SET APART FOR THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Romans 1:1-7
Key Verse: 1:1

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

In these 7 short verses at the beginning of his epistle to the Romans, Paul lays out for the believers who he is and who they are in the context of God's world salvation purpose revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through this short message, I want to think also about who we are in God's history, according to the pattern Paul laid out for us.

First, Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus. In this short phrase, we can see the impact that Paul's conversion in Christ had. Paul could have called himself many things. For example, we have a long list of Paul's qualifications in Philippians 3:5-6, “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.” Wow, a Hebrew of Hebrews! What an awesome title! I for one would like to be known as a “physicist among physicists.” Dr. Esther might wish to be known as a physician's physician, etc. But others recognized Paul, and he recognized himself as a great man in the world. Paul had a lot to be proud of. He had many “identities.” But when Paul met the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, he gave up all those identities and the prestige that went with them, and he lived from then on as a servant of Christ Jesus. The book of Romans has many deep theological arguments and concerns. But fundamentally, Romans presents to us the foundation for a new life as a servant of Christ Jesus. May God help us, like Paul, find our true meaning and identity as a servant of Christ Jesus.

To be a servant is not the same as being an employee. Many of us have been employed in “service industries” such as food service companies, cleaning services, at gas stations, etc. But we must recognize that serving our customers for 8 hours a day at minimum
wage is not the same as being a servant. A servant's job is never done. A servant's reward is not a wage. The Biblical concept of servant is well explained in Jesus' parable of the unworthy servants. Luke 17:7-10 reads: “Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat?’ Would he not rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink?’ Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’ What can be the reward for such a thankless task? Who would ever want to be a servant? It is a reasonable, but deceptive question. Deceptive – because the reality of this world is that we are not owners, but servants. We don't have a choice to serve. Our only choice is whom or what we serve. Bob Dylan is the father of today's lyrical rock bands, such as U2, the Dixie Chicks and even rap stars like Eminem. He was widely regarded as one who had a distinct vision, almost like a prophet, for the coming generation. He was thought of as his own man and a true poet. But he went through a spiritual crisis under the pressure of living up to his own reputation. He met Jesus Christ personally, and wrote a number of confessional gospel songs. One of them is entitled, “You gotta serve somebody.” This maverick poet found that he had been serving somebody all along. And that somebody was not a forgiving or loving master. He was a cruel master who only took, and never gave in return. He was doomed to serve this master, money, and the devil behind it, until he came to know that there is another way. By committing himself to serving Christ Jesus, he could be set free from his ego and from the idol worship of others, and he could begin to serve the truth. He was not sorry anymore to be a servant, because he found in Christ Jesus one who was worthy of his very best, and whose reward was good and sure. Paul was happy to be recognized as a servant of Christ Jesus. It was his thanksgiving for being set free from the service to sin, to money and to his own ego. It was the confession of his hope in the Master's reward.

Second, Paul, set apart for the gospel of God. Look again at verse 1. ‘Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.” Here, Paul is speaking about his unique calling
in Christ. As we know, Paul was an enemy of the gospel. As he went to Damascus in pursuit of Christians there, under the authority of the chief priests of Jerusalem, he was met by the Risen Jesus. He was blinded, and had to be led into the city, where he waited helplessly, until Ananias came to lift his blindness and give him his holy mission. Paul had been zealous in his persecution of the church. He was found guilty of persecuting the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And yet, the Risen Jesus called Paul to be his servant by bringing the good news of the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul had been very ambitious. He was eager to seize the opportunity so that he might gain glory and honor for himself. But when he was called by Christ to serve the Gentiles, he was convinced that his life was not his own. Rather, he found that he was brought thus far for God's purpose and glory alone. He was "set apart."

Paul's experience of God's calling was unique to him, as was his mission to make known the mystery of God's grace to Jews and Gentiles alike. But the experience of being "set apart" is not. Every Christian who has experienced the love of God through Christ Jesus personally has been "set apart" for God's world salvation work; for the gospel. In 1991, I was invited to go to the Korean world mission report, mostly because I could sing "Moscow Nights" in Russian, and I could dance. In fact, because of my life of sin, I thought for sure that Korean coworkers would despise me, especially when they heard that Dr. Lee had nearly died in a car accident because of me. But through the unconditional love of God's children in Korea, I could experience that my life was not a tragedy or a sad joke. Instead, I looked back on my life, and realized that even at my worst, when I proudly proclaimed that I had thrown away my faith, or when I indulged in an immoral life, God was preparing me for his service, and leading me to find his calling for me in UBF. For example, throughout high school and college, I never knew why I should keep studying Russian language. But I did. And now I am using my Russian all the time for the glory of God in UBF. When I looked back on my life from God's perspective and in the awareness of his grace, I found that I had been set apart for him, for service to his world salvation purpose. It had nothing to do with me. It was purely his grace and love for me, and for all those he would reach through me. His calling of me was in fact part of his plan of world salvation. Each of us has been "set apart" for his gospel,
through which he wants to save the whole world. We must grab hold of that unique calling he has given us, until it bears the fruit he intended for it.

In the movie, “The Grapes of Wrath,” the despair felt by the people of Oklahoma because of the drought of the early 30’s was well expressed through the former preacher, Jim Casey. He told the lead character, Tom Joad, “I’ve lost the callin’.” In fact, he expresses the despair of modern man who has lost the meaning of life. Whether we have God’s calling or not is a matter of utmost importance. Those who have God’s calling have the meaning and direction of life. What is more important, those who have God’s calling have God’s hope for themselves. No one is righteous or perfect by themselves. But those who have God’s calling also have the confidence that God who called them will lead them step by step until they have carried out God’s calling for them in their generation. Don’t live as dead fish floating down stream. Come to Jesus Christ through one to one Bible study and hear God’s calling for you to be a fisher of men and a source of blessing for the world.

Third, the gospel of God. Look at verses 2-4. “the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.” Of course, Paul is going to systematically develop the ideas and themes of the gospel throughout this epistle. Here, Paul is laying out the facts of the gospel. That is, the gospel is the good news of the fulfillment of God’s promise to send his Son to be our Savior King. John 20:31 says, ‘But these were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The gospel is the revelation of God’s faithfulness to his promises. The gospel is the revelation of God’s power to give eternal life to all those who believe.

The factual and historical basis of the gospel is important, because it serves as the unchanging foundation of what we believe. Paul wrote many letters to counteract what he called “a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all” (Gal 1:7). Many creative, rebellious and greedy
people tried to make the gospel fit their own blueprint for a happy life. The Jews tried to portray Christ as a nationalistic hero. The Gnostics tried to portray him as a disembodied spirit. But they could not do so without changing the facts of the gospel. Therefore, their “different gospel” became no gospel at all, and was swept away in time. 1 Corinthians 15:2 says, “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.” May our confidence never be in our cleverness or in the ability of others, but in the facts of the gospel, in what God has promised us, and what he has done for us through Christ Jesus, his Son.

Fourth, grace and apostleship. Look at verse 5. “Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.” This verse is Paul’s testimony regarding his life of faith and mission in Christ. Again, it is specific to Paul, especially the call to serve the Gentiles. However, we can learn three things from Paul’s personal testimony.

First of all, Paul affirms the foundation of the gospel is Christ Jesus himself. It is through Christ that Paul was saved. It is for Christ that he now lives and serves. It is from Christ that he received authority to do his work. Paul had no right or authority to say anything to anybody, because he had persecuted the church of God. But Paul could have total confidence in every situation, because his motivation and authority came from Christ Jesus, whom God raised from the dead.

Secondly, Paul expresses concisely what are the gifts we have received through the gospel. They are grace and mission. On the face of it, these gifts are two very different things. Grace is very lovely, like a flower in a girl’s hair in the springtime. Mission is drastic and severe, like the image of the missionary being tossed out over the waterfall on a cross in the movie, The Mission. Who names their daughter, Mission? But as Paul examined his own life in Christ, he found that those two things were inseparable. Grace is the fountain which feeds the life of mission. Mission is the labor which keeps the fountain flowing. Those who want to take the grace, but leave the mission behind, find that the fountain of grace dries up, leaving them as miserable, old Christians
like Lot. Those who forget the grace in order to build up a bigger mission, faster, find that they have feet of clay. Once, Paul really wanted to make God's work grow faster and faster, according to his time schedule. But he was suffering from a thorn in his flesh. So he prayed that God would take it away. But God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you? In order to grow in fruitfulness in mission, Paul found that the only secret was to drink more deeply of the grace offered him in Christ Jesus. At the end of his life, he could not go anywhere, because he was a prisoner in Rome. But God opened the way for the evangelization of the Roman Empire when Paul taught the Bible to the prison guards and the household of Caesar. The more helpless he became, the more he depended on God's grace, the more fruitful and blessed he was. Grace and mission.

Thirdly, obedience and faith. Historically, the Protestant Reformation grew up because of the Catholic Church's growing tendency to enforce obedience and its indifference to personal faith. These days, superficial Bible scholars persecute as preachers of "works-based salvation" those who call for obedience. But as Paul experienced God's grace and mission in his own life, so he preached it to others. Whether Gentile or Jew, a man's faith in Christ should lead to obedience to Christ's commands. This is the content of the world mission command, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Whatever our mission field may be, we are called to help others have the faith in Christ that leads to obedience to Christ. Obedience, however, cannot be forced. It can be taught only by example. But we can't use our persistent disobedience as an excuse not to teach it! We must repent and obey, so that by any means others may learn obedience through our example.

Fifth, loved by God, called to be saints. Some people might argue that Paul was unique in history, that Paul is Paul, and I am me. Look at verses 6 and 7a. "And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints." We can understand that God gives us a mission because he loves others. But we must learn from Paul that God gives us a
mission because he loves us. God's best love for us is to discipline us and train us through our holy mission, to grow in the image of our Lord Jesus Christ, and then one day to know him fully, and to be fully like him in his kingdom. Praise Jesus who loves us enough to discipline us until we are fully sanctified in his image!

Look at verse 7b. "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ." The fruit of a life submitted to the Lordship of Christ is grace and peace. May God give you the conviction that you are set apart for the gospel of God. May God bless you to know the peace that surpasses all understanding when you live according to the principles of grace and mission.