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**Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith**  
**Message: A Ministry of Service**

**Transcribed Message**  
**March 17, 2024**  
**Romans 16:1-2**

I feel like all I have to say this morning by way of introduction to our study is turn in your Bibles to Romans 16. You're obviously somewhat familiar with the book of Romans because if you're not it's the last chapter of the book. Many of you did not think that there would ever be those words uttered here in this place. Turn in your Bibles to Romans 16. But let not your heart be troubled because there are 27 verses, so I see at least 25 or 26 Sundays yet to go. We take our normal summer break. Somewhere in 2025, we will be able to finish. No, we won't do any of that. We will press on and see what God has willed for us this morning.

What God does have for us is this matter of a ministry of service. We'll look at the first two verses of Romans 16. I'm going to read those: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well." We look at those verses and all I see there is a reminder of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4 when he said it's required of a steward to be found faithful. It looks to me like what Paul would have us understand and know that what it is that God requires of a servant is that simply we be found faithful. That's what he has called us to. That's what we want to be. So, let's be faithful to the call of God on our life.

Let's look back and a look ahead as we come to this last chapter, reminding ourselves what it is we've already looked at in the first 15 chapters. We look back at that and we realize that we've already seen in chapters 1 through 8 this matter of orthodoxy. Orthodoxy just simply means true. It means right. It's something that can be trusted and counted on. In the first eight chapters of Romans, Paul brings before us all these wonderful doctrines of our faith – taking us from our lost condition in those opening chapters, walking us through the glories of salvation and all the way into chapter 8

beyond sanctification, even to glorification. Chapters 1 through 8 really are about this matter of orthodoxy.

Then he gets to chapters 9 through 11 and I just came up with the word explanation because in 9 through 11 Paul is having to explain. The question might be: Paul, if this gospel is so glorious and if God's people, the Jews, are in fact his people then what's going on? Why are they not believing? Why aren't more of them trusting this gospel? Paul in chapters 9, 10 and 11 steps into this pretty significant explanation of God's judicial blindness in his judgment upon the Jewish people. Yet he also gives us a wonderful look at the glorious future that is still to come.

Then when we get into chapters 12 through 15, we get into orthopraxy. Orthopraxy just reminds us that there is a correct way to live our life, isn't there? There is in fact ethical behavior and that ethical behavior is to flow out of right doctrine. We don't get right doctrine just to fill our heads with doctrine. We get right doctrine so that it leads to right living. That's the importance of chapters 12 through 15 as Paul with James reminds us that we're not just supposed to be hearers of the word but we're supposed to be doers also.

Then let's look ahead a little bit. What will we see in chapter 16? There are at least three things. The first one we're going to see is that all Scripture matters. All Scripture matters. 2 Timothy 3:16. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. Because of that, it's profitable. All structure is given by inspiration. All of Scripture. So yes, even when we come to the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter, which is one of those chapters when you're in your Bible reading plan for the year you always like to come to those chapters of genealogies because you can make up a lot of ground very quickly as you just kind of skim through those. You can do that in Romans 16 because you look at this and it looks like a bunch of names. In fact, there are a lot of names in this chapter. Yet here Paul is going to say to us even in a list of names, and I hope that's what we get to see, there's some great nuggets of truth tucked away in this chapter, so we want to look at that together.

The second thing I think we would see in this chapter is that all people matter. All people matter. Francis Schaeffer wrote a book *No Little People* and the gist of it was there really aren't any insignificant people in God's kingdom. There aren't any insignificant people in the work that God's doing. It's very similar to what Paul says in 1

Corinthians when he reminds them there's not many among you that are mighty or wise. God didn't take all the elite of the world to establish his church. No, he took people like us, common everyday people. Paul says he took those who the world looked at as being foolish. Here we're going to see that in this list this is what God does. He reminds us that all people matter. All people are important.

Then the third thing that we want to see is the connection between those. This connection between doctrine and people really results in the importance of relationships. The importance of relationships. Paul, as we've recounted many times, wore many different hats. He clearly was a theologian and a church planter. He was a missionary and an apologist. He was an apostle and a writer of Scripture. All these things. Here we see how much he valued connections and relationships with people. He did not live in an ivory tower, separating himself from the everyday mundane things of life. He stepped into relationships with others. He says to us in effect in this 16<sup>th</sup> chapter. there should be no such thing as Lone Ranger Christians. If you're trying to live your Christian life in isolation and away from people, then you're missing out on God's intent and plan for you. He never intended that we go it alone. He intended that we surround ourselves with people and that's why we have the emphasis that we do in the New Testament on the matter of family. Here it is in this great and weighty letter, this magnum opus that Paul writes here at the end of it all, he just begins to list all the people that were important and significant in that venture.

Now on your outline there is a box. In that box there are people who Paul did not write to. There are two people that Paul did not write to. Both start with a P and I wonder if you know who those two people might be. We've mentioned the first one before. Peter. He does not write to Peter. There's no historic evidence, no biblical evidence that Peter started the church at Rome. Whatever else is put out there by other groups, that simply is not historically or biblically supported. In fact, there's no real reason to think that Peter was ever engaged in the church at Rome, at least in any significant way as a leader. Clearly, as we said a few weeks ago when Paul wrote the letter to the church in Rome, if Peter was a significant leader at the church of Rome and Paul did not mention him, that would've been a massive faux pas. That would've been a big miss, but he doesn't. He doesn't mention Peter. That's the first one.

The second one that he doesn't mention is not so much a person as it's an office. He doesn't mention the word pastor. He doesn't write to the pastor of the church. Why does he not write to the pastor of the church at Rome? A very simple explanation is because in the early church there wasn't anybody who had the title of pastor of the church at Rome. That whole mindset that the modern church has devised for its own ecclesiastical structure to say this is the pastor of the church is really to great detriment and harm. The New Testament doesn't outline a church structure in which one man has that kind of authority or impetus to lead the entire group. But rather the New Testament describes for us a plurality of leaders. There are elders who are to give governance and give spiritual leadership. It doesn't fall to one man. You might ask what about in Revelation in the letters to the churches when John writes to the angels of the church. Many people think that those angels were in fact the pastors. That's one view. There is that view, but let's not go down that road. But there's a plurality of leadership, not just the pastor. That's why Paul doesn't write to the pastor of the church at Rome. Somebody else might say you're the senior pastor of Covenant Community Church. I'm the senior pastor because I'm the oldest guy around. That's been taken care of now with the guy that stepped aside. Now I am really the senior pastor for the first time. That is at an age thing. That's not a governance thing. That's not a ruling thing. That's a little sidetrack.

Let's look at a very special lady because that's what the first two verses are about. They're really about a very special lady in Paul's life, and this lady is Phoebe. Let's start with that. Who was Phoebe? Let's just begin with her name. we might learn something about her if we would just look at her name because her name means bright and radiant. Most likely her name was taken from a Roman god, and so most Bible scholars would say it's very unlikely that Phoebe was a Jew. She was probably a Gentile. Jewish parents would almost certainly not name one of their children after a Roman god or goddess. Her name means bright and radiant. I think we'll see it seems to describe something about who she is.

She is secondly said to be from Cenchreae. We've looked at this map before and you can see Corinth. That's where Paul is as he writes to the church in Rome. Just to the east, even though it's not on this map per se, about 6 miles from Corinth is the city

of Cenchreae. It was actually the main port. When Paul leaves for Jerusalem in Acts 18:18 and he's got the gifts for the church, Paul left for Jerusalem from Cenchreae. Having been in Corinth for an extended period of time, this is where he left from. It's very possible that Paul, because he was in Corinth for 18 months which was the second longest time he had ever spent in any one place. He spent at least two years in Ephesus. He spent 18 months in the city of Corinth, and it is very likely that he got to see up close and personal the ministry and the person of Phoebe. We don't have any idea. We'll have to wait and find out when we have a conversation with Phoebe sometime into eternity. But it may be that she was in a setting where she heard Paul preach and teach the gospel, not unlike Lydia when Paul ministered, and Lydia came to Christ and became a significant part of the church. So here it could very well be that Phoebe comes under the hearing of the gospel even in the ministry of Paul. But in any event, he got to see her, and he got to see her ministry. He trusted her with the assignment.

Notice the assignment that he gives to her. It's an extraordinary one. If you look at the map, she is going to be given the assignment to go from Corinth all the way to Rome. The purpose of her going there we don't know. It could be that she was going there on business herself and Paul asked her to take the letter to the church at Rome with her and to deliver it to them. She's given an incredible assignment. She's handed the magnum opus, this wonderful book that we've been looking at. She is given the assignment to deliver it to the church in Rome. There was no postal service. There wasn't any Amazon, FedEx, or anybody else to deliver stuff. The way it would normally be done is you would give somebody that you knew was going somewhere a package or a letter that you wanted taken. You'd entrust it to them, and they would take it and they would deliver it for you. That's what's happening here. Perhaps as I said she was going there on business and Paul knew that was going to be unfolding and so he asked her. Travel wasn't like it is today. There might be some minor challenges in travel today. but can you imagine traveling in the 1<sup>st</sup> century? She's going to get on a ship to make her way across the sea. At some point she's going to hit land and have another part of her journey. There certainly had to be a measure of courage on the part of a woman to take this letter and go all the way to Rome. No doubt there were others that

accompanied her, but still this was not an easy assignment, one that she must have felt the significance of and there was certainly a danger as well.

Here is what one author said: "She carried the future of Christian theology." She carried the future of Christian theology. Donald Ray Barnhouse put it this way: "Never was there a greater burden carried with 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." I like that. Someone went a little bit farther than I would go and said the Reformation was in her purse. I'm not going to make any comments about things that go into a woman's purse and hopefully come back out at some point. But that is what she did. She was the one who was going to deliver this amazing letter. That was her assignment.

Why was she so special? Paul tells four things in these two verses about what it is that made Phoebe so special. The first thing that he said: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe." She was a sister. Paul of course doesn't say it that way. He doesn't say she is a sister. He says she is our sister. She is our sister. She shares in our spiritual heritage together as children of God. She has the same heavenly Father. Paul is saying she has the same heavenly Father that I do. You Roman believers, she has the same heavenly Father as you do. Every child of God by faith in Christ is part of God's family. Ephesians 2:19. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are a fellow citizen with the saints and members of the household of God." That's what he underscores here.

That is instructive it seems to me for a couple of reasons. It underscores first of all just how Paul sees and values women in ministry. Both within the church unfortunately and outside the church, radical feminism has viewed Paul in a very negative light. Paul is viewed as being an oppressor of women. In fact, it's not out of line to say there are radical feminists who think Paul is a hater of women. I shared in one of the small groups with the guys that there was an incident of a young lady who just recently was ordained into the ministry. I don't know if it was her first Sunday in this church or if it was the first Sunday to introduce herself. There she is standing behind the pulpit and she introduces herself and gives her name, gives a little bit of her background and her story. Then she proceeds to tell them in this mainline denominational church

the pronouns that she goes by. Then she says, "You may have noticed in the reading of Scripture (which she had just done previous to that which was a portion in 1 Corinthians 6 from Paul) that I deliberately did not read some verses and we all know the reason I didn't is because at times Paul could be a jerk." That was her introduction, having been ordained in the ministry at her church for the first time. That is not an uncommon view of Paul. Sadly, it's in the church and of course it's outside of the church. Paul was no hater of women. He was no oppressor of women. He was in fact one who viewed with great joy his opportunity to partner with his sister Phoebe. It is totally false to look at it that way. The reality and the truth are that wherever Christianity has gone and wherever Christianity has been preached in the purity of the gospel, the role of women has been elevated and women have been honored. That's something that I think needs to be underscored. I see that here when he says this is our sister. This is my sister that I'm sending to you. That is strong stuff.

Then you notice that he commends her. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe." It reminds me of Romans 15:7 when Paul says welcome one another. Welcome each other. When you see each other, welcome each other. Have that sense of love for each other. What did he mean when he says I commend her to you. Well, he means in some sense this is an official letter of commendation. It was necessary. We don't know if Phoebe had any previous connection or history with the church in Rome. It's likely that she's taking this letter for the first time and maybe she doesn't know any of these people. Other than the people that know Paul who are at the church in Rome, many of them maybe had no idea who Phoebe was either. We don't know that, but that's possible. She needed a letter of commendation that said this is a trustworthy woman. This is a special lady. This is my sister. With that, you need to take care of her. You need to provide for her. There needs to be housing and provision and safety. All these things need to be provided for her. That is a part of that as well. So first of all, here she comes. She comes with my letter. I'm commending her to you. She is our sister.

Secondly, she was a servant. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae." When I say she was a servant, believe it or not those four words have led to thousands of other words. Do you know why? When I say she was a servant and then I say believe it or not those four words have become the focus of

thousands of words, the reason that has become the focus of thousands of words is because that little statement touches again on the role of women in the church. I'm not sure that Paul intended when he made that statement for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be writing thousands of words about it, but we'll save that for discussion later. There are two ways to understand what's going on here. The word servant. I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae. We can read that, and we can look at that, and we can say first of all Phoebe was a female deacon. Some would say that she was a deaconess. Some churches use the word deacon for male and female, and some use the word deaconess for female deacons. We could look at it that way and say because Paul uses this language, he is saying to the church at Rome I'm sending to you Phoebe our sister and I just want you to know she is an officeholder because she's a deacon or deaconess in the church at Cenchreae. She has this official office that she is a part of. The word *diakonia* can be understood in a technical way. If Paul intends for this word to be understood in its technical usage, he is saying I'm sending you our sister Phoebe and she is an officer in the church at Cenchreae.

Paul uses that word three times in that way. In Philippians chapter 1 and verse 1 he says, "Paul and Timothy servants (different word for servant) of Christ Jesus to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi with the overseers and deacons." There are two offices in the church as the New Testament puts that forward. There's not three. There's not an office of pastor, an office of elder, and the office of deacon. There's an office of elder and there's an office of deacon or deaconess. He clearly has that in mind in Philippians 1. He's referencing two different offices. In 1 Timothy 3, you have all of the qualifications put forward for elders and deacons. In verse 8 he says, "Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy or dishonest..." He is using the word *diakonia* in a technical way. He is talking about those men who all who are in the office of deacon at the church. Same thing again that he says in verse 12 when he references them again and says, "Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their own household well..." We can understand it in that way.

The office of deacon seems to have been established in Acts 6 when the apostles are overwhelmed. You'll remember the church is growing by thousands and



thousands of people and the apostles are overwhelmed with all the needs. They began to neglect the word and prayer. So, they listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit told them to raise up faithful and godly men who will do the work of service. and it seems that that's the origin, even though it's not put forward specifically, but most everybody looks at Acts 6 and says this is where the office of deacon began. When Paul says she was a servant of the church at Cenchreae, he may indicate to them she's my sister. She's your sister. She is an officeholder in the church at Cenchreae. She is a deacon. That's one way to understand.

The second way to understand it, the other perspective is to say Phoebe was simply a servant. She was a church worker. That is the general use of the word. It can go either way. *Diakonia* is the most common word in the New Testament when we see a reference made to a servant, or we would think of it as a volunteer, someone working and serving in the church. All of us all of us are called to be servants. All of us are called to serve, so in that general sense we're all deacons and deaconesses. Some hold an office, but all of us are called to that service. The word is used 29 times in the New Testament. Three times it refers to someone who's in this office or this position.

Let me make these four observations. I don't believe this is in your outline, but I just want to put these things before you. The first one is simply this. The New Testament is not clear as to whether this word is to be understood in a technical way or a general way. If you are visiting a church and you look on their website, or you go to church and oh my goodness, they have women deacons. It is perfectly biblically okay for a church to have women deacons. It is perfectly legitimate and okay for a church not to have women deacons. The reality is there's a ministry going on of service, and whether there is an establishment of an office in a church called deacon or deaconess it is not a definitive way of a viewing that church in terms of its ecclesiology. Both are allowed.

Here's the point of that. Neither side can be dogmatic. Neither side can say they have the biblical position on this because the Bible simply is not clear about this, and so we should just acknowledge that in humility that whatever position we have there is an allowance for the other one as well. We're all called to serve. I said that already. We're all called to serve. The New Testament is filled with examples of women in ministry.

Jesus had a group of women that ministered to him and provided care for him and did things that needed to be done. The Gospels mention that. The ministry of women is of course of great value in the life of our Lord and in ministry.

The last point I would make is CCC would not function well without the godly gifted women serving as they do. I've toned that down, guys, in the way I've said that. I probably should've said CCC would shut down. We would have coffee because John and Neil would make the guys coffee, and that might help us to get to the next step. This is the reality. It's something that we should be grateful for because the value of women in ministry is something that the Scriptures lift up as well.

Now the third thing he says is that she's a saint. She's a saint. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church of Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints." A saint is simply a holy one. Every believer is a saint. That's the way Paul started off this letter in the very first chapter of Romans. He starts off and he says in verse 7: "To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints." We're called to be saints. We are saints. A saint is not a special class of Christian. It's not a special category. It's not just for a few people. You don't become a saint by what you do, even though that is a view that is put forward by a particular church. You are a saint because of who you are in Christ. You're a saint not by what you do but by what Christ has done for you. That's the reality that we want to engage and recognize and step into. Paul starts off the letter in 1 Corinthians 1 and says, "to the saints at Corinth", and that church was literally a mess, but he still called them saints.

Last one. Phoebe was a sister. She was a servant. She was a saint. Lastly, she was a patron. She was a patron. The tradition of Phoebe "that you may welcome her" verse 2 "in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever way she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well." Tradition says that Phoebe was a single woman, that she was a businesswoman, and that she was a successful businesswoman, because she was a patron of many, Paul says, and of me. For a woman with a family and children to be asked by Paul to take a letter and go on a long, lengthy, dangerous, challenging journey is very unlikely. When you think, as I said before, people didn't travel in the 1<sup>st</sup> century like we travel today. But it is rather

amazing as you read your Bible how much traveling people did and how they did venture into some of these trips that were dangerous and uncertain, that had many obstacles and things along the way. Here she is. She's a patron of many and Paul again speaks to the fact that she offers financial help to people. She did that.

We said two weeks ago that one of the things that the gospel does in our life is the gospel makes us generous. The gospel makes us generous. Evidently the gospel came into Phoebe's life, and it made her generous. She shared in the things that God had entrusted to her, the financial means to help other people and to help Paul, and that's what we see in her life. what God requires of any servant is that we simply are found to be faithful.

What do we take away? Christian service. That's what we're looking at. Service is the natural function of any Christian. It is just who we are. We're not called to be spectators. We're not called to Lone Ranger Christianity. We're called to be participants. We're called to be contributors. So just a simple question: how are you serving and where are you serving? I've always thought that is one of the easiest questions that could be asked of any of us. If someone asks, how do you serve? Where do you serve? You shouldn't have to pause and wonder. You may have so many things that you're doing by way of service that you are trying to frame your answer to respond to that, but if you're asked that question and there's a long pause because you can't actually think of anything that fits into the category of how you're serving and where you're serving, then it seems to me that this speaks to that matter. Again, we're not to be spectators. It's so easy to be a spectator. It's so easy just to come on any given Sunday and just receive and then leave. That's simply contrary to what God intends for a functioning healthy believer in the context of a local church. I'm not suggesting by that that every area of service must be here and must be in these four walls. It does not and it should not be. But there should be some way in which every one of us is contributing to the life and ministry of Covenant Community Church.

I spoke to this a few weeks ago about how grateful I am for the hundreds and thousands of hours that are offered in service by you, the body of Christ, to this church and to this community. I don't take that for granted. I am deeply appreciative of that. As I look at our calendar in the life of our church on any given week, we are not a program

driven church. Our desire as elders and pastors is not to fill your life up with so much stuff that you don't even know what to do by way of rest or refreshment. That is never going to be our goal. We don't want to do that. We want to be disciplers of people. Being disciplers of people means you must have some margins in your life for sure. But when I just look at the calendar and I just see what happens on a day like today when again as I said a few weeks ago, we've got all kinds of people that are taking care of our little people and blessing us in that way. They'll do it again in the next hour. Then all the people who make something happen like we're experiencing this morning, not only by way of leading us in worship but by preparing this place for our gathering. There is lots of time and lots of energy that goes into that. Then on any given Monday we have things that we do by way of reaching out into our community. ELL. English Language Learning gets to come here and be a part of that ministry. Kind of a cool side note to that is this last Friday I got to share in the life of a family of our ELL ministry who had a loved one pass away. I got invited to come to their home with an extended family gathering and be a part of that time with them and just pray with them and share the gospel with them. That would've never happened if 30 or 40 people weren't giving every Monday night to bring these people a better understanding of how to live life better in America and learn the English language. The list just goes on and on of things that are happening.

That is simply to ask each of us: how are you serving and where are you serving? If you say to yourself, I'd love to, but I just don't know what to do. Thank you for that thought because all you have to do is go to the welcome booth this morning and there's a little brochure right there among all the brochures called Service Opportunities. There are about 250 different ways to serve in the life of our church. I would start there. I would pray. I would engage with those people who are leading various ministries and just ask if there is any way you can be of help. Is there anything you could do? As I read and understand my Bible, I am going to answer one day for the stewarding of my life and the stewarding of my gifts. What have I done with those? How have I used those for the glory of God? The Bible says that even Jesus when he came did not come to be served, but he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

That's the gospel. Jesus came. He gave his life, and he died on the cross for our sin, for my sin and yours. Sin by its very definition separates from God. God is holy and righteous and apart from Christ we are not. But the good news is in Christ we can have the righteousness that God's righteousness requires Him to require because he gives it to us as a gift. To receive this gift, all you have to do is to believe that what Jesus did was all that needed to be done and God forgives your sin, and he gives you eternal life.

Let's pray. Father, we ask you again this morning to do that work in each of our lives that only you can do by your Spirit and by your word. Lord, I pray specifically that you would raise up servants whose heart is to be faithful – faithful to the things that you have called them to do and faithful to who you have made them to be. I pray as well, Father, that by your Spirit you would open the eyes this morning, the heart this morning, that someone would believe and trust that Jesus is the only way, the only truth, and the only life. That separation that they sense from you, that distance that they realize from you can only be bridged by Jesus and what he did, not by what we can do or who we are. Move, Holy Spirit, in their heart to cause them by your grace and mercy to believe and trust and receive the gift of eternal life. We pray in Christ's name, amen.