**The Joy of Community**

**Romans 16:1-16 (ESV)**

July 8, 2018

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***1*** *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae,* ***2*** *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.*

***3*** *Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,* ***4*** *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.* ***5*** *Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.* ***6*** *Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.* ***7*** *Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.* ***8*** *Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.* ***9*** *Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys.* ***10*** *Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobolus.* ***11*** *Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.* ***12*** *Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.* ***13*** *Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well.* ***14*** *Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them.* ***15*** *Greet Philologus, 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.*

D.L. Moody reminds me much of the Apostle Paul and his zeal to proclaim the Gospel boldly and broadly. One story tells of his coming up to a businessman who was walking along Michigan Avenue in Chicago. And he simply said, “Sir, are you a Christian?” This businessman was irritated by the question. He said, “That’s none of your business.” And D.L. Moody looked back at him and confidently said, “Sir, yes it is.” And the man looked at him and was taken aback by that response. He said, “Well, you must be D.L. Moody.” (Laughter!) Dwight Moody was so well known for sharing the Gospel that a businessman who had never met him realized that D.L. Moody made it his business to talk to everyone about the Lord Jesus. Would to God that more of us were known for this kind of boldness in sharing the Gospel! I believe our community would be different if God’s people were as bold. So won’t we pray and ask God that each of us would have one person that God would open a door and send to us where we could at least begin a conversation about Jesus, about His salvation, about what He means to us, about the life that He has given to us? Won’t you pray for that?

God will use our simple faithfulness to perform miracles if we offer our bodies to Him as living sacrifices. God loves to use simple people who are willing to proclaim His Son, to bring spiritual life, to do miracles in the lives of others. God also uses our relationships with one another in the church to draw others to Himself. People in this world long for the kind of community that God alone creates inside His church.

We, as God’s people, are right to prioritize fellowship. We’re not to think of fellowship as a small matter, as something to be maybe added on to our church life. Unbroken community in the church is one of the most effective and significant ways that God opens the hearts of unbelievers. This world and its relationships are broken. They’re looking for answers to the conflicts that abound in relationships outside the church. And so, it’s community inside the church that intrigues people. It piques their attention.

Dwight Moody noticed little children playing in the streets of Chicago when he walked to church on Sunday mornings. He knew that they needed Christ and his heart was burdened for them. He knew that they would never hear of Christ if they didn’t connect in some way to Jesus’ church. So he started a Sunday School. And this Sunday School became very, very fruitful. It was so fruitful in fact, that President Abraham Lincoln went to visit D.L. Moody’s Sunday School. A reporter from the newspaper came to interview the children because they were wondering why children would choose to be in Sunday School when they were really free to play on the streets. And so this reporter asked one little young man, “Why do you and your friends go to Moody’s Sunday School on Sunday mornings?” And the little boy smiled and he responded simply, “Because they love a fella there.” This little boy didn’t have a lot of love in his life. And he recognized that when he went to D.L. Moody’s Sunday School class, there were people there who really loved him and cared for him personally. Let’s pray that that happens here this week at VBS. Pray that it happens every week in our Sunday School classes; that children would find Bethany to be a place where, “They love a fella there.”

Christian love in the church opens doors for Gospel witness. This is the way God works. Our local church is a spiritual family. It is not a place. It’s not a building. It’s not an organization. It’s a spiritual family to whom we belong and to whom we as God’s people are committed to serve, to love, to encourage, to strengthen, to sharpen for the glory of God. Our devotion to brotherly love is a central feature of our worship. In fact, we can’t worship God if we don’t have that feature in our life, if we don’t look around at the brothers and sisters in our own local church and say, “I’m devoted to loving you and I will love you to the end. I will love you sacrificially.”

Romans 16:1-16 highlights this aspect, the aspect of community, of fellowship in the church, perhaps better than any other passage in the New Testament. At first, many are tempted to rush through this reading. It’s a bunch of a list of names. It says, “Greet, greet, greet, greet, greet. Let’s move our minds onto something more worthy, something more weighty.” But this passage is one of the most instructive in all of the Bible because it drives us to commit ourselves to community. It drives us to commit ourselves to deep relationships in our own church family.

Paul is a scholar who pens one of the most deep theological treatises of the Gospel ever written, in this letter to the church at Rome. So when we come to chapter 16, we’re a bit surprised by the warm, personal comments. This is a log of doctrine, it’s outworking in our life. And yet now, he just softens and he just starts talking about people and listing people by name in a church that he’s never ever visited. Yet, he knows some of these people. And he wants to send a personal greeting of love to them.

Imagine Albert Einstein writing a 50 page paper on the theory of relativity to present to some world symposium on physics. And at the end of that paper, he writes two pages of personal notes to some really close friends. It would seem a bit odd. It would seem a bit out of place in such a document. But here, Paul, the theologian, is driving home the relational center of all theology. We gladly sit at Paul’s feet as he discusses doctrine. After all, he is this amazing Bible scholar. He’s this amazing thinker who writes with such tight logic. But we also gladly sit at Paul’s feet as a brother, one who is highly relational. And we learn about the significance of community inside the local church from him.

This passage contains the specific names of 24 people. 17 are men; 7 are women. There are also 2 unnamed women and an unspecified number of unnamed men. Paul is giving us a snapshot of the kind of community that God designs for every church, all of us, to experience. And so this morning, we’re going to consider five qualities of Christian community. What makes Christian community unique? What makes it significant? What makes it so powerful? What makes it so important? The first quality that jumps out at us from this passage is that

**Quality #1: Christ is the center.**

The eternal Son of God is right in the midst of His church. He’s walking in community with us. Jesus Christ is the starting point and the finish line for all relationships among God’s people. All Christian friendships flow from Him and they all flow to Him. Christian community is not built around the members in the church. It’s not us getting together and saying, “Let’s really emphasize how important we all are and then let’s build a community.” That’s what they tried to do at the Tower of Babel. Christian community is built around the Lord Jesus. It’s built around our worship of Him. We gather around Jesus as the center. And as we gather around Him as the center, we’re brought into relationship with one another.

I would ask: What creates community at Wrigley Field? It’s not that the people are gathering together to be with one another. That doesn’t happen. The fans are wanting to get close to the players who are playing a baseball game that day. And so, the fans travel from far and wide to be at this one place. And the closer they get to the Cubs team, the closer they get to each other. Once they are joined together at the stadium, there’s a kind of fellowship that many experience. They chat with each other. They kind of feel like they’re in community with each other. There’s a camaraderie, like they know each other. And yet, the Cubs are not Christ.

It might be worth it to go on a Saturday to this place to see a baseball game, but it’s not worth it to build your whole life around that team. It’s worth it to build our whole life around Christ, have everything centered upon Him. So inasmuch as we are drawing closer to Christ, the very nature of our relationship with Jesus causes us to draw closer to one another. We can’t draw closer to Christ without drawing closer to other worshipers because there’s only one Christ. And we’re coming to this place from far places and wide places and all times and epics of human history. We’re coming to Christ, but we’re drawing closer and closer to one another as we draw closer to Christ. This is how Christian community works.

The other week, I had lunch with a man who I had never met before. As we started talking about Jesus Christ and His saving work in our lives, I felt like I had known this new friend all of my life. There was such a closeness we enjoyed, such a fellowship. And what is that? It’s the bond of Christ. It’s our close proximity to Jesus that allows us to experience deep community with one another. As believers, we daily gather around the cross of Jesus. We daily gather around the empty tomb, and we exult in Jesus’ name. And as we bow our hearts at Jesus’ feet, we look around, and what do we see? We don’t see us and Jesus. We see us and our brothers and sisters in Christ who also are worshiping this great God who has redeemed them even as He does us. We can’t ignore them. We can’t shut our eyes and say, “I’m only looking at You, Jesus.” No. Through our love for Christ and His love for us, we have a love that is binding us together in Jesus Christ. You see, Christian community derives life from a mutual love for Jesus and a shared experience with Jesus. That’s where the life of Christian community is. Jesus is at the center. Let’s observe how Paul emphasizes this.

***3*** *Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,*

There it is. Christ is right at the center.

***5*** *Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.*

There He is. He’s the center!

***7*** *Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.* ***8*** *Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.* ***9*** *Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys.* ***10*** *Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ.*

In this brief passage, Paul describes his friends as being “in Christ” four times, as being “in the Lord” five times, and as being a sister or brother, two times. The bonding agent in these relationships is a vibrant, living connection to Jesus. So how is Christian community formed in the church? It’s through a vibrant relationship with the living Lord. These people that Paul mentions likely had very little else in common with each other. Jesus was their point of commonality, but Jesus brought life, He brought meaning into their relationship.

Now, there is a danger for those who name the name of Christ and yet aren’t in vibrant relationship with Him. It’s possible to have friends who are Christians without having Christian friendships. What I mean by that is that Christian friendships are unique. And it’s not just unique because the people in those friendships name the name of Christ. They’re unique because they’re bound together by Christ. Those relationships are from Him. They flow from His life. And they are to Him. They’re flowing back to Him. They’re built around Him. And this is a very real danger, to think we have Christian friendships when all we have are worldly friendships with Christians. And there’s a world of difference. There is no community in that. Christ must be at the center. He must be the vibrant center, the One who is worshiped, in order for community to be formed in the church. So how do I know if my friendships are Christian, uniquely Christian? What are some key characteristics of Christian friendships?

1. Christian friendships always pull us closer to Jesus, never farther away.

So we ask: Do our friendships do that? Because I’m in a relationship with a brother or sister, am I drawn closer to Christ? Is my faith strengthened and invigorated?

2. Christian friendships always lead us to greater obedience to Jesus, never toward disobedience.

So am I more faithful in obedience to Christ’s commands?

3. Christian friendships intensify our witness for Jesus, never weaken our witness.

Because of our relationship with each other, we want to talk more about Christ to unbelievers.

4. Christian friendships increase our love for Jesus’ church, never diminish it.

Our love for Jesus’ church doesn’t weaken. We don’t get more despairing about God’s church or more negligent. But rather, we say “Man, we love this church that Jesus has formed and fashioned. Yes, she has many, many flaws, but we love her. She’s Jesus’ church.”

5. Christian friendships converse about the Gospel and its applications to life.

In other words, that’s not uncommon. It doesn’t mean we don’t ever talk about things like the Cubs and Cardinals, but it means that we talk often about the Gospel and its application, its meaning to us.

6. Christian friendships seek ways to serve Christ together.

How can we labor on behalf of Him?

So by way of application, when we think of community centering itself on Christ, let’s commit ourselves to being a Christian friend to the Christian friends we already have. That’s the first application I would make. In other words, talk with your friends that you already have about your desire for Christ Jesus to be central, about Christ Jesus to be preeminent in your life. Ask them to pray for you. Confess your sins to one another. Care for one another in this way.

The second application is let’s commit ourselves to being a Christian friend to those that God would send into our life, to new people. That God would open our eyes to people for whom He would have us offer this kind of community, this kind of friendship.

**Quality #2: Human walls fall down.**

Christian community does not allow human labels and divisions to destroy or interrupt fellowship. God’s Spirit is supernaturally at work in Jesus’ church to break down walls of separation. God’s Spirit doesn’t break down these walls through human methods. God’s Spirit breaks down these walls through the Gospel. It’s the power of the Gospel that brings reconciliation between us and God and then it brings reconciliation between us and one another.

**Galatians 3:26–28** for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

It’s faith that connects us to adoption. It’s faith in Christ; active faith. Christ is the center. So, given that Christ is so central to us, there is neither Jew nor Greek. That wall is torn down. There is neither slave nor free. That wall is torn down. There is neither male nor female. That wall is torn down.

When we reflect on the list of names that Paul provides for us here in Romans 16, it’s remarkable the diversity that we find! First, he says there are slaves as well as free men that are listed. So among the salves there is Ampliatus in verse 8, Urbanus in verse 9, Hermes in verse 14, Philologus and Junia in verse 15. These are all common slave names. So these are slaves in households.

That name Ampliatus is interesting. It’s engraved on a decorated tomb in the catacombs of the Christians in Rome. And this grave dates back to the time of Paul. And so it’s very likely that this person that Paul mentions here to greet is one who died and then the Christians said, “We need to make a really great marker because he was such a great person. We want to remember this person.” It’s a very elaborately decorated grave, and it only has one name. That’s strange because free men, on their graves, they always had three names. So we know that this Ampliatus is a slave, and yet, it’s unusual to see a slave with such a nice grave marker.

Just as an aside, God does not target the influential and the powerful over the weak and the powerless, to advance His Gospel. Man’s strategy, and I’ve seen this from the time I was in high school, is to target the humanly prominent with the Gospel. They think, and in high school there is the philosophy, “If we can get the cool kids to follow Jesus, then everyone else will follow. So let’s target the cool kids. Let’s really work to build relationships with the kids who are the influencers.” I want you to understand that’s not the way the church began. That’s not the way the church grew. The church was built from slaves, the lowest of the low. Paul says there’s not many that are influential. There are some influential people that came to Christ in the 1st Century, but not many. And God says, “I did this so that My power would confound the wisdom of this world.”

It makes sense, doesn’t it, that if you want to attract a big group of people, you get the really cool people who are influencing. Everybody loves them. Everybody likes them. Get them, and then everybody follows. That makes sense, doesn’t it? But this where God says, “No. It makes sense on a human level, but if I want to receive all the glory, I’m going to take the slaves first. And that’s who I’m going to build My church from; the weakest and the most powerless.”

He mentions not only slaves, but it’s instructive as well that Paul mentions by name, seven different women. And this is in a culture that was very male-dominated. And these women are spoken of by Paul so we get the idea that they are his dearest friends, his most esteemed co-laborers.

***1*** *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae,* ***2*** *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.*

Phoebe is sent by Paul to Rome with this letter. So she’s carrying the letter. Think of that! What would we have done for three years if Phoebe had lost the letter on her way to Rome? We wouldn’t have been able to discuss all these great truths. So God put the only manuscript of the letter to Rome, in Phoebe’s hands, to carry from Corinth across the sea and to the city of Rome. And he says, “Listen! When Phoebe gets there, don’t just take the letter and say, ‘Thank you, Phoebe. I want to read what Paul says.’ Make sure you give her the honor that is due her. This was a difficult task. It was an important task. I entrusted this to her because she’s a trustworthy woman.” Notice he calls her first a sister, then he calls her a servant, and then finally he calls her a patron. That means she likely was a woman of means and she provided financial help not only to Paul, but to many servants of God. The name “Phoebe” is a feminine form of the Greek god Apollo. So she was likely raised in a pagan Gentile family. But she came to Christ. And now she has this very special place in Paul’s heart.

In addition to Phoebe, Paul mentions Prisca, Mary, Junius, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Those names mean “delicate” and “dainty.” And then he mentions Persis in verse 12. And he uses it in the past tense. She must be an elderly lady who is no longer strong enough to do the kind of labor. That’s the only one for whom he uses the past tense. She “worked hard.” But he says, “I want to make sure you greet her because she’s a special lady. She’s shut up in her house.” We don’t know exactly what’s happening, but we get the sense that she’s no longer able to work like she used to be able to work. He said, “I want to remember her. This woman is dear.” What would the church be like were God to stop calling women to work hard in ministry? I believe the church would die. That’s why I’m so thankful that God continues to call faithful women to serve the Lord in valuable ways.

This list includes Jews and Gentiles. It includes young and old. It includes married people and likely, single people. God designed His church from the beginning, to connect diverse people together in worship so that we, as a diverse people, would worship Him together. God is jealous for His glory. He purposes to receive glory through the unified worship. The only thing that can really cross those barriers, those lines, and truly and radically obliterate them, is the power of Christ.

In Revelation chapter 5, we get a picture of the worship of heaven.

**Revelation 5:8–10** And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

Why does God do that? Because Jesus is worthy of that kind of worship. That’s why! Now, I know that our experience at Bethany does not completely match the picture of Revelation 5. I know there’s going to be a lot more diversity in Revelation 5 than there is here. I pray that we would experience more and more diverse membership as God transforms us. We are a church whose members are predominantly married, white, and middle to upper-middle class. And I’m thankful for every member. That’s not in any way to disparage the married, white, upper-middle class. Not at all! I’m thankful for every one. But if you are at Bethany, you’re a part of our family and you’re not married, you’re not white, or you’re not middle to upper middle class, I want you to know that we really value you as members of this family. We need you to help us glorify God. I know that sometimes you may feel outside due to many cultural factors that most of us overlook because we’re thinking with our background in mind. It’s hard! But we do commit to being a church where Jesus Christ is the center and where every member of God’s church knows that they are a precious gift from God to this family. I would just encourage you to please continue to persevere and press in to love here, and let us seek to glorify His name together.

I do not claim to have specific answers to the lack of diversity in Jesus’ church in America. I believe that rejoicing in the Gospel together is the necessary place to begin. And I also think it is easy to criticize the problem of a lack of diversity in the church and be part of the problem at the same time. It’s easy to look and to shake our heads at churches in general, for the failure to be diverse. And yet, even as we’re shaking our heads at that, we fail to yield our preferences for the joy of others in our own church, not recognizing that our demands limit the diversity that our church will experience.

Let’s consider just one area. It’s the area of music. There are many areas, but let’s consider this. I think most of us can relate to this in some way. In music, there’s a certain kind of music, a certain volume of music, certain words to music, and a certain place of music in the worship service that each of us has a preference toward. It’s not wrong to have preferences. But if we demand that music follow our preferences, what will we have in our church? We’ll have a church full of people very much like us. It’s impossible to have diversity if we don’t yield our preferences. It’s impossible! And this is hard even among a people who are quite a bit alike in almost every other way. Our backgrounds are quite a bit alike. We look quite a bit alike. And yet, this is still very hard. Why is it so hard? Because we don’t connect our desire for diversity with our demand for our preferences. And unless we say, “You know what? I don’t care about my preferences anymore. What I care about is that Jesus Christ would be glorified. That’s what I care about.” He’s glorified by a diverse group of people. We know that from Revelation chapter 5. Diversity happens in a church when we value God’s glory above our own desires. To yield our desires for the sake of a brother is a burden, but it is a blessed burden. It is the gate into the joy of community. Let me read to you from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I love this!

*“The Christian, however, must bear the burden of a brother. He must suffer and endure the brother. It is only when he is a burden that another person is really a brother and not merely an object to be manipulated. The burden of men was so heavy for God Himself that He had to endure the Cross. God verily bore the burden of men in the body of Jesus Christ.”* – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

This is what Christian community is. I love that! It’s a blessed burden that we bear with one another in different preferences. That’s a great thing! Here are some applications.

1. Thank God for the people who make our congregation as diverse as it is.

Thank God for people who are diverse from us. If you love hymns, thank God for people who love Praise music. If you love Praise music, thank God for the people who love hymns. If you’re elderly, thank God for the young people. If you’re young, thank God for the retirees and the elderly. If you’re single, thank God for those who are married. If you’re married, thank God for those who are single. If you’re rich, thank God for the people in our church who are poor. If you’re poor, thank God for the people in our church who are rich. If you don’t have a beard, thank God for the people who do have beards. (Laughter!) If you don’t have hair, thank God for the people who have hair. (Laughter!) Do you see what I’m getting at? We often tend to start closing in ourselves. “I really want people to be very much like me.” And yet, “How dare the church not be diverse.” We can’t do that. But truly, especially, thank God for the people around you who are of a different race than you, or from a different country, or from a different background. Really thank God for them. Take time to do that. And that’s for all of us. So if you’re from a minority culture, thank God for the people from a majority culture here. If you’re from a majority, really, really press in and say, “God, thank you! We need these folks in order to express the kind of worship that is true of heaven.”

2. Ask God to help us be a church where diverse people are loved well and strengthened in their faith.

**Quality #3: Jesus’ mission is pursued.**

God creates community in the church through mutual work of significant ministry for Christ. So it’s as we labor together for the cause of the Gospel that we learn to appreciate one another and we sense our need for one another. This is how it worked in Paul’s life.

***3*** *Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,* ***4*** *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.*

***9*** *Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ…*

***12*** *Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.*

The mission of Jesus joins our hearts to other laborers for Christ. Our labors for the Lord produce a sweet fellowship with other co-laborers. This is what Christian community does. Community is started and sustained by our passion for Christ and the mission of the Gospel. As we desire to experience community in our church family, let’s first begin to work for Christ’s mission through our own local church, with other brothers and sisters. It’s as we work together that God forms this community that is centered around Christ. It is diverse in its nature, but we’re working, striving together for the cause of the Gospel.

**Quality #4: God’s love abounds.**

It’s God’s love, it’s not ours. It’s not our best efforts to like each other. It’s God’s love produced by God’s Spirit. God’s love transcends the kind of human love in which we love those who love us. That’s human love. It’s a love produced by God’s Spirit that willingly sacrifices for one another and remains devoted to one another through hardships, testings, and difficulties. When he says, “Be devoted to one another,” he’s saying stick to one another. Persevere in those relationships. Don’t easily break them just simply because you get upset at some matter. Be devoted to one another.

As we read through these verses, we hear the deep affection that abounds among these precious friends. You might want to underline some terms that Paul uses to describe the affectionate heart. First the word “greet.” This command appears seventeen times. It’s a command.

***16*** *Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.*

So greeting one another is actually an important part of our assembly together. It’s not just a time when we kind of wander over and shake someone’s hand and we get over with that so we can really get on to the worship. It’s part of our worship. He says to greet one another with a holy kiss. And the emphasis is not so much on the kiss, as it is on the holy part. It’s not a hollow thing. In our culture, we typically give handshakes. We give hugs. He would say, “Greet one another with a holy handshake.” Not a hollow one where it’s some sort of polite social courtesy. But it’s like, “I care about you. I’m excited that you’re here worshiping! I’m excited that you’re a part of this family!” When I greet one another, I want to say, “This is a special thing. It’s the nearest thing to heaven we’ll ever experience. It’s Christ’s community coming together for the cause of Christ.” Such greetings can have a huge impact upon our worship and upon our witness.

I want to give you a challenge. And that challenge is a five minute challenge. The Five Minute Challenge is this. Here we have a command. Seventeen times it says, “Greet.” What do we do with it? Well, it seems that we should greet one another. Maybe that’s a good application. Instead of getting up and rushing out to the car or out to the next assignment, just get up and say, “I’m going to spend five minutes and I’m going to talk with somebody that I don’t necessarily know. Or maybe I do know them and I’m just going to talk with them and have a spiritual conversation with them with Christ in the center. “How can I pray for you? How is Christ encouraging you? How might I encourage you today in your walk with the Lord?” Take five minutes and just say that’s all you’re going to do every Sunday. You might start saying, “But if I take five minutes, it’s going to turn into twenty minutes.” Praise God!

Notice also that Paul uses the phrase “risked their necks.” It’s a term of sacrifice in verses 3 and 4. They were willing to lay down their lives for their brothers. It says “in their house” in verse 15. It’s a term of hospitality. Again, this is an indication of love. And then he says in verse 13 that Rufus’ mother has been a mother to me. “She’s been so affectionate, so tender, so dear, she’s been like my mom. I call her mom.” Community in the church flows from a heart of God’s love for one another. Bonhoeffer again says

*“The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community.”* – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Did you catch that? That is brilliant! If you don’t get anything else from this message, get that. We have this idea, “I would love community.” And we think about “me, me, me” when I think about having community in the church. Bonhoeffer says if you dream of community, you’re going to destroy it because that’s not how community is ever created. Community is created by people saying, “I’m going to go to this place and I’m just going to love people.” And then watch God work.

Christ is the center. Human walls fall down. Jesus’ mission is pursued. God’s love abounds and finally,

**Quality #5: Deep relationships are valued.**

Paul had never been to Rome. He greets twenty-six of them and names twenty-four specifically by name. He likely learned of these precious saints from Prisca and Aquila and perhaps from Phoebe. Perhaps he met some of them in their travels and their paths crossed. But here’s the issue. Paul values relationships in the church, even relationships to a church he had never been to. He valued each one. At its heart, Christianity is relational. It’s first relational toward God. We’re reconciled to God by the death of Jesus. But at its heart, it’s relational to one another. Let’s remind ourselves of Romans 12.

**Romans 12:9-13** Let love be genuine…Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor…be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

So friends, let’s thank God for the community He creates in His church. Let us say, “God, by Your grace, allow me to be a person who strengthens that community.” I close with a final quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I love his little book called *Life Together*. I’ve shared two other quotes and I want to close with this one.

*“If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ.”*—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

So friends, let us thank God daily for the Christian fellowship and community that He’s given us in this place where we are.