

### Dangers of False Teaching and Effects of Unsound Doctrine

#### Romans 16:17-20

Romans 16:17-20 - *"Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. <sup>18</sup> For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. <sup>19</sup> For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore, I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. <sup>20</sup> And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen."*

#### Background Notes

Romans 16 is the final chapter of the apostle Paul's powerful letter to the Christians at Rome. In this book of Scripture, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ has been clearly proclaimed and explained. There is a way in which a holy and righteous God can justify unrighteous sinners. How? The eternal Son of God became Man. He went to the cross and died for our sins. Therefore, in the words of Romans 3:26, God can be just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus. That's the gospel, and I trust everyone hearing this Talk has believed that message and become a Christian.

The letter to the Romans is not only important for Christian doctrine; it is very practical as well. In fact, Romans 12 through 16 is considered the practical division of Romans. We've already seen a lot practical teaching in these chapters. Now, before Paul closed this wonderful letter of Scripture, he warned his readers to be on guard against false teaching and its effects.

Most likely the false teaching to which Paul referred was the teaching of the Judaizers, although other forms of false teaching may be in mind as well. The Judaizers were the legalists of the day, and they taught that salvation was not by grace alone. They taught that doing the works of the Law were necessary to be saved.

Now don't get the idea that some of these non-Christian Judaizers were members of the Christian congregation in Rome. However, the false teaching of Judaism was around, and it was possible for Christians to be affected by it. Remember, even Peter was affected with the false teaching of the Judaizers. In Galatians 2 we learn that the apostle Paul had to confront Peter for being affected by this false legalistic teaching – in fact, Paul had to refute Peter to his face!

So Paul alerted the Christians at Rome to the danger signals of unsound doctrine and false teaching. He warned them that they should be on the lookout for false teachers, and especially guard against their false teaching.

The danger signals of false teaching are the same today as in the 1st century, so this chapter is important for us to read and apply today.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. False teachers and their followers cause divisions.

Verse 17: *“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.”*

Do you remember what our Lord Jesus said about false prophets? In Matthew 7:15-16 He said, *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?”* One of the fruits of false teaching is division and dissension. Now every individual who causes division or dissension in the church is not necessarily a false teacher. These people may be true believers, but they have been affected by false teaching. False teachers and their followers cause divisions, and even though you are a Christian, you could be negatively affected by false teaching.

Sometimes I receive letters from a Christian brother, who, I believe, is a Christian legalist. He’s definitely a Christian and he loves the Lord, but I would have to say that he’s been affected by the false teaching of legalism, just as many of the early churches were affected by the legalism of the Judaizers. This brother not only judges the spirituality of other believers by his own self-appointed non-biblical legalistic rules, but he has caused a great deal of unrest, dissension and division among God’s people. How does he continue to get away with it? The reason is that a legalist always tends to “appear” very spiritual – just as the Pharisees in our Lord’s Day appeared.

That’s why the Lord Jesus said, *“You will know them by their fruits”* (Matthew 7:16). **Take note of the “fruit” of a teacher.** Good fruit of a good teacher would be a local body of believers who are joyful, strong and unified in purpose. False teachers produce a local church that is weak, divided and lacking the love and unity that should characterize followers of Jesus Christ.

*“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses...”* If certain individuals are causing division and dissension, chances are they’re affected by false teaching of some kind -- even though they may appear to be spiritual. False teachers and their followers cause divisions.

### 2. False teachers and their followers produce offenses.

Again, verse 17: *“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses...”* Here the word “offense” means to put obstacles or hindrances in the way of sound doctrine. Sound doctrine means healthy doctrine -- doctrine that promotes the spiritual growth and the spiritual health of the believer.

I remember preaching a number of times in a church where an outspoken Christian man who believed in theistic evolution was a member. Theistic evolution is the idea that God created man, but He did it by the process of evolution. I believe that that is false teaching, and it is not what the Bible teaches. Every time I preached at this church, I felt the ministry was

hindered. This outspoken man and his influence were an obstacle, an offense to the teaching of sound doctrine. False teachers and their followers produce offenses.

### **3. False teachers and their followers serve themselves.**

Verse 18: *“For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.”*

Here’s another clue for detecting false teachers. Always ask the question, “Are they serving the flock, or are they serving themselves?” For example, here’s a typical line of the “prosperity gospel” preacher: “God wants you to be healthy and wealthy. After all, you’re a child of the King, and the King wants you to live like a king! If you support this program financially, we’ll teach you how you can receive the blessing of material prosperity in a very short time. If you write to us this week and include a substantial ‘love offering,’ we’ll send you a prayer-blessed pamphlet giving you ten sure steps to material prosperity for the glory of God.” In some cases, these prosperity gospel preachers *“serve... their own belly.”* Some of them are indeed living like kings -- with luxurious homes, cars, boats and even private planes – all of this obtained from the “love offerings” of ordinary Christians.

Now let me ask you, in the light of verse 18, are these preachers servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, or are they serving their own appetites? I think the answer is obvious. False teachers and their followers serve themselves.

### **4. False teachers and their followers deceive the simple.**

Verse 18: *“and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.”* Watch out for the smooth talker! Just as a smooth talking, flattering immoral person can seduce an unsuspecting younger person into all kinds of wrong thinking and decisions, so it is with the false teachers. They make the false teaching look good and irresistible.

Why do you think the cults are so successful? They suck the unsuspecting and naïve and simple into their system. Why do you think some prosperity gospel teachers are so successful? Smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple, ordinary, untaught person.

Watch out! Avoid and turn away whenever you see these danger signs and signals of false teaching that God has given to us in Romans 16. False teachers and their followers deceive the simple.

## Practical Applications

### 1. Ignorance is bliss.

Where is that verse in the Bible? It's not a verse in the Bible! However, I think this saying can be applied in verse 19, even though we don't normally use the expression in this way. Verse 19: "*I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.*" In other words, don't spend your time checking out evil or trying to understand evil, but concentrate your time and efforts on the good.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were instructed to not even ask or inquire about the evil practices of their pagan neighbors! God wanted His people to remain **ignorant of those evil practices**. I always tell my students that they don't have to know the details of the evil in our society in order to be an effective witness against that evil. If you read the newspaper or watch newscasts, unfortunately you'll hear of immorality and salacious scandals. It's hard to stay "simple" concerning evil these days. However, verse 19 should still characterize the Christian lifestyle. Be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. So -- in that sense -- ignorance is bliss!

### 2. Satan is no match for your obedient feet!

Verse 20: "*And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.*

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.*" Victory over Satan is promised here! The apostle Paul may have had a particular victory in mind when he wrote this – possibly that the early Christian heresies would soon be shown to be false! That's a possibility.

However, there's certainly a general principle for spiritual warfare in this promise that the Lord has given to us in Romans 16. Notice that there is no guarantee in this promise that every Christian will have quick victory over Satan. No, the key for quick and decisive victory over Satan is found back in verse 19: "*For your obedience has become known to all....*"

#### **Obedience is the key to victory over Satan!**

Let me ask you: does Satan have you in a defeated state right now? Are you filled with doubts about your salvation and the teaching of Scripture? Are you in despair? Are you demoralized? Are you discouraged in any way? Does Satan often defeat you?

Maybe the problem is that you're a disobedient Christian. Stop disobeying and **start to obey** -- right now! Satan is no match for your obedient feet!