

**First Baptist Church, Granite Falls, MN**  
**Pastor Todd Mitchell**  
**February 7, 2010**

**Introduction**<sup>1</sup>

Well, we are well into the month of February, and that means it is time for me to send you another issue of my monthly journal. I can't believe that this issue will wrap up four years of *The Pastor's Quarry*? How fast time flies!

Can any of you think back four years and remember what I wrote about in the very first issue of *The Pastor's Quarry*? Back then, I had only been your pastor for a few weeks. When I decided to start writing a monthly journal, and I started writing the very first one, there were so many things I wanted to say. But I could only pick one. And the one I picked, the one I wrote about, was about the Christian love we shared with one another, the love that you and I shared in Christ. And I titled that first little essay, "The Greatest Friendship."

That's right, the word "love" was not in the title, even though I wrote about love. The title was "The Greatest *Friendship*," because friendship *is* a kind of love. And that is what I tried to explain in that essay. As C. S. Lewis explains in his book *The Four Loves*, friends love each other in a special way. Friends love each other not face-to-face, like lovers who admire one another, but side-by-side, together facing a common interest.

We here in the church love one another as friends because we all share a common interest: Jesus Christ. Some people are friends because they have a common interest in quilting, or hunting, or some other thing. And if you have an interest like that, there are even organizations you can join with like-minded people, like sewing circles and hunting clubs. But the organization of people with a common interest in Jesus Christ is called *the church*. For us, our shared love of God is that which first and foremost makes us friends. We enjoy standing shoulder-to-shoulder, together facing the beauty of our Lord.

This greatest friendship is the very one we see in our next passage of Paul's letter to the Romans. In Romans 16:3-16, Paul sends greetings to a whole list of friends, and urges his readers to greet one another with the same warmth he wishes he could give them in person:

Romans 16:3-16 3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4 who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. 5 Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. 6 Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. 7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. 8 Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. 9 Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. 10 Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. 11 Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who

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belong to the family of Narcissus. 12 Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. 13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. 14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. 15 Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. 16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

- This is an example for us to follow
- This shows us what Christian love looks like
- This points the way to Christian love

### **I. This is an example for us to follow**

Now, with the possible exception of v.16, nothing here really *commands us* to do anything. But it does show us how Paul thought and how he acted.

#### **A. This is descriptive, not prescriptive**

In other words, it seems to be descriptive, not prescriptive. So when I say that this is an example to follow, I need to make clear what I mean. I am not saying that we must all write letters with greetings just like this, or that we all must kiss each other, like Paul says in v. 16. What I am saying is that there is a *principle* of Christian love here for us to learn. If we follow Paul's example, here, then we will learn this principle and apply it, and we will love one another in the same way.

#### **B. Couldn't this just be politically expedient name-dropping?**

Now, there are some commentators who say that really what Paul is doing here is just "dropping names" so that when he finally gets to Rome, he'll have their support. If that's true, then all of a sudden this passage loses its luster. If that's true, then the only example Paul is setting is one of being politically astute.

Here's the way the argument goes. Paul is doing something here that he doesn't do in his other letters. You see, even though he does send greetings in his other letters, he never lists this many names. At most he'll list two or three. But here he lists more than two dozen! So why does he list so many? It must be because he wants to name everybody he can possibly name, just to impress his readers, just so that they'll be nice to him when he gets there. That's what some people assume Paul is doing here.

But there are three reasons I think that is a bad thing to assume. First, this way of thinking is suspiciously modern; in our modern culture, in which people tend to selfishly use each other, it is almost inconceivable that such extended greetings could really be sincere. But it is unwise to think that Paul, two thousand years ago on the other side of the earth, would think the same way. Second, it is frankly unfair to just assume that any writer, much less the Apostle Paul, is being insincere. And third, we have good reason to assume that Paul *is* being sincere,

because Paul's greetings here match up with everything we know about Paul's love.

### **C. This matches up with everything we know about Paul's love**

Paul is a loving man. Just listen to how Paul loves his fellow Christians. In one of his letters to the church in Corinth, he explains why he admonished them so strongly in an earlier letter:

2 Corinthians 2:4b I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

Do you hear the depth of Paul's love for those Christians? This is a deep love, an abundant love, a love that made his heart ache for them, a love that made him cry when he had to admonish them.

And listen to this. A little later in that same letter, he tells about the time he traveled to Troas to preach the gospel. When he got there, he started looking for his Christian friend Titus, but he couldn't find him:

2 Corinthians 2:12-13 12 When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, 13 my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

Titus meant so much to Paul that when Paul couldn't find him, his "spirit was not at rest." It bothered him so much that he left for Macedonia. Only when he finally sees Titus is he comforted:

2 Corinthians 7:5-7 5 For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. 6 But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, 7 and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

Paul loved Titus and the Corinthians so much that when Titus finally found him, and told him how much he meant to the Corinthians, he went from depression to rejoicing. This is a man who loves his fellow Christians. No wonder he told Timothy, "As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy." (2Ti 1:4)

Knowing all this, knowing how much Paul loved, we know how much love he is pouring out in our passage this morning. These greetings here in Romans 16 are sincere, and they show us what Christian love looks like.

## **II. This shows us what Christian love looks like**

Our passage this morning shows us that Christians love one another as friends, they love one another warmly, and they love one another charitably.

## A. Christians love one another as friends

First, Christians love one another as friends. Christians love one another as friends, because they share a common interest – and that interest is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the theme of this whole passage. He is the golden thread woven throughout this list of greetings. Eleven times here Paul points to Jesus. Verse 3: Prisca and Aquila are “fellow workers in Christ Jesus.” Verse 5: Epaenetus “was the first convert to Christ in Asia.” Verse 7: Andronicus and Junia “were in Christ before me.” Verse 8: Ampliatus is his beloved “in the Lord.” Verse 9: Urbanus is a fellow worker “in Christ.” Verse 10: Apelles is “approved in Christ.” Verse 11: Paul sends his greetings to “those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.” Verse 12: Tryphaena and Tryphosa are workers “in the Lord,” and Persis has “worked hard in the Lord.” Verse 13: Rufus is “chosen in the Lord.”

And at the end of our passage, at the very end of v. 16, Paul says “All the churches of Christ greet you.” He isn’t jealous of his friendship with his readers. He stands shoulder-to-shoulder with all of his friends east of Rome and sends greetings from them all. And what unites them all is Christ.

Is it any wonder people started calling us “Christians” back then? The Bible says that back when the Apostle Paul was teaching at the church in Antioch, people started calling the disciples of Christ “Christians,” because it was obvious to everybody that they were devoted to Christ.

Jesus Christ is what binds Paul’s heart to all these dear people. They are his friends because they share the greatest friendship of all. They share a friendship around Jesus Christ. They stand shoulder-to-shoulder and admire their common interest, their Lord, Jesus Christ.

For these people, Jesus Christ isn’t just a passing fancy. Jesus Christ isn’t just one small part of their lives. Paul and Prisca and Aquila and Epaenetus and all these other people don’t just *go to church*. They *belong* to their churches. They are members one of another, *in Jesus Christ*. They are friends, true friends, that share more in common with each other than they share with any unbeliever, even among their own blood relatives.

Christians love one another as friends in Christ, and they love one another warmly.

## B. Christian love is warm

In these greetings, we see a Christian love that is warm. Paul gets personal, here. He names names as he passes on greetings to all these people. And stop and think for a minute just how warm it is to pass on greetings like this. What does it mean, anyway, to pass on greetings? We do it all the time. Just the other day when I visited Florence Olson in the nursing home, she told me, “Say hi to your family.”

When Mrs. Olson says that, she means it. She really does want me to go home, she really does want me to find my wife and children, and she really does want me to say, “Mrs. Olson says hi.” Why does she want that? Because she loves

them, and she wants them to know she loves them. She is thinking about them, and she wants them to know she is thinking about them.

Paul is doing the same thing here. He loves these people, and he wants them to know he loves them. He is thinking about them, and he wants them to know he is thinking about them. He hasn't forgotten Prisca and Aquila. He still remembers how they worked together with him, and how they risked their necks for him. And he is grateful. So he says, "Greet Prisca and Aquila." And he says, "Greet also the church in their house," because he cares for them, and he wants them to know how much he cares for them. Christian love is warm.

Paul hasn't forgotten Epaphroditus, and he wants Epaphroditus to know he hasn't forgotten him. He still remembers the day Epaphroditus believed in Jesus Christ, because Epaphroditus was the first convert to Christ in Asia. And because he loves Epaphroditus and he wants Epaphroditus to know he loves him, he calls him, "beloved." Christian love is warm.

He does the same thing for Mary, whom he praises warmly for working hard for his readers, and he does the same thing for Andronicus and Junia, two fellow Jews who share something special with Paul – imprisonment. He praises them for their famous faith, and for being in Christ before him. He does the same thing for Ampliatus, whom he calls, "my beloved," and for Urbanus, his "fellow worker," for Stachys, "beloved," for Apelles, "who is approved," and on, and on. Christian love is warm.

And then, in v. 16, he says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." In that day, in Paul's culture, greeting one another with a kiss was a common thing. In some parts of the world today, it is still a common thing. In our culture, we don't kiss each other, but we do shake hands and even embrace each other, sometimes. But the point here is that Paul wants them to welcome one another personally, the way he would if he was there.

Christians love one another as friends, and they love one another warmly. And they love one another charitably, too.

### **C. Christians love one another charitably**

Here's what I mean by that. The love Paul has here is a love that does not pick and choose among Christians. He is a Jew, but he doesn't hold his love back from Gentiles. He is a free man, but he doesn't hold his love back from slaves. His love knows no preference. He loves Jews and Gentiles, free men and slaves, men and women, without distinction.

We know that because of the names Paul lists here. Scholars have done a number of studies on these names, and have concluded that most of them are Gentile, and most of them "are those of slaves and 'freedmen' (slaves who [have] been given their freedom), or the descendants of slaves/freedmen."<sup>2</sup>

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2 Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans, NICNT* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 918.

And not only does Paul name these Gentiles, Jews, slaves, and free men, he also sends his greetings to the whole church in Prisca and Aquila's house (v. 3), all the brothers with Ascyncrius and his friends (v. 14), and all the saints who are with Philologus and his friends (v. 15). Do you think all these people are equally lovable? Or do you think there might just be one or two among all these Christians who aren't perfect, who have some annoying character flaw, or who disagree with Paul in some minor point of doctrine?

Of course there are. And Paul knows it. Paul has been around the block a time or two. He has sent one tear-stained letter after another to Christians who have been very difficult to love at times. But Paul is charitable, and he loves his fellow Christians with the love of Christ. He loves the unlovely as well as the lovely. He loves them charitably.

Aren't you glad we have all these greetings here in Romans 16? Ever since the beginning of chapter 12 Paul has been teaching about how we ought to treat each other. But here we get to catch a glimpse of what all that looks like, because here Paul is practicing what he preaches. Here Paul is showing us how to obey commands like the one he gave in 12:10, "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." He is showing us how to obey the command he gave in 12:16, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight." He is showing us how to obey the command he gave in 15:7, "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

And by setting this example for us, by showing us the warm, charitable love of Christian friends, Paul points the way to this love for us.

### **III. This points the way to Christian love**

To follow Paul's example, you yourself must be in Christ, and you yourself must be personal, and charitable, too.

#### **A. You must be in Christ**

If you are not in Christ, then you are excluded from the greatest friendship of all. If you are not in Christ, you cannot be a friend in Christ, because you do not share the one common interest that unites Christians as friends – the common interest in Jesus Christ himself.

Christianity is an exclusive club. If you are not in Christ, then you are not on the inside. One of us may share some other little interest with you, like an interest in business or politics or airplanes or cooking or sewing, but unless you share Christ in common with us, you will always be on the outside.

We who are Christians earnestly want you to join us, because we want to share the joy of Christian love with you. In Christ we have fullness of joy. In Christ we are truly united, drawn together in peace and harmony.

Imagine for a moment a bicycle wheel. Are you thinking of a bicycle wheel? It has lots of spokes going out from the hub. Now, imagine Christ is the hub of the wheel, and every human being on earth is each on a spoke of that wheel. You are on one spoke, and the person sitting near you is on another spoke. Now how can you ever get close to that other person? That's easy – you have to move along the spoke to get to the center. And the center is Jesus Christ.

Husbands and wives, the only way for you to grow closer to each other is for each of you to grow closer to Christ. The same goes for you brothers and sisters, and parents and children, and fellow church members. If you try to grow closer to each other without growing closer to Christ, then guess which way you are moving along? That's right – you are moving away from Christ. And every second you are moving away from Christ, you are moving farther away from everyone around you, into the cold, miserable desolation of despair. But every second you are growing closer to Christ, then you are growing closer to others who are doing the same thing.

Not that you can *use* Christ to grow closer to anybody. It doesn't work that way. If your focus is on anything or anybody but Christ, then you are drawing away from him. The only way you can move closer to Christ is to actually face Christ. Christian love is just that – love in Christ.

The way of the world is to try to have peace without Christ, but there is nothing in that direction but misery. “But,” the Bible says, “to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12) And as fellow children of God, we share the greatest friendship on earth – facing our dear Lord shoulder-to-shoulder with one another, and drawing ever closer to one another.

So to follow Paul's example, and know the joy of Christian love, you yourself must first be in Christ. And you must be personal, too.

## **B. You must be personal**

Personal, that is, with your fellow Christians. That should be obvious from everything we have seen in Paul's letter to the Romans for the last several months – and it sure is obvious in our passage this morning. Don't just *go to church*. *Belong to the church*. Get personal. Spend time with each other. And when you are away from your fellow Christians, remember each other. Think about each other, pray for each other, *love* each other.

Jesus got personal. He took on the form of a man and walked with his disciples. He ate with them. He washed their feet. He called them by name. And after he rose again, he met them on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and cooked breakfast for them. Jesus got personal.

And so should you and I. And the way we do that is in the church. In the church we worship God together, we help one another when one of us is in need, we

encourage one another, and we admonish one another, too. We love each other warmly and personally.

And yes, that takes effort. Some people aren't willing to go to the trouble. They'd rather stay home and just listen to sermons on the radio, TV, or on the Internet. If they do attend church services, they show up at the last minute and leave early, to stay independent. They don't want to take the time for their brother, and they don't want to open up their hearts to anybody else. They want to treat Christ just as their own personal savior, and keep their religion a private matter between themselves and God.

But it doesn't work that way. You can't draw close to Christ selfishly. The only way to draw close to Christ is on his terms – and his terms are personal.

1 John 4:20-21 20 If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

I can't understand a person who says he loves God but doesn't show any love for the church. It doesn't make any sense. It's like saying I love my wife but I'd really rather not spend any time with her. If you love God, then you will love the church – every single member.

So get personal. Love your fellow Christian like Paul loves his fellow Christians here in our passage this morning. Love warmly. And love charitably.

### **C. You must be charitable**

It's not always easy to love one another. Your fellow Christians are sinners saved by grace, but they are still sinners. There will be times when they will be hard to love. And there will times when you yourself are hard to love.

But Christian love is charitable love. We don't love on our own terms. We love on Christ's terms – and Christ's terms are to love steadfastly, to be long-suffering, and to be forgiving. Jesus said:

Luke 17:3-4 3 Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, 4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, "I repent," you must forgive him.

That means you keep loving your brother even when he fails again, and again, and again. Yet so many people are ready to storm out of a church at the slightest provocation. There are people who leave a trail of broken relationships behind them because of a list of offenses they feel have been committed against them. I submit to you that many of these people may not have faith in Christ at all, for, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."

So love charitably. Love the unlovely. And love without respect for persons. Love like Christ, who died for people with white skin, black skin, yellow skin, and red skin. Love like Christ, who died for tax collectors, laborers, lepers, and sinners of every kind. Follow the example of Paul, whose Christian love crossed borders internationally and socially.

Nothing douses the flame of Christian love faster than pride. The moment you look down on other Christians because you think you are superior to them, the fire goes out. And there are a thousand and one ways to look down on others. That family's too big. That family's too small. That lady just doesn't know how to dress nice enough. That lady dresses too flashy. That guy is a slob. That guy is too poised. And on and on it goes. There have been professing Christians who have glared across the pews at parents because they disapprove of the way they rear their children. There have been professing Christians whose skin has crawled at the thought of embracing another Christian just because he is black, or because he has AIDS, or because he has been in prison.

Can you imagine if Christ shied away from you and I like that? I don't even want to imagine it. And thank God, we don't have to. Because Christ did not shy away from sinful man. Christ died for us all. Christ even died for me. And he even died for you.

So let us love one another charitably, like Christ loves, and like Paul loves here in Romans 16.

### **Conclusion**

In a few minutes we're going to sing a familiar song, "Blest be the tie that binds." You've sung it so many times you could probably sing it without even thinking about the words. But I want you to think hard about the words, this morning.

*Blest be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds  
Is like to that above.*

*Before our Father's throne  
We pour our ardent prayers;  
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one  
Our comforts and our cares.*

*We share our mutual woes,  
Our mutual burdens bear;  
And often for each other flows  
The sympathizing tear.*

*When we asunder part,  
It gives us inward pain;*

*But we shall still be joined in heart,  
And hope to meet again.*

Amen. Is that the way you feel, Christian? I hope so. Oh, may our own hearts be bound in that kind of Christian love.

Let us be true friends in Christ our Lord, and love one another warmly and charitably.