

## PEOPLE WITH NAMES

### Romans 16:1–16

**Dr. George O. Wood**

*We're coming to the end of Romans. Some of you are old enough to remember when we began!*

Romans 16:1–16 (NIV)

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. 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. Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. 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. Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my relative. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. 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. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.”

I love a passage with names. There is beauty to a passage with names, as you have heard me comment, perhaps, before. Whenever we come across passages like this in Scripture, we must immediately recognize that it is someone's favorite verse. I'm sure Rufus's favorite verse in all

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the Scripture has got to be verse 13 of chapter 16. To be mentioned once in the Scripture is quite an honor. And in honor of those whose names are herein, if no other reason, we would read this Scripture. It's reminiscent of the fact that there is a Book that has the names of the redeemed. And it is a Book in which we all want to have our names enrolled.

There's some twenty-seven names in this list. Seven of them are definitely women, possibly an eighth. That's a question we'll look at in a little bit. The rest are men. Certainly, a great variety of calling that is represented in this Scripture. Most all the people whom Paul is addressing are laypeople. Sometimes, I think we make the mistake of assuming that unless one is an Apostle Paul or an Apostle Peter or some other great in the Church, he or she can't really be doing the will of the Lord. Yet leadership in the Church is sort of like the tip of the iceberg. Very little bit of the iceberg shows above water. We can't think of the Church as simply being the Apostle Paul and the few people who are with him on missionary journeys. The Church is far larger and more expansive than that.

We get a taste, as we read these names in Rome of persons who in lay capacities were serving the Lord faithfully. These were evidently individuals who Paul has met in his various travels in the Mediterranean world. They have, since he has met them, migrated to Rome. For he himself has never been to Rome, so he is addressing people whom he personally knows, whom he has evidently met along the way.

The fact that there are many names of laypeople here suggests for us that Romans wasn't written for theologians—maybe one of the things we've tried to say in this year and a half we've been in the letter of Romans. And also we need to recognize that the early Christians, although Paul says in Corinthians that not many are wise after this world's standard, it doesn't mean that these early Christians were incapable of thinking great thoughts and perceiving great truths.

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So in the letter to the Romans, Paul has set before these ordinary believers—some of them who are now named—the greatest truths that can ever grab the human mind. And can be understood by ordinary people like you and me. Someone has said that in this chapter, Romans 16, Paul leaves the mountaintops of doctrine to come down to walk the pavements of Rome. We see the faces of the people to whom he has been writing.

One other thing we might say about the beauty of this passage is that it certainly reflects the church at Rome as a web of relationships among people, rather than a maze of hierarchy. The Early Church, at this point, really doesn't have a hierarchy. Paul does not say, "To the presiding bishop in charge of the church at Rome, and to the imminent domains that are under his care, and to the sub-deacons that are under their care, and, finally, to all the lesser people who make up the church." There is no hierarchy there at all. It's just a group of people to whom he is giving greetings. Even, certainly, by failure to mention any apostle in the greeting, it's an indication that there's no apostle there at this time, or surely an apostle would have been mentioned.

When we look at the church as a web of relationships, we see the tremendous beauty that comes in the body of Christ by being tied to other people in it. If Paul were writing in a formal style to a church that had a structured hierarchy, he would begin his greetings like a person does in a commencement speech. Where he says something like, "Mr. president, distinguished members of the board, and of the administration and other faculty. Honored guests and parents of the students. And last but not least, all the students." Students are always mentioned last in those graduating speeches, if you've noticed.

But no such formalities here, because the Church is a web of relationships. Paul, speaking as an apostle, is very conscious of his authority as an apostle. But it's one that certainly doesn't have the rigor of hierarchy that we see that later developed.

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We want to take some time to look at these fascinating people of Romans, in verses 1–16, and let them come alive for a few moments before our eyes. See, as you listen to me, if you can visualize some of what they look like.

The first person we're introduced to is the lady Phoebe. Her name means "radiant" or "bright." It was a title that was used for the Greek god of the moon, Apollo. It's fascinating that Phoebe, after she became a Christian, for some reason did not change her name to some more Christian distinctive. She evidently kept the name she had. She is given a letter of recommendation by Paul. We know that the early Christians, because of the lack of Holiday Inns and Ramada Inns and the like, needed somebody to open their home when they traveled. So it was customary that a letter of recommendation from a church should go with them so that other believers would know that these were attested persons and were not false teachers or persons coming in to disrupt the Body. Paul talks, in 2 Corinthians 3, about not needing a letter of recommendation. He says, "You're my letter of recommendation" (2 Corinthians 3:2). But other believers did need letters of recommendation. So Paul wants to commend this person to the Roman church. She is the carrier of this Roman letter. And, by the way, caring for small things can be so important. This letter wasn't that large, and I'm so glad she didn't lose it in transit somewhere along the way. It had a very important mission.

Paul calls her the deacon of the church at Cenchrea. The English translators have a bias. They cannot believe that a woman could hold a position of deacon. So they add an ending that the Greek doesn't have and put an "ess" on the end. It's really that she's the deacon of the church at Cenchrea. The same title that is used for Paul as a deacon of the Word of God, and Apollos. A title used of others in the New Testament. It's here used of this lady Phoebe.

It may not be that there was a formal office of deacon. "Deacon" could be translated rather widely to be called "servant." But the fact that she is a helper of many, "and of myself as well,"

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indicates a prominent position in the church of service. The word “helper” here connotes a person who is more than simply a person who gives aid. It has a unique stress to it, the idea of patroness. She is someone who perhaps threw her home open, and may be a woman of wealth and position. Who, in this wicked city of Cenchrea, had made her place a haven for Christians, a recovery center for those who were coming in, to have the oil of Christian love poured upon their wounds of life. A place where, perhaps, the Apostle Paul himself felt welcomed and refreshed and fed. She is a woman who really beautifully serves the Lord at this wicked city of Cenchrea.

The next persons we are told of are Prisca and Aquila. Sometimes we read their names as Priscilla and Aquila. Priscilla is the diminutive. Just like we have the words Sam and Sammy, and Sammy is the more familiar. In those days, when you added an “la” to the end of a name, you were using the more familiar way of speaking. The more formal name was Prisca. Here, she is so addressed. Priscilla means “little Prisca.” This gallant couple had had occasion to meet with Paul previously. We see that they were expelled from Rome, and when Paul came to Corinth, he met them in Corinth, made tents with them, and lived with them, and started the church at Corinth. Later, when Paul sailed from Corinth and went to Ephesus at the end of the second missionary journey, this couple went with him. They remained at Ephesus. Paul left, but a preacher by the name of Apollos came along. They taught Apollos more accurately concerning Jesus. Apollos’s ministry was greatly strengthened.

Now we find them here in Rome that whereas they had had a house church there at Ephesus, they have a house church here, again, in the city of Rome. Later, when we look at 2 Timothy 4:19, the last of Paul’s letters, we find that they have gone back to Ephesus. So this tentmaker couple traveled quite widely in their trade. Wherever they went, they were a blessing to the body of Christ.

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It's evident by looking at them that they had a team ministry. Here is a man and a wife who, when they are named, are always named together. There are some couples where God may particularly call one, and most often it is the man in the visible role. So you think of an individual's ministry. This couple was so balanced in their ministry that wherever they're named, they're named together. Aquila is never mentioned without his wife Prisca. In fact, four out of six times they're named in the Scripture, Prisca's name comes first. This is about as odd as writing somebody a letter and saying, "Dear Mrs. and Mr." It may be an indication that of the two, Prisca had the more visible type of ministry. We do know that both of them were very instructed in the Word. Some have even speculated that Prisca is the one who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. Pure speculation, but an interesting thought.

We know from Paul's description of this couple that they were willing to die for him. "They risked their necks for me," which is at some point—perhaps at Ephesus—where Paul faced many dangers. They had exposed their own physical safety in order to secure his.

Another person mentioned is Epenetus, whose name means "praised or worthy of praise." He's simply called beloved. And he is seen as the firstfruit of Paul's converts in Asia. The King James has here "Achaia," but that is incorrect. It's Asia. Perhaps he is one of the twelve we read about in Acts 19 who had believed in John's baptism. But now, when Paul comes, has hands laid upon him to receive the greater baptism in the Spirit, and to receive water baptism in the Name of Jesus (Acts 19:1–7).

Mary, another woman in the list, is distinguished for her hard work among the saints.

Then an interesting couple of names, Andronicus and Junias. They're interesting for several reasons. One is, their being named together may indicate that they are man and wife. Junias—there are two possibilities for that. "Junias" more commonly was a feminine name. It could sometimes be used as a masculine name, if it was an abbreviation of the longer name Junianonis.

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Translators, however, have a difficult time seeing a woman as a possibility. They go on to note the end of verse 7: “Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsman and fellow prisoners. They are men of note among the apostles.” The words “men of note” does not even occur in the original text. But it is simply unthinkable for the translator to presume that a woman could have been an apostle. So they, interestingly enough in the English translation, insert the word “men” and simply say that they are of note among the apostles. Most commonly, the word “Junias” was used to describe a woman. In fact, a fourth-century church father said this about this text.

“Indeed, to be apostles at all is a great thing. But to even be amongst those of note, consider what a great compliment this is. They were of note owing to their works and to their achievements. Oh, how great is the devotion of this woman, Junias, that she should be counted worthy of the appellation of apostle.”

Here is a person who was seen as the kinsman of Paul, and it could mean nothing more than they were fellow Jews. They, at some time, had been in prison together. We don’t know a specific incident when that has occurred. But Paul notes they were prisoners together. They were people of note among the apostles. This may mean that they themselves were apostles. Or that they were recognized highly by apostles. And he says, “They were in Christ before me” (Romans 16:7). Paul, as he is advancing in age, is able to say that about fewer and fewer people. But here, of these two people, he is able to say, “They were in Christ before me.”

He then goes on in his list. “Ampliatius, who is my beloved in the Lord” (verse 8). Described here not as working hard, but described in terms of the personal relationship that they had enjoyed together, a relationship of love.

Urbanus and Stachys. Both men. Urbanus’ name means “of the city.” You might call him city slicker, urban, or polite. He is a fellow worker of Paul in Christ. As is Stachys, whose name means “ear of corn,” who’s called “my beloved” (verse 9).

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And there is Apelles, who is approved in Christ (Romans 16:10). Another fascinating description, because this phrase “approved in Christ” points to the fact that, at some venture or some point in Apelles’s life, he went through a particular test, and he stood that test. Therefore, the stamp is placed upon him, as it’s placed upon a steel-belted tire that’s been properly inspected and made: Approved, passed the test.

Then there are those who are in the household of Aristobulus, and then Herodion, and those of the household of Narcissus. Paul does not greet, specifically, Aristobulus and Narcissus, but simply greets those of their households. Which indicates not so much, necessarily, immediate family, but rather an extended household which involves slaves. He is greeting here, evidently, the employees, or what we would call now the slaves of Aristobulus and Narcissus, who are believers.

There were many, perhaps, in Rome who were called Aristobulus and Narcissus. But from the first century, we do know that there was a very prominent Aristobulus and a very prominent Narcissus in Rome, and it may be that there were Christians who belonged to the households of these two prominent persons. We’ll just talk about them for a moment. Because it is, I think, very reasonable to speculate this possibility. Aristobulus lived in Rome all of his life. He was the grandson of Herod the Great, who killed the babies of Bethlehem. Unlike his brothers, he chose to never come back and get involved in the political intrigues of Judea. He was a very close friend of the Emperor Claudius. After his death, by virtue of the way the Romans operated, his household would have been united with the imperial household. His slaves would have become Caesar’s slaves, but they would still be known as the household of Aristobulus.

Narcissus was a freed man who was the appointments secretary to the Emperor Claudius. He became very wealthy because he controlled all the correspondence coming to the emperor. And if somebody wanted to get a letter to the emperor, they just had to grease the palm a little bit to

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get the letter in. Narcissus was murdered by the intrigue of the new emperor's mother. And he had a household of slaves as well, which upon his death would have become Caesar's, but still would have been known by his name.

It is most likely to presume, since Paul, when he writes the Philippian letter from Rome, he himself is under house arrest. When he writes that letter he says, "Those who are of Caesar's household greet you." It may be that the very people who belonged to the household of Aristobulus and Narcissus were in the administration. The administrative family of Caesar himself. And, especially, this makes a lot of sense, because immediately after Aristobulus, and before Narcissus, Paul greets his fellow Jew Herodion, and that name is suggestive of the fact that here was person who was indeed in the Herodion-Aristobulus household.

But if this hypothesis is true, it certainly does indicate that as the gospel got to Rome in the first century, it penetrated right away in some of the high-ranking echelon of the Roman empire.

Then there are Tryphena and Tryphosa, two women whose names are taken from a root word which means "to live luxuriously." And literally translated, their names are "Dainty" and "Delicate." What they sound like in the Greek, there's a certain kind of rhyming to the sounds. Some have said these are twin sisters, and they certainly have names that you might expect of twins. He says Dainty and Delicate have worked hard in the Lord. They didn't just look in a mirror and admire their beauty. But they went to work for the saints. And their beauty—their daintiness and delicacy—was what they were doing for others and for the Lord.

There is then another woman, Persis, whose name means "Persian woman." Perhaps we ought to look very closely at the tact of the Apostle Paul in writing here. Because he calls her "the beloved Persis" (verse 12). Whereas, the others, he has called them "my beloved." Now it is "*the* beloved." And he's very careful that no one read any sort of romantic connection. So he's quite at home in calling a man, "my beloved". But when it comes to the ladies, it is "*the* beloved," lest

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anyone misunderstand. Persis's work also is described as in the past tense—who “worked hard in the Lord.” Whereas Dainty and Delicate's work was in the present tense. An indication, perhaps, that illness had happened to Persis, or she is now of old age and is unable to work any longer.

Her labor in the Lord, though, has not been forgotten. It is recognized.

Then there is Rufus—I think, one of my favorite characters in this list. His name means “red or red-haired.” Obvious indication that among those in Scripture, there are redheaded people. Who was this Rufus? And who was his mother? Mark throws out an interesting little hint. The Gospel of Mark is evidently written to the Roman church. Mark, when he is recording the scene of Christ on the way to the cross, drops something interesting in the text of his Gospel that is not found in the text of the other Gospels. He says in Mark 15:21: “They compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and of Rufus, to carry his cross.” Why did he have to identify Simon as being the father of Alexander and Rufus? What do Alexander and Rufus have to do with the story? Writing to the Roman church as Mark evidently is, it's an indication probably that Alexander and Rufus are right there in the congregation and he's saying, “It's their dad that carried the cross.” What an incredible thing it would be for a man coming in from Cyrene, probably a Jew who had come in as a pilgrim to Rome, and he's going to worship. But instead, he's made to carry some convicted criminal's cross. That circumstance that intersected his life changed his whole life, changed his family's life. His son Rufus, later, is acknowledged in the Roman church. Not only that, but Paul says Rufus's mother, who would be Simon of Cyrene's wife, has become “my mother as well” (Romans 16:13). At some point in their life, perhaps this older woman had had a real ministry to the Apostle Paul and treated him like a son. How blessed Rufus is in being described as imminent in the Lord, or especially chosen, which would be a hint back to this unique way in

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which his father and his household had met Christ. How blessed he is that he is perhaps the son of the one who carried the cross. And he has a mother who mothered an apostle.

There is then a list of names: Asyncritus, and Phlegon, and Hermes, and Patrobas, Hermas.

They're just given in a whole group. Greet these five persons, these five men of the brethren with him. Someone has said these, maybe, were five bachelors who maybe teamed up together and had a house church going. We can't say that for sure, but it's an intriguing possibility. But they evidently labored together. There's, evidently, a house church associated with them, for Paul greeted them by name and the brethren with them (Romans 16:14).

Then there's Philologus and Julia. Probably husband and wife. Philologus means "word lover." Maybe when his parents named him, they thought they were going to have an educated child. They'd call him Word Lover. But he came to love a greater and better Word, the true Word. His name, therefore, would be a remarkably fitting Christian name—Lover of the Word. And Julia. Julia was one of the most common names used for women who were Roman slaves. And it may be that these two were a couple.

And there was Nereus and his sister, and Olympas. Nereus. Nereus, there's an interesting speculation on him as well. It's maybe not quite as solid as some of the other traditions of the other names I have indicated. But we know that in about 95 A.D., some thirty-seven years or so after the writing of the Roman letter, that there were two distinguished persons in Rome that were condemned for being believers. Husband and wife. The wife was the niece of the then-reigning emperor, and she was a granddaughter of another emperor. She was exiled in 95 A.D., and her husband was killed. The common tradition about them was that they were judged for being Christians. And the person who's a chamberlain in their house survived by the name of Nereus. And Nereus may well have been this person who, again, would have been at this point a young person involved in the household of Caesar.

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The names, as we stop to comment on them and in some cases speculate on them, appear to take on a greater vividness and concreteness. One of the real tests, credentials, that the New Testament brings to us is that it is not a book dropped out of heaven for men to read. But it is a Word of the Spirit of God, which is dropped into the hearts of men. It becomes written to real, live people. It's not some esoteric, hidden book of philosophy. But it has the credentials of common, ordinary people relating to it and intersecting with it. This separates it from gospels or religions which are built upon mysticism. Because there's nothing of that mysticism here. We can look at the names of the people and the fact that they were living in Rome. It ties it. The New Testament message is tied to history.

Let's take some moments to apply these persons to our own lives, try to look at each of them in turn.

Have you ever heard a message from Roman 16? I don't know what else to do with this text other than to do this.

**I. One lesson that comes to me is that very true statement that we do not go to church; we *are* the church.**

If we see being a part of the church as a one-hour-a-week experience, we tragically miss the stress of the New Testament by being in the church. As we are in the church, we find our ties becoming deeper. So that after a while, with the Apostle Paul, we could name twenty-seven persons within the church. And not only can we name them, but we can associate certain descriptive phrases with them. I would simply say, "Are your ties in this local body deepening as you've been here over the time that God has given you to be here, whether for a week or for a year? Or are they about the same level as when you first came in the door? An encouragement to deepen them, to strive, if you don't know twenty-seven persons in this body, to take Romans

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16:1–16 as an example and say, “I’d like to touch base with twenty-seven lives who could minister to me in my experience with Christ.”

#### **II. There is this sense of the fact that we do not have one minister, but we are all ministers.**

This body of Christ in Romans is not identified as “to Pastor George Wood and his congregation,” but it is to the many saints that are at the church, distributed throughout the city. These saints are described as some of them being helpers, some of them risking their necks, some of them work hard, some of them are approved in Christ, some are beloved. They are commended for their conduct in some cases. For their character in other cases. In other cases, for their willingness to suffer for the Lord.

I think these people would have been surprised had they known that today their names would be read some 1,900 and some odd years later. To have that kind of recognition. They had not labored in order to gain that sort of recognition. They had labored and gained the recognition of apostle. And because they had gained his recognition, I’m sure also they had gained the recognition of the Lord. Which suggests to us that whatever work we do in the Church, the Lord has for it a fitting motif. Paul says to the Corinthians, “For you know that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain.” If an apostle doesn’t forget, how much more will the Lord not forget our labor and our involvement in His work, for His cause? There is certainly a place of ministry for everyone in the body of Christ.

There is, in these sixteen verses, ministry for women. There is ministry for couples who are serving the Lord, like Prisca and Aquila and others. There are families who are ministering for the Lord, like Rufus and his mother, and Nereus and his sister, and Tryphena and Tryphosa. And there are singles, I think, who are serving the Lord as well in this passage. In this church, we see singles and marrieds, male and female, young and old. We see, by the names, Roman names,

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Greek names, Jewish names. We see rich and poor persons. All of them making up the composite, which is the church.

Finally Paul tells all of these people in verse 16, “Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you” (Romans 16:16).

### **III. By this, he is saying we are among those who are both welcome and who, in turn, welcome others.**

“Greet one another with a holy kiss,” he says. We would have to underline the word “holy.” In many parts of the world, among some European peoples, the giving of a kiss is a traditional form of greeting. Perhaps we’re not quite as at home with that in our culture. We shake hands. And I think we, in this church, are getting beyond that, to giving one another a hug. That’s all well and good and as it should be. What really surprises me here is that Paul even has to give this admonition at all. Wouldn’t Christians automatically do that, since it was an automatic form of greeting and courtesy that was extended in circles outside the church?

Yet I wonder if we’re much different than the apostolic Church. There are times, unless we hear a reminder, “As you leave today, be sure and take a few moments to greet one another, spend time with one another,” sometimes we don’t hear that greeting and we go straight on out. It may have been the case with the Roman church as well that we fight this tendency to be individualistic and go on with our own affairs. Paul says, “Stop, you Christians. When you’re together, greet one another with a holy kiss.” Assume it to be your responsibility to welcome someone else. Don’t wait to be welcomed. The admonition is not to wait around until somebody greets you with a holy kiss. But it’s greet one another with a holy kiss. Every believer, take the action. Take the initiative.

### **IV. Then he says when you greet others, know yourselves that you are, in turn, greeted.**

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You are the welcomed ones. He says, “All the churches of Christ greet you.” Here he’s speaking for all the churches which he’s founded on these missionary journeys, which are sending their love and their greetings on to the Roman church. Wherever this letter comes, that greeting follows it. I like to think that these ancient churches greet us again today as we read this letter. There is such a thing as the communion of the saints. That wherever the Church meets in any place and any country among any people, these greetings of the churches come. All the other churches of Christ, past and present, greet this church in this moment as we hear this letter, because we’re part of the larger company. What is our greeting? It’s like we are pilgrims meeting one another as we’re on a journey, saying to one another, “Hello! We’re saved. We know you are. We’re heaven bound. We greet you on the way. How are you ? God bless you. We’re going home together to Christ and to God. We greet you with a holy ‘hail’ of the redeemed.”

There may be occasions in our life when we feel like we couldn’t make it in a list like this as individual persons. I think a listing of names is a helpful reminder to us who are redeemed that God takes regard for our name and our position.

As you look at all these names, are any of them loved more by the Lord than others? Do you think that Paul is loved more by Christ than someone forgotten, like Nereus or Julia? I don’t think so. I think the Lord takes note of various work which we do. But since He is our heavenly Father, He loves us with a mature love of a Father and makes delight in all of us as His children. I say this especially because the enemy likes to come at times and suggest to us that if we’re in the family, we’re just barely in the family and that He loves others far more than He loves us. He’s tolerating us. Nothing could be further in the truth. If you’ve given your life to the Lord and truly trusted on Him, then you belong in this list along with all the saints. Greetings to you, and give greetings to one another.

### **Closing Prayer**

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For the joy of being in Your company, we give thanks. For the joy of knowing that we are loved with a love that has no limit, we give thanks. For faithful laypeople and the church at Rome who served You freely out of their heart, who rate only one mention in the Scripture, we give thanks. For all of those in that Roman church whose names aren't mentioned at all, we give thanks. For our faith is a faith which is built upon the testimony of the apostles. These dear ones of the past were living stones set in the lower floors of that building into which now we are placed ourselves as living stones. That the whole edifice of the Church, through the centuries, might grow up into the image of Jesus Christ the Lord.

We thank You for one another today, for us, the church, now meeting in this place, at this time.

We're grateful that You greet us, Lord, and You bring us the good news once more of Your love and care. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.