

First Baptist Church, Granite Falls, MN
Pastor Todd Mitchell
January 24, 2010

Introduction¹

In our study of Paul's letter to the Romans, we have finally reached the last chapter, chapter 16. And this chapter is very different from the rest of this letter. Over half of it is just a list of people whom Paul either wants to commend to the Romans or whom he wants the Romans to say "hi" to. It's the most personal part of this letter. It's so personal that it is tempting to rush through it; after all, what do a bunch of personal greetings have to do with us today?

But it is a mistake to rush through this. There is much for us to learn here in chapter 16. In fact, there is so much for us to learn here just in the first two verses that I barely have enough time to preach a sermon on them!

In the first two verses of chapter 16, Paul commends a woman to the church in Rome, a woman named Phoebe. And because of what he says about Phoebe, there has been plenty of debate about the place of women in the church. Some point to these two verses as proof that Phoebe held the office of deacon, and some feminists even point to them as evidence that she was an official leader in the church. Could they be right? I hope to answer that question this morning.

But that is not all. I also hope to inspire you with what the Bible says about women here. It might surprise you, if you think that women should stay hidden in the shadows. If you think women belong in the background, then by the time you leave here this morning, you just might have a different view of women in the church – because Phoebe is a very important person in the church, a prominent person, a world traveler who is internationally renowned.

Romans 16:1-2 1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, 2 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.

There are lessons here for everybody. There is a lesson here for you ladies, and a lesson for you men. But before I draw out those lessons, let's first make sure we understand just who Phoebe is – and who she is not.

- Who Phoebe is not
- Who Phoebe is
- The lesson for men
- The lesson for ladies

I. Who Phoebe is Not

Before I can talk about who Phoebe is, I have to talk about who Phoebe is *not*. If I don't do this, then someone might assume something about Phoebe that I don't mean to say at

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

all, and misunderstand the things that I say about her. So let's consider the first thing that Phoebe is *not*. Phoebe is not an official deaconess.

A. Phoebe is not an official deaconess

Now, to be more precise, I must say that in *one sense* Phoebe is a deacon, but she does not hold *the office of deacon*. Does that sound a little bit confusing? Allow me to explain. In the Greek, Paul calls Phoebe a “diakonos” which can mean two different things. It can mean “deacon” the way we use that word, as the title of an office in the church, or it can simply mean “servant.”

Now, because this word can mean two different things, some Bible editors put a little note next to this verse. Your Bible might have a note like that – a note that says Phoebe might not just be called a “servant” but actually a “deaconess.” So *could* Phoebe actually *be* a “deaconess?” Could she actually hold an official position in the church?

If so, then maybe we should change the way we do things around here. Here at First Baptist Church, we elect three men to the office of deacon. We do not elect any women to the office of deaconess. Some churches do – churches who agree with us in pretty much every other point of doctrine. Could they be right?

There are a couple of reasons they think they are. First, we have what Paul wrote to Timothy. Keep your thumb in Romans 16 and turn to 1 Timothy 3. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul tells Timothy what the requirements are for the office of pastor, in vv. 1-7. And then, in v. 8, he begins to tell him what the requirements are for the office of deacon:

1 Timothy 3:8-10 8 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.

Stop there. Let's review. In verses 1-8, Paul gives the requirements to hold the office of pastor. Then in v. 8, he says, “Deacons, likewise” – he moves on to the next office, the office of deacon. And now, look at what he says in v. 11:

1 Timothy 3:11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

“Wives, likewise.” Many people say that in v. 11 Paul is moving on to the *next* official position in the church, the office of *deaconess*, and Paul is giving a list of requirements to help us pick the right women for this job.

But there are a few reasons I think this is wrong. First, if Paul is moving on to a new office in v. 11, why does he come right back to the office of male deacon in vv. 12-13? Second, Paul does not even use the word “deacon” when he talks about

the women in 1 Timothy 3:11 – he uses the word for “wife.” He could have used the word for deacon, but he didn’t. And third, Paul has just written, in the last chapter, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man.” (1Ti 2:12a) Deacons may not have the same level of authority as pastors, but they have to have some authority to manage that with which they are entrusted.

So I do not believe Paul is talking about women serving as deaconesses or “official helpers” in 1 Timothy 3:11. I think he is simply explaining that the wives of deacons, and maybe even the wives of both deacons and pastors, must have these qualities.

But there is another reason some churches think they ought to appoint women as deaconesses. It has to do with the Greek grammar right in Romans 16:1. I normally don’t get into Greek grammar in my sermons, but I think I should just for a minute, because just recently a very well respected teacher brought this up at the fall conference at Central Seminary, and some of you have listened to the recordings from that conference.

What this teacher pointed out is that in Romans 16:1, Paul calls Phoebe a “deacon,” and he uses the *masculine form* of the word – so he *must* have been talking about some sort of official position. The Greek students here can tell you that in Greek, words have gender – either masculine, feminine, or neuter. So since Phoebe is a woman, why did Paul use the masculine form of the word “deacon?”

Short answer: he didn’t! In Paul’s day, this particular word, just like some other words in Greek, is the same in both masculine and feminine.

So no, I do not believe Phoebe holds an official position like “deacon” or “deaconess.” But there is one more thing that I do not believe Phoebe is – I do not believe she is an official leader in the church.

B. Phoebe is not an official leader

Now, you might be wondering why I would even bring this up. The answer is that in v. 2 of our passage this morning, Paul calls Phoebe something that *does* mean “leader,” sometimes. In your Bible, you’ll see that the end of v. 2 says Phoebe “has been a patron [or helper] of many and of myself as well.” But if you ever happen to read one Bible version, the *Young’s Literal Translation*, you’ll read, “she also became a leader of many, and of myself.”

But that really is not such a literal translation. The word doesn’t just mean “leader.” It also means “protectress,” or “patroness.” Surely that is what Paul means here. He would never say that she is his leader, whether she was a woman or not – in his letters he makes clear that he has authority over Christians like Phoebe as an apostle. And as we’ve already seen, Paul told Timothy “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man.”

So I do not believe Phoebe is an official in the church; she is neither a deacon, deaconesses, nor an official leader. But if you think that means that Phoebe is somehow less important or less prominent, think again!

II. Who Phoebe Is

This brings us to who Phoebe *is*. And if the things I've said so far about what she is *not* might upset the feminists, the things I'm about to say might upset the male chauvinists even more. Phoebe is a mightily important servant and patron, and she is more prominent than all of us men put together will *ever* be.

A. Phoebe is a servant and a patron

Phoebe is “a servant of the church at Cenchreae.” We don't know exactly what she did for the church. But this we know – she is enough of a servant to be known as one. She is selfless, not selfish

Phoebe does not just go to church expecting to *be* served. She is not one of those people who go to church just to critique the way others are serving. She is not somebody who just goes to church on Sunday and then keeps to herself. In fact, she doesn't just *go* to church, she *belongs* to the church. We know all this because we know that Phoebe is a *servant* of the church.

And because we know that, we also know something else about Phoebe. We know that she is a trophy of God's grace. Once upon a time, she was a pagan. Think about it! Do you realize whom she is named after? Phoebe is the name of a Greek goddess! She is from Cenchreae, a port of Corinth. Almost certainly, she once was a pagan Gentile who worshiped idols. But once she heard the gospel and believed, she left that all behind. Before, she shared the table and the cup of demons. Now, she shares the table and the cup of the Lord.

We don't know exactly what Phoebe was like before God changed her forever. But we do know what Paul said in his letter to her and the rest of the Corinthians. He reminded them that some of them used to be sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers. “But,” Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:11, “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

Whatever Phoebe used to be, she has been washed, she has been sanctified, and she has been justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. Once upon a time Phoebe was conformed to this world. No more. Now she is being transformed by the renewing of her mind. Now she is presenting her body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.

And not just her body, but her money and influence as well. It's not for nothing that Paul says, “She has been a patron of many and of myself as well.” Phoebe has influence, which means she is probably pretty wealthy. If she wants to, she could relax and enjoy herself with that wealth.

But instead, she uses it to be the patron, the protectress, of Paul and other Christians like him. She is like a mother bear who watches out for them as if they were her own cubs. And she uses her money and influence to get them what they need, and to protect them from harm.

Can you imagine how much Paul must have relied upon Phoebe? Just imagine being a stranger in a strange land, without much money, and with enemies all around you. Wouldn't it be nice to have a rich friend in town, a friend who watches out for you and helps you and protects you? That's exactly what Phoebe was to Paul and *many* others.

All of this adds up to make Phoebe one *very* important person in the church – important *and* prominent.

B. Phoebe is a prominent woman

If you think women just belong in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant, then you've never met Phoebe. Phoebe gets out there and makes things happen for the church. She is even a world traveler, an international ambassador for the apostle Paul. Most likely, she is the one carrying this letter from Paul to the Romans.

And just as she has looked out for Paul, now Paul is looking out for her. Can you imagine being one of the Christians in Rome when Paul's letter is read? Not only does he call Phoebe his sister, not only does he praise her for being a servant of the church in Cenchreae and a patron of himself and many others, he even asks them to “welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you.” As soon as this part of Paul's letter is read, all eyes are on Phoebe. In an instant, Phoebe is famous; in an instant, everybody is ready to do a favor for this prominent woman. She has earned Paul's respect, and he insists the Romans treat her with respect.

We don't know if Phoebe is married or not. If she is married, her husband is not just in the background, here – he is invisible! Phoebe is certainly not a receding figure who lives a life withdrawn from society. Whether she is single or married, Phoebe is prominent in her own right.

Phoebe may not hold office in the church, but make no mistake about it, she is one very important, prominent woman. And herein is a lesson for us men and for you ladies, too.

III. The Lesson for Men

First, there is a lesson for us, men. I'm speaking to all the Christian men who are members of a local church. The lesson for us is simple. We need to do the same thing Paul wants the Roman Christians to do. We need to welcome women like Phoebe in the Lord, in a way worthy of the saints, and we need to help women like Phoebe.

A. Welcome women like Phoebe

By now, we know what Paul means when he says, “welcome her.” In the last four chapters, Paul told us how to love one another with a sweet, strong, steadfast love that supplies one another's needs, a love that patiently bears with the failings of the weaker brother, a love like Christ's. And Paul told us to “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (Rom 15:7)

That's the kind of welcome that is worthy of the saints. That's the kind of welcome Paul expects the Roman Christians to give Phoebe. And that's the kind of welcome you and I should give women like Phoebe. We may not have women like Phoebe visiting us from afar, like the Romans did. But let us never fail to welcome the Phoebes who are among us (and oh, may God give us Phoebes!).

Men, don't ever make the mistake of looking down upon a woman because she is a woman. Don't ever make the mistake of disrespecting a woman because she is not allowed to hold office in the church. And never, ever, make the mistake of thinking that male leadership in the church somehow means that men are more valuable, more important, or more prominent than women.

Yes, Paul says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man," and yes, Paul says, "rather, she is to remain quiet. (1Ti 2:12) But that same Paul is the first one to run to Phoebe when he needs help in Corinth. That same Paul is the first one to praise this woman who sails over the horizon with his commendation.

In none of this is Paul being inconsistent or hypocritical. No, Paul is treating women exactly the way they should be treated. He is giving them the same respect he gives men. He is treating them as perfectly equal to men in the sight of God. Yes, they have different roles in the church and in the home. But this in no way detracts from their importance, and in no way detracts from their taking a prominent place among the people of God.

A hundred years from now, men, will anybody remember any of our names? Probably not. But they will remember Phoebe's name, and she died almost two thousand years ago. Never forget that. The woman sitting next to you might just be more important and more prominent in the kingdom than all of us men put together.

Men, if the Bible says the leaders in the church are to be men, then we had better lead biblically, and treat our Christian sisters with all of the love and respect and praise that is worthy of the saints – male or female. We are to welcome women like Phoebe – and help them, too.

B. Help women like Phoebe

Paul tells the Romans, "help her in whatever she may need from you." We don't have to try to figure out what they might have done for her. Paul wanted them to do *whatever* she needed them to do. And so should we.

So, men, how shall we help women like Phoebe? Part of that answer is easy – give them the resources they need and the room to use them. What might they need? Well, in 1 Timothy 5 Paul says he expects them to bring up their children, show hospitality, care for the afflicted, and devote themselves to every good work. For all that, I imagine they could use money, and houses, and furniture, and time, and encouragement, to name a few things. But guess who really knows what our

women need? *They do*. So let's pay attention to them, and listen to them, and give them what they need.

And may I suggest that we go a step further, and help *produce* ladies like Phoebe? The way to do that is simple. We do it by teaching them God's word. Paul made that crystal clear in his second letter to Timothy. It doesn't matter how much money and other stuff we give our ladies if they don't know how to use it in a biblical way. Handing resources to anybody in the church without biblical instruction is like handing a loaded revolver to a little child. It can be downright dangerous to the church.

Do you know which letter in the New Testament is addressed to a woman? 2 John, of course. John addresses that letter "to the elect lady and her children." And did you know that in that letter, John expects that lady to be able to tell sound doctrine from false doctrine? He warns her, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching ["the teaching of Christ"], do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works." (2Jn 10-11) There's no way she could do that unless she knows the teaching of Christ.

All of this seems so obvious when you read the Bible. It seems so obvious that women should be well-trained, well-equipped, and well-respected. But many women have lived their whole lives without biblical training. I've even heard the argument that women should not receive advanced theological training because it would make it harder for their less-educated husbands to lead them. (As if learning the word of God somehow makes women more rebellious!) And many women are just treated as "silly women," with little encouragement to serve the church like Phoebe did.

Men, let us educate our women, and educate them well, in the word of God. And let us encourage them to stand up and be counted among the important, prominent women of the church like Phoebe. And let *us* stand in the background and rejoice at every one who becomes famous for her service to the church!

IV. The Lesson for Ladies

But this brings us to the lesson for ladies that I want to draw out of our passage this morning. I'm speaking to all the Christian ladies out there who are members of a local church. Be like Phoebe. Don't think of church as a place to be served, but as a place to serve. Be a servant of the church, and be willing to be a prominent woman.

A. Be a servant of the church

Ladies, serve God by serving the church like Phoebe. That doesn't necessarily mean you will be traveling internationally like Phoebe did, though you ought to be willing to do that, too. If you are like the godly woman of 1 Timothy 5, then you are serving the church when you bring up your children (if you are a mother), when you show hospitality, when you help other Christians, when care for the afflicted, and when you devote yourself to every good work.

What does all this look like? It looks like lots of hard work with your own family inside your home. It looks like lots of hard work helping other Christians outside of your home, too. It might look like having people over for dinner, and bringing meals to sick people in the church, and visiting shut-in members in their houses and at the nursing home, and cleaning the church building, and sending care packages to missionaries, and discussing God's word with one another, and all sorts of things. And it looks like some of the most joyful, the most fulfilling, the most wonderful moments of your life as you bring God glory by serving the church.

But you can't serve well if you get distracted by the things of this world. And with all of our wealth in this society, there are a thousand and one things that can distract you. Nowadays, you can fritter away your days by shopping at the mall, without even leaving your home – by shopping online. You can dissipate yourself in endless amusements as the servants of Hollywood wait upon you hand and foot, to tickle your every fancy. You can lock your door and pretend the rest of the world doesn't even exist, what with all of our modern conveniences that allow us to live in isolated independence. But remember what Jesus said:

Luke 16:13 No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

You cannot serve God and *anything* else. So serve God by serving his church. We are counting on you to do that. We are counting on you to rear the next generation of Christians who will bring glory to God, ladies.

When I look out in the pews I see lots of children who are under ten years old. But do you know what I think of when I look at them? I think of pews full of young ladies and young men, because those little children will be all grown up in the blink of an eye. How will they live? How will they serve? Will they serve? If they imitate you, ladies, what will this church look like in ten years?

A few minutes ago I challenged the men to help the Phoebes in the church by helping *produce* those Phoebes. But of course, when it comes to training the young women, the most important people in the church are the older women. Paul told Titus:

Titus 2:3-5 3 Older women . . . are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, 4 and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled, pure, working at home [there is some debate over what exactly that means], kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

This is all part of how you serve the church, ladies. Older ladies, teach the younger ladies. Young ladies, learn from the older ladies. Be trophies of God's grace like Phoebe.

B. Be willing to be a prominent woman

And yes, that might even mean that you fill a prominent role someday, like Phoebe did. I know that is difficult for some of you to imagine. We have some very modest, quiet women here, and I am sure it is hard for some of you to imagine being in the spotlight the way Phoebe was.

But as we fit together the pieces of this puzzle, with what we know of the godly woman from Titus 2, and 1 Timothy 5, the example of Phoebe, and (who could forget!) Proverbs 31, it is pretty clear that the woman of God is a busy lady who may well become more and more prominent as she serves. Phoebe sure couldn't help the many Christians like Paul without getting noticed!

So I challenge you, ladies, to be willing to become prominent. Obviously, that's not your goal. If you serve simply to be in the spotlight, then surely you have received your reward. But never shy away from the spotlight because you think it's unladylike. Never shy away from some service simply because you think it is too high-profile for a lady to get involved in. If it is biblical, then be a Phoebe, and simply serve.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, I say to you the same thing that Paul said to the Romans. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe."

Men, welcome and help the Phoebes of our own church the way Paul would, with all the love and respect and encouragement we can give them.

And ladies, serve God by serving the church like Phoebe did, even if it puts you in the spotlight.