

First Baptist Church, Granite Falls, MN
Pastor Todd Mitchell
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Introduction¹

After a little more than two years, our study of Paul's letter to the Christians in Roman is drawing to a close. We still have a few verses left, though, and I look forward to preaching a few more sermons on what remains. But none of them will be a sermon like this one. You see, we have finally reached the very last command that Paul gives in this letter.

After 97 sermons, we have finally reached the very last command of this letter, in the form of a plea. Now, of all the things Paul could have said, what do you think he wrote? After all the things Paul has said about loving one another, after all the things he has said about welcoming each other, after all the warmth and charity of his greetings that we heard last Sunday, what do you think is his final plea? The answer is sobering. It is the very opposite of welcoming. Paul's final plea is not to draw near a certain group of people, but to turn away from them. He wrote:

Romans 16:17-19 17 I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. 18 For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. 19 For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.

Now, this is amazing. In the very last verse before our passage this morning, Paul wrote, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." But then, in the next breath, he points to a group of people and sternly says, "Watch out for them!" And not only that, he commands, "Avoid them!" Do you know what this means? It means that we don't welcome just anybody. There are certain people we are supposed to avoid. There are certain people from whom we are supposed to separate.

Now, this is a hard thing. But if we love the Lord, we will take it seriously. We need to hear what the Bible says this morning. And we need to get this right. If we don't, the consequences could be horrific. If we embrace the people we are supposed to avoid, we could be swept out to sea by their lies. And if we start avoiding people, but we avoid the wrong people – the very people we are supposed to welcome – we will become a festering cancer in the body of Christ. So we must take this seriously, and we must get this right.

From our passage this morning, I want to show you:

- Paul's plea for separation
- Who to separate from
- What makes these people dangerous
- The lesson for us

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I. Paul's Plea for Separation

This really matters to Paul. Right here in his letter, right in the midst of all the warm, loving, words of friendship and encouragement, he says, "I appeal to you, brothers." He says these these things to his fellow Christians because he loves them and wants to protect them. He wants them to watch out for certain people, and to avoid them.

A. Watch out for certain people

Paul says, "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught." Now, I'm going to come back to just who these people are. For now, I just want to stop with those words, "watch out."

Your translation may say, "mark them which cause division," and that's a good translation, too. The point is that the Roman Christians are supposed to pay attention to these people. They need to be alert. They need to be watchful. They need to take notice of these people. They are not to be taken lightly. They are not to be treated the same way as other people. These people are special. They require special treatment.

Paul wants the Roman Christians to be careful. They are supposed to know what to watch out *for*. They are supposed to be on full alert. This is not something that he wants them to do just once. This is a way of life. This is a life of constant vigilance.

I once saw a video of a deer hunter using a full-size decoy, to lure a deer in close enough for him to take a shot at it. This decoy looked just like a deer. And to make sure it seemed like the real thing, this hunter put out special scents on the ground, to smell like a deer. He used a deer grunt call to make sounds like a deer. But you know, it's hard to fool a deer. They're wary. They're watchful. They're careful. And in this video, when they came in toward that decoy, they were on full alert. They didn't just walk right up it. They hung back, watching for signs of danger. Their noses twitched, sniffing for danger. That's the level of watchfulness that Paul wants the Roman Christians to have.

You know, some of the deer finally did come right up to the decoy. They were still cautious, but finally their curiosity got the best of them. And when they did, they put themselves right in front of the hunter's bow. And when the hunter drew back his bow, and let his arrow fly, it cost them their lives. The only ones who were safe were the ones who were smart enough to run away. The ones who avoided the decoy were the ones who stayed out of harm's way.

B. Avoid them

And that's exactly what Paul wants the Roman Christians to do. He doesn't just say, "Watch out for them." He says, "Avoid them." There are some people who are so dangerous that they must be avoided. The Roman Christians are supposed to

turn away from some people. They are not supposed to greet them with a holy kiss. They are supposed to separate from them.

Now, I'm going to come back to this in a little while. But before I do that, we need to figure out just who it is Paul is talking about, here.

II. Who to Separate From

There are two things that Paul says about these people in v. 17. In v. 17, he says that there are two things these people do. Number one, they “cause divisions.” And number two, Paul says, they “create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.” These two things are what the Roman Christians are supposed to watch out for.

A. Those who cause divisions

Number one, they cause divisions. What does that mean? Think of a flock of sheep. When they are unified, that flock of sheep grazes together. They are unified around their shepherd. They hear his voice, and know him, and they do not go astray. But what happens if a wolf comes into that flock? In a moment, the sheep can scatter. The sheep are divided. This is exactly what Paul was concerned about.

During our scripture reading this morning you heard what Paul told the elders of the church in Ephesus:

Acts 20:29-31 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

Fierce wolves speaking twisted things, causing men in the church to rise up and speak twisted things, creating division as they get members of the church to follow them.

Do you know why “speaking twisted things” causes divisions? It causes divisions because it destroys unity. Speaking twisted things, speaking twisted doctrine, creates division because it threatens the true doctrine which unifies the church.

You have to understand this if any of this is going to make sense. Do you remember what I said last week? What makes us friends is our common interest in Christ. Our fellowship is in Christ, and nothing else. We are united around Christ, and nothing else. And the only Christ we know is the Christ of the Bible. The only Christ we know is the Christ we know from the sound doctrine in the Word of God. And anything that threatens sound doctrine threatens to divide us.

B. Those who create obstacles to sound doctrine

That's why Paul warned the elders in Ephesus that the real threat of the wolves was the threat of “speaking twisted things.” And that's why, here in our passage this morning, Paul says these people not only cause divisions, but they “create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.” The one is the cause

of the other. Divisions are caused by false teaching. And false teaching is false because it dares to defy true doctrine – the true teaching of the Word of God.

But just what does this mean? Does this mean that the Roman Christians should be on the lookout for anybody who teaches anything contrary to what they have learned? Does everybody in the church there have to agree on absolutely everything? Does this mean they all have to watch out for the first person to disagree on something, and avoid that person?

Of course that isn't what this means. We already know that, because of what Paul said in Romans 14. Do you remember what he said in Romans 14? His main point was that matters of conscience are matters of liberty. There, he said, "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions!" Disagree with one another, yes. Reject each other, no! In Romans 14, Paul taught that we ought to honor matters of conscience, and we ought to trust God's power to save our brother with whom we differ, even if we think he is mistaken.

So in our passage this morning, Paul isn't talking about disagreements like that. We don't all have to agree on everything. We can disagree about whether women should work outside the home, and whether we should have TV's in our homes, and whether we should homeschool or not, and even more important things than that. My Presbyterian friends and I certainly disagree about baptizing babies. But as long as they do not believe baptism saves those babies, and as long as we agree upon the fundamentals of the faith, we are still brothers in Christ. We aren't going to be watching out for each other and avoiding each other because of disagreements on these things.

So just what does this mean in Romans 16:17? If Paul isn't talking about disagreements over matters of conscience, just what is he talking about? What is it that could create divisions and obstacles contrary to sound doctrine?

I can think of several things that could do this. Since it is the gospel that unites us, the most obvious thing that could divide us is some false teaching that denies the gospel. For instance, if somebody teaches that Jesus didn't really pay the penalty for our sins on the cross (like Charles Finney taught), then he denies the gospel. If somebody teaches that Jesus wasn't really God (like the Jehovah Witnesses do), then he denies the gospel, since only a God-man could pay the penalty for our sins (a mere man could not pay for his own sins, not even after an eternity in hell). If somebody teaches that Jesus wasn't really born of a virgin (like liberals teach), then he denies the gospel, since he is denying that Jesus was a God-man. If somebody teaches that Christ's righteousness is not imputed to us when we believe (like the Roman Catholic church teaches), then he denies the gospel, since that leaves it up to us at least in part to become righteous through our own actions. And if somebody teaches that God cannot know the future (like Pastor Greg Boyd does), then he denies the gospel, since the promises of inheriting the kingdom are not promises at all, but just hopeful predictions. Somebody who teaches a denial of the gospel certainly creates divisions and obstacles contrary to sound doctrine.

But there are other ways that people can create such serious divisions and obstacles contrary to sound doctrine that we should watch out for them and avoid them. In 1 Corinthians 5:11, Paul said:

1 Corinthians 5:11 But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

Now, imagine a teacher going around and trying to persuade Christians in the church that sexual immorality is actually a gift from God? It is almost inconceivable, yet that is exactly what the ELCA and the UCC do, “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power,” to borrow Paul’s words from 2 Timothy 3:5. And guess what else Paul told Timothy in that verse? He wrote, “Avoid such people.”

So certainly, people who deny the gospel or teach that evil is good create divisions and obstacles contrary to sound doctrine. But I can think of another way, too – simply by disobeying what Paul taught in Romans 14. If somebody insists on imposing his preferences upon his fellow Christians, and elevates his incidental beliefs to the level of fundamentals, he creates divisions and obstacles contrary to sound doctrine. That’s what Paul had in mind when he told Timothy:

1 Timothy 4:1-3 1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, 2 through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, 3 who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

Can you think of anybody who does things like that? Or what about people who teach that a certain Bible translation is the only inspired Word of God, and that anybody who disagrees is an apostate?

Paul says, “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.” And in v. 18 of our passage this morning, he explains what makes these people dangerous.

III. What Makes These People Dangerous

He says two things about them. First, he says, “For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and,” second, “by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.” Let’s look at each one of these.

A. They serve their own appetites

First, “such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites.” Your translation might say, “their own belly.” That’s literally what the Greek means, but it is a metaphor. In Greek thought, the belly was the seat of the passions, the base

appetites. These are the same passions Paul had in mind when he wrote, in Romans 6:12, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.”

So here, when Paul says, “such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites,” what he means is that no matter what these people say, they are more interested in sinful satisfaction than they are in Jesus Christ.

But is this really true? Think of the ones Paul talks about in his first letter to Timothy, the ones “who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” (1Ti 4:3) How can we say that they are serving their own appetites? Aren’t they *denying* their own appetites? And what about the Mormon “missionaries” who devote years of their lives to the hardship of travel and of being reviled as they go door-to-door spreading the teachings of Joseph Smith? Aren’t they *denying* their own appetites?

No, they are not. They are indulging their appetites. Because if a person is not serving the Lord, then he is by default indulging his appetites. Paul says:

1 Timothy 6:3-5 3 If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, 4 he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, 5 and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

If you aren’t submitting the will of God, then you are defying the will of God. And if you are defying the will of God, it is not to please him. It is to please your own godless appetites. Even the one who denies himself many things is still indulging his own appetites, if he is doing it on to his own terms, and not God’s.

But we’re not just talking about liberals and Mormons and Roman Catholics and Jehovah’s Witnesses, here. We’re also talking about people who look a lot like us. How many Fundamentalists are so proud of being “Fightin’ Fundamentalists” that they care more about the fighting than the fundamentals? And how many of them fight for the fundamentals half as much as they fight for the incidentals? I listened to one sermon on our very passage this morning in which the preacher railed against anybody who would use a different Bible translation than the KJV. And when he started boasting about being a “Fightin’ Fundamentalist,” the crowd really started cheering (actually, they were Amen-ing).

Beware people who are spoiling for a fight. There’s a reason one of the qualifications for pastor is that he not be a brawler. Brawling, fighting, quarreling – these are the delights of the flesh, the passions, the belly. That’s why Paul told Timothy to “flee youthful passions” when he told him to “not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil.” (2Ti 2:24) The man of

God isn't spoiling for a fight. He is an ambassador of Christ, not a scrapper. His feet are shod with the gospel of peace, not boxing shoes.

Those who create divisions and obstacles to sound doctrine "do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites." That's especially dangerous, because, as Paul says next, "by smooth talk and flattery [lit. fair, or persuasive speech] they deceive the hearts of the naïve," and make them serve their own appetites, too.

B. They deceive with smooth talk and flattery

In other words, they're tricky. They don't go around with signs on their foreheads saying, "Watch out for me. Avoid me." They may seem very likable. Ever seen Joel Osteen on the television? I think he could sell ice to an Eskimo. He's a brilliant orator and might be the best motivational speaker I've ever heard. Even though I disagree with him, I can't help but start to feel uplifted if I listen to him long enough. It's hypnotic. But he preaches a gospel not of salvation from sin to the glory of God, but of simply getting out of whatever rut you're stuck in so you can be successful in your business. His smooth talk and flattery deceives the hearts of the naïve – the people who don't know sound doctrine, and who aren't watching out for false teachers like him.

But smooth talk and flattery isn't just for the soft-spoken. The "Fightin' Fundy" can be just as full of smooth talk and flattery. Let me show you what I mean. When I was in seminary, I had to take a class in logic. Now, for the final exam, our teacher didn't just hand out a test. No, he made us watch a video called, "The Leaven in Fundamentalism." The video was of two chapel sessions at a prominent Fundamentalist Bible College in which two teachers took turns explaining why the KJV was the perfectly preserved Bible, and anybody who thought another translation could be the Word of God was a sinful hypocrite.

And do you know what? Even though these men were not nearly as smooth as Joel Osteen, they were smooth in another way. One of them was a bit of a shouter – but oh, was he persuasive. His words were so smooth and so fair that I started to feel this strong urge to agree with him.

But that's exactly why our logic teacher picked that video. Because when you actually started to analyze the argument of those teachers, it crumbled. They had no argument. It was just a whole bunch of smooth talk and fair speech that powerfully deceived the hearts of the naïve.

We don't know exactly who it was that Paul has in mind in our passage this morning. But we sure do know the type of person he has in mind. And the only way for the Roman Christians to avoid being deceived is to always be watchful, and to know sound doctrine, so as not to be naïve. They must always be on guard, always be vigilant. In v. 19, Paul says, "For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil." In other words, they must never rest. Yes, they are obedient. They are not divided, they are not led astray – yet. But because Paul doesn't want that to

happen, ever, he urges them to beware of these dangerous people, so that they would never know the evil consequences of being deceived.

IV. The Lesson for Us

Which brings us to the lesson for us. And there is definitely a lesson here for us, Brothers and Sisters: We need to take matters of unity and separation seriously.

A. Take unity seriously

First, we need to take unity seriously – seriously enough that we cultivate it and keep from wrecking it ourselves. Unity ought to be so precious to us that we prize it, and hold it dear, and weep at the very thought of division. Never forget what Paul said in the last chapter:

Romans 15:5-6 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If you want to bring glory to God, then you ought to be jealous of the unity of the church. But unity isn't something you can just make out of thin air. As Dr. Bauder says:

You never get unity by aiming for unity. You never get fellowship by aiming for fellowship. If you want to promote the experience of unity and if you want to promote the experience of fellowship you must promote the factors that unify you and that you hold in common.

As my friend Eric White pointed out, you can tie two cats together by the tail and hang them over a clothes line, and you'll have a union – but you won't have unity. Simply being together isn't what makes us grow in unity. The only way to make unity grow is to grow in what unifies us. And that means growing in our understanding of doctrine. Of all the things we do, nothing is more important to building unity than learning the Bible.

So let's take unity seriously, and learn sound doctrine. And let's make sure we don't make the mistake of wrecking unity by becoming the very thing we are supposed to avoid. If we forget that some doctrines are more important than others, if we forget what we learned in Romans 14 about not quarreling about matters of conscience, if we forget to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us, then we ourselves can create divisions and obstacles to sound doctrine. Don't be a "Fightin' Fundy" who is just scrapping for a fight. Take unity seriously.

B. Take separation seriously

And take separation seriously. There does come a time when you must avoid somebody. Paul told Titus, "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him." (Tit 3:10)

And when it comes to false teachers who deny the gospel, we aren't even supposed to recognize them as Christian brothers. If we do, we become as guilty as they are. John said:

2 John 8-11 8 Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. 9 Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. 10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, 11 for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

But isn't that rude? Yes, it is. But that's how seriously we need to take separation from false teachers who deny the gospel. We cannot treat as Christian brethren those who deny the gospel. That is why I cannot be part of the Ministerial Association, and that is why I could never sign documents like the Manhattan Declaration.

Does that mean we have to separate from all unbelievers? No. If we did, then we would have to withdraw from the world. But Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 5:10 that we are to associate with even the most profligate sinners of this world. We don't avoid our neighbor because he is an unbeliever. The only people from whom we separate are those who claim to be brothers in Christ but who deny him by what they say and what they do.

And never forget that the people whom Paul is talking about in our passage this morning are those who are actively causing problems. He is not talking about Christians who are just a bit confused. Those people don't need to be shunned; they need to be taught. But when it comes to the wolves, the slick talkers who serve not the Lord Jesus but their own appetites, the ones who create divisions and obstacles to sound doctrine, we need to take separation very, very seriously.

Conclusion

So let us take matters of unity and separation seriously, Brothers and Sisters.

Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.