

## TO GOD BE THE GLORY

Romans 16:1-27

Key Verse: 16:27

*... to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*

At the beginning of our Romans study, I said that the four gospels tell us about the life and mission of Jesus in a series of snapshots, while this letter is like a textbook about Jesus. Paul wrote a powerful, systematic, and in-depth doctrinal thesis on the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, this chapter teaches us that Paul was not just an academic theologian. He was a shepherd. In today's passage, he greets more than 29 people, calling their names one by one. He knew each person's character. He knew their prayer topics. This chapter also includes his warning for them and his final benediction.

### I. GREET ONE ANOTHER WITH A HOLY KISS (1-16)

Paul had never visited Rome at the time he wrote this letter. But he knew many believers in Rome personally. From his greetings to them in this passage, we learn that the members of the church in Rome were indeed diverse. Some were Jewish Christians (Andronicus and Junia, Herodion), though a majority of them were Gentile believers. There were several women who worked hard for the ministry. Many names indicate that they were former slaves. For example, consider "those who belong to the household of Aristobulus" (10) and "those in the household of Narcissus" (11). Aristobulus and Narcissus were not believers. In fact, they were wicked men who were close friends of the Emperor Claudius who persecuted the church. But their household servants became faithful believers and are mentioned by Paul in his letter. We don't know their names. They probably didn't even have proper names. But God certainly knew each of them. Paul called the believers in Rome his friends, fellows, coworkers, and brothers and sisters. He used the phrase "in the Lord" or "in Christ" 10 times in this chapter to describe the Christians. Likewise, our fellowship members are a diverse group of people. What binds us together is our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers and sisters in Christ! Now let us look at closely a few names that Paul mentions in the letter.

**First, Phoebe** (1-2). Look at verses 1-2. *"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me."* Why did Paul commend Phoebe to them? Who was she? Phoebe was a deacon of the church in Cenchrea which was located a few miles from Corinth. (It was here that Paul had his hair cut to keep a vow before sailing for Syria (Ac 18:18)). Phoebe was a wealthy and generous woman. She was the benefactor of many people including Paul. More importantly, she was a woman of faith. As a deacon, she served the Lord, not only by taking care of the various church business, but also by praying, encouraging and teaching people with the word of God. How do we know that she was a woman of faith? Paul trusted her. He apparently asked her to deliver the only copy of his letter to Romans. Women like Phoebe are precious in God's

ministry. We must honor and respect them, and make an environment in which they can work.

**Second, Priscilla and Aquila (3-5a).** Look at verses 3-5a. *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. Greet also the church that meets at their house.* Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned several times in the Bible (Ac 18:2-3,18-19,26; 1Co 16:19; 2Ti 4:19). They were Jews from Pontus who had immigrated to Rome. They lived in Rome until A.D. 49, when the Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. Then they went to Corinth where they met Paul. Like Paul, they were tentmakers, so they worked together for living and stayed together. They also became trusted coworkers in their ministry. Priscilla and Aquila must have accepted Paul's world mission vision, because they followed Paul to serve the ministry in Ephesus, leaving behind their business and property and starting all over again. Paul says, "They risked their lives for me." They had a deep commitment to the work of God. They were Jews, but they served the Gentiles with the word of God, opening up their own house as a church. All the Gentiles were grateful to them for sure.

**Third, Epenetus (5b).** Paul says in verse 5b, "*Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.*" In any pioneering ministry, the first convert is very precious. It requires great faith and courage for a person to be the ancestor of faith in a small ministry. Many young men feel pressured when they are called "ancestor of faith." But if a person becomes the first convert to Christ in the area, he or she becomes a sign of God's work and encourages others to follow. He or she becomes hope for future ministry. So the first convert is very precious in God's eyes.

**Fourth, Mary, Tryphena and Tryphosa, and Persis (6,12).** Look at verses 6 and 12. *Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.... Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.* In his greetings to these four women, Paul used the words "work hard" three times. Mary worked very hard for the church. Persis worked very hard in the Lord. Tryphena and Tryphosa also worked very hard in the Lord. As women, they had many things to do at home. There were endless and often thankless jobs for them to take care of everyday, including cooking, cleaning, laundry, and caring for children. But these women still found time to work hard to serve the Lord in the ministry. We know that no ministry can thrive without hard-working women in the midst. Someone said that behind every fruitful UBF ministry are hard-working women of faith and prayer. The names Tryphena and Tryphosa mean "dainty" and "delicate" and may allude to luxury. Before they became believers, they might have been spoiled princesses in a well-to-do Roman family. But they felt empty inside despite their luxury. Then they heard the good news of Jesus Christ. They found a true meaning of life in Jesus. They became hard-working women in Christ. They were full of joy in serving the Lord who saved them and gave them eternal life. Paul also remembered other women in

this letter, including Rufus' mother. He said, "*Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too*" (16). We don't know the details, but she must have loved and served Paul as her own son. Paul considered her a mother to him. May God raise up many women of faith and prayer among us who can take care of young students as their spiritual mothers!

**Fifth, Andronicus and Junia** (7). 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.* We don't know much about this couple, except what Paul says here. They had been in prison with Paul, suffering together with him for the gospel of Jesus. Paul says they were outstanding (or prominent) among the apostles. They had a high reputation as man and woman of faith. Then Paul added the fact that they had been in Christ before he was. Paul respected them for their years as believers. In his eyes, they were seasoned warriors of faith with many stories to tell about their spiritual battles in Christ. Paul was a great apostle who had met the Risen Christ personally. His mission life was excellent. But he showed a respect for his spiritual seniors. Paul was a humble servant.

Paul sent his greetings to many more believers in Rome, including Apelles whose fidelity to Christ had stood the test (10). Paul recognized Apelles as a man of God because his faith was tested and approved in Christ. Some people seem to have strong faith when things are going well, but they prove otherwise during a time of trial. Paul personally experienced a pain of watching some of them do that, including Demas who deserted Paul because of his love for the world (2Ti 4:10). We can imagine how the faithfulness of Apelles encouraged St. Paul.

Look at verse 16. *Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.* Paul used the word "greet" or "greetings" 21 times in this passage. This chapter is full of greetings. We learn that we should greet one another affectionately. In several cultures, kissing is a way of expressing one's love and affection. But what is a holy kiss? Paul used this term elsewhere in his letters to encourage believers to express their sincere love and affection for each other (1Co 16:20; 2Co 13:12; 1Th 5:26). A holy kiss was not sexual; nor it was pretentious or deceitful as in Judas' kiss of Jesus at Gethsemane (Lk 22:47) and Joab' kiss of Amasa before stabbing him with a dagger (2Sa 20:9). A holy kiss was a symbol of unity in the Christian community. So should we kiss each other whenever we get together? Well, we are not in a kissing culture. People in Turkey, France, Italy, and in some Arab nations kiss each other when they meet, between men and women alike, on the lips as well as on the cheeks. However, we are uncomfortable to kiss the opposite sex on the cheeks, let alone on the lips. Instead, ours is a hugging culture. The point of a holy kiss is to express our love and affection for each other. So let us hug or shake hands with each other to express our affection and love for one another.

## II. WARNING AND BENEDICTION (17-27)

Look at verses 17-18. *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. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.* Obviously there were some people in the church in Rome who caused divisions among the believers. They put obstacles that were contrary to the teaching they learned. Why? They were motivated by their own selfish ambitions. By smooth talk and flattery they deceived the minds of naive people to satisfy their own appetites. They pretended to serve the Lord, but they were not. Paul warned them to keep away from them. Then Paul's spirit was lifted when he remembered those who remained faithful to the Lord. He said, *“Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you”* (19-20). Paul rejoiced because of their obedient attitude. And he told them to have a spiritual discernment to deal with evil wisely. He told them to be wise about what is good and innocent about what is evil. He also assured them that the God of peace would soon crush Satan.

In verses 21-24, Paul sent greetings from his coworkers in Corinth from where he was writing this letter, including Timothy the young pastor, Gaius who provided hospitality for Paul and the whole church there, and Erastus who was the city's director of public works (21,23). Paul always traveled and worked together with others. He was always training young co-workers to be spiritual leaders for the work of God. He trained men like Timothy and Titus, and sent them out to churches that needed shepherds. This way Paul called from among the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. He also depended on men like Tertius to help him to write letters, perhaps because of his poor eye sight (22).

Let us read verses 25-27. *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—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.* In his final benediction, St. Paul brings up the gospel of Jesus one last time. He says that he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ that revealed a mystery. This mystery had been hidden for many ages. What is the mystery? It is the heart of God who wants all sinners of the world to come back to him and receive the grace of salvation. This was such an amazing secret that the Jews refused to accept or believe. It was written in the Old Testament scriptures, but it was hidden from their eyes. But the mystery was fully revealed through the coming of Christ. Paul was certain that God wanted both the Jews and the Gentiles to be saved. The gospel is

the power of God that bring salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile (Ro 1:16; Eph 3:6). This was why God had chosen the Jews in the first place and this was why God called him to be a missionary to the Gentiles. His certainty came from a deep and thorough study of the Scriptures. So he exclaims in the last verse of his letter: "... to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen" (27).

In conclusion, praise God for blessing us to study the book of Romans! It is indeed a tremendous blessing to have the mystery of the gospel unlocked before us through St. Paul's writings. Let us watch out for the people who cause divisions and who distract us from the gospel of Jesus Christ as we serve the Lord together in a Christian community. Let us make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit among us by embracing one another with love and affection in Christ. Let us pray more and work hard in the Lord, both in times of good and in times of trials, so that many young people around us may become an offering acceptable to God. *To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*