

Subject: *Words of Caution and Comfort*

Scripture: *Romans 16:17-20*

This passage is quite a contrast to verses 1-16, in which Paul mentioned several dear brothers and sisters in Christ and the reasons he was thankful for them. It reminds us that the church is not perfect, and there are always problems to deal with. The only perfect church is in heaven.

In a perfect world we would have perfect churches and everyone would be of the same mind to serve Christ and glorify Him, to submit to one another and put others first, to protect the purity and unity of the church. But we don't live in a perfect world. The real situation is that some people in the church can be divisive and put their own desires ahead of the church. What is the church to do with trouble-makers?

Three churches (Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian) worked together to have a town revival. After the revival was over, the pastors met together and shared the results in their churches. The Methodist pastor said, "It was a great revival. We gained four new families." The Baptist preacher said, "It worked even better for us. We added six new families." The Presbyterian pastor said, "Well, we did even better than that. We got rid of ten of our biggest trouble-makers."

Divisive people are always a threat to the church. We live in a fallen world and that means people can be disgruntled, unhappy, selfish, and in some cases disruptive and dangerous. This kind of attitude and behavior can be harmful to any church.

1. PAUL'S WORDS OF CAUTION (vs. 17-19)

We need to understand this passage in its overall context. Paul has written this letter to the church at Rome. He has written about sin and its consequences, about salvation and its blessings, about God's sovereignty and its assurance for believers. He has written about the proper response of gratitude and humility and obedience to God. We should devote ourselves to God as living sacrifices. We should be mindful of others when it comes to secondary matters and we should strive for unity in the church. That's the way everyone in the church should be, but the reality is that some people can be divisive and cause trouble. Because Paul loved the church he always commended those who were faithful, and he cautioned them about those who were unfaithful.

A. Paul identifies the problem

In verse 17, Paul says to "mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine (teaching) which you have learned." The word "divisions" means standing apart, being separate, or causing separation. He is not talking here about minor differences. The word "offenses" means laying a stumbling block in someone's way or causing someone to fall. A person can be a stumbling block to others by their words, their actions, or their attitude.

These are people who grumble, complain, criticize, murmur, and gossip. They cause strife and act out of pride. They are selfish and unconcerned about the unity and purpose of the church. They may teach things that contradict or undermine what believers have been taught (vs. 17). "The doctrine which you have learned" is the same doctrine we have in the NT.

True believers have been taught to trust Christ, accept Him as Lord, give all they are and all they have to Him, love other believers, and commit their lives to share the gospel with the world. This is not true of a divisive person. He opposes the Lordship of Christ, the doctrine of Christ, the unity of believers, and the mission of reaching the world with the gospel.

These people don't serve Christ, but their own interests (vs. 18, their own belly = the stomach and its physical appetites, that is, their personal desires).

They are persuasive and prey upon simple (naïve, unsuspecting, innocent, immature) people. They use smooth, convincing words to influence people to side with them. They want people to think like they think, believe like they believe, talk like they talk, and feel like they feel.

B. Paul addresses the problem

The solution is not complicated, but simple: mark these people and avoid them. The word "mark" (Gk. *skopeo*, English word "scope") means to keep your eye on, to look at, observe, or focus on them, and then "avoid" (stay clear of) them. Notice, the church is to avoid and turn away from the people, not just from their sin. This is the responsibility of the whole church, not just the pastor and the deacons or leaders. In other words, the church must police and protect itself.

In verse 19, Paul urges them to be wise about what is good and simple (naïve, innocent) concerning evil. J. B. Phillips translation says: "I want you to be experts in what is good, and not even beginners in evil." A healthy church must have godly wisdom and discernment to spot trouble-makers and keep what is evil out of the church. The one question that believers should ask is this: What is true and what is right? If something is not true and something is not right, we should turn away from it as far as possible.

2. PAUL'S WORDS OF COMFORT (vs. 20)

Paul turns from the visible enemy in the church to the invisible enemy of the church (Satan). He wants the church to know there is no doubt about the ultimate outcome of good over evil. The God of peace will bruise (crush, defeat) Satan under their feet shortly (not soon, but swiftly, quickly). Satan is at work in the world, and in the church. Satan is behind these divisive people in the church, just like Jesus predicted (parable of the wheat and the tares).

God is "the God of peace." That may seem strange in the context of division in the church, but God and His church never make a truce with the devil and his workers.

Matthew 10:34-36 ³⁴ *Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.* ³⁵ *For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.* ³⁶ *And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.*

There will be no peace in this world until the Prince of Peace comes back. One day Christ is coming to put down Satan and claim the church as His bride. That is the ultimate fulfillment of this verse, and it goes back to the first promise of the gospel in Scripture.

Genesis 3:15 *And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*

Notice that God will bruise Satan “under your feet” that is the feet of the church. This is the ultimate and final victory that believers have over Satan. Even now Satan is defeated by God working in the church to obey what Paul says in verses 17-19.

Paul closes verse 20 with a prayer for the church to have the grace of Christ. Grace is greater than all our sins, greater than all our troubles, and greater than all our enemies.

In light of these verses, we should be vigilant and cautious, careful to guard the unity of the church, and shun people who cause division. And we should be confident that God will protect His church and defeat Satan and his workers.

We need God’s wisdom to recognize trouble-makers, we need grace to stand firm against them and avoid them, and we need patience to wait for God to give us final victory over Satan and his workers.