

Greet One Another With a Holy Kiss

Romans 16:16

I want to start this morning with a little quiz. Now I've already told you that the command to love one another is the most frequently repeated one another principle. It appears no less than nine times in the New Testament. Here's your one question pop quiz. Which one another principle is number two? Which one is repeated the next most number of times? Is it to live in harmony with one another? How about the call to forgive one another? Or perhaps could it be the need to encourage one another? Anyone want to take a stab at it?

You might be surprised. The second most frequent one another principle is this. "*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*" We're not talking about one obscure reference. No. It's written by two apostles, in five different letters, encompassing dozens of congregations, in several different countries. Four times Paul urges his readers to "Greet one another with a holy kiss." He has to tell the Corinthian church in both of his letters to them. I guess they weren't a very warm and welcoming congregation. In Peter's first letter written to the churches of Asia Minor he calls them to greet one another with a kiss of love.

And yet we feel free to totally ignore this command. We're not a liberal congregation that picks and chooses which parts of the Bible we follow. We believe the Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word of God. So why do we dare ignore this teaching? What is a holy kiss or a kiss of love anyway? What is the real intent of this command, and how do we faithfully fulfill it in the church today? We will try to answer these questions from Romans 16. So please turn in your Bibles to Romans 16.

The ancients may have had limited ways in which they could greet one another, but today we have more ways to keep in touch than ever before. We have landlines, cell phones, and Skype. We have text-messages, instant messages, Facebook messages and in big cities we even have bike messengers. We have snail mail, air-mail, and email. With all of this you might think we would be the most relational people in the history of the world, with strong personal connections. Yet one of the phenomena of our modern age is that people feel more isolated and disconnected than ever. As Pink Floyd asked repeatedly in their album *The Wall*, "Is there anybody out there?" That album is a masterpiece of loneliness. There's a reason why that album remains perennially popular with every new generation of college students because it so effectively communicates the angst and isolation so many young adults feel. I was talking to a group of college kids who were telling me what a genius album that was. They sounded just like my peers twenty-five years ago. We are alone in a crowd.

Could it be that in this tiny little nugget of New Testament teaching that we happily skim across that there is cure to our isolation? Might this be a sign that points us to the answer of our aloneness?

The Emphasis is on Greet, not Kiss

When we read Romans 16:16, "*Greet one another with a holy kiss,*" our attention is immediately drawn to the word *kiss*, but in the grammar of the text, that is not where the emphasis of this verse lies. The main thrust of this command what? *Greet*. The primary command is to greet. This is the greeting verse, not the kissing verse. That doesn't mean that the kiss was unimportant, or wasn't a part of the command, but the emphasis is on the greet, not the kiss.

Interestingly, the root of the word translated *greet* means "to enfold in the arms." It originally meant to hug. Now by the 1st century it came to be used for greeting someone in general. But even in the kiss of greeting the hug remained. You would embrace someone in your arms and give them a kiss on each cheek.

The kiss of greeting was not new with the church. It wasn't introduced by the apostles. It was an ancient part of Mediterranean culture. Kissing was a common and standard greeting in the 1st Century among both the Jews and the Romans. Its significance varied depending on who was kissing and the context of the kiss. Close friends may greet each other with a kiss on both cheeks. When someone was addressing a superior such as a student greeting their rabbi, they may offer a kiss of respect on the hand. Such kisses could also be given on the forehead or even on one's beard. This was all in addition to the passionate, romantic kiss. This is where we have a hard time with the distinction, because in our culture the kiss has been so highly sexualized, we have a hard time seeing it any other way.

The people that Paul and Peter were writing too were already kissing. This isn't a command to do something they weren't already doing. The command wasn't to kiss. It was about how they should kiss. It was to be holy and marked by love. Greeting one another in the church was to be something special. More than feigned politeness, more than heartless routing, it was to be affection from the heart. It was to be set apart. There was to be no deception or ulterior motives.

The early church took this standard greeting of their culture and they invested it with new depth and meaning. They made it something special; something "holy." By the 2nd and 3rd Centuries the holy kiss or the kiss of love became an important part of the church's worship. The kiss was the opening act of their celebration of the Lord's Supper. Communion was seen as a time of intimacy both with God and with each other. The kiss signified that we had all been made one in Jesus. The church was to be a place where everyone was loved and included in Christ. The Holy Kiss let everyone know that they were welcome as a part of the body.

The closest we come to anything like this is the welcome time at the beginning of the service. There's lots of handshakes, and maybe few scattered hugs, but do you get the impression that perhaps something has been lost here?

Universal Principle versus Particular Cultural Application

We do need to be careful how we apply this 1st Century teaching to our modern situation. We could simply transfer the physical practice of kissing, but totally miss the point. It's kind of like when Jesus washed the disciple's feet, and asked them to do the same. The point wasn't that we should always wash each other's feet, but that we should be willing to serve, that we should humble ourselves, that no one is too important not to humbly serve their brother or sister in Christ.

We need to be able to distinguish between the universal essence of this command and the cultural application. The essence of the command is not the form. Kissing was how this teaching was applied in their 1st Century, near-eastern culture. We see this same thing with head coverings. In the 1st Century a woman who didn't wear a head covering in public was considered either a prostitute, a woman of loose morals, or she was seen as the ancient equivalent of a radical feminist. Not wearing a head covering was the ancient equivalent of bra-burning. So Paul said that women in church should keep their heads covered. However, in the book of Genesis, we see a time when wearing a veil was a part of the costume of a prostitute. It was a different time, and a different culture. The universal principle would be do not dress or conduct yourself in such a way as to send the wrong message, in a way that creates an immoral perception.

In 1 Timothy 5:23 Paul advises the young Timothy to drink a little wine for some stomach problems. Now is that a command, we should all drink wine? No, Paul was simply giving what was sound medical advice in the 1st Century. Wine was known to be an effective treatment for certain parasites and stomach ailments. The universal principle here that would apply to us is to get proper medical treatment. Drinking wine was their particular cultural application.

We have a similar situation here in Romans 16:16 kissing is the cultural application of the universal principle. The form, the kiss itself, was just the vehicle for the real principle here. The universal principle is that we are to receive and welcome each other with tender affection.

Context, Context, Context

In Bible College when I took Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, my professor impressed us that the first three rules of good Bible Interpretation were context, context, and context. He called it King Context. That is certainly true with this verse.

We can see the emphasis on greeting throughout the rest of Romans 16. Look back at the beginning of chapter. There are certain types of Bible passages that we tend to skim over as being unimportant: Genealogies, there are the long lists of names and numbers in the two censuses that were taken during the wilderness wandering in the book of Numbers. Romans 16 is one of those chapters, but we need to read it here this morning.

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It almost sounds as though Paul is reading through the church membership roster as he recites all of these names. But there is much more to it than that. One early church father said that even those who are extremely good men hasten over this portion of scripture as superfluous. This is a mistake though, as he says, "it is possible even from bare names to find great treasure."

So what is the treasure in this list of names? First of all, don't think that Paul is simply being polite and proper with all of these greetings. He is very sincere here as he extends heartfelt greetings. You can tell that his life has been deeply touched by some of these people. What makes this so amazing, though, is that Paul had never been to Rome before. These are relationships that he has built over the years in all of his travels and through his many letters. He genuinely loves and cares for these people.

And notice how in all these verses what is it that he says again and again? "Greet, greet, greet." We never see the word kiss until we get to verse 16. The emphasis is all on the greeting. So that forms the context when we get down to verse 16, "*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*" After all of his specific and personal greetings, he gives us a general call for all Christians to greet one another.

Romans 16 is a flesh and blood example of how the church should be about personal relationships. It shows us that the church should always be a place of tender affection. Gathering with believers should be the company of old friends. In worship you should always be able to find a warm embrace, a shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen, and a heart to care. The treasure of this chapter is that it shows us the power of personal relationships. This all begins with the way that we welcome and receive one another. Let me give you three ways in which this passage is powerful.

The Power of Names

First of all, we see the power of names. This is no generic greeting. Paul didn't give one of those, "Say hello to everyone for me." Paul's greetings are very personal and tender. I find it amazing that Paul took the time to address so many of these people by name.

It is so important to learn and use each other's names. This has always been one of my weaknesses as a pastor. I have such difficulty remembering names. I'm not a large group person by

nature, and I always felt out of my element working a crowd, so hanging on to a new name is hard. However, I continue to struggle to do better in this, because I know how important a person's name is. When someone meets me and they remember my name later, that means so much. To value a person's name is to value them. To use their name in a warm and personal way is to honor them.

There are some amazing things about this list of names that sheds some light on the incredible depth and breadth of this word, "Greet." All we see here is a bunch of funny sounding names, but if you were reading this with 1st Century eyes, some things would leap right off the page. The first thing you would notice is how these names include both Jews and Gentiles. You never saw this outside the church, Jews would have nothing to do with Gentiles, and Gentiles thought Jews were just plain weird. Jews and Gentiles greeting and kissing! it was unthinkable, but here it is. Our fellowship is greater than any racial, cultural or ethnic difference. How tragic it is that here in 2016 our country is more segregated on Sunday morning than any other time.

The second thing you would see with your 1st Century eyes would be that several of these names were common slave names. These weren't names used by those in upper classes. A few of these names, though, come from a very different class. Narcissus was a rich and powerful man who even had influence with Emperor Claudius. Bible scholars believe that Aristobulus was the grandson of Herod the Great. Our fellowship is greater the social rank or economic status. In the church it doesn't matter what side of the tracks you come from, or in which neighborhood you live.

You would also notice how many women Paul greets in this text. Nine of the Twenty-six are ladies, and five of them are especially commended for their ministry in the church. You would not find such public recognition of women anywhere else in 1st Century Roman culture. Our fellowship is greater than our gender differences.

No wonder Paul could write to the Galatians and say that in Jesus, "*there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:28)." So you see, there is power in names.

The Power of Hello

We also see in this text the power of "hello." There is something very endearing and disarming about a warm hello. And no, I'm not going to start singing Adele. Jeremy Houck, a fellow minister in Alabama, says he has a great idea for a bumper sticker, "World peace begins with 'hello'." Now that doesn't mean Iran will abandon its nuclear ambitions if we just send them a Hallmark card, or that Kim Jong Nutlog in N. Korea will dismantle his nuclear program if we just forward a friendly email, or that all violence in Iraq will stop if our soldiers would just smile and say "HI" to everyone they see on the street.

But without that necessary first step, nothing else can happen. A warm greeting leaves a lasting first impression.

A hearty embrace can turn a bad day good. A friendly smile and a cheerful greeting can lighten your step. When you genuinely feel that someone is happy to see you, it makes you feel loved and wanted. Not only should we be happy to be here, we should be happy you're here as well.

No one should feel lonely, neglected or overlooked in the church. This is also why the way we greet and welcome visitors to church is so important. Whenever we see someone new in church we need to take the time to welcome them and include them. Greet them first, after service instead taking care of everything else. I've heard of churches that practice the two-minute rule. For the first two minutes after church you should talk to people you don't know.

Son-Rise wants to be a church that values people and relationships. Worship is wonderful. Outreach is a high calling. Bible Study is irreplaceable, but without relationships they mean nothing. Remember the 1st and 2nd most important commandments. Love God and Love Others. It says that at the top of our web page. It all hangs on those two things.

The Power of Touch

Thirdly, we see in this text the power of touch. These weren't impersonal greetings. That's why it is significant that their greeting included an embrace and a kiss. There is something incredibly powerful about a kiss. We understand this in a romantic context. I remember my first true love, Kelli. The first time we kissed I literally passed out. I remember the first time I kissed Teresa. I couldn't believe how soft her lips were. (Yes dear, I remember out in front of TCBY Yogurt in Joplin, and then back in front of your dorm on campus.) I wanted to keep kissing her just so I could feel how soft her lips were. But the power of the kiss doesn't have to be limited to romance.

By its very nature, a kiss is a very personal form of touch. Everything we eat must cross our lips. We taste with our mouth. Every bit of air we must breathe must cross our lips. Every word we speak. Early in life our lips are key to exploring the world around us. You notice how babies put everything in their mouths. Part of the reason for that is that our mouths are so sensitive, that's why babies put things there. To touch with our lips is a very vulnerable and accepting thing to do. A kiss requires intimacy. We are very careful about what touches our mouth. It's hard to be distant, divided or bitter with someone you have kissed.

Perhaps the reason Peter and Paul wanted the early Christians to make the kiss holy, was because they understood the power of touch. Jesus used the power of touch with incredible results in his ministry. He would touch others that no one else would touch. So often when Jesus healed people,

he healed them with a touch. He didn't have to touch them to heal. He could heal with just a word, even over great distances. So why so personal? Why so hands on? Because a touch is powerful. Jesus' power as the Son of God healed their illness, but his touch helped heal their heart. Touch communicates love and attention. It offers reassurance.

Recently, I've been teaching Allison how to drive. I've been remembering how it seemed like just last year I was teaching her how to ride her bike. She was doing real good riding straight. She could have done it by herself, but just to be safe I kept my hand right on her back. Just in case. I wasn't holding her up. It was just a reassuring touch, and as long as I kept my hand there, she did great. But as soon as I removed my hand, when I withdrew my touch, she panicked, and would stop. Jesus understood the power of touch. He redeemed with his touch. It worked the other way as well. In a crowd of people, he noticed when one sickly woman touched him. We can redeem much with a touch as well. It is sad that we have lost the art of touch.

Our problem is that our culture has so sexualized touch, that we are afraid to touch. We have lost the gift of touch. I've had bus drivers tell me that they aren't allowed to hug the kids on their bus. We are so paranoid of accusations and lawsuits, that we want to keep everyone at arm's length. What a tragedy. Cheapening sex hasn't brought us closer together. It drives us apart. I'm not sure how we can recover the lost art of the nonsexual, affectionate touch in the church, but we need to. The church should be at least the one place where people can literally feel loved.

A verbal greeting is one thing. It's nice and polite and all, but to add touch to a verbal greeting takes it to a whole other level. It takes time and effort. You have to go out of your way to affectionately touch someone. You can't just do it as you walk by. So give someone a big, warm hug. Let them know you're praying for them. And next time you read through this list of names, you'll know there is more going on than meets the eye.

The way we welcome and receive one another is a testimony to what we believe about how God welcomes and receives us. A tender and affectionate greeting says I welcome you and receive you just as God does. You will find his love and grace here. Here you have a home. With us you have a family. When you have nowhere else to go, you come here. When no one else will listen, talk to us. You are my brother. You are my sister. You are welcome here.