

LEARN TO WORK WITH OTHERS

Today's Text: Romans 16: 1- 27

Extracts:

I commend to you Phoebe *our sister who is a servant of the church* in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many, and of myself also. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, *my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life*, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Ephraenetus, who is *the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ...* Greet Andronicus and Junia, *my countrymen and my fellow prisoners*, who are of note among the apostles, *who were also in Christ before me* [Rom. 16: 1-7]

On Monday, 17 January 2011, Robert Bentley was sworn in as the Governor of Alabama State, USA.¹ Soon after, he addressed worshippers at the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and said, "Anybody here today who has not accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, I'm telling you, you're not my brother and you're not my sister, and I want to be your brother." His comments drew immediate response from the Anti-Defamation League (which fights discrimination against Jewish people) and the Birmingham Islamic Society who questioned whether non-Christians could expect to receive equal treatment during Governor Bentley's tenure. In a statement issued by his office the following day, the governor promised to be the governor of "all Alabamians- Democrat, Republican and Independent, young, old, black and white, rich and poor."

Governor Bentley might have spoken on the spur of the moment but he might also have exposed his inner feelings concerning how to relate to others. As a public official, he would have to work with others without fear or favour. He would have to know how to motivate all for effective results to be re-elected. Do we all not have a similar problem? As workers in the Lord's vineyard, as parents and teachers, as leaders in government and industry, we have to work with others to produce results. Therefore, we must learn to work with others. Unfortunately, most of us want to play the lone ranger. In this week's Bible verses, Paul greets a long list of those who had helped to make his ministry such a huge success. There are certain practices and principles that we can learn from his experience to help us to know how to work well with others. Read on!

¹ Based on: Jay Reeves, "New governor: Non-Christians 'not my brother,' 'not my sister' 1/19/2011; http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/41149562/ns/politics-more_politics/?gt1=43001#

1. Background: Behind every great name is a great team!

An African proverb says, “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with somebody.” In most cases, nobody is an island to himself/herself. You need others for your success. You may be able to force some people to do your bidding because you can punish or reward them. But, as soon as you lose that hold over them, they can turn on you and bite back. Therefore, it is better to learn how to work with others, such that what they do for you “might not be by compulsion ... but voluntary” [**Philemon 14**].

Let us face it. Many of us find it difficult to work with others. As leaders, we may be too full of ourselves. We are too big to do certain chores or learn from subordinates. We see everyone else as part of the ladder with which to climb up our selfish cliffs. As subordinates, we may not be willing to submit to team requirements because we cannot claim personal credit for group success. Some of us are simply rebels. For example, Korah and two hundred and fifty leaders of the children of Israel in the wilderness revolted against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, asserting, “You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?” [**Num. 16: 1-3**]. *No matter how we feel, working with others is inevitable and imperative.* That was why God formed Eve as Adam’s comparable help-mate so that he would not be alone [**Gen.2:18-19**]. That is why “a threefold cord is not quickly broken” [**Eccl. 4: 12**]. Paul’s success helps us to deal with the issues that we encounter when we try to work with others.

In the last chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul expressed his personal gratitude to those who had played one role or another in his difficult but effective ministry. He indeed confirmed that behind every great leader is a great team. From that chapter, we can glean some of his success factors, as follows:

a) *Paul worked with everyone he needed*

By definition, Paul was a member of the elite. He was a Pharisee [**Acts 26: 5**] who studied law under Gamaliel, a doctor of law [**Acts 22: 3–KJV**]. He was a Roman citizen by birth [**Acts 22: 28**]. Therefore, he was qualified to look down on anybody, including the Roman officials in his home province. Yet, he found it easy to work with people of every class and clime that he needed for his success. For example:

- *Jewish aristocrats*, such as Aquila and his wife, Priscilla [**Rom. 16: 3**]. They were tentmakers like Paul and they had gladly hosted him when he went to Ephesus. They had been residents of Rome until they were expelled like other Jews by the emperor, Claudius [**Acts 18: 1-4**]. They even had a church in their house and risked their own lives for Paul’s life as he tried to spread the gospel to the

Gentiles [**Rom. 16:4-5**]. During Paul's third missionary journey, it was Priscilla and her husband that helped his travelling companion, Apollos, to understand "the way of God more accurately" [**Acts 18: 24-28**]. That was the Apollos who watered the word of God that Paul had planted [**1 Cor. 3:6**];

- *Fellow prisoners* such as Andronicus and Junia, his countrymen who were notable among the apostles and, in fact, were in Christ before him [**Rom. 16: 7**];
- *Africans*, such as Rufus, "chosen in the Lord, and his mother" whom Paul also addressed as his mother [**v. 13**]. Recall that it was Simon of Cyrene (near Libya in Africa –**Acts 2: 10**) that helped Jesus to carry the cross. He was the father of Alexander and Rufus [**Mk 15: 21**]. Paul knew that family quite well and worked with Rufus and his mother;
- *Servants*, such as Phoebe, Mary and the household of Narcissus [**Rom. 16: 1, 6, 11**]. No chore done for Paul was too small or too insignificant for him to recognise!

The foregoing list suggests that Paul was able and willing to work with others, no matter their or his social status before coming to Christ.

b) Paul was humble and appreciated help from others

Paul was humble enough to admit what others did. For example, even though we call it Paul's letter, Tertius was his scribe. Paul allowed him to make that public and to also send his own greetings [**Rom. 16: 22**]. When the Philippian church sent him supplies through Epaphroditus, Paul was so filled with thanks for the "sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God" that he prayed that his God should supply all their need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus [**Phil. 4: 19**]. How many of our leaders today would publicly admit that the quotable quotes attributed to them were actually penned by their speech writers? How many of us would admit that we do depend on silent others on whose shoulders we are standing so tall?

c) Paul rendered help to his helpers

Paul got help from others and did not hesitate to reciprocate. For example, he commended Phoebe's contribution to his work and that of many others. He urged his audience to assist her "in whatever business" she had need of [**v. 2**]. In sending a run-away slave, Onesimus, back to his master, Philemon, Paul wrote, "If he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account [and] I will repay" [**Philemon 18-19**].

d) Paul gave the glory to God

Paul gave the glory of his success to God when he concluded his epistles, “To God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen” [**Rom. 16; 27**]. Indeed, without God, we can do nothing. However, our ego can often get in the way!

From the foregoing, Paul has taught us that while we may take total blame for failure, we must share success with others. So, what lessons have you learnt from Paul’s experience?

2. Lessons for us

The following lessons can easily be seen from Paul’s experience:

a) *Stars only come out at night!*²

It is quite tempting to want to be a star, the sole title holder. But does it ever occur to us that stars actually come out at night? In the day-time, the bright light of the sun will swallow the star-lights. Even at night, the stars are only visible when the moon is not there and the earth is in darkness. So, *with all the sterling qualities we have seen about stars, God created them to be subordinate to the sun and the moon. That is a measure of humility, which every believer needs to cultivate.* For example, as soon as Jesus’ profile began to rise, John the Baptist deferred to Him, saying, “He must increase, but I must decrease” [**Jn 3:30**]. The Apostle John outran Peter to reach the empty tomb where Jesus had been buried but he waited for Peter to enter first [**Jn 20:3-6**]. It was Barnabas who first brought the new convert, Paul, to the apostles in Jerusalem [**Acts 9: 27**]. Yet, he played a subordinate role in Paul’s first missionary journey [**Acts 13: 1-2**]

Therefore, if you want to be treated as a star, you must be ready to cooperate and work with others who are also stars in their own right. That is why the best teams that win competitions are made up of players who are not necessarily all stars like Pele or Maradona or Messi but those who can pass the ball to those who are best placed to score goals.

b) *Recognise and appreciate other people’s talents*

Everybody has talents, no matter how small or underdeveloped or unused. If you do not appreciate that, you may be tempted to believe too much in yourself to your detriment. For example, when Goliath came threatening the army of Israel. He was counting on his height. He boasted, “Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants.” In the end, it was David, a mere teenage shepherd-boy, not yet qualified to enter the

² “Stars come out at night,” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 2 No. 26: 14 Oct. 2001; p.4; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/Starscomeoutatnight.pdf

army that used a mere sling with a stone to kill the giant [1 Sam. 17: 1-9, 31-51]!

That person that you are underrating may be the pillar that you need to lean on for success. For example, when David was looking for his and his troop's family members that had been taken captive by the Amalekites that raided Ziklag in their absence, it was an abandoned Egyptian servant, dying of hunger and disease, that David revived who showed him the way to the Amalekites [1 Sam. 30: 1-18]. It took Mary Magdalene to show the other disciples where Jesus was buried! When the men ran away to hide, Mary was one of the few women "who had come with [Jesus] from Galilee, followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid" [Lk 23:55].

c) *You can disagree with others without being disagreeable*

No one can work with everybody, especially if they do not share your goals or values. Nevertheless, that is not the reason to treat such people as pariah. You can disagree without being disagreeable. For example, Jesus never missed the opportunity to use harsh words against the scribes and Pharisees [Lk 12: 1-2]. Yet, He did not turn down an invitation by one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread with him on a Sabbath day [Lk 14: 1].

During Paul's second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take along with them Mark but Paul refused on the ground that the young man had earlier abandoned them in Pamphylia. We are told, "The contention became so sharp that they parted from one another." Barnabas sailed to Cyprus with Mark while Paul chose Silas as his new missionary partner [Acts 15: 36-41]. They disagreed but the work of God did not thereby suffer. See how factional fights within Christian denominations are hindering the spread of the gospel in some parts of the world.

Whether you can indeed work with others depends in the end on the extent to which you submit yourself to Christ's will for, without Him, you can do nothing [Jn 15: 5]. That is Paul's message to us in this week's study.

3. Conclusion: Learn from the Master Himself!

Jesus has said, "The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" [Jn 6: 37]. Yet, we did not choose Him; He chose us [Jn 15: 16]. Look at the team He chose over two thousand years ago for His earthly ministry [Matt. 10: 1-4].³ They

³ "Christ's Inner Circle," *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 1 No. 11: 3 December 2000
http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_1/PDFs/ChristInnerCircle.pdf

were made up of old and young people who were conniving and ambitious; full of themselves, envious of one another. One of them ultimately betrayed Him. But what kept them together as a cohesive team that has changed the world?

When Jesus was with them, it was the sheer force of *His good examples* that endeared Him to His followers. He slept where they slept; He ate what they ate. He did not lord it over them even if that would not have been out of place. Instead, *He was among them as the one who served* [Lk 22: 27]. But, after His ascension into heaven, His disciples received *the Holy Spirit* and they became *transformed* and began *to do great exploits. By their fruits, they became known.*

That can be your portion if you have the mind of Christ [1 Cor. 2: 16]. Your focus is no longer on your *self-worth*, measured by your office or position, but by your *true worth*, measured by your standing before God. If God is pleased with you, even your enemies will be at peace with you [Prov. 16: 7]. You will begin to find favour wherever you find yourself. Doors will begin to open to you because you have opened doors for others. Then you will know that He that is in you is greater than he that is in the world [1 Jn 4: 4].

Learn to work with others.