

Rev. Lex DeLong / General Adult

Romans Road to Recovery / Romans 16:1–16

The gospel advances through the quiet sacrifices of ordinary believers, making their everyday faithfulness worthy of our calling in Christ.

Notes

Romans 16:1-16

Title: "The Unsung Heroes of Grace"

Subtitle: Trading the Myth of Celebrity Christianity for the Beauty of Everyday Faithfulness

Main Idea: The gospel advances through the quiet sacrifices of ordinary believers, making their everyday faithfulness worthy of our highest honor.

Companion Scripture: Philippians 4:1-3

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We live in an era addicted to celebrity. And unfortunately, much of the Church has bought into the myth. We have highly educated scholars, celebrity pastors, influencer Christians, and massive platforms.

We have been conditioned to believe that the *strength* of a church is found in a charismatic leader, that its *courage* is measured by loud public declarations, and that its *beauty* is seen in a highly polished Sunday production. We act as if the kingdom of God advances on the backs of superstars.

But when the Apostle Paul—the greatest church planter who ever lived—reached the end of his theological masterpiece to the Romans, he didn't roll the credits on a list of celebrities. He spent sixteen verses listing slaves, immigrants, stay-at-home mothers, and tentmakers.

Today, let's trade the empty myth of celebrity Christianity for the profound reality of everyday faithfulness.

The truth is:

The gospel advances through the quiet sacrifices of ordinary believers, making their everyday faithfulness worthy of our calling in Christ.

If we want to understand how God actually builds His kingdom, we have to look at the people Paul honors in this closing chapter.

In verses 1 and 2, Paul introduces a woman named Phoebe.

Right away, Paul shatters our modern assumptions about where real spiritual power lies. He shows us, first of all, that **the strength of the Church comes through everyday servants.**

I. The Strength of the Church Comes Through Everyday Servants (vv. 1-2)

Look at how Paul begins this chapter in Romans 16:1–2 "1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; 2 that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well."

- In the ancient world, you didn't have email, and you didn't have a reliable postal service. When you wrote a letter, you had to find someone you trusted with your life to physically carry that scroll across dangerous trade routes. Paul is in Corinth, and he is sending the most profound theological document ever written—the Book of Romans—to the capital of the empire.
- Consider with me who he trusts to carry this letter, a woman named Phoebe.
- Paul notes that she was a servant of the church at Cenchreae.
 - Cenchreae wasn't a quiet, polite suburb. It was Corinth's eastern seaport—a gritty, rough-and-tumble sailor's town dominated by the massive pagan Temple of Isis.
 - Phoebe was operating a business and leading a church in a dark, transient port city.
- In the first century, the letter carrier wasn't just a UPS driver who dropped a package on the porch and walked away.
 - The letter carrier was the emissary of the author.
 - When Phoebe arrived in Rome, it was her job to unroll the scroll, stand in front of those house churches, and read it aloud.
 - When the Romans raised their hands and asked, "What did Paul mean in chapter 8 by the law of the Spirit of life?", it was Phoebe's job to explain it to

them.

- Think about the weight of that. As the great New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce wrote:

"It is a matter of profound interest that the first recorded expositor of the Epistle to the Romans was a woman." — **F.F. Bruce**

- Paul gives her two titles here.
 1. First, he calls her a *servant*—
 - a. the Greek word is *diakonos*, where we get the word deacon.
 2. But the second title is where we really see her influence. He says she has been a **patron** of many, including himself.
 - a. The Greek word there is *prostatis*. In Roman culture, a *prostatis* was a benefactor—a person of significant wealth, social standing, and influence who legally protected and financially bankrolled their clients.
 - b. New Testament scholar James D.G. Dunn points out that as their *prostatis*, Phoebe wasn't just a donor; she likely acted as the legal shield for the church against hostile Roman authorities.

But I want you to catch the sheer scandal of who is holding this title. Phoebe was a Gentile. Her very name, *Phoebe*, means "radiant" and was a popular title for the pagan Greek moon goddess, Artemis. She was a Gentile businesswoman from a gritty, pagan port city, bearing the name of a Greek goddess.

Think about the radical kingdom shift Paul is displaying here. The Apostle Paul was a former Pharisee of Pharisees. A "Hebrew of Hebrews" who used to pride himself on his pure pedigree. Yet here, in a patriarchal, status-obsessed society, the great Apostle Paul points to a Gentile woman with a pagan name and says, "I am her client. She is my protector. My ministry doesn't happen without her."

This is what it looks like when the strength of the church comes through everyday servants. Phoebe didn't demand to have her name in lights..."

This is what it looks like when the strength of the church comes through everyday servants.

- Phoebe didn't demand to have her name in lights.
- She didn't ask for a platform.
- She took her everyday reality—her business acumen, her wealth, her travel itinerary—and she completely surrendered it to the Lordship of Christ.
- She leveraged her everyday resources to carry the heavy freight of ministry.

Some of you are sitting in this room today with business acumen, with financial resources, with administrative gifts, or simply just a servant's heart to get things done in the background and you are waiting for a formal ministry title to start using these gifts and abilities for the kingdom.

You are waiting for a microphone, an invitation, an appointment to some position.

The strength of the church comes when its members stop waiting.

- God wants to take your everyday career, your everyday resources, and your everyday influence and use them as the very engine that drives His gospel forward in this city.
- Strength isn't found in a single charismatic leader; it is found in the quiet, faithful people who say, "God, whatever I have, it's yours, for the sake of your kingdom."
- Phoebe shows us that the engine of the early church ran on everyday servants who leveraged their resources for the kingdom.
- Let me be clear about something: everyday faithfulness is rarely comfortable. It is not polite, and it is not always as clean as writing a check or organizing logistics.
- Sometimes, behind-the-scenes faithfulness requires you to step straight into the mess, the danger, and the grit of other people's lives.

As Paul continues his greetings in verse 3, he shifts his focus from the woman who helped fund the mission and deliver this letter, to a married couple who provided the actual battleground for it.

In their story, we discover our second truth: **The courage of the Church shines brightest in the trenches.**

II. The Courage of the Church Shines Brightest in the Trenches (vv. 3-5a)

Look at Romans 16:3–5 *"3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4 who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; 5 also greet the church that is in their house..."*

- Prisca and Aquila were a blue-collar, tent-making, husband-and-wife team.
- Most importantly, they were Jewish.
 - Years earlier, the Emperor Claudius had issued an edict expelling all Jews from Rome.
 - The Roman historian Suetonius recorded this event, noting that Claudius kicked the Jews out because they were constantly causing disturbances over a

man named "Chrestus"—Christ.

- Think about the trauma of that. Prisca and Aquila were ethnically and religiously targeted.
 - They lost their business, their home, and their stability for the sake of the gospel years before they ever met Paul. They were already battle-tested and bore the scars from it.
- But look where they are now.
 - They are back in the capital city.
 - They had the courage to march right back into the belly of the beast—back into a city that had previously exiled them—just to establish a gospel beachhead.
- Paul says two things about this couple that should completely shatter our comfortable version of polite Christianity.
 1. First, he says they "**risked their necks**" for his life.
 - a. In the original Greek, that phrase is literal. The verb is *hupotithēmi*, which means "to place under."
 - b. It is the specific imagery of someone voluntarily laying their own neck under the executioner's axe in the place of someone else. We don't know exactly when this happened, but at some point, a mob or a magistrate came for the Apostle Paul and this Jewish couple stepped in front of the blade for the Apostle to the Gentiles.
 - c. They looked at the greatest missionary of their generation and said, "If you want him, you have to go through us."
 2. That is breathtaking courage. But I want you to see how that courage was practically lived out, because of the second thing Paul says about them: "*Greet also the church in their house.*"
 - We need to reconstruct our mental image of the early Church.
 - For the first three hundred years of Christian history, there were no steeples, no stages, and no massive cathedrals.
 - The Church typically met in the *atrium*—the central courtyard—of a Roman home.
- Prisca and Aquila didn't just risk their necks against a violent mob; they risked their personal space, their property, and their peace and quiet every single week.
 - They took their private sanctuary and turned it into public space.

- They let the messy, unpolished, chaotic reality of first-century sinners spill right into their living room.

As the early church father John Chrysostom said of this couple:

"They had made their house a church... their house was a heaven." — **John Chrysostom**

- This is what it means to be in the trenches.

We live in a culture that tells us our home is our castle—a fortress meant to insulate us from the exhausting demands of the outside world. Polite Christianity says, "I'll go to a building for an hour on Sunday, sit in my row, and go back to my private, pristine life."

But the courage of the early Church was found in men and women who were willing to get their carpets dirty. They were willing to have their furniture scuffed by strangers. They were willing to stay up late having difficult, tear-filled conversations over a dining room table with people who were spiritually bleeding out.

Some of us might need to hear this today: The most courageous thing we can do for the gospel this year might just be opening our front door.

- It might be deciding to host a small group, even though our house isn't perfectly clean.
- It might be inviting that struggling co-worker over for dinner, or taking in a foster child, or turning your kitchen table into a place where the broken people in our neighborhood can find the grace of Jesus.
- That isn't glamorous work.
- It won't make us famous.
- But Prisca and Aquila show us that the courage of the Church doesn't shine on a stage—it shines brightest right there in the messy, beautiful trenches of everyday hospitality.

When we decide to get into the trenches like Prisca and Aquila—when we actually open our lives and our homes to the messy, gritty reality of ministry—we quickly discover something: it is exhausting work.

- It will demand your time and drain your physical energy.
- But it is a *holy* exhaustion. It is the kind of pouring out that leaves you profoundly full, because there is absolutely no greater joy than watching God use your ordinary, messy life to eternally change someone else's.

In the first-century Roman Empire, physical labor and exhaustion were despised. The elites avoided sweat at all costs; that's what slaves and the lower classes were for. If you

had status, you had comfort. But as Paul continues down this greeting list, he doesn't celebrate the rested, comfortable elite. He highlights the overlooked, the marginalized, and the exhausted.

And as he does, he shows us our third and final truth: **The beauty of the Church is found in its invisible laborers.**

III. The Beauty of the Church is Found in its Invisible Laborers (vv. 5b-16)

Romans 16:5–16 "5 also greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epänetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. 6 Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. 7 Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me. 8 Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. 9 Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys my beloved. 10 Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus. 11 Greet Herodion, my kinsman. Greet those of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord. 12 Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord. 13 Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine. 14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them. 15 Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. 16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you."

When we read verses 5 through 16, it feels a little like reading an ancient phone book. We tend to skim past names like Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, and Apelles because they don't mean anything to us. But to the original audience, this list of names was a sociological miracle.

- To understand the beauty of what Paul is doing here, we have to understand the ugliness of the Roman Empire.
 - Rome was a society obsessed with status.
 - It operated on a brutal caste system.
 - The elite were at the top, and at the bottom were the slaves—who made up perhaps a third of the city's population.
 - In Rome, a slave was not considered a person; a slave was property. A piece of talking machinery.
- Archaeology and historical records tell us that names like Ampliatus, Urbanus, Hermes, and Persis were common slave names.

- Paul also greets believers in the households of Aristobulus—who was the grandson of Herod the Great—and Narcissus, a wealthy freedman of the Emperor.
 - The Christians in those households were almost certainly slaves working for pagan masters.
- In the Roman Empire, a wealthy aristocrat and a common slave would never share a meal.
- They would never associate as equals.
- But in verse 16, Paul commands this diverse, mixed-status group of house churches to "*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*"
 - In other words: Embrace one another.
 - Look the runaway slave in the eye, look the wealthy nobleman in the eye, and recognize that at the foot of the cross, the ground is completely level.

Notice who Paul specifically singles out for the highest honor.

- Look at verse 6: "*Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.*"
- Look at verse 12: "*Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa.*"
- *Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.*"

Four women.

- And Paul uses a very specific Greek verb to describe them: *kopiaō*.
 - Your English Bible probably translates it as "worked hard" or "labored," but that doesn't quite capture it.
 - In the first century, *kopiaō* meant to toil to the point of physical exhaustion.
 - It meant to work until your muscles burned and you were ready to drop.
- In the Roman world, physical exhaustion was for the lower classes. The ultimate goal of a successful Roman citizen was leisure—getting someone else to sweat for you.
- Paul flips the script. He looks past the elite, he looks past the people with titles, and he points right at Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis.
 - He says, "Do you want to know who the real heroes are? Look at the exhausted women. Look at the people doing the back-breaking, unglamorous labor to serve the saints."

We have historical proof that these invisible, exhausted women were the true engine of the early church.

- About fifty years after Paul wrote this letter, a Roman governor named Pliny

the Younger was tasked with investigating this dangerous new movement called Christianity. He wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan explaining how he tried to uncover the "truth" about their secret house church meetings.

- And who did he interrogate?
 - He didn't arrest the wealthy property owners.
 - He didn't go after the aristocratic men.
 - Pliny wrote that to find out how the church actually operated, he arrested and tortured two female slaves.
 - He noted in his official report that the church called these slave women *ministrae*—deacons.
- Even the pagan Roman government knew what we so often forget: the strength and survival of the Christian church rested squarely on the shoulders of its invisible, exhausted laborers.

This is where we find the true beauty of the Church.

- The beauty of the Church is not in a polished Sunday production.
- It is not in the lights, the stage, or the livestream.

The beauty of the Church is found in its invisible laborers.

- Every Sunday, this church runs on the physical exhaustion of people who will never hold a microphone.
- It runs on the moms and Grandmothers who serve in the children's ministry.
- It runs on the men who show up early in the freezing cold to salt the sidewalks.
- It runs on those who show up to cut up and clean up from a tree that a storm dropped in our parking area.
- It runs on volunteer servants of the Lord who clean the church and take out the trash, send out cards to let others know that they are not forgotten, plan the music, fold the bulletins, bring snacks, track the finances, or simply those who just decide to straighten out the rows of chairs when they notice them out of place.
- It runs on the widow or widower who sits in their living room on a Tuesday morning, interceding in prayer for a church that might not even know they are doing it.

Some of you feel like Persis or Mary today.

You are physically exhausted.

You are pouring yourself out for your family, for your neighbors, or for this local body,

and you feel entirely invisible.

The culture tells you that if you don't have a platform, your work doesn't matter.

But Romans 16 stands as a permanent, eternal reminder:

God sees the invisible laborer.

He sees your sweat.

He sees your late nights.

He sees your quiet sacrifices.

He sees you when no one else does.

And in His Kingdom, the exhausted servants are the ones who are celebrated.

God sees your exhaustion, and He honors your quiet sacrifices.

As we take a step back and look at this beautiful, chaotic, exhausting, incredibly diverse list of names in Romans 16, a radically different picture of the Church emerges than the one our culture tries to sell us today.

Conclusion

We've seen that the true **strength** of the Church doesn't come from the person with the biggest platform; it comes through everyday servants like Phoebe, who quietly carry the heavy freight behind the scenes.

We've seen that the **courage** of the Church doesn't shine on a stage; it shines brightest in the trenches, through people like Prisca and Aquila who risk their comfort, open their homes, and get their carpets dirty for the gospel.

We've seen that the true **beauty** of the Church and our Church isn't found in a polished production; it is found in the invisible laborers—the exhausted, faithful men and women who serve without an audience.

In a culture that tells you that you only matter if you have a following, a title, or a microphone, God is telling you something entirely different.

- Some of you might feel like your service goes completely unnoticed.
- You might think that arriving early to set up chairs, rocking a crying baby in the nursery, leading a small group in your living room, or quietly financially supporting this ministry is too small to matter.
- But God is keeping meticulous records.
- The world may never know your name, but as Paul reminds us in Philippians 4, your name is written in the Book of Life.

You are known by the King, and in His kingdom: that makes you a hero.

So here is my challenge to you as we leave today.

First, **embrace the trenches**. Stop waiting for a platform to do ministry. Trade the myth of celebrity for the beauty of everyday faithfulness. Find a place to serve in this church or in your neighborhood this week, even if it costs you a little discomfort.

Second, **honor the invisible**. Look around this room. Think about the people whose quiet sacrifices make this church family function. Before you leave this building today, find one of those unsung heroes. Look them in the eye, tell them you see their labor, and thank them for it.

The gospel has never advanced through superstars. It advances through ordinary believers.

- Let's be a church of everyday faithfulness.