

If You Don't Love People, You Don't Love God

A lot of people ignore the last chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans because it's basically a long list of ancient names we can't pronounce. After Paul finishes his masterful teaching on grace and salvation, he sends warm greetings to his many friends in Romans 16.

Paul was apparently reluctant to leave anyone out of this list. He mentions Phoebe, Aquilla, Epaenetus, Mary, Adronicas, Junia, Ampliatus, Urbanus and "Prisca," an endearing nickname for Priscilla. He greets Stachys, Apelles, Herodion, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis and those in the household of Aristobulus. He says hello to Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Philologus, Julia, Nereus and Olympas.

Paul refers to many of these people affectionately as "my beloved," "my kinsman" or "a choice man." They were not casual acquaintances. They were Paul's close friends, and he carried them in his heart. He had been in prison with some of them. He missed them so much that he wept when he thought of them.

And after mentioning these 26 people—plus Rufus' unnamed mother and Nereus' unnamed sister—Paul sends greetings from his co-workers, Timothy, Lucius, Jason and Sosipater. And he reminds everyone to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (16:16). Paul's love for people was not just affectionate in a verbal sense. It was downright slobbery.

Paul began the book of Romans by telling his friends: "I long to see you..." (1:11a). Toward the end of the letter he says he looks forward to visiting them so that he can "find refreshing rest in your company" (15:32, NASB 1995). This miracle-working apostle and theological genius reveals another side of

himself; he's gushy, mushy and huggable. He's the quintessential people person.

It makes me sad to think Romans 16 is ignored today because the fervent love Paul showed his Roman friends is the essence of biblical Christianity. God wants us to love each other with pure, over-the-top passion.

Paul's love for people was not just evident in his letter to the Romans. He told the Philippians: "I long for you with all the affection of Christ Jesus" (1:8). He wrote to the Thessalonians: "Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you ... our own lives" (1 Thess. 2:8). He told Timothy: "I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day, longing to see you, even as I recall your tears" (2 Tim. 1:3-4).

This is what the Bible calls "the love of the brethren" (see Heb. 13:1). Our love for each other is supposed to be sincere, not faked. It is supposed to be fervent, not cool or professional. It is supposed to be affectionate, not distant or clinical. It is supposed to be dripping with emotion, not dry and intellectual. Our passionate love for each other flows out of our love for Jesus.

But there's a problem. Everywhere I go today I hear Christians bashing the church and complaining that they can't attend this or that local fellowship because of loveless, hypocritical believers. We've become experts at nitpicking; we are quick to find fault; then we are even quicker to judge and condemn. And we have figured out how to make these judgmental pronouncements sound super-spiritual.

Church dropouts today have a long list of reasons why they can't worship with other Christians: 1) "We don't agree with all their doctrines;" 2) "The pastor preaches too long;" 3) "The worship is too long;" 4) "The worship is too short;" 5) "The church closed during the pandemic;" 6) "The church never

closed during the pandemic;" 7) "A church member posted something online that offended me;" 8) "A church member complained about something I posted online;" 9) "The pastor didn't speak to me last Sunday;" or 10) "No one spoke to me when I visited."

There are actually 1,001 ways a Christian can and will offend you at church. But your job is not to count the offenses; it is to forgive every time. That is what fervent love requires. Yet we have become experts at being offended, and our bitterness squelches the holy love God wants us to demonstrate.

The apostle John wrote: "The one who says that he is in the Light and yet hates his brother or sister is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother and sister remains in the Light, and there is nothing in him to cause stumbling" (1 John 2:9-10).

If we want to be spiritually mature, this is the bottom line: We must love people no matter how they hurt us. Canceling the church is not an option. If your love has grown cold, ask God to remove the offense—and invite His people back into your heart again. {eo}

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