

## WATCH OUT

### Romans 16:17-23

#### INTRO

Remember last week's passage, Romans 16:1-16, where we saw the beautiful community the gospel creates? Paul's twenty-six greetings revealed a community of believers marked by unity and love for one another – let's call this "gospel community," a community created by the gospel. Today's passage will end with more of this community – Paul's eight friends who are with him as he writes sending their greetings.

But in between these greetings, Paul turns to a serious warning against the things that can destroy gospel community.<sup>1</sup> As beautiful and precious as it is, it's also under attack. Let's read Paul's warning:

[READ Romans 16: 17-23]

You know that moment when a parent stops a child who is walking out of the house and says, "Be careful! Watch out for \_\_\_\_\_ (snakes, tigers, flying squirrels, etc.)"? Right in the middle of his parting greetings, Paul has a fatherly moment with the Roman church: "Watch out! This gospel and the gospel community I've just described are precious treasures. Don't let anyone take them from you."

Other than in chapter one when he said he longed to see them, this is the first time Paul addresses the Roman church directly. And he comes on strong with an appeal for them to watch out for those who would twist the gospel he's just labored to describe<sup>2</sup> and destroy the gospel community it formed. These are what the Bible calls "false teachers," people who twist the gospel message for their own gain.

What about us? Is false teaching something we have to watch out for today? "False teaching" sounds like one of those Bible words/phrases that gets thrown around in church but can feel removed from our daily experience. Was this just for people in Paul's day?

*Please hear me out:* False teaching is alive and well today – from pulpits to podcasts, from Youtube to TikTok . We need Paul's closing warning more than

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry, *Whole Bible Commentary*, p. 2242.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Thielman, *Romans*, p. 735.

ever. This gospel Paul has laid out – that the righteous shall live by faith alone in Christ alone – is too precious to lose. WATCH OUT for those who would take it!

Why watch out? Paul gives three reasons:

These false teachers are not who they say they are, you are not who you once were, and God is who he always said he was.

**I. If They Are Not Who They Said They Are,**

Then, who are they??

“those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have been taught...”

They’re not who they say they are in two ways: doctrine and deeds

1) Their Doctrine (what they teach):

Their teaching is “contrary to the gospel they [had] been taught” – it was not the true gospel. False teaching always takes something God said and twists it or misapplies it, sometimes ever so slightly, but with disastrous effects. It always has an element of truth.

There are two general varieties of false teaching in Paul’s writings:

- a) *False by addition* – those who *add* to the gospel; it’s Jesus plus following the food laws or keeping the Sabbath – any teaching that adds some work that I do to round out my salvation
- b) *False by subtraction* – those who *subtract* from the gospel; take away some key component of it – like taking away obedience as a fruit of salvation

Errors like these cause divisions – disagreements that break the unity of believers.<sup>3</sup>

They also create obstacles, or, as one commentator explained, “ideas, teachings or practices that prevent progress and send one down a path of destruction.”<sup>4</sup> Twisted teaching keeps tripping you up so you don’t grow in Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> William Danker, *English-Greek Lexicon*, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Thielman, p. 737.

[Observation: **Error divides**. You look at a church where there is a lot of division, you'll probably find false teaching somewhere in the mix. Error doesn't just affect the one believing it; it affects the whole community of believers. It always hurts gospel community. But the opposite is also true: **Truth unites**. Danielle and I joined the Y and a guy was trying to teach us the different workout machines. As we asked more questions, eventually found out he attends a sister PCA church in Birmingham, and we felt an instant connection with him because we believe the same gospel. **Truth unites**.]

"Watch out!" Paul says. They don't teach what they say they teach. But that's not all. They're not who they say they are in their -

2) Deeds:

- a) Claim to serve Jesus but don't - (v. 18) "For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites"
  - "Appetites" lit. "bellies"<sup>5</sup> – refers broadly to fleshly appetites<sup>6</sup> Like in Titus 3:3: "slaves to various passions and pleasures" They are like the false teachers Jude speaks of: "shepherds feeding themselves" (v. 12) – stuffing their own faces while the sheep starve
  
- b) These false teachers target the naïve – the vulnerable. How? "by smooth talk and flattery" – various translations – lit. "good words and blessings" – I like Tyndale: "swete preachingse"<sup>7</sup>

According to one commentator, these are those who use "language that on the surface seems theologically correct, but who draw incorrect conclusions from that language about how believers should live."<sup>8</sup>

Another calls it "fine talk that seems to offer something good but takes advantage of the unwary."<sup>9</sup>

Like the fruit in the garden, this teaching looks sweet, but it goes down bitter.

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<sup>5</sup> Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek NT*, p. 496.

<sup>6</sup> Thielman, p. 738.

<sup>7</sup> Thielman, p. 738.

<sup>8</sup> Thielman, p. 738-739.

<sup>9</sup> Danker, p. 384.

*Who* do they target? “the naïve” – “the unsuspecting” – the trusting”<sup>10</sup> – the gullible.<sup>11</sup>

Maybe someone young in age. Maybe young in the faith, have never been intentionally disciplined, trained up.

How do they deceive the naïve? “they deceive [their] **hearts**” Chilling. We think of false teachers going after one’s thinking – one’s mind. But, as Matthew Henry warns, “they corrupt their heads by deceiving their hearts.”<sup>12</sup>

Anyone who has ever been drawn in by false teaching is first captivated in their hearts – their emotions, their will, their desires – once their hearts are hooked, then their thinking begins to shift.

Brothers and sisters, watch out. Guard your hearts. Let them not be drawn in by “swete preachingse.” Paul says the way to do this is simple: “avoid them” – steer clear!

*They are not who they say they are.*

## II. **You Are Not Who You Once Were**

In v. 19, Paul says, “your obedience is known to all” – by obedience, he means that these Roman Christians held fast to the gospel Paul proclaimed, and it changed their hearts and lives.

Their obedience was “known to *all*” – Romans 1:8 – “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in *all the world*.”

The Roman church was on the world stage. Rome, the capital of the Roman empire. The center of the world at that time. Christians? There? People took notice. (Like Tim Keller planting a church in Manhattan. There’s no way that’s gonna work).

Paul is saying, “you’re a city on a hill, shining the light of Christ to a watching world – “I rejoice over you!”

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<sup>10</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon.

<sup>11</sup> Thielman, p. 739.

<sup>12</sup> Henry, p. 2242.

You're not who you once were, and the world sees that.  
Now, "don't let Satan blow it out."

How were they to keep their light shining? By heeding Paul's warning: "I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil."

Sounds like something Jesus told his disciples in Mt 10:16: "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Same two adjectives (wise and innocent).

What does Paul mean?

"Be wise as to what is good" – so what is good? The NT word "gospel" means "*good* news." Paul is saying, "when it comes to the gospel, I want you to know it inside out. Get wisdom in the school of the gospel. Soak in it. Memorize it. Be transformed by the renewal of your minds in this gospel.

But when it comes to evil, be "innocent." Lit. "unmixed"<sup>13</sup> – "pure"<sup>14</sup> – like what he says in 12:9 – "Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good."

[Have you heard how bank tellers are trained to identify fake money? They study the real thing. They know in exact detail what each bill looks like, so much so that when they see a counterfeit bill, they spot it instantly. It's the same with the good news. If you know what the true gospel is, you'll also know what it isn't.]

Be wise as to what is good. Watch out. This gospel is the real thing. Don't fall for anything less.

*You're not who you once were.* And finally,

### III. **God Is Who He Always Said He Was**

Now Paul lifts us up from our run-ins with false teachers here on earth to a view of the cosmic spiritual war between God and Satan.

*It's a picture of utter victory for God and his people.*

And it's found in this promise:

"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."

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<sup>13</sup> Zerwick, p. 496.

<sup>14</sup> Danker, p. 13.

- 1) A Fitting Victory – the God of peace defeating Satan, the author of discord<sup>15</sup>

It's fitting because for there to be true peace, the enemy of peace must be destroyed.

The God of peace who went to every length to secure peace between himself and his people, even to the point of giving his only Son, so that now, as Paul says, "we, having been justified by faith, have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ro. 5:1). The God who will soon bring peace on earth once and for all through a new heavens and new earth, when all will be well – all made new.

This God versus Satan, the hater of peace, the destroyer of peace. The ultimate false teacher, the *first* false teacher, that smooth-talking serpent who twisted God's words ever so slightly but with universe-altering effects.

Every false teacher is first led astray by this serpent. All expressions of false teaching we see today are but the heads of the hydra. God is saying that the day is coming when he will not only sever the heads but thrust it through the heart.

And that day is near at hand, because this fitting victory is also:

- 2) Imminent Victory – "The God of peace will soon crush Satan..."  
Our wait and the wait of all who have died in Christ before us will soon be over.

Paul reminds us in 13:11, "...you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed."

You who labor, hold on. You who are weary, hold on, just a little while longer. Victory is coming soon, and it will be final.

- 3) Final Victory – "The God of peace will soon *crush* Satan." You don't get up from being crushed.  
Isn't Satan already defeated? Yes. I think of him like a snake when you have his neck under the shovel. He can still bite. He's still wriggling

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<sup>15</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Romans*, p. 278.

like crazy. We are called to be watchful. But soon, the shovel will come down hard and this cruel serpent will be less than a memory.

This word “crushed” was used in military contexts for the rout of an enemy – you would often see the emperor standing over the conquered peoples.<sup>16</sup> This leads us to something surprising.

4) This is a shared victory – “The God of peace will soon crush Satan...under *your* feet.”

As one said, “God does the crushing, but Satan ends up under the feet of believers.”<sup>17</sup>

We see allusions to Psalm 8:6, speaking of humanity: “[God] has put all things under his feet,” and Psalm 110 of David, “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

For Satan it’s a picture of ultimate humiliation – the most powerful fallen angel pictured under the feet of feeble believers.

For us, it’s a picture of ultimate exaltation – God in his grace giving undeserving sinners a share in his victory.

How could this be?

We get a hint in Joshua right after the Israelites defeat five Canaanite kings. Joshua 10:24 reads: “And when they brought those kings out to Joshua, Joshua summoned all the men of Israel and said to the chiefs of the men of war who had gone with him, ‘Come near, put your feet on the necks of these kings.’ Then they came near and put their feet on their necks.”

So Christ, our Captain, will enable us to set our feet on the head of Satan.<sup>18</sup> We will share in *his* victory as more than conquerors.

This our Captain was himself crushed in our place. And now he welcomes us in and invites us to share in the victory.

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<sup>16</sup> Thielman, p. 741.

<sup>17</sup> David Guzik, Blue Letter Bible App.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Henry, p. 2242.

Brother, sister, take heart. All will be well. Watch out for false teachers, yes; but we need not watch forever. Soon evil will be totally rooted out and all that will remain is the good.

“Mid toil and tribulation,  
and tumult of her war,  
she waits the consummation  
of peace forevermore;  
till with the vision glorious  
her longing eyes are blest,  
and the great church victorious  
shall be the church at rest.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> S.J. Stone, *The Church's One Foundation*, 1886, stanza 5