Romans Lesson 1 (2018)

**“HELLO, TO ALL WHO ARE IN ROME!”**

(Grace and Apostleship)

Romans 1:1-7

Key Verse: 1:5

“Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake.”

 Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome is a long letter, which consists of 16 chapters. It’s a complete statement of Christian faith. If anybody wants to know what Christianity is all about, they should read and study the book of Romans. In fact, ever since it was written in the first century, it had greatly impacted numerous people throughout history, including outstanding Christian leaders like Saint Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and many other ordinary believers. We are so grateful and excited that we can study the book of Romans this year. I hope and pray that our study of Romans would significantly impact each of us so that we can be a part of God’s work of salvation in New York City - the modern day Rome and beyond.

 In today’s passage, Romans 1:1-7, Paul briefly introduces himself, his relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel, which is the major theme of his letter (1-5). He also identifies the recipients of his letter and greets them 6-7). Let’s briefly think about Paul, who wrote this letter, particularly his relationship to the Lord Jesus and the gospel.

 Look at verse 1. “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.” The name “Paul” is his Roman name. He also had his Jewish name “Saul.” The name “Saul” is familiar to us because of King Saul, the first king of Israel from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Sam. 9:21). Even though King Saul was not a great king in terms of his faith, he was still the first king of Israel who left some legacy after his death. I am sure those who belonged to the tribe of Benjamin felt proud of being named after King Saul.

 It’s possible that he always had two names “Paul” and “Saul” as many other Jews of the time. As a matter of fact, Paul was a Roman citizen by birth. Paul was his Roman name. If he had a passport, he definitely had the name “Paul” in it. Yet, it seems that while he was in Jerusalem, he used his Jewish name “Saul” instead, not “Paul” his Roman name. People in Jerusalem called him “Saul.” For example, when we read the book of Acts, we find that he was introduced as Saul when he initiated the killing of Stephen (7:58, 8:1). Saul was a Pharisee who was known as the ringleader of the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem and beyond. When Christians heard the name “Saul”, they felt uncomfortable. Even though orthodox Jews in his time praised his courage to remove Christians as heretics, he was a violent murderer before God.

 Then by God’s providence and mercy, he personally met the Risen Christ whom he had persecuted on the road to Damascus. Jesus called him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4) “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuted.” (Acts 9:5) Realizing that he was proud and ignorant, Paul repented and was converted. Yet, for a long period of time, people called him “Saul” and they continued even 10 years after his conversion. And his name “Paul” does not appear until he launched his first missionary journey along with Barnabas in Acts Chapter 13. After that, it seems that the name Paul became his official name. Apparently, Paul wanted to be known as Paul (which means humble or small) rather than as Saul (which has the spiritual stigma of being arrogant or proud).

 Obviously, the recipients of his letter in Rome knew Paul’s past history and reputation very well. Some people liked Paul and the others were suspicious of him. But whatever they knew about his past, Paul was a new creation in Christ Jesus. He was no longer arrogant or proud. By calling himself “Paul”, he wasn’t just pretending to be humble. He was truly humble in heart and spirit.

 How do we know if someone is truly humble in heart and spirit? Can we be humanly humble but spiritually proud or arrogant? What do you think? Paul wasn’t faking his humility. How do we know? One way to know is that we see Paul’ humility in the way he identified himself in relation to his Lord Jesus Christ and to his calling.

 Look at verse 1 again. “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.”

 **First, Paul identified himself as a servant of Jesus Christ (1a).** In his relationship to Christ, Paul was a “bondservant” (Greek ***doublos***). Some people might translate it as “slave.” Yet, many Bible scholars think that’s not a proper translation. After all, when we hear the word “slave”, we feel very uncomfortable. In fact, some people even today are enslaved against their own will. But that’s not what Paul meant when he said that he was a servant of Jesus Christ. Jesus didn’t force Paul to be his slave. Instead, after experiencing Jesus’ amazing grace and love through the forgiveness of sins, Paul fell in love with Christ and respected him so much that even though he was set free and became a free man, he volunteered to become the servant of Jesus Christ. When he said that he was a servant of Jesus Christ, it wasn’t just a mere verbal acknowledgment of one’s identity. It was his inner conviction of an unbreakable bond of love and loyalty.

 If someone asks you “who are you?” or “who do you think you are?” how would you respond? Some will say, *“I am my own man/woman.”* But if you are a real Christian, you will say, *“I am a servant of Jesus Christ to whom I belong. I dearly love him with all my heart because he loved me and gave himself for me. I am willing to live and even die for him, my Lord.*” And it should be our deep inner conviction day by day and moment by moment. That’s what Paul said in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” May the Lord give us the deep conviction that we belong to Christ Jesus our Lord.

 **Second, Paul was called to be an apostle (1b).** The word apostle (Greek ***apostolos***) means ‘***a person who is sent.***’ It can be used for someone who is commissioned to a position or duty. But when Paul used the term “apostle” here, he meant something special, that he was God’s special appointee, along with the Twelve Apostles, whom Jesus designated. We know that because of the betrayal and death of Judas Iscariot, Matthias was replaced in his place (Acts. 1:26). These Apostles were given special authority by our Lord Jesus to preach the gospel and lead the early church. In fact, apostolic teachings became the foundation of the church. But Paul was not one of the Twelve. So many believers didn’t want to recognize him as the apostle. They said “Well, Paul was not one of the Twelve. *So how could he call himself an apostle? He is arrogant.”* As a matter of fact, if he were not an appointed apostle, Paul deserved to be considered insane and arrogant. His teaching should be heresy and he should be considered very dangerous and harmful and condemned as a false prophet.

 But the fact is that the Risen Christ appointed him to be an apostle. When he was still blinded from his encounter with the Risen Christ on the way to Damascus, the Lord told Ananias to go see Paul and pray for him, putting his hands on him to restore his sight. Yet, Ananias was afraid and reluctant to go and said, *“Lord, he was a violent and dangerous man who persecuted and killed so many believers.”* The Lord said to Ananias in Acts 9:15, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.” Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, along with the Twelve Apostles. In fact, some recipients in Rome might still have lingering thoughts about his apostleship. But Paul neither hesitated nor bragged about his apostleship. Even though he expressed how unworthy he was to be called an apostle, he clearly identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ by saying “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (1 Cor. 15:9-10) Here, we learn that Paul’s view of apostleship is based on God’s grace. In other words, grace and apostleship are inseparable. In fact, he talks about apostleship again in verse 5 by saying “Through him we received grace and apostleship…” We will think about this a little later.

 **Third, Paul was set apart for the gospel of God (1c).** Look at verse 1 again. “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.” If the word “servant” is a general term, the word “apostle” is specific, and the phrase “set apart” is even more specific. Apostle Paul said that he was set apart for the gospel of God.

 What did he mean when he said that he was set apart for the gospel of God? Although Paul didn’t specify, it seems that he had God’s special calling for the gospel of God itself, not just by spreading the gospel truth, which he did very diligently, but also by organizing the gospel truth in written form, conforming and defending it. As a matter of fact, Paul’s letters were some of the first written documents in the New Testament, like Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians and Romans, all written in the 50’s. Among 27 books in the New Testament, 13 of them were written by Apostle Paul. The book of Romans is the most comprehensive statement of the gospel of God in the entire Scripture. And Paul worked very hard to defend the gospel truth from a different kind of gospel in his time.

 Now, what is the gospel of God that he was set apart for? Look at verses 2-3. “The gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.” The word “**gospel (Greek *Euangelion*)**” means “good news” or “good tidings.” What is the good news of God? According to Paul, the gospel of God is not a theory, but a person, Jesus Christ-the Son of the living God. The good news of God is not just about salvation, as we think it is. The gospel of God is about a person, Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God who became a man, died for our sins and rose from the dead according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

 In verses 3 and 4, Paul claims that Jesus is the Son of the living God in two ways, first through his birth and second through his resurrection from the dead. In fact, the Scripture predicted that the Messiah would be born as David’s descendant and the virgin would be conceived and give birth to a son, and he would be called **“Immanuel- God with us.”** In fact, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the legal wife of Joseph who was a descendant of King David. During his earthly ministry, Jesus performed so many miracles that only God could do, including the healing of so many incurable diseases, showing compassion to sinners and raising the dead. Most of all, Jesus rose from the dead, just as he and the Scriptures had predicated. Paul himself was one of the eyewitnesses of the Risen Christ. The gospel that the Apostles, including Paul, preached is not a human invention. It is the gospel that God Himself planned and brought into the fulfillment through Jesus Christ. The good news for us is a person, Jesus Christ our Lord- the Son of the living God. Jesus Christ is the most amazing and greatest thing that can happen to us. Let me tell you why.

 I really like a story, shared by a pastor I deeply admire. There was a very wealthy man who had collected many valuable art treasures. His only son was quite ordinary but was dearly loved by his father. But his son died unexpectedly as a young man. The father was so devastated in sorrow and grief that he became ill and died a few months later. The father left a will which specified that, at his death, all his art should be publicly auctioned, and that a painting of his son was to be auctioned first. On the day of the auction the specified painting was displayed and the bidding was opened. Because neither the son nor the artists were well known, a long time passed without a bid being offered. Finally, a long-time servant of the father and friend of the son timidly bid a few dollars, all the money he had. When there were no other bids, the painting was given to the servant. At that point the sale was stopped and an official read the remainder of the will, which specified that whoever cared enough for his son to buy his painting would receive all the rest of the estate. “Bingo!” He just hit the Jackpot.

 This story illustrates God’s provision for fallen humankind. Anyone who loves and receives His Son, Jesus Christ, will inherit the heaven Father’s estate. We, as believers in Christ, have riches beyond our imagination, beginning from the grace of forgiveness of sins, love, peace, joy and hope in this world. When we die, our body returns to dust. But we know that we have the everlasting life in the glorious resurrection body.

 In verses 5-7, Apostle Paul turns his attention to the recipients of his letter. Look at verses 5-6. “Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake. And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.” Here, who are the “we” whom Paul was talking about? Did he mean himself Paul and the Twelve Apostles, and no one else? No. The word “we” includes all Christians, including the Christians who are in Rome. Through Jesus Christ, we received grace and apostleship at the same time even though we may not be aware of it. Most of us don’t have a problem with the fact that we’ve received the grace of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. However, we often wonder if we have also received apostleship, which indicates a special mission from God, especially the sharing of the gospel of Jesus with others in some cases as a missionary. What do you think?

 Can we receive only grace and not apostleship? Yes, but that’s not God’s will. According to Paul, everyone who belongs to Christ Jesus is an apostle, a missionary, in the sense that we are sent out into the world as his messenger. Even though we might not be an expert like Apostle Paul, God does not eliminate any of us from his redemptive work. All of us are invited to join the grace of apostleship in one-way or another. Some of us can invite young students or older folks to one-to-one Bible study or Group Bible discussions. Some of us may just pass out gospel tracks or Bibles. We can participate in any possible way. No matter how insignificant it may appear, God can use it for his glory in an amazing way.

 Last Friday, I happened to check my mailbox at the Center. I got mail from a man from Arizona, named Hans Jurgen Hauser. I didn’t remember any one by this name. The content of his was surprising. He said that the reason for writing this letter to me was to express his appreciation for University Bible Fellowship for leading him to Jesus. Then he said that while he was attending Queens Borough Community College (QCC), one of the members of UBF approached him on campus, and gave him a Bible. And it turned out that on March 20th, 1988, he surrendered his life to Jesus. He said that without the help of that person, his chance to receive salvation would have not been possible! Now, he is a freelance writer and has published nineteen articles and two self-published short novels. He has also been growing to be a Bible teacher in his local community church in Arizona. I said “Wow!” I am not sure who gave him the Bible at the Queens Borough Community College sometime in 1988, 30 years ago. Whoever did it God used that person greatly.

 What a big difference and great impact was made to this one precious soul! Praise Jesus our Lord! Through him we receive grace and apostleship to call all kinds of people to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake. We don’t need to worry about our ability to obey God’s calling. When we obey, the Lord will surely enable us to carry his will, sometimes in an unimaginable way, to reveal his glory. What people really need today is the gospel, the gospel of God, Jesus Christ – the Son of the living God. Jesus is the greatest fortune. He is the good news of God for all people, including you and me. No matter what circumstances we may be in, may we obey His call, holding on to the grace and apostleship of Jesus Christ, believing that God will reveal his glory!