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Romans 16:1-27

34th Message

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A FAMILY BUILT ON LOVE

SERIES: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ETHICS?

It has been an honor to journey with you through Paul's letter to the Romans. The letter was first recorded by the slave Tertius and taken by Phoebe from Corinth to Rome. Romans is probably the most important document in Western Civilization. May we be established in the faith according to its contents, and strengthened to see the majesty and beauty of Jesus Christ.

A special blessing in my life over the past four years has been getting to know a friend who is a medical doctor. He has a fascinating story about his coming to Christ. After suffering through two disastrous marriages and divorces, he went on a search for meaning and purpose in his life. He decided to volunteer one day a week to work in an AIDS clinic in San Francisco. There he watched many young men die. But one man in particular deeply touched him. This man revealed that at times he had as many as five or six sexual encounters with men a day. When my friend asked him why, he replied that he was looking for love. My friend watched this young man die—lonely, empty, isolated, without family or love. This made a profound impact on him and was instrumental in motivating him to pursue the same goal, love.

I think it could be better stated that love came looking for him, for God sent him a beautiful Christian woman (who later became his wife). Then he began attending a home Bible study and learned about Christ. On June 25, 1984, at 1:38 in the morning, he woke up and felt the presence of Christ in his room. He said that presence gave forth a love he had never known before. It was then that he gave his life to Jesus Christ.

Since that day, he has been on a journey of love, for he discovered that he was adopted into a worldwide family with no age limits or distinctions. Even the Jew and Gentile are wedded together in the bonds of love. Last year, he and I travelled behind the Iron Curtain together. There, I watched him minister in love to more than 100 people at a picnic. With his doctor's bag, he was able to treat people who were sick and hurting. Then he told them about his life and taught them the wonderful message of love in Jesus Christ from the Scripture. When we went backpacking, he found another family of brothers and sisters. In his house, there is a photograph of that family on his wall—21 people hiding out in the mountains, teaching the Scripture and sharing together. These are his brothers and sisters for life. In just four short years, my friend has become a fulfillment of what Jesus said to his disciples in Mark 10:29-30:

“Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.” (NASB)

The first half of that verse has become a reality in my friend's life. He has been adopted into the family of love.

This is the theme of Romans 16, the last chapter of Paul's epistle. As you remember, this book has three major divisions. In chapters

1–8, the apostle shared with us the plan of salvation, from guilt and condemnation to glory. Then chapters 9–11 showed how this plan of salvation was moving out on a worldwide scale to create one family. Originating with the Jews, going to the Gentiles and returning to the Jews, the gospel has made us one family united in love. Then we saw in chapters 12–15 the ethics of this family. In everything this family does, whether it be worship, ministry, or relating to the world or government, the bottom line is love. Love is the characteristic of this family.

In Romans 16, Paul gives 33 examples or illustrations of this love from the first century. This text has four divisions.

Outline:

Greetings to the Christians in Rome (1-16)

Warning against false teachers (17-20)

Greetings from brothers with Paul (21-23)

Benediction (24-26)

Since the text is long and there are so many names, instead of taking every name individually and chronologically, I will treat the text thematically using the titles *Family Builders*, *Family Predators*, and, *The Father of the Family*. Paul is going to show us how to build a family in love. There are six major categories of family builders in the body of Christ. We should all find our place in one of these in order to help build this family in love.

I. Family Builders (16:1-16, 21-23)

The first category is

A. Valuable Women

Women are mentioned more in the New Testament than in any other literature of that day. In this text, several prominent women are mentioned for their ministries. In the gospels, women were the first to receive the announcement of the coming of Christ. They were also the first to see the resurrection. Then they had to announce it to their dull male companions, the disciples, who did not believe them at first. The book of Acts records that when the church was born women held important positions in the ministry according to their gifts.

I must say I have truly learned to appreciate the female contribution in life. I was raised with a mother and three sisters. I now have a wife and three daughters. What I have concluded is that it takes a four to one ratio in my life to keep me on the right path!

The first woman we learn about in Romans 16 is Phoebe.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; 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. (16:1-2)

Cenchrea was one of the two seaports of Corinth. Phoebe had a marvelous ministry there with Paul. The title for her ministry “helper” is better translated “patroness.” In other words, Phoebe had some financial means, and with her own money she subsidized Paul so that

he could be set aside for full-time ministry. With her funds, she also helped the church and set others aside for the work of the gospel.

Because she was so faithful at that task, she was given the honor of being the official representative of the church of Corinth to take this epistle to Rome. What an honor! Think of the contribution she made to world history. Also think of the dangers she encountered along the way. She is called a deacon. She was a servant sent on a task, representing the church in Corinth. As a result, Paul instructed the Roman church to extend generous hospitality to her.

The ministry of patroness is a valuable ministry in the body of Christ. Years ago, we had a woman like this at our church. We called her the “purple lady” because she always wore purple, and everything in her house was purple. She was a widow of some means who enjoyed giving of her resources to further the gospel of Christ. She supported many young men in seminary. She was exactly like Phoebe.

Another interesting group of women is named in verse 12:

Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis [“Persian woman”] the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord. (16:12)

Tryphaena means “Dainty” and Tryphosa “Delicate.” These two women were probably sisters and quite possibly twins because it was not uncommon in the ancient world to give twins names derived from the same word root. Their names suggest that they were probably aristocrats of a high station. Notice the basis of their commendation. Even though they were aristocrats, they willingly gave themselves to hard work for Jesus Christ. In other words, they were not afraid to get their hands dirty. This shows that they had outstanding character.

We have had many women do the same thing in our church, whether in practicing leadership, starting new works or serving. I am delighted at how many of our ministries were founded by women. Both the Crisis Pregnancy Center and our Vietnamese ministry were started by women. Our ministry to the Polish refugees and to children in Backyard Bible Clubs are also handled by women.

This is one important category in the body of Christ—valuable women. There is a second category.

B. Special Singles

Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them. (16:14)

These men all had Greek names and were probably businessmen who had come to Rome and were now living together. Evidently, they were using their living quarters for a house church. Therefore, they had formed a fellowship group as singles and had gathered together to have an outreach into the community.

In verse 15, we see another singles’ group:

Greet Philologus [lover of the word] and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. (16:15)

These five also comprised some type of living or fellowship group. Dr. Barclay has an interesting suggestion about them. Perhaps it was this Nereus may have been the housekeeper of the prominent Roman citizen Flavius Clemens who later became the Consul of Rome, the highest political office in the city. In A.D. 95, Flavius Clemens was condemned to death by the Emperor Domitian because he had become a Christian, and his wife Domatilla, who was also a Christian, was banished. In Rome there is a Christian graveyard dedicated to Domatilla. Dr. Barclay thinks that perhaps Nereus, as a single person and servant, penetrated that home for Jesus Christ.

Singles’ groups have a wonderful ministry in the body. They can be ready and available because they are not tied down by family responsibilities. Thus, they can easily use their homes for outreach.

We have a group like this in our church who call themselves the S.L.O.B.S.—Single, Lonely, Only, Bible Study. When I had the opportunity to teach them once, I was brought into their intimate circle of fellowship. They even gave me a T-shirt—something they do for all of their teachers. What an exciting ministry they have as singles!

We have seen Paul recognize valuable women and special singles. Now we come to the third group.

C. Courageous Couples

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

Aquila who was a native of Pontus, the southeast region of the Black Sea, was married to Priscilla. Whenever they are named by Luke or Paul, Priscilla is always mentioned first. This may indicate she had the more prominent spiritual gifts or the more striking personality. We are told in other passages of Scripture that they were tentmakers and Jews. In A.D. 49, Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome. When they pulled up stakes and left, they happened to come to Corinth.

And it was there she met Paul, the tentmaker, who just happened to be at Corinth at the same time. Because they were willing to become aliens in the world, they had the opportunity to be disciplined by the apostle for a year and a half. After he trained them, they followed him to Ephesus. When the edict was lifted upon Claudius’ death in A.D. 54, they were able to return to Rome.

Wherever they went, this couple had a church in their home. We always read, “Greet them *and the church in their house.*” They must have had the gift of hospitality. They always opened up their home for Jesus Christ. They were also courageous, for Paul says they risked their lives in some way for him. Perhaps during the riots in Ephesus, they hid Paul and took care of him.

We had a couple like this in our church years ago. When I took on the college ministry, I jokingly asked them to move on campus at Stanford University so that we could meet in their home for Bible study. Since the husband was the administrator for Stanford Hospital, they were able to do just that! Then they invited me over to see the house and to talk to a contractor who was also coming. They said, “Tell the contractor what you want done to our house. Do you want a wall moved? Do you want a study upstairs? What do you need?” Every Tuesday night for three years, this woman turned over her kitchen to two students who cooked dinner for whoever came. After dinner, we met for our study and often stayed until midnight. We had as many as 80 students on occasion. This couple used their gifts to triple my ministry.

Another outstanding couple is mentioned by Paul in verse 7:

Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen [fellow-Jews], and my fellow-prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me. (16:7)

Scholars are uncertain whether the name Junias is masculine or feminine (Junia). Because they have not found another masculine form of this name some identify Junia as the wife here. Paul says these two were believers in Christ before him, and since he calls them kinsmen they were probably Hellenistic Jews. At some time, this couple shared an imprisonment with Paul. Any experience like that would strengthen the bonds of love.

When he calls them “apostles,” I do not think he means apostles in the primary sense of the original twelve and Paul. Rather, I think he considered them to be apostles in the secondary sense of church-planters. They were missionaries or pioneers of new works. They were so good at what they did Paul says they had an outstanding reputation among the apostles.

We have now met the valuable women, the special singles and the courageous couples. Look now at the fourth group of people.

D. Adopting Mothers

There are always mothers in the body of Christ who like to adopt others.

Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine. (16:13)

This Rufus is most certainly the same Rufus mentioned in Mark 15:21 as the son of Simon of Cyrene who one day was ordered by a Roman soldier to carry the cross of Jesus Christ. Since he walked side by side with Jesus to Golgatha, you can imagine the eye contact that must have passed between them. The love that he saw melted his heart, and now his son Rufus was eminent in the family of Jesus Christ. I am sure he never forgot what it meant to be crucified with Christ.

At some point Rufus’ mother adopted the apostle Paul as a son. After becoming a Christian, Paul had been cast out by his own relatives. I think this “adoption” probably happened during the time of Acts 13 when Barnabas went to Tarsus looking for Paul and brought him to Antioch. At Antioch, one of the believers was named Simeon with a surname Niger (dark-skinned). This man has been identified as Simon the Cyrene. When Paul lodged with this family, Rufus’ mother adopted him. Thus, when he was an outcast with no hope, no kinsmen and no inheritance, he was welcomed by a mother into the body of Christ and treated like a son. Paul never forgot that.

Last week up in Napa, there was a demonstration of hatred between the Skinheads, a white-supremacy group, and opponents of their view. One reporter outlined the background of these Skinheads. Most of them come from underprivileged and broken homes. How many of their lives could be changed if Christian mothers would “adopt” them and welcome them into loving homes?

I had a mother who “adopted” me during my first year in Christ. My economics teacher in high school imparted two gifts to me. She taught me to take new ground for Christ and to never be sluggish. Then she pointed me in the direction of my wife. When I was a senior and headed for Stanford, I was dating several girls. She sat me down and said, “Brian, if I were you, I would quit chasing around after those other girls and settle down with a girl like Emily. She’s my cup of tea!” We should all have such loving matchmakers! In any case, she displayed the wonderful role of the adopting mother for me.

We have seen valuable women, special singles, courageous couples and adopting mothers. The fifth group, and probably the most influential in the kingdom of God, is what I call

E. Sagacious Slaves

Greet Apelles the approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion my kinsman. Greet those of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord. (16:10-11)

In the ancient world, a freedman could have a number of slaves as his property. If that freedman died without any heirs, the estate was absorbed into the imperial household under the name of the man.

Thus, we have the “household of Aristobulus” and the “household of Narcissus”—slaves from the households known by those names.

This was God’s way of getting these servants of Christ into the highest circles of the imperial government to share the kingdom of God. Aristobulus was the grandson of Herod the Great and was a friend of the Emperor Claudius. Thus, he was close to the inner workings of the government. Some of his slaves were obviously Christians. Sandy and Headlam say, “The Narcissus in question was very possibly the well-known freedman of that name, who had been put to death by Agrippina shortly after the accession of Nero some three or four years before. His slaves would then in all probability become the property of the Emperor, and would help to swell the imperial household.” These slaves were in a position to lead high-level Roman officials to Jesus Christ, and for this some were martyred. How was the imperial organization penetrated for the gospel? Not from the top down, but from the bottom up through bold servants!

There is another slave mentioned in verse 8:

Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. (16:8)

In the Catacomb of Domatilla, the Christian burial ground in Rome, this name is carved on a stone over an ornately decorated tomb. This means that Ampliatus was highly respected by the church leaders of Rome. What penetration into the community!

These slaves did not see their low estate in life as making them insignificant in the kingdom. They knew how the government worked, and they watched where they were placed by the sovereign will of God. Wherever they went, they boldly shared Jesus Christ.

They were not only bold, they were educated. The man who transcribed this letter for Paul was Tertius, which means “Third” in Latin. In the ancient world, a slave was given a number when he was born, not a name. When the children were called in for dinner, the mother might have cried, “One, Two, Three, Four—you are all here!” Tertius did not let the fact that he was a slave keep him from being educated in higher things. His pen and his hand took the dictation for this letter. He was privileged to be involved in the first incarnation of the inspired word through the apostle Paul.

Many of you work in service positions such as waiters, secretaries, or nurses. Never undervalue your contribution to the body of Christ. One of the most impressive witnesses I know is an auto mechanic who never completed his formal education. But wherever he goes, he boldly shares Christ. He has not allowed the fact that he did not get his high school diploma to keep him from being educated in the gospel, and he continues to grow in grace, in ideas and in theology.

We have valuable women, special singles, courageous couples, adopting mothers, and sagacious slaves. There is one final category mentioned in verse 23.

F. Honorable Officials

Erastus, the city treasurer greets you. (16:23b)

The word “city treasurer” literally means “a clerk of works” which actually was a rather humble office. But in Corinth, there is a paving block that bears Erastus’ name: “ERASTUS. PRO. AED. S.P. STRAVIT.” This is translated, “Erastus, in return for his aedileship (commissioner of public works), laid this pavement at his own expense.” This one stone tells us that although Erastus was merely a clerk of works when this letter was written, he held a higher position later. Because he had done such an excellent job as a city official, he was later promoted to commissioner of public works for the entire city of Corinth. Out of appreciation, he presented the city with a marble pavement he paid for at his own expense. To me, that is an example of Christian excellence at work. What a demonstration of the body of Christ in those days!

We have people like this at our church. City officials are worshipping among us. One time I was selected for jury duty, and when I looked up to the bench, I could not believe who was there—a Christian brother from our church. A year later, as it turned out, this Christian judge had done his job with such excellence he was promoted to Superior Court on the recommendation of the Governor of the State of California. Our brother is obviously an honorable official like Erastus.

All of these family builders are involved in the body of Christ. God uses valuable women, special singles, courageous couples, adopting mothers, sagacious slaves, and honorable officials.

Are you part of these family builders? There are four qualities that all of these Christians displayed in the first century.

First, *they made Christ Lord*. They realized they were not automatically placed in this family. They had to make Christ Lord of their lives, and they considered serving him to be an honor. Many of them risked their lives for the privilege of following Christ, and we know from history that many of them were martyred for his sake. You need to make Christ Lord, to make the personal decision to be a part of this family.

Second, *they loved each other*. In Rome, the house churches included Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, slave and free. All were supping together freely as one family. There were no divisions. If your fellowship includes only a small circle of people, you are robbing yourself. You need to open your heart wide to the entire body of Christ. We are involved in an international community bonded in love.

Third, *they were devoted to service*. These saints did not leave the ministry to the “professionals.” In fact, they could not, for all of the apostles were locked up and busy writing letters. These saints had to do the work of the ministry. They recognized that the kingdom of God was spread by the Spirit. They also knew that they all had gifts, and they used them. In fact, they built their lives around them.

Fourth, *they gave a courageous witness to the world*. They knew this earth was not their home. They saw themselves as aliens headed for a heavenly Zion. If the government uprooted them, they realized that God was behind the action. If an edict was passed by the pagan Claudius ordering all Jews to leave Rome, they went willingly. They knew God was at work spreading his kingdom.

The same historical phenomenon is happening today in China. Years ago, an edict was passed saying that all missionaries had to leave the country. Decades later, the power of the edict has collapsed. Now the Chinese government will pay anyone, whether single or married, to teach their people English. This has once again opened the doors for missionaries. We can put you in touch with the organization that will get you a position there. Some of our people have already been there, and they say that every night the students want to hear about Jesus Christ.

II. Family Predators (16:17-20)

The apostle goes on to say that there is a danger threatening the love of the body, however.

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the un-

suspecting. For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil. And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. (16:17-20)

Paul says there are false believers in our midst, predators who speak out of the sides of their mouths. They are false Christians who use smooth talk and flattery. Such are only interested in feeding their own fleshly bellies. These people threaten the wonderful bonds of love.

“Don’t be distracted by them,” says the apostle. “Keep doing what is right. Your love and your ministry are too important. Keep doing what you are called to do and let Christ expose them. Don’t even give them the time of day.” This will keep the family healthy. Jesus Christ will crush Satan soon enough. In the meantime, these false believers are not to distract us from our ministry of love.

We now come to the most important member of this family, the Father.

III. The Father of the Family (16:25-27)

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever. Amen. (16:25-27)

In that day the saying was “All roads lead to Rome.” The road in all our hearts leads to the heavenly Father who loves us. In the worldwide family of Christ, we become bonded together—weak and strong, rich and poor. The longer we live, the more overwhelmed we are by his love. It is a privilege to be a part of this family. We are with the Father, we are a part of his family, and we have been given the gift of faith to obey him and to appropriate this wonderful life.

Paul is awed by the most wonderful attribute of God—his faithfulness. What God wrote through the prophets has come to pass. What he has said he has done, and he will do the same thing now in our lives. God establishes his people according to what he has revealed in his Word. Therefore, we are to spend our days giving him the glory that is due him in song.

Many of you may have identified with the AIDS patient I mentioned earlier. Perhaps you are still looking for love. You may not know this family that I have been talking about. I would encourage you to wait no longer. Enter into the fellowship of Jesus Christ.

A year ago, my doctor friend met another AIDS patient, a 31-year-old woman who was also lonely. She had contracted the disease in her quest for love. This time my friend had a message of hope for her and he led her to Christ. That woman was my wife’s sister. She died March 3, 1988. The second half of Mark 10:29-30 has now been fulfilled in my friend’s life. He has already received in this life ten times the houses, brothers and sisters. He knows his present family. And Jesus says that in the age to come there is eternal life. Now waiting for him in heaven is a daughter in the family of God.

Amen.

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