

“The Bottom Line”

Today we're in the final week of our sermon series in the book of Romans. We're in chapter 16, if you have your Bibles. We'll be looking at some of the closing verses in this letter that is (without question) one of the clearest and most straightforward presentations of the Christian faith ever written.

What Paul has written (for us), and what God has to say to us, in this letter is not only a powerful message for us (within the Church), to hear and to take to heart and to begin to apply in our lives, but also a life-changing message for anyone (in the world) who (through it) would come to know and trust in what God has done for us in his Son.

Paul's opening declaration (in chapter one), his theme for the entire letter, is at the heart of what he believes God wants us to hear. In that opening chapter, Paul says, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel." (He says), I'm not embarrassed to speak it or to be associated with it, because "it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe." It has the power to change life. It has the power to give life.

How come? Because, (in it), Paul says, in the gospel, "a righteousness from God is revealed." A good news word from God is offered. And it's offered and it's revealed (and it's life-changing) because of what God has done for us in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The bottom line in Paul's letter is Jesus. The bottom line in the Christian faith and life is Christ. If nothing else, in these weeks (in this series), I hope and I pray that it has reminded (if not caused) you to fix your eyes on what God has accomplished for you in his Son and what he has called you to in this life.

He is your hope. He is your assurance. He is the One (and the only one) who can make you right with God. And he's done it, and it all belongs to you, as you learn (in this life) to place your trust in him.

What I want to do today, in wrapping-up this series in Romans, is to lift up a number of important "bottom line" truths found in this closing chapter. A number of important "bottom line" lessons we can take and apply in our lives. And they're all found in these final verses of Paul's letter...and we'll take them (today) one at a time.

Here's the first, very basic, (bottom line): You and I are a family in the Lord. We (together) are a family in Christ.

I don't know if you noticed. Chapter sixteen is one of the chapters in the Bible where it would be easy to jump over it and not give it too much (time or) thought. It appears to be not much more than a few closing comments made to a few not-so-familiar people, many of which (the names) are not too easy for us to pronounce.

On the one hand, that's what it is. In closing, Paul is offering greetings to those he had either (heard about) or had come to know, who happen to live in Rome. It's nothing more than a listing of names (of people) whom we've never met (and never will), and who don't (and won't) mean anything to us, at least not until we meet them in heaven. It would be easy to jump over (this chapter) and move on.

But before (moving on), let's not miss what Paul is doing. Paul is listing names, no doubt – twenty-seven of them, to be exact. He's offering greetings to folks he hopes (one day) he'll be able to see face-to-face. (He's never been to Rome.) He's sending his greetings. He's telling them that he hopes (in the not-too-distant future) it will happen.

But he's doing it by name. He's calling them out by name. And he's doing it (by name) and calling them out (by name), because he knows that names matter, that being called by name makes a difference, and that behind (each of the different names) being called, is the name of the One who calls us all together in him.

We are a family in the Lord. You and I, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. Our names matter, not only to each other, (and to us), but to God. I hope you know that.

As one of your pastors, I work at names. (I really do.) I don't always get them right. Sometimes I remember your name (your names) five seconds after you've gone through the line after worship. (You know how that works.) We all have a tendency to forget...but not Jesus. Jesus never forgets.

He knew your name before it was given to you. He used your name when he chose you as one of his own. I baptize you (whatever your names), John and Jerry and Jeanette in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. I've called you by name (no matter who you are), Betsy and Brian and Bob to be my disciples. And I'll never stop calling your name (no matter where you go), Michael and Maria and Mary, and Cynthia and Charlotte and Sam...because my sheep hear my voice and they follow where I lead.

Names matter to God. They need to matter to us. You matter to God. You and I, we need to matter to each other, in the same way, and for the same reasons.

Did you notice how Paul speaks about these people with names? He names them. He singles them out. But he does it as a testimony to the connection they have in Christ.

(Verse 2): "I commend to you Phoebe...receive her *in the Lord*." (Verse 3): "Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers *in Christ Jesus*." (Verse 5): Epenetus, the "first convert *to Christ*." (Verse 7): "Andronicus and Junias, they were *in Christ* before me." (Verse 8): "Ampliatius, whom I love *in the Lord*." (Verse 9): "Urbanus, our fellow worker *in Christ*." Verse 10: "Apelles, tested and approved *in Christ*." And (verses 11, 12, & 13): "Greet those who are *in the Lord*", "Greet Persis, who has worked very hard *in the Lord*," (and) "Rufus, chosen *in the Lord*."

This is not a simple listing of names, sending greetings. This is the way a person who is part of the Church, (drawn together and saved by Jesus), talks about his friends.

I look around this sanctuary and I see a whole bunch of people who (over the years of my ministry) here at St. Timothy's have become my friends. So many of you (here today) are among my friends. We've come to know each other. We've come to love each other. I value (and treasure) your friendship. I really do. And I know (from experience) it works both ways. (I feel it every time we're together.) But before we knew each other and we (became friends), we were already friends and we knew each other *in the Lord*.

I don't do a lot of traveling in my ministry. But when I do (and I meet people) from other parts of country, all it takes is the fact that they grew up Lutheran or they belong to a church where they now live. I don't (yet) know them, but I feel like I know them. There's a connection already there. There's a family bond that already exists. And the connection and the bond (that's there) and that exists is Jesus.

Look around in this sanctuary. Go ahead and look around. This is your family. These are your brothers and sisters in the faith. And no matter where they go, what they do, they will never stop being your family, because we are all brought together and connected in Christ.

The Bottom Line (#1): We are a family in the Lord. #2: Our unity in Jesus is essential to our witness. Our unity in Jesus is essential to our witness.

Look at verse 17 for a moment. (I love the way Paul pulls this together.) He says, "I urge you, brothers (and sisters), to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them." (Verse 18), "For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the minds of naïve people." And then he says, (verse 19), "But everyone has heard about your obedience...so I am full of joy over you...everyone has heard about your obedience."

What's going on in these verses? What's Paul telling us? Several things. One, he's saying that it's important for us to stay united. Don't let anyone (or anything) cause division among you, cause you to be pulled away from (one another) and the connection you have in Christ. Stay focused on Jesus. Don't let anything divide.

And two, don't be deceived. Don't get sucked in. There are many in this world (Paul says) who will offer you another gospel, (another teaching) that is contrary to what you've learned from Jesus. If it's not (what you learned) from Jesus, then don't fall for it. Don't go for it. It's nothing more than "flattery and smooth talk," and we all know what that sounds like when we hear it.

Stay united (Paul says). Don't be deceived. How come? Because your unity, (in Jesus), will become your witness to the world. Your faithfulness (to Christ) will become what you have to offer to a dying world.

I hope you know that? This world (literally) is dying without Jesus. This world (with every day that passes) is going to its grave without Christ.

Don't miss the importance of what we're doing. This whole (theology thing) in Paul's letter, these past eleven weeks we've been spending in this study in Romans? This isn't only about learning what's true so we

can know it. This isn't only about focusing on Jesus so we can be of one (and the same) mind together in the Church.

Our theology (what we know) about God, and our unity (around what's true and eternal) in Christ is for the sake of our witness to the world. That's why we're doing this. That's what Paul wants for the church in Rome (and for us) more than anything. He wants our life together to be a witness to the world. He wants our shared faith and hope (and reason for living) in Jesus to become a testimony to what God has done for the world on the cross.

We could spend all day on this lesson. (I'm not naïve to what's going on in the world.) The world today has all kinds of reasons for choosing to not go to church. The world today has all kinds of excuses for choosing not to follow Christ. Paul says, "Don't let one of those reasons be you." (Paul says) "Don't let one of those excuses be us."

Stay united in what matters. Don't be deceived by any message other than what has been (already) given to you in Jesus. The world will notice your obedience. The world will be drawn to the unity you have in Christ. Keep it going. Don't get sucked in.

"The Bottom Line": We are a family in the Lord. Our unity (in Jesus) is essential to our witness. #3: Satan is a defeated enemy. Satan is a defeated enemy.

Just for fun, I went back and counted. Do you know how many chapters there are in the book of Romans? That's not a trick question. (You should know.) Today we're in the last one, chapter sixteen. Do know how many verses there are in those sixteen chapters? (I went back and counted, just for fun.) Do you know how many there are? In the book of Romans (all told), there are 433 verses. There are 433 verses in Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

Do you know why that matters? (I'll tell you why that matters.) It matters, because only one verse, (verse 20), in chapter sixteen, even mentions the name of Satan. Only one verse (out of 433), actually, only one-half of one verse, gives any recognition (whatsoever) to the devil. And what it says is that he's a defeated enemy. What it tells us is that he has no lasting power over Christ.

In verse 19, (it says), "Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good (Paul says), and innocent about what is evil." (And then he says), "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet....The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you."

Do you know what I love about that verse, about those verses? They remind us that Satan's power is real. He's out there. He's around every corner. Like a roaring lion, he's ready to pounce. And so, be on guard. Watch out. Don't let your guard down. He'll go after you, every chance he gets.

But he only gets one-half of one verse out of 433. And what he gets (what Paul gives) is the same thing he was given back at the start.

Genesis, chapter three, you remember how it happened. In the Garden of Eden, a perfect paradise, it's all there, only one tree (from which) to stay away. What happens? Along comes the deceiver, the enemy, slithering like a snake. And he offers one of his many empty and shallow and deceptive promises.

You know the story. Eve gives in and takes a bite. Adam watches it all happen and does the same. And from that moment on, it all begins to fall apart. Pain in childbearing. Banished from the garden forever. On his belly for all the days of his life. The curses (from sin) never stop.

Remember the promise? In chapter three, verse 15, God is speaking (to the serpent) and he says, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he (pointing to Christ) will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." The cross is going to happen. Jesus will have to die. But his death (on the cross) will not be the final word from God, but the final blow that will ultimately bring the devil down.

"He will crush your head," pointing to Jesus. What does Paul say? (The same thing.) "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." That's all he gets. One-half of one verse out of 433.

Don't miss it. Satan is a defeated enemy. His power in your life has no (lasting power) in your life. No matter what's going on (in your life), God has the upper hand. No matter what's taking place in your life, there's an event that took place (on Calvary) that settled the score. He's a defeated enemy. He has no lasting power. His work (in your life) is infinitely overshadowed by the work of Christ on the cross.

And that leads to the final "bottom line" truth in this chapter, the final (and forever) bottom line declaration that (we all) need to hear...and that is that our hope is in Christ. Our hope is in Christ.

Next week, we begin the season of Advent. Advent is a time when we watch and we wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus. It's the beginning of a new year in the life of the Church. It's the beginning of a new season when we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ.

Do you know what (today is) in the Church year? We're not following it in this series, in this study in Romans. But if we were, do what day (in the Church year) we'd be celebrating today? It's called Christ the King Sunday. "Christ the King Sunday." In the Church year, today is a day to celebrate Jesus as King.

I find it interesting, even though we're not following it in this series (the Church year), that on the same day when we're closing out our series, we're actually celebrating the same thing.

Christ is King, and he always will be: on the cross, when he took the devil head-on and won the battle. In your life, as he has promised to be with you in all that happens, no matter what. And ultimately and eternally, when he returns to this world and calls each of us into his forever kingdom. Jesus is King. Our hope is in Christ. There is no other truth more "Bottom Line" than that.

Let me close our series by simply reading the final verses of Paul's letter. They're what we sometimes refer to as a doxology, a closing word of praise and honor given to God.

It's a good way for us to close, because God is the one who deserves our praise. Listen as I read this closing praise and doxology (from Paul and us) to God.

"Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."