**TO GOD BE GLORY FOREVER**

***Romans 16:1-27***

***“…to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.” (v. 27)***

Today we are studying the last part of the book of Romans. In this chapter, there are many names whom Paul mentions and greets. It may be considered as a postscript after the conclusion of this long epistle. But if we read carefully, we can find that this chapter resembles a beautiful, affectionate love letter to the Roman Christians. Paul expresses his personal love to each of them by remembering all their devotion. He also delivers some warnings with fatherly love. Finally he reminds them of the gospel again. Let’s learn some spiritual lessons planted in Paul’s final greetings.

1. **Greetings (vs. 1-24)**

In this chapter, which word appears most frequently? “Greet!” The word “greet” or “greetings” are repeated 22 times. This letter is full of greetings. Paul greets 28 people who are in Rome by name (Rufus’ mother and Nereus’ sister are the exceptions) and refers to many others in groups. He also sends greetings on behalf of his eight co-workers, including Timothy, who were with him in Corinth (21-24). What does Paul mean by “greet” or “send greetings”?

First, they are precious family members in Christ. “Greet” means to “pay respect and honor with affection.” In his greetings, Paul deeply expresses his personal respect and love to each of his recipients. He calls them sister or brother. He calls some of them like Epenetus, Ampliatus, Stachys and Persis “my dear friend.” This literally means, “the one loved by me.” Paul considered them as his beloved sons and daughters. Look at verse 13. ***“Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.”*** Paul remembers Rufus and his mother. Paul always seems strong and great in the New Testament. But at one time, he needed a mother’s love. Rufus’ mother loved Paul as her own son. It was a great comfort and contribution to Paul’s spiritual growth and his ministry.

To Paul, all of them were his spiritual family members regardless of their human background. Some of them were Jews, and others were Gentiles. Some of them were of noble position, but some were possibly even slaves. Their gender, nationality, and social status were different. But the gospel, the power of God, changed them. Each of them was a precious fruit of the gospel and living evidence of the power of the gospel that brings salvation to everyone who believes (1:16). Jesus purchased them from the bondage of slavery to sin and Satan by paying his own life. Paul knew how much Jesus loved them, even more than his physical family members. Once Jesus was teaching the crowd, someone told him, *“Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”* Jesus replied to him, pointing to his disciples, *“Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12:46-50).*

Jesus, the holy God, made sinners holy through his suffering and death. He is not ashamed to call us part of his family and to call us his brothers and sisters (Heb 2:11). Indeed, the Bible calls the church God’s household (1Ti 3:15). The church is God’s family. We are family in Christ. Christ loves the church so much to the point of giving himself up for her (Eph 5:25). So Jesus wants each of God’s family members to love one another as he loves each of us. The early church vividly revealed what the church should look like. The early church was not like the mega churches of today, but house churches. They gathered at a person’s home and worshiped together. In verse 5, Paul greets Pricilla and Aquila’s house church, ***“Greet also the church that meets at their house.”*** Wherever they went, Priscilla and Aquila opened their home to be used as a “house church.” They gathered Christians or truth-seekers, taught the word of God to them, and gave them delicious food. An open door, open arms, and open hearts were the characteristics of their lives. There were many house churches like Priscilla and Aquila’s in Paul’s time. In each house church, they shared in Christ’s love by gathering together, sharing their possessions and praising God. The early church really showed what God’s family looks like.

Most of our UBF churches around the world are house churches. We don’t have magnificent church buildings, or congregations of many hundreds or thousands. Our Minneapolis chapter is same. We have small numbers in an old house. Our worship area reminds us of the catacombs. But our humble number and meeting place can be our great strength to have a family bond in Christ. Some may be like a spiritual father or mother to others. Some may be sisters and brothers. Some can be sons and daughters in Christ. While doing the will of our heavenly Father and serving one another, unknowingly we serve Jesus as his brother, sister and mother. Family members embrace each other regardless of their shortcomings. They don’t measure if other members are beneficial to them or not. Because we are family, we love and serve. So in verse 16a, Paul urges Roman Christians, ***“Greet one another with a holy kiss…”*** We should not take this too literally. However, Paul teaches all of us to love one another with holy affection. As Christ welcomes each of us regardless of our weaknesses and mistakes, he encourages us to accept and pay our respect and honor each other as fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters in Christ. May God bless our church to put this into practice and maintain strong family bond and love in Christ!

Second, all labors are remembered in Christ. As Paul says “Greet someone,” he is also asking to “let them know that I remember him or her.” In his greetings, Paul remembers not only their faces, but also what they had done for the body of Christ. In verses 1-2, introducing Phoebe to the Roman Christians, Paul honors her, ***“…she has been the benefactor of many people including me.”*** As a servant of the church in Cenchrea, she must have helped many brothers and sisters in very practical ways. Including Paul, many who were in need and distress were greatly relieved and strengthened by her help.

Look at verses 3-4. ***“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.”*** Priscilla and Aquila were precious co-workers of Paul. On his second missionary journey, Paul met them in Corinth. Like Paul, they were tentmakers, so they worked together and stayed together (Ac 18:3). They must have accepted God’s vision for world salvation based on the word of God through Paul. Later, they followed Paul to Ephesus, leaving their business and property behind and starting all over again. Paul remembers especially that they risked their lives for him. This literally means that they laid down their own necks for Paul. In what way they risked their lives is not known. However, when Paul was in a great deal of danger, they must have sheltered him at the risk of their own lives. It is not easy for us to sacrifice our time, materials, and energy for the body of Christ. But they even devoted themselves to the Lord fully to the point of death. They had a life-giving spirit and a life commitment to the work of God. To Paul, they were such beautiful co-workers, so he remembered their sacrifice wherever he went. This precious couple’s names are repeatedly mentioned and remembered in the Bible.

Look at verse 5b. ***“...Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.”*** Epenetus was the ancestor of faith in the province of Asia. In any pioneering work, the first convert is very precious. While the majority are following the pattern of this world and enjoying sinful lifestyles, to be the first believer in a region, it requires a special element of faith with decisive action and courage like Noah and Abraham. As the firstfruits are important for farmers, this kind of person becomes a sign of God’s works, blessings and hope for future ministry. Special respect is to be paid to those people. I pray that God may continually raise many Epenetus-like disciples from among college students.

Who is the next in turn for Paul’s remembrance? Look at verse 6. ***“Greet Mary who worked very hard for you.”*** Mary is identified simply as one who worked very hard for the body of Christ. Along with Mary, in verse 12, Paul also remembers Tryphena and Tryphosa, and Persis who worked hard in the Lord. Before meeting Jesus, these women were perhaps spoiled princesses among the privileged Roman elite. They probably spent their time on adorning their appearance and seeking romantic relationships. But they were empty, and life seemed meaningless. Then they heard the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. They found meaning, joy and their true object of worship. Out of love for Jesus, their true husband, they worked hard in serving the body of Christ. Now their true beauty shone not from their appearance, but from their inner mindset, as they diligently served the church and God’s work. Proverbs 31:30 says, *“Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.”*

Look at verse 7. ***“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.”*** Andronicus and Junia were possibly a couple. They were seniors to Paul in Christ. Paul especially remembers that they had been in prison with him. When or where this occurred is not mentioned, but as we know Paul had suffered frequent imprisonments (2Co 11:23). They participated in Paul’s suffering and loneliness in prison for Christ’s sake. There is a saying, “a friend in need is a friend indeed.” Partnership in suffering in Christ deeply united them together in love. Paul commends them for their exemplary faith and life.

Look at verse 10. ***“Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test.”*** One’s true faithfulness to Christ is proved in time of trials. In the Old Testament, Joseph was tested repeatedly by God until he became a shepherd to Pharaoh and prime minister of Egypt. Likewise, Apelles had been tried through some persecution, hardship or temptation. But he had overcome the test and stood firmly. Paul recognizes Apelles as a proven warrior and victor in spiritual battle.

Paul remembers each of his co-workers’ help, labor, love, suffering, loyalty, and devotion for Christ’s sake. He is sincerely thankful and pays deep respect to them with a debtor’s heart. Likewise, whatever we have done for the body of Christ, our Lord remembers it all without failure. Even if human beings fail to acknowledge, our Lord doesn’t fail. Jesus says in Mt 10:42, *“…if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”* Even the smallest service given to the seemingly most insignificant brother or sister, he remembers and rewards. So in Revelation 22:12, he promises, *“Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done.”*Whether or not people know or appreciate our work, let’s give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because we know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain (1Co 15:58).

Third, watch out for those who cause divisions. In his greetings to the Romans, he also admonishes a final word of warning, that they watch out for spiritual enemies. Look at verse 17. ***“I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.”*** Satan always try to break the strong family bond in the church. He uses those who are divisive and seek to hinder the Lord’s work in the church. Their teaching and way of living are contrary to the gospel and the gospel-centered life. Their motive is not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. When they live for their own selfish purpose instead of taking up their cross to follow Christ, they become troublesome in the Christian community, consciously or unconsciously. The methods that they are using are smooth talk and flattery to deceive the minds of naïve people.

So Paul gives the Romans spiritual direction. Look at verse 19b. ***“…but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.”*** To avoid being swayed by the deceiver, but instead to adhere to the gospel truth, we must be wise. Also to be innocent about what is evil, we need to keep spiritual purity. However, our wisdom and spiritual purity do not come from within us, but from God. There is no other way to be wise and pure except maintaining our personal relationship with God through deep meditating on the word of God, devoting ourselves to prayer and offering our bodies as a living sacrifice to God.

Sometimes in our spiritual battle, however, we may feel that there is nothing we can do but watch and pray. But in the end, God gives final victory. Paul had assurance of God’s victory in his personal spiritual life and in the Roman church. Let’s read verse 20. ***“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.”*** The God of peace will destroy Satan and establish peace. If the God of peace fights for us and the grace of our Lord Jesus is with us, who can be against us? Therefore, we can have faith, patience and peace regardless of the situation.

1. **Reminding of the gospel (vs. 25-27)**

Paul finally came to his closing benediction in his longest and most complete epistle of the gospel. Look at verses 25-26. ***“Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith…”*** Paul had his head and heart so full of the gospel that he could not but mention it again in this final part of Romans. The sum and substance of the whole gospel is Jesus Christ. The message of the gospel of Christ had been hidden in the Old Testament like the treasure in the field. Yet, it was fully revealed through the coming of Christ by the command of the sovereign and eternal God.

All men are sinners, with no exception. All men deserve God’s wrath and eternal punishment for their sins. However, God, in his great mercy, presented his one and only Son Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood on the cross. Those who believe and confess Jesus as their Lord and Savior freely receive the forgiveness of sins, and the righteousness of God. Now we have peace with God; we have become children of God; we have joy and the hope of the glory of eternal life and the kingdom of God as our inheritance. Based on this amazing grace, God directs us not to gratify our sinful desires but to live according to the Holy Spirit, so that we may be sanctified in Christ’s image. Furthermore, he has given each of us a priestly duty to bring the gospel to the world, so that all the Gentiles might believe and obey God. We must live up to this great purpose by preaching the gospel and practicing its teachings in our daily lives.

As Paul reminds the Romans of the gospel, he concludes this grand epistle by praising God with great thanksgiving and reverence. Look at verse 27. ***“…to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.”*** In the gospel, God’s infinite power and wisdom to save fallen human beings are clearly manifested through Jesus Christ. It is God’s absolute power that establishes each believer. It is God’s perfect wisdom that reveals to each believer the gospel truth. By his grace alone, we are standing on gospel faith now. So Paul confesses in 1Co 15:9-10a, *“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…”* The ultimate purpose of the gospel is to glorify God through Jesus Christ. God wants to be fully glorified through his Son. So apart from the gospel and Jesus, it is impossible to honor God in our lives. Let’s not forget God’s marvelous grace lavished upon sinners through Christ. Let’s not forget that the chief purpose of our lives and salvation is to declare the praise of God who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light through Jesus Christ. Let’s pray that God’s name may be continually glorified through our faith in Christ, obedience to him, and growth in his image. ***“…to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.”***