



## Signing Off

### Lesson 20 | Romans 16

Paul's letters were long by ancient standards. Based on the records that we have, the average length of an ancient letter written in Greek was 87 words. The average length of one of Paul's letters was 2,945 words.<sup>1</sup> Romans is the longest letter of Paul's, coming in at over 7,000 words! As Paul comes near the end of this long, important letter he wants to make one final impression on the church. In his final signing off he greets his friends at Rome, shares a few final thoughts, and then closes with a powerful doxology of praise to God.

Sadly, this section of Romans could be quickly glossed over by many people. "Wait," you might even be thinking, "are we really going to study the chapter with all the names?" While there are a lot of names in this section, there's a lot more happening as well. And studying those names can have more spiritual benefit than most people realize. All of God's Word is given by inspiration, and all of it is profitable (2 Timothy 3:16). Paul's conclusion to this great letter should not be seen as extra or unnecessary. It should rather be seen as part of God's holy, inspired Word which speaks to us today.

***Why do you think people so quickly gloss over the introduction and conclusion to the letters of the New Testament?***

***What is lost if we don't pay attention to all of God's Word?***

### **Ministry Is People (1-16, 21-24)**

Some have made the joke that ministry would be easy if only it weren't for all these people! While it is true that dealing with people can be challenging (and that goes for you and me, too), we must not forget that people are the whole point of ministry! Paul's long list of names near the end of this book might seem random or unrelated to our lives today, but there is much here we can learn. Rather than working verse by verse through this section, we will get a bird's eye view and hit some of the highlights of the chapter.

***When you read through the passage, ask your group what they can learn about relationships by hearing how Paul interacts with those he knew in Rome.***

### **Relationships Matter**

Some people have tried to argue that Romans 16 wasn't originally in Paul's letter and was added later. One reason for this is that Paul had never been to Rome, and yet he somehow managed to send greetings

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<sup>1</sup> These statistics come from R. E. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection*, 163.

to 26 people living in Rome. Yet as one Bible professor responded, “This isn’t a problem if you’re Paul and it’s Rome.” In other words, it’s not a surprise that one of the most connected people in early Christianity knew quite a lot of people in one of the most connected cities in the ancient world.

What does this have to do with us? Well, it shows us how seriously Paul takes the matter of relationships. Many people today think Christianity is all about me and my relationship to God. While your relationship with God is certainly the core of your faith, we must not forget that our relationships with others matter quite a bit, too. Whenever we see Paul, he is seeking to maintain the relationships that he has built over the years. You can’t live as a successful Christian if you aren’t building and maintaining godly relationships.

***What does it look like today to build and maintain godly relationships?***

***Why do you think it is that people don’t build and maintain godly relationships?***

### **Ministry Requires a Team**

Many people see Paul as a David Livingstone type missionary. They imagine a Paul all by himself who goes charging alone into places that have never heard the gospel, and it’s just Paul versus the city. Nothing could be further from the truth. From the very first trip he went on, Paul had ministry partners. Twice in this passage Paul will refer to his coworkers (“helper” 16:3, 9). On three occasions he will commend those who labored with him (16:6, 12). Paul was part of a team. Many of these names are somewhat well-known – Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, Silas, Aquila, Priscilla. In this chapter we get an even bigger glimpse at just how many people Paul knew, partnered with, and worked with.

***Why do you think some imagine Paul as a loner when there is so much in Scripture about those with whom he worked?***

What is true for Paul is true for us – for ministry to go forward we need a team. Successful ministries aren’t built on the backs of dynamic leaders, although God can certainly use dynamic leaders. Successful ministries occur when God’s people work together to accomplish God’s purposes. This means that you are needed! Most of these servants we wouldn’t even know unless Paul had mentioned them in passing at the end of his letter. They may not have had glorious tasks and may not even have been teachers or preachers. But their work was important, and Paul made it a point to thank and commend them. You have a role to play, and the ministry here will only go forward as you seek to participate in what is going on.

***Why do you think that people don’t see the importance of participating in the ministry of their church?***

### **We Aren’t Just Churches; We are the Church**

We often emphasize the autonomy of the local church, and rightly so. This means that each church is independent and that no presbytery or council can tell our church what it can and can’t do. Yet if we’re not careful we can sometimes lean a little too far into the “independence” and forget that we aren’t the only church God is working with and through. God has people all over the world who are a part of His global church.

***How can realizing that God is at work in other churches be important for us as we think through what God is up to in the world today?***

There is an important balance that needs to be struck here. On the one hand some people can become so focused on the fact that all Christians are part of the church that they don’t see any need to be a part of a local church. Others can get so focused on their local church that they become proud and arrogant,

thinking theirs is the best if not the only church through which God is working. Paul works with local churches, but he wants those churches to have vibrant connections with each other and so he not only greets the believers in Rome, but he sends greetings from those in Corinth as well (16:21-23).

### **Honoring Servants Is Biblical**

Some people feel uncomfortable when Christians get honored. Whether it's a recognition Sunday, or sharing what a missionary or speaker has done, it bothers them when someone is publicly commended for their service to God. "After all," such Christians sincerely reason, "shouldn't all the glory go back to God?" While this might seem logical, it isn't biblical. While all of our accomplishments should direct praise back to God, that doesn't stop Paul from thanking and commending fellow servants for the work they have done. Paul is pretty free with compliments here, thanking and praising those whom he had worked with over the years. While we do want to be careful that we don't fall into man worship, we shouldn't allow that fear to keep us from doing what we see Paul doing in Scripture.

***How do we appropriately honor those who are worthy of honor while still making sure that God gets the ultimate glory?***

But not only does Paul honor these servants, he also doesn't honor all of them in the same way or even to the same degree. Some people simply have their name mentioned, which to be fair is still a tremendous honor to be remembered as a co-laborer with Paul forever in Scripture. Others receive higher praise for working hard, or being a fellow-prisoner, or laying down their neck for Paul, or being well-known to the apostles. Paul doesn't just give generic compliments; he specifically mentions meaningful things about individuals.

***Why don't we seek to give appropriate, concrete praise more often?***

### **Final Thoughts (17-20)**

As Paul nears the end of the letter, he gives out one more warning and one more encouragement. He warns the church that they need to be on the lookout for one of the most deadly foes a church can face – division (17-18). He then encourages the church over the good report he has heard and the confidence he has that God will help them to be ultimately victorious (19-20).

#### **Warnings about Potential Dangers (17-18)**

Disunity was a big deal for Paul. He spent much time working through the question of debatable issues (Romans 14:1-15:13). He had carefully laid out the relationship of Jews and Gentiles, desiring that both would humbly realize their need for God and would live in unity rather than arrogantly think they were better than the other (Romans 11). Paul begins his discussion on sacrificial living by discussing the importance of working together in unity with our spiritual gifts (Romans 12:3-13). A study of Paul's letters will demonstrate that unity was really, really important for Paul.

Not surprisingly, then, as Paul comes near the end of this letter he warns once again about the dangers which would attack the unity of the church. He encourages the church to watch our dissensions and stumbling blocks which take people away from the core truths of the faith. The real cause behind such false teaching is false teachers who want to use God's people to satisfy their own cravings.

***In what ways do false teachers take advantage of the God's people by sowing division?***

***How can Christians be on the lookout for divisive teachings and self-centered teachers?***

### **Encouragement to Continue in Obedience (19-20)**

Yet Paul also wants the church to know that he sees the good they are doing and is encouraged by it. He wants them to continue doing what is right and to keep learning and growing in wisdom while ignoring the false, wrong teachings. But Paul wants the church to know this warning doesn't come from a place of fear. Paul is confident about their future because he knows that God will succeed in empowering the church in their fight against evil.

***How can confidence in the final outcome of God's plan be a help to believers as they continue on their Christian walk?***

### **Closing Doxology (25-27)**

Paul ends the letter of Romans with one of the most beautiful doxologies in all of Scripture. These verses are a fitting end for a majestic book that thoroughly explains the gospel, yet makes that deep theology practical for everyday Christianity.

#### **God Is All-Powerful**

"What if I fail?" is a question that haunts many Christians, and for good reason. We are all far weaker than we would like to admit, and we know all too well the sinful tug of our own heart. When Paul begins to praise God at the end of this book sharing what God has done for us in Christ, he starts with a powerful opening when He says that God is the one who is able establish us securely in our faith.

***According to this passage, how is it that God keeps us from falling?***

Paul states that God is able to establish us "according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ." Our strength and spiritual stability comes from the message of Jesus and what He has done for us. This message was not previously known; it was a mystery. But now God has made it known to all the nations with the result that they can live in obedient faith.

***How does the gospel give us the strength to be established in our faith?***

#### **God Is All-Wise**

When Paul ended the doctrinal section in Romans 11, the thing that most overwhelmed him was the wisdom of God (11:33). As he comes to the end of the book, he continues to marvel at God's wisdom in everything he has done for Jews and Gentiles in the gospel. God's plan to save individuals from His wrath and to bring both Jew and Gentile to Himself through faith apart from works of the law was such a brilliant plan that Paul can't get over just how wise God is.

***In what other ways is the wisdom of God seen in the gospel?***

#### **God Is All-Glorious**

Finally, Paul ends the letter by praising God and ascribing glory to Him for all that He has done. The power of God to keep us from falling and the wisdom of God in planning out our salvation should result in praise from us. Paul's concluding statement in this letter is a prayer desiring that glory to be given to God.

***What does it mean when Paul prayed for glory to be to God through Jesus Christ?***

***How can we ascribe glory to God?***