

## **“The Church of Friends”**

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Scriptural Foundation: Romans 16:1-16, NIV

### **Personal Greetings**

<sup>1</sup>I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, <sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, <sup>4</sup>who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. <sup>5</sup>Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. <sup>6</sup>Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. <sup>7</sup>Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. <sup>8</sup>Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. <sup>9</sup>Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. <sup>10</sup>Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. <sup>11</sup>Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. <sup>12</sup>Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. <sup>13</sup>Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. <sup>14</sup>Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. <sup>15</sup>Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

<sup>16</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

As we prepare to move into a new church building in three short weeks, we remind ourselves that the church is not a building. We are thankful to God for our new building. I believe that this new building will be a great asset to the church and to her ministries, but the church is not a building. The church is a people. The church is a people set apart by God and because she is a people, she is relational by nature. The people in the church have been born again into a new relationship with the living God so that we talk with Him, we listen to Him, we follow Him, we love Him, we serve Him, we relate to Him, and we worship Him, and the people in the church have been placed into new relationships with others who are also a part of the family of God so that we talk with each other, we listen to each other, we love each other, we serve each other, we relate to each other, and we care for each other. No one enters into a personal relationship with God without also entering into personal relationships with the other members of God's family and of Jesus' church. When we are born again, we are born into a family, into a new community. The people in the church relate to God as their Father and the people in the church relate to one another as brothers and sisters.

A huge part of our identity as members in Jesus' church is our relationship with others in the family of God. When I was born into the Boerckel family, I had two older brothers. A couple of years later my sister was born into our family and I do not remember life without my two brothers and sister. Then as a young man I married a woman named Kimberly. We had three sons over the course of our first ten years together. When someone asks me, "Tell me about yourself," I talk about my mom, my dad, my two older brothers, my younger sister, my wife, my three sons and I talk about my Lord Jesus. Who I am has so much to do with the people that I relate to. Relationships largely define our identity. These people are so much a part of who I am that I cannot think of my life without thinking about them.

Friends, that is God's design for His church and that is God's design for His people. God designs that our relationships within His church be so special, so impactful, so profound, so deep, and so central to our lives that we cannot think of ourselves without also thinking of the relationships that we have with other people in the church of The Living God. If you are not experiencing deep, personal relationship within the church, then you are not experiencing the church as God intends. I believe that God would have you and me to experience much, much more. Our subject considers the horizontal relationships that God calls His own people to pursue within the context of the local church.

God has created each one of us with a longing for human relationship. God does not intend for us to live our lives in isolation from other people. No man is an island.<sup>1</sup> This world is a hard place and God does not design for us to walk it alone. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 speaks to the subject,

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<sup>1</sup> John Donne, Meditation XVII.

<sup>9</sup>Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup>For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!

God designed us to relate to one another in friendship so that we can share one another's burdens and we can share each other's joys. We need these sweet relationships in our lives in order to find encouragement in the midst of trials and in order to increase our joy in the midst of our service to God. God does not design us to be lone wolves or to be independent. God designs us to be connected to other people in Christian friendship.

It is reported that Howard Hughes, the man who at one time was worth approximately four billion dollars, said, "I'd give it all for one good friend." That is pretty sad, isn't it, but it is true. The wealthiest man in the world, at that time, would say that he would give it all if he could have just one, good friend. We need friends who love us at all times, friends whom we can count on in a crunch, friends who will confront us when we are wrong, friends who will cry with us when we are sad, and friends who will rejoice with us when we are happy.

I like the story of former UCLA football head coach Pepper Rodgers who was going through a losing season and he was undergoing so much intense criticism and pressure from alumni and fans. Things got so bad, he remembers with a smile, that he found friends hard to find. He said, "My dog was my only true friend." Rodgers says of that year, "I told my wife that every man needs at least two good friends—and she bought me another dog."

We don't have to buy a dog in order to have true, good, healthy friends. God intends for us to go to the church of The Living God and find them there.

In this study we look at Romans 16:1-16, and I believe that this is one of the most fascinating paragraphs in all the New Testament. It points to the kind of relationships that we can expect to find within the local church and it points as to how we can establish them. This paragraph contains the specific names of twenty-four people: seventeen men and seven women.

Why does Paul include this paragraph in a letter detailing the deep theology and implications of the Gospel? The first fifteen chapters of the letter of Romans reveal Paul to be a man of incredible intellect, a scholar, and a thinker. Some suppose that people who are interested in academics and interested in the world of ideas are people who are not very interested in other people and in relationships. Such people are often socially awkward and not "relationally minded," and indeed some intellectuals fit this description, but not Paul. Paul was a man of immense balance. He possessed great interest in doctrine and in deep thoughts regarding God, but he also possessed great interest in people. Paul was not a man who tried to go it alone and after writing to this church fifteen chapters of profound theological ideas, he sets aside Chapter 16 as a very personal note to bring that balance of the importance and necessity of relationship. Paul was very much in touch with people. Romans 16 reveals the focus, the energy, and the time that Paul spent in establishing friendships and in maintaining friendships. Paul teaches lessons here about Christian friendships that we need to learn. We will consider four aspects of Christian friendships. First we will consider the basis of Christian friendships; second, the unity of Christian friendships; third, the means of Christian friendships; and fourth, the love of Christian friendships.

Let's first consider the basis of Christian friendships. Christian friendship is not based upon geography or shared hobbies or personalities. When we read through this list of twenty-four individuals we discover that they have almost nothing in common and nothing of a worldly nature. The only thing that these twenty-four people have in common, that binds them together, is their love and commitment to the Lord Jesus. Christian friendships are built around a shared relationship with Jesus Christ, as we see in Verse 1,

<sup>1</sup> I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae...

Paul calls Phoebe his "sister" and a "servant of the church". He is bound to her by a mutual love for the Lord Jesus. We read, then in Verse 3,

<sup>3</sup> Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus...

Skip to Verse 5.

<sup>5</sup> Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.

We read in Verse 7,

<sup>7</sup> Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

We can go on and on though this list of names and the descriptions that Paul gives to his friends. Four times he describes his friends as being “in Christ”. Five times in this paragraph he describes his friends as being “in the Lord”. Two times in this paragraph he describes his friends as “sister” or “brother”. The common denominator which Paul is point to which links all of these people together in such a close and personal relationship is a living and active connection to the Lord Jesus through faith. The people on this list have very little else in common.

Notice that the connection of Paul’s friendship had nothing to do with doctrinal agreement or party affiliation. It was not that they were just a part of the same organization, but it was their special relationship with the Lord Jesus; it was their commitment to Him.

Do you know that it is possible to have friends who are Christians without having Christian friendships? It is possible to have friends who say, “Yes, I am a believer in Jesus,” but have that friendship be devoid of the essence of Christian friendship. Christian friendship is all about Jesus being the very center. Just because a person claims to be a Christian does not mean that they would make a good friend and it doesn’t mean that we have a Christian friendship with them. Paul’s relationships with these twenty-four individuals were relationships bound by their devotion to, their commitment to, and their obedience of the Lord Jesus. Paul writes to the church in Corinth, and he says in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, that there are some people in that church who call themselves Christians, but he is telling the church not to associate with them and do not be friends with them, because they are not living in obedience to and they are not living in commitment to the Lord Jesus. He is telling the church that they are living in rebellion against Him and they should not be friends with them or associate with such because they will corrupt them. That is the principle that Paul teaches.

When Christians do not place the glory of Jesus above everything else, Christian friendship cannot exist. Christian friendships are unique in that they pull us closer to the Lord Jesus. They draw us nearer to Him. They lead us to greater obedience, greater devotion, and greater service. Do you have friendships in your life that promote spiritual vitality rather than leading to spiritual lethargy? God intends for each one of us to have these kinds of friendships in our lives.

If you are a person who loves the Lord Jesus and you are committed to obeying Him and serving Him, then pursue friendships with people who are of like minds.

The unity of Christian friendships is also expressed through this list of twenty-four people. From the paragraph we learn that Christian friendships break down every social, economic, racial, and cultural barrier. As we reflect upon the names listed by Paul, we are impressed by the tremendous diversity we discover here. Some of the names on this list are slaves: Ampliatus in Verse 8, Urbanus in Verse 9, Hermes in Verse 14, and Philologus and Julia in Verse 15. These are all common slave names. John MacArthur comments on Ampliatus names in Verse 8: “In one of the earliest Christian catacombs near Rome, the name Ampliatus can still be seen on a beautifully decorated tomb. Because free Romans always had three names, the fact that this grave marker contains only a single name could be further evidence that the Ampliatus mentioned here by Paul was, or had been, a slave. But the fact that his tomb was elaborately decorated indicates that he was held in special high esteem by his fellow Christians and was one of their beloved brethren as well as Paul’s.” Here is a slave who has no status whatsoever. He would be given, likely, an unmarked grave were he to die without having this circle of friends gathered around him, but because he is such a special servant of the Lord, as a slave, he is given a prominent place in the early Christian graveyard in the catacombs, and his name set there, “Ampliatus”, for all to see, even to this day. Paul marks him out as one of the favored of God and what this tells us is that in the early church, and for the church throughout the ages, friendships transcend cultural barriers; barriers between slave man and free man. Those two never had anything to do with each other, but now, in Christ, they are friends. Wealthy and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile – every cultural barrier is challenged by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some of the names on this list are upper class, influential, wealthy people. In Verse 10 we read of Aristobulus, who is thought to be the brother of Herod Agrippa, one of the great leaders of the Roman government. In Verse 11, we find Herodian who is a relative of Herod. And, in Verse 11 also, we find Narcissus who is thought to be the secretary, a prominent government official, in the government of Claudius, the Emperor. These three were very likely important people by the world’s standards. They would not likely mingle with slaves anywhere else in their lives, but here, as part of Jesus’ church, they are set side-by-side as friends. The church no longer thinks of people in respect to social strata. As

part of the church, the wealthy and the influential did not expect special treatment that they were accustomed to in the world around them. They joyfully entered into relationships with people their world would consider unworthy because Christ brings into one body, one family, and one community.

In this list there are men and women. The early church was not a men's club. Contrary to the culture of the day, women were given places of prominence, esteem, and importance in the church. Paul is often criticized as being a "male chauvinist" or a misogynist because of his teaching regarding male headship within the context of marriage and because of his teaching regarding male leadership in the church, but nothing could be further from the truth that the Apostle Paul was a male chauvinist. Of the twenty-four names that Paul lists to the church at Rome as being people to greet as his friends, seven of them are women.

The first name listed in Chapter 16 is a woman named Phoebe, as we read in Verses 1-2,

<sup>1</sup> I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, <sup>2</sup> 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.

The name Phoebe is a feminine form of name "Apollo" which is a pagan god. She was likely born into a pagan family. Somewhere along the line she met the Lord Jesus and became very excited about serving Him. Paul commends her to the church in Rome, why? She is from the church in Cenchreae. Paul is writing this letter of Romans in Corinth. Cenchreae is a seaport of Corinth. It is only about eight miles away from Corinth. Paul now commends her to the church at Rome when he says, "Receive her and welcome her and help her with whatever she needs."

Why is Paul commending her? In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, there was no Federal Express, there was no UPS, and there was no United States Postal Service, so if you wanted to deliver a letter, you had to find someone who was traveling to the place you wanted the letter delivered. Phoebe is likely the one who delivers the letter of Romans from Corinth, where Paul has written it, to the church in Rome. Think of the treasured privilege that is; to carry the letter of Romans! There is only one copy and we think of how God has used the letter of Romans all throughout the ages to bring about faith and life. The Reformation would have been impossible apart from the letter of Romans, and this dear woman has in her hands the single copy and she travels miles upon miles to faithfully deliver it to the church at Rome, and he says, "Church, when she gets here, welcome her and receive her with open arms and great affection."

Phoebe likely is a wealthy woman because she is a "patron", and a patron is a benefactor. Paul is telling them that she has been his patron. Phoebe has contributed to Paul so that Paul can be free to do the work of the Gospel and so that Paul would not have to make tents for a living, but that he would be able to spend more of his time sharing the Gospel with other people throughout Asia Minor. Not only was she a patron to Paul, but she was a patron to other people who were presenting the Gospel. She was a generous woman. Phoebe was likely going to Rome on business and that is why he said, "When she gets there help her in any way she needs." Christian friendship is to be practical; it is not just spiritual. It doesn't mean to just pray over her, but it means if she "needs to network with someone in the church with her business someone should help her and introduce her to people. If she needs some directions to certain places in this strange city, help her to get where she needs. Help her in whatever she needs and you will be blessed if you help this dear woman because she uses the resources she receives from her business to advance the cause of the Gospel. Help her!"

The Apostle Paul goes on to talk about another dear woman in Verse 3, Prisca. She is married to Aquila and they are a husband and wife team. This couple is mentioned six times in the New Testament; three times by Luke in Acts and three times by Paul. Like Phoebe, Prisca is an integral part of the ministry of the Gospel, as we read in Verses 3 and 4,

<sup>3</sup> Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, <sup>4</sup> who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.

Paul calls Prisca his "fellow-worker" who risked her neck for him, who served alongside of him, and remained loyal to him even when her life was on the line. These are the kinds of rich friendships that the Apostle Paul enjoys in the church.

The point that I wish to make is this: Christian friendships are amazingly diverse. Within this list Paul mentions friends who are slaves, friends who are free, friends who are rich, friends who are poor, friends who are single, friends who are married, friends who are men, friends who are women, friends who were of lowly birth, friends who were of noble

birth, friends who are Jewish, friends who are Gentile, friends who are young, and friends who are very old. Friendships in the church rightly cross all social, economic, racial, and cultural barriers. I think it is right to pursue this kind of diversity, this kind of unity, within the church and in our friendships. The reason we pursue diversity in friendship is not for the sake of diversity. That is the world's mantra: pursue diversity because diversity is valuable. As Christians, we understand that we pursue diversity in friendship because that becomes an expression of the profound unity that is the church; that there is no physical barrier that is so high that the church of Jesus Christ doesn't lay low and that the one unifying person of Jesus Christ makes everything else on level ground and opens up our arms to every other kind of person, people whom we otherwise would not come across and would not become friends with and that we would perhaps have a hard time becoming friends with. Now we are able to enter into a deep and personal relationship because of the glory of Jesus and of His church. Let us ask ourselves, "Do my friendships in the church reflect the unity that God has established among His people; a unity that, when it is seen by this world, will bring glory to the God who redeemed us?"

Now, let us discuss the means of Christian friendships. How can I make friendships in the church? Here we want to become very practical. This list suggests one important means. I know that there are other legitimate means by which we can accomplish the pursuit of friendships, but one means that the Apostle Paul emphasizes over and over again, in these sixteen verses, is the means of digging deep into the work of God through the local church.

Every one of these people is a people to whom Paul ministered or people that Paul ministered with or a people that ministered to Paul. It was an all-surrounding ministry. In Verse 5 we read,

<sup>5</sup> Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

Paul formed deep friendships as he did the work that God called him to accomplish in building Jesus' church. It was his commitment to ministry that threw him in with all of these people, so that as he is doing ministry, here is this first convert in Asia, Epenetus. Paul became friends with Epenetus because of his ministry in Epenetus' life. It is not only a friendship based upon Paul's ministry to others, but it is also a friendship based upon Paul's ministry with others, as we see in Verse 7,

<sup>7</sup> Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

These were believers before the Apostle Paul was converted, and now he calls them as his fellow workers and people who have suffered with him for the cause of the Gospel, people who were in prison with him. In Verse 9 we read,

<sup>9</sup> Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys.

Here is a person who has labored along side of Paul for the cause of the Gospel. Paul made his friends as He reached out in service to God through the local church. The Apostle Paul did not make friends by pursuing some felt, personal need for friendship. I think that is important because that often times keeps us, if we have that as our motivation, from discovering the friendships that God would otherwise provide for us.

I have rarely set out with the thought, "I need to make some friends so I am going to go and find some friends," but as God, in grace, has led me in my life, He has given me the thought, "Ritch, you need to get busy in doing the work of God through His local church." As I have responded to the call of God upon my life, His gracious and merciful call upon me, I have found friend, upon friend, upon friend without measure and depth that has made me feel so blessed. That has been true from the time I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, when I first heard God say, "Ritch, you need to be about the work of my Kingdom. Begin now! As a 9<sup>th</sup> grader start doing something." God has opened friendships to me that are of immeasurable treasure.

Paul made his friends as he reached out in love to others in service to God. The sweetest part of ministry I believe is the closeness that ministry to God brings, closeness to God and to other people. If you desire deep Christian friendships, I urge you to ask God to lead you to your place of service to Him. I believe this is the very best place to begin.

I believe that much of the loneliness that occurs in the lives of the people who sit in the pew of a church is often due to an unbiblical view of the church. Many come to church thinking, "Just give me a good sermon and I will be on my way. I just want a good word of encouragement. That is fine. That is what I long for. That is what I desire and then I will be able to make my way out." The benediction is prayed, "In Jesus' name, Amen," and, boom, a canon fires and the person is launched out of their pew, all the way to the parking lot and into the seat of their car.

I have a challenge for you, take a five minute challenge. After the service is completed and the benediction is prayed, spend five minutes and say, “Lord, for five minutes after every service, I am going to look around and get to know and introduce myself to some people I don’t know very well. I want to talk with them. Lord, help me to be an encouragement and help me to discover how I might pray for that person and minister to them.” I believe that if you take five minutes after each service and have that be your heart and your thought, God will change relationships in your life and bless you in a way that you will not be able to measure. God intends for His church to be a family and a place of friendships! We cannot be healthy Christians without spiritual friendships and we cannot be a healthy church without being a community of friendships.

The last issue we want to study is the love of Christian friendships and the love that is found within them. Christian friendships are bound by God’s love. Jesus taught this in John 13:35, NIV,

<sup>35</sup> *“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

As we review the list of friends in Romans 16, we see the sincere love that characterized these relationships that Paul has and that sincere love is characterized by sacrifice. Prisca and Aquila were willing to lay down their lives for the Apostle Paul. I like the way he uses slang terminology to describe it: who risked their necks for my life. We don’t know what incident Paul is referring to, but Paul does. There was some point in Paul’s life and in Paul’s friendship with Prisca and Aquila where they literally could have died as a result of their loyalty and friendship with him, and they would willingly die. They put them in a place of that risk. It may have been when one of the crowds was pressing in against Paul, wanting to kill him, that they stood in between Paul and the crowd and they said the crowd would have to kill them first before they could kill Paul. We don’t know, but the Apostle Paul says that here are two people that he would remember as dear for the rest of his life because he would remember the day they risked their lives for him and they almost died because of their friendship with Paul.

It was a love of sacrifice, but it was also a love of hospitality. They opened up their home so that the church met in their home, the text tells us.<sup>2</sup>

There is also the love of shared suffering. Andronicus and Junias’ willingly shared prison with Paul for God’s glory.

There is tenderness and care. In Verse 13 we read of Rufus and of Rufus’ mother, and Paul says that she had been a mother to Paul because Paul’s mother had died, and now he had this dear woman who said that she would be like a mom to him and care for him. That dear woman ministered to him. Here was the strong, stalwart Apostle Paul who went through so many trials and who didn’t need a mom. No, he needed a mom and Rufus’ mom became his mom. It was the love of tenderness and the love of care.

There is also the love of warmth and of friendliness and we see that in Verse 16. In Verse 16 we read Paul’s commandment to the church. He has just described his friendships and sent his greetings, and he says,

<sup>16</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.

Paul is saying that they are the church of God and they should express the same kind of warmth and affection that he has with them with one another. He is telling them to build friendships within the church.

We want to talk about this command because it is an important one. It is a command we don’t often think about and we don’t reflect upon its import. We want to be doers of the Word and not hearers only.<sup>3</sup> This command not only appears here, but it appears three other times in the New Testament; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; and 1 Thessalonians 5:26.

<sup>20</sup> All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

<sup>12</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss.

<sup>26</sup> Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 16:19

<sup>3</sup> James 1:22

Peter adds, in 1 Peter 5:14,

<sup>14</sup> Greet one another with a kiss of love

Five times in the New Testament we are commanded by God to greet one another with a holy kiss; a kiss of love.

A kiss is a physical demonstration of warmth. It was the most common means of greeting, in the ancient Near East and in the culture of the Apostle Paul's day, for a friend to greet a friend or a relative to greet a relative. You may remember the story in Luke 7 where Jesus is attending a dinner at Simon the Pharisee's home. He is eating supper when a sinful woman approaches Him and she begins to wash Jesus' feet using the water from the tears that are running down her face, tears of repentance and tears of sorrow over her own sin. She washes dirty feet with her tears and she dries Jesus' feet with her hair and she begins to kiss Jesus' feet as she pours perfume on them. Simon the Pharisee becomes very indignant. Jesus is letting this sinful woman touch him. There was supposed to be a cultural barrier between the respected Pharisees and the sinners and Jesus was not acknowledging that barrier. He said to himself, "If Jesus knew who this sinful was He wouldn't let her touch Him." Jesus, of course, knew what Simon the Pharisee was thinking so he begins to tell a story of two men who owed a certain lender money. One owed the lender a small amount of money and one owed the lender a huge amount of money. The lender forgave both men's debts and Jesus asked, "Who do you suppose loves that lender more?" The man replied, "The one who is forgiven more." Jesus said, "You are right." Then Jesus offered this rebuke, He turns, and as He is looking at the woman He is speaking to Simon the Pharisee and he said, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house and you did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet."<sup>4</sup> Jesus continued to Simon the Pharisee, "Simon, if you would have just even given me the customary greeting you would have kissed me, but you didn't kiss me and this woman cannot stop kissing my feet."

In the Ancient Near East, it was a social custom to greet one another with a kiss of warmth and affection. Simon the Pharisee neglected to give Jesus even the cultural symbol of welcome.

This holy kiss that Paul talks about is not a romantic kiss between a husband and a wife. It is a kiss of friendship. Every culture has different ways of expressing greetings, of expressing affection, and of expressing warmth, and for the culture of the church in Jesus' day this was the accepted norm. Paul is not creating a new kind of greeting for this culture. He is using a cultural greeting and he is redeeming it. The cultural custom of kissing one another as a welcome had become empty, hollow, void of meaning, and it had become obligatory. What the Apostle Paul is saying about the greeting that takes place within the church, he is saying, "When you greet one another, greet one another with a holy kiss. Don't just give an obligatory kiss when you greet one another, but redeem the custom by greeting one another with a kiss of real friendship and real affection; a kiss that expresses true Christian love.

Our culture has largely set aside the kiss as a form of greeting among friends. Some are happy that is a cultural custom of other cultures and not of our own. I have some German roots in my family and Germans are not known for their cultural expressions of affection. In fact, the German translation of this verse read, "Greet one another with a firm slap on the back." – just kidding, of course. Our culture uses other forms of expressions of affection in greeting one another. It is common to give a handshake or a hug. I do not think Verse 16 commands us to fight against our culture by instituting the kiss as a form of greeting within the church. That would not be received as affection and it would not be received as love by many within our culture. It would be received as a little uncomfortable for one not used to it. Paul is not saying to provide a context of discomfort, but he is saying that we should provide a context where people know that they are loved.

In our culture, when someone approaches you with a handshake that handshake is very hollow, very cold, and very meaningless. Almost, as they are shaking your hand they are looking at the next person beyond you. Other times, when people shake hands we know that we are being loved. There is warmth to their touch, there is a look in their eyes that is looking deeply into ours, and there is an expression of love in that person. We know the difference, don't we? We know the difference when someone comes to us and gives us an obligatory hug and says, "Hey." And, we know the difference when someone says, "It is good to see you. We have been praying for you."

Paul is saying that in the church, we should look around and greet one another with a real a real of love that is genuine and authentic friendship.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 7:44-45

When my brother, Scott, visited a church, as a young man who was single and just out of college, he was close to the area that he was living and working. It was a great church that taught the Word and it taught the Gospel. It was good worship, except from the time he drove his car into the parking lot to the time he drove his car out of the parking lot not one person said hello to him, not one person greeted him, and not one person expressed warmth to him that day. He was not to be outdone. He knows that good churches that preach the Gospel and teach the Word are rare so he decided to go back to that church the next week. He believed it was a good church and that the Lord was leading him there, but he was not going to leave that church until someone greeted him.

He arrived at church that next Sunday and he walked into church and no one greeted him. He loitered around in the lobby and no one greeted him. He went into the sanctuary and sat down with people all around him. It wasn't a huge church, maybe two to three hundred people, but no one greeted him. But, he was resolved that he was not going to leave until someone greeted him. The church service ended and he decided to sit until someone greeted him. People got up and he remained seated. They began to file out of the church and they just walked right by him and no one greeted him, one-by-one. Pretty soon the sanctuary was becoming more and more sparse because fewer and fewer people were there. Pretty soon there was no one in the church sanctuary except for him, sitting all by himself. Not one person said, "Hello," or greeted him.

He decided to sit there until someone greeted him. That was his resolve! He hears a "click" and the lights go out and he is sitting in a dark sanctuary. Finally, he gave up his resolve and left without being greeted.

Scott stuck it out in that church. He believed it was a good church, but it was a church that hadn't learned to greet one another with a holy kiss. He ended up finding his wife there and, ironically, after he left his secular job and graduated from seminary, he became pastor of that church.

The Apostle Paul means for us to apply his command when he says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." In order to greet one another we have to see other people. That church was not filled with people who looked at Scott and said, "I don't want to be friendly with that person." I think they are people who are busy and had other friendships and just did not see him that day.

After seeing we have to approach the person and that is a little uncomfortable to approach someone we don't know very well, but that is what the command calls us to do.

After approaching them we have to love them. It is not a matter of formality. We are not doing this to have more people in the church, as in building a business. We are here to express Christ and His love, to honor Christ, and to lift up Christ. If that expression of love helps that person to remain, great. If it helps the person to find another church, great. It is whatever the Lord has designed, but it is our role to worship God by heeding the expression of His love.

Finally, we have to be willing to communicate our love in this simple way.

So, I ask, what are you going to do differently in order to obey God's commands?

We are excited to move to a new church building, but moving to a new church building will not make us a great church. The church is a people and what makes a church great is a love for God and a love for people.

I close by saying a few words about the greatest and dearest of friends. Jesus, in John 15:15, said to His Disciples,

<sup>15</sup> *"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."*

He said that He was not going to call them "servants" because there is a divide between a servant and a master. There is no communication.

Is Jesus your friend? God Himself offers you not just a relationship between a slave and a master. God offers a relationship of friendship with Him and that friendship comes through faith in Jesus, and He offers you that kind of personal relationship, to know and be intimately connected in friendship with The Living God. God says, and it is so very simple, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and I will give you eternal life. You will know Me and relate to Me."

If you have never trusted in Jesus as your Savior, I urge you to give your life to Him today.