

Romans 16

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 April 2017

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Now what Paul rejoices and is so glad in as he finishes this letter to the church in Rome is his friends.!

Paul writes about it as my gospel, the one I've been writing about.

Not any other gospel, Paul's gospel which is God's gospel. And that ability of God to establish and strengthen the church by the gospel as then and now is God's business in the world.

That is what God is doing. What is God doing in the world today? God is establishing a living family of Christian believers by the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that is what this letter to the Romans is all about. Romans could be summarised I think as stay strong, stand together and do not lose sight of the gospel.

[1 : 25] That is what Romans is all about. Stand together and do not lose sight of the gospel. Do you remember how Paul put it in Romans 1 verse 16? He says for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

who by their righteousness suppress the truth. Sorry that's verse 18, you should know that. Verse 16 says for I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

To the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. And at the end of the chapter, at the end of this book, it is mirrored isn't it?

Very much that statement. Paul is saying as he don't be ashamed of the gospel no matter what anyone says. He is saying as he at the end of this letter, I am not ashamed of the gospel, it is the power of God.

Now down through the history of the Christian church, this is always how God establishes strong local churches. Churches which are ready and well placed to offer the grace of God.

[2 : 33] God has humbled them and has changed them. As churches hold out that gospel to the world, they are established. God establishes the churches by the gospel, not by method, not by people, not by style and not by spin.

God does not establish real, enduring, living churches by their response to cultural trends and by their analysis of popular culture.

Not by tricks, not by miracles, not by church growth methods. God does not establish the church by money. God does not establish the church by great buildings or by intellectual skill or by strength or by force.

God establishes his church by the gospel which Paul has explained in Romans. People who have lost sight of their Christian moorings and roots are always, aren't they, trying to establish churches by other means.

By great music. By having a right demographic. By having different coloured people up the front. I am told often that is the way to grow churches. But God establishes churches by the gospel and that is why he wrote the letter.

[3 : 48] And so when we come to Romans chapter 16, which is a funny chapter, isn't it, on our first reading. What we see there is real warmth and personal sincerity. There are signs of his letters and he is appealing to these people in Rome as he sends them his greetings.

And he is hoping that the only wise God will receive glory from his church when it is established by the gospel. Now, no matter what anyone says about the church that you go to or the church that I belong to, I sincerely hope and pray that we would be able to say that our congregations are established by the gospel, by Paul's gospel, by God's gospel, not by anything else.

And I want to say to you that is the telltale sign of whether we've understood Romans. Now, Romans chapter 16 is first and foremost a realistic description of the church in Rome. It's realistic

because it's so personal.

It's so personal, isn't it, in the long list of unpronounceable names that take up most of the chapter. And there's two things, I think, that stand out significantly in chapter 16 of Romans. Two things that when a church is established by God through the gospel will always mark out a church family. And those two things are love and struggle. Love and struggle. So, first of all, love. In all these words that's full of names and personalities, there's a depth of human love and care.

[5 : 18] That means that Christian people, even when they've never met one another, they have the most significant thing in life in common. So, you may be here for the first time this lunchtime.

You might have never come before, you might have never met us, but you have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour and your Lord. And you and I have more in common than anything else, even though we've never met.

We have the most significant thing in our lives in common. And you'll be sent, so this fall right to a group of believers in Rome, most of whom he's never met. That becomes profoundly powerful. When you read their names in verses 3 to 16, when you read the names of Paul's fellow workers in verse 21 to 24, any kind of truth that you've heard in the past, that Paul was a kind of cold theological misogynistic bully, who never really got the Saramaic Phariseeism kind of blown out of his system, well, look at chapter 16.

Paul mentions 28 people by name. And part of the whole value of this chapter is it reveals to us what it was like to be under the Apostle Paul's care. That his love extends to these people. He is big-hearted and compassionate and he is interested in them. And he appreciates the fact that he expressed concern and kindness to his brothers and sisters. And the fact that he does so, and he takes time to do so, gives the teacher of this letter and the Gospel that he explains weight and substance.

[6 : 50] Because here we see in Romans chapter 16, Paul was a real human being. It's not a theological abstraction, the letter to the Romans. It's not a letter we've dug up from some museum.

It's not some kind of intellectual exercise, the epistles of the Romans. But here's a real Apostle writing to real people who he loves really deeply. I actually don't think the Apostle Paul was interested in theological debate and discussion.

Well, he was. But he certainly wasn't interested in that theological debate and discussion, which didn't influence real lives. No one could ever have said that if they met Paul, that what he thought did not match up with the way that he treated people.

With the way that he considered them personally. And that is the kind of church that the real Gospel, Paul's Gospel, God's Gospel, always establishes.

So if you ever think, and I think far too many people often think, that it's possible to be part of God's family, and to be relationally distant from everyone else in that family, or to stand more likely on the fringes of church life, and get your fix from internet preachers, you have totally misunderstood what the Gospel is, and what the Gospel creates.

[8 : 17] You cannot be like that. You cannot sit loose to the church of Jesus Christ, if you've understood the Gospel. Because Romans 16 shows us the names of real people who loved each other deeply, and were radically committed to each other, and that is what the Gospel of Paul, the Gospel of God, produces.

Now secondly, very obviously, such a depth of love is born and parceled up with struggle. And that's what it means to love, really, isn't it? To love means to put the needs of someone else beyond our own needs.

And if you're ever going to do that, well, there's going to be lots of struggles along the way. Look at the phrases that pop out as a recurring theme. Verse 4, You see, as Paul peppers the names throughout these paragraphs, he also peppers this strand of thought, doesn't he?

Verse 4, They risked their necks for my life. Well, they did that, didn't they? It's very easy to gloss over that.

Would you ever be able to forget if somebody had literally risked their neck for you? Look at verse 6. My kinsmen are my fellow prisoners.

[9 : 28] They were well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Look at verse 7. My kinsmen, they worked hard for you.

Verse 7, They were my fellow prisoners. Relatives who have been in prison with me. Look at verse 10. Greet a palace who is approved in Christ.

Greet those who belong to the family of Aristopoulos. Greet my kinsmen. Herodian, Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphena, Tryphosa.

Greet their beloved persons who's worked hard for the Lord. People who've been tested. People who've worked hard for the Lord. It's very striking, isn't it?

They've risked their life. They've worked very hard. They were in prison. They were tested. They were approved. It sounds, doesn't it, like a kind of testimonies of people who've been fighting in a war.

[10 : 31] Or they've struggled through extreme difficulties. And I think what Paul is saying is, here are a group of ordinary Christian people. Ordinary Christian people in ordinary church life.

Whose love for Christ shows itself in love for one another. And that means that their daily lives are marked by love and by struggle.

By hard work, by sacrifice, by imprisonment even. It's a very simple thing. It's a very simple thing to create a church with no struggle and no love.

It's quite a simple thing to create a church with no cost and no debt and no gospel. It can actually be a very, very big church.

And very impressive. It could be full of all sorts of types of people. But it's not the real thing. Real churches are full of love and full of struggle.

[11 : 38] And if you do not love, there'll be no struggle. And many want and seek and find churches would actually offer a life of ease and a place where following a crucified Jesus will never involve us in personal love or cost.

But a realistic description of an ordinary church is one that describes, as Paul does here, a heartfelt love and an ongoing struggle of many kinds. That is the normal pattern of church life.

Now let's move on. Let's ask the question, why? Why does God make church life like that? Why doesn't God establish churches whereby our struggles are completely removed?

Sounds quite appealing, isn't it? Why can't God establish churches where all illnesses are cured? Immediately. Why can't God establish a church where it would be easier rather than difficult for us to love one another?

Why can't God establish churches where faith is never tested? Why does he do it this way? Well, what do we think a watching world will see? An encounter when God's people really love one another, even when it costs them to do so.

[12 : 53] They will see Jesus. That's what they'll see. And other people see Jesus more clearly when we are coping with our weaknesses than when we are rejoicing in our strengths.

And days of ease. That is when people see Jesus amongst us. And that is why in verses 17 to 20, Paul surprisingly interrupts this kind of flow of personal greetings to write a very honest and real and blunt word of caution.

He says, I appeal to you brothers, watch out for those who cause divisions. Did you notice the words that follow? Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you've been taught.

Avoid them. There are people who want there to be no contest. To be no cost. There are people who want to serve their own appetites.

Who are full of smooth talk and flattery and deception. And naive souls are taken in. And these are the things which Satan loves to divide the fellowship, Christian fellowship. Smooth talk, deception, flattery.

[13 : 57] And Paul says, they are contrary to the doctrine you've been taught. Now Paul is warning his need of Christians at the end of the letter in which he's pleaded with them in almost every chapter.

You must stand united. You stand on the same ground. That is the thrust of every chapter of Romans. These two groups, the Jews and the Gentiles. And Paul is saying, stand together on the gospel.

And he says, what will divide those two types of people? Well, a person will divide you. Smooth talkers, deceptive flatterers, who departed from what I taught you.

And they will bring the whole thing to ruin. And no church will be established. They are church wreckers and they should be avoided. You see, what have we learned in the book of Romans?

We have learned that the gospel humbles everybody under God's grace. That every single one of us in this room are on the same ground. There is no boasting amongst God's people. Pride is excluded.

[14 : 57] I am just as sinful as you are. And you are just as sinful as I am. And if you have been born again, you've been saved by God's grace in the same way that I have been saved by God's grace.

And I didn't deserve it and neither did you. So where is boasting? Christ died for me. And Christ died for you. So who is better off? Why be divided?

Why should we be divided? The gospel produces unity in a church fellowship. Whereas smooth talkers, religious gurus and selfish leaders, they produce division.

They've got big appetites. Personal ambitions and desires. And Paul says, watch out for that. Keep away from that. He says, be innocent, doesn't he, about their wicked ways. Don't even discuss matters with them.

You'll never sort them out. Just watch out. And stand on the gospel. Well, that's the thrust of those verses. And at the end, take heart. Because if you do that, do you see that promise of Genesis 3.15?

[15 : 56] The great seed promise of the Bible, the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. Are we surprised that Paul is so forthrightly honest in chapter 16, verse 17-20?

He's so forthrightly honest in the midst of a loving list of friendship greetings. We shouldn't be. Paul is just wise, isn't he? The devil who loves to divide churches is a snake.

He hides his poison. And he hides his poison in self-serving sinfulness. And they are the deadly ways of destroying churches.

And Paul knows that the local church in Rome could have been ended. So he says, you Jews, you Gentiles, you weak, you strong, you men, you women, you mild-mannered, anxious Christians, you strong-willed, mature, fiery believers, don't lose sight of the gospel.

Because the gospel will set your heart on God. And the gospel will make you equally humble.

[17 : 04] And the gospel will provide you a common purpose. So watch out for division and smooth talk. Now finally, these words, aren't they, from verses at the end of the chapter, are really prayerful praise.

Verse 25, God has made his will known through the gospel.

So that the nations could believe in Christ. And this God is worthy of our praise forever. So I wonder whether you hear verse 25 this lunchtime.

That God is able to strengthen you. And God is able to establish you. Whatever you feel about yourself. Whatever you feel about your Christian fellowship.

God is able to establish you by the gospel. And I think it's refreshing to think about that. That the building of the church relies on God and not on me and not on us.

[18 : 26] That new sight of the gospel. And so every local church, since Rome, and today, has this choice to make.

Do we keep going with the gospel? Whatever others may think, or say, or do, or do we choose an easier path? That's a very real choice for every church.

And that is what Paul was saying to Rome. God says here that he is able to establish the church by the gospel. So to vote for the gospel is to vote for two things.

Joy and struggle. To go with the gospel, as we've learned in Romans, means you will plumb the depths of what it means to see your own sin. And then you will rise to the heights to see what the Savior has done.

And a God who can forgive you. And if you go with the gospel of Romans, some people will hate you. But God will establish you. Or alternatively, you could go with some other way, of which there are an infinite number to choose from.

[19 : 28] So church in Rome, here's your choice. Glory to God, as he establishes you in the gospel. Or glory to you, as you descend into the defunct realms of your own cleverness.

And that is the church's choice. And never more so than today. The gospel by which the only wise God will continue to grip the souls of men and women and to change them forever.

God's wisdom which brings life to the dead. Or human wisdom. Whereby we begin to say, Paul, not everyone likes your gospel. It's sometimes unpopular.

So do you mind if we just tweak it here and there? Do you mind if we actually get rid of parts of Romans chapter 1? And we take off some of the sharp edges. And if we do that, Paul, if we don't mention those things in Romans 1, we'll become far more popular that way and we'll gain ourselves a hearing.

Let us show you, Paul, how we can establish a better church than the one you tried to establish. And Paul, if you let us have our alternative for the gospel, we will show you that we will have a church where actually you don't have to suffer in all those ways.

[20 : 37] Where actually, if we never mention the Bible's teaching on homosexuality and the wrath of God, well, the sun will always shine.

And Paul says, no, I urge you, I urge you to stick with the gospel, the gospel you've heard from Romans. And to depart from that gospel is to depart from God and his blessing.

Faith is obedience to the gospel. It is never an altering of the gospel. Faith is proclamation of the gospel.

And in these verses, it is never a hiding of the gospel. Faith says, I'm not ashamed. Why would we be ashamed when at its heart is the Saviour who died for us?

To be ashamed of Him would be the most appalling thing possible. Faith says, God is able to establish a church by the gospel and by the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

[21 : 39] And so, do you believe that? Jesus says, He can establish a church by this gospel. How strong do you believe Jesus to be? He stayed on His cruel cross for our sake.

I think that's strength. He held Himself under the power of death. He rose from the grave, vindicated forever. He is already, at this point in time in history, Jesus has already called a vast army of people from all the nations to follow Him with undying love.

That is strong. Christ is able of strength and even martyrs to sing His praise. I read this week of eight church leaders in one country that have been martyred.

I saw their photos and Christ was strong enough to make them stick with the gospel rather than denounce it. Christ is strong enough.

500 years ago, He changed the face of the earth in the Reformation. He is strong enough. He is strong enough to cleanse people like me and to bring people like me from sinful death to life and people like you.

[22 : 51] And so Paul says at the end of Romans 16, give glory to the only wise God, the God who has done all that, all that He ever could do, to show you that He is able to establish the church by His gospel.

Back there in Rome, then, now and forever, there is no other way by which God will build His church. So Paul says to Rome, and he says to us, stick with the gospel.

Let's pray.