

Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 12 of 13)

The God of Peace Will Soon Crush Satan

Romans 16:7-20

Mark Vroegop

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. ²⁰ The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Romans 16:17–20 (ESV)

Our journey through the book of Romans is quickly coming to a close. Next week we will finish our study of this wonderful book by looking at the last six verses of Romans 16 and reviewing where we have been over the last two years. My life has been marked by this book, and I am sad to see it go.

The plan in 2016, in case you are wondering, is to go back to the Old Testament in January and February and to look at the book of Lamentations to see if we can recover the lost language of lament. The series will be called “Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy – Learning the Language of Lament.” After that our next series will be on the topic of Heaven. So we are jumping from lament to eternal glory. And then we will be back in the New Testament as we study the book of 1 Peter to learn how to be exiles in our world.

Last week we tackled twenty-six names, and we talked about the importance and the variety of relationships in the body of Christ. As well, I encouraged you to ask some questions about how you might leverage relationships around you for the advance of the gospel. I loved how many of you stayed around after the service and connected with people. I heard from a number of you about how you met someone new, had a great conversation, or just liked how connected you felt to other people.

The point of verses 1-16 is simply that the church should be a place filled with people who are connected together by the gospel. When that happens, there is nothing more attractive or compelling than the church. A healthy church is beautiful and special.

However, it can go south very quickly. An entire church or a Sunday School or a Small Group or a small circle of friends can very easily spoil the beauty of what it means to be the church. I’m sure you’ve seen it happen. Maybe you were a part of something like that. It is amazing how quickly a healthy group of people can implode.

In Romans 16:17-20 Paul gives the church his final words of instruction. Everything after this will be related to final greetings and a beautiful doxology. After a lengthy list of names of people that Paul really loves, he warns them about the way that Satan, sin, and deceivers collude to destroy the church.

Paul wants them to stay vigilant and long for the day when the gospel will ultimately triumph. Therefore, he gives this church some final instructions. Let's see what he says to the church in Rome and to us.

What to Avoid: Divisive Deceivers (vv. 17-18)

The shift in verse 17 is dramatic and somewhat startling. The wonderful list filled with affectionate statements could have had "kumbaya" playing in the background. Suddenly, the tone shifts toward a two-fold appeal regarding the kind of people who could shatter the beautiful harmony of the church.

That is one of the things that I love about the Apostle Paul. He really understands the "on-the-ground" challenges of dealing with real people and real issues. He knows that things could be going wonderfully well in the church when it comes to relationships and harmony, but that it can collapse so quickly. Paul has, no doubt, seen this happen. He has even dealt with it personally. For instance, an associate named Demas was greeted by Paul in the letter to Colossae and in Philemon, but in 2 Timothy 4:10 we read that Demas "in love with this present world has deserted me." Paul knows, from personal and pastoral experience, that as we enjoy unity, harmony and relationship, we ought also to be vigilant.

In particular Paul is concerned about those who would deceive people and become divisive. He knows that these kind of people destroy the unity of the church. Therefore, the Roman Christians are encouraged to be on guard. Deceptive deceivers are dangerous.

When Paul says "I appeal to you brothers" it is no small matter. This kind of language has been used before in Romans for some very significant pastoral instruction (Romans 12:1, 15:30-31). But this is Paul's final appeal, and there is a strength in these closing words. He desires for them to be vigilant as they consider their relationships with one another. Relationships have the potential to be used for amazing, gospel-centered good. And they can become the setting for terrible destruction.

Now Paul makes two appeals in this text regarding those who are divisive: 1) to watch out for them and 2) avoid them. Let's unpack both of these appeals and also learn about what drives the divisive person.

When Paul says "watch out" for these people, he uses a word which means to mark or to notice someone carefully. The word is actually used positively in Philippians 3:17 - *17 Brothers, join in imitating me, and **keep your eyes** on those who walk according to the example you have in us.* But here it is used negatively. The church is to be aware and looking for those who would destroy the unity of the body.

How does this destruction happen? There are two problems that Paul identifies: dissensions and stumbling blocks. Both are destructive but in different ways. Dissension is the creation of factions and strife between people. This is more than just honest, humble disagreement. Dissension is listed among the sins in Galatians 5 that are characteristic of the works of the flesh. It is disagreement which leads to discord. It is being disagreeable not just disagreeing. It more about the spirit, tone, and heart of someone or a person who uses disagreement in order to advance another self-centered agenda. We'll learn more about the motives in a moment.

Stumbling blocks, as we saw in Romans 14-15, are issues that cause substantial harm to a person's faith, even causing them to question if they can or should be a Christian anymore. Stumbling blocks often lead to some level of a rejection of truth and a departure from faith.

I think that the next phrase "contrary to the doctrine you have been taught" helps us understand the nature of what we are talking about. The stumbling blocks were some form of teaching that was contrary to what the church at Rome had been taught, and it likely related to the even the gospel itself since so much of Romans is about the Good News. But do not think of this merely as a matter of salvation. If you read ahead (19), you will see that there is some connection to doing what is good and not doing what is evil. If you combine this with Paul's linkage of faith with obedience (as in 1:5 – "obedience of faith"), it seems that the false doctrine was producing sinful living.

Therefore, Paul is calling the church to watch out for those whose tone and teaching create unnecessary divisions and bring about spiritual disaster. The church is to be on guard against those who wreak havoc on the church through false teaching and creating relational schisms.

The second appeal is really the conclusion of the first. If someone has been identified as creating division and stumbling blocks, the strategy is simply to avoid them. Paul does not want the Roman Christians to be affected by false teaching and a divisive spirit, so he instructs them to prevent the deceiver from exerting their influence. And the best way to do that was to avoid them. In other words, do not have anything to do with them.

Does that instruction strike you as odd? Sometimes in the name of loving our enemies or confronting fellow believers, we can forget that the Bible does make provision for the kind of response that avoids the person. A few examples:

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. (1 Corinthians 5:11)

⁶ Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

¹⁰ As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, ¹¹ knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. (Titus 3:10–11)

It might surprise you to know that there is a time and place where the right remedy or the wise move is to no longer allow the divisive deceiver to have an audience with you or with others because of the danger and the infectious nature of their views or words. Sometimes it is not only appropriate but even right to avoid contact with people who fit this bill.

The problem with divisiveness and false teaching is what we find in verse 18. Notice the four-fold warning about what is behind the scenes, lurking in their heart: 1) they do not serve Jesus even though they may have an appearance of doing so, 2) they are actually serving their own appetites,

which is another way of saying that they are serving their own self-centered desires, 3) they manipulate through words or specifically smooth talk and flattery, and 4) the result is that they are successful in deceiving the hearts of the naïve.

The reason why these deceivers are to be avoided is because of the subtlety of their actions. It looks like they are serving Jesus but they are not. Their words sound encouraging and convincing. And they are most effective with those who really do not fully know what they are dealing with. Therefore, Paul says that the church must watch out for and avoid these kind of people.

What are we to make of this instruction by the apostle Paul? Let me give you a few pastoral thoughts:

1. Never take for granted the beauty of unity in the body, and be aware of the potential for false teaching or people with selfish motives to make a mess of the church.
2. Take note of the description of divisive deceivers, and be sure that you never become one of those kind of people. The problem with divisive people is that they are convinced that they are right and clueless about the damage that they create.
3. In some cases, the best remedy to deal with divisiveness is to distance yourself from it or him or her. Deception and divisiveness are dangerous enough that it warrants avoidance.

Ray Ortlund, the Senior Pastor of Immanuel Church, provides an insightful game-plan for how to become a divisive person in an article entitled *“How to Rescue Your Church in Three Weeks.”*

Week One: Walk into church this Sunday and think about how long you’ve been a member, how much you’ve sacrificed, how under-appreciated you are. Take note of every way you’re dissatisfied with your church now. Take note of every person who displeases you. Take note of all the new people whose presence is changing your church. Meet for coffee next week with another member and “share your heart.” Discuss how much your church is changing, how you and others are being left out. Ask your friend who else in the church has “concerns.” Agree together that you must “pray about it.”

Week Two: Send an email to a few other “concerned” members. Inform them that a groundswell of grievance is surfacing in your church. Problems have gone unaddressed for too long. Ask them to keep the matter to themselves “for the sake of the body.” As complaints come in, form them into a petition to demand an accounting from the leaders of the church. Circulate the petition quietly. Gathering support will be easy. Even happy members can be used if you appeal to their sense of fairness – that your side deserves a hearing too. Be sure to proceed in a way that conforms to your church constitution, so that your petition is procedurally correct.

Week Three: When the growing moral fervor, ill-defined but powerful, reaches critical mass, confront the elders with your demands. Inform them of all the woundedness in the church, which leaves you with no choice but to put your petition forward. Inform them that, for the sake of reconciliation, the concerns of the body must be satisfied.

Whatever happens from this point on, you have won. You have changed the subject in your church from gospel advance to your own negativity. To some degree, you will get your way. Your church will need several years to recover. But at any future time, you can do it all again and keep your church exactly where you want it. It only takes three weeks.¹

Part of the reason that we need the book of Romans is to keep connecting us to the gospel, to keep humbling us, and to keep reminding us about the importance of the relationships that we share among us. Watch out for others, watch out in yourself that divisiveness or false teaching do not take root. Look out for divisive deceivers.

What to Be Innocent in: Evil Actions (v. 19)

The second instruction is really the “put on” of the “put off” of divisiveness and deception. After giving this sober warning, Paul attempts to encourage the church in the way that he wants them to live. It appears that he is not writing these cautionary words because of anything specifically in the churches in Rome. He does, however, know the track record of churches and people in general.

So what does he say? He begins in verse 19 by identifying that the church’s reputation throughout the world is really good. They are known for their obedience. In other words, the reports that Paul is receiving about the spiritual condition of the churches in Rome is really positive. What’s more, it makes him very happy to hear that they are walking in this obedience.

There is something really beautiful about a church that is generally and genuinely marked by obedience. If you’ve had the privilege of being raised in a church environment that was marked by biblical unity and godly obedience, you should thank God profusely. Don’t ever take a Christian community marked by obedience and unity for granted. Because I’m sure there are others who could tell you horror stories of churches who were train wrecks in terms of unity and obedience. Paul praises this church because their reputation was marked by obedience. The church makes him happy because their reputation for godliness is well known.

What’s more, Paul wants this reputation to continue. He knows that they could become a target of the enemy and that persevering in obedience and unity is rare. So he adds to the appeal to “watch out.” He says, *“be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil” (19b)*. He pulling language from the previous verse about deceivers and the naïve, and Paul is charging this church to be wise and innocent in the right things.

The church needs discernment – you and I need discernment – in both categories of good and evil. The charm and the pressure of deceivers is that they have information or an experience or relationships that you do not have. The temptation to go along with them is connected to a subtle promise of not being left behind, coming to a fuller understanding, or “growing up” in what you do. This was the essence of the temptation in the Garden of Eden when the Devil tempted Adam and Eve with information that they didn’t possess (Genesis 3). The fear of missing out was the central to the

¹ <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/rayortlund/2012/04/27/how-to-rescue-your-church-in-three-weeks/>

temptation. The Devil told them that their “eyes would be opened.” They would be wise! And how wise they became! They were wise to their sin, their nakedness, to separation from God, to life outside the Garden, and to death. They were wise in death and “innocent” of righteousness.

Paul’s admonition here is a reversal of this tragic path. He calls this church and us to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. At one level this means that our lives are to be marked by obedience and not evil. We should strive for obedience and shun evil. But at another level, and in context with the theme of deception, I think this command also means that we should turn the temptation of “missing out” on its head. We should look at the story of Adam and Eve and covet (in the right sense) their innocence. Would anyone say now that Adam and Eve were missing out prior to eating the forbidden fruit? We should see through the deceptive allure that the tempter uses, and have lives marked by wisdom in what is good and innocent in what is evil.

There are some things in life where missing out is not only wise, but it is the better choice! Is your life marked by wisdom in what is good and innocence in what is evil? Do you value and love what is good? Are you cautious and self-aware about your natural tendency to believe a deceiving promise offered to you by someone or some thing is being used by the Devil? Is your radar up for deceitfulness of sin in your life and in the lives of others? Do you long for what is good, think about what is good, and put into practice what is good? Let’s be a people who are marked by wisdom in righteousness and innocence in evil.

What to Hope for: Satan’s Defeat (v. 20a)

All of this talk about deceitfulness, deception, empty promises and division in the church makes us long for something. When we read texts like these we cannot help but look forward to the day when these kinds of instructions will no longer be necessary. We yearn for the day when Christ deals with Satan once and for all!

As Paul concludes his letter and as he thinks about the hope for future, he reminds the Roman Christians that the final verdict on deception and divisiveness has not been delivered. I think he tells them this because life and ministry can be overwhelming. It can feel as though the enemy is winning at every turn. The striving for righteousness, the battle against sin, and the refuting of false promises can be exhausting and discouraging. What should the Romans look forward to? What should we look forward to?

Romans 16:20 is a very unusual verse. The language is sharp and direct. It puts into words what a Christ-following, gospel-loving, sin-hating Christian longs for: ²⁰ *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet...* *Romans 16:20a (ESV)*. Any believer who has lived in the midst of a broken world and seen the way that sin destroys, divides, deceives, and decimates people’s lives will resonate with this prayer. Anyone who has had a front seat on the devastation of sin in their own life or in the life of another longs for Romans 16:20 to happen soon. Anyone who has to battle temptation or watched helplessly as a family member or a friend believed the lies of the devil aches in their soul for this day to come.

The fact that Paul calls God the “God of Peace” in this verse is important. Shalom is what characterized the Garden of Eden, and it is what will characterize the New Heavens and the New Earth (more on this in 2016!). In fact, Advent is a season where we celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace.

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end... Isaiah 9:6–7 (ESV)

But how does he bring peace? Jesus brings peace by crushing Satan under our feet. This statement has roots in the promise God made in the Garden after the Fall in Genesis 3:15. The Deceiver was told even then that his time was numbered. The future of Satan has been foretold by God from the very beginning, and, one day, peace will reign on the earth again. There is coming a day when the Devil, all the demons and all deceivers will be dealt with once and for all (Rev. 20:10). And those who belong to Jesus will reign with Him and share in His victory. The crushing of Satan will be under His feet and under ours.

No doubt Paul had seen many times the effect of Satan’s power in the world. He even bore the marks of Satan’s works in his body! And he, like us, longed for the day when God would say, “No more!” I don’t know about you, but it is good to be reminded about this reality because I find myself more and more saying, “Come, Lord Jesus, Come.” And I don’t just mean to rescue us and take us to heaven. I mean that at one level, for sure. But, I also mean “Come and crush the works of darkness.” My heart longs for the definitive, eternal, and sin-cleansing verdict to be issued once and for all.

What to Trust in: God’s Grace (v. 20b)

The final statement in this text is more than just a way for Paul to conclude his thought. Verse 20b is more than just a benediction. When Paul says, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” Paul is pinning all their hopes for their past, present and future on the power of the grace that believers have in Jesus.

What does this mean? Grace is the unmerited favor of God that comes to those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. Grace is the forgiveness that is offered to those who could not save themselves. Grace is the thing that is greater than our sin. Grace is the spiritual power given to use through Christ that makes a person forgiven, creates a new heart, and secures our eternal destiny.

But grace is also what we live by every single day. It is the promise you trust in when you are tempted. It is what you rely upon when trials come and you wonder if you can make it. Grace is what you pray to invade the hearts of people who are believing the lies of the enemy. Grace is what you breathe when it feels like everything is falling apart around you. And grace is what you hope for as you look toward a dark future. You believe in and trust in God’s grace. You breathe and live on grace!

The beautiful hope of the gospel is that God’s grace through the resurrected Christ will be with you. No matter what happens or what you face or what the church is dealing with or how the Devil is at work, His grace will always be with you. Always. Always. And the beauty of heaven is living in a world

with nothing that doesn't fit with God's grace. Everything that doesn't fit with grace has been contained, destroyed, and defeated. The reign of Christ means the rule of grace!

So what do we do in the interim? We work hard – really hard – to build the unity of the body through loving relationships in the church. We platform the gospel with how we care for one another in relationships. And then we never take harmony, obedience or unity for granted. We keep careful watch over ourselves and one another for teaching or beliefs that are unbiblical. And we watch out for a divisive spirit that can easily destroy the body of Christ.

What do we do? We weep over the brokenness of the world and the lies that circulate in the very air that we breathe. We lament over the problem of sin in the world and in all of us. We pour our lives into finding any way to bring God's grace into a world that is desperate for hope and healing.

And we pray with expectancy the words of Romans 16:20! We long for the day when the God of Peace will crush Satan underneath our feet. And even now, we pray: "God, crush the works of Satan!" with the names and faces and stories of people that we know who are trapped under his wicked deceptions. We do not just pray this prayer with a future hope; we pray it with expectancy and longing even now.

While looking humbly at ourselves and tearfully at the brokenness of the world we pray: "May the God of peace crush Satan underneath our feet." And "May it be soon!"

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