

# Activate | Week 8

## Romans 16:1–16

With the rise of Social Media, a whole new label has been born. Those who have hundreds of thousands of followers, or enough acclaim among a particular demographic, are called “social media influencers.” As the name implies, these people have enough sway with their followers that they can influence them. Generally, this involves persuading them to buy certain products.

Within the body of Christ there are plenty of people who could also be considered “influencers,” but hopefully for different reasons. While it’s not wrong to be attractive, athletic, charismatic, or clever, an influencer for Christ should resemble him. In Romans, Paul has emphasized the importance of being righteous, loving, humble, and strong in one’s Spirit-led convictions. Those are the people who we want to influence us to pursue Christlikeness.

We are coming to the end of Romans and the verses we are looking at this week are full of names. The people behind those names were likely unknown to most of the million people living in Rome at the time. Yet, these are people who had tremendous influence for the kingdom of God.

## Day 1

Paul is wrapping up his letter to the Romans, but before he closes, he wants to greet some of the people to whom he is writing by name. Remember, Paul hadn’t founded this church and hadn’t yet visited it. Some of these people he may have met during his travels around the Empire, but many he may have only heard about second-hand. This is the longest list of greetings in any of Paul’s letters. As you read through the names, consider why he might have taken the time to list so many.

Also, as we look carefully at a section of Scripture that we might otherwise skim, let’s think about the individuals represented by these names. In this list there are Jews and Gentiles, Men and Women, rich and poor, but all were people who committed to worshipping and serving Jesus.

## Read the Word

Romans 16:1–16

*16 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. <sup>2</sup>I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her*

*any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.*

*<sup>3</sup> Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup> They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.*

*<sup>5</sup> Greet also the church that meets at their house.*

*Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.*

*<sup>6</sup> Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.*

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

*<sup>8</sup> Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord.*

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

*<sup>10</sup> Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test.*

*Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.*

*<sup>11</sup> Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew.*

*Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.*

*<sup>12</sup> Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord.*

*Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.*

*<sup>13</sup> Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.*

*<sup>14</sup> Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them.*

*<sup>15</sup> Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them.*

*<sup>16</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss.*

*All the churches of Christ send greetings.*

- Why do you think Paul greets so many people in the Roman church?

## Reflect

You don't have to be Sports-Illustrated-famous, Instagram-famous, or any other kind of famous to matter in the Kingdom of God. In fact, the love of God gives you immeasurable worth just for being you. He has given you a purpose with eternal significance as you seek to share the love of Christ with those inside and outside of the body of Christ.

If Paul hadn't said a quick "hello" to Ampliatus or Tryphosa in his letter to the Romans, we wouldn't know them now. But God would. And the people whom they loved and blessed know them now in heaven as they await the final stage in God's grand plan of redemption.

As we go through the week, let's take the opportunity this list of names gives us to consider the impact we want to have on the lives of the people around us and adjust our priorities accordingly. Let's also be grateful for those people who have influenced us in our faith.

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, you are gracious, loving, and righteous. Thank you that my life can have eternal significance. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve you and others. Help me re-evaluate my priorities this week as I consider the best ways I can use my time, talents, and resources.*

## Day 2

When is the last time you wrote and mailed a handwritten letter? I imagine that many people under 30 may have never written one. I recently had to show my teenage daughter how to address an envelope because she'd never needed to before!

We now live in a world where communication is quick, cheap, and easy. We can dash off a text message or an email and the recipient has it in seconds. The Apostle Paul certainly didn't have this option. Writing the letter to the Roman church was a costly and time-consuming project. And once written, Paul couldn't simply drop the letter in the nearest post box. It had to be hand delivered at great expense. Paul wouldn't trust just anyone with such important correspondence. He trusted his letter to Phoebe, the first person he mentions in Romans 16.

## Read the Word

**Romans 16:1–2**

*<sup>1</sup> I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. <sup>2</sup> I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her*

*any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.*

- How is Phoebe described? What does Paul ask on her behalf?

## Reflect

Phoebe is only mentioned here in these few short verses in Romans, yet she provides a brief sketch of what a life lived for Jesus might look like.

Phoebe means “Titanness” and this indicates she converted to Christ from a pagan background because no Jewish family would name their child after a pagan goddess.<sup>1</sup> Her home was in Cenchreae, although she may have received the letter from Paul in nearby Corinth where he spent considerable time. She traveled all the way to Rome from Greece, a journey of at least 1200 miles, depending on the route. Phoebe was likely a wealthy supporter of Paul’s. He calls her a “benefactor,” a term of honor used for patrons.

Phoebe is commended as a deacon. This term, *diakone* can be translated as simply “servant,” but because it is mentioned in the context of a specific church, many scholars believe that Phoebe might have held that office in her home church. Because she was wealthy, she may have hosted the church in her home. Regardless, she was someone Paul trusted to get his letter to Rome.

Phoebe likely had a bigger role than simply dropping off the letter. This was a letter of great importance written to all the believers in Rome. In the first century, letters were read aloud, almost performed, to the gathered recipients. The courier represented the sender and tried to communicate something of his or her presence as they read. Phoebe was probably instructed by Paul in the contents of the letter so that she could read it with the proper emphasis and inflection, answer questions, and help the Roman believers understand this long and complex missive.<sup>2</sup>

Phoebe possessed both status and wealth. She was privileged in her culture because of her rank and position, but easily disregarded because of her gender. Yet Paul chose her, a Gentile convert and a woman, to take his message to Rome. He called her sister.

Phoebe had been introduced to Jesus, maybe by Paul himself, and like all of us who receive the Holy Spirit, she was forever changed by the encounter. She knew Jesus as her Lord and as her Savior. This wealthy woman from Greece became willing to devote her time, money, and talents to serving the cause of Christ. What are you willing to devote to him today?

- What could be a better investment of your time, money, and talents than Jesus’ mission? In what ways can you be a Phoebe — someone who is willing to be used by God to share his message?

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<sup>1</sup> Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards*, unpublished manuscript, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> McKnight.

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, you are so gracious and good. Thank you for using people like me to carry out your will on earth. Guide and direct me in how I can serve you and the people around me today.*

## Day 3

Recall that in Romans 12:5, Paul reminds the Roman believers that “in Christ, we though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. He then challenges them to use their spiritual gifts to benefit one another. This week, we’re getting to read the names of people who were doing precisely what Paul asks. He commends them for their efforts on behalf of Christ and his body.

There are two notable names on the list, Priscilla and Aquilla, beloved co-ministers with Paul. Today, we’ll go to the book of Acts to where these two are mentioned and see another sketch of lives lived for Jesus.

## Read the Word

### Romans 16:3–5a

*<sup>3</sup> Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup> They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.*

*<sup>5</sup> Greet also the church that meets at their house.*

### Acts 18:1-3,18–19, 24–26

*<sup>1</sup> After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup> There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, <sup>3</sup> and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. <sup>4</sup> Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.*

*<sup>18</sup> Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken. <sup>19</sup> They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.*

*<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. <sup>25</sup> He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. <sup>26</sup> He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.*

- Based on what you read in Acts, how would you describe Priscilla and Aquilla?

## Reflect

In AD 49 the Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome because of some “civil disturbances...instigated by Chrestus” (likely a misspelling or alternative spelling for “Christ”). It’s possible that debates over those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and those who didn’t had caused riots in the city. Regardless, thousands of Jews were kicked out of their homes and forced to move. Among them were Aquila and his wife Priscilla. The couple, tentmakers by trade, end up in Corinth where they meet a fellow tentmaker, the Apostle Paul and become his life-long friend and ministry partner.

According to Acts 18, the couple stay in Corinth with Paul for eighteen months while he establishes the Corinthian church. When Paul is forced to leave Corinth, the couple go with him. Paul stops in Ephesus but continues his journey. Priscilla and Aquila stay. It is in Ephesus that they meet Apollos.

Apollos is a gifted communicator and knows the Hebrew Scriptures, but his knowledge is incomplete. He was not inaccurate in his teaching about Jesus, but because he only knows of John’s baptism, he may have been unfamiliar with the complete gospel and the coming of the Spirit. Priscilla and Aquila cared enough about the truth of the gospel and the spiritual life of Apollos to take him aside and teach him.

Priscilla and Aquila’s commitment to expounding the gospel and building up the early church continued. Because Paul mentions them in his letters, we know the church in Ephesus met in their home for some time. Because of their mention in Romans, we know that at some point they moved back to Rome and continued hosting and leading a church.

Priscilla and her husband worked together to see the fledgling 1<sup>st</sup> century church grow in strength and number to the extent that they put their life on the line. Together, they were strong and faithful allies to the Apostle as he sought to make Jesus’ name known.

We aren’t told how or when Priscilla and Aquila met Jesus, but it’s clear that they loved and followed him faithfully. They invested their time in knowing his Word, freely offered their resources for his use, and even risked their lives to reach people.

In his grace and wisdom, God can use calamities to steer us to the place we need to be. When the decree came down from Claudius expelling the Jewish people from Rome, I doubt Priscilla and Aquila knew the life that was waiting for them beyond the city's borders. But I'm guessing that in the end they had no regrets.

- How can you be like Priscilla and Aquila? Someone who helps other people understand God's truth or opens up their home for Christians to meet and worship together?  
Someone who will stand with a Christian brother and sister even at great personal risk?

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, thank you for all the believers who have come before me. Those who boldly proclaimed the gospel, nurtured new believers in their faith, and lived their lives in service to the church. Please use me the way you've used them.*

## Day 4

Recently I spent a day on the couch with a cold because I felt too crummy to do much else. I watched a season of *Downton Abbey*, a British drama set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that follows the lords and ladies of a great English estate and the servants who work for them.

I was struck by the rigid class divides that the show portrays. Servants had to dine separately, could not speak socially to guests of the house, and in general had to "mind their place." Those of title and position were given every privilege, while those from the working class were regarded with suspicion and even disdain.

At least in terms of social structure, the world depicted in *Downton Abbey* is not so different from the world of ancient Rome. You were born into a class, and your parents' place defined yours. People didn't just do jobs; they *were* their jobs. You didn't just have a family; your social standing was determined by theirs. The assumption was that all kinds of external factors — your birthplace, family line, accent, education — revealed who you really were more than what you thought and felt, how you behaved, or what you could do.

The gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't allow this kind of divide. The gospel is the great leveler because it says that all people are sinners deserving judgment while proclaiming that all people are loved and valued by their Creator. It insists that we are wholly dependent on God, while giving us a mission of eternal significance. It is in Christ that we find our true identity, and that has nothing to do with who our parents are, where we were born, or how much we own.

As we look one more time at the long list of people that Paul greets in Romans, we'll consider that there is a rich diversity that may not be apparent from a quick reading of these names. Yet in Christ, they all had value, worth, and purpose.

## Read the Word

### Romans 16:5b–16

*Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.*

<sup>6</sup> *Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.*

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

<sup>8</sup> *Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord.*

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

<sup>10</sup> *Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test.*

*Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.*

<sup>11</sup> *Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew.*

*Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.*

<sup>12</sup> *Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord.*

*Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.*

<sup>13</sup> *Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.*

<sup>14</sup> *Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them.*

<sup>15</sup> *Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them.*

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

- What does Paul praise these believers for?

## Reflect

Based on Paul's greetings in Romans 16, scholars estimate 3–5 house churches (based on the three times "house" or "household" are specifically mentioned, plus the longer list of names in verses 14 and 15 which could indicate two more). People often lived and worked in the same place, so a "household" could include workers as well as family.

A mix of economically, socially, and ethnically diverse believers assembled together for worship and fellowship in Rome, including the household's family, tenants, slaves, freed slaves who worked for the household, and any number from Rome's homeless population.<sup>3</sup> Though we can't say for sure, Paul's list of names likely mirrors this social and economic diversity.

Ethnically, we see both Jewish and Gentile names on Paul's list. Paul mentions Andronicus and Junia specifically as Jews, as well as Herodian. We also see many women mentioned by name. We've already discussed Phoebe and Priscilla. Junia is called an "apostle," signifying her role as either a missionary or leader in the church. Several other women, including Mary, Persis, Tryphena, and Tryphosa are affectionately greeted as "hard workers." Once again Paul subverts the cultural values of this world by acknowledging the dignity of those on whom society looked down.

In Christ, all these people were to consider each other brothers and sisters in the faith, making the early church a truly strange and radical thing to the surrounding culture. To the status-obsessed Romans, welcoming slaves and common laborers as equals and then considering them family would have been foreign in the extreme. To religious Jews, even associating with Gentiles was suspect, and these people were eating together as a community. In the body of Christ every member is to be valued and embraced by the others.

Every member is also to know that they are vital to the body and to the spread of the gospel. Notice how often Paul commends these people for their hard work in the Lord. While we don't know any personal details about all these people, we can admire them for their devotion to Christ and allow them to inspire our own. There were no paid pastors, theologians, or missionaries on the list. These were just ordinary people, many of whom had to struggle to survive and provide for their families, yet they dedicated themselves to serving Christ and his body. Paul makes note of their efforts on behalf of the Lord. Would he say the same of you and me?

- Be honest with yourself and with the Lord. Could you be described as a hard worker *for the Lord*. What kind of effort do you expend on behalf of your brothers and sisters in Christ? How much energy do you put into helping the gospel message and the love of Jesus spread? Pray over your answer.

## Pray

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 69, 87.

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, I don't want to waste my time, energy, or resources. They are all gifts from you. Show me how I can live for you.*

## Day 5

It's Friday! As we come close to the end of Romans, take some time to reflect back on the journey the Lord has taken you on through this amazing book. Spend some time in prayer, thanking him for the gift of the Spirit and inviting him to continue to change you.

### Reflect on what you've learned

If you've read through Romans 16:1–16 before, you may have just skimmed over it. Since we took a little time with it this week, what have you learned? What's your biggest takeaway?

### Make Connections and Take a Next Step

If you were an average person living in the first century in a big city like Rome, Corinth, or Ephesus, you may not have had any direct knowledge of the Christians who were gathering regularly in your city. After all, Rome had a population of more than a million people, and all the house churches combined at the time of Paul's writing would have totaled around 200 people.

Yet the men and women that Paul greets at the end of Romans formed a foundation that God would continue to build on until the Roman church would be one of the most important and influential in the Empire. Their impact at the time they received this letter was not grand or impressive, but it was significant. Their love for Jesus and others mattered.

It matters for us too. Our trip through Romans 16 has me thinking of all the men and women who have impacted me for Christ. If I were to write my own version of this greeting, I would have plenty of people to include. How about you?

As you spend some time with the Lord today and consider your next steps in following him, you might want to write a Romans 16 kind of greeting. Make a list of the people that are significant to you and write down what you'd commend them for. Pray over each name. Maybe even send them a quick note to say thank you.

Then consider how you might be a name on someone else's list. How can you love and bless others for the Lord and work to see the gospel spread?

Think through some specific actions you can take and work on them this week.