

Paul is now coming to the end of the book of Romans, and as is natural for the ending of a letter, he wants them to greet each other in the Lord. Greet this person in the Lord. Greet that person in the Lord. All the churches of Christ greet you. And that's a very fitting thing, to greet everyone in this way. We would expect the letter to do just this. But we're tempted to skip over all of those names, just like we're tempted to skip over names or lists of names in the Old Testament. It just seems like information that we don't need. It seems like something that we can move on past to get to what is really important. It seems too specific to be of any use for us today. But honestly, Christians, just like we heard last week, everything that is written in the Bible has been written for our benefit, and that includes this list of names. If Paul's travel plans last week are important to us, so are all of these greetings. Because through these greetings, we learn something about what the church of God is.

Take, for example, this: all of these names tell us something about where these people come from. Now, I know in our days when we give names to our children, we tend to just give names because we like the way that they sound. It's a nice name. I want to give a nice name to my children. That's all that it really is. Just because you have a German name doesn't mean that you're German. Just because you have an English name doesn't mean that you're English. It's just a name to us. But in those days, your name said something about who you were. It said something about where you came from. Greeks had Greek names, and so forth. And so when we look at this list, then, we see a mixture of lots of different kinds of names: Greeks and Latins and even some Hebrew ones. Most of the names in this list are Greek, names like Phoebe or Epaphroditus or Andronicus. Those are Greek names. Some of the names in this list are Latin, names like Prisca or Aquila or Urbanus. And two, or at least two, of these names are Hebrew: Mary and Herodion. And so through this list of names, then, we see that the church of Rome was made up of people who came from all kinds of different backgrounds, all kinds of different races.

And the reason that's so important is because it shows us that the Church comes from all nations. Though we are all different, we are all united together as one in the Lord. Because think about what it says in Revelation, chapter 7: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands." And so the picture is of the Church, this great multitude drawn from every people and nation and tribe and language, made up of people from all over the earth. It's not just one group, as if the church was only American. It is everyone united together in the Lord. Now, that does not get rid of our differences. Our physical differences still remain. I don't stop being American just because I am a Christian. I don't stop being white because I am a Christian. In all of these things, we still have these differences, because that is how God made us. And yet we are united together in Christ as one in the Lord.

And in our day when we are dealing with deep racial divisions, very deep problems in our society, that is something that we need to hold on to, something that we need to hear. Because the solution to our divisions is not to be found in the world. The solution to our divisions is to be found in Jesus. As Paul says in Ephesians, chapter 2: "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two." So in other words, in the flesh of Christ we find a real unity. That wall that divides

us has been torn down, so that now we are one in the Lord. The two have become one in Jesus. Yes, our physical differences remain. God made us that way. That doesn't go away. And this doesn't mean we have to be united politically either. God has given to each nation its place on the earth. That's how he created us. This is all good. But even though we are different, yet we are one in Jesus, because he has united us together in himself. So this is a real unity that will never be taken away.

So that's the first thing that we see. The second thing that we see in this list of names is that it says something about who these people are in terms of their social status, whether they are upper class or lower class. And again, I know, to us names are just names. That doesn't really say anything about who we are. But in those days you could sometimes tell if someone was part of the upper class or if someone was a slave just based on their name. Because there were the freeborn people, those who had never been slaves, they were the upper class. And there were also the slaves or the ones who were free men, people who were once slaves or descended from slaves. And you had these two very different classes of people. And sometimes you would give names to one that you wouldn't give to the other. And so in this list, we see a mixture of those kinds of names. Some of the names are upper class names, freeborn people, names like Prisca or Aquila or Urbanus or Rufus. And many of the names are slaves or free men, names like Nereus or Hermes or Persis. This is especially true when Paul talks about the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus. He's not talking about their relatives. He's talking about their household slaves, those who were part of the house, but not really part of the immediate family. And yes, some of the names could go either way, but the point is clear. We see both levels of society, the rich and the poor, upper and lower, slave and free, joined together in one church at Rome.

And that's especially important because in those days, Christians, the classes didn't mix with each other. The rich absolutely detested slaves. They wanted nothing to do with them. They had slaves, yes, but they didn't socialize with them. Because in some cases, they even saw them as being something less than human. They were simply tools to be used in the service of their needs. That was it. That's the way that the pagan world often look at slaves in Paul's day. But here in the Church, we don't see just upper or lower. We don't see just rich or just poor. We see them both together, so that the rich are together with the poor. The free are together with the slaves, because Christ has joined all men into one in himself.

And that's significant for us, because in our time of deep social divisions, this is also the solution to our problems. Because in our day, the rich often exploit the poor, and the poor often despise the rich. They want nothing to do with one another. And yes, the world tries to find some kind of political solution to these problems, but they never work. And so it is in Christ that we find real unity, a real answer to our problems. Because in Christ, the rich would no longer exploit the poor, but help them and take care of their needs as brothers in the Lord. And in Christ, the poor would no longer despise the rich, but treat them as brothers in the Lord. And so in this way, we see a real unity, not just some political solution. A real answer to the problems that our society faces.

And so that's the second thing. The last thing to see in this list of names is probably the easiest to see, and that is that it's made up of both men and women. Most of these names are male, names like Aquila, Andronicus, Herodion, and so forth. But there's quite a few of the names that are

female: Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, and so forth. And that's important because it shows that the Church is not just for one of the sexes. It's not just for men, it's not just for women, but together they are united in the Lord. Because sin and the world today tries to drive a wedge between men and women, to set them at odds with each other, to always have them fighting against each other, so that it seems like we can never have any real peace. There's all kinds of suspicion, all kinds of hatred that goes back and forth both ways. But the world tries to fix those problems with some political solution. If we just do this, everyone will get along. But it doesn't work. And so what is the world going to do? But Paul shows us that real unity is to be found in Christ. Real unity between male and female in the one body of Jesus, so that they are united together as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Looking forward to the same hope. Looking forward to the same salvation. Worshiping the same Lord together. It is a real answer to the problems that we face, a real unity in Jesus Christ.

So that's why this passage at the end of Romans is so important, Christians. Because it shows us a picture of what the Church is, a picture of a real unity, a real answer to all the troubles that we face in the world today. Because unity is not to be found in pretending as if our differences don't exist. It doesn't help to pretend that there isn't such a thing as rich or poor, or male or female, or whatever it may be. You're not going to find unity in that way. And unity is not going to be found in trying to get rid of those differences, either. To try to destroy the difference between male and female, or rich and poor, or the races, or whatever it may be. Unity won't be found in that way either. Rather, unity is to be found in Jesus Christ, who has united us all into one body. As Paul says in Galatians 3: "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." So then, let us worship him as one, whoever we may be, because Jesus is the answer to all of our questions. He is the solution to all of our problems. And in him and him alone, we will find real peace.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have broken down the dividing wall of hostility in the body of your Son, Jesus Christ. We pray that you would lead us to seek after the real unity to be found in him alone, so that we may with one voice worship you forever. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.