



# HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

**Grace in Action**

**October 25, 2020**

**Romans 16:1-2**

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*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, <sup>2</sup> that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.*

*(Pastor prays)*

Before Constantine would become emperor, early in the 4th Century, General Constantine emblazoned a cross on the shields of his soldiers because he had put his faith in Christ. And as Providence would have it, his soldiers won that great battle of Milvian Bridge with those cross-emblazoned shields. Constantine became emperor and was the first Roman emperor to legalize Christianity with the Edict of Milan in 313. This made Constantinople the seat of Christianity in the eastern part of the world.

That Christianity needed some boundaries. In 325 the Christian Church became orthodox with the Council of Nicaea where the Nicene Creed was written. Constantinople continued to grow and needed a preacher, so 50 years later a man called John “the Golden mouth” Chrysostom would become Bishop of Constantinople. He was famous not just for his fiery eloquence and piercing sermons. His greatest quality was his straightforward approach to preaching the Bible. He didn't interpret the Bible allegorically like most early preachers did. He wanted the Bible to speak and move people by the spirit. John Chrysostom used a plain reading of the Bible, preaching through it, and when he got to Romans 16, his counsel to other preachers was, “don't rush through this chapter, because it's a gold mine and people who mine gold are careful about even the smallest fragments.”

The Apostle Paul wrote most of the New Testament, and in his writings he mentions at least 15 faithful women making a difference in the life of the church. In this passage, Paul devotes at least two verses to highlight a woman named Phoebe, someone he had never mentioned before and never would again.

Now at first glance it feels like there's not much to gain by staying here too long . But as we close Romans down in the next few Sundays, I think it's wise to heed Chrysostom's advice and be careful about even the smallest fragments of gold. I want to hold this woman up and think together "why does he mention her and what can we learn about following Christ by examining the life of this woman named Phoebe this genuine 1st Century Christian?"

### **Genuine Christianity is Grace in Action**

We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus and it's that grace that leads to action. Let's see if we can't learn some things from Phoebe's life.

### **A genuine Christian obviously loves the Lord**

Paul gives Phoebe four titles in verses 1 - 2 and I want to deal with two of them here; but first let's deal with her name. Phoebe. It's a pretty common name in Greek mythology. It means "light" or "radiant" and it is, oddly enough, the name of many Greek slaves. Phoebe could have been a freed woman who lived in Cenchræe, the port town to Corinth. She was saved but didn't change her name the way Paul had changed his name from Saul. Why didn't she change her name? I think she didn't change her name as a reminder of the power of the redemption of Christ, what Christ does for the worst of sinners and the most lost.

Paul gives her two titles that I feel go together. The first one is that Paul calls her a "saint." It's a common word for Christians. She is living for Christ and it's well known, and Paul says she is worthy of that kind of respect. In addition, he calls her "sister," "our sister." It's interesting that Paul would dignify this woman to such a degree as to call her not just **my** sister but **our** sister. It's no small thing to be called Paul's sister. He uses that same terminology when he's telling Timothy how to treat women in the church in 1 Timothy 5. He says treat the older women as you would your mother and treat the younger women as sisters in all purity. It gives you some idea of this previously unnamed woman and her character, that she obviously loved the Lord. Is that the first characteristic people know of you? From your social media, personally, your

habits, your language, your appearance, would anyone be surprised that you are a Christian? Genuine Christianity obviously loves the Lord.

### **A genuine Christian really loves the mission**

You might even say loves a Christian challenge. Verse 1 says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe.” That word “commend” is like an expanded spiritual passport, it gets her in. Why does Paul need to commend her to the church at Rome? Well, most everyone named in this chapter is already in Rome. Phoebe is headed to Rome, traveling from Corinth, and she is going to carry this letter. One old preacher said, “Never was there a greater burden carried by such tender hands.”

Phoebe carried so much as she traveled from Corinth to Rome. It was about 600 miles and just think of all that was in that letter. She didn't know the impact of what that one letter would do for the rest of Christian history. Packed in the book of Romans, that letter, is the theological history of the Christian church. The book of Romans will become the ground that John Chrysostom stood on to preach salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. There in the book of Romans would be the power that would change Saint Augustine. The book of Romans would lie dormant awhile until the awakening of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation began. Two hundred years later, in 1738, a spiritually miserable Anglican priest named John Wesley went to Aldersgate to a meeting to hear a lecture. There in this meeting a man started reading a commentary on the introduction to the book of Romans written by Martin Luther. And John Wesley said, “I did feel my heart strangely warmed” and he was converted.

If we didn't have the book of Romans, how would we know the “Roman Road” ? How would we know the wages of sin is death? How would we know that all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God? How would we know that while we were still sinners Christ died for us? How would we know that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised Him from the dead and that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved? There is so much packed into this book of Romans.

After 10 months of going through such a hard time , without Romans, we would know that for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose.

Paul wrote the letter, put it in Phoebe's hands and she took the mission. She could have never known what astounding value her life would add to the church and she is never mentioned again. Are you underestimating your contribution to the mission of the church? Phoebe had the quiet determination and faithfulness of a strong woman who loves Christ and loves the mission.

### **Genuine Christians love to serve**

Let's look at how Paul describes Phoebe in verse 1. He calls her a servant. *Diakonos*. Now most believe that Phoebe was fairly well to do, she had money, and was successful. And yet, she was called a servant at the local church in Cenchreae. *Diakonos*. It's where we get the word "deacon" that would become the office of Deacon. But I don't think that is what Paul is developing here. I think he is saying, here is a smart, hardworking, committed member of the church, and although she is financially well off and maybe even rich, she has given herself and proven herself by serving at the church. And that seems to be the major trait that Paul is commending. Not that she is rich or a great businesswoman, but that she has given herself to helping the church in a real *discernable* way. Do you love your church? How are you serving the Lord at your church? Why is it hard to serve at church? What kind of mission are you a part of at church? When we look at Phoebe, we see that a genuine Christian loves to serve.

### **A genuine Christian needs friends**

Notice the clear directions Paul gives in verse 2. <sup>2</sup> *that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you*, Welcome her in the Lord. Welcome – to receive like you have been expectantly waiting on her. It's the same word Luke uses in Luke 15 when he said Jesus received sinners and ate with them. It's the idea of bringing into fellowship. Some of you know how hard it is to feel like you are a part of the church. Here is this Greek woman carrying a letter from a Jewish man written to a Roman church. It could be awkward, so Paul tells them to give her a genuinely warm welcome and do it in the Lord. In other words, it's not that they have common interests so you should get along. None of that matters. You are to welcome her in the Lord, Jesus Christ, the crucified, resurrected and reigning as Lord is enough to hold even the most opposite of us together.

Something else is done in verse 2 that speaks of Christian friendship. Paul says help her. *Paristemi*. It means "to stand by" or "stand beside" someone especially when they are alone or in trouble. This is the word Paul used in second Timothy 4 when he was telling Timothy about

Alexander the coppersmith and how he had done him so much harm. How alone he felt and no one stood by him, but “the Lord stood by me and strengthened me.” That's what Paul means when he says to welcome this woman. Because although she is strong, confident and well off, every Christian needs somebody to stand with him or her from time to time. Don't get so busy or preoccupied that you miss out on standing by or helping. Don't assume because someone appears confident and capable and strong that she doesn't need someone to stand with her. Are you intentionally helping others outside of your people? Who have you befriended at this church in the last six months? Genuine Christians love the Lord. Genuine Christians love the mission. Genuine Christians love to serve. Genuine Christians need friends.

### **A genuine Christian loves to give**

Look at this last thing Paul says about Phoebe in verse 2. She has been a patron of many and of myself as well. Patron. That means she gave financially to lots of people and to Paul as well. She supported the church and used the money she made to support the Gospel mission. She gave what she had and evidently she had a lot. The life of one faithful woman held up before us to encourage us to live our lives for Jesus Christ. As we close this morning, let's end with questions:

How obvious is it that you are changed and love the Lord?

Do you love the mission?

Do you love the church?

What next thing do you need to step into?

Are you serving?

Will you take steps to serve?

Are you actively becoming a friend ready to welcome in the Lord and stand by and help?

Of all the places your money goes, is the church a major recipient of your giving? You can tell a lot about a person by where his money goes.

God has given us this woman so that we can see grace in action. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus. That salvation puts us into action.

*(Pastor prays)*