

The Gospel According to Paul: Romans

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Final Words of Warning and Final Greetings (16:21-24)

Avoid Divisive Persons

*Now I urge you, brethren, note **those who cause divisions and offenses**, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. ¹⁸For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. ¹⁹For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. ²⁰And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. ²¹Timothy, my fellow worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives. ²²I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. ²³Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.*

The bulk of the letter was most likely dictated by Paul to Tertius, his amanuensis or scribe. In Romans 16:22, Tertius gives greetings to the disciples in Rome and identifies himself as the one who had written the letter to that point. In verses 17-20, perhaps, Paul had picked up the pen to express his special concerns regarding those who were following him into

the synagogues where he had made converts with the intent of undermining everything Paul was saying. Then, at verse 21, Tertius picks up the stylus, sends greeting from himself and those others ministers of Christ with Paul there in Corinth. Our primary concern is with Paul's words of warning to the Roman Christians.

There are several things going on in this text: (1) a warning about those who cause division, (2) their means of causing division, and (3) how to respond to them.

A Warning About Those Who Cause Division

The concern is to avoid those who "cause divisions," (*skandalan*, the English word "scandals" comes from this word) contrary to "the teaching" (the '*didache*'). The noun "teaching" is singular; the teaching is the teaching of Christ, the teaching he has entrusted to his disciples. There is apparently, in the mind of Paul, teaching (*didache*) from which these Christians were not to depart. What would have been essential to "the faith" at this stage of the development of Christianity? The larger issues we have seen so far concern the identity and lordship of Jesus and the place of the Law (*Torah*).

Another word of interest is *koilia*. It literally means, "hollow," but is used of the belly, stomach, the internal part of man, even the appetite itself. Since the gut was sometimes used to refer to the center of human emotion, much as the heart is used figuratively to mean the same thing.

Division (*dichostasia*) was the result of the *skandalan*. In chapter 14 we have these terms used in discussion of the eating of meat and special day controversies. Perhaps, the Gentile Christians are under consideration as those who would destroy the church in order to have their views prevail. Their practice and their attitude would have given offense to the Jewish Christians, leading to offense and division. The motive behind this matter is that of "serving their own belly," or "serving themselves." Then, the problem may be with the Jews who would not compromise on the dietary laws of Leviticus. Instead of denying themselves someone preferred to gratify their own appetites or wills. Whether they were libertine or legalist in nature, their desire was guided by what was in their own interest. Paul says they "cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned." False teaching can polarizes the church.

Paul's advise here is clear; the major difference between a teacher of truth and a false teacher is the motive underlying their actions. Those who teach truth are serving the Lord. They are not in it for themselves; they are doing what they do for Christ and his church. In 2 Corinthians, where Paul defends his ministry against the charges brought against him by certain false teachers, he contrasts his motivation that was Christ-centered with the false apostles and their self-serving motives.

Their Means of Causing Division

In verse 18, Paul addressed both the methods these teachers use as well as their target audience. He says, "By smooth talk (*chrestologia* - gradifying) and flattery (*eulogia* - eulogizing) they deceive the minds of naive people."

Beyond their personal appeal, they have learned how to argue their cases. They are often articulate and believable. They they know their position well and are able to articulate it. It is a tragic commentary that many believers in the church today would be hopelessly outclassed in a theological discussion with some of these people over such issues as the deity of Christ.

One thing to keep in mind, the issue is always "what" is right rather than "who" is right. If "their Jesus," or "their message of Jesus," is different than "the Jesus" Paul had preached, as revealed in Scripture, the power of someone's personality cannot outweigh the truth, nor can "who they are" be considered as justification for hearing them.

They attempt to divide in two ways, (1) sow discord, by which believers are drawn away from unity in the interest of a given teaching, and (2) they occasion offenses, by which people are alienated from one another. Unity brings strength and division greatly weakens. The church here in Rome had a unity that was a great compliment to them. They had not allowed themselves to be divided by racial, socio-economic, or gender differences. But Paul warns them that what Satan could not do in these areas, he may be able to accomplish in a different way. One is reminded here of the satanic strategies in C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*. Satan never gives up, when Jesus was able to overcome all the temptations presented by Satan, Luke tells us the Satan left him until another time or "for a season," (Luke 4:13).

How Respond to Them

Paul clearly shows, that he did not condemn all kinds of discord, but those which were contrary to that “*which you have learned*”. What had they learned that was so critical to their faith that they were never to compromise it or turn from it? The content of this letter should give us a good idea; and at the heart of it was the issue concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth and how that belief in who he claimed to be could transform the life of the believer.

Keep in mind that Paul was writing this letter to Rome from Corinth in Greece. In Corinth there was division in the church. There were already people there who were teaching false doctrine and Paul was, at the time of this writing, having to deal with that. So, he is concerned that what has happened at Corinth (as well as Galatia and Thessalonica) not happen to the church in Rome. Paul doesn't say for the church in Rome to reprove, rebuke and exhort them; rather, he says he says, “avoid them,” have nothing to do with them, leave them alone. They serve their own appetites, their own desires, and they are preying on those who are least able to discern their false teaching.

In terms of application, the question, which immediately confronts us, is, who is a false teacher who falls into this category and how are we to distinguish between that person and those within the body of Christ with whom we happen to disagree on various matters? Paul is not contradicting himself here in light of what he has already written in chapters 14-15 concerning differences of opinion in such matters as food, drink, and holy days. In such matters, Paul's teaching of chapter 14 was that a spirit of good will toward one another (*agape*) and responsible discussions that leads to mutual edification would resolve such matters. There are, however, matters that cannot be compromised, and Paul calls these “the teaching you have received.”

How is one to determine such teaching? One sure question to ask is, “*Is this teaching consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth?*” Paul's instruction of Phil 2:1-11 clearly tells us that following the example of Christ is a sure way of knowing what one should and should not do. “What would Jesus do?” is always a good question when one is in doubt about concerning the right thing to do in a given situation.

A second question to ask would be, “***Will this teaching hurt the cause of Christ and his church?*** In Acts 20:13-35, Paul goes to great lengths to impress upon the elders of the church at Ephesus to follow this rule and not allow anyone or any teaching from taking the form of “savage wolves.”

A third question should be, “***Is this teaching a true reflection of the nature of God?***” God is not just a supernatural being; he is “a Supreme Being.” Neither his holy nature nor his moral nature may be compromised in our interpretation of his actions or his instruction to us. If it is inconceivable that a being who is absolutely holy and absolutely good in his nature would do or instruct anyone else to do a given thing, it just may be a good idea to look at the matter again in terms of our interpretation. This is one of the best hermeneutical principles around. The claim that God is sovereign and anything he says or does is not to be questioned is irrational and compromising with reference to the integrity of God’s being. One should never entertain a teaching that compromises God’s character.

A fourth question would be, “***Could acceptance of this teaching cost me my soul?***” This does not often appear as obvious to us as one would think. It is the case that if we are doing or teaching something that is forbidden by God in Scripture, even though we have convinced ourselves that because the cultural norm or “forbiddenness” of the behavior is no longer looked upon as wrong or sinful by our contemporaries, then it is to be considered an acceptable behavior, that behavior or teaching is still condemned in God’s word to us. Such an example would be *porneia*, the Greek word for “fornication” or “sexual immorality.” Clearly, the majority of our culture approves of such behavior; this does not, however, mean that God has changed his mind about it, or that he will not confront us with such a behavior when we face him in death.

In 1 Cor 2:1-2, Paul said, “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Then, in 1 Cor 16:22, he wrote, “If anyone does not love the Lord - *Anathama* [let him be cursed]. Lord come (*Marana tha*).” Both expressions are in Aramaic; the one says that one who does not acknowledge Jesus is cursed, and that the Jesus will come and all such persons will then face him. No doubt, to Paul, believe in who Jesus claimed to be was not optional.

Crushing Satan Under Foot

Paul concludes this warning with the words, “the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.” Given the context, it probably means, in part, that the false teachers, who are clearly inspired by Satan, will be defeated, in the triumphal procession of God (2 Cor 2:14).

Jesus tells Satan to get away from him (Matt 4:10) and to get behind him in Matt 16:23. In Luke 10:18, when informed by his disciples that they were casting out demons, he replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” In Acts 10:38, Peter, in his sermon to the house of Cornelius, says of Jesus, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” The writer of Hebrews says of Jesus, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil,” (Hebrews 2:14).

In Acts 26:18, Paul said that he had been made an apostle in order that he might turn the Gentiles from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.” In 2 Cor 2:11, he warns his readers that Satan was capable of outwitting them; and in 11:14, he warns them that Satan is capable of masquerading as an angel of light. He says in 1 Thess 2:18, that Satan had stopped him from coming to Thessalonica, and in 1 Timothy 5:15, that some of the followers of Christ had in fact turned away to follow Satan. Paul instructs the church in Ephesus, “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes,” (Eph 6:11).

James, the Lord's brother, in his epistle, warns his readers,

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice, (James 3:14-16).

Then in 4:4-7, James says,

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the

world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to dwell in us desires with jealousy? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." [Proverbs 3:34] ⁷Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

The Apostle Peter, in his first letter, warns, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour," (1 Peter 5:8). So also, the Apostle John warns, "the one practicing sin is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this reason the Son of God was manifested, in order that he might destroy the works of the devil." He then makes a very revealing statement, which is somewhat an echo of the "sons of light" and "sons of darkness" language of the Dead Sea Scrolls; he writes, "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother," (1 John 3:10).

That Satan will be defeated by God is a theme found throughout the New Testament, especially, in the book of Revelation, "Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short." (Rev 12:12). This imagery is reinforced by the words of Jesus in the apocalyptic discourse of Matt 25:41, "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'"

Perhaps, however, the most pertinent passages for our purposes here is 2 Timothy 2:23-26, where Paul warns the young minister Timothy,

Don't have anything to do with foolish and unconvincing arguments, because you know they produce fights. ²⁴And the Lord's servant must not fight; instead, he must be kind to everyone, skilled in teaching, patient. ²⁵In gentleness, instructing those who oppose him, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to acknowledgement of the truth, ²⁶and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

Conclusion

We must understand, however, that we only defeat Satan in our own personal struggle with him. Paul does not say that we or the church will crush Satan, he says that God will crush Satan through his church. How so? Satan's domain is darkness and his holding chamber is death, if they are destroyed, he has no domain and no holding chamber.

In Galilee, when Peter said to Jesus, "You are the Christ [Messiah], the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter (*petros* – stone) and on this rock (*petra*) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." What is the meaning of, "the gates of Hades will not overcome it?"

The gates of Hades, in Greek mythology (well known in Palestine at this time), were the means of entrance and the means of incarceration to the one entering the realm of the dead. The gates would not, however, be able to imprison and hold those belonging to the Lord's church. Many would experience death, but they could not be held within Satan's realm because of the conquering power of the resurrection of Christ and his claims on all those who become one with him in new creation, thus participating in his conquest of death and the grave by the power of resurrection.

The Greek word translated "overcome" is *katischuo* [a compound of *kata* meaning "over" and *ischuo* meaning "to be strong," hence, to be strong over]. The gates of Hades will not be strong enough to hold those of the Lord's church. That is his promise, and his resurrection was the seal of the power and legitimacy of his promise. Paul said in this letter,

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:37-39)

Paul ends this part of this letter with this statement, "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you." Note that this statement acknowledges Christ as the source of the grace to which we have access in time of need, and it

affirms Jesus as, "Lord," who is with us always.

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