

Division and Doctrine

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[0 : 00] I'd like you to open up your Bibles to Romans chapter 16.

! Romans chapter 16. We're going to jump in in verse 17 this morning and read down through verse 20. But this journey through the book of Romans has been,!

And I hope for you, as it has been for me at times, an eye-opening journey through Romans. We have learned much from the book of Romans.

We have learned much from the Apostle Paul. We have seen God as He speaks through this letter, teaching us the truth, helping us to better understand the Gospel, helping us to have a firmer foundation beneath our feet, and then helping us to see how we should live out the implications of the Gospel.

That it's not just information to store away in our brains, but it ought to take root in our hearts and change the way that we relate to one another, change the way that we look at the world around us.

[1 : 07] That has happened for me in the last two and a half, almost three years, since we began walking through this book. And I know some of you have only come on since we reached chapter 16. Others came on in chapter 14.

And some of you came on somewhere in the middle of the book of Romans. And so some of you have caught different portions of this book. But I hope that you have caught the Gospel week in and week out, as Paul has not only systematically laid it out for us, but helped us to see and understand the different ways in which the Gospel should impact who we are and how we think and how we feel about the world around us.

And now this morning, as we jump into verse 17, we're going to see once again the application of the Gospel, but not merely to how we live our lives, but to how we assess others around us, particularly how we assess those who stand in places like I stand now.

How we assess those and how we think about those who teach the Word of God. And so I'd like you to glance there at chapter 16, verse 17, and stand as we read down through verse 20.

Paul says, 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, for such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites.

[2 : 27] And by smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the hearts of the naive. 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.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. We need the grace of Jesus with us this morning, Father.

As the Spirit of Christ teaches us and instructs us from this Word about Christ. Help us to see and help us to rejoice in what we see.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen. You guys take a seat. I read an article this week, not this morning, but this week, in which a gathering of feminist scholars came together.

As scholars tend to do, they create their own conferences and they come up with reasons to get together and listen to one another, deliver their speeches, and talk about the books that they've written, and buy one another's books.

[3 : 36] And I read an article in which one of the organizers and attendees at a feminist conference with a number of feminist university teachers and scholars as they gathered together.

And the conference was there to discuss the various sort of minority groups in which people find themselves. And not merely racial or ethnic minority groups, but all sorts of things. Anything that you might label as a minority group.

Anything that you might be able to say, that places me at some sort of disadvantage in the culture in which I live. And so as one of their exercises in the midst of this conference, they wanted to group people according to the disadvantaged group in which they found themselves.

And then not only that, but they also wanted to have, to further subdivide the groups if you had others whose lives were intersected by multiple disadvantaged statuses.

So for instance, it would be one thing for them, for someone to say, I am a, and this was a feminist conference, so this wouldn't have been the case, but if someone said, I am a black man, and so therefore in America, I have to deal with the difficulties of being African American in America.

[4 : 47] But if you were African American and a woman, you would be in a separate category because then you're dealing with not only the difficulties of being African American, but also the difficulties of being a woman. And then when you multiply that out by all of the alphabetical letters in the LGBTQ whatever, the writer of this article said that pretty soon things dissolved into chaos because everyone was arguing over who was the most disadvantaged.

They were all arguing over who suffered the most in our culture. And ultimately this attempt, this conference that was aimed at sort of uniting people and healing over and trying to get them to be able to find others who were like-minded and similar experiences and to talk and discuss the difficulties that they had, ultimately it ended up fracturing them further because everybody was focused upon the thing that they specifically identified with and they couldn't come to any sort of agreements.

They couldn't even group into any real logical types of groups because everyone had an issue. Everyone had something that they wanted to focus upon. They were there ostensibly to express some sort of unity and support for one another, but they ended up fracturing even further.

And that happens all the time. That happens in our culture very frequently because there is a tendency to want to avoid clear definitions while at the same time everybody wants to be clearly defined in a way that expresses exactly how they feel about themselves so that there is an avoidance of any universal statements of truth, but everybody wants to have their own version of the truth, something that's suitable for them.

But when everyone has their own version of the truth, no one can come together. There's nothing to unite us. We see that in the culture, but we also see it happening in churches all around us.

[6 : 42] We see many churches that want to avoid the discussion of doctrine. They don't want to talk about truth with a capital T.

They don't want to talk about the details. They don't want to talk about the matters of faith that the Scriptures take so much time to pour over. But when they do that, they do that seeking unity because they believe that doctrines divide, and yet what they often find is that in the absence of doctrine, division multiplies.

In the absence of clearly stated truths, everyone pursues after their own version of the truth. And even more dangerously, those who have not been taught the truth, those who are not aware of what the truth is, become vulnerable to any version of the truth that might be presented toward them.

And any version of the truth that doesn't line up with the truth is in the end a lie. So that we can seek unity, and yet the means by which we seek it can oftentimes become the cause of division amongst us.

And I think that's what Paul is addressing here near the end of the book of Romans. Take a look in verse 17. I want you to notice what he says because it seems strange initially as you begin to read through.

[7 : 59] He says, I appeal to you brothers to watch out for those who cause divisions. Watch out. There are people who want to divide you, Paul says. But then here's the strange part.

The next command that he gives them is found at the end of that verse. Here's what he says next. Avoid them or separate from them. Watch out for those who cause divisions.

And how do you watch out for them? You divide from them. You separate from them. You avoid them. Well, that seems like a strange sort of logic for the Apostle Paul to urge us to have. Be wary of people who want to create divisions, and the means by which you do that is you divide.

That doesn't seem to make sense to us. But as we begin to understand what exactly the Apostle Paul has in mind, we can begin to see why there are some divisions that are necessary for the sake of greater unity within the body of Christ.

So I want us this morning to consider who are these people that are causing divisions? Or more broadly, what are the kinds of people that we often see in the church who bring about divisions?

[9 : 11] Notice again what he says. He says that they cause divisions, but notice how. They create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.

So the path toward division that these teachers take is to deny the doctrine that the believers of the church in Rome have already been taught.

Now, Paul has written the book of Romans so that the Roman Christians can be more familiar with the things that he himself teaches. But he's already said back in chapter 15 that he's confident in them.

He's confident that they know the truth. He hasn't written these things. He hasn't written this book to tell them anything that they don't know. In fact, he says that he wrote Romans to remind them of the things that they've already believed, of the things that they've already received.

And so Paul, in writing this book, is trying to help the Roman church to know and understand where he stands on these crucial issues. So that by this point in the letter, the Romans should have already concluded, and we ought to be able to conclude, that the church in Rome was unified with the Apostle Paul on the most essential doctrines of the faith and on the things that he discusses throughout this letter.

[10 : 23] So that there is a base, bottom unity. There is a doctrinal core and foundation that Paul assumes the church in Rome already has. And now he says that those who cause division are teaching and acting and speaking in ways that are contrary to those core doctrinal convictions that he is confident the Roman Christians already possess.

And that shouldn't surprise us. Now I don't think that Paul has in mind any specific particular group of false teachers that have infiltrated the church at Rome. When you read through this letter, there's no indication that there's any group of false teachers already active and at work in the church of Rome.

But if you know anything about the Apostle Paul or the other apostles, if you've read through the book of Acts or if you've read very many of the epistles in the New Testament, then you will know that false teachers were frequent and common.

The Apostle Paul was constantly having to return back to churches that he had planted and then moved on from in order to address the fact that after he left, false teachers had come into some of those churches and begun to teach things that were contrary to the doctrine that they had received from him.

Over and over Paul deals with this. And so we should not be surprised if today we have to deal with the same issues. Again, there's not a specific false teacher or a specific issue in mind here at Rome.

[11 : 47] There's just the general truth that wherever the church is to be found, eventually false teachers will try to make their way into the church. We are in fact warned over and over throughout the New Testament of the dangers of false teachers and false teachings.

Let me show you just a handful of those. Hold your place in Romans and turn toward the back of the New Testament to 2 Peter. In 2 Peter, in chapter 2, the Apostle Peter gives us a warning.

He speaks first of prophets who arose in the Old Testament time period. He says, but false prophets arose among the people, that is the people of Israel. And then he says, just as there will be false teachers among you who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

False teachers will come in, he says. It's not a matter of perhaps they will, perhaps they won't, maybe your church will have to deal with it at some point in time. No, Peter says, they will come into the church as surely as they came in among the people of Israel and there were false prophets that abounded throughout the life of the nation of Israel.

As surely as they existed, so there will be false prophets and false teachers even in the church. You can turn over just a couple of pages in your Bibles to 2 John. You can see another warning there.

[13 : 14] In 2 John chapter 4, 1 John chapter 4, excuse me. In 1 John chapter 4, John the Apostle warns us, Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

For many false prophets have gone out into the world. Many have gone out into the world. They're out there. They're active. And therefore, John says, you must be on the alert.

You must be aware of these false teachers, of these false prophets. Of course, it's not the apostles only that warn us of this. If you continue to hold your place in Romans and turn all the way back to early in the New Testament to the book of Matthew, Jesus in Matthew chapter 7, in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount, His most well-known sermon that's recorded for us in the Gospels, in the midst of that sermon, He says in Matthew 7, 15, to His disciples, Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

They come to you in sheep's clothing, Jesus says. In other words, they won't be easily recognizable. Inwardly, they are ravenous wolves.

In fact, I think it's this teaching of Jesus that the Apostle Paul probably has in mind in Acts chapter 20 as He calls together the pastors, the elders of the church of Ephesus, and He begins to give them some final words of wisdom.

[14 : 47] He asked them to meet Him. As He was traveling on, He asked them to meet Him along the coast so that He could speak with them one more time. And in Acts chapter 20, if you look there, Paul, in the midst of telling them a number of other things, gives them a warning.

He says in verse 28 of Acts chapter 20, to the pastors, this is to the elders of the church of Ephesus, Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God which He obtained with His own blood.

Now notice what he says in verse 29. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves, see I think he has in mind what Jesus is saying in Matthew 7, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

Now verse 30 is what's frightening. And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.

From among your own selves, that is from among you pastors, from among you elders, men will arise saying false things.

[15 : 55] So when Jesus says, there will be wolves in sheep's clothing, this is exactly what He means. He means that sometimes those who are the most trusted within the church, sometimes those who we are the most inclined to believe and give the benefit of the doubt to, sometimes they themselves will be the wolves in sheep's clothing.

They themselves will speak twisted things in attempt to draw away the followers of Christ from Him. This is a reality that we have to face.

This is a reality that we have to deal with and we have to acknowledge it's there. I think sometimes we are not fully aware of the deceptiveness of false teachers, of the ability of false teachers to appear and to groom themselves to look like sheep when they are really wolves.

It's actually quite impressive and frightening when you realize just how impressive it is. In some ways, I think that we have been spoiled by the movies and television shows that we watch.

Because in any given movie, if you're watching a movie and there is a villain of the movie that at the beginning of the movie is really thought to be one of the good guys and he's there with the good guys, there will be all of these hints to us who are watching the movie that this guy is not really good.

[17 : 19] But to the other characters, they have no clue. But we're given these little hints. Sometimes the camera will linger a little bit longer on the face of the villain who's hiding out now.

And when everybody else is turning away and walking away, we'll see a smirk on his face or we'll see a knowing look like there's something that he's hiding. And so we've become accustomed to being able to see and know when there's a villain in the midst of the good guys.

And we kind of import that into real life and we think that we will know. We think that we will be able to spot them. But the reality is, we're not an outside viewer looking in.

And we're the other good guys who never see it coming until the end when they find themselves in trouble and at the mercy of the villain and they need to be rescued. That's who we are.

We're the sheep. And we don't see the wolves in sheep's clothing. We just see other sheep. And Jesus says, watch out for that. And Paul says to the elders of the church of Ephesus, watch out for that.

[18 : 23] And don't even assume that the men who've gathered here today to talk to me, an apostle, do not even assume that those whom I've summoned to myself on this day are all authentically sheep.

There may be wolves here today in our midst, he's telling them. Beware. Know that they are among you. And now here we are in Romans chapter 16, the same apostle now warning this church in Rome, not because he is convinced that they're already there, not because he has someone specific in mind, but because he knows that it is simply a universal fact that eventually they will come in.

And so he gives us two commands. First, we are to watch out for them. Watch out. Be on the lookout because they're not easy to see, are they? They're not. We're not going to have those knowing glances.

The camera's not going to linger on their face. We're not going to be aware unless we are paying very, very close attention and we are looking for wolves. You have to always be looking for them.

So first he says to watch out and then when you see them, when you recognize that they are actually there, he goes on to tell us, avoid them. Stay away from them.

[19 : 40] And so the question is, how do we move from the first commandment to the second? How do we move from the stage of watching out to being able to avoid them? That is, how can we recognize them?

How do we know? Well, Paul tells us explicitly that they are known because they teach things that are contrary to the doctrine that we have already been taught.

So we are on the lookout for those who teach things contrary to the things that have been made known to us from the Word of God.

But it's not always as simple as just looking for someone who says something that is openly in contradiction to the Scriptures. It's not always as simple as that. Sometimes it's as simple as that.

Sometimes there will be people out there who say things that are ridiculous and that we can dismiss out of hand. So that there have been teachers who have attempted to arise throughout the history of the church.

[20 : 38] Some who have said that Jesus was not even a real human being. He didn't even have a real body. He just looked like a man. He just appeared to be a man. And in fact, in John's letters, he addresses those people.

But he addresses them pretty clearly as if they're known. They're not hard to find. You just need to know that what they're saying is wrong and you need to not welcome them. He even goes so far as to say, don't welcome them into your home.

And by that he means when these traveling preachers come into your town teaching that, don't give them an open doorway. Don't invite them into your home. Don't let them into the church. Don't let them among you.

They're easy to see. They're easy to spot when they're saying something along those lines. But most of the time, most of the time, they're not so obvious.

Because most of the time, false teachers use the language of the Bible in order to support the teaching that they're pushing. Most of the time, they use and twist the words of Scripture to suit what they want to say.

[21 : 40] And we are liable to fall for that because we are always listening as the Apostle Paul says, we are oftentimes listening, wanting to hear things that tickle the ears.

In other words, we all have areas and we have blind spots. We have things that we wish the Bible said. We have things that we wish were true because it would make life easier.

It would remove some of the complications. And so when a preacher or a teacher comes along and he begins to say the very things that you wish were true, you are prone to believe those things.

You are prone to accept those things. And so there's no reason to be surprised at the influence and the growth of the prosperity gospel in the world around us.

That shouldn't surprise us. We shouldn't be caught off guard by that because it's saying to people exactly what they want to hear. You get to retain a little bit of Jesus but you also get to have a nice car and a big house if of course you have the faith to claim it for yourself.

[22 : 46] If of course you can do all these things and take all these right steps in order to gain the thing that God so desperately wants you to have. And yet, we see nothing of that in the New Testament.

We have a Savior who had no place to lay his head. We have apostles who warn us about the fiery trials that lie ahead of us. We have James not telling us to seek after wealth but saying, woe to you who are rich.

Warning those in the church who are rich because wealth is not a thing to be sought. It is a danger if you possess it, James says. But we shouldn't be surprised despite all those warnings about the prevalence and the spread of the prosperity gospel.

because we want to be told God wants you to have a bigger house and God wants you to have a nice car and God wants you to be healthy at all times.

We want to hear that and so we are more willing to hear it and put up with it though it is contrary to what the scriptures say. In fact, the prosperity gospel has found its growth worldwide among the poorest of peoples.

[23 : 58] Why does the health and wealth gospel have such a strong foothold in South America and in Africa? It's massive. It's growing. When you hear statistics about the spread of the church in the third world, be very careful because those statistics are diluted with the spread of false gospels, namely the prosperity gospel in those parts of the world.

Things are not as rosy as some would paint them. It has achieved great success in those parts of the world because you are talking about people who are desperate to have someone come and say, God wants you to never have...

Fill in the blank. He never wants you to suffer from AIDS if you are living in Africa. He never wants you to have to deal with the Zika virus if you are living in South America.

Whatever it is that weighs upon them, you have false teachers coming in and they are saying, if you have enough faith, you can avoid all of those things. If you have enough faith, you can no longer worry about where your next meal is going to come from.

And yet, we don't find that in the New Testament. We simply do not find that. It spreads because people naturally are willing to hear and receive and accept teachers who say things that they wish were true, but they know in their hearts are not true.

[25 : 23] So there are some false teachings that are easy to spot and easy to reject. There are other false teachings that are maybe easy to spot, but more difficult to reject because they say things that we want to hear.

But then there is another category of false teaching. Difficult to see at times. Difficult to turn away from because of the deep deception that lies within it.

Apostle Paul sort of lays out for us, if you'll turn over to 2 Corinthians, I want to show you this quickly because I want us to have a clear understanding in mind of when Paul says that those who cause divisions, they teach things that are contrary to what we have been taught.

You need to have a clear grasp on what are the things that Paul has in mind. Yes, you can just read the Romans and get a good feel for that. But we need to have a clear grasp on what Paul has in mind when he speaks of the doctrines that you have been taught that false teachers contradict.

2 Corinthians chapter 11. Listen carefully. You'll see some similar language here. Some of the other passages and in Romans 16. He says, I am afraid in verse 3.

[26 : 41] I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led away from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

In other words, Paul has great concern over the believers in Corinth being deceived by false teachers because he already knows that they are putting up with, that is, they have not done what he says in Romans, that is, avoided them, divided from them.

The false teachers are still in their midst. They've put up with them. And these false teachers are teaching against the doctrines that they've been taught and received. Namely, they're proclaiming another Jesus, a different spirit, and a different gospel.

These are very clear tests that we can apply to any preacher or teacher, to me or to anyone else who stands here or in any other pulpit.

Clear, obvious tests. So that Paul says, if someone proclaims to you a different Jesus, they are a false teacher. Now this to me is a category that we have by and large forgotten about.

[28 : 05] I have talked to a number of people over the years who have intimate knowledge of their convictions over the timing of the rapture, and yet they don't know the basics of what the Bible has to say about what God is like and who Jesus is.

We major on the minors and we miss the majors, and when we do that, we place ourselves in a position where we are easy to deceive on these crucial matters.

Paul says, if anybody proclaims another Jesus, and I love the way that he words it that way, the way that he words it here, because we sometimes think, well, as long as they're proclaiming Jesus, it's okay.

As long as they believe in Jesus, it's okay. Except that it might not be the right Jesus. It very well may be a false Jesus. I've told some of you the story of the other Chris Trousdale.

Some of you are familiar with this, but it is the best illustration I have, and so I repeat it. on the existence of other Christs and other Jesuses, but there is, there is another Chris Trousdale that exists in the world, and I know Trousdale is not a common name.

[29 : 16] I mean, if you have a really common name, you're thinking, who cares? There are a dozen of me living right here in my own town, but there is another Chris Trousdale who has some small modicum of fame, especially on the internet.

Apparently, at some point in time, he was in some sort of Disney boy band that I had never heard of, and probably nobody in this room has ever heard of, but a lot of 13 and 14 year old girls at that time were aware of who this particular band was.

I've still never, I mean, I've never heard of them playing in concert, they probably don't exist anymore, but there are still websites devoted to him. There's a website called ilovechrischilesdell.com, and it's not about me, shockingly.

I was very upset to find out that that wasn't a website that Allie had purchased the domain name and put it online. It's not for me. It was hurtful, but nevertheless, I got over it.

There are a number of them. If I Google myself, I will never find, like a Google image search. I'm not there. Like, you can scroll down through 300 pictures and you won't find me.

[30 : 21] I have to put the word pastor next to my name, and then it's only like the first two or three pictures that are of me, and then the rest of them are of this other guy. Well, several years ago, and I assume this is about the time that he was popular, several years ago, we, Allie and I, we were living in Dayton and we had just moved into a rent house, and so we had a house, right?

We weren't living in seminary housing anymore, and so we thought, well, let's get a home phone. We hadn't had a home phone, I don't know, since we'd been married probably. We just had our cell phones, and so we got a home phone and never really thought anything of it.

We don't have one today because it's useless, it's pointless, but we had one at the time for a little while, and we didn't think, I didn't think anything about it. I just thought we'd just get a number, and it was listed, you know, like any other number, and suddenly, we had an answering machine back then, not voicemail, suddenly, we started getting these messages left of giggling girls wanting to know if this really was Chris Trousdale, and so one day, I actually answered the phone, and I heard the giggles, and I thought, oh my gosh, this, you know, this is one of them, and so I start asking her questions, and she's just elated that Chris Trousdale is interested in her, and I'm asking her about where she lives, how old she is, I mean, all kinds of personal questions about her life, just who she is, where she goes to school, where she lives, and then finally, at the end of it, I said, I am not the Chris Trousdale you're looking for, and you need to be careful, little girl, about who you give your information to, because I could be some psycho and find you exactly where you are.

I am not the guy you're looking for. Stop giving people information, and you know, then she freaked out and was off the phone, but you know, my point was to her, stop doing that, but she really thought that I was this guy.

She thought I was that Chris Trousdale, and I'm just not. Google the pictures, you will laugh, you will really laugh. It is not me. But the reality is, is that sometimes we fall for the same silly mistakes when the name of Jesus is thrown around.

[32 : 22] We think, well, I mean, he preaches Jesus, or well, they say that they believe in Jesus, and yet, it might be another Jesus altogether. And it's not as if it's going to be easy to spot, these false Christs.

It's not as if these false teachers that Paul was dealing with in Corinth have come along and wholesale created just an imaginary Jesus just out of thin air. No.

They're still claiming that this Jesus is the Jesus of Nazareth, most likely. They're still claiming that this is the Jesus who died on a cross, and they probably even believe in the resurrection, because these are things that to openly deny them at the beginning would be obvious, and clearly these are not obvious false teachers.

And so much of what they're going to say about this other Jesus probably resembles the authentic Jesus. It's easy to spot the false Chris Trousdale. You just need to see a picture of him.

But sometimes it's difficult to spot the other Jesus, because wolves in sheep's clothing do not advertise themselves. They do not make known the differences.

[33 : 30] They do not shout them from the rooftops. They hide the differences and brush them aside as if they're unimportant. And yet the Apostle Paul would say, it's another Jesus.

Depart from them. Get away from them. Fear them. They bring destruction everywhere that they go. And then besides that, he mentions another spirit and another gospel.

Now, in the ESV, the spirit is with a lowercase s, and some of your translations, it might have an uppercase s, because we're not always certain, as we're translating through, is this a reference to our spirits, like the human spirit, or is it a reference to the Holy Spirit?

And it's not quite clear here whether Paul is saying that they are proclaiming a different spirit, as in you should have a different kind of character, or whether they're proclaiming a different Holy Spirit, and they've given to the Holy Spirit attributes that do not belong to him, much the same way that people often do with Jesus.

That's not clear here, but I'm not sure that that's important. I think in the context of Paul's writings to the Corinthians, the fact that Paul had to constantly deal with a group of false teachers that was claiming the power and influence of the Holy Spirit, even while they were supporting and urging ungodly lifestyles, means here that whether we take this as human spirit, as in proclaiming to you a different character, a different way to live, or the Holy Spirit doesn't matter.

[34 : 59] I think Paul's point is that anybody who comes to you claiming that they have received from God some instructions about the Christian life, and those instructions do not line up with what the Bible says, maybe they're endorsing sinful behavior, maybe they're brushing aside things that the Bible treats as extremely important and things that we ought not to do or ought not to say.

Paul says, beware of those people as well. And then the third category though is more obvious, a different gospel, a different gospel. And again, we understand what this means, but that doesn't mean that we always spot it.

We understand that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the truth, that Christ has come into the world, He has lived a sinless life, He has laid down His life for us, He has died for our sins and in our place, and that if we trust in Him, we can have all of our sins forgiven as He absorbs the wrath of God on the cross for us, and that He rose three days later from the grave, so that those who've had their sins washed away by the work of Christ on the cross, now have eternal life granted to them through His resurrection.

That's not a complicated message. Paul sums it up in 1 Corinthians 15 in like three verses. It's not an overly complicated message. We know what the basic gospel message is, but so often we fail to recognize when people tweak it and change it in deadly ways.

I say that because over and over throughout his letters, the Apostle Paul was having to deal with false gospels. And if false gospels found it difficult to take root in the church, then he wouldn't have to deal with it over and over.

[36 : 45] But he does. It may be simply the addition of something else you must do aside from repenting and trusting in Christ in order to be saved. It may be the addition of baptism to that.

You must repent, you must trust in Christ, and you must be baptized or else there is no salvation. It may be simply the addition of baptism. Or it may be the addition of some sort of sign.

It may be that they're saying that you have to speak in tongues or you have to do X, Y, and Z or you're not saved. The addition of anything to the work of Christ as sufficient to save us creates another gospel because the gospel is the good news about Christ, not about the good news of what Christ enables us to do by our own power.

It's simply the good news of Christ and Christ alone. But over and over false gospels creep in. Turn to Galatians real quickly.

I want you to show you just how serious this is. In Galatians chapter one, Paul gives what is probably his strongest warning and rebuke in all of his letters.

[37 : 57] Galatians chapter one, verse nine. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

He means there, let him be condemned to hell. That's what he means by that word. He's he's not playing games. He says for am I now seeking the approval of man or God or sorry, look up in verse.

Nine at verse eight, he says, even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preach to you again, let him be accursed. There is no matter who it is who comes to you to proclaim a false gospel.

If it is a false gospel. Let them be cursed, condemned. They are deserving of God's judgment. Paul does not mince words.

He doesn't play around when it comes to the preservation of the truth. And he doesn't want us to play games with the truth. He doesn't want us to treat the truth as if it is something we would like to have.

[39 : 07] But it's OK if the lines are blurred here and there. He's not OK with that. If someone proclaims another Jesus or another spirit or another gospel, let them be accursed.

Or in the words of Romans 16, go away from them, depart from them, avoid them. Because it's only in avoiding those who teach false doctrine that we'll ever find any grounds upon which to build any genuine, authentic unity within the body of Christ.

Go back to Romans 16 so I can point out what we need to do. What do we need to do practically? We know the danger. We see the danger. We see how frequently they slip in among us. We know how common false teaching and false teachers are.

But how do we avoid them? What can we do to prepare ourselves to not be among those who either don't see it or they see it and they don't apprise it correctly and attribute to it the great danger that it comes with?

How can we see it, understand it for what it is, and have the courage to point it out and depart from it?

[40 : 19] How can we do these things? Well, first we need to see exactly what the false teachers are doing. Verse 18. He says, Such persons, those who cause divisions, 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. The first thing that we need to get right in our minds about these people, about false teachers, is that no matter how much we might personally like some of them, no matter how much we might think about some of them, or no matter how much we might admire some of the things that they have done, we have to recognize they do not serve Christ.

They do not. If you convince yourself that false teachers are somehow still in service to Christ, you deceive yourself. They do not serve Christ.

And we have to realize that because if we don't recognize that and if we can't bring ourselves to admit that about false teachers, then we can spend all of our time recognizing false teaching, but we will never have the courage to depart from it, to get away from them.

But if we will recognize one simple truth, false teachers do not serve Christ. They do not. Then we will be enabled to separate from them when it is necessary.

[41 : 48] But notice also what he says. They do not serve Christ. What do they do? They serve their own appetites and by smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the hearts of the naive.

That's how they operate. They deceive the hearts of the naive or more literally, they deceive the hearts of the innocent, of the unsuspecting, of those who are not constantly on guard and not constantly watching.

People who are not aware of the great amount of evil that exists in the world and the extent to which it can penetrate into the body of Christ. They are not aware. And so by smooth talk and by saying the things that people want to say, they deceive those who are not yet ready, whose ears are not attuned to see and hear false teaching.

Or to those who do not quite yet believe and haven't been able to in their own minds and their hearts to admit these false teachers are real and they don't serve Christ.

You see, the innocent, the naive that Paul has in mind, they don't want to think badly of anybody. They want to say anything bad about somebody. They don't want to mark anybody out. And so they are prone to want false teachers to justify themselves.

[43 : 08] They are prone to want false teachers to talk their way out of trouble. They want them to do that. They want them to. And so it becomes very easy for the false teacher.

For those who are naive and not yet ready to admit that these people do not serve Christ, it becomes very easy for them to use smooth talk and flattering words to convince them that everything's okay.

It's all been blown out of proportion and it's just not a big deal. It's how they operate. It's how they work. And how do we respond to that?

If we know how they operate and we know what they're doing and we know what we need to see, we need to be able to see what they've got wrong and we need to be able to say they don't serve Christ.

But how do we get there? Take a look at what we see in the next verse. Verse 19. Again, Paul is affirming initially his confidence in the Romans. He knows that they believe the gospel.

[44 : 07] He's confident in them. He says, for your obedience is known to all. That's how Paul knows. They have a good reputation in the world or at least broadly in the Christian world. The news that Paul has received from those that he knows who are in and out of the Roman church is good news.

Your obedience is known to all so that Paul says, I rejoice over you. Then there's this word, but. But. I want you to be wise as to what is good.

And innocent. As to what is evil. Be wise toward the good and be innocent and blameless. Toward the evil.

I think that he means by that. To be wise toward the good in context is to know the truth. To not run from that word doctrine.

It's not a it's not a scary word. It's not a word that marks out those who have no genuine love, but they only care about theological debates. That's not what the word doctrine is for.

[45 : 09] The word doctrine is for the gospel because the gospel is something that you teach. And doctrine is just teaching. Jesus says in the Great Commission to make disciples baptizing people and teaching them.

And so when he says that I want you to be wise toward the good, I take the good here to be the doctrine mentioned earlier. And you need to know it. You need to be wise toward it. You need to be discerning. You need to be able to see when things don't fit together with it.

That's the kind of mindset that you need to have if you're going to be able to recognize these false teachers. And then on the other hand, you need to be innocent as to what is evil.

Now, I think there's a bit of a play on words happening here because Paul has already said about those who are innocent or the ESV translates it as naive.

He's already said that they're they can be liable to deception. They're easier to deceive. But now he says that there is a good kind of innocence. There is a good kind of failure to be acquainted with something.

[46 : 16] And he says, I do not want you to be acquainted with what is evil. I don't want you to be steeped in those things. I don't want you to be associated with anything that is contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Be wise toward the good. Know the good. But do not be associated and fall in with those who oppose the good, the truth of the gospel.

Do not fall in with them. Do not be associated with them. Do not run in their circles. Be innocent as to what is evil. I think so often we.

We have a tendency. To think that we can make the difference. That we can we can show we can show this person everywhere where they're wrong.

And sometimes that leads us into entanglements that are difficult to break away from. We do have a calling to correct those who are in error. We do have a calling to correct those who are being tempted by another gospel.

[47 : 23] After all, the elders of the church in Ephesus are supposed to be protecting the sheep and guarding against the fierce wolves that come in among them. We do have a task of saying to those who are being pulled in, don't go that way.

Here's the truth. Turn away from that. Beware of those people. We do have the task of doing that, but we do not have the task of entangling ourselves with the false teachers.

We do not have the task of tying ourselves to them or to their ministries. We do not have the task of defending them when their name is brought up.

I can remember several years ago at another church in a meeting of just a small gathering of church leaders and there were a few folks who were mad at me. Happens occasionally.

All right. I know it's shocking to you. There were a few folks who were upset with me. And one leveled the charge against me. You insulted a man of God from the pulpit.

[48 : 25] Whoa. When did I do that? I just thought I was walking through the Bible. And I said, I have no idea what you're talking about. And I was preaching a sermon similar to this one about false teachers at some point.

And he said that I, he said, you slandered Joel Osteen. Huh. And so I thought for a moment, just a moment. And I said, I think to be a man of God, you first have to believe and preach the gospel of God.

So do not think that I've slandered a man of God. Just a false teacher. But he was so entangled with, with the ministry, the public ministry that he had, not, not personal involvement in it, but reading his books and suggesting them to others and really liking this stuff.

But he wasn't innocent as to what is evil. And then he couldn't see it anymore. And, and he was to the point to where anybody who said anything bad about this particular false teacher, that person was now in the wrong and evil and ought to be censured.

I think that's what Paul, one of the things that he has in mind when he says, be innocent to what is evil. Do not be entangled with them, not personally, and do not be entangled in, and devoted to their ministry and their teaching.

[49 : 44] We need to be wise to the good and know the truth so that we can spot error. And we need to be willing to distance ourselves from error.

Because ultimately what is at stake here is the gospel of Jesus Christ. What is at stake here is not merely the unity of the church. The unity of the church exists to proclaim the glory of Christ.

But you cannot proclaim the glory of Christ if you have another Jesus or if you're making him share that glory with anybody else in another gospel. It cannot be done. And so what Paul is calling us to in this passage here and what he's warning the Romans about and warning us about is not merely, he's not simply saying to us, you need to be really good at spotting false teachers.

He's saying to us, you need to love the gospel. You need to love Christ enough to stand and to see the false doctrines that are out there and to say what they are and to never be entangled with them.

Let's pray.