

Final Warnings and Promises

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Romans 16:17-27

This morning brings us to the close of an incredible 20-month study through Paul's theological letter to the Romans. Our journey has led us from wrath to reconciliation, from the depths of human depravity to the heights of divine glory, from degeneration to regeneration, from condemnation to justification, from death in Adam to life in Christ, from sin to salvation, from degraded passions and dishonored bodies to living sacrifices and renewed minds, from idolatry and worship of self to love and devotion to Christ, from the darkened hearts of man to the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge in Christ, from the misery of wickedness to the mercy of sovereign grace poured out on sinners. Paul concludes his letter by imparting a few important warnings and then he leaves us, just like he did at the end of chapter 11, in worshipful doxology as he contemplates the wisdom of God's redemptive plan. Let's turn our attention to our text, Paul writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit says:

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you. Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. Romans 16:17–27

I. THE HEART OF A SHEPHERD (v. 17-20)

In our study of verses 1-16 last week we saw Paul's heart overflowing with love and thankfulness as he recounted the names of those who shared a committed partnership in the gospel with him. But not everyone was working with Paul for the spread of the gospel. As we pick up in verse 17 this morning we immediately see a transition from warm greetings to wartime warnings. We see a shepherd desiring to protect his flock here in verses 17-20. Shepherds have the responsibility of protecting their flock. When you really love someone, you want to do everything you can to protect them. A loving heart is protective heart. Paul is so jealous for their unity, as indicated in verse 16 with the holy kiss, that he cautions them to be vigilant for those who would seek to divide the flock by way of false teaching. Here, Paul outlines four warnings or protective measures.

1. Keep watch (v. 17)

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

It's important to note that when Paul uses the language "I appeal to you" or "I urge you" that what he is about to say carries great weight or significance. This is the third time Paul has "appealed to" or "urged" the Roman church to a particular action. In chapter 12:1 Paul said, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Likewise in chapter 15 he said, "I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf" Romans 15:30. Here in chapter 16, Paul appeals to the church at Rome to be watchful, to be on guard against anyone who would to teach anything contrary to what he had taught them.

Paul says, "I appeal to you, brothers, watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles..." This word "watch out" is from the Greek word (σκοπέω) *skopeo*. It's the word from which we derive our English word "scope" - as in a telescope or a microscope. It has the idea of observing intently, scrutinizing closely, analyzing carefully. As Christians we need to be alert, watchful, observant, attentive, and on guard - we can never become spiritually sleepy. On guard for what? Paul tells us that there are two groups of people for which we need to have a watchful eye.

1. Cause divisions (dividers):

Keep your eyes peeled for those who might come in and sow disunity among the body of Christ. These are the people who, either by what they say or what they do, divide the church - usually by creating followers that will be loyal to themselves. God has a lot to say about divisiveness. The writer of Proverbs tells us, "There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies,

and one who sows discord among brothers” Proverbs 6:16–19. Paul, in Philippians 1:27, says, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.” He begins Philippians 2 by saying, “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” Philippians 2:2. Peter says the same thing in 1 Peter 3:8, “Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.”

2. Create obstacles (deceivers):

The Greek work for “obstacles” here is (σκάνδαλον) *Skandalon*. You can hear the English word scandal. More often than not the divider is the deceiver - he divides by his deception. These are the false teachers whose message is either an addition to or a subtraction from the gospel. Paul says that they come teaching things that are “*contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.*” If you add to the gospel you have created a false gospel. Likewise, if you take anything away from the gospel, you have created a false gospel. Paul was both broken and angered when false teachers slipped into the church of Galatia and deceptively convinced many that circumcision was requisite for salvation. They came teaching doctrine other than that which Paul had taught. They were deceivers looking for a following and in doing so divided the church. Paul’s response was, “Foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh” Galatians 3:1–3?

Be alert and watchful, but also be discerning.

2. Be discerning (v. 18)

For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve.

Here this loud and clear: Anywhere there is a genuine work of God, the enemy is present and active. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5:8 to be watchful and discerning. He says, “Be sober-minded [discerning]; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” This text comes in the context of Elders shepherding the flock of God. To love is to protect and that is exactly what Paul is doing here when he cautions us to be discerning. Paul gave the same caution to the Elders of the church in Ephesus as he departed for Jerusalem. He said:

Pay careful attention to yourselves [be discerning] and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples

after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.
Acts 20:28–32

Did you notice what Paul called the false teachers in that text? He called them fierce wolves. Jesus said the same thing, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits” Matthew 7:15-16. That is, they typically don’t announce themselves. They don’t typically come in the front door, announce their intentions and ask for the pulpit next Sunday. That’s why we must be watchful and discerning. Weigh everything that you hear from this pulpit and every other pulpit against the Word of God. If it’s from another pulpit avoid it, if it’s from this pulpit, and there is a refusal to come in alignment with God’s Word, relieve the preacher from his post. The man can go, the Word of God must stand.

How does Paul describe those whose teaching is contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught? He does so by pointing out their motives (self-serving) and their methods (deceptive):

1. For such persons do not serve the Lord.

False teachers have no love for Christ and no desire to be His slaves (*doulos*). No matter how seemingly sincere and caring false teachers or preachers may appear to be, they are never genuinely concerned for the cause of Christ or for His church. They are driven by self-interest and self-gratification.¹

2. They serve their own appetites.

This is a metaphor for self-indulgence. They are only interested in themselves. Paul describes them in Philippians 3:18-19 as those who, “Walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” More often than not, the appetite of false teachers is financial gain. Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, Kenneth Copeland, Paula White, Creflo Dollar, Eddie Long have all been investigated by the IRS.

3. They are smooth talkers and flatterers.

The Greek says pleasant speakers. They are often charismatic and charming. Their delivery is polished. They twist scripture for dishonest gain. This is the antithesis of Paul’s ministry:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and

¹ MacArthur, John, *Romans 9-16*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994.

my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:1–5

Remember Moses?

But Moses said to the LORD, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” Then the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.”
Exodus 4:10–12

4. They are deceivers.

Three good questions to help us with our discernment:

- A. Does this teaching agree with Scripture?
- B. Does this teaching point me to glorify Christ?
- C. Does this teaching challenge me to pursue godliness?

5. They target the hearts of the naïve (simple).

What does Paul tell us to do with such people? He says, “Avoid them...” Literally, bend away from them - turn away. That means don’t engage them, don’t dialogue with them, don’t debate them, don’t entertain them, do not pass go, do not collect \$100; deviate from them. You might say, “But what if I’m ministering to them?” Notice Paul didn't say, “Avoid them unless you are ministering to them.” He simply said, “Avoid them.” There is a marked difference between being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you (1 Peter 3:15a) and trying to engage a person who comes in the guise of Christianity and divides and deceives with false teaching. Jesus used strong language when He said, “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you” Matthew 7:6.

Be watchful, be discerning, but also be faithfully obedient.

3. Faithfully obey (v. 19)

For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.

Paul encourages the Roman believers here when he says, “Your obedience is known to all.” Not only are you obedient, but that is what others know you for! What are you known for? What are we as a church known for? What a commendation... “Your obedience is known to all!” Keep it that

way! Paul commends the Thessalonians similarly when he says, “Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, *that you do so more and more* [excel still more - NASB]” 1 Thessalonians 4:1.

Be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil... Do you hear the echoes from the garden in Genesis 3 here?

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”
Genesis 3:1–5

To be wise concerning good means to recognize, follow, and love it! To be innocent concerning evil is to be unsophisticated in it. One man helpfully translated this, “I want to see you be experts in good, and not even beginners in evil.” This verse has both a broad context and a narrow context. In broad terms Paul is saying be unlearned in all evil - in all sin. Keeping with the context of the passage though I think Paul is connecting this back to the potential influence of false teachers. It’s been said that you don’t have to crawl in the trash can to know that there is trash in it. I think this is just an extension of Paul’s exhortation to avoid false teachers. John MacArthur helpfully says:

It is spiritually unwise and dangerous to be overly exposed to [false teachers], whether through reading their literature or becoming involved in their churches, colleges, seminaries, or other institutions. By doing such things, many ill-prepared but self-confident believers have had their faith as well as their doctrine seriously subverted, as they are “carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14).¹

Many believers have sought to debate, dialogue, argue, and understand the positions of those whose teaching is evil only to find that their own foundations were shaken. Satan is not stupid (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). He is cunning and crafty (עָרוּם - *arum*) – wise and understanding. Many who thought they were strong theologically have been destroyed by seeking to win the wolf. Paul says, “Avoid them.”

We don’t learn to discern evil by getting to know evil. We learn to discern evil by being thoroughly acquainted with what is good and pleasing to Christ. I was teaching on Matthew 5:27-30 in my ACE class in early January and we were talking about the radical response we are to have towards our sin... If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out... If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off... In other words, there is an aggressiveness with which we must pursue purity.

I encouraged my class that we should deal with sin just like we would deal with a lion if we encountered one in the wild. You don't approach it and try and pet it – you flee. The reason that too many people end up eaten alive by sensual sin is because they spent too much time petting the kitty instead of intentionally fleeing in a safe direction. The same applies here with false teachers - don't cozy up next to the kitty.

Be watchful, be discerning, be faithfully obedient, and lastly, be encouraged by truth.

4. Persevere in hope (v. 20)

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Paul is not only a protective shepherd, but he is also intuitive. Lest there be any potential discouragement in the hearts of the Christians in Rome concerning his warnings to be watchful and discerning of Satan's schemes, Paul is quick to remind them that there is no doubt as to the ultimate outcome of the battle between good and evil. Though Satan is behind the activity of false teachers, his days are numbered and the final victory is unshakeable. Good will prevail and evil will be defeated. Christ is the Hero of Scripture. To underscore this glorious truth Paul reaches again back in Redemptive history to Genesis 3:15 where God pronounced the death sentence on Satan. Though it was shrouded in mystery, God said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring (זָרָע - zera - singular); he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

What does Paul mean when he says, "Soon?" I think he means two things. First, and in an ultimate sense, the next act in God's redemptive agenda is the return of Christ. The Hero will return and He will deliver that scull-crushing blow that God promised in Genesis 3:15. But secondly, God in His graciousness allows believers to experience regular interim victories over Satan, partial crushing's of him under feet. How? As we grow in wisdom concerning what is good!

II. THE HEART OF AN EVANGELIST AND DISCIPLEMAKER (v. 21-24)

Paul was an evangelist and a disciple maker. We rarely find him by himself. Having greeted 26 individuals in vs. 1-16, he now passes on messages from 8 individuals who are with him in Corinth.

1. Timothy – Paul's son in the faith and right hand man in ministry!

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I

see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also. Philippians 2:19-24

2. Lucius – Possibly Luke the physician and gospel writer.

Paul mentions Luke in 2 Tim. 4:11 and Philemon 24 as being with him as a companion in ministry.

3-4. Jason and Sosipater – My Kinsman or fellow Jews.

Jason was the name of one of the first converts in Thessalonica and Sosipater was a Berean Acts 20.

5. Tertius – Penned this letter as Paul dictated it. (v. 22)

6. Gaius - Paul led him to Christ and baptized him (1 Corinthians 1:14).

Seems as though his home was the meeting place for the believers in Corinth. His home is where Paul is staying while in Corinth.

7. Erastus – Treasurer of the city, a prominent man.

The gospel reached into the high places in Corinth. Let's pray for this in our city!

8. Quartus – A brother in Christ!

Verses 24 is not found in the most reliable manuscripts. *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.*

III. THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL (v. 25-27)

Paul oftentimes ends his letters with a benediction, but there is not a more fitting way to end this massive theological letter than with a doxology (doxa “glory” logia “saying”). Proper theology always leads to doxology! When we see God in all of His glorious splendor, the only response is worship. Here, Paul recalls the central themes of his letter and summarizes them. Though this is a summary, the doxology contains profound truths about God and the gospel. Paul praises God for His work (v. 25-26) and His wisdom (v. 27).

1. God is able...

Romans begins and ends with a reference to the power of God through the gospel (Bookends). Power of God to save (1:16) and the power of God to establish (16:25).

2. To establish His church by the gospel...

Paul says that God is “Able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ.” God supports, makes firm, steadfast, settled, or immovable... He is able to make you

stand. God has made it possible for those who were once bound to earth by their own sinful depravity to be loosed from their sins and, to be given access to the throne of grace through Christ.

Furthermore, this means that there is no fear He cannot allay, no danger from which He cannot deliver, no anxiety He cannot quiet, no despair he cannot lift, no sin or temptation that He will not provide a way of escape from, no burden that is too heavy for Him to carry, no weakness with which He us unable to sympathize and in which His power is not made perfect, no circumstance from which He cannot bring good, and no salvation He has initiated that he will not bring to glorious completion at the last Day! Paul reminds us, "Being confident in this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" Philippians 1:6.

3. Which has been revealed in the person and work of Christ...

Paul says that all of this is, "According to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings." Mystery doesn't mean mysterious. It means that the wisdom of God which was once concealed, at least in its completeness, has now through Christ been revealed in all of its glorious splendor. In other words, everything that the Old Testament anticipated is realized and has come to fruition in the person and work of Christ. He is the wisdom of God, the mystery revealed. Now, here is the exciting thing... For as much as we, by God grace, now understand, we don't understand everything. The wonder of this mystery will continue to unfold in eternity. If that doesn't excite you, if that doesn't increase your yearnings for heaven, only a new heart will!

4. Whose desire is to save a people from every nation...

Paul says that the mystery revealed in Christ, "Has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God." Ultimately the mystery is Christ (Colossians 2:2), He is the reality of which all of the Old Testament Scriptures pointed an were but a shadow. But the mystery is also that of gentile inclusion (Colossians 1:27). The gospel is good news for both the Jews and the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:6, 6:19). Are you getting the picture of Revelation 7:9-12 now with members from every nation, tribe, people, and language circling the throne offering unceasing worship to God!

5. That they might abound in the obedience of faith....

The purpose is to bring about the obedience of faith.

6. Praise God for His wisdom!

Paul closes, "To the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ!" God's wisdom is [revealed] in Christ Himself, 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge', [it is revealed] in his cross which, though foolish to human beings, is the wisdom of God, [It is revealed in His] decision to save the world not through its own wisdom but through the folly of the gospel, [by way of a redeemed], multiracial, multicultural church; and His [ultimate purpose

is] to unite everything under Christ.² Among other things, wisdom is the ability to devise perfect ends and to achieve those ends by perfect means. And that God did in Christ.

Our only response is:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11:33–36

It's appropriate that we end in doxology this morning. Stand with me and sing!

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

² John Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 405.