

Difference Makers—Romans 16:3-6—4/21/2013

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A couple of weeks ago in the sports world, Roanoke was in the national headlines at the college basketball Final Four.

One of the coaches of the final four teams vying for the NCAA basketball title was from Roanoke and the winning team's Most Outstanding Player for the Final Four was from Roanoke.

Though Luke Hancock had not been his team's highest scorer all season nor had he even been a top five starter through the tournament, his performance in the semi-final and final games was pivotal.

So as analysts talked and voters responded, they chose Luke Hancock as the difference maker in the national championship.

Difference-maker is often how it's termed when games are evaluated for who made the biggest impact by their skills or crucial timing.

But that was just about making a difference in a game.

What impressed me more was the previous weekend when Luke Hancock comforted a teammate whose leg had cracked in half.

He knelt down and apparently shared some hope & prayed & made a huge difference in the injured teammate's perspective.

I don't know those young men or their spiritual status, but I share that to illustrate what I mean by a difference-maker, by someone who acts with lasting impact at an event or in a trial like a major injury.

When most everyone else was recoiling in shock or sickness at the sight of this basketball player's bone poking out of his leg, someone saw a need and made a difference in the situation.

And that's what I want to talk about today for your life & mine.

I want us to be difference-makers in the lives around us.

I want you to make a difference by how you live and how you love and what you say and what you do.

I want you and me to make an eternal difference, to invest in people and efforts that have a lasting impact for generations.

I want God to use us for His glory so when we meet Him, we will be welcomed by His joyful words, "Well done, good & faithful servant."

And there are a lot of truths we could study to prepare to be difference makers and many of you know those truths.

And as I meditated and prayed this week, I thanked God for the impact that many of you already have as difference-makers.

I pondered pointing out some of you by name and highlighting things I know you do though I probably don't know half of it.

But I decided we'd stick to the text of Romans as we continue in our study today and let some other examples teach us all.

As we do, I pray you will be encouraged and challenged.

As we move further into the greetings of Romans 16 this morning we find a few difference makers that give us 5 characteristics to strive for.

If you want to have a lasting legacy such that your life matters and your time on this earth means something, then we'll take a peek today at 5 characteristics you want to describe you.

We'll not get through all the greetings of Romans 16, but let's go ahead and read them again as we get back into our study.

Turn there & follow along as I read Romans 16:1-16. [READ]

As we said last week, Paul began with a commendation of Phoebe because she was carrying the letter to the church at Rome.

Then he began his list of greetings to fellow believers he knew and probably to some he did not know but had heard about.

This has more greetings than other letters probably because he had never visited Rome.

So as those who knew him heard greetings, they could affirm relationship with him and his trustworthiness.

Paul's knowledge about others also affirmed this letter as authentic.

To set down the firmest anchor of recognition and connection, Paul began by greeting Prisca & Aquila.

Those two names are the ones we know the most about in this list.

We know about Prisca and Aquila—or Priscilla and Aquila—because they are mentioned in other letters of Paul and they are mentioned in Luke's book that we call Acts.

Prisca is this Christian lady's name and Priscilla is a nickname of endearment like "little Prisca", kind of like a girl named Jen or Jennifer might be called Jenny.

It's like we call our son Timothy, Timmy, or you can think of other shortened or altered names you use for yourself or others.

And as we saw last week with Phoebe, we see again with Prisca & Mary & more next week that women served vitally important roles.

The work of the church depends on faithful Christian ladies serving in the many ways God has designed them.

So as we live biblical roles for men & women in the home & church, we affirm the equality of men & women & the value of all serving.

Every Christian is gifted in some way to serve and so every one of you needs to be serving somehow.

And Prisca and Aquila give us an example of the impact a faithful Christian couple can have in serving together.

We know they served together because they are always mentioned together in Scripture, sometimes with her name first and sometimes with his name first.

As they served together, their impact was deepened and their example gives us the 1st of our 5 points this morning.

As I said, our outline will be 5 characteristics of difference-makers in the eternal ministry of the Gospel.

The 1st of those descriptions of those who make an impact are that they are partners, not lone-rangers.

Point #1—Difference-makers are partners, not lone-rangers.

The 1st characteristic to consider from Romans 16:3 is that difference-makers are partners, not lone-rangers.

I get that from the description Paul used for Aquila & Priscilla.

He called them coworkers, or fellow laborers, meaning they were together with him, joined in the work as partners.

Paul could've meant that as tent-makers because they did the same job like Paul, but he clarified that this was in Christ Jesus.

The significance of Paul saying this is not merely what he was saying about Prisca and Aquila.

It's also what Paul was saying as a single man and an Apostle.

Paul was not a lone-ranger—he realized that he did not work alone.

Throughout this section of greetings, we see Paul’s dependence on others like Phoebe for her generosity and hospitality.

Since Paul had worked together with Priscilla and Aquila in Gospel ministry and making tents, they were precious co-laborers in Christ.

And that reminds us that we can’t do everything on our own.

We must partner with other Christians with different gifts so we are mutually blessed and so our efforts are multiplied.

Other believers bring help and perspective and wisdom and experience to situations that we don’t necessarily have.

So we profit by laboring together in partnership with fellow Christians and even with other faithful churches in our area and around the world.

We are not alone if we are in Christ Jesus.

As we mentioned last week with sister Phoebe, we have spiritual brothers and sisters treasured in the local church and around the world.

Let’s turn to Acts to see a little more of how Aquila and Priscilla came to be Paul’s coworkers in Christ Jesus.

Turn to Acts 18 where we read that Aquila and Priscilla had been in Italy earlier but met Paul after being driven out by the emperor.

Follow along with me in Acts 18:1-4. [READ]

We learn here that Aquila was of Jewish descent and that he was from Pontus which is modern-day Turkey south of the Black Sea.

Aquila and Priscilla had been in Italy, probably in Rome, before Emperor Claudius had commanded all Jews to leave.

Paul met them in Corinth where they stayed together making tents.

They most likely heard Paul preach to the Jews there even before he went to the Gentiles as this chapter later recounts, but it’s not stated when they trusted Christ.

Whenever it was, they were followers of Jesus and helpers of Paul in his 18-month ministry there before they all left Corinth together.

Read Acts 18:18-21 to see what happened next. [READ]

Apparently Paul gained enough trust in Priscilla and Aquila to leave them in Ephesus with the young church there.

And when Paul wrote 1st Corinthians from Ephesus, Prisca and Aquila were hosting a church in their house in Ephesus and Paul sent their greetings in 1st Corinthians 16:19 of that letter.

So this was a trusted, faithful couple of fellow laborers.

Then read on Acts 18:24-28 to see what else Aquila and Priscilla are described as doing in ministry. [READ]

This is one of my favorite examples in the NT of a husband-wife team serving the Lord together in ministry.

And what’s clear here is that both Priscilla, who is mentioned first, and her husband Aquila had this meeting with Apollos.

I can just imagine Priscilla leaning over to Aquila after hearing Apollos preaching and saying, “Honey, I’m not sure he fully gets it.”

Kids—do you ever hear you mom say something like that to your dad about you or someone else?

What’s a godly woman to do in a situation like that?

Does the Bible prohibit her from talking to a man like Apollos?

No. Not at all. It is totally appropriate and biblically acceptable for a Christian lady to share truth with a man and even to correct him.

She's not to publicly teach or exercise authority over him as an overseer or elder or pastor in the church.

But that doesn't mean she can't ask him some questions and bring some correction or greater clarity or depth to his doctrine.

And that's what Priscilla did alongside her husband here in Acts 18 with Apollos.

This text is my answer to the question that comes up when talking about women's roles in the church and someone wants to know if a single woman can be a missionary and if so what's she to do?

My answer is that she's to evangelize and share truth and point people to the Bible as the authority just as all Christians do.

Then when a church is started, she can privately help men to lead.

It's certainly best to have men doing that work, but if a woman is the only Christian or only mature Christian in a congregation or church plant, then she can prepare men to lead.

Then the gathered church can be taught by a male pastor as the NT prescribes while private ministry happens to prepare for that.

Priscilla, who is mentioned first here, is an example of that role being fulfilled and her exercise of it is ideal because she's ministering alongside her husband.

I can think of many counseling sessions with others where my wife said the most important and helpful things and asked the most insightful, probing questions and I was just thankful she was there.

I was helped by what she said and she helped others too.

You might call that living room ministry or kitchen-table counseling because those are the places it often happens where Christian women are sharing valuable truth with men and women in our context.

It happens here in our church relationships as we serve together in various parts of ministry together and it happens in Care Groups and in Sunday School classes and over meals together.

And men and women and boys and girls all profit from that kind of partnership no matter what role or position or gender we are.

Paul understood that and he valued the blessings of laboring together with the team of Prisca and Aquila.

And I have to share how thankful I was as I wrote this that the names of many of you couples flooded my mind with joyful praise of God for the teams of ministers laboring together in this local church.

Just as I was thrilled to think of single ladies serving here like Phoebe when we studied her example last week, I'm thankful for couples like Aquila and Priscilla this week.

And it reminds me how blessed I am to partner with faithful brothers and sisters in this body who are difference makers.

My life and family are so enriched by the partners in life and ministry and church and eternity that we enjoy in this body.

And it's true in relationships we have with believers around the world.

So let me just encourage you to keep it up and excel still more.

Like Prisca and Aquila, you can be coworkers in Christ Jesus no matter what your occupation or role is.

They were tent-makers like Paul and they went on making tents after Paul was freed up to focus only on preaching.

Yet even as they made tents and Paul preached, they were still considered co-laborers in Gospel ministry with Paul.

So no matter your job, if you labor in all things for the glory of Christ and the ministry of the Gospel and His church, then you are coworkers in Christ Jesus.

That's point #1—difference-makers are partners, not lone-rangers.

Next, characteristic #2 of those who impact others eternally—#2, difference-makers are sacrificial, not self-protective.

Point #2—difference-makers are sacrificial, not self-protective.

That is, Christians who make a difference in ministry to others are concerned about others, not about themselves.

And that concern extends to taking risks to love others rather than worshipping the idol of our own comfort.

Turn back to Romans 16 and read verses 3-4 again. [READ]

Prisca and Aquila had put their own necks on the executioner's block somehow for the sake of Paul's own life.

We don't know exactly what was done or how or when, but the point is that this Christian couple risked their own lives to save Paul's life somehow and to preserve the ministry through Paul.

That may have happened in Corinth when Acts 18 describes that Sosthenes the leader of the synagogue was beaten.

Or it may have been in Ephesus or at some other time that's not recorded in Acts or known to us today.

We know that Paul faced danger many times throughout his ministry so it could have been any number of times and even more than once.

But the virtue to emulate here is self-sacrifice, which is grounded in the humility that sees others as more important and takes risks to serve them.

That may be as frightening as risking death like Prisca and Aquila did or it could be as simple as speaking up in public or having that hard conversation with a friend or relative to share truth.

The focus of difference-makers is not on how hard this will be for me or how much this will cost me or how I'd rather take it easy or escape or not try.

Difference-makers are not self-absorbed & self-protective in such ways and that frees them up to serve sacrificially.

The glory of Christ is more treasured than our lives.

And the spread of the Gospel to adults and kids here & around the world is more valuable than another comfort to pad my cushy life.

To make a difference, we must crawl out of the cushions of life that tempt to smother us in endless indulgence.

Prisca & Aquila were willing to relocate not only to Ephesus with Paul & get left there, but then they were in Rome as Paul wrote this letter.

Then later, at the end of Paul's life they were back at Ephesus because Paul greeted them there when he wrote his last NT letter that we call 2nd Timothy.

So their sacrifice involved the financial investments and risks of moving and business shifts for the sake of Gospel ministry.

And we also see their sacrificial serving and generosity because there was a church that met in their house.

Read verse 5 in Romans 16 again. [READ]

From this list of greetings, we learn that the church in Rome included smaller churches that met various homes there.

In the early church, they did not begin with buildings like we have today, but in homes of that time that might allow for to 80 people.

Those gatherings for house-church would include extended family members and servants who were Christians in that household and also Christians from others households.

Then those house-churches would come together for larger gatherings of the church in a city in places that would allow it like at Jerusalem near the Temple as we read of early in Acts.

But especially when persecution happened, Christians would need private homes as the only safe places to gather.

Prisca and Aquila were one of those host homes as they sacrificially offered hospitality to foster fellowship and discipleship.

So let me offer a 3rd description of spiritual difference-makers from this couple's example of hospitality and giving and traveling that made their impact wide-ranging.

We read in verse 4 that all the churches of the Gentiles were thankful for them along with Paul.

How does that wide breadth of ministry happen?

It happens by being large-hearted, not small-minded.

It happens by being open to give, open to go, open to serve, open to invest, open to meet new people and deal with messy lives and issues and continue to love and serve.

It comes by praying with a growing faith that wants God to use us and with a longing for God to do big things for His glory.

So let's note 3rdly from this couple's example that difference-makers are large-hearted, not small-minded.

Point #3—difference-makers are large-hearted, not small-minded.

And again, I get that from the example of Prisca and Aquila as they hosted a church in their house and traveled as needed for ministry and they were open to God working through them.

Even their risky rescue of Paul was known so broadly that all the Gentile churches were thankful for them.

They modeled being large-hearted, not small-minded.

So we've said difference-makers are (1) partners, not lone-rangers; (2) sacrificial, not self-protective; and (3) large-hearted, not small-minded.

Now let's move to the next person & a 4th application point.

#4—difference-makers are commas, not periods.

To have a lasting impact, we need to remember that difference-makers are commas, not periods.

If you've been around me long enough you've heard me say that before and you've forgotten who I stole that from just like I've have.

Or you've heard me say it that we are rivers, not ponds.

I like those illustrations—a period is the end of the sentence and we are not the end of what God is writing.

Similarly, ponds exist to hold water, not to pour it out and that's not what God intended for Christians to be.

God did not save us so that we'd sit around and soak up the rays of His grace and do nothing with it here on earth.

If God saved you, He wants to use you to reach others no matter how gifted you are or are not at sharing your faith.

You need to view your life that way—you were made to serve.

If you are a Christian, you are a comma, not the end of the sentence nor the end of the story.

You are a pause in the program of God that He plans to continue writing as He uses you to reach others.

And I could make that application from loads of clear commands in Scripture, but I get it today from the mention of Epäenetüs as the first convert to Christ in Asia.

He was the firstfruits, meaning he was the first of others to come and we might imagine that his coming to Christ paved the way for others.

And his coming to Christ first probably endeared him to Paul and is what Paul meant by calling him his beloved.

This reference to Asia refers western Turkey not what we think of as Asia today.

And Asia is the correct reading here, not Achaia as some manuscripts and English translations put it.

It could be Achaia, but Asia is better attested.

And by the way—if Achaia were the right reading here, it would not contradict 1st Corinthians 16:15 naming the household of Stephanas being the firstfruits in Achaia because Epäenetüs could be in the household of Stephanas.

That's helpful to note to answer questions and refute claims that come from scoffers against the Bible.

The Bible doesn't have contradictions or errors.

But back to the point about Epäenetüs—he was cherished and loved by Paul and was the first to trust Christ in Paul's ministry in Asia.

As an early convert, he probably was instrumental in his prayers or example or words in reaching others.

So recall #4, that difference-makers are commas, not periods.

Then 5thly today, difference-makers are workers, not watchers.

Point #5—difference-makers are workers, not watchers.

In other words—to make a difference in the game, you need to get into the game and play, not merely sit back as a spectators.

To make an impact, you need to make an investment.

To see lives changed, you need to get involved in others' lives.

To see fruit grow, you have to get your hands spiritually dirty.

To reap rewards in heaven, you have to make eternal investments and give up earthly treasures to give sacrificially.

To see something move forward, you need to help move it & not just sit back & criticize how it's not moving.

Difference-makers are workers, not watchers.

And that's what Mary was in Romans 16:6 so read it. [READ]

The only thing we know about this Christian Mary was that she toiled to the point of exhaustion for the Christians in Rome.

Her work was copious—the Greek verb kopiao described her.

For that diligent labor, Paul commended her as he greeted her.

This was Mary of the Roman church, probably not the same Mary as several others mentioned in the Gospels, and possibly known only to Paul by her reputation as a worker.

But this Mary of Rome joins others named Mary and other ladies of this chapter as faithful workers in the early church.

Her example reminds us that difference-makers are workers, not watchers.

Difference-makers are (1) partners, not lone rangers; (2) sacrificial, not self-protective; (3) large-hearted, not small-minded; (4) commas, not periods; and (5) workers, not watchers.

What are you?

Are you a difference-maker?

Are you making an impact in your family, among your extended family, at your office and in your neighborhood?

Does your presence and involvement make a difference?

If so, what kind of difference?

An eternal one that brings blessings of truth & goodness & love into this broken, fallen world that is grasping for hope & riddled with fear?

The events of this past week in Boston show how fragile our comfortable American lives are and how easily everything we take for granted can be shaken or stolen.

That should be a wake-up call for us to want to impact the lives of those around us and not waste another hour or day.

It should light a flame for us to be difference-makers.

That happens first by being in Christ Jesus—that's what's central throughout these greetings.

The love and partnership and sacrifice and devotion all flow first from lives that are turned away from self to Christ alone.

So if you have not started there, please give up on ruling your own life and serving sin in any way and entrust your life now and forever into the worthy, wise direction of Jesus Christ.

He has provided righteousness in His life, payment for sin in His death, and victory forever in His resurrection.

So trust Him and let Him make the eternal difference in you and then begin to follow Him and let Him use you to make a difference in the lives of others.

And if you do know Christ, then pray that He'll make you an even greater difference-maker than you already are.

Are you investing today in the impact you want to leave behind you when your short life is passed?

Are you pursuing what will welcome you with Christ's words of "Well done, good and faithful servant"?

I pray you are and that you'll make whatever changes needed to be more ready for a lasting, powerful impact on others for God's glory.

Pray with me as we close.