A MINISTER OF CHRIST JESUS TO THE GENTILES

Romans 15:14-33

Key Verse: 15:16

“...to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”

When Paul began this letter, he shared his vision and his plan to visit Rome. He was eager to preach the gospel to them. He was not ashamed of the gospel because he knew it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes (1:16). When he used the word “ashamed,” Paul knew that it was easy for the Roman believers to be ashamed of the gospel. Paul realized that they needed conviction in the gospel. So he gave them a great exposition of the gospel in chapters 1-11, and a great exhortation to live by the gospel in chapters 12-15:13. And then, with his two benedictory prayers in verses 5-6 and 13, it seems his letter has come to an end. But he continued. He reminded them why he wrote this letter, and he shared his mission, his vision, his plan, and his prayer topic. In doing so, he wanted the Roman church to participate in God’s world mission work. He wanted them to be a missional church, not just a local fellowship. The church is not an organization with a mission department. The church is God’s mission to a lost world. The church must be missional. Rome was a strategic city for the evangelization of the whole world. At that time, the church at Rome was relatively small. The believers seemed to be struggling just to survive. They seemed to be nothing but a small band of fringe people. But God had a great hope for them. From God's point of view, they were very important. Paul wanted them to have a sense of God’s mission and participate in his mission. We sometimes feel like the Roman believers. Many people's main concern is how to get good grades, a good job, marry well, raise good children and retire with good benefits. In the course of doing these things, it is easy to lose a sense of God’s mission. As we listen to Paul’s vision and plan, let’s remember the power of the gospel and gain a sense of God’s mission.

First, grace and God’s mission (14-19). Paul began his letter in chapter 1 in a very personal way, and he ends it here, by sharing his own personal testimony. Though Paul had apostolic authority, his tone was not hierarchical, but rather testimonial and relational. This reflects the mind of Christ as a humble servant. Nevertheless, as Paul explained the gospel truth so clearly and simply, the Roman believers might have felt he regarded them as immature children. But that was not the case. In verse 14 he confidently asserts that they were full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another. Here “goodness” means “excellence of character.” They had Christian integrity. They were morally upright, truthful, kind and honest. This is the fruit of the gospel. They knew God genuinely and were able to teach effectively. Paul respected them from his heart as mature servants of Christ. Yet he wrote to them quite boldly on some points and reminded them of the gospel again. Though they were mature, they still needed to be reminded of the truths of the gospel. The gospel is so deep and wide and is the source of life, strength, wisdom and encouragement. We need to be reminded of the gospel every day. This refreshes our souls.

Paul boldly wrote Romans because of the grace God gave him. What was this grace? Let’s read verse 16: “...to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”  The word “grace” is used in various ways in Romans. For example, we received grace and apostleship (1:5). We are justified freely by his grace (3:24). We live under God’s grace and not under the law (6:14). We are chosen as his remnant by grace (11:5). We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us (12:6). Here in verse 16, Paul used the word “grace” in relation to God’s mission. Why did he say that God’s mission is grace? It is because God’s mission is given as a special favor to those he loves and trusts. Once Paul said to Timothy, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service” (1Ti 1:12). This grace of mission elevates our lives from the level of working just to survive, to the level of serving the living God. It gives us meaning, joy and purpose that is valuable beyond anything in this world. No one can earn this blessing by their merit; it is given only by God’s grace. It is easy to think of God’s mission as a painful cross which we have to take as a duty. If we do so, mission seems burdensome. But in truth, God’s mission is his grace. When we remember this grace, we can carry out God’s mission every day with a thankful heart and joy.

In verse 16, the word “minister” means “servant.” From the beginning of this letter Paul identified himself as “a servant of Christ Jesus.” A servant’s goal is to please his master. Paul wanted to please Christ in everything (2Co 5:9). For example, he wanted to go to Rome according to the will of Christ; it was not his own plan (1:10). Christ called Paul to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. To carry out this mission, Paul gave his life to Jesus. He said, “I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (Ac 20:24). How, then, did Paul carry out this mission? He preached the gospel, not just with words, but with his actions. Indeed, he shared his very life with the Gentiles (1Th 2:8). Paul lived out the gospel truth by humbly serving others with the mind of Christ. He did this following Jesus’ footstep, as his servant. Paul was a shepherd like Jesus. He took care of people until they grew strong in faith, were sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and were acceptable to God (16b).

Here we can learn that grace and mission are intertwined; we cannot have one without the other. God’s grace is the driving force to serve God’s mission. Without God’s grace no one can serve his mission joyfully. In the same way, when we carry out God’s mission, his grace increases all the more. God’s grace is given together with his mission. One who lives without God’s mission is abusing God’s grace, and will gradually drift away. God’s grace is not cheap, but costly, and it always bears good fruit. Thank God for giving us his mission by his grace. Do you have a sense of God’s mission?

How did Paul consider his life of mission? He said, “Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God” (17). Paul thought of his mission life as glorious. In fact, he boasted of his ministry. In doing so, he glorifies Christ, not himself. He gave all credit to Christ. He recognized that it was Christ who worked through him to minister to the Gentiles. This summarizes Paul’s entire ministry. When Paul obeyed Christ as his servant, Christ worked powerfully through Paul’s words and deeds to lead the Gentiles to obey God (18). Here we need to pay attention to the words “obey God.” Paul did not lead people to obey him, but to obey God. The words “obey God” sound simple, but they are most important. Sin is disobedience to God; it cuts the relationship with God, who is the source of life. On the other hand, when we obey God, life and blessing overflow and our relationship with God is restored. Here we learn the importance of obedience in gospel work. It is easy to think we can do gospel work by making a great plan according to our own brilliant ideas. Many people approach church growth as though it is a business. They apply business strategies and principles to the church. In some sense, it may be helpful. But there is also a danger. It is that one may ignore the guidance of the Holy Spirit to follow the example of Christ through obedience. Paul’s success in ministry was not the result of his entrepreneurial skill. When we read the book of Acts, we learn how he obeyed the guidance of the Holy Spirit, even when it did not make sense. In fact, he was a man of obedience. Only one who is obedient can raise obedient disciples. God works through people who obey him. When Paul obeyed Christ, God blessed his ministry by working through the power of the Spirit to perform signs and wonders (19a). So he could carry out God’s mission by proclaiming the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum (19b). Let’s remember that it is Christ who works among us through our obedience.

Second, Paul’s pioneering spirit and vision (20-33). Biblical obedience is often misunderstood. Some think of it as blind submission; others as something passive and dispassionate; still others as robotic and impersonal. But Biblical obedience is quite different than these ideas. It is the true expression of faith (1:5; 16:26). It is a dynamic, vibrant and passionate response to God’s word that is powerful and effective. Though Paul was obedient, he was not passive; he was very active and full of holy desire. He said in verse 20, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.” Paul’s ambition was holy, not selfish. This ambition did not come from his own idea. It came from God through his word. Verse 21 says, "Rather, as it is written: Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." Paul was eager to preach the gospel in Rome to those who had never heard. He had often been hindered in going to them (22). But he did not give up. He had a burning desire to preach the gospel to them (23; 1:13). This is what we should learn from Paul. He had God's heart for the lost. God is not willing that any should perish, but wants everyone to come to salvation (1Ti 2:4; 2Pe 3:9). There are many unreached people in the world who are calling out for help, like the man in Paul's dream who begged, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Ac 16:9). Let's pray that we may share God's heart and have a holy ambition to share the gospel with the lost.

In verse 23 Paul said, "...there is no more place for me to work in these regions." It seems that he completed his mission. Thus far, he had really worked hard, risking his life many times. He proclaimed the gospel from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum. He raised many leaders who were working hard in the cities throughout the Roman Empire. His fruit was remarkable. Now, it was time to retire and enjoy the fruits of his labors. But he was not complacent. He was eager to visit Rome and share spiritual blessings with them. But that was not the end. He planned to go to Spain, which was regarded as the ends of the earth. He wanted to obey Jesus' world mission command to be his witness to the ends of the earth (Ac 1:8). He wanted the Roman church to assist him on his journey as a missional church. Here we learn Paul's pioneering spirit. When we think about Paul, we never picture him as a doddering old man who should go to a nursing home. Instead, we remember him as a dynamic and passionate man with pioneering spirit. Pioneering spirit always refreshes and renews us like flowing water. But if we lose pioneering spirit we become complacent, useless and corrupt, like stagnant water filled with bacteria. There is no joy of life, but rather complaining, sorrow and regret. However, when we are full of pioneering spirit we experience joy and life-giving spirit.

In verses 24-29 Paul shares his plan. Paul was writing from Corinth on his way to Jerusalem to deliver an offering from the Gentile churches. He called the Christians in Jerusalem “the Lord’s people” (25,26,31). They belonged to the Lord who bought them with his blood. They were suffering from severe poverty. Paul was concerned with their practical needs. So he collected from the Gentile churches a contribution for the poor in Jerusalem. Beyond the immediate relief of the poor, Paul found deep meaning in this offering. It gave the Gentile Christians an opportunity to give thanks to the Jews for the spiritual blessings they received through them. In receiving material help from the Gentiles, the Jews could acknowledge them as brothers and sisters in the Lord. It was a practical way for the Jews and Gentiles to overcome the barrier between them and become one in Christ. Then they could glorify God.

Finally, Paul urges Roman believers, by the Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit to join him in his struggle by praying to God for him (30). His first prayer topic was that he may be kept safe from those who refused to believe in Judea. When Paul defended his Gentile sheep with the gospel, denying that circumcision was necessary for salvation, many among the circumcision group were offended. They began to hate Paul and wanted to discredit him, thinking he was destroying their tradition, and was a traitor to his own people. In fact, when Paul went to Jerusalem, forty people took an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed him. Paul asked the Romans to pray for him to be saved from such crazy people in order to carry out his mission. Paul's second prayer topic was that the contribution he took to the believers in Jerusalem would be favorably received by them. He knew it was not easy for the Jews to accept the Gentiles. To do so, they needed God’s grace. So Paul asked prayer for them. Paul's third prayer topic was that after delivering the offering, he may go to the Romans with joy and in their company be refreshed. Paul considered the Roman believers as his prayer partners and urged them to pray. Then he finished his letter with a prayer of blessing: "The God of peace be with you all. Amen" (33).

         In this passage we learn that Paul had God’s mission for the Gentiles. It was to preach the gospel to them. He was faithful to this mission to the end. He was full of Spirit because he had a sense of God’s mission. Like Paul, we need a sense of God’s mission. Young people try to do many things to change the world. God’s mission may be one of their activities. But it must be more than that. God’s mission gives us life direction and purpose. It can be the foundation for us to grow spiritually throughout our lifetimes. So it is vital to have a sense of God’s mission when we are young. As time goes by, those who participated very actively in God’s work slow down and lose touch with college culture. It is true that we cannot do much. It is easy to feel useless and to shrink back. But when we hold on to God’s mission, we can find the way to serve God continually. Especially, we can pray and encourage lonely people here and there. I am so thankful for Dr. Joseph Chung and the senior missionaries who meet regularly, study the Bible together and pray. They have found the way to serve God by visiting single family house churches throughout North America and sharing spiritual fellowship with them. Let’s have a sense of God’s mission. This is God’s grace and true blessing.