

**WATCH OUT**  
**ROMANS 16:17-20**

Despite our best planning, our sincere desires, and our extensive efforts not everything always goes according to our plans. That's true at work, in our homes, in our relationships, with our leisure activities, with our retirements, and even in our churches.

When churches are loving, hard-working, enduring, truth-teaching, and grace-giving things still sometimes go awry. Because of that reality, the apostle Paul lays out some theological and ministerial caution tape for the Roman church (and us). This is one large problem to watch out for and guard against so that the faithfulness to Christ in the church will be preserved.



We can summarize what Paul says this way:

**ALWAYS BE VIGILANTLY ATTENTIVE AGAINST FALSE TEACHING.**

Some have suggested that Paul's words in Romans actually ended at verse 16, because it seems odd that he would give such a solemn warning after such affectionate greetings. Yet if you think about it, the section actually flows very naturally from the preceding: the Romans are unified and Paul has deep affection for many in that church body, so he adds this addendum to protect the unity and love they have in the church by guarding against one of the primary destroyers of unity — false teaching.

This kind of admonition late in the letter is not unusual for Paul. While his benedictions are typically warm and friendly, it is not unusual for him to give final warnings in his final words about false teaching (and it's not uncommon for us either — “drive carefully,” “don't pick up any strangers...” “come straight home...”).

Cf. **1 Tim. 6:20-21**; **2 Tim. 4:14-15**; **Tt. 3:9-11**; Gal. 6:12-13; 1 Th. 5:21-22; 2 Th. 3:11-12; Eph. 6:10-12.

In these verses Paul provides **three principles** for protecting the unity of the body of Christ:

1. A Problem to **PREVENT** (vv. 17-18)
2. A Provision that **PROTECTS** (v. 19)
3. A Preview of a **PROMISE** (v. 20)

## 1. A Problem to PREVENT (vv. 17-18)

### • Watch out for false teachers

- ✓ Paul **urges** the Romans to **keep an eye on** false teachers. The word “urge” is a present tense — keep doing this; there is an importance to the task — it’s critical. And specifically, they are to watch, mark, be attentive, scrutinize, and avoid anything aberrant. Don’t be casual about this responsibility. They (and we) should consider themselves to be on guard duty and protecting.
- ✓ Now Paul doesn’t immediately call these people “false teachers” — he calls them *the ones who cause dissensions and hindrances...*
  - The **dissensions** are things that divide and are in opposition to something. The only other time the word is used in the NT it is used as a characteristic of fleshly living (Gal. 5:20).
  - The **hindrances** are “stumbling blocks” — destructive things that lead people to sin (14:13).
  - Both those aberrations come from a lack of sound teaching — the truths that are **contrary to the teaching you have learned**; he is talking about foundational truths of Scripture that promote spiritual life and vitality (6:17; Tt. 1:9). These teachers are against orthodox teaching. What produces the dissensions and hindrances in the church body are false teaching. A little error is a major problem because it destroys people’s lives (e.g., 1 Tim. 4:1-3) — people make ungodly decisions about what they do because they believe error; false living comes from false believing.
- ✓ Notice also that watching out for false teachers is the responsibility of *every believer*: Paul addresses the command to the **brothers** — every believer in Rome was to be watching and guarding, not just the leaders. The church (all its members) is the pillar and support of the truth (2 Tim. 3:15), so all the members are involved in the process of guarding that truth.
- ✓ This a sober reminder about the cruciality of watching for erroneous teaching. Always have your biblical and theological radar working to protect the truth.

### • Reject false teachers

- ✓ This is the second part of Paul’s “urging” — don’t just watch out for them — **turn away**.
- ✓ Literally the word means “bend away.” He means to avoid, get away from, shun, and remove them.
- ✓ What does this look like? We don’t debate and argue with them. We reject them and expel them. We act decisively because we want to protect the new converts and immature. E.g., Acts 20:27-32.

### • Reject false teachers because they are self-deceived (v. 18)

- ✓ Why does Paul encourage the Romans to act so decisively? Because they are **enslaved**.
- ✓ Now every believer is a slave — but we are slaves to Christ (remember 6:17-22). That slavery is appropriate because Jesus is **our Lord Christ** — He is the Lord (Master), Messiah (King).

- ✓ And He is Lord and King over us particularly. So it is appropriate to be His slave, to live to serve Him.
- ✓ That is not the position of these false teachers; they have rejected the Lord in favor of their own **appetites**. The word is “stomach” or “belly.” It is used figuratively to refer to internal desires. They have personal longings and desires that are contrary to Christ’s and they follow those desires.
- ✓ This is the origin of all ungodly behavior — we believe something erroneous, and that error leads us to ungodly desires, which leads to ungodly behavior. (“We do what we do because we want what we want and we want what we want because we believe what we believe.”) The problem is false beliefs.
  - E.g., **Phil. 3:17-19** — they have set themselves and their desires and motives as ultimate; they are worshipping their desires and those desires have ultimate authority (= self-deception).
  - Are there examples of people like that? Consider Ananias (**Acts 5:1-4**), Diotrephes (**3 Jn. 9-10**)
- ✓ These false teachers are to be rejected because they have taken God’s truth and used it for self-indulgent purposes. They are self-deceived, filling their own bellies and not caring about others.
- ✓ These false teachers are distracted from Christ (and they distract others from Christ). They purport to be the authority and do not lean on Scripture and Christ as authoritative. They must be rejected.

- **Reject false teachers because they deceive others**

- ✓ The ultimate problem of false teachers, though, is that they not only are self-deceived, but they are deceptive towards others.
- ✓ What they say sounds good and appropriate. They use **smooth speech** — “smooth talkers,” what they say sounds right. They also use **flattering speech** (“eulogy”) — praising, well-chosen words.
- ✓ But no matter how pretty the words, they are deceptive. Their words are lies that lead trusting, unsuspecting, and innocent people away from Christ and the truth.
- ✓ The word **unsuspecting** has the idea of “guileless,” maybe even “simple.” They should know better, but perhaps they simply haven’t been taught yet, and they end up being led astray. The depth of the deception is not just that they do unwise things, but that their **hearts** are deceived — internally, in their motives, desires, conscience, and will they are deceived and move away from God.
- ✓ We see this kind of deception of others in **2 Tim. 2:16-19**; the tragedy is not just that their own lives are destroyed but that they also take down others. This will proliferate in last days (**2 Tim. 3:13**).
- ✓ There is a proliferation of many kinds of false teaching today:
  - *Prosperity gospel* — that our best life is now and not with Christ in Glory
  - The false gospel of *easy believism and licentious living* — just believe in Jesus and do anything
  - The *ineffectiveness Scripture* — “the Bible is good, but it is unauthoritative to change lives” — we need psychology or self-help or motivational messages, but not the Bible
  - *Unbelief in the historicity of Scripture* — a denial of the story of Adam, etc. (William Craig)
  - *Apostate living* — Ravi Zacharias, Josh Harris, Abraham Piper, Tullian Tchividjian, etc...
- ✓ The tragedy of false teachers is not just that they destroy themselves, but that they take others along with them into destruction. That’s why we must guard and remove them.

## 2. A Provision that **PROTECTS** (v. 19)

- How can we protect ourselves against this ungodly thinking and influence? The Romans were already doing what they needed to do in order to protect themselves (and so are many GBCers).
- Paul connects v. 19 to vv. 17-18 with the word **for** (because). What does he mean (how does it connect)?
  - ✓ Paul means that the Romans should watch out for false teachers because they are already obedient to the truth of God and he doesn't want them to be dissuaded from that faithful lifestyle.
  - ✓ Following these divisive false teachers will not only lead to disunity in the body, but it will lead them to ungodly and false living.
- Paul commends the Romans because **the report of your obedience has reached to all**.
  - ✓ When Paul talks about "obedience of faith" he means that there is a kind of obedience that flows from faith in Christ — because they believe they obey. The mark of faith is obedience and the mark of unbelief is rebellion and disobedience. He has already established that principle (1:5; 15:13).
  - ✓ And that is exactly the way the Romans were already living (cf. 1:8). We protect ourselves against falsehood and error when we do (obey) the truth. The more we disobey, the more deeply we slide into theological error. If we don't do what we know, we will lose what we know (1:21, 24, 26, 28).
  - ✓ But the Romans had avoided that, so Paul was **rejoicing** over them (cf. 1:8; 2 Jn. 4; 3 Jn. 4).
  - ✓ Obedience produces joy for you and for everyone around you; disobedience produces sorrow for you and everyone around you. You will not be ultimately happy when you disobey.
- Because Paul wants them to continue in obedience he adds a desire for them: **I want you to...**
  - ✓ **Be wise in what is good** = Wisdom is the application of knowledge — living the truth we know. So Paul means, "I want you to live out and practice habitually the things that are righteously good."
    - One theologian calls this "sanctified street smarts...Wisdom is concerned with how we relate to people, to the world, and to God." [Edmund Clowney]
    - Unfortunately, this is in short supply: "The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants." [Omar Bradley, 1948]
  - ✓ **Be innocent in what is evil** = The word doesn't mean "naïve," but "pure" in relation to what is evil. You may know about things that are evil (though we should do all we can to limit that knowledge); but no matter how much you know about evil things, you should not gravitate towards doing them.
  - ✓ This is exactly what Paul said in 12:2 — our hearts should not be bent toward (conformed) to the world, but renewed in such a way that our inclination is always towards the righteous action.
  - ✓ It seems likely that Paul is intentionally echoing the words of Christ: Mt. 10:16.
  - ✓ One theologian says this person is "too good to deceive, too wise to be deceived."
  - ✓ If we want protection from false teaching then we need to practice doing the truth (Js. 1:22ff).

### 3. A Preview of a **PROMISE** (v. 20)

- These nearly final words of Paul might appear to be harsh or strong; but he finishes hopefully: ***The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.***
  - ✓ The God whose nature is peace will bring about peace on the earth. That reminder of God's peace at the end of the book reinforces what has been a dominant theme of Paul in this letter (3:17; 5:1; 8:6).
  - ✓ In 15:33, Paul uses this same phrase "the God of Peace" as a reminder of the presence of God and the comfort of having Him always close to us.
  - ✓ However, to say that God is a God of peace does not preclude Him from being a God of war and judgment. The way He brings peace is through the crushing and eternal destruction of Satan; His peace to us is mediated through His judgment of Satan. It is notable that the words ***peace*** and ***crush*** are next to each other in the Gk. text, emphasizing the contrast and irony of God's action.
  - ✓ So God brings peace by ***crushing Satan***. What does that phrase mean?
    - ***Crush*** means to trample; and the future tense gives it a sense of certainty: it *will* happen.
    - The crushing will happen ***soon*** — it is imminent; it will happen quickly. It doesn't feel like it is happening quickly. But however long it takes (and almost 2000 years after Paul wrote this we are still awaiting its fulfillment in Rev. 20), Satan's destruction is still coming quickly. It is a reminder to us to think of our life events with an eternal perspective, in which all things on this earth are happening quickly, and even the entire history of earth is but the merest blip of time (to this point, only about six days, 2 Pt. 3:8)
    - It is also notable that we do not destroy Satan; ***God*** does. We can resist Satan and flee Satan, but we do not destroy him. We are not powerful over Satan. But God is (a ref. to Gen. 3:15).
    - While God is the One who destroys Satan, we get the benefit of that destruction — his destruction is ***under our feet***. God will crush him and we will "walk on him" — derive the benefit of his soon destruction. God is victorious over His enemy, and we get the spoils.
- *How will Satan be crushed?*
  - ✓ He will personally be bound and cast into eternal Hell and under God's unrelenting wrath (Rev. 20).
  - ✓ He will be rendered powerless against believers (Heb. 2:14) — sin will be destroyed.
  - ✓ He will be incapable of tempting and leading believers astray — his false light will be extinguished (2 Cor. 4:4; 11:14).
  - ✓ His false ideologies will be exposed and eliminated (2 Cor. 10:5).
  - ✓ The death that comes from sin will be vanquished (1 Cor. 15:54-57; Heb. 2:14).
  - ✓ The fallenness of creation will be restored (Rom. 8:18-21).
  - ✓ Everything that comes from and through Satan will be destroyed and we will be free from every kind of deluding influence that comes from him.

- The last phrase in this verse is a kind of benediction prayer: ***The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.***
  - ✓ That *is* a prayer request. Paul is desiring God to act for the Romans and provide a comforting grace for them (something like how he opened his letter (1:7)).
  - ✓ But it's also a reminder of the promise of what God does for those who are His — for every need they have, He gives them sustaining grace.
  - ✓ This is a promise: when you are faced with opposition and people who will attempt to deceive you and lead you astray, God will provide you the grace you need to obey and follow Him.

**CONCLUSION:** When things are going well, there is a temptation to relax — to be less vigilant.

- ✓ We are less attentive to our spouse
- ✓ We prepare less for discipling and counseling
- ✓ We spend less time praying in dependence on God
- ✓ We have a greater willingness to be accepting and tolerant of unbiblical viewpoints
- ✓ We are prone to being too confident in ourselves
- ✓ We are more likely to assume that things will always be good (and easy)
- ✓ We are less likely to plan for the future

The Roman church was doing well. Our church is doing well. Paul's well-timed words at the end of his letter are an appropriate and sober reminder: this is no time to relax. It is a time to be attentive, vigilant, watchful, and persevering for anything that might distract us from a single-minded devotion to Christ.

**BENEDICTION:** Romans 15:13