

DID YOU GET THE LETTER?

Romans 16

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Romans 16. The last message in this series of Paul's letter to the Romans. Beginning in verse 17.

"I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. Timothy, my fellow worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives. I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings. Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen" (Romans 16:17–27, NIV).

I like to receive mail. Every day at the mailbox, I am wanting to know what has come in. I think that this desire to receive mail comes from my days as a college student, when I would hover by the mailbox every day hoping for that letter from someone who was far off, that only wrote once or twice a year. I have gotten such a penchant for reading mail that, when I was a student, I would read anything anyone sent to me even if it was what is called junk mail. For me, it wasn't junk mail. It had my name on it.

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I still feel a twinge of guilt these days when I throw unopened junk mail into the trash can. I try to read as much of it as I can. On the other hand, I've learned it's wrong to read other people's mail. Some letters that I have received I've kept. I have read them over and over.

This letter that we have been looking at for the last year and a half, has it been a mimeographed letter? Sort of junk mail? Or has it been a letter that you thought, maybe, was addressed to someone else and maybe you never did open it? Or is it a letter that, hopefully, you have seen as addressed to you as well? You're invited to read it. Now you're standing by the mailbox, and we've gone through the letter, and you're reading the signoff part of the letter. That's where we're at this morning. Seeing its close.

Paul has already come to a logical conclusion in chapter 15. But like many persons who preach, he finds it difficult to put the finish to the message. So he keeps going. Sends greetings in the early part of chapter 16. Then one additional word of teaching comes forward. It is a word of warning. A final word of warning which he brings to say that the Roman church is to beware of those who would come in its midst and bring dissension and difficulty. The word for "dissension" signifies a kind of a strife. "Difficulty" is a word which can mean entrapment. Kind of theology and teaching that can emerge where people try to trap true believers who perhaps are not knowledgeable enough in the Word of God, or knowledgeable enough about the wiles of false teachers. And they could come into their entrapment.

It's not surprising, really, that Paul should give this warning to the Romans, even though it's a very spiritually mature church. Whenever we see Paul leaving a church that he has founded, we see him giving them a warning, sometimes near the close or at the close of his time with them, to say, "Watch out, the dogs are coming. Those who seed dissension in the Body." When he left Ephesus and he was speaking for the last time to the pastoral leaders, the elder at the church of

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Ephesus, he warned them about the fact that even in that mature and vibrant church there would come those who would bring false teaching.

His word of appeal therefore in verse 17 is meant to keep the Roman church from acknowledging those who come with false doctrine. When Paul says, “I appeal to you, brethren,” it’s a thing which now he’s done three times in the letter. There’s no word at all in this letter where Paul says anything by way of command. He doesn’t say to the Romans, “I command you.” He comes as an older brother in the Lord and simply coaxes his appeal by way of request. “I appeal.”

I think, as we look at this appeal to the brethren, we need to recognize that there are two kinds of brethren. In Romans, there are the weak brethren who have been described in Romans 14 and 15. And now there are what we may label here, “false brethren.” The weak brother is in the faith, but he’s weak in his grasp of the significance of Jesus Christ upon his life. He’s still trying to earn his salvation a little bit by works. But the false brethren have completely gone away from the radical proclamation that only Jesus Christ can save us. And have, instead, inserted something additional into that message.

Of the kinds of false brethren in the Body, there is a further division. There are two kinds of false brethren, I think. There is the false brethren that Jesus talks about in Matthew 13, where he gives the parable of the wheat and the tares, or the weeds and the wheat. He says, “Let both grow together until the end of the age when the Lord comes and reaps the harvest” (Matthew 13:24–30,36–43). That is, there are some “false brethren” or “false sisters” who look like they are a Christian, act like they are a Christian, but you cannot really discern whether they are in the faith or not. In fact, that’s not necessarily our prerogative. That’s the Lord’s. So the Lord says, “Let the weeds grow together with the wheat” (Matthew 13:30). Don’t have a heretic hunting

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mentality in the church to make everybody walk such a fine line that it becomes a small circle.

The physical circle—the body of Christ—is, in some occasions, a mixed bag.

I think the second kind of heresy is the one that Paul is dealing with here in Romans 16 that I wouldn't call weeds or tares. I would call crabgrass. The Lord doesn't say, "Let the crabgrass grow together with the wheat." He says, "Let the weeds grow together with the wheat." The weeds or the tares were those particles of vegetation that looked very much like wheat in its early stages. It was impossible to distinguish the two. To pluck up the tares would be to pluck up the wheat. But you certainly can tell crabgrass from wheat. There's a radical distinction. And there are some who make such a racket in the body of Christ and are so distinguished by the words which flow out of their mouth and the actions which flow out of their life that it is proper, according to Scripture, to institute discipline and give warning to them.

There are also two kinds of heresy of those who are the crabgrass. There are those who have a heresy that involves them falling short of proclaiming the full Word of God. In the New Testament, these persons were called Judaizers. They accepted the message of the Old Testament, but didn't really understand the implication of Jesus' life and work. They wanted persons to live by law, by ritual and regulation.

Then there are those heretics who sought to go beyond the Word of God and add things to it.

Time would fail us to note all the varying elements of these kinds of things which are occurring within the New Testament. Perhaps the Colossians, what was going on in the Colossian church, would be an excellent example of those going beyond the Word of God, adding to the Word of God—the worship of angels and demoting the position of Jesus from His place of centrality. As compared to the Galatians, who had the tendency to listen to the heretics, who stopped short of the Word of God, and just simply left us with legalism.

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In response to these heretics—the crabgrass—Paul says we are simply to take note, and we're to avoid. We're to take note so as to mark out those who bring false teaching. And then we are to avoid them. Not to involve in shouting matches or arguing matches or wrestling matches with them.

We must remember that this was written in a time before the cults or the sects became expelled from the body of Christ. We now have rather sharp demarcations. We have obeyed Paul's words in saying when a person refused to confess Jesus Christ as Lord God, he cannot belong. He cannot be a part of the Church. So a group goes off and forms its own thing called Jehovah's Witnesses. Or another group comes along and adds something to the Scripture that's not there. They form their group. But in the Early Church, all of these groups were present in one Body. Can you imagine the sort of diversity that could occur in a congregation if you had sitting there Christian Scientists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and evangelical believers all attempting to call themselves Christians, the sort of dynamic that would occur in the Body? This is the scene that would occur in the Early Church with all these groups present. Paul's practice of taking note and avoiding is a scriptural rationale for us to say, "There is a separation. There is a body of doctrine which is received and must be received. If it's not received, then we take note and avoid." We do it in a way that it's a non-hassling kind of a way. Our purpose is not to win arguments, but to win people to Jesus Christ.

Paul gives some characteristics of false brethren in verses 17 and 18. As he has noted, false brethren creeping into the church create dissension and difficulty. They cause strife, and they seek to entrap people in their ways.

I. He indicates they are opposed to apostolic doctrine.

This is the doctrine which has been proclaimed by the apostles and found in the New Testament. They are also not centered in Jesus Christ. Instead, he says, they are centered on their own

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appetites—and the word, literally, is on their own “belly.” A term which meant they were more satisfied in something that pleased their palate, or taste.

It’s like they saw the varying beliefs about God as though you had gone to a smorgasbord to eat. But instead of having food, you had doctrine. There was a whole smorgasbord of doctrine there. And they said, “What do we really like? We’ll take that, and that, and that—and we’ll take what suits our own interest.” This is pleasing their own appetites. One must be careful that he not simply select out those things to believe that give him pleasure. It is those things to believe and trust in which have been revealed to us by God.

II. Paul also says about the false brethren that they are smooth talkers who deceive.

They come with fair and flattering words. It’s a very interesting term which he uses in the Greek language. Their words sounded very spiritual, is what he’s saying. They can say, “Praise the Lord,” a lot and, “Hallelujah,” and they speak all the same language. And you think, “Aren’t these wonderful people? Look at all the wonderful words that flow out of their mouth.” Paul says, “Get past what they’re lip-synching, and instead look at what is really flowing from their life.” What they’re doing, Paul says, is “deceiving the hearts of the simple-minded” (Romans 16:18).

I don’t like this translation, simple-minded, because it infers that the body of Christ is made up of a bunch of dodos, and we’ve got to look around and see who it is that’s trying to entrap all the simple-minded folks. The literal word here is a word that means “without evil.” It describes persons who, in respect to participating in these kinds of doctrines and experiences, have not indulged. Therefore, they are naïve to them, or innocent to them. It’s not that the main Body of believers is a simple-minded group. It’s just simply, because they have not dabbled in some of these areas, they may be prone to not having discernment in regard to some of these smooth-talking people. So the body of Christ is to be aware.

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In repelling these false teachers from the Body, Paul gives these words of encouragement. In verse 19 he encourages them by saying that he knows the primary characteristic in the Roman church is to be obedient. What a beautiful quality to describe a church Body, or to describe an individual. They are obedient.

III. Then he expresses to them a wish that he would have them wise as to what is good, and guileless as to what is evil.

Here he is saying, “I don’t want you to have to dabble in all this stuff that these false teachers are bringing. You don’t need to get deep in their mysteries.” Or, as Revelation puts it, I think very beautifully, “You don’t need to know the deep things of Satan” (Revelation 2:24).

Wise as to the good—that is, knowing what is good—but not necessarily informed about what is evil. You don’t have to search for good in a garbage pail. If your idea of knowing what is good from what is bad is to get in a garbage pail and dig for the good so you can see all the evil, I’d say that’s not necessarily a way to go looking for the good.

There are many people who feel that you’ve got to dig in the garbage pails of life, doctrinally and morally and everything else, if you’re to really treasure what is good. What a contrast this is with Philippians 4:8, which tells us to think upon those things which are true, and those things which are good, and those things which are worthy of praise, and can bring forth a response of joy in our life. Much different here than simply indulging in the evil to know what it is.

He states a promise to them—that if they will do this, the God of peace will soon crush Satan under their feet. What Paul appears to be doing here in verses 19 and 20 is recreating what happened in Genesis in respect to the invasion of false doctrine. In Genesis, Eve was disobedient to God. Therefore, she became wise as to what was evil, in contrast to what is spoken here.

Because she became wise as to what was evil, Satan, shall we say, bruised her heel. That was a prophecy that the Lord gave of Satan in the Garden. He would now bruise mankind’s heel. How

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would he do this? He would bring this devastation as a result of losing this innocence in respect to evil.

So disobedience set up a wisdom as to evil—set up, then, the bite of Satan upon the human personality. But Paul says, “All this can be reversed now. If you’ll be obedient and will not entertain these false teachers, then what is going to happen is you’ll be innocent in respect to what is evil. Instead of Satan grabbing you, you’re going to stomp him on the head.”

And the God of peace, who creates peace here in the Christian body—whereas, these troublemakers seek to sow division, He is the God of peace, and He’s going to deal with the troublemakers by crushing them under your feet. And He will do that shortly. Or probably the best translation is, “He will do that swiftly. He’ll do it all at once.” It’s kind of an act of expelling.

So this verse doesn’t necessarily look so much to the gray end of the age as it does to trouble in the Christian body that may have emerged through false teachers, and say to the body, “If you will be obedient and you will be innocent to the evil, then your obedience and your innocence will allow God, the God of peace, to crush these false teachers, which are satanic, under your feet.”

Of course, it’s a beautiful phrase to describe, too, what God is going to do at the end of the age when He is going to, once and for all, in one swift blow, put an end to the power of the enemy. But, of course, at the end of the age He’s going to crush Satan without our help. But here, He is crushing Satan with our help. It’s our feet that do the stomping, not His.

Paul then gives final greetings after this final warning. I really would like to get stuck in verses 21–23. It’s as though, now, Paul has finished the letter and the word has gotten out among some of the pastoral leadership and the laypeople of Corinth where he’s writing the letter from. Paul is just about done dictating. “He’s been in that room for a whole a day and a half or two days, and

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let's go in and hear the letter before it gets to Rome. Let's see what he wrote." So now, filling the room, are Timothy, and Lucius, and Jason, and Sosipater, and the like.

As they come into the room, Paul takes note of them and wants to translate their greetings to the Roman church. So he says, "Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you" (Romans 16:21). Timothy, this loyal person who had mixed parentage. His mother was a believer. His father was not. Yet this person coming from mixed parentage turned out to be a key person that God used. It's possible to overcome the adversities of a mixed parentage in regard to faith. Sometimes it's said if your mother is a believer and your father is not, your father is going to have the greater impact on the boy because he's going to follow in Daddy's steps. Here, with Timothy, is an example of a godly mother and an unsaved father, and yet the boy followed in the mother's and the grandmother's steps. For those of you of single-parent families—especially gals in our midst who are single parents of the family or maybe the only one in your family who really believes—take encouragement from Timothy, whose life can be summed up in this one word which Paul uses: "worker." What a beautiful tag to drape around a person's life. If you could express a personality in one word, how would you express it? Paul says, I can express it in this word of Timothy. He's a worker.

Then he gives greetings from fellow Jewish believers. The word here is "kinsmen." It probably means simply that they were Jews. Perhaps Lucius could have been the Lucius of Acts 13:1, who was a member of the pastoral leadership at the church of Antioch. Or it might just be a different spelling for Luke. Luke was with Paul at this time. Jason could be here the person who first met Paul at Thessalonica when Paul hid out in his house when they were looking for Paul to persecute him. Sosipater was a believer, evidently from Berea in Acts 20:4.

Then Tertius the writer of this letter. That means he is the secretary whom Paul is dictating to.

We know that it was Paul's practice customarily in his letters to, rather than write them himself,

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to dictate them. According to close study of Galatians, the reason why he evidently did this was not only maybe the custom of the time, but maybe the real reason was he was nearsighted.

Because when he closes the Galatian letter, he says, as he puts on his own handwriting, “See what large letters I’m writing to you” (Galatians 6:11). Which is a characteristic of a nearsighted person. You need the large letters to read them. So he has used a secretary, Tertius.

And there’s an exquisite courtesy here in Paul, because he doesn’t say at this point, “Tertius, who wrote this letter, sends you greeting.” But Paul evidently turns to Tertius and says, “You’ve been writing all along. How would you like to send greeting in your own name?” He gives Tertius the opportunity, then, to insert his personality into he letter. “I, Tertius, greet you in the Lord” (verse 22). Tertius, by the way, his name means “third.” In Roman society, slave families had many occasions that their children were named, First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth. They were regarded as economic value. When a name like Tertius is attached to a person, it’s almost a sure indication that the person is a slave. Here was a slave who, evidently, was an educated slave who had become a Christian.

Then there’s greetings from Gaius. Gaius is the one who’s been host to the body of Christ in the city of Corinth. Probably the same Gaius who’s called Titius Justus in Acts 18:7, whose house was next door to the synagogue. Who was a Greek, but who loved the Jewish people. When he came to faith in Christ and the synagogue in Corinth kicked Paul out, they went next door and the church took up residence in his house as they met here. He was one of the persons who was baptized by Paul at Corinth.

This Gaius was not asked to do the same thing as the rich, young ruler. The rich, young ruler was told by the Lord, “Sell all you have and give to the poor and come follow me” (Matthew 19:21).

But Gaius was allowed to keep his spacious house and to be a hospitality center for traveling Christians, such as the Apostle Paul. He put his goods to work for the Lord.

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Then there's Erastus, the city treasurer. In 1929, members of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens found in Corinth a marble paving block with this inscription from the first century: "Erastus, commissioner for public works, laid this pavement at his own expense." F. F. Bruce, New Testament scholar, suggests that one of two things happened. If this is the same Erastus, which it probably is—the same Erastus in Scripture, and the same who laid the pavement in Corinth—that he either was commissioner of public works before he became a believer, then after he became a believer he was promoted to city treasurer. Or he was city treasurer, and after he became a believer he was demoted to commissioner of public works. Somehow, though, during his tenure as commissioner of public works, a position a little bit less than treasurer, he had had a civic involvement of laying a street. Another indication that the gospel had penetrated some upper rankings within society.

Finally there was Quartus, who is simply called "the brother" (verse 24). Again, a one-word tag hung upon his life. Perhaps the description of the way he related to other believers. His name means "Fourth." Quartus.

Each of the eight names in this list has some description attached. Worker, kinsmen, writer, host, treasurer, or brother. Someday, people may sum us up in one word or in one sentence. What would we like that one word or one sentence to be?

I have a little side thought on Quartus. In Acts 20:4, which is written at a similar time to the incidents at the end of Romans 16, there is a person associated with Paul called Secundus, whose name means "second." Then there's Tertius in this letter, whose name means "third." And there's Quartus, whose name means "fourth." One is tempted to say, "Were these all three brothers who were called "Second," "Third," and "Fourth," who were traveling with the Apostle Paul at this time? Be that as it may, before Secundus, Tertius, and Quartus came to Christ, their society may have reckoned them as numbers. But when they came to Christ and fit within the

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family of God, they became known as persons, personalities. God always, I think, knows us by our name. Not simply by a number, or by an economic calculation.

When you put up a prayer to the Lord, do you post it in by saying, “This is Social Security Card number . . . calling. Would you enter that on the computer of heaven? Check it with all the other things and see what kind of an answer you can spit back, great computer in the sky.” When we get to heaven, are we going to log in at the gate, if there is a gate to log in at, and say, “I’m here.” And they say to us, “What is your number?” and then they go and look it up. “Number such-and-such is on the roll. Come on in, number . . .” Somehow, God is so amazing that He doesn’t need to use numbers to keep track of us. He can really keep track of us by our name. Names are so important because they are, in essence, personality. And even if somebody in the world has a name that is identical to yours, you’re still different in God’s sight. And unique and precious in His eyes. He doesn’t regard you for your economic value. But for your value as a human being, for whom Christ died.

Paul finally comes to the close of the letter in verses 25–27. A doxology. A doxology means “word of praise,” or “word of glory.” It’s sort of like the beginning of Paul’s letter. There are a number of parts through it where he begins a thought and he just simply cannot keep together his predicate with his subject. He starts off in a theme, and then he gets lost in modifying it. So if we really read sentences 25–27, what he’s really saying is, “Now unto him who is able to strengthen you, to the only wise God, be glory forevermore through Christ.” That’s how the sentence should read simply. But in between those two beginning and ending phrases, he got lost in a sea of description—describing how God strengthens us. It’s a tremendous characteristic of Paul. And one of the difficult things, in reading his letters, is to know when the Holy Spirit has inspired him and he has gone off in kind of a spiritual excursion.

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But the praise itself is simply, “To the only wise God be glory forevermore.” He’s at the end of the letter, and nothing more can now be said except glory to God. Now to him be glory! “Glory” was a word that was used to describe, and is still used to describe wealth and splendor and reputation. It’s a word which you can’t easily define. It is a word—like the word “hallelujah,” or the word “fantastic,” or “super-fabulous”—that denotes some essence of being or characteristic that we give praise toward.

God is being told here by Paul that we give glory to Him. We can’t put it all in words. We try to sum it up in one word, like glory. That means you really do have wealth and honor and reputation and character, and your gospel shows us what wealth of love and character and personality You have. So we give You glory.

The reason why Paul gives the glory is that this God, who is so wonderful, is able to strengthen us. And the word here for strength is literally to establish us, to make us firm, to root us. This is the stress of the whole letter—to deepen our understanding and our grasp of our faith in Christ. The idea that if God is able to strengthen us doesn’t mean that there’s some doubt of whether or not He’s going to do it. We say, “He’s able, but is He willing?” This is not just “able, but not willing.” This is both. He is able and willing, and will establish you in Christ.

Paul says He establishes us by His gospel. We know that we are firmly rooted in Christ because the good news of salvation has been brought to us. We know that we have been firmly rooted and established in Christ because of the preaching of Jesus Christ. This is the preaching that Jesus himself brings in the Gospels. And this is the preaching of Jesus Christ which others witness of Him concerning. The revelation of the mystery has been made known to us.

Is anyone tempted to feel that the gospel of Jesus Christ includes everybody but them, and they’re on the outside looking in? The Gentiles had always felt this way because there’s a mystery in the Old Testament—not fully revealed, only hinted at by the prophets—that there

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would come a time when non-Jews would feel fully embraced by the good news of the kingdom. Here it is, Paul says—now, in Jesus Christ. That era of mystery is over. The mystery has been revealed, and the gospel goes forth to every person. And we are strengthened by the fact that we feel included. And not only that, but we're strengthened by the eternal command of God. God himself has ordered that we be strengthened through the gospel of Jesus Christ. So the effect of our being established is that we should give the obedience of faith.

Paul says this great praise to God is through Jesus Christ. It comes by Him. In John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." There is no other praise that can be given to God, which is received of God and expresses God's worthiness and glory and beauty, unless that praise comes through Jesus Christ. It doesn't come through Muhammad. It doesn't come through Confucius. It doesn't come through Buddha. It doesn't come through Joseph Smith. It comes through Jesus Christ.

Now a simple question, Did you receive the letter? If you received the letter, then you know that this letter has told you that you were a condemned person. If you aren't yet sure of that, go back and read the first three chapters, which tell us that all persons in God's eyes are guilty of sin and of breaking His law. While this letter tells us that, it goes on to tell us that we are made righteous by Jesus Christ alone. So this letter anchors our salvation and says, "It's not in our feelings. It's not in the ups and downs of life. It's rooted firmly in Jesus, who gave His life for us." Did you receive the letter which told you that?

Did you receive the letter which says you're kept by God's power, and not your own? And did you receive the letter which said to be vitally involved in the body of Christ? That's been the whole stress of the last five chapters of Romans. Be vitally involved in the body of Christ.

I think that, after looking at this letter together, we ought to take a moment to give thanks to God, as does the Apostle Paul.