

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 16:17-27

- **A Relevant Warning**

As Paul dictates his final words to the Romans, he characteristically covers several items. The first seems abrupt to some, but it is hardly unusual for the apostle. After so many words of greetings and commendations, he switches tones and says:

“I urge you, brothers, 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.”

Paul uses a phrase to begin this warning that we have seen before in Romans. He writes, “I urge you, brothers ...” He's emphasizing that what he is about to say needs to be carefully considered. What follows can be outlined this way:

- Watch Out
- Keep Away
- Recognize the Dangers

First, he says, “... Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.”

Throughout Romans we have seen various points of division that the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians faced. Dietary laws, Sabbath Worship, and Alcoholic beverage consumption were just a few of

them. These issues threatened to separate believers from one another.

What Paul is warning about now, is something more insidious. He's warning of "inside threats" to the Romans Churches. Once again, keep in mind that there are no large church gatherings. Paul is thinking of the many small house-churches spread throughout the capital. Communication between them is sporadic, at best. Word of mouth is the most common form of communication.

What is Paul concerned about? He tells them to "watch out" for men who are joining the house churches and distorting the gospel that Paul and the other original apostles have passed down. He's warning them to take note of anyone who contradicts the original, genuine gospel message.

It's here that we should consider that message. The early Church gospel message was simple – and universal. It can be found in what we call the "Kerygma" – the core of the gospel found in the preaching of the apostles.

Let me give you an example from Paul's own hand. In I Timothy 3:16, he writes: "Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory." – I Timothy 3:16

The original gospel message was clear. Almost every "kerygma" message contains the same list of fundamental ingredients – Christ's Virgin Birth, Sinless Life, Atoning Death, Resurrection, Ascension, and Second Coming.

By Paul's day, most of the original apostles have died. John will prove to be the "last man standing". Already, there is great concern about itinerate preachers who are distorting the gospel. They are contradicting the original message.

The second set of watch words is, "Keep Away". Paul is very clear about what true Christians should do. He tells them to keep away from anyone who is deliberately contradicting the original gospel message.

This is a stark change from his earlier encouragement to "Greet one another with a holy kiss." There's a message here. Greeting one another is more than a social expression: It is an acknowledgement that others are genuine brothers and sisters in Christ. The Romans are warned not to greet or welcome these false brothers. They are not brothers, they are enemies of the gospel.

That brings us to Paul's third point: Recognize The Dangers

Verse 18 tells the Romans all they need to know about these false teachers. Paul writes, "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."

In one verse Paul related the motivations and methods of these enemies of the gospel. First, they are not serving "Our Lord Christ", but their own appetites.

It's interesting that Paul uses the phrase, "Our Lord Christ". It's the only place you will find this phrase in his letters. He's emphasizing the dividing line between the false teachers and the real family of God. Real apostles serve "Our Lord Christ".

But there is more: While real preachers serve "Our Lord Christ", Paul says false teacher's are serving their own appetites. If we compare that statement to what the apostle John says in his three short epistles, we find Paul is not just referring to physical appetites. He's alluding to physical and sexual appetites.

Paul uses a similar, graphic metaphor of self-indulgence in Philippians 3:19, where he says this about such people: "their god is their stomach".

The second thing Paul makes clear is that these false teachers are a danger to uninformed or immature Christians. He says, "By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people."

Their methods are smooth talk and flattery. It's interesting that both methods involve vocal tactics. These false teachers will be identified by their eloquence and ability to say what others want to hear. It reminds of what Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:3 – this time, about hearers of false teachers:

"The time will come when people will not listen to sound doctrine, but will follow their own desires and will collect for themselves more and more teachers who will tell them what they are itching to hear."

Given these dangers, Paul is urging the Romans to use discernment about those they are coming in contact with – and to be doubly discerning about those that join their house churches. It only takes one false teacher to create chaos in such small gatherings.

In rounding out this warning, Paul tells the Romans, "Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil."

There is both a warm affirmation and warning in that verse. Paul notes that he has great joy in the fact that his friends' track record shows they practice obedience to the gospel. Still, as John Stott points out,

"There are two kinds of obedience, blind and discerning, and he longs for them to develop the latter..." – John Stott

Regardless of their past obedience, they need to be discerning about what is good and what is evil. Now, that's important. Some things are obviously evil, but others aren't. With false teachers on the rise, the Romans need to be sure they aren't being taken in by "smooth words and flattery." These false teachers are not always obvious.

John Stott suggests that there are three valuable tests that should be applied to teachers: Biblical Ethics, Christological tests, and moral tests. As he suggests, we should be asking questions about what we are hearing taught: "Does it agree with Scripture?" "Does it glorify the Lord Christ?" "Does it promote goodness?"

As if to punctuate the dangers he has been expressing, in verse 20 Paul adds these words to his warnings: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you."

Paul places the subject of these false teachers and discernment beneath the umbrella of spiritual battle. The God of peace and Satan are the primary actors in this battle. Paul wants his friends to know that the ultimate outcome will be that God will crush Satan under their feet.

Paul is making it clear: Satan is behind the activity of the false teachers. Satan wants to pervert the gospel and turn believers away from it. Still, the day of his defeat is at hand. As one translation puts it, "God will throw him under your feet, that you may trample upon him". There's little doubt that Paul is referencing Genesis 3:15 when he speaks of God crushing Satan under the feet of believers. In the Genesis passage, God promised the woman that, while the serpent would bite the heel of her offspring, ultimately, his head would be crushed by him.

- **The Final Greetings:**

After the last section on false teachers and spiritual warfare, Paul now passes on greetings from eight people who are apparently with him in Corinth at the time of this epistle.

He's sent personal greetings to 26 individuals in Rome, but now he passes on greetings from eight.

As others have noted, Paul begins with a well-known pastor and follows with three lesser known Christian brothers. He begins with Timothy and adds Lucius, Jason and Sosipater.

From the Book of Acts, we gather that Timothy had been Paul's constant travelling companion for some eight years and had carried out several special journeys for Paul.

Timothy was the closest of all of Paul's fellow ministers. Paul regarded him as his "son in the faith". At the time of this epistle, Timothy is apparently getting ready to join Paul on his trip to Jerusalem.

There are many suppositions as to the identity of the next three men that Paul names. Lucius may be the "Lucius of Cyrene" who accompanied Paul in Antioch some ten years before. Some suggest "Lucius" may be a variant reading of Luke the evangelist.

Jason may well be Paul's landlord in Thessalonica, and Sosipater may be the Berean church's delegate to Jerusalem - whose name was abbreviated to Sopater.

At this point, we get a glimpse that might otherwise be lost. We read, "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord." Paul often employed an amanuensis (a-man-u-en-sis) to write his letters.

Amanuensis is a Greek word denoting "a literary secretary." An amanuensis was similar to a co-author. They did more than transcribe dictations. They also had the authority to sign documents for the author.

In Paul's case, Tertius wrote Paul's letter, but he also was responsible for making copies of the document – as often, the epistle was sent to several recipients.

Bible scholars suggest this list of Paul's Secretaries:

- Tertius was responsible for Romans

- Sosthenes was responsible for 1 Corinthians
- Timothy was responsible for 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon.
- Silvanus or Silas was responsible for 1 and 2 Thessalonians
- Luke was responsible for 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus.

After the greeting from Tertius, we read: “Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city’s director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.”

A couple of things stand out in these greetings. One is the name Gaius. It was a very common name in the New Testament. The apostle John had a great friend by that name that he writes to in his third epistle.

This Gaius, like John’s friend, is especially known for his generosity and willingness to host the ministers that came his way. He evidently was a believer with some financial means – as his hospitality extended to the Church at Corinth. Paul may mean that one of the house churches met at Gaius’ home.

Erastus is important for a different reason. He is called, “the city’s director of public works”. He was a local government official – probably the magistrate in charge of public works

This is interesting because of the existence of a clearly legible, first-century Latin inscription on a marble pavement close to the ruins of old Corinth. If this is the same Gaius, it provides us with further evidence that some Christians of that era were far from poor and unknown individuals.

With that, we finally come to Paul's last words in Romans. True to form, Paul writes yet another doxology. He says,

“Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, 26 but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him— 27 to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

In its own way, Paul's doxology sums up the entire epistle. It is not a quick addition to an already exhaustive letter. Paul expresses some important thoughts about the gospel and God's purposes for revealing it to the world. So let's look at it.

The very first thing we see is Paul's assurance that the gospel – just as he presented it – is able to establish every believer. Paul is again advocating a faithfulness to the original gospel because that is what is able to give each believer confidence and stability.

Second, Paul points to a feature of the gospel that he often writes about in his epistles. He notes, “... 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...”

Paul again uses the idea of the “mystery” of the gospel. In classical Greek writing, a “mystery” wasn't something unknown. It meant something that had been hidden, but now was revealed.

Paul is again indicating the plan of God to reveal his Son at just the right time in history. Before, the gospel was hidden from the world, but now has been unveiled. For Paul, this is one of the outstanding features of the gospel: A salvation that was planned in eternity past has been revealed – and he is privileged to be one of its messengers.

Third, we once again have the subject of the Gentiles. This mystery gospel was hidden from the world for centuries, but now has been released, as it were, for the Gentiles to see and believe.

As Paul has explained many times in Romans, the Jews believed they were the exclusive recipients of the gospel, but God had a much greater plan. Salvation has now been revealed, "so that all nations might believe and obey him."

As John Stott puts it, "Thus the mystery begins, continues and ends with Christ."

Considering all of this, Paul expresses his final word of praise in Romans. He writes, "... To the only wise God be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen"

Men seek wisdom. It's true in every quadrant of humanity. Often, as the scripture bear out, they have sought wisdom from the gods of this world. There have been, and are, after all, so many gods in our world.

But Paul identifies only one God as the "Only wise God", and he says he is worthy of worship "for ever through Jesus Christ".

In Romans 1, Paul describes how humans chose not to know the Creator, and exchanged His glory for that of animals. As Paul puts it in Romans 1:22, "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools."

Now, Paul punctuates God's plan of salvation as he tells us that "The Only Wise God" has revealed himself again ... in the person of His Son. The God the Gentiles rejected has given them a second chance to know him.

All this leads Paul to say, "... To the only wise God be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen"

