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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #64

August 14, 2022

Separating from Smooth Talking Heretics and Stomping the Devil Beneath our Feet

Romans 16:17-23

Perhaps never before, during the last 2,000 years, has there been such a vitriolic, venomous attack launched against the Christian church as we see today. I know this sounds a bit grandiose and maybe even a bit melodramatic, but consider a few undeniable facts.

We live in a day when taking a stand for monogamous, heterosexual marriage is viewed as bigoted and hateful. We live in a day when refusing to endorse homosexual or transexual behavior is denounced as intolerant and vindictive. We live in a day when claiming that the Bible is the ultimate and final authority by which to determine what is true and false, what is good and what is evil, is ridiculed as outdated and unscientific. We live in a day when insisting that the only way to be reconciled to God is through personal faith in Jesus Christ is considered as elitist and arrogant. We live in a day when killing babies in the womb is regarded as a fundamental human right and contending for protection of those babies is interpreted as insensitive and lacking in basic human compassion.

But I suspect that nothing exposes the church of Jesus Christ to more ridicule and mockery than the claim we make to absolute and ultimate truth. In our post-modern world, there is no such thing as absolute truth, except, of course, for the absolute truth that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Or if there is absolute truth, no one can identify it or discover it. Truth is whatever you make it out to be. Truth, in today's world, is whatever works to make you feel good about yourself. Truth today is whatever affirms your sense of personal dignity and authenticity. And you dare not suggest that someone else's so-called "truth" is in point of fact profoundly wrong and misguided and even dangerous.

I say all this as a way of introducing Paul's very strong warning and exhortation in Romans 16:17-23. What Paul says here is profoundly out of step and inconsistent with the mindset of most people today. In unmistakable and unavoidable terms, the apostle tells us that some people are evil. Some people cause divisions. Some people in the professing church of Jesus Christ believe things that are contrary to the true doctrines that Paul himself has been teaching us in Romans. Paul speaks directly and without apology to the fact that some people are deliberately deceitful and are to be avoided.

But in today's relativistic, inclusivistic, post-modern world, where we are told to be "welcoming and affirming" of all people regardless of their sexual behavior and theological beliefs, these are hateful terms; these are unloving, arrogant claims on the part of Paul. So, what are we to make of Paul's counsel to us?

I do hope you realize, right from the start, that if there is no such thing as absolute truth, the only outcome is the triumph of power. People mistakenly think that if everyone would just acknowledge that everyone is entitled to define truth and goodness and error and evil however they please, peace would prevail. We would all get along with each other much better than we currently do. No, the very opposite is true. If everyone's "truth" is equally valid, the people who ultimately win are those with the most power. If there is no absolute, ultimate, transcendent standard of truth and error, of good and evil, by which we can live and interact with each other, the people with the most power and strength and wealth will, in the end, prevail over those who are weaker and less wealthy.

Two Commands that Appear Contradictory (v. 17)

If Paul is anything, he is consistent. At no time in writing Romans or any other NT letter does he contradict himself. But there are times when his words might appear to be contradictory. If so, it is due to our ignorance and our failure to dig deeply into his meaning. That is certainly the case here in v. 17.

Paul has many times argued for and insisted on unity in the body of Christ. Back in Romans 15:5 he prayed that the believers in Rome would "live" in "harmony with one another" and "with one voice" glorify God. Here again in Romans 16:17 he warns against those who would create "divisions" or "dissensions" (cf. Gal. 5:20 where it is one of the works of the flesh). He clearly doesn't want division to exist. Some people "create obstacles" to others in the church and by doing so cause disunity. And Paul is adamantly opposed to it. That seems clear enough. That doesn't mean that any and all disagreement and division is bad. Some divisions are inevitable and come as a result of standing firmly on the truth. Paul himself took a strong stand against Peter (Gal. 2:11-14). "What Paul rejects are divisions that are not based on or in accord with his gospel" (Schreiner, 777).

But he then, in the last part of v. 17, issues an exhortation that on the surface appears to intensify disunity and division. He tells us to "avoid" certain people. Don't greet them with a holy kiss (v. 16)! Avoid them! In other words, he tells us at the close of v. 17 to do something that will divide and separate people, while at the beginning of v. 17 he clearly says that "divisions" in the body of Christ are a bad thing. What's going on here?

The only way to understand what Paul is saying is by recognizing that sometimes in order to maintain unity and peace in the body of Christ you have to avoid and steer clear of certain individuals. When you identify people who are causing divisions, divide from them! When you see people in the local church who are bent on creating disunity, avoid them. In order to maintain unity, sometimes there has to be disunity!

I trust that is now clear. But we must also note the way in which Paul envisions identifying those who create sinful divisions and put stumbling blocks or obstacles in the path of other Christians. It is "the doctrine that you have been taught" (v. 17).

Divisions and Obstacles in the Local Church (v. 17)

It's important that we understand that what Paul is addressing here is an entirely different situation from the one he addressed in Romans 14. In Romans 14 he was concerned about divisions in the church over secondary matters, issues of what to eat and drink and whether or not some days were more holy than others. These were not issues that affect our eternal destiny. That is why he called for Christians in Rome to defer to one another and not divide over such matters.

Now, it should be noted that it is always possible for someone to take such a rigid and dogmatic stand on secondary issues that he/she is causing unnecessary division in the church. Let's suppose someone in the church is so rigidly demanding when it comes to alcohol that unity and love are being threatened. On occasion you will encounter someone who insists that a Christian should never under any circumstances drink alcohol, even in moderation. They dogmatically insist that it is always sinful. Or perhaps a person argues that every believer must observe Saturday as the Christian Sabbath, or perhaps they believe Sunday is the proper day and that anyone who works on Sunday or mows their lawn or watches or participates in a football game or a golf match on Sunday is living in sin. People like that can be divisive. Even though the issue at stake is of secondary importance, they are inclined to make it of primary importance and rigidly insist on their view to the point that divisions arise in the church. Paul could certainly have such an individual in mind here in Romans 16.

But I think the problem in view here is much more serious. When Paul says that such people create obstacles "contrary to the doctrine" that he has been teaching them in Romans, I think he probably has in mind someone who might:

- deny that Jesus is both fully divine and human, one with the Father and the Spirit in the Trinity;
- deny that justification is by faith alone in Christ alone, insisting that salvation is dependent on our good works;
- deny that we are by nature fallen and sinful and entirely dependent on God's mercy and grace for salvation, perhaps arguing that human beings are by nature good;
- deny the doctrine of original sin as stated by Paul in Romans 5;
- deny the necessity of the Holy Spirit progressively shaping us into the moral image of Jesus;
- deny that Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father;
- deny that his death was a penal substitutionary sacrifice in which the wrath of the Father was satisfied;
- deny the core truths of the gospel of God;
- deny that godly living and a commitment to holiness are an essential response to God's grace; in other words, they are antinomian.

Paul clearly believed that our unity in the local church is rooted and grounded in our common beliefs regarding theological truth. You simply can't have professing Christians in the same local church arguing for opposite ideas on essential or foundational doctrines. When it comes to the fundamental truths that determine our eternal destiny, there can be no wiggle room. When heaven and hell are at stake, hold firmly to the essentials of the faith.

Tragically, there are false teachers everywhere. And Paul says as clearly as he can, sometimes you have to divide in order to maintain unity, because biblical unity is tied to biblical truth. Now, let's be careful. I don't believe Paul is calling on us to serve as doctrinal police who are always sniffing out every potential heretical teaching. We are not the theological Gestapo! That mindset only serves to breed suspicion and judgment in the church.

But neither are we to be naïve and gullible. There is a delicate balance here. Some who cause division can be approached and won over, when shown the error of their ways. But Paul has in mind stubborn, recalcitrant, defiant, unrepentant divisive people who when confronted push back and argue without biblical grounds for doing so. These are people who simply love to fight solely for the sake of the fight. They aren't open to correction.

I see both responses in the church around the world today. There are many who so deeply hate any form of confrontation that they tolerate the most grievous of heresies. Live and let live, is their philosophy. And the result is that destructive doctrines that mislead and undermine Christian living run rampant. These are the people who downplay the importance of biblical doctrine. Their default position is to compromise whenever possible.

On the other hand, there are also those who live for the fight. They pick at every doctrine until little is left but the bones. They argue that anyone who disagrees with them on even the secondary and tertiary doctrines of Christianity is probably lost and should be loudly condemned. John Piper described such folk this way: "What I mean is that they become so obsessed with spotting doctrinal error that they lose their ability to rejoice in doctrinal truth. They're like dogs that are trained so completely to sniff out drugs at the airport, that even when they're off duty they greet everybody that way. It doesn't make for a very welcoming atmosphere" (John Piper).

Neither of these is the right approach. We must first identify those doctrines that are essential to the faith and without which a person's eternal destiny is in jeopardy. Those are the truths on which we stand firm and hold our ground. Even then, let's be diligent to explore with these people their motivation for causing division. God willing, they can be persuaded and won over and will recognize the error of their ways.

Make no mistake. There is a standard of biblical truth to which God calls us. He clearly sets it before our eyes and hearts and calls for unwavering fidelity. Back in Romans 6:16 he referred to "the standard of teaching to which you were committed." In Acts 20:27 Paul said that he himself never failed to proclaim "the whole counsel of God." Paul in 2 Timothy 1:13-14 reminds Timothy of "the pattern of the sound words that you have heard" from me. He talks about "the good deposit" that has been entrusted to us. And Jude calls on all Christians "to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

And if someone in the church persists in causing division and creating obstacles by their denial of these truths, Paul's counsel is unmistakable: "**Avoid them!**" Now, what does that mean? There are differing kinds and expressions of avoidance. For example, if a person is officially excommunicated from the church because of blatant, unrepentant sin, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:11 that you should not "associate" with this person, which he goes on to say means that you should "not even eat with such a one."

But there are obviously lesser expressions of “avoidance” that would not demand that you never share a meal with this sort of person. I’m quite sure Paul would counsel against putting this divisive person in a position of leadership or in a place where they could influence others through their teaching. That being said, I don’t think he means you should never speak with this individual or that you should never pray for them or hope for their repentance and salvation. My sense is that he’s calling on us not to continue life as usual, as if nothing of significance has occurred. Don’t give the divisive person any reason to think that their offense is minimal. Don’t associate with them in such a way that they might gain the impression that you are in agreement with them. Don’t “hang out” with them as if nothing of importance has occurred. But if they want to meet to process the matter, I’m quite sure Paul would be ok with that.

What Kind of Person Does Paul have in Mind? (v. 18)

Paul says three things about the people he regards as divisive.

First, they “do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites,” or more literally, their own “bellies” (v. 18a). Their motivation isn’t to glorify Jesus or to uphold truth. Their aim is to promote themselves and advance their personal agendas. They are driven by the internal hankering for recognition. It is their own personal praise and not that of Jesus that is uppermost in their minds. It isn’t simply an issue of their holding to differing theological convictions. They are in the grip of worldly passions and idolatrous hunger for public notice. In other words, their problem isn’t primarily intellectual. It is moral. The reference to their “appetites” may also be a way of saying that they are primarily interested in satisfying their own fleshly pleasure. In any case, what they are not doing is serving Jesus.

Second, they engage in “smooth talk” (v. 18b). Don’t ever let a person’s verbal eloquence overwhelm you. Don’t ever think that simply because someone is good with words and can turn a phrase and say things that cause goosebumps to rise up on your arms that he/she is therefore theologically solid and orthodox. ***Most false teachers in the course of church history have been extremely eloquent.*** That’s how they managed to gain huge followings and large offerings. Of course, this is not an indictment of eloquence, in and of itself. It’s always easier and more pleasing to listen to someone who doesn’t butcher the king’s English. But test a person by their content, not by their oratorical talents.

Third, this sort of individual resorts to flattery. The Greek word translated “flattery” is the term from which we derive our English word, *eulogy*. Sadly, that is what happens at many, if not most, funerals. The person delivering the “eulogy” ends up flattering the reputation of the deceased. Paul here warns us against being taken in by flattery. It’s so easy to give your allegiance to someone once they have spoken of you so highly to others. Simply put, ***most false teachers are really nice!*** Their politeness and carefully chosen words are designed to put you at ease so that you will lower your guard, and before you know it, you are swallowing altogether the horrific ideas they are promoting.

Paul says that the aim of such divisive individuals is to “deceive the hearts of the naïve” (v. 18c). What this means is that rarely will these people be so blatant as to openly deny that Jesus is God incarnate. They will probably avoid ever saying that you are justified and saved by your good works. But they have a way of endorsing those sorts of damnable heresies by couching them in words that sound, at least on the surface, to be orthodox.

Here's one good example. There was a heretic in the 16th century named Servetus. He was eventually burned at the stake for his heresy, which should never have happened. But he would happily declare that he believed Jesus was the Son of God. But he denied that Jesus was God the Son. To say that Jesus was the Son of God is to use biblical language, because Jesus was undeniably the Son of God. But what Servetus meant is that Jesus was a subordinate creature of God, a person who was made by God as a creative act. To say that Jesus was nothing less than “God, the Son,” is something he denied.

Here is another example. A 4th century bishop named Arius (d. 336) denied the deity of Christ. One author describes Arius in this way:

“Here was a bright, energetic, attractive fellow, the kind of citizen whom any Rotary Club would welcome. Singing sea chanties in dockside pubs and teaching Bible stories to the Wednesday night faithful, this was an immensely popular man. His story reminds us that heresy does not bludgeon us into belief. We are seduced” (Parker T. Williamson, *Standing Firm: Reclaiming the Chastain Faith in Times of Controversy* [Lenoir, North Carolina: PLC Publications, 1996], p. 31).

Be diligent and on the alert for pastors and teachers and conference speakers and best-selling authors who are handsome, winsome, eloquent, and well-dressed, but who care more for the size of the offering they can obtain than the biblical orthodoxy of their message. False teachers are not easy to spot. I don't think I've yet seen a successful internet or TV speaker who gained a huge following and amassed large amounts of money who didn't fit the description that Paul gives us here in v. 18. Simply put, “The Romans must be on guard because the opponents are urbane, witty, and sophisticated. They will not be unattractive boors” (Schreiner, 778).

Wise to what is Good and Innocent as to what is Evil (v. 19)

Back in Romans 15:14 Paul spoke highly of the Roman believers. He said they were filled with knowledge and spiritually mature. Here, once again, he praises them for their spiritual growth. In fact, he says that the progress in sanctification among the Roman Christians “is known to all” (v. 19a). Their reputation had spread widely. But Paul also includes himself here. He rejoices over the spiritual and theological growth that he has heard about among the members of this church.

But don't let that go to your head, says Paul! Be “wise” and embrace whatever is good. But be equally diligent in your commitment to remain “innocent” when it comes to evil. He's talking specifically about how they respond to the divisive false teachers in vv. 17-18, but the principle applies more broadly and encompasses everything in the Christian life and in the believer's response to the world around him. So, says Paul, don't let your good reputation both inside the city of Rome and outside be dragged through the mud by your failure to discern the divisive and heretical teachers who abound everywhere. If you do, you will bring reproach on the name of Jesus.

Satan's Defeat: Past, Present, and Future (v. 20)

This is the first explicit reference to Satan in the epistle to the Romans. Paul did refer to “angels” and “rulers” in Romans 8:38 as among the many forces or threats that can never separate us from the love of

God in Christ Jesus. But here he finally brings up our enemy, and the one thing he says about him is that he is soon destined for doom! By the way, isn't it interesting that Paul here refers to the God who "crushes" Satan as the "God of peace"! God's peace, notes Stott, "allows no appeasement of the devil. It is only through the destruction of evil that true peace can be attained" (401).

We know that Satan's demise comes in stages. The first stage was his defeat in the wilderness when Jesus resisted his temptations. The second stage came as Jesus delivered people from demonic influence. His casting out of demons was a major blow to Satan's kingdom. Yet a third stage came when Jesus authorized and empowered his followers to take authority over the demonic realm. We see this in Luke 10 where Jesus responds to the report from his disciples that "even the demons are subject to us in your name" (Luke 10:17). This is what prompted Jesus to declare: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18).

The most decisive defeat of the Devil came with the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. It was with a view to his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead that Jesus said, "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out" (John 12:31). Paul speaks of this in Colossians 2 when he says that Jesus "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in it" (Col. 2:15). When he was raised from the dead, the Father exalted Jesus "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, . . . and put all things under his feet" (Eph. 2:21-22).

Again, the author of Hebrews says that by his death and resurrection Jesus destroyed "the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). The word "destroyed" in this text doesn't mean Satan was annihilated and no longer exists. He means that he has been decisively defeated and stripped of his power to enslave Christians in the fear of death. When Jesus died and was exalted and enthroned at the right hand of the Father, "the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him" (Rev. 12:9-10).

Yet another stage in the defeat of Satan comes every time you and I, in the power of the Spirit, resist Satan and his temptations. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you," wrote James in James 4:7. This is the same thing Paul had in mind when he wrote in Ephesians 6 that we can "withstand" Satan and his assaults by adorning ourselves with the armor of God. And the final stage in his defeat, the ultimate and everlasting overthrow of Satan happens when Christ returns and is "thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur" where he will be tormented day and night (Rev. 20:10).

So, what is Paul saying in Romans 16:20? When and in what way will God "crush" Satan under the feet of Christians? There are two possibilities, and both may be true. But first note that it is not simply under Christ's feet that Satan is placed in subjection, but under *your/our* feet! We are in Christ. We are authorized by him to resist and overcome the Devil. You should never live in fear of Satan. He is a defeated enemy who even today is subjected to the authority of Christians who wield their power in the name of Jesus.

When does/will this happen? Paul says it will happen "soon" (Rom. 16:20). As I said, there are two possible ways of understanding this, both of which are likely true. On the one hand, believers crush Satan every time they "avoid" false teachers who try to perpetuate and impose doctrines of demons. It would

appear that Paul believed the false teachers of v. 17 to be instruments of the Devil. To identify and resist false teachers and remain innocent “as to what is evil” (Rom. 16:19), we “crush” Satan, over and over again in the present day. The fact that Paul says Satan will be crushed under “your” feet, that is, the feet of the Roman believers in the first century, serves to confirm this first view.

The other way in which Satan will “soon” be crushed is at the final judgment. But if that is the case, how can Paul say it will occur soon? That is where 2 Peter 3:8 comes into play. There the apostle tells us that “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” “Soon” for God could be either tomorrow or two thousand years in the future. The word “soon”, then, probably focuses less on the time of Satan’s final defeat and more on the *certainty* of it. But how is it that when he is finally judged it will be “under” our “feet”? I don’t know exactly how this will occur, but Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:3 that “we are to judge angels.” Satan is an angel; a fallen angel, but an angel nonetheless.

Who Wrote Romans? (vv. 21-23)

The most important thing in these final three verses is the identity of Tertius, who in v. 22 claims to be the man who “wrote this letter.” Tertius was an *amanuensis*, a secretary of sorts who took dictation from Paul. The Spirit revealed words to Paul. Paul spoke the words to Tertius. Tertius put pen to parchment, and from this we have Romans. Paul regularly wrote using a secretary to take down the letter. We know this because at least four times he concludes a letter with a greeting that he says is in his own hand, implying that the rest is in the hand of his secretary (1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 2:17).

So, the point here is that although Tertius is the one who actually writes down the words, those words and the theology they express came directly from Paul. And Paul’s words and theology are themselves the words and theology of God the Holy Spirit. That doesn’t mean Paul took dictation from the Spirit in the same way that Tertius took dictation from Paul. The doctrine of biblical inspiration means that the Spirit, mysteriously but with utmost certainty, communicated to Paul precisely what God wanted made known. And Paul, on the basis of his education, experience, personality, and vocabulary, in turn spoke the revelation that came from the Spirit to Tertius. And Tertius, in turn, inerrantly recorded what Paul said.

Conclusion

Although there is much in this paragraph that might serve as a fitting conclusion to this message, I want to simply remind you that Satan, though still prowling about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8), is a defeated enemy, whose ultimate and eternal doom is certain and sealed. And you and I have no reason to fear him, for as Jesus said, “I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you” (Luke 10:19).