

WARNING, VICTORY, AND GRACE
(SUNDAY, AUGUST 18, 2013)

Scripture reading – Gen. 3; Rom. 16:17-20

INTRODUCTION

We are almost to the end of our study through the letter to the Romans. Even in the closing verses of Paul's letter we find important instruction – warning, promise, and encouragement.

Our text is another reminder of the great concern of the apostles for true doctrine and correct practice – orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

I think we can say that churches always face two great challenges – the perversion of the gospel and other central doctrines and antinomian or lawless behavior and thinking.

What we see here in the final verses of Romans is also found in the writings of the Apostle John.

1John 2:3 Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. **4** He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. **5** But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. **6** He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

2John 9 Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. **10** If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; **11** for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

Both John and Paul knew the great dangers early Christians faced. These same dangers are what we face. The false teachers might not look the same, but Satan constantly seeks to attack and deceive the true church of Jesus Christ.

Vance Havner commented appropriately on this issue:

Satan is not fighting churches; he is joining them. He does more harm by sowing tares than by pulling up wheat. He accomplishes more by imitation than by outright opposition.¹

¹ John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), n.p.

There are three parts in Romans 16:17-20, a warning, a promise, and final blessing and encouragement.

Watch out for false teachers and those who would lead you astray. It is God's grace that is your assurance and victory.

1) WATCH OUT FOR THOSE WHO CAUSE DIVISIONS AND STUMBLING, vv. 17-19

Rom. 16:17 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. **18** For 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. **19** For 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.

The first part of Romans 16 as we noted last week contained Paul's words of instruction and greetings as it related to 26 women and men who were part of the house churches in Rome. Why does Paul turn now to give this warning? I think we can see a pattern here that we see in Acts 20 when Paul spoke to the elders of Ephesus, where he emphasized in his goodbye speech the dangers that they would face. As Paul with great love and appreciation expressed his greetings to those in Rome he was also reminded of the dangers they would face.²

Who are the dangerous people who cause divisions and offenses as we see in verse 17? We really don't know anything about the specific threat other than what we read here. Were they people encouraged lawless living – libertines? Or were they Judaizers, those who proclaimed that faith alone in Jesus Christ is not sufficient for salvation? I don't think we can answer these questions and we don't really have to. It is also not entirely clear whether the false teachers were already active in Rome or whether they were a coming threat. Douglass Moo and others suggest that Paul had in mind a definite group of people but those who had not yet showed their faces in Rome.³

What is clear is that Paul gave a strong warning that the believers in Rome carefully be watching for such dangerous people who would try to lead them astray.

The verb urge is the same verb that Paul has used already in Romans 12:1 and also 15:30. Paul is giving a very strong request. The believers in Rome must carefully watch out for those who would seek to cause divisions and offenses and teach in ways contrary to the doctrine which they learned.

² Moo, 929.

³ Moo, 930.

The word divisions is used only one other time in the NT. It is listed in Galatians 5:20 as one of the works of the flesh, where it is translated as dissensions. Division we also know is a key strategy of Satan. He constantly looks to sow discord among the brethren. It is for this reason that Paul also warns us about the use of wrath in Ephesians 4. Improper anger gives place for the devil to work.

Some suggest that the warning that Paul gives here is connected with the instruction given to the strong and the weak in Romans 14 and 15. Other commentators don't believe there is a direct connection but certainly in Romans 14 and 15 Paul did talk about the issues that were causing division among those 'strong' and 'weak' in faith. But the issues listed in Romans 14 and 15 are certainly not the only areas where division can affect churches. Division can be created over just about any issue.

You hear commonly preachers talk about dividing over the color of the carpet used in a church building. I haven't personally heard of that before, but I can only imagine this illustration has some basis in reality.

Watch out carefully for those who cause divisions or unnecessary conflicts.

The second dangerous fruit of these false teachers is offenses. This same word is used earlier in Romans 14:13 where it is translated as a cause to fall.

Rom. 14:13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in *our* brother's way.

The Greek word is *scandalon*. The word can have different meanings but in Romans 16 and Romans 14 it means a spiritual problem that leads to damnation. An offense or scandal is behavior or encouragement that leads someone away from Jesus Christ and to destruction of both body and soul.

It is significant that Paul says that the way to recognize these false teachers is that what they are encouraging is against sound teaching or doctrine. You can see the fruit of their actions but you should also be able to see that what they are teaching or encouraging goes against the doctrine that is found in Scripture.

Titus 1:9 holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

Here we have another witness to the vital importance of sound doctrine and teaching for the Christian life. For too many Christians, doctrine is considered boring, lifeless, pointless. Certainly a

head full of facts is not the end goal in the Christian life, but we are talking here about how vital it is to know what Scripture teaches and the correct understanding of Scripture.

Are you seeking to grow in sound teaching and doctrine? How much priority do you give to a correct understanding of God's Word?

The end of verse 17 gives the second command, avoid those causing division and offenses. This same verb is used earlier in Romans 3:12 about all men and women in their rebellion who have turned aside from God and from truth. Here the verb has the positive meaning of staying far away from such false teachers. Have nothing to do with these people.

Here we see that although unity is essential for Christians we cannot have unity with those who do not hold to the truth of the gospel and who would seek to lead people astray.

Paul in Ephesians 4:13 speaks of the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. This is where true unity is found. From others there must be the godly application of separation and avoidance.

Look at both verses 18 and 19. They both begin with what word? Both verses begin with the word **for**. These two verses are related to the warning and command of verse 17. Verse 18 gives a further description of the false teachers and verse 19 gives a further description and witness to the believers in Rome.

The false teachers Paul wrote in verse 18 might claim to be servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, but such is not the case. Rather they serve their own belly.

What does this mean?

Several suggestions have been given. Probably the best idea is that this refers to a combination of their greedy, luxurious lifestyle and their self-centeredness.⁴ Here I can think of so many of the false teachers today on Christian TV and radio who enjoy extravagant lifestyles based on their false teaching. These false teachers may be skinny but they serve their own bellies.

Paul in a similar way spoke in Phil. 3:19.

Phil. 3:19 whose end *is* destruction, whose god *is* their belly, and *whose* glory *is* in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.

Paul is not just giving an insult here in verse 18. He is exposing the dangerous motivation of these false teachers. This needs to be kept in mind so that we will stay away from such false teachers.

⁴ Moo, 931.

How do such false teachers have an audience if they are really just serving their own belly? The second half of verse 18 gives the answer. Through smooth words and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the simple. How could it be any other way? The people even today who are the most dangerous in terms of their theology are some of the best communicators. They produce books and videos that in terms of production and writing are generally speaking very high in quality. Not all false teachers are able to do this, but certainly the most successful ones are the best at putting on slick presentations. And so sadly the simple are deceived.

2Cor. 11:3 But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

Verse 19 then goes on to describe the faithful testimony of the Romans but a connection is made to the warning in verse 17.

Paul highlights the obedience of the Roman Christians.

It is significant that it is obedience which is emphasized here. Obedience is often reduced today. Feeling is most important. Not so for Paul and the writers of Scripture. Obedience doesn't mean works-based religion. It means one is living according to the leading of the Holy Spirit according to the truth of Scripture. It is not the dull life, but the life of faith and focus on the Lord Jesus Christ. Christians should be known for a number of things. Obedience should be on this list of things that characterizes who we are, as the result of true faith in Jesus Christ.

The language here in verse 19 is connected with Romans 1:8 where Paul spoke of the faith of the Romans as something spoken of throughout the whole world. Paul rejoiced in such a testimony. Obedience is a beautiful thing. With obedience must also be wisdom.

What does the last part of verse 19 call to mind? The language has a connection to the instruction of our Lord that we read earlier today.

Matt. 10:16 "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

What a beautiful combination is given in the final part of verse 19 – wise in terms of what is good, simple or harmless in terms of evil.

The world mocks such a testimony today encouraging you to experiment, try things out. How can you know if you will like something unless you experience it? God doesn't want his people to be naïve,

but the Christian doesn't have to experience things in order to know whether they are good or bad. We have the clear testimony instead of God's Word.

May God give you also a faithful testimony of obedience and being wise and harmless.

2. THE PROMISE OF VICTORY, v. 20A

Romans 16:20a And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.

There are several connections in this passage with Genesis 3.

Eve was deceived by Satan and his temptation that Eve through her disobedience would become like God in knowing good and evil. It can be said that the corruption of the gospel and Christian doctrine is similar to Satan's temptation of Eve.⁵

Verse 20a also has a connection with Genesis 3 and specifically with verse 15.

Verse 20a is a challenging verse. Commentators, not surprisingly, are not in agreement as to the precise meaning of the verse.

We should first see a connection in verse 20 with other parts of the NT.

Before the final benediction in 1 Corinthians 16, we read in verse 22,

1Cor. 16:22 If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. O Lord, come!

1 Thessalonians also has a similar statement of promise in its closing chapter.

1 Thess. 5:24 He who calls you *is* faithful, who also will do *it*.

The promise here in Romans 15:20, then may not be identical to what is found in other places, but we can say there are parallels.

The language that Paul uses has a connection to Genesis 3:15 but it is also very appropriate for this passage. Verse 17 speaks of those who cause division and offense, the opposite of peace we can say. Here in verse 20 the promise is that the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.

⁵ *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT*, 692.

There are two aspects of this promise. First, there is an immediate reference, which is noted by the word **shortly**. This adverb means soon, in a short time. What is this crushing of Satan under the feet of the Roman Christians?

Given the context it speaks of victory over those who would cause divisions and offenses. Paul here then both warns the Christians and encourages them with the promise of victory.

If we knew more about these false teachers we might be able to say even more. R. C. Sproul in his commentary suggests Paul might also here be speaking of the judgment that would come upon Jerusalem in about 10 years time. At that very time Paul was enroute to Jerusalem to bring an offering to help relieve the poor. Paul was also very aware that some of the greatest opposition to the gospel came from unbelieving Jews. This is a possible interpretation but we don't know enough to be dogmatic here.

The second aspect of this promise is the eschatological. There is a connection then back to the Garden of Eden and the fall of man, the crushing of Satan and his forces which took place at the cross, and then the final destruction of Satan and all those aligned with Him when the final aspect of Christ's ministry is accomplished in His triumphant return.

Our own struggle then is part of the larger struggle. Our victory is not because of who we are but rather the God of peace who crushes Satan under our feet.

Isn't this such an important thing to keep in mind? This doesn't mean that all will be easy. It does mean that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Another OT passage that comes to mind is from Joshua 10.

Josh. 10:24 So it was, when they brought out those kings to Joshua, that Joshua called for all the men of Israel, and said to the captains of the men of war who went with him, "Come near, put your feet on the necks of these kings." And they drew near and put their feet on their necks. **25** Then Joshua said to them, "Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed; be strong and of good courage, for thus the LORD will do to all your enemies against whom you fight." **26** And afterward Joshua struck them and killed them, and hanged them on five trees; and they were hanging on the trees until evening.

3. THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS IS YOUR GREATEST ENCOURAGEMENT, v. 20B

20b The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you. Amen.

It is very easy to read such benedictions quickly and pass them by. They are so very familiar. But what they represent is the great hope that we have as you face your own weakness and sin and face the enemies of sound doctrine.

Every one of Paul's letters begins and ends with a reference to grace, and Romans ends with two references – verse 20 and verse 24. I think one observation we can make is that the grace that Paul desires to be with us is the grace that is found in each of the books of the NT.⁶ The source of grace is the God of grace. His grace is extended to you in salvation. And God continues to extend His grace to you through His Word, through prayer, and the sacraments.

These words are then the greatest assurance for you and also set forth the great challenge of seeking to receive and respond to God's grace.

Grace means there is no hope for you to earn God's favor through your own efforts. There is no more foolish quest than thinking on my own I can earn God's grace and salvation.

But if you have tasted the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ, shouldn't that grace be the greatest incentive for you to serve Him and obey Him? This is entirely different from works-based salvation. This is not legalism. This is responding to God's grace.

No one can live up to this response either. And so the continue assurance is again that God will continue to keep and guard you in His grace.

Listen to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ from John 10:27-28.

John 10:27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. **28** And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.

CONCLUSION:

Watch out for false teachers and those who would lead you astray. It is God's grace that is your assurance and victory.

As I mentioned last week, the Christians in Rome perhaps a few hundred in number lived in the most powerful and populated city of that time.

⁶ This was a point made by John Piper at a Gospel Coalition Conference in I believe 2009.

Such a small group of Christians was given then the encouragement that their victory would come not because of their own strength but through the mighty power of the God of peace. This is how the power of Satan would be crushed.

The challenge for us is not identical but it is similar.

Do you keep careful guard and watch against those who would lead us astray either through false doctrine or encouragement to live in ways displeasing to God?

Do you take seriously the grace of God and show that in thankfulness and continue trust in the Lord Jesus Christ?

May this always be the testimony of this congregation for the glory of our great God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Closing Hymn: 278

BENEDICTION – 1 PETER 5:8-11

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.