Romans Lesson 2 (2018)

**UNASHAMED**

(The Gospel-the Power of God)

Romans 1:8-17

Key Verse: 16

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”

Since most of the Christians in Rome didn’t know who Paul really was, it was necessary for him to take some time to introduce himself and explain why he was writing this letter to them. In the previous passage, Romans 1:1-7, Paul briefly introduced himself in relation to Christ Jesus and the gospel, saying that he was a servant of Christ Jesus and called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God (1). Then he briefly summarizes the gospel of God for which he was set apart (2-6).

In today’s passage, Romans 1:8-17, Paul addresses the initial purpose of writing his letter to them. He had such a genuine interest in them and compelling desire to visit them in Rome (8-10). At that time, he wasn’t sure when he could actually visit. So he honestly shared his strong emotion with them (11-13) and explained why he was so passionate about sharing the gospel with them (14-17). He said that he wasn’t ashamed of the gospel. In other words, he was very confident of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. So let us think about why Paul wanted to visit them in Rome and why he was not ashamed of the gospel.

In verses 8-10, Paul shares his thanksgiving and prayer topics for the Christians in Rome. Look at verses 8-10. “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be opened for me to come to you.” Paul said he was thankful for the Christians in Rome because their faith was being reported all over the world. What does that mean? It seems that there were positive reports about the Christians in Rome particularly because of their faith. We don’t have any immediate information about it. Yet, many Bible scholars think that it’s related to what had happened to the Jews in Rome during the reign of the Roman Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54). In fact, due to the disturbance made by the Jews, which includes conflicts between the orthodox Jews and the Jewish Christians in Rome, the Emperor Claudius kicked all the Jews out of Rome by issuing an edict in A.D. 49 (Acts 18:3). Apparently, the Jewish Christians were among the Jews who were kicked out of Rome.

When we read Acts Chapter18, Paul met a Jew named Aquila and his wife Priscilla in Corinth during this second missionary journey, because they were among those who were kicked out of Rome and resided in Corinth. We don’t know how many Jewish Christians had to leave Rome at that time. Obviously, their departure could have been very crucial to the survival of the church in Rome because it was possible that they had important leadership positions. Yet, it seems that the adversity turned out to be an opportunity of spiritual growth among the Gentile Christians in Rome. They stood firm in their faith in Christ Jesus. Apparently, the expulsion of the Jews by the emperor might be one of the reasons Paul couldn’t visit Rome earlier. But when Paul heard of them, he gave thanks to God for their faith.

In verses 9-10, we see how much Paul was concerned about and prayed for them. He said, “God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be opened for me to come to you.” Here, we see that Paul prayed for them earnestly because he had genuine concern for them. And his deep concerns, he not only prayed for them but also was eagerly looking for the opportunity to visit them. Why? He explains it in verses 11-13.

Look at verses 11-13. “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.” What did he say about his reason for visiting? Well, at that time, Paul was a great apostle, a very fruitful missionary and a successful church builder around the world. Obviously, Paul was aware that he had a lot to share with these ordinary Christians in Rome. Yet, he didn’t seem to have superior feelings over them. Instead, he wanted to have a fellowship with them in Christ, as he clearly indicated in verse12 “that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” Paul was humble not just humanly but also spiritually. He saw himself as one of the followers of Christ who was in Rome. And he eagerly wanted to learn from them and be encouraged by them as they would possibly be encouraged by his faith. It was not a hierarchical but horizontal relationship with mutual respect in Christ Jesus.

Paul also said in verse 13b “… in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.” Here, we learn that Paul’s purpose of having fellowship with them in Christ wasn’t just having a good time together. It was to mutually encourage each other to grow mature in Christ Jesus as shepherds, Bible teachers and disciple-makers, possibly through the study of the Scripture. I am so happy that we have one-to-one Bible studies and Group Bible studies. During these studies, I believe that it’s important to share what we know and have learned. But it’s also important not to dominate others with our head knowledge or opinion. It’s important to listen to each other with respect. Most importantly, we need to listen to God together. And that’s one of the effective ways of having fellowship and discipleship in Christ Jesus.

When the Risen Christ appointed Paul to be one of his apostles, he was called to preach the gospel particularly to the Gentiles, non-Jewish population (Acts 9:15-16). It was proper for him because Paul was a Roman citizen, was culturally prepared and able to speak Greek very fluently. On the other hand, Simon Peter and other apostles mainly took care of the Jews in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and beyond. Of course Paul also shared the gospel with the Jews, but he mainly focused his ministry among the Gentiles because of God’s special calling. We are called to preach the gospel to all people, including everyone in all ages and different cultures and ethnicities. And many of us who are in UBF are called to preach the gospel to college campus students. God’s calling is both general and special. So it’s important for us to be aware of what God’s general and special calling for us is. Specialty does not mean superiority. All ministries of God are all important in the sight of God, whether you are called to serve BBF, CBF, HBF, UBF or SBF (Senior Bible Fellowship). The bottom line is that God wants all people to be saved through the gospel of Jesus Christ. That’s what Paul basically believed.

Look at verses 14-15. “I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and to the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.” In those days, the Greeks thought that non-Greeks who didn’t speak Greek were barbarians, uncivilized people. They thought they were superior to non-Greeks. When Paul said that he was obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks and both to the wise and the foolish, he wasn’t actually making a distinction among the people. His point was that he was obligated to all people no matter who it was.

So what did he mean when he said that he was obligated to all people? The Greek word for **“obligated**” is ***“opheiletes”***, which means ***“a debtor.”*** So, when Paul said “I am obligated to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish,” he meant that he was a debtor to all people. In other words, Paul was saying that all people are entitled to collect a debt from him. If you don’t pay bills or far behind in payment, the collecting agency would try to collect debts. That’s very uncomfortable experience. But feeling obligated is not bad. It’s good in some cases. Generally, children who have been nurtured and supported by their parents might, when they become adults, feel an obligation to pay back the debt they owe to their parents. That’s pretty normal and healthy. Also we, as Christians, whose sins are forgiven through the sacrificial death of Christ Jesus, feel obligated to pay back the debt to Jesus. But how can we pay back Jesus? We can’t. And we feel that we are not obligated to anyone, except Jesus Christ. So why was Paul saying that he was a debtor to everyone? It sounds too farfetched to accept the idea that we are indebted to all people.

Well, according to John Stott, the author of the Basic Christianity, we become a debtor in two ways. The first is to borrow money from someone. The second is to be given money for someone by a third party. For example, if a friend of yours handed me $1,000 to give to you, I would be indebted to you until I give you the money. So it’s in this second sense that Paul was in debt. Even though Paul had nothing to do with most of the people in the world, he strongly felt obligated to all people because he believed that Jesus Christ had entrusted him with the great wealth of the gospel so that he could share with all people.

Recently, one lady in Connecticut who won a $ 599.7 million Jackpot asked the court to allow her to stay anonymous. I don’t know why but she might not want to deal with the hassle that might come publicly. And she might not necessarily want to share her wealth with some people. We, as Christians, are the winners of a spiritual jackpot. We are to share the great spiritual wealth with others. A hidden secret is that the more we share the gospel with others, the more blessings we receive from God.

Having said this, I don’t think Paul was able to reach all people in the world in his time, not even half. Yet, the point here seems to be more on Paul’s attitude of sharing the gospel wherever he went. He didn’t share the gospel with others as if he were doing them a favor. He didn’t have the feeling of superiority over anyone. He shared the gospel with humility and gratitude toward Jesus and the great sense of obligation or responsibility for the people.

In verses 16 and 17, Paul speaks of another compelling reason for sharing the gospel. Look at verse 16. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” Even though the gospel of Jesus Christ is such great spiritual wealth from heaven, it wasn’t necessarily desired or accepted by the people of the world because it looked unattractive and totally undesirable. Usually people desire wealth, prosperity, glamor, romance, sports, arts, entertainment, science, technology, and the like, which look convincing. So many people pay a lot of money to watch football games and music concerts. People invest a lot of money in educating their children and build their career. On the other hand, not many people would pay attention to a Jewish carpenter, who was crucified, died and was believed to come back to life. Why not? It’s unattractive and desirable.

If Paul thought that the gospel of Jesus needed to be more attractive and relevant to the people, he could have made it that way. But he didn’t because he knew that the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection is the only gospel that brings salvation to everyone who believes. In what sense, is the gospel of Jesus Christ the power of God?

First of all, it saves us from the curse of sin and death. People die for many reasons. We will all die someday. Yet, people’s souls experience death even before they experience physical death. People suffer a lot physically due to physical illness. But more people suffer because of spiritual illness and sickness of their soul found in guilt, shame, feelings of being cursed, anger, bitterness, greed, lust, pride, selfishness, addiction, etc.

What can wash away our sin? What can save people from the wretchedness of the curse of sin and death in human soul? When I was growing up, I was a happy-go-lucky kid. I was smart and talented in many ways. I was very proud of myself. Yet, at some point, I began to feel doomed by some unknown power. Even though I tried to be optimistic about life, I could not resist a certain power of darkness, which included jealousy, pride, jealousy, lust, fear, the sense of shame and guilt. I felt so trapped by the dark power in me that I became completely dysfunctional at some point in college career. I felt completely lost, while I was drinking, smoking and partying. I was like an apostle of darkness. I felt I was sinking into a bottomless pit of darkness. In 1974, I repented of my sin and accepted Jesus as my Savior and Lord. I experienced the great joy of salvation for the first time in my life. Jesus Christ who suffered and died on the cross and rose from the dead set me free and gave me a new life. Now, by the grace of Jesus I am what I am.

Paul said that he was not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. The gospel is the power of God. The word “power” in Greek is “***dunamis”*** which the word “***dynamite***” is derived from. Apostle Paul knew through his personal life and ministry that those who believed in the gospel experienced the amazing power of God’s redemption and transformation in their lives whether they were a Jew or a Gentile. He didn’t hesitate to share the gospel with anyone because he was confident that the gospel of Jesus Christ can save anybody and change them if they trusted in it. We are not to be ashamed of the gospel. We should be confident or even be proud of the gospel.

Look at verse 17. “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.” We can say that verse 17, especially the phrase “the righteous will live by faith” is the main theme of the entire book of Romans, which requires a lot of thoughts and explanations. According to Paul, what makes the gospel powerful is its content. The righteousness of God that is revealed in the gospel is Jesus Christ. And we can have this complete righteousness by faith from first to last through the grace of Jesus Christ. In other words, we can be justified by faith in the grace of Jesus. We can be redeemed, healed, reconciled and sanctified by faith in the grace of Jesus, and finally we can be glorified also by faith in the grace of Jesus Christ. “The righteous will live by faith.”

Let me close my sermon. Apostle Paul said that he was not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. Most of us are hesitant to share the gospel. Why not? We have many good excuses not to share it, like “I am too busy” or “I am too shy.” We think that if we don’t do it, someone else will do. True. According to statistics, 360,000 babies are born per day and 152,000 people die each day. One of the saddest things is not that people die but that they die without knowing and accepting the good news of God for them. If someone is dying without hearing the gospel, we are not completely free from the responsibility before God. When I studied this passage, I was convicted and wanted to make a small decision to share the gospel at least with one person per day. I know it’s not going to be easy. But if someone didn’t share the gospel with me around 45 years ago, I wouldn’t be “ME” today. The Gospel of Jesus Christ sounds unattractive or not complicated enough, but it has the amazing power of God to save everyone who believes. D. L. Moody, one of the greatest American evangelists, said that the gospel is like a lion. All we have to do is to open the door of the cage and get out of the way. All we need to do is to share the gospel, and God will take care of the rest. May the Lord help us to stop making excuses and share the gospel! Let us let the lion out of the cage!