

Title: The Roman Road to Happiness
Date: July 17, 2022
Subject: More paths to true happiness.
Scripture: Romans 12 and 16

Paul Barnes and I engaged in little competition during a summer music tour for college. I believe we were in Pensacola, FL. We wanted to see how many people we could meet and how many names we could remember of the 100 plus youth who were at the event. The female members of our singing group said it was just a way for us to chat up high school girls. We talked with the guys too. Paul and I had fun introducing ourselves, showing interest in others, getting to know names and a little about them.

There's another guy named Paul who had a thing for names. His books are liberally sprinkled with names, some so frequently mentioned they become familiar. There's Timothy, Aquila and Priscilla. Then there are a few who are infamous because of being noted for deserting Paul. Most of the people are done so with appreciation.

In one place it seems like the apostle was getting a kick out of seeing how many people he could include. He uses 41 names and groups not including himself. That's a lot of people he wanted to greet and who wanted to send their greetings. The actual what some might term the "teaching material" is confined to four out of 27 verses. There's a three verse benediction. This leaves 20 verses of people. The truth is it's all teaching material and gives us insight into the importance of humans.

There are people who say they could be happy with just the Lord. That sounds like a nice spiritual sentiment, but I'm not sure how accurate it is biblically. The reason is God created us for relationship with him **and** to be in relationship with others. We're told that when we become a follower of Jesus Christ, it's not an individual enterprise or function. We're placed into an organism known as the body of Christ, the family of God.

Much of our happiness on earth relates to how we relate to others in the body. This is seen in the Lord's emphasis on the "one anothers." We've spotted some of these on our road trip as they connect to happiness, joy, gladness. Among them -- the need to encourage one another, love one another, serve one another. We probably could take each one and make the case for following it would make us happier.

We're nearing the end of our travels on The Happiness Highway. I want to pull together some on-ramps.

We begin with the place where Paul uses lots of names. Romans 16. It's the conclusion of a very deep and penetrating book that describes our salvation. As one source states: "None of Paul's other letters states so profoundly the content of the gospel and its implications for both the present and the future" (NIV Study Bible, Intro to Romans). I'm not going to read the names or have somebody else make the attempt because the names are unfamiliar and twist our American tongues.

The words greet and greetings are used over 20 times as Paul sends his greetings to various people and groups. Why would he do that? The simple answer is he liked and appreciated people.

The deeper question is: Why would God take up space in his Word for an exchange of greetings? We often treat greetings as no big deal. We often don't pay attention to the way people greet us just so long as we hear something. A case in point is how easy it is to say, "how are you?" simply as a means of saying "hi" and not expecting anything substantive in return.

Greetings are communicated in many ways across cultures: shake hands, bow, kiss cheeks, rub noses, bump fists, slap on the back, kiss hands, high 5, hug, wave, nod. Words to say it include hey, hello, hola, good morning, Aloha, howdy, Shalom, Ciao and "how are you"?

Why should we greet people? The most important reason is they're made in the image of God. I'm going to say it again, changing the order. People are image bearers of God. Additionally, if the person is a follower of Jesus Christ, then Jesus is living inside of them. They're a container for Jesus. I don't think we often think about that. I know I don't often think about it that way. It can be an awesome and reverent moment to think that you are face to face with somebody in whom Jesus lives.

If the person doesn't have a personal relationship with God, they're people for whom Jesus Christ gave his life. They're people whom God wants to join his family.

Either way we slice it, God thinks the people we meet are pretty important and special and valuable. And if God thinks so, we should think so as well. Greeting is a way to recognize who they are, that they exist. It's a form of respect.

Another aspect of Paul's greeting is the way he opens his books. They're occasions to speak to the readers and remind them about the grace and peace that come from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It's something for us to consider about the way we greet people. Our approach can be from the desire to extend grace and peace and love from God to others. We are the Lord's instruments to accomplish that.

British pastor John Henry Jowett told the story of a man who'd been released after three years in jail. He was walking down the street when he happened to bump into the mayor. He expected to be shunned. The mayor paused and said in a cheery tone, "Hallo! I'm glad to see you! How are you?" The ex-con mumbled something and went on his way and so did the mayor. Years later the two met in a different city. The mayor didn't remember the man or the meeting, but the ex-con had never forgotten the mayor's actions and words. He said, "I want to thank you for what you did for me when I came out of prison." The mayor asked, "What did I do?" "You spoke a kind word to me, and it changed my life!" (John Henry Jowett, *The Best of John Henry Jowett*, edited by Gerald Kennedy, P. 89).

Greeting one another can and should be expressions of friendship, goodwill and affection. They're some of the simplest and easiest forms. Max Lucado recalls getting together with three other couples for dinner. They'd been friends for decades, traveling, playing and raising families together. He writes of the evening: "As we were dining, the eldest son of the host family stopped by. He's been through a tough stretch, battling

depression, struggling through divorce. We rose to greet him when he entered the room, not because of his recent turmoil, but, well, because he is a dear friend to all of us. We chatted and laughed at some stories. He told us about the girls who think it's funny that a bachelor has two cats. It was nice, very enjoyable. But memorable? No. At least not to me. Later that evening he sent this text to his mom: "Thank you again for tonight... I've never felt so much love walking into a room before... It was kind of crazy... It felt spiritual... I just had this feeling like I was being greeted in heaven or something. That was really powerful... It's like I was instantly surrounded by all this unconditional love, and it just brought me a peace like I never felt before. I think that will stay with me forever." (Max Lucado, *How Happiness Happens*, P. 65).

Lucado observed, "We just never know, do we? We never know when a gesture of kindness will touch a heart. Perhaps that's why Paul urged us to greet *everyone*. He did not say, "Greet the people you like." Or "Greet the people you know." Or "Greet the people you want to know." He said simply, "Greet one another."... The ungreeted individual never thinks "they ignored me because they loved me." Just the opposite. Insecurity is often the unhappy child of silence. You and I may carry a canteen of water, but we don't know who is thirsty. For that reason, we are called to offer it to everyone." (ibid., pp. 66, 65).

We greet people because of what it can do for others. It shows they matter. We greet people because of what it can do for us. The other day I was walking across the Menards' parking lot to go into the men's mall when I met a father and son coming out. The boy was about five and was carrying a broom. He looked like he was proud to do so. I thought of congratulating the dad for getting the boy to do some work. But I simply just kind of nodded. I was surprised when the boy said, "Good morning." It made me glad I at least nodded and made me feel good this little guy would extend that form of greeting.

Another "one another" comes in the previous chapter -- Romans 15. Please turn there. We'll actually read this time.

Read Romans 15:7.

"Accept" was used back at the beginning of chapter 14 where it began a long section about accepting people whose faith and expressions of faith were different. The weak are to accept the strong and the strong are to accept the weak. In 15:7 the teaching is coming to a close on that particular subject. Paul weaves accepting others into accepting people of different ethnicities.

Accepting one another is a variation on the idea of loving one another as Christ has loved us. We focused on that in a previous stop on our road trip. Acceptance is more than benevolent coexistence and toleration. Preeminent Christian thinker and one time chaplain for the queen of England John Stott wrote: "It means to welcome into one's fellowship and into one's heart. It implies the warmth and kindness of genuine love" (John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, P. 359).

The purpose of accepting could be expressed in 15:5, 6. READ.

The reason we're to accept one another is so we can bring praise to God. It's a way to make God happy as it pleases him. To accomplish this we offer grace and truth.

We can bring greeting and accepting others together by something Jesus said in his Sermon on The Mount. He was speaking about the need to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. There he said, "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (Matthew 5: 46, 47).....

Not exactly the crowd we are to strive to be like. Jesus elevates the standard.

A third thread is revealed in Romans 12. The chapter is a rapid fire 21 verses full of God's expectations of how his children are to live. It contains a number of the "one anothers" - be devoted to one another in brotherly love, honor one another above yourselves, live in harmony with one another.

The verse I want to connect us to speaks of joy through the command rejoice.

Read Romans 12:15.

The second part of the verse often gets more attention. We're to mourn with those who mourn. We share grief with those who go through difficulties, suffer loss, experience pain. We're to walk beside them, not ahead of them to try to show them the way or behind them as observers who correct them, but with them to participate in their mourning.

Sometimes it seems like we overlook the first part of the verse - rejoice with those who rejoice. Sometimes it's because it seems like they keep having good stuff happen in their lives and nothing good ever happens to us. We get jealous and envious.

People talk about having an attitude of gratitude in which they express their thanksgiving to God. There are books with ideas about how to do it. Some find one or three things a day for which they're thankful. They write it down and then express gratitude to God.

That idea can be tweaked to fit with rejoicing with those who rejoice. It's not an original idea with me. Max Lucado gives this counsel: "Here is a helpful exercise that can turn your focus off yourself and on to others. During the next 24 hours make it your aim to celebrate everything good that happens to someone else. Keep a list. Develop your "rejoice with those who rejoice" (Romans 12:15) muscle. The instant you see something good done by or for another person, let out a whoop and a holler, silently if not publicly. Throw some confetti. Can you envision the fun you will have? You won't begrudge the good weather enjoyed by Floridians; You'll celebrate their sun-kissed today. Your colleague's promotion will activate happiness not resentment. The sight of studious Mary won't create a grumbling Martha. Just the opposite. You will thank God for the attention she gives to spiritual matters. By the end of the day, I dare say, you will be whistling your way through life. Make a big deal out of yourself, and brace yourself for a day of disappointments. Make a big deal out of others, and expect a blue ribbon day. You will move from joy to joy as you regard other people's success as more important than your own... Blessed is the Christian whose focus is on others. Miserable is the Christian whose focus is on self" (Max Lucado, How Happiness Happens, PP. 53 - 55).

Jesus spoke of the rejoicing in heaven because of one person who is saved. It's through the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. When the shepherd finds the lost sheep and the woman finds her lost coin, they call on friends, family and neighbors to rejoice with them. We can rejoice with others.

Remember in the Christmas story where Elizabeth who was childless and well along in years had a baby? After the boy was born: "Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy, and they shared her joy" (Luke 1:58). We can rejoice with others.

We probably shouldn't get to the shepherds who heard the good news of great joy and what they did after they saw the baby in the manger otherwise this is gonna turn into a Christmas in July sermon.

Rejoice with those who rejoice.

As mentioned, much of what's written in Romans chapter 12 is about how people who are in the body of Christ are to live their lives. A lot of it clarifies how we're to love one another -- sincere love and devoted to one another in brotherly love (Romans 12: 9, 10).

Part of that is accomplished by the way we look at ourselves. Read Romans 12:3.

Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought. It's relatively easy to think of ourselves more highly than we should. We think our methods, plans, goals, ideas, are better than the average Joe schmo Christian. We get a big head.

Don't get a big head. As the further teaching indicates, all of us are incredibly important to God, equally important to God, but none of us should assume we are the Most Valuable Player on God's team. Someone I don't recall accurately stated the truth, "I'm special, just like everybody else." Don't think are better than others. Instead we're to do as it says in 12:10. READ Romans 12:10.

One last on ramp. READ Romans 12:13B.

Americans were surveyed as to the words they'd most like to hear. You might be able to guess number one: "I love you." Pat yourself on the back if you got it right. The second was of a similar vane: "I forgive you." The third probably will catch you by surprise. "Supper's ready."

One day Abraham was sitting by his tent during the heat of the day. He saw three men approaching. Most likely it was two angels and the Lord but Abraham didn't know that. He welcomed them into his home, offering them something to eat, the opportunity to be refreshed, all the while acting as if they were doing him a favor by allowing him to serve them. Be open hearted and open handed to others. Share. Greet, meet and eat.

Melanie and Trevor have hiked miles of Colorado mountain trails together. Neither could do so alone. Melanie was born with spina bifida and needs a wheelchair. Glaucoma took Trevor's sight. You may think he pushes her. No. He carries her on his back while she gives directions and describes the surroundings. They feel they're a "dream team." They recognize they wouldn't get anywhere by themselves and that by serving each other they can go farther.

Followers of Jesus Christ are on the same team. We aren't to worry about who among the human element gets the credit. We're dependent on each other as we walk down the road.