicide after Claudius’ death (Bird). If this is him, then his slaves would have passed to the Emperor and would have been in a very delicate position (Bird).

- It’s an amazing thought that the **Lord saved people in such a variety of contexts!**

12: Because the names ***Tryphaena*** and ***Tryphosa*** were possibly sisters? They are also commended for their “**work**.”

Persis is also noted for her labor. The name, incidentally, means “**Persian**”.

13: Rufus a common Latin name, and very common slave names.

- He was very likely the same Rufus mentioned in **Mark 15:21**, that is, the son of Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross.
- This Rufus was “**chosen in the Lord**.”

Paul also sends a greeting to ***Rufus’s mother***, “**who has been a mother to me, as well**.”

- Rufus’ mother had been very kind to Paul.

14: Now comes a group of five names, otherwise **unknown**, but commonly names of slaves and freedmen: ***Asyncritus***, and ***Phlegon***, ***Hermes*** (the name of the Greek god), a common name for slaves; ***Patrobas***.

15: *Philologus*. The name means “**fond of words**,” which may be the equivalent of “**Chatterbox**” or may refer to a secretarial position. (Morris).

Julia – Probably the most common Roman female slave name.

- She may have been the **wife (or sister) of Philologus**.

Nereus, her **unnamed sister**, ***Olympus***, and all the saints with them, are finally greeted.

16: Paul urges them all to use a ***holy kiss*** as a greeting (cf., 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; “a kiss of love”, 1 Pet. 5:14).

- Commentators do a lot of squirming to explain away “kissing Christians.”
- **Philips: “Give each other a hearty handshake all around.”** Very British.
 - Let there be warmth, love, enthusiasm, cheerfulness as we greet each other.

All the churches of Christ: At this time most of the churches were in the East.

- **This section begins with the church (v. 1) and ends with the church (v. 16)**

C. Greetings from Corinth (21-23)

21: Paul now passes on to the Romans greetings ***from friends***

Timothy, whom he describes simply as my fellow worker.

Lucius, Jason (the name of Paul’s host at Thessalonica in Acts 17:5–9 – may or may not be the same person), and, **Sopater**

22: Tertius. Here's one instance in which we hear from Paul's scribe.

Morris, "It is a nice little human touch. That the apostle allows this to be done in connection with such a weighty letter as this sheds light on the relationship between the apostle and his helpers."

23: Gaius – He is likely to be the Corinthian Gaius whom Paul baptized (1 Cor. 1:14).

- He hosted Paul in Corinth, and maybe a church as well.

23b: Erastus - the city's director of public works

- There's an inscription bearing his name in ancient Corinth today.
- Joined with Erastus in sending greetings is Quartus, another brother.

Application: What should we say about this list?

1. **Romans was written with ordinary Christians in mind, not professional theologians** (Morris)
2. **It's a privilege and blessing to know other brothers and sisters in Christ.**
 - How do you think Paul knew so many people in Rome, and knew them well enough to make these personal notes, though he had never been to Rome?
 - I'm speculating, but likely by **praying** for them, upon hearing reports.
 - **Sinclair story about Scott: 11 years after driving him around at a conference, Scott sent him a note before Sinclair moved: "I have sought to pray for you through the years; don't stay in the States too long."**
 - **The reports of Stott's prayer life is remarkable; praying for hundreds of individuals by name.**
3. **The church has been blessed, sustained, and built up throughout its history by unsung heroes.** People who care about the name of Christ, more than making a name for themselves. Don't get swept away in the naval-gazing evangelical sub-culture of conference hopping, twitter rants, and endless one-upping. Immerse your life in the local church.
4. **Leaders know the importance of faithful/ordinary servants.**
5. **Our Chief Shepherd knows us by name, and he's aware of our service to him.**
 - Paul is a shadow of Jesus.
 - To receive a commendation by a great leader is one thing, but to hear "Well done, good and faithful servant" from the Lord of glory is another!
 - Jesus cares about your service to the church, more than Paul does.

#2: How Christian Friendship Is Established: The Gospel

V. 2: "Welcome her **in the Lord.**"

V. 3: "My fellow workers **in Christ Jesus.**"

V. 5: The "first convert **to Christ.**"

V. 7: "They were **in Christ** before me."

V. 8: "My beloved **in the Lord.**"

V. 9: "My fellow worker **in Christ.**"

V.10: “Apelles, who is approved *in Christ*.”

V. 11: “Greet those *in the Lord*.”

V.12: “Greet those workers *in the Lord*.”

V.13: “Persis, who has worked hard *in the Lord*.”

V.14: “Rufus, chosen *in the Lord*.”

These are former pagans, from various backgrounds, and **Jesus changed them!**

Who's in the church? Christians! Those who have been changed by the gospel.

- When you are united to Christ, you are also united to a new family!

The **gospel** creates new spiritual friendships.

What on earth would unite these diverse people in these various towns?

- They were united around **a common Savior**.
- They called Jesus **“Lord”**

C.S. Lewis: Friendship is created when you have “What, you to?”

- It doesn't come when you say, “Will you be my friend??”
- **We have the greatest commonality.**

Because Spirit-filled Christians share a common passion in Christ, people who may not have otherwise spent time together **can become great friends.**

- **Techies can become friends with retirees,**
- **Rock stars with doctors**
- **Hip hoppers with farmers**
- **Artists with jocks**
- **Businessmen with hipsters**
- **Valley girls with home girls,**
- **Nerds with UFC fighters,**
- **Duke students with car-heads**
- **Alabama fans can even marry Auburn fans.**

Jesus creates remarkable spiritual friendships.

#3: How Christian Friendship Is Experienced

The short answer is **“love.”**

4 times Paul uses the word *loved* or *beloved*.

Then we also read of other expressions like these:

- “My beloved Epaenetus” (v. 5),
- “Ampliatius, my beloved in the Lord” (v. 8),
- “my beloved Stachys” (v. 9),
- “Greet the beloved Persis” (v. 12).
- “Greet Mary, who has *worked hard* for you” (v. 6)

- Rufus' mother has been like a mother to me" (13)
- Prisca and Aquila "risked their necks for my life" (v. 4).

How Love is Expressed: (1) Honor one another, (2) Showing Hospitality toward one another, (3) Showing Affection to one another, (4) Doing Ministry Together, and (5) Staying Focused on the gospel together.

These are **5 practices** we should pursue as a community of Christian love:

1. Honoring One Another

- "Welcome Phoebe in a way **worthy** of the saints" (2)
- He and others give "thanks" Prisca and Aquila (3)
 - Here's an occasion where an individual is thanked.
 - Some are so pious that they think you should never thank someone because only God should be thanked. They end up being more pious than biblical, which is actually less than pious.
 - You can express honor by saying "Thanks."
- Some are honored for being "older in the Lord" (7)
- He also commends those who worked hard (6, 12)
- And he mentioned those who sacrificed and gave generously
- **Romans 12:10**, "Outdo one another in showing honor." Let's do it.

2. Showing Hospitality to One Another

- "Welcome Phoebe" (2)
- "Great also the church in their house" (5)
 - **Tentmakers could probably use their skills to host.**
- **23:** Gaius, "who is host to me and the whole church."
- "Seek to show hospitality" (**Romans 12:13**)

3. Showing Affection for One Another

- In Acts we read of weeping, embracing, and kissing (20:37).
- In 21:5, we see the whole families accompanied Paul to the ship, and prayed.
- **V. 16:** "Greet each other with a **holy kiss.**"
 - **This was a custom that some believers practiced after the Lord's Supper**
- I don't want to push this too far, and I don't want to encourage any sort of strange or inappropriate behavior, but are greetings should be warm.
- Some people only receive happy greetings **from their pet dog!**
- **Romans 12:10:** "Love one another with brotherly affection"
- **Short greetings, and conversations are important, not unimportant.** We shouldn't think you have to have 3 hour meetings with people for them to be significant. A warm greeting and a word of affirmation goes a long way, doesn't it?

4. Doing Ministry Together

- This list is not a social club; they are serving the Lord together.
- "Do not be slothful in zeal; serve the Lord" (**Romans 12:11**)

- Out of love for one another, a love for Jesus, a love for the world, we serve.
- Paul commends a variety of people from their gospel ministry.
- Community is developed strongly in the trenches of loving service together.

5. Staying Focused on the Gospel Together (17-20; 25-27)

A. Staying Focused on the gospel keeps us *unified* (17-19)

Here, Paul is like Columbo, “Oh yeah, just one more thing...” upon interviewing a suspect, Columbo would unravel the suspects whole story. (Bird)

- Paul drops this little bit about false teaching in at the last minute that sheds light on the Roman situation.
- Paul wants them to be very careful to not let false teachers in their midst.

17: Unity can only happen around the truth of sound doctrine.

- How we detect false teaching? It’s not consistent w the truth of the historic gospel.
- Many false teachers will say some things that sound good (love neighbor, honor people, serve the poor), but don’t believe and preach that Jesus died for sinners and rose victoriously, and many other central doctrines.

18: Paul says regarding smooth talking false teachers: note them and avoid them!

- **Why?** The cause divisions, and create obstacles (they hinder people’s progress in the faith).
- He says they’re in it for their own selfish appetites.
 - Get rich? Start a weird cult.

19: Paul says be wise. Stay focused/obedient. Be discerning enough to detect evil, and to avoid it.

B. Staying focused on the gospel keeps us *hopeful* (20)

- Speaking of evil, Paul draws attention to Satan.
- Jesus has won the ultimate victory over Satan already, but he is still raging for he knows his days are short (Rev 12:12)
- We still deal with false teachers.
- We still deal with Satan’s attacks in various ways.
- We still die.
- We still deal with sin.
- But soon, in the future, the God of Peace will crush Satan under our feet, and we know this because the battle has already been won by our Messiah on the cross!
- We will live in total shalom: Perfect peace, harmony, without sin, death, and temptation.

C. Staying focused on the gospel gives us strength to endure to the end (25-27)

How do you end the greatest letter ever written?

The same way you started it!

- Paul bookends the Letter with a reference to the gospel according to the Scriptures.
- And it's in the context of praise.
- Romans deserves a concluding word of praise, and this one is beautiful!

25: The Gospel has power to not only save unbelievers, but to *strengthen* believers!

- Here, we're reminded of the sanctifying power of the gospel.
- Be thankful for friends who remind you of the gospel, thus bringing you strength...

25b: The Gospel is about Jesus. It's Christ-centered. "the preaching of Jesus Christ"

- When you are discouraged, you need to listen to the preaching of Christ!
- You find strength in it.
- We find strength in knowing that the ultimate victory comes through the work of Christ, not our own work.
- Our hope is based on his perfect record, not our performance.
- **When your fav team wins the championship, you rejoice in the victory but you didn't contribute to it!**
- In a similar way, we are rejoicing in the triumph of Jesus. We share in that victory.

25c-26: This Gospel is the grand message of the Bible!

- Many things were a mysteries concealed, but are now prophecies fulfilled.
- Many didn't get that Isaiah 53 was about Jesus.
- Many didn't understand that the kingdom would come as mustard seed.
- We have the whole story now.
- We go to the Bible and find strength, as it reveals gospel truths.

26b: This Gospel is intended for the nations!

- "all nations"
- We don't serve a tribal Savior, but the Lord of the nations.

27: The Gospel magnifies the infinite wisdom of God. (27)

- Romans 11:33-36. Oh the depths.
- You need wisdom, look to this God.

The gospel gives us strength to endure.

Summary

1. Praise God for the gospel! For the victory that we have through our union with the Lord Jesus!
2. Praise God for the gift of community! Thanks God for friends. Let's renew our commitments to be good friends to one another.
3. Pray for growth in love – honor, hospitality, affection, ministry, staying focused on the gospel

What a wise God! What a wonderful Gospel! What wonderful hope!

To the only Wise God be glory forever. Amen.