

Romans 16:17-20

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[0:00] Well, good morning. I'm very glad to be here with you this morning. I hope you are glad to be here as well. Let's open our Bibles to Romans chapter 16. Our text for today is Romans chapter 16, verses 17 through 20.

We find ourselves back in the final chapter of Romans this week and have an additional eight weeks. I'm just kidding. We don't. We have a planned additional one week until we'll conclude our study of this letter.

The last time we were considering this book, we took a look at Romans 16, verses 1 through 16, and then verses 21 through 23. We look at the text this way because they contain greetings to people and greetings from people.

These 19 verses mention 35 people by name, as well as the mention of groups of Christians in households and companions to people mentioned by name. Today, we are stepping back to a four-verse interjection, and I want to take a moment to explain why I think the interjection exists. Paul is making a point, at least in part, in these four verses that I've been laboring to make to you over our time together in this book. We must be so careful with our doctrine, and we must be so careful that we assign doctrinal importance so that the gospel is preserved.

[1:33] I've made this case for theological triage to you again and again. I'll spare you today making that case. But we need to be careful in thinking about what hills we die on.

In this letter, Paul teaches that justification or salvation is by grace alone. It's his kindness toward us.

Through faith alone, this is the means in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone. And then he teaches us what the life liberated from the power of sin looks like, and the driving characteristic of that life is unified love.

So I think that in 16 verses 1 through 16, Paul has expressed all of these wishes of embrace. Remember that term, greet.

That means to pull in tight, to embrace. For people that he loves, and then, because he loves them, he can't help but give them one more exhortation.

[2:44] It was, after all, Paul who wrote in 1 Corinthians 13 and verse 6 that love rejoices with the truth. So join me as we look at this interjected, final exhortation of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Romans 16, I'll begin reading in verse 17. Let me remind you, beloved, that this is God's word to us, written for his glory and our good. And so we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands.

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have been taught. Avoid them. For 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.

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 have a very simple three-point outline for our study this morning, which is as follows. Number one, Paul's caution.

[4:04] Number two, Paul's encouragement. And number three, Paul's confidence. Number one, Paul's caution. And we see this in those first two verses.

What I think we first need to consider here is what Paul is not cautioning against. He is not here speaking about the lesser order issues.

He is not talking about varied opinions. There are many things that we don't entirely see eye to eye on in the Christian faith. I'm sure you can draw many of them to mind.

This is a text about false teachers. Those who do not serve are Lord Christ. Notice that in verse 18. Remember that Paul has encouraged unified love in this letter in chapter 14. This is verse 1. As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

[5:07] And then later, verse 13 of the same chapter, Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Paul commands us to bear with one another over the minor points. Elsewhere, like in Titus 3.9, Paul tells Titus to avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.

And in 2 Timothy chapter 2 and verse 23, he tells Timothy, Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies. You know that they breed quarrels.

Paul wants us to find the right hills to die on. He wants us to be sure that we hold in our closed fists what we are willing to fight for.

And those doctrines are the highest order doctrines. In a day where every bit of news seems to send people into existential tailspins, we need this word.

[6:20] Listen to the astounding words of Paul written from a Roman jail cell in Philippians chapter 1. This is verse 14 and following. And it just amazes me every time I read it.

Lord, that I will be more like Paul in this way. He says, beginning in verse 14, And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These two categories, right? Brothers are being emboldened to speak the word because of Paul's imprisonment, right? Some from goodwill, some from envy and rivalry. The latter do it out of love, those from goodwill, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.

The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. And I don't know exactly what's going on here, but it sounds like these brothers had some sort of competitive intention with the ministry of Paul.

[7:31] But what is it that they are proclaiming? He says, verse 18, What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed.

And in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice. So there's these men with poor intentions about their gospel proclamation, and yet they're proclaiming the gospel, and Paul rejoices in this, and his attitude is incredibly instructive.

Some of you act competitively towards other Christians or other churches. The kinds of elitist things you say reach my ears from time to time, and it grieves me.

We desire to be as faithful to God's word as we can possibly be. I hope that you have chosen to fellowship with this church because you believe that we are being faithful to all that it commands. We're headed in that direction. If we are not there yet, and we're not, we are headed in that direction. The moment you think that we have no faults, or simply act towards others like we have no faults, then you have become a destroyer of the unity that is ours in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[8:50] This is an aside. This is not the main point that Paul is making here, but I want to say to you, let's rejoice in those who preach the gospel, even if we disagree on some minor things.

Let's rejoice with anyone, and with any church, that is clear on the gospel. Justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in the personal work of Jesus Christ alone, because this matters so much.

Now, we could get into all kinds of doctrine and talk about all kinds of things. I'm not trying to over-reduce this simply to grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone. I'm not simply doing that. But the two large categories we need to be thinking is, is teaching that messes with the nature of God, and teaching that messes with the person and work of Christ.

He was not teaching or implying that true believers have the right to do physical harm to heretics. During the Reformation, some Protestants as well as Catholics committed grave inhumanities in the name of Christ.

When a group of Samaritans refused to render hospitality to Jesus and the disciples, James and John, whom Jesus had nicknamed Sons of Thunder, asked, this is in Luke chapter 3, Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?

Jesus replied, One of Jesus' several strong rebukes of Peter was given in response to that disciples cutting off the ear of one of the high priest slaves when the Jewish leaders brought Roman soldiers to arrest Jesus.

Put your sword back into its place, he said to Peter, for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Even protection of the Son of God did not justify the use of physical violence.

[15:20] So, a caution against the caution. What are we to do? Well, the right response is right here in the text, is it not? Avoid them.

We are just to avoid them. We are to turn away from what they teach. We are to warn others against what they teach.

We are to instruct others in the truth so that the error can be most readily identified. Why? Because these teachers do not serve our Lord Christ.

Verse 18. But their own appetites, that is to say, their own greed. They are doing it for themselves. And by smooth talk, appealing talk, and flattery, they deceive the hearts of the naive.

So, those who are immature in the faith need to be protected from these false teachers. In thinking about this very issue, I was so helped by Paul's words to Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 4.

[16:32] In thinking, what is happening in our age that so many people are so drawn in by false teachers? And I was very helped here.

Paul instructs Timothy, this is verse 1 of chapter 4. He said, Here's what he says. Preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching. So he says, Preach the word. Preach the word. Preach the word.

Preach the word. Preach the word. Why? Verse 3 says, For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

It is going to happen. It is happening. What are we to do? What are we to do?

[17:39] With complete patience. Now it seems today that the only heresy is saying that there is heresy. But if we are to follow Paul's instruction here, we must speak with great clarity for the truth and against falsehood.

This text does not give us space to gloss over false teaching. Great clarity for the truth and against falsehood.

Listen to another warning of Paul's concerning false teachers in 2 Corinthians chapter 11. This is verse 13 and following. There he says, For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.

Their end will correspond to their deeds. People will be misled. They will look at the shiny glitz of much of what is being taught out there and they will be deceived.

[18:59] What part can we play in rescuing them from such false teachers? All we can do, beloved, all we can do is speak with great clarity for the truth and against falsehood.

And you may say, But Nathan, doesn't that cause division? And my response to you is, No. To the contrary, it is the false teachers that cause division.

Paul tells us, These are the men who cause divisions. Their departure from the truth is divisive, not the correction of it. The correction of it is trying to bring us back together around the truth.

If we're to love people as we should, we're going to rejoice in the truth. So allow me to give you two broad examples. The first is Roman Catholicism.

We are Protestants for a reason and we still protest against Roman Catholicism. Now as a quick aside, I said in a Bible study many years ago, over a decade ago, that Roman Catholicism was the world's largest cult that I said this because his girlfriend at the time claimed to be a Catholic.

[20:18] And so I simply said, Well, let me tell you why. I call Roman Catholicism a cult. And I began to explain the things that Rome teaches and he, to each thing I said, said, She doesn't believe that.

I went, Okay, well, that's good. Here's another thing that Rome teaches. Oh, she doesn't believe that. And we walked through a litany of things. And at the end of that, I just said, Your girlfriend's not a Roman Catholic.

And he said, this is after about an hour on the phone, Yeah, she's going to a non-denominational church right now. I went, Why do we have this conversation? I stand by the statement.

So, this is from, and what I'm going to read to you is from the Council of Trent. This is the 16th century, long ago, but this is a response to Reformation teaching of grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, right?

If you're not on the same page as me, justification by grace through faith in Christ, if I'm saying that to you and you're going, I don't even know what he's talking about, please come talk to me. We have talked about it a lot throughout our study of the book of Romans.

[21:23] I want you to be very clear on this. If we are to be saved, it is because God shows us grace, gives us something we don't deserve. He uses our faith, which he gives us, right?

And it's in what Christ has accomplished on our behalf. Full stop. Justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. This is their response.

Canon 24. If anyone says that justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely fruits and signs of justification obtained, not because of its increase, let him be now for the things that I'm saying to you.

Right? This is divisive. This is against what the scripture teaches. Not what I'm saying. Canon 30. If anyone says that after the reception of the grace of justification, the guilt is so remitted and the debt of eternal punishment so blotted out.

Let me just stop for a second there, right? If anyone says that after the reception of the grace of justification, the guilt, if anyone says to you that if you have been justified, your guilt is expunged.

[22:34] It's so remitted and the debt of eternal punishment so blotted out that no debt of temporal punishment remains to be discharged before the gates of heaven can be opened. Let him be anathema.

That's the Roman Catholic Church. That's what they teach today. They still hold the Council of Trent to be true. False. False, false, false.

And so we protest, right? We are not Roman Catholics. That is a hill to die on, justification by grace through faith in Christ. Alone. The theologian Herman Bavink, this is true, I'm about to say.

This is yay for Herman. This is not a falsehood. This is on the back of your bulletin. If you care to read it with me, it says, faith is not justified by its own essence or act because it itself is righteousness, right?

It's not saying the faith itself is the good work that justifies you, but by its content because it is faith in Christ who is our righteousness.

[23:39] That's so good, right? The object of the faith in the person and work of Christ alone. If faith justified on account of itself, the object of that faith, that is Christ, would totally lose its value.

But the faith that justifies is precisely the faith that has Christ as its object and content, right? That is what we teach, right?

So, broad example, Roman Catholicism, Council of Trent. Now, bring it to the more clearly modern day and speak a bit about the word of faith movement.

And I want to strongly warn you against the word of faith movement. I use the term movement because it's not a denomination. It's a collection of a lot of teaching that's going on in the world these days.

Some would qualify this and just say it's the prosperity gospel, but that comes in varied degrees. So there's a lot of it that doesn't look like prosperity on the surface, right?

[24:37] It's not purple suits and private jets, but it shares much. It confuses the nature of God and the person and work of Christ, right?

When I talk about the person and work of Christ, I'm talking about what Christ has accomplished, all that's contained in the word it is finished, which includes everything that he did and everything that

what he did guaranteed would happen.

So it's all of the promises that he's granted us as well, right? Our glorification, right? Future glory with him is guaranteed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, right? So it's encapsulated in that, okay?

Word of faith confuses the nature of God and the person and work of Christ. I'm about to give you two examples, right? Number one, this is Bill Johnson from Bethel Church, okay?

Bethel music, that's the connection that's going on here. This is in Redding, California. He says this, I quote, For many years, I misunderstood the biblical concept of desire.

[25:46] Psalm 37, 4 tells us, delight yourself in the Lord and he shall give you the desires of your heart. Like many pastors, I foolishly taught that if you delighted yourself in the Lord, he would change your desires by telling you what to desire.

You should have stopped right there. But that's not at all what it means. that verse literally means that God wants to be impacted by what you think and dream.

That ought to make you cringe inside. It just ought to make you cringe inside. This is a direct attack on God's aseity, right? God's saying, I am who I am.

He is existent apart from us and we do not affect God. We do not impact him with our thoughts and our dreams. And so, they're going to teach that you can speak things into existence, right?

Word of faith, right? God wants to empower you and he wants to give you success and make your life wonderful and all you have to do is say it and believe that it's going to be that. Another example, much closer to home.

[27:00] This is Jensen Franklin from Free Chapel, right? In our back yard. Now, this is going to sound pretty good for a little while, right?

I'm going to point out to you why it's not. It's going to sound pretty good. He says this, I quote, There is life and there is living.

Are you ready to start really living out God's plan for your life? Good question. There's more to life, more to faith, more to you. God gives you the formula for success which boils down to two words. God first. Still doing okay, aren't we? That's where God began. Look at your Bible. What are the very first words written in the beginning?

Genesis 1, 13. God created is the rest of that. He doesn't say that, but God first is his priority that should rule every decision of our lives. In Matthew 6, 33.

[28:02] So here's where I'm going to pick on him. He says, In Matthew 6, 33. Now let me tell you what Matthew 6, 33 says. It says this. Jesus says, Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you.

These things will be added to you. And what he is talking about in that chapter is anxiety about food and clothing. He's saying, Why are you living like the world lives?

You have a heavenly father who loves you and he's going to provide for all of your temporal needs. That's what he's talking about in that text. Okay? So he says, In Matthew 6, 33, Jesus tells us, so here's what he's telling us, Matthew 6, 33 means, To hear his plan, receive his direction, and his blessings.

If you want success in your life, in your marriage, in your work, in your witness, putting God first is key.

If you want everything to go grand, everything to be great, empowered life, realize everything, right, what do you do? God first, speak it into existence. Jesus has told us to hear, receive, and go.

[29:11] Right? This word of faith movement is very deceptive. Right? Alright. So that's the caution. Right? We need to be very careful and we need to be very clear about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, there's an encouragement. Paul has an encouragement. He says in verse 19, 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. Paul tells the Roman believers in verse 19 that he is encouraged by their good works and it would seem the report of their good works had been received far and wide.

Likely, we see in Romans 118, he says, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. It's suggested that he means all the known world.

Everywhere that I'm aware of your faith, your good works are being proclaimed. So, he says to them, press on in your obedience to the truth.

[30:24] But then he encourages further, be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. And I think in the context of identifying and avoiding false teachers, Paul means for us to see that bad doctrine leads to bad practices and that poor theology leads to sinful doxology.

How are we to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil? We are to be about the work of knowing God's word.

Now, I will say of all of you generally, if you are coming to church here, you are not an experience chaser. I'm thankful for that. We are not creating a lot of experience for you.

You likely already know that the general way that God grows as people is through the common means of grace. It's bit by bit over time.

We put in the work. We are to read and pray and sing and preach and listen to the preaching of God's word. We are to get to know it over time.

[31:33] Perhaps you are one of those people that is looking for that mountaintop moment. Perhaps the Lord will grant it to you, but it's just not the normal way he seems to work.

He seems to work through patient dedication to his word. Picking it up in the various ways that we pick up his word. It's a very common analogy, but I think it's such a good one that I'm going to share it with you anyway.

Do you know how secret service agents identify counterfeit bills? It isn't possible for them to study all the possible errors a counterfeiter may make, but what they can do is know in great detail what a genuine bill looks like.

Likewise, we are to recognize error by knowing what is true. As you grow in the knowledge of what is true, error will become more evident to you.

Things will feel, if you'll allow the word, hinky, something's not, something's off with what I'm hearing taught here. Perhaps you'll know already, or perhaps you'll have to do some digging around to understand what is being taught in error.

[32:50] So Paul is encouraging here, I think, keep up the good work.

You're doing well, so keep up the good work that you're doing. Press on, dear Christian, for we have great reason to press on.

Which brings me to my last point, which is Paul's confidence. Paul's confidence. I love that Paul does this.

He is inspired, he's being led along by God, he packs these rich statements on the end of so many of his exhortations. Verse 20, he says, that the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Paul begins verse 20 by calling God the God of peace. At the end of chapter 15, he does this in thinking about God's provision for his people.

Life, this side of glory, is war, but our God, he's the God of peace. We have peace with him, and one day he's going to make peace on the earth.

[34:03] He's made promises for us, and he will deliver on them. We struggle in this life. People ask me how I'm doing these days.

Many of you have probably heard me say this. My kind of canned response is another day waiting for glory, which is my way of saying I'm sad, but I'm filled with hope.

That's the day-to-day state I tend to be in these days, and I'm glad for it because I think it's a good state to be in. One day soon, the God of peace will soon, it'll come swiftly soon, one day God will destroy our enemy, Satan, and all those who serve him is the implication here.

Paul is saying, look, these men, these false teachers that you're going to have to mark out and avoid, their destruction is sure because Satan's destruction is sure.

Look what he says elsewhere, Philippians 3, verse 18 and 19, for enemies of the cross of Christ, their end is destruction, their God is their belly, and they glory in their shame with minds set on earthly things.

[35:20] And then Jude verse 12 and 13, these, speaking of false teachers, are hidden reefs at your love feasts. As they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves, waterless clouds swept along by winds, fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted, wild waves

of the sea casting up the foam of their own shame, wandering stars for whom the gloom of utter darkness have been reserved forever.

Now, texts like that ought to want us to call those people even to repent and believe in Christ. But the point he's driving at here at the end of our text today is that we can be sure that the Lord will set things right one day.

So in the meantime, we press on. We have great reason to press on. Paul is confident of this and he needs to give us confidence to persevere.

And then, lest we think that we can accomplish any of this on our own accord, he concludes this section of his letter with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Our Christian lives begin by grace and our Christian lives are sustained by grace and will be sustained to the end if we belong to Jesus. And I hope that that gives you great measures of perseverance.

[36:57] Life this side of glory is guaranteed to be difficult. We follow a Savior who was hated by the world. We should expect nothing less, but we should persevere because of the wonderful hope that Savior has brought us.

Oh, how grateful we should be that our God provides for all that he commands. Let's pray together.