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A FINAL WARNING: BEWARE OF FALSE TEACHERS!

Romans 16:17-20

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Romans, Lesson 107

A Final Warning: Beware of False Teachers!
Romans 16:17-20

Years ago, a seminary professor told his class at the beginning of the semester that they would work together on one major project during that semester. They would move systematically through the New Testament to categorize every area of truth and determine how many times each area is addressed. Their goal was to find what one thing is emphasized more than any other in the New Testament. When they completed the project, they were amazed to see that warning against false doctrine is emphasized more than any other thing, even more than love, unity, and experience (Renald Showers, in "Israel My Glory," [April/May, 1995], pp. 24-25).

I have not verified their conclusion, but they're probably right. Jesus warned (Matt. 7:15), "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." Much of His ministry consisted of confronting the false teaching of the religious leaders of His day (cf. Matt. 16:11-12; 23:1-39). In His discourse on things to come, He warned (Matt. 24:4-5), "See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many."

The apostle Peter devotes most of 2 Peter to warning against false teachers. Jude devotes his entire short letter to the same theme. John in his epistles repeatedly warns of false teachers. Paul's final words to the Ephesian elders warned them (Acts 20:28-30),

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

His final letters to Timothy and Titus repeatedly emphasize the need for sound doctrine. He told Titus (1:9) that an elder must hold "fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teach-

ing, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." He goes on to explain that there are many empty talkers and deceivers who are upsetting whole households through their false teaching. In his final charge to Timothy, after telling him to preach the word, he explained (2 Tim. 4:3-4), "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

So it should not surprise us that as Paul concludes his letter to the Romans, in the midst of giving and sending warm greetings to the saints, he breaks in with this warning to beware of false teachers. Some liberal commentators have thought that this paragraph is so abrupt and out of context that it must have been added by a later scribe. But Paul was constantly battling false teachers who hounded his steps and perverted the truth of the gospel. He was writing from Corinth, where false apostles posing as servants of righteousness had caused much damage (2 Cor. 11:3-15). As he thought of his many dear friends in Rome, he didn't want them to be led astray. He had heard that they were doing well in the Lord (16:19a), but the present is no guarantee for the future. So his love for them prompted him to insert this warning against the dangers of false teachers.

Paul's words here are totally out of sync with our current culture that holds tolerance as the chief virtue. Even many professing evangelicals argue that we should set aside all doctrinal differences, even with the Roman Catholic Church, and come together in the areas where we agree. They say, "Jesus didn't say that the world will know we are Christians by our correct doctrine, but by our love." And so they hold unity services with those who deny the gospel and other core biblical truths. In its most extreme form, they hold interfaith services with those who believe in other religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam.

Even the respected evangelist Billy Graham fell into this serious error. He was always known for cooperating with Roman Catholics in his crusades. But even worse, as far back as 1978 *McCall's* magazine quoted Graham as having said, "I used to believe that pagans in far countries were lost if they did not have the

gospel of Christ preached to them. I no longer believe that." (Cited by Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided* [Banner of Truth], p. 73.) In May, 1997, in a TV interview with Robert Schuller, Graham said,

I think that everybody that loves or knows Christ, whether they are conscious of it or not, they are members of the body of Christ.... God's purpose for this age is to call out a people for his name. And that is what he is doing today. He is calling people out of the world for his name, whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world or the non-believing world, they are members of the Body of Christ because they have been called by God. They may not know the name of Jesus but they know in their hearts that they need something they do not have, and they turn to the only light they have, and I think that they are saved and they are going to be with us in heaven (*ibid.*, pp. 73-74).

Schuller was surprised by Graham's words and asked for clarification, "What, what I hear you saying, that it's possible for Jesus Christ to come into human hearts and soul and life, even if they have been born in darkness and have never had exposure to the Bible. Is that a correct interpretation of what you are saying?"

"Yes, it is," Graham responded decidedly. At which point, Schuller exclaimed, 'I'm so thrilled to hear you say this: "*There's a wideness in God's mercy*."' To which Graham added, 'There is. There definitely is' (*ibid.*, p. 74).

Of course there *is* a wideness in God's mercy. As Romans 10:13 states, "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." But Jesus Christ is that Lord and He said (John 14:6), "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." So when a Christian leader as respected and popular as Billy Graham says that people of other religions will be in heaven apart from faith in Christ, it shows why we need to pay close attention to Paul's warning here to be on guard against false teachers. He's saying,

Even obedient Christians need to be on guard against false teachers who deceive others for their own gain.

Paul makes three points: First, believers need to be on guard against false teachers (16:17-18). Second, even obedient Christians

need to be on guard against false teachers (16:19). Third, ultimately, it's the God of peace and His grace that protect us from falling prey to false teachers (16:20).

1. Believers need to be on guard against false teachers (16:17-18).

“Urge” (Rom. 12:1; 15:30) is a word of strong appeal. Paul is talking to believers (“brethren”) and he shows us how to recognize these false teachers and how to respond when we encounter them.

- A. Recognizing false teachers: to spot one you have to know what to look for.

Scholars debate exactly who these false teachers were. Apparently, they had not yet arrived in Rome, so Paul is giving a heads up so that when they arrived, the believers would be able to spot them. We cannot be certain, but since the Judaizers dogged Paul's steps and tried to bring Gentile believers under the regulations of the Mosaic Law, they may be the ones in view (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 929; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 803). But the warning is generic enough that it applies to a wide range of false teachers. Paul lists four marks to identify false teachers:

- (1) The motivation of false teachers is to promote themselves by causing dissensions and stumbling blocks.

Romans 16:17: “Keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned....” We need to understand that Paul is *not* saying that true teachers avoid all controversy! Jesus Himself provoked a lot of dissension by confronting the hypocritical religious leaders (Matt. 10:34-36; 23:1-36). Paul contended vigorously with the Judaizers in Galatians, where he tells how he confronted Peter publicly because he had come under their sway (Gal. 2:11-15). When the gospel or other core biblical truth was at stake, Paul believed in the necessity to contend strongly for the faith. In fact he sums up his entire ministry by saying that he had fought the good fight (2 Tim. 4:7). He was not opposed to controversy when the gospel was at stake.

But the word that Paul uses here translated “dissensions” is a deed of the flesh (Gal. 5:20). And these dissensions are “contrary to the teaching which you learned.” This dissension stems from

self-centered, self-exalting motives. False teachers attempt to build a following because they love promoting themselves and being the center of attention. They're after power, fame, money, or sinful sexual gratification. They don't seek to exalt Christ and Him crucified. They don't hold firmly to the gospel of justification by faith alone. By adding the word "stumbling blocks" (9:33; 11:9), Paul shows that these men created dissension by teaching damnable heresies. Invariably, those who stood for the gospel would rightly oppose them. The result was dissension in the churches. But at the root of it, these false teachers were motivated by promoting themselves, not Christ.

- (2) The message of false teachers is to contradict core biblical truth.

Their message was "contrary to the teaching which you learned." Paul is mainly referring to the truth of the gospel which the Romans had believed and which Paul had set forth so clearly in this letter. There are many areas of doctrine where godly Christians may differ and yet still be saved, such as various views of prophecy, baptism, church government, spiritual gifts, and other secondary issues. But there are core doctrines where all true Christians must agree or you cease to be Christian in any biblical sense of the word. All of the cults promote a way of salvation by works that detracts from God's glory through the cross of Christ. All false teachers undermine the person and work of Christ. If you abandon these core doctrines for the sake of unity, the unity you end up with is not *Christian* unity. So pay attention to the message.

- (3) The master of false teachers is their own appetites, not the Lord Christ.

Paul explains (16:18), "For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ, but of their own appetites." False teachers are in the ministry for their own profit or gain. They take people's money so that they can live lavishly. They love power and being in the lime-light. Often false teachers take advantage of women in their congregation for their own sexual gratification. But they do not preach or live in submission to Christ as Lord. By the way, "our Lord Christ" clearly affirms the deity of Jesus Christ. True teachers seek to submit every area of their lives to Christ as Lord and God.

- (4) The method of false teachers is to use smooth and flattering speech to deceive the hearts of the naive.

False teachers are usually nice, likeable, and winsome. They flatter you by telling you what you want to hear. They smile a lot as they tell you how great you are and how you can have your best life now. They don't talk about anything negative, like sin and the coming judgment. They say, "People are beat down enough as it is. When they come to church, they need to hear a positive message, like God's love and acceptance" (apart from repentance, of course). They use biblical verses (often out of context) and biblical language, but they often change the meaning of the terms. For example, both the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses talk about believing in Jesus as Savior and Lord, but their "Jesus" is not the Jesus of the Bible.

Arius (d. 336), was a heretic who denied the deity of Christ and was the forerunner of the modern Jehovah's Witnesses. He gained a huge following. The courageous Athanasius battled against him. Parker Williamson describes Arius (*Standing Firm: Reclaiming the Chastain Faith in Times of Controversy* [Lenoir, North Carolina: PLC Publications, 1996], p. 31, cited by John Piper, "Watch Out for Those Who Lead You Away from the Truth," on Desiring-God.org):

Here was a bright, energetic, attractive fellow, the kind of citizen whom any Rotary Club would welcome. Singing sea chantees in dockside pubs and teaching Bible stories to the Wednesday night faithful, this was an immensely popular man. His story reminds us that heresy does not bludgeon us into belief. We are seduced.

Note also that the deception takes place on the heart level, which refers both to the mind and the emotions. Deceivers know how to manipulate people's feelings. They tell you stories that tug on your heart. They get you laughing. They often ridicule those who stand firm for biblical truth and portray them as mean, angry, and unloving. They appeal to greed and the desire that we all have to be healthy. If you'll just send them a gift, they'll pray for your prosperity and healing. By preying on your feelings, they lure you into their web of deception. So to recognize false teachers, watch their motives, their message, their master, and their methods.

B. Response to false teachers: Keep your eye on them and turn away from them.

Paul says, "Keep your eye on them and turn away from them." The noun related to the verb "keep your eye on" is used in Ezekiel 3:17 (LXX) to refer to the watchman on the wall. His job was to keep his eye peeled for the enemy and to sound the alarm when he saw them coming so that they could prepare for battle. Since these false teachers often disguise themselves as "servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:15) or as "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matt. 7:15), you have to be discerning to spot them.

Paul does not tell us to engage in dialogue with them or to invite them into our church to see if we can find some common ground as we discuss their ideas. Sometimes division or separation is both the necessary and the godly thing to do. Christian leaders especially have to be careful here. For example, when Billy Graham invited Roman Catholic leaders to sit on the platform with him at his crusades and he used the Catholic Church to follow up with those from Catholic backgrounds who responded to his message, he sent a strong message to the untaught that the Catholic Church preaches the same gospel that we preach. The problem is, they don't. They preach salvation by grace through faith *plus works*, which is precisely the Galatian heresy. Paul preached salvation by grace through faith *alone*. The difference is not minor, because Paul said that the Galatian heretics were damned (Gal. 1:6-9)!

Should you invite cultists who knock on your door to come in and discuss their beliefs so that you might lead them to Christ? Maybe, but be very careful! The cults do a better job of training their people than we do. They can take you to every verse that seems to support their errors. If you're not knowledgeable, they will confuse you and draw you into their heresies. I usually tell them that I have studied the Bible seriously for over 40 years now. If they're seeking the truth of how to know God and go to heaven, I'd be glad to talk with them. But if their aim is to convert me to their errors, they're wasting both their time and mine. Almost always, they say, "Thank you, have a good day," and walk away.

So believers need to be on guard against false teachers. Also,

2. Even obedient Christians need to be on guard against false teachers (16:19).

Romans 16:19: "For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil." Why does Paul begin this verse with "for," which seems to be explaining the warning of verse 18? The sense seems to be that Paul rejoiced to hear about the obedience of the Roman believers to the gospel, but that obedience also made them a prime target for these false teachers. False teachers rarely make converts out of raw pagans. Rather, they go for unsuspecting Christians who lack discernment.

Paul also says, "I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil." J. B. Phillips paraphrases it, "I want to see you experts in good, and not even beginners in evil." Or, in Jesus words (Matt. 10:16, ESV), "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." In the context, "good" refers to sound doctrine in line with the gospel. "Evil" refers to the corrupt doctrine of the false teachers. While it's helpful to have a basic knowledge of what the cults and other false religions teach so that you can avoid their errors and witness to them, it's not edifying to study these errors in depth. Some who are targeting a particular false religious group may need to study their teachings more thoroughly. But our focus should be on being wise in the Scriptures. Knowing the truth will equip you to refute the errors of false teachers.

Paul concludes with a promise and a blessing:

3. Ultimately, it's the God of peace and His grace that protect us from falling prey to false teachers (16:20).

Romans 16:20: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you."

- A. The God of peace is able to crush Satan under our feet as we trust in Him.

This is Paul's first mention of Satan in Romans. He is no doubt thinking of the first temptation in the garden, when the serpent deceived Eve. God promised that her seed (Christ) would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). The implication is that Satan is behind these false teachers who deceive the hearts of the unsus-

pecting, just as he deceived Eve. Note that in this context of spiritual warfare, where God will crush Satan, Paul calls Him “the God of peace.” He makes peace both between us and Him and peace between believers through the cross of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:14).

Satan was defeated at the cross (Col. 2:15). But until Christ returns the battle rages as the enemy seeks to deceive and devour Christians. We win the battles against him as we put on the full armor of God and resist his evil schemes (Eph. 6:10-20; 2 Cor. 2:11; James 4:7; Rev. 12:11). He will be finally defeated when Christ throws him into the lake of fire (1 Cor. 15:25; Rev. 20:10). While we should not ignore Satan and we should respect his cunning and power, we should not fear him. The Bible is clear that God will finally triumph and Satan will lose (1 John 4:4).

B. The grace of our Lord Jesus will protect us from the errors of false teachers as we walk closely with Him.

“Grace” takes us back to Romans 1:7: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Grace really is the theme of Romans because God’s grace is at the heart of the gospel. False teachers invariably subvert the grace of God, either by teaching salvation by works (legalism) or by promoting licentiousness. Knowing and experiencing God’s grace sustains us in the battle against the enemy. His grace motivates us to study His Word of truth, which protects us against the deceptive lies of false teachers.

Conclusion

J. C. Ryle was a champion for the truth in the Church of England during the 19th century. I’d recommend that you read him. In *Warnings to the Churches* ([Banner of Truth], p. 110), he wrote about how difficult yet necessary controversy in the church is. Then he added, “But there is one thing which is even worse than controversy, and that is false doctrine tolerated, allowed, and permitted without protest or molestation.”

After acknowledging that many would view what he writes as exceedingly distasteful, he states (p. 111), “Three things there are which men never ought to trifle with—a little poison, a little false doctrine, and a little sin.” Amen!

Application Questions

1. Jesus told us not to judge others and yet a few verses later He said not to cast your pearls before swine and to beware of false prophets, both of which require judgments (Matt. 7:1-5, 6, 15). How do you reconcile these commands?
2. Paul here gives at least four marks of false teachers (motivation, message, master, and methods). Can you think of others?
3. When is it right and when is it wrong to discuss biblical truth with false teachers? What guidelines apply?
4. How do we determine which doctrines are worth dividing over and which doctrines can be set aside for the sake of unity?

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