

Let's Be United, Romans 16, 3/28/21

Here we are at the end of this incredible letter of Romans, we've been in this book so long- there many with us that weren't here at the beginning- babies have been born, people have come to Christ, people have been married, moved across town...there's been a pandemic, an election, a livestream, all white sneakers and high waisted jeans have come back in style...and here we are still going in Romans. I guess we have broken all the church growth rules. They tell you that you shouldn't do a series for longer than 6 weeks- we only overshot that by 29 weeks...(although Martin Lloyd-Jones preached through Romans for 7 years) and you should have really cool titles...Ours was really creative- "Romans". And you should avoid controversial topics...oops- we talked a lot about sin, God's wrath, predestination, sexuality, politics, submission, civil disobedience, gray areas...as one preacher said after preaching through Romans "We said circumcision like 53x! And your still here!"¹ At Brandywine we believe God leads his church primarily through His Word and we preach the whole counsel of God, not just the easy and happy stuff...and so that means we often work slowly through whole books. In doing so we are able not only to deepen our understanding of God's Word- but we are also equipping you how to follow the flow of thought and how to study the Word of God for yourself.

So how should we approach this last chapter? In order to get one of our sons to start eating salads we had to put bacon bits in it...the problem at first of course was that it turned into the game, find the bacon in the lettuce...well that a little bit what this chapter is like. It reads like a list of random names, a few disconnected thoughts and a final goodbye. But tucked among all the greens of these names are some profound truths. So let's discover what God wants us to see in His Word today. Let's pray.

Well it's March Madness, about 80 million brackets get filled out. Sweet Sixteen, Elite Eight, Final Four...We will see Paul's **Final Four Points in Romans 16**. Warning that this message will unapologetically contain cringy basketball references.

Point #1 Christianity is a Team Sport (1-16, 21-24)

Paul gives shout outs to 34 teammates in ministry with him. Let me make a few observations. The list is incredibly diverse. 9 of them are women, which at the time of writing would have been highly unusual within such a male-dominated society. And these women are not just named but they are all-stars: they are prominent businesswomen and benefactors, one named Phoebe may have been serving as a deacon, there are evangelists, those in critical roles making an impact right along with the men for the sake of the gospel. Not just diversity of gender but in ethnicity and class. Jews and Gentiles serving alongside one another. Scholars tell us that several of the names are likely members of the slave class, as well as those of high society- Aristobulus, Narcissus and Erastus.² For early church history, the church was the only place

¹ JD Greear quote from Romans 16 message😊

² John Stott, *Romans*

where classism, racism and sexism were largely absent. *Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

Paul encourages this diverse group to demonstrate their love and unity together with a physical display- v.16 *Greet one another with a holy kiss.* In college there were some single guys saying that was their favorite verse...Getting Romans 16:16 tattoos...but the emphasis is on the word “Holy”. This was a greeting in that culture that signified the common affection, kinship and equality. This is the vision behind our value- Unity in Diversity. Diversity is a drum we continue to beat not because it’s trending in culture but because it’s God’s vision for heaven, it was important enough for Jesus to die to create, and for Paul to write about in virtually every letter. Christianity is utterly unique in this vision. 90% of Muslims live in Middle East/South Asia, 98% Hindus- India, 88% Buddhist East Asia. Christianity: 25% Europe, 25% South and Central America, 22% Africa, 15% Asia, 12% North America. More than any other religion because it’s God’s idea.

3rd observation about the team- they were not sitting on the sidelines; they were all in the game. Notice the descriptions-

- Phoebe- deacon, benefactor, letter carrier v.1-2
- Priscilla and Aquila- co-workers who risked their lives v.3-4
- Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis - worked hard v.6,12
- Andronicus and Junia- imprisoned for gospel ministry v.7

- Urbanus and Timothy- co-worker v.9,21
- Apelles- withstood testing v.10
- Momma Rufus’ - a mother to Paul v.13
- Tertius- Paul’s scribe v.22

- Gaius- practices hospitality v.23
- Erastus- workplace ministry v.23
- Several host churches in their houses v.5, 10, 15

While Paul might be the MVP, what we see among this list is that it takes a team, with a variety of role players- skills, passions, gifts who carry out the mission of Christ in a variety of ways. With the exception of Paul and Timothy- likely these are unpaid, regular people in the pews. Most of these people this is their only mention in Scripture or anywhere else in history, but they made an eternal impact on people and the spread of the gospel. Historian Stephen Neill says, “Nothing is more remarkable about the spread of the gospel in the first century than its anonymity.”³ Because they were in the game you and I are here today. Now it’s our turn. They have passed the ball to you and me. In every generation and place where the gospel spreads and people are transformed, it is because ordinary people own the mission. *We strive for 100% spiritual employment.* Everyone in the game- tech, greeting, leading, financial benefactors,

³ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*

administration, working with kids, worship, teaching, hosting and hospitality, caring for the hurting, giving, carrying the gospel into the workplace, sports team, serving in the community, building bridges in neighborhood service. There are 47 one anothers in Scripture that define the church. We cannot do these from our couch, watching the livestream. It's good, for some, it may be legitimate because of a health concern...but it's not adequate, it's not Christ's vision of the church. Watching the livestream for an hour "to get your church in" and go on with the rest of our week isn't Christ's vision for you and his body- he wants something so much more for you! Being part of the church isn't merely attending, getting something out of the service and leaving. It's about each other, it's about relationships...you are missing out! You need each other and others need you. And if you are watching this livestream from outside of the Brandywine area, we are so glad you are with us and I hope we can be a supplement to you- but our hope for you is that this livestream would be an on-ramp to a local church. We would love to help you get connected to one. Maybe Easter is your time to get out of that slump. One day- Jesus will mention your name in the great assembly in heaven- get in the game!

Point #2 Strong Teams Play Defense (17-19)

¹⁷ I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. ¹⁸ For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites.

By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.¹⁹ Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.

Teams that go far in the NCAA tournament all have one thing in common. They play both sides of the court- offense and defense. Paul is saying the same about the church. Strong, effective, long-lasting churches have a great offense- they love and serve each other and the community, they are welcoming to guest. They share the gospel and reach out to the lost. But they are also strong on defense, they preserve doctrine and guard against false teaching. I have seen it over and over that churches that do not guard the truth of God's Word against false and divisive teaching will within a generation or two be ineffective, weak and go astray. Now Paul is not speaking here of "divisions and obstacles" of gray areas or what we called "3rd Order Matters" in chapter 14. Paul is speaking of "what is contrary to the teaching you learned". In other letters, Paul calls it "that which does not accord with sound doctrine" or "that which is not according to the gospel." He's talking about first and 2nd order matters and people who are divisive about those issues. And his instruction is clear and blunt: "Watch out", "Keep away". In other words, don't be naïve, don't be accommodating- confront it when you see it. Be discerning- don't just passively listen to a sermon or a talk, whether it is me or anyone else and just take it in without any filters. Verse 18b: "By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve." Just because someone has lots of twitter followers or YouTube views, is charming, sweet, eloquent, engaging doesn't mean they are teachers of truth. Test everything according to Scripture. Trust but verify. This isn't just for deacons, elders and pastors...it's a team effort.

It is not an easy time in history to play defense, to be a lover of truth, it may be looked at as arrogance or worse as hate speech. While we should never be offensive in our attitude or conduct, the gospel is offensive. The Word of God will be offensive to our cultural sensibilities and the American-made idols we worship- power, money, comfort, sexual identity, freedom, self-actualization, pluralism, secularism. But truth must be preserved among the people of God against false teaching and competing philosophies. Christ leads his church through His Word by His Spirit.

Point #3 Our Opponent will be Defeated (20)

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

This is the only mention of Satan in the whole letter. And the mention is: He's getting crushed. Our victory is sure. He has been defeated on the cross, is being defeated through the expansion of the gospel and will be defeated ultimately at that great and future judgment when he is thrown in the lake of fire. Paul's use of the word crush takes us all the way back to God's promise after Adam and Eve had sinned. God said in Genesis 3:15 the serpent would have his head crushed by the future seed- the first reference to the Gospel of Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate serpent crusher. Satan suffers defeat each time someone puts their faith in Christ, each time a Christian chooses good instead of evil, each time God's people worship together in faith and unity. I know at times, we can get really discouraged because it feels like Christianity, Christian values and rights are being more and more marginalized. It becomes increasingly difficult to live out our faith, harder to stand up for your faith in school, it looks like our enemy is winning the culture...We might not know who is going to win the NCAA Basketball championship, I'm pulling for Gonzaga because I have them winning in my bracket...but church, we know who wins- Jesus- and he's bring us with Him. Martin Luther's great hymn a mighty fortress is our God, "His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure." Whenever Paul is encouraging the church he always points them to the hope of Christ's return. And this leads us to our final lesson.

Point #4 All Credit for Victory Goes to God (25-27)

²⁵ 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,

²⁶ 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— ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Theology should always lead us to doxology. Truth leads us to worship. Paul has spent 16 chapters showing us that Jesus is all we need to live the life God has for you. He's not just powerful to change you, but to transfer you from death to life, from the grasp of Satan to the grasp of God. And it's nothing you and I have done. At the negotiation table of salvation, we bring nothing, Jesus brings everything. There is now no condemnation, we are love unconditionally, accepted without reservations, breathing eternally.

And it is the reason why Paul doesn't take the credit saying "Well I'm Paul the Apostle, if it wasn't for me none of you would be saved..." No- *to the only wise God be glory forever through*

Jesus Christ! This life isn't about me, it's not about this church, it's not about this building, or how many people come or budgets...it's not about you! It's about Him and it will be about Him for eternity.