

**Romans:
A Warning Against Schismatics
and an Expression of Hope**

Romans 16:17-20

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If you have your Bibles, I would invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 16. We have been in Romans, 16 for the last couple of weeks and at the end of this month, on the last Lord's day of this month, God willing, we will complete our study of Romans and begin the next Lord's day a study of the book of James. Today, we come to a passage sandwiched in between greetings. A passage which may surprise you, and strike some of you as a little bit strange. This is a passage perhaps penned by Paul, himself. We know that this letter of Romans was dictated by Paul to a man named Tertius, because in Romans, 16:22, Tertius, the amanuensis, or scribe, or secretary of Paul, actually gives greetings to the Roman Christians, and identifies himself as the one who had written the bulk of the letter.

But apparently, in verses 17 through 20, Paul, himself, had picked up the pen in order to identify himself. When letters were sent, in those days, they were often dictated, and the only way that you would know for certain that the person who supposedly was sending the letter was the person who was sending the letter, as he would take the letter up, sign his name and perhaps write a few sentences of the last part of the letter so that you could see his handwriting and that it was, indeed, the person who the letter claimed to be from. And so, Paul has picked up the pen, himself, and before he closes in this list of greetings, a few things pop into his mind that he wants to say. It is of vital importance and significance to the spiritual health and welfare of the Roman Christians to listen to what he says, but its also important for our spiritual health and welfare as we listen to this, God's holy, inspired, profitable and sufficient word. This is God's word:

Now I urge you , brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teachings which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting. For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil. And the God of peace

will soon crush Satan under your feet.

Amen. Let's pray.

O Lord, this is Your word, meant not simply for a fledgling congregation of Roman Christians nineteen hundred and forty something years ago, but meant for us today. By Your Spirit, open our eyes that we might behold truth from Your word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The things that Paul says in this passage may strike some of us as strange. They aren't exactly what we would expect to hear from a pastor, as he is bringing final words of greeting to the church. There have been some very tender words that he has spoken from verse one all the way down to verse 16 of this chapter, and perhaps you weren't expecting him to go back into the mode of exhortation again. And, perhaps you weren't expecting him to exhort in these areas. In fact, some of the things that he says in these few verses before us are alien in the thought world of our age. We live in a relativistic and pluralistic society, for instance, and talking about people who hold to doctrinal error, error of opinion about religious matters, talking about them being cut off, talking about them being shunned by the people of God, talking about them being divisive, and schismatic, and hindrances, and obstacles to the gospel... That's fairly strong language, and we don't naturally talk in those categories today.

But Paul says these things to the church for a reason. And for the very reason that these things are alien to the thought world of our age, they are extremely important for us to understand, especially as we come to the Lord's Table. In fact, in this passage we are going to see three things together. In Paul's warning, which you'll find in verse 17 and 18, we are going to learn the truth that 'unity is in the truth'. It's in the truth. It's not in setting the truth aside. It's not in not caring about the truth. It's not in thinking, "Well your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth," and "We can just agree to disagree, and just all get along." Unity is in the truth. Paul teaches that very clearly in this passage.

Secondly, in verse 19, where you see that beautiful exhortation wrapped up in an encouragement, we learn that it is our individual duty and responsibility as Christians to exercise discernment about spiritual teaching. As believers, we must be spiritually discerning about the biblical and theological teaching we are getting. Even Christian teachers need to be tested against Scripture, for there are many who claim to be Christians who teach against the doctrine of the apostle.

And thirdly, in verse 20, in the expectation of hope which Paul expresses there, he points us to the source of our victory in this world, the source of our victory against Satan, our enemy, the source of our victory against the opposition of the world, and that source of victory is in God, Himself. So I would like to look at these three things with you briefly.

I. The Church must be wary of those who cause divisions by teaching things out of accord with Apostolic doctrine.

Look first at verses 17 and 18, where we see this warning against schismatics, or dividers; those who cause division in the Church. It's an admonition about people who are dividers and hindrances to the work of the gospel. And Paul is saying, in verses 17 and 18, that the Church must be wary of those who cause division by teaching things that are out of accord with the apostle's doctrine. Notice that Paul directs this urging, this appeal, not to the elders, but to the whole Church. Look at his language in verse 17: "You brethren." Now, elsewhere, Peter and Paul will make exhortations like this to the elders. Yes, it is especially the elders' job to guard the flock. Yes, the elders especially must have their eyes open for those who are teaching false teachings in the church. Paul makes that clear in 1 Timothy, chapter one, verses three and four. He makes it clear, again, in Titus, chapter one, verse nine. We find it in numerous places in Paul's letters. In Acts 20:28, when he speaks to the elders at Ephesus, he reminds them that they are shepherds of the flock and they are to keep their guard up for the sake of the flock. So, it is especially the elders' job to do this.

But in Romans, chapter 16, verse 17, Paul explicitly directs this exhortation to us: "You brethren," you brothers and sisters in Christ, - the whole congregation - keep a lookout for those who bring division through wrong teaching; dividers, schismatics, and for those who create resistance to right teaching through their wrong teaching, those who are hinderers of the work of the gospel. Yes, elders are to be concerned about that, but every Christian is to be discerning.

Now, you may be asking yourself, why in the midst of a list of greetings, greetings which have run from verse 3 to verse 16, greetings which will pick up again with Tertius' note in verse 21 and will continue except for one benediction - or one doxology - to the end of the chapter? Why, suddenly this exhortation? Well, think about it. Where is Paul writing from? He's writing from Corinth to Rome. Now, in Corinth, there was division over doctrine in the church. There were already people there who were teaching false doctrine and Paul was having to confront that and here he is, signing his name to this letter, and he thinks, "O my, I don't want that to happen in Rome"! And so, he pauses to give an exhortation to the whole congregation - be on the lookout for those who bring false teaching. Paul doesn't say for the church in Rome to argue with those people. He doesn't say to try and convince them, or try to win them over. He says, "Cut them off, shove them out. Have nothing to do with them. Leave them completely alone." And he gives a very unflattering description of their character in verse 18. He says two things. They serve their own appetites. They are serving their own desires, in other words, and they are deceiving those who are naive. And they are preying on those who are least able to discern their false teaching. And Paul's exhortation here is a call to every Christian to be discerning. Every Christian has a duty to be on guard against false teaching and to reject

false teachers.

But, that's against the spirit of the age. We live in a day and age where calling something false teaching isn't considered nice. It's not nice to call something false teaching. It's not nice to call someone a false teacher, and in fact, it's often charged that those giving false teaching, they are the ones who are bringing division in the churches.

About 25 or 30 years ago, when the wonderful evangelical renaissance began in the Southern Baptist churches, Southern Baptist leaders, in many parts of the United States, realized that they needed to recapture the seminaries, because liberals had taken control of the Southern Baptist seminaries. And as they did so, they held forth for the inerrancy and the authority of Scripture. And do you know what happened? The liberals who were in charge of the seminaries said, "You people are dividing the church. You are keeping the church from doing its mission. We need to get along - get on with the work of evangelizing and not arguing over the inerrancy of Scripture." Well, as far as the apostle Paul was concerned, it's not those who believe in the authority of Scripture who are dividing the Church - it is those who don't believe in the authority of Scripture. It is not those who are questioning the apostolic teaching who are the great defenders of the faith. It's those who believe the apostolic teaching who are the great defenders of the faith. And so, Paul makes it clear that it is not faithful doctrine which divides; it is false doctrine. And Christians are called to be discerning in precisely that area. For Paul, doctrine - right teaching - is very important. And it is false doctrine that always brings division to the Church, and not faithful doctrine. And therefore, Christians must be on the lookout for those who cause division through false teaching.

We have had to do that in our own congregation. It is a painful thing to do, but Paul calls us to task right here. It may be that you are a student getting ready to go off to school. It may be a liberal arts college or a state university. You may be required to take a religion course from someone who claims to be a Christian, and yet teaches against historic Christian doctrine. You will be called upon in that circumstance to discern the truth. You need to know the truth in order to do that. You may be a person listening to a teacher in some setting, a preacher, a religious authority who claims to be Christian, but who is against the apostolic teachings of Christianity. You are called upon here to be discerning.

II. Christians are to be "too good to deceive and too wise to be deceived, "wise as serpents, harmless as doves."

Secondly, if you will look at verse 19, Paul's word of encouragement and exhortation here is directly connected with what he's already said in verse 17. You see that connection in the little word, *for*. "I urge you to keep an eye out, he says in verse 17, "*for* the report of your obedience has reached to all." Now, that

doesn't seem to make sense at first. Keep an eye out for false teachers because I already know that you are doing such a good job, and you are growing in grace and you are obedient.

That doesn't seem to make sense, but it makes perfect sense. Paul is writing from Corinth where this is a problem, to Rome where it's not. And he is wanting to make it clear that he's not telling them to be on the lookout because they've messed up. He's not telling them to be on the lookout because he sees them falling down on the job. He's saying, look, I've already heard the reports of your obedience. You are doing wonderfully. You are growing in grace. In fact, he says in verse 19, I'm rejoicing in you. And so I want you to understand, Paul is saying, I am not exhorting you in this because I am disappointed in you. I'm not exhorting you in this because I'm critical of you. I'm exhorting you in this precisely because you are doing so well, and I don't want you to fall into the trap. And so, that's what I mean by saying the exhortation is wrapped up inside of an encouragement. Because, in verse 19, Paul is calling these Christians to be too good to deceive, and too wise to be deceived. He's calling them, in Jesus' language, to be wise as serpents, and as harmless as doves. But he's doing it not because they've messed up, but because he doesn't want them to fall into a trap. He knows how faithful and obedient they are. He's rejoicing over them, but he wants them in their faithfulness to be innocent and wise - wise in that which is good, innocent in that which is evil. And this is the call to every Christian, a call for spiritual and biblical discernment. We need to know the truth. We need to know the difference between truth and error, and we need to exercise discretion in regard to those who are supposedly preachers of God's word.

Have you ever turned on the television and seen the diet of what passes as Christian teaching in religious programming? The vast majority of it, the great bulk of it, is crazy. And yet, when you see the dollar amounts given by sensible Christians to these essentially Christian ministries, you have to ask yourself, "What in the world are these people doing? Do they have no discernment? Can they not see the patent falsehood of the 'health and wealth' gospel? Of the get rich quick schemes? Of the total lack of biblical and gospel content of many of these shows?" You can watch the shows for minutes, and minutes, and maybe hours and wonder, "What possible spiritual benefit could have been conveyed by that. Even if I could get my cavities turned into gold, what possible spiritual benefit could that have given to me?" People who sit under these kinds of hucksters are culpable, Paul says, because they are called to spiritual discernment. Christians, all Christians, are called to know what is good and what is wise, and what is right and to exercise discernment regarding false teaching.

III. God Himself is the source of our peace, unity, victory and we need His grace.

Thirdly, in verse 20, Paul goes on to give an optimistic expectation. He's given a

warning, and he's given an exhortation wrapped up in encouragement, but here he gives an expectation of hope. He is very, very optimistic. And he closes with a benediction. He says, "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under their feet." There's his expectation for the church in Rome. He has great hopes for them. God will soon crush Satan under their feet. God, Himself, he is saying, God Himself is their source of peace and unity, and victory, and we need His grace.

Now, you need to understand the link of what he says in verse 19 and verse 20. Just as you might wonder what the link is between verse 19 and verses 17 and 18, so also you might ask why does he suddenly start talking about God crushing Satan under our feet in verse 20? Where does that come from? Well, it comes from verse 19. In verse 19, what did he tell you to do? He told you to exercise spiritual discernment, to be wise in that which is good, and innocent in that which is evil. Now, that does make you think of Jesus' words "to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves?" But it actually takes you further back than that. It takes you back to a very old story in Genesis, chapter three, when Eve was tempted, and what did she show herself to be? Not wise in that which is good, and discerning and innocent of that which is evil, but naive and deceived in that which is concerning evil. And so, Paul in verse 19, is saying, don't you make the same mistake. You be discerning about those flattering words that sound good, but in the heart of them they are death. You be discerning about those words. You know the truth. You know error. You know the difference between the truths. You be wise with that regard, but be innocent with regard to doing evil.

And then he says in verse 20, he says, the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. He is expressing the expectation that when you are faithful to be discerning, that God will crush Satan under your feet. Do you realize this is the first reference to Satan in the book of Romans? Up to this point there has been no explicit mention of Satan, and the first time he is mentioned, what is emphasized? That the power of God in the gospel is greater than the power of Satan. Now, my friends, that's not the impression that you get from so much of popular literature in Christianity. There is a major series currently being read and seen by people right now, that would give you the idea that Satan has the upper hand in everything. But Paul's emphasis is that the power of the gospel is greater than Satan's, and God will soon crush Satan under your feet.

Notice this interesting juxtaposition in verse 20 - the God of peace will crush Satan. What? The God of peace? Will crush? Yes! Because our peace does not come from the absence of warfare. It comes, in fact, directly from divine warfare against the enemy of our souls. God wins peace for us through divine warfare. God is the source of our peace. God's peace comes to us through God's war. Indeed, it comes to us from God's victory in God's war against our enemy. And so our peace is brought about by the victory of God, especially in the life and death of Jesus Christ. And so, the apostle wants us to be mindful of where the source of our peace is, and he wants us to be mindful of how that peace has been won for us.

Now, Paul ends this part of this letter with this statement in verse 20, which is the normal way that he concludes his written communication. "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you." And I just want you to note three things about that benediction, that prayer, that blessing. The first thing is that it emphasizes the favor and aid of Christ for His people. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you." It is the favor and aid of Christ that enables us to have victory over Satan. Notice, also, that this benediction, or prayer, or blessing is an act of worship. It acknowledges Christ as the source of grace. And then thirdly, notice that it is a witness to Jesus' divinity. He calls Jesus here, "Lord," and he recognizes Jesus as the fountain of grace. Now, every good Jew knew that all grace and favor came from God, and God alone. And so, when Paul announces that Jesus is the source of grace, he is identifying Jesus as divine, the Son of God, deity, and he is recognizing His divinity and His Lordship. If God is the source of peace, then no peace He offers, or authors, will be at the expense of His truth. That is one of the great lessons that Romans 16, verses 17 through 20 teaches. May God bless us as we believe it and live it. Let's pray.

Our Lord, and our God, as we come to the table to commune with Christ and His people, we pray that we would do so in truth, believing Your word, acknowledging its authority, coming to you in Christ alone who, Your word has said, is the only way of salvation. Grant then that we might feed by faith on the One who renders Himself up as an a propitiation, an atoning sacrifice for all those who receive and trust in Him. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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