

Disarming the Divisive
Romans 16:17-19
ABC 12/31/17

We are all aware of the fact that almost any product we purchase today, comes with a warning label of some sort. In an effort to avoid ridiculous lawsuits, companies include warnings that reveal the utter lack of common sense among consumers. A few:

- a baby stroller: *Remove child before folding.*
- a fishing lure with a treble-hook: *Harmful if swallowed.*
- an electric hand blender: *Never remove food from blades while product is operating.*
- a Dremmel tool: *This product not intended for use as a dental device.*
- a car sunshield: *Do not drive with sunshield in place.*
- on a cartridge for a laser printer: *Do not eat toner.*
- curling irons: *This product can burn eyes.*

In Rom 16 Paul interrupts his greetings & gives a final warning to the Christians in Rome, one that is much more needed than those just given! What's the warning about? False teachers. Several years ago, a seminary professor told his class at the beginning of the semester that they would work together on a major project during that semester. They would move systematically through the NT to categorize every area of truth & determine how many times each area is addressed. Their goal was to find what was emphasized more than any other. When they completed the project, they were amazed to see that warning against false doctrine is emphasized more than any other thing, even more than love, & unity.¹ I haven't verified their conclusion, but have no reason to doubt them. Jesus warned, **Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves** (Mt 7:15). Much of His ministry consisted of confronting the false teaching of the religious leaders of His day (Mt 16:11-12; 23:1-39). In His discourse on things to come, He warned, **See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' & will mislead many** (Mt 24:4-5). Peter devotes most of his 2nd letter to warning against false teachers. Jude devotes his entire letter to the same theme. John repeatedly warns of false teachers in his epistles. Paul's final words to the Ephesian elders warned them,

¹ Renald Showers, *Israel My Glory*, April/May, 1995, pp 24-25

Be on guard for yourselves & for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; & from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:28-30).

His final letters to Timothy & Titus repeatedly emphasize the need for sound doctrine. He told Titus that an elder must hold **fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine & to refute those who contradict** (1:9). He goes on to explain that there were many empty talkers & deceivers upsetting households through their false teaching. In his final charge to Timothy, after telling him to preach the Word, he explained, **For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, & will turn away their ears from the truth & will turn aside to myths** (2 Tim 4:3-4). It shouldn't surprise us that as Paul concludes his letter to the Romans, in the midst of giving & sending warm greetings to the saints, he breaks in with this warning to beware of false teachers. After all, he was writing from Corinth, where false apostles posing as servants of righteousness had caused much damage (2 Cor 11:3-15). As he thought of the Christians in Rome, he didn't want them to be led astray. He'd heard they were doing well in the Lord (16:19a), but the present is no guarantee for the future. So his love for them prompted him to give this warning.

16:17-20 PRAY

Paul's words here are totally out of sync with our culture that holds tolerance as the chief virtue. Even many professing evangelicals argue that we should set aside doctrinal differences & come together. They say things like, *Jesus didn't say the world will know we are Christians by our correct doctrine, but by our love.* & so they hold unity services with those who deny the gospel & other core biblical truths. In its most extreme form, they hold interfaith services with those who believe in other religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, & Islam. But the Bible is clear that there is only 1 way of salvation. As Rom 10:13 states, **Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.** Jesus Christ is that Lord & He said (Jn 14:6), **I am the way, & the truth, & the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.** So when a so-called Christian says that all religions lead to

God, it shows why we all need to pay close attention to Paul's warning here to be on guard against false teachers.

1. We all must be on guard against false teachers (17-18). We all must be spiritually discerning about the biblical & theological teaching we are getting. Even, or especially, what you hear from this pulpit needs to be tested against Scripture. Every one of us who are part of the body of Christ must be wary of those who cause division by teaching things that aren't in accordance with Scripture. This isn't just the job of leaders in the church, it's the job of every one of us. Paul uses the word **urge** (12:1; 15:30) which is a word of strong appeal. Why must we be on guard? Because false teachers try to divide the body (17) & deceive the unsuspecting. The exhortation is to watch, to keep your eye on, to observe, to look at & contemplate & not lose sight of a certain kind of people.

A. What to look for Scholars debate who these false teachers were. Apparently, they hadn't arrived in Rome yet, so Paul is giving a general warning so when they did arrive, the Roman Christians would be able to spot them. We can't be certain, but since the Judaizers dogged Paul's steps & tried to bring Gentile believers under the regulations of the OT Law, they may be the ones in view.² But the warning is generic enough that it applies to a wide range of false teachers. Paul lists 4 marks to identify false teachers:

1) Motivation: Promote themselves by causing dissension & hindrances. We need to understand that Paul isn't saying to avoid confrontation. Jesus Himself provoked a lot of dissension by calling out the hypocritical religious leaders (Mt 10:34-36; 23:1-36). Paul contended vigorously with the Judaizers in Galatians, where he tells how he even confronted Peter publicly because he'd come under their influence (Gal 2:11-15). When the gospel or other core biblical truth was at stake, Paul believed in the necessity to contend strongly for the faith. In fact he sums up his entire ministry by saying he had fought the good fight (2 Tim 4:7). He wasn't opposed to controversy when the gospel was at stake. We need to be alert because false teachers will bring 2 things: **dissensions & hindrances** (17). These are far more serious than differences of opinion in grey

² Douglas Moo, *Romans*, p 929

areas or debatable things. This isn't splitting hairs over minor matters. These dissensions are **contrary to the teaching which you learned**. This dissension stems from self-centered motives. False teachers attempt to build a following because they love promoting themselves & being the center of attention. They're after power, fame, or money. They don't seek to exalt Christ & Him crucified. They don't hold firmly to the gospel of justification by faith alone. By adding the word **hindrances** or **occasions of stumbling** or **stumbling blocks** (9:33; 11:9), Paul shows these teachers create dissension by teaching things which trip up the unsuspecting. Those who stand for the gospel must oppose any & all false teachers who are motivated by promoting themselves, not Christ.

2) Message: False Teachers contradict core biblical truth. Paul is warning them, & us, to watch out for those who challenge & undermine divinely revealed apostolic teaching as recorded in Scripture. Their message was **contrary to the teaching which you learned**. Paul is mainly referring to the truth of the gospel which the Romans had believed & which Paul had set forth so clearly in this letter. There are many areas of doctrine where godly Christians may differ & yet still be saved, such as various views of prophecy, baptism, church government, spiritual gifts, & other secondary issues. But there are core doctrines where all true Christians must agree or you cease to be Christian in any biblical sense of the word. Paul is warning of doctrinal scandal, the adding or subtracting something to the gospel that will trap unsuspecting believers in some doctrinal error.³ By the way, all cults promote a way of salvation by works that detracts from God's glory through the death & resurrection of Jesus. All false teachers undermine the person & work of Christ. If you abandon these core doctrines for the sake of unity, the unity you end up with isn't Christian unity. So pay attention to the message. Know the truth of Scripture & if something doesn't line up, don't fall for it.

3) Master: Their own appetites, not Jesus (18). False teachers are in the ministry for their own fame, power, or profit. They're driven by self-interest & self-gratification. They take people's money so they can live lavishly. They love power & being in the limelight. They don't preach or

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, V 4, p 1929

live in submission to Christ as Lord. They pretend to speak for God. They may even seem to speak for Christ & be enthralled with the gospel. However, the truth is they're really only interested in themselves, their work, their name, their bank account, & their power. By the way, the phrase **our Lord Christ** clearly affirms the deity of Jesus Christ. True teachers seek to submit every area of their lives to Christ as Lord & God. If false teachers are slaves not of Jesus but of their own appetites, what does it look like for us to be slaves of our Lord Jesus Christ & not of our appetites? This gives us something to watch out for in ourselves. We should ask if we are slaves of Christ or slaves of our own appetites. After we've examined ourselves, we'll be more alert & able to see the dangers that can lurk in & rise up in the church.

4) Method: Smooth & Flattering speech to deceive the naïve. They are smooth talkers. They use language that sounds good & is pleasing to the ears. False teachers are usually likeable. They flatter you by telling you what you want to hear. They smile a lot as they tell you how great you are & how you can have *your best life now*. They don't talk about anything negative, like sin & God's judgment. They say, *People are beat down enough as it is. When they come to church, they need to hear a positive message, like God's love & acceptance* (apart from repentance, of course). They use biblical vss (often out of context) & biblical language, but they often change the meaning of the terms. For example, the Mormons talk about believing in Jesus as Savior & Lord, but their *Jesus* is not the Jesus of the Bible. Note also that the deception takes place on the heart level, which refers both to the mind & the emotions. Deceivers know how to manipulate our feelings. They tell stories that tug on your heart. They get you laughing. They often ridicule those who stand firm for biblical truth & portray them as fundamentalists who are mean, angry, divisive, & unloving. They appeal to the desire we have to be healthy & wealthy. If you'll just send them a gift, they'll pray for your prosperity & healing. By preying on your feelings, they lure you into their web of deception. So to recognize false teachers, watch their motives, their message, their master, & their methods.

B. Response to False Teachers: Watch & turn from them. Paul says, **Keep your eye on them & turn away from them.** The noun related to the verb **keep your eye on** is used in Ez 3:17 in the LXX to

refer to the watchman on the wall. His job was to keep his eye peeled for the enemy & to sound an alarm when he saw them coming so they could prepare for battle. Since these false teachers often disguise themselves as **servants of righteousness** (2 Cor 11:15) or as **wolves in sheep's clothing** (Mt 7:15), you have to be discerning to spot them. Keep in mind, Paul is concerned about unity. He wants to promote unity. *Watch out for those who cause what?* **Dissensions**. These people are enemies of unity & we're to avoid them or stay away from them. Does this sound contradictory? Paul wants unity, therefore watch out for those who cause divisions & divide from them. When we spot division-causing people, divide from them, avoid them. These 2 commands sound contradictory because the 1st one is driven by a passion for unity: Watch out for those who cause divisions. & the 2nd one is, in fact, a call for division. When you spot such a division-causing person, divide from him. To guard against wrong divisions, sometimes we need to divide from those who create divisions against the truth. What is it then between these 2 commands that helps us see how they aren't contradictory? It's Paul's reference to doctrine in vs 17. The issue here isn't the same as in Rom 14 where Paul is dealing with different convictions about non-essential things. There he said, **Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind** (5). There was no talk there about shunning people. The whole point was to help the strong & the weak Christians live together in unity with mutual respect & understanding. But here the approach is dramatically different. Here Paul says: Avoid them. Divide from them. Why? Because they're promoting doctrine contrary to what they'd been taught. When a person departs from the doctrine that the apostles taught, Paul sees this as a greater threat to unity than the disunity caused by avoiding such people. Maybe you're wondering how can dividing from a false teacher promote unity in the church? The answer is that the only unity that counts in the church is rooted in a common apostolic, biblical teaching. Isolating false teachers, avoiding them, is Paul's strategy for preserving unity that is based on biblical truth. There is a body of doctrine that someone can go against. We must watch out for those who cause divisions & create obstacles contrary to the doctrine found in Scripture. There is a doctrinal standard. There is something you can depart from. Paul refers to it in several ways. In Rom 6:17, he calls it **the form of teaching to**

which you were committed. In 2 Tim 1:13-14, he calls it **the standard of sound words** & **the treasure entrusted to us**. In Acts 20:27, he calls it **the whole counsel of God**. There is a body or standard or pattern of sound doctrine. There is a deposit of biblical truth entrusted to us in the Bible & we must be faithful to understand it, protect it, & pass it on for future generations. The challenge here is that we mustn't put every minor opinion in this category so there's no room for any disagreement at all (Phil 3:15). The pattern of sound doctrine would be a faithful summary of biblical essentials determined by how crucial they are in expressing & preserving the history of redemption, the nature & condition of man, the nature & work of Christ, the nature & Word of the Holy Spirit, & the nature & work of God the Father. One of the greatest challenges in the quest for unity is deciding what belongs in this body of doctrine when Paul says, *if someone departs from it, avoid him*. Avoiding someone doesn't mean: Stop caring about him or stop praying for him or even stop talking to them. What Paul commands with the words **avoid them**, is not no contact at all, but rather avoid the kind of contact that communicates life can go on as usual between us. It can't. If you, as a professing Christian, persist in departing from the doctrine the apostles taught, we can't simply hang out together like we used to. Neither does Paul tell us to engage in dialogue with them or invite them into our church to see if we can find some common ground as we discuss their ideas. Sometimes division or separation is both the necessary & the godly thing to do. If you are new in the faith or are young or untaught, realize that you need to be ready to listen & eager to learn biblical truth. We all must be diligent to be sure we are anchored in the truth of the Bible so we're not tossed about by error & trickery. We must be on guard against false teachers both from within & from without the church. Don't watch false teachers on TV, listen to them on the radio, buy their books, or have anything else to do with them. Ignore them as they stand outside the fold of genuine Christianity.

2. Even obedient Christians need to be on guard against false teachers (19). Within the context of the warnings of vs 17-18, vs 19 gives us more reasons to be watchful & more ways to be watchful. Why does Paul begin this vs with **for**, which seems to be explaining the warning of vs 18? The sense seems to be that Paul rejoiced to hear about the obedience of the Roman

believers, but that obedience also made them a target for these false teachers. Paul says, **I want you to be wise in what is good & innocent in what is evil.** JB Phillips paraphrases it, *I want to see you experts in good, & not even beginners in evil.* Or, in Jesus' words, **Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents & innocent as doves** (Mt 10:16, ESV). In the context, **good** refers to sound doctrine in line with the gospel. **Evil** refers to the corrupt doctrine of the false teachers. While it's helpful to have a basic knowledge of what the cults & false religions teach so you can avoid their errors & witness to them, it's not edifying to study these errors consistently & constantly. Our focus & attention should be on being wise in the Scriptures. Knowing the truth equips us to see & refute the errors of false teachers. We are to know about evil, but we aren't to know everything about it. We're not to try a little & see if we can handle it. We're not to see if it really is as bad as God says. We're not to try to get as close as we can without crossing the line. & we're not to expose ourselves to what is evil so that we can develop an immunity to it. So if something is evil, don't toy with it, wade in it, mix with it, try it, taste it, or dabble in it. Christian liberty is freedom to get as close to Christ as possible, not freedom to test the boundaries of sin. Instead, fill our minds & hearts with what is good, with the doctrines of this letter, for example, & be on our guard against those who would lead us from the simplicity of what we've been taught to the deception of special revelations, new insights, novel doctrines, or movements that bow before a human teacher rather than glorify God.⁴ Paul wrote the same idea to the Philippians, **that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life** (Phil 2:15-16a). **Innocent** speaks of something unmixed, clean, or wholesome. The word *naïve* comes to mind, with the meaning *wholesome in regard to evil*. Webster defines it as, *deficient in worldly wisdom*.⁵ This is being ignorant of stuff the world knows a lot about & refusing to become familiar with it. One reason for the Roman Christians to be watchful was because their testimony was important in the world in which they lived. & guess what? That's why we need to be watchful as well. You may think these

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: The New Humanity*, Vol 4, p 1934

⁵ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, www.m-w.com

1st century Christians lived in Rome, so it was probably easier for them, but times are different now. You think America in the 21st century is a much harder place to be a Christian. When Paul wrote to these believers they were living in what Seneca, the 1st century historian, called *the cesspool of iniquity*.⁶ Roman philosophers of that era made fun of monogamous couples. Add to this the fact that child prostitution was accepted & unwanted children were left to die. It's no more difficult for us to follow this text of Scripture than for the early Roman Christians. In every age & era, Christians must purposefully nurture naivety & choose ignorance of sin by refusing the world's ways of thinking & living. Paul concludes with a promise & a blessing: **20**

We'll look at that next week.

JC Ryle was a champion for the truth in the Church of England during the 19th century. In his book, *Warnings to the Churches*, he wrote about how difficult yet necessary controversy in the church is. Then he added, *But there is one thing which is even worse than controversy, & that is false doctrine tolerated, allowed, & permitted without protest or molestation*.⁷ After acknowledging that many would view what he writes as distasteful, he states, *Three things there are which men never ought to trifle with—a little poison, a little false doctrine, & a little sin*.⁸

What does all this mean for us today?

1. We have a need for discernment. Paul basically tells the church to wise up! Look around, be aware, think critically, & don't believe everything you hear! Just because it is positive, smooth, pleasant, & makes you feel important, doesn't mean it isn't deadly. Know God's Word so errors are easier to spot.

2. We have a need for humility. Paul tells the church to not only wise up, but to listen up! Maybe you think, *I'll never get caught up in false teaching. I can spot heresy at 200 yards*. Your challenge may have nothing to do with false teachers, it may have everything to do with false living. & you are being warned. Maybe God, at this very moment, through this passage of Scripture, is interrupting your life with a warning, with a challenge.

⁶ John Meyer, *Romans*, p 26

⁷ p 110

⁸ p 111

3. We have a need to pray for wisdom. No matter how long you've been a Christian, we all need more wisdom, a wisdom that distinguishes between good & evil; a wisdom that longs for that which is heavenly & despises that which is worldly.

4. We have a need to prepare. We are truly in a war zone. There are 2 misconceptions to avoid in this battle. The 1st is that walking with God diminishes the temptation to sin. If this were true, then Jesus Himself would have never been tempted. He was led by the Spirit of God & was walking in perfect harmony with His Father when He was tempted in the wilderness by Satan. The 2nd misconception is that the longer we walk with God, the less likely we are to be tempted with sin. If this were true, then why did Satan tempt Jesus who lived a sinless life for 30 years in perfect fellowship with the Father? After 30 years of growth & development & obedience, in total surrender to the will of His Father, He was still tempted. By the way, when Luke recorded the temptation of Christ, he ended the paragraph by reporting, **the devil ... left Him until an opportune time** (Lk 4:13). We would expect the text to read, *the devil left Christ forever*. There was no need to bother tempting Jesus. However, it says the devil left Him until another opportunity might arise. We must understand that Jesus was walking with purity & godly perfection, & Satan still was looking for any possible opportunity to tempt Him. If Satan thought he could trip up the Son of God, how confident do you think he is that he can trip us up?

There's only one perfect teacher & His name is Jesus. He has lived perfectly, died sacrificially, & risen victoriously. He's the only One we should give ultimate trust & obedience to. & He's given His one inerrant authority in the sufficient Scriptures & He's promised His Spirit will teach us as we seek to know & follow Him from these Scriptures. As we think today of false teachers, let's be thankful for Jesus & His Word. If you don't know who Jesus is or you've never turned from yourself & your sin to follow Him, do so today. He is worthy of your trust & we'd love to share more about Him with you if you'll allow us that privilege. Let us all commit to Him our need for forgiveness & pardon & for His power & grace for the temptations we will need to run from even today. As we run, let us praise God that one day, finally & ultimately, Satan will be crushed under our feet in final & eternal victory. But that's for next week.

