

# **“WATCH OUT FOR THOSE WHO LEAD YOU ASTRAY.”**

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**Scripture Texts: Romans 16:17-20**

## **Introduction.**

I wonder if this text strikes you as a bit odd or out of place. Paul is clearly at the end of writing this letter. He just finished giving warm, personal greetings to 24 people in the church in Rome, and he closed his greetings saying:

**Romans 16:16** Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

We are expecting an “I love you, good bye,” and instead we have an “I love you and oh by the way.” Many times in Paul’s letters he is in the midst of a thought and something else comes to mind and so he will follow that thought for a while and then come back to the original thread.

This text is one of those. As Paul is thinking about and remembering all these people he loves and cares about, suddenly it comes to his mind to give them some warning. That is how much he cares for them and their spiritual wellbeing. He knows the dangers of the Christian life and he wants to wake them up to those dangers.

This is a good pastor, a good father to the flock. This is like a father sending his son or daughter off to college or out into the world. This is what true love looks like, the genuine care of souls.

I warned each of my sons of the spiritual dangers they would face and be challenged with as they went off to college. And as I have said to you before, I warned the three that went to Christian colleges more seriously than I did those going to state schools.

In Christian schools the dangers are much more subtle, more smooth talking. The enemy is far more covert, using little doubts or questions that

chip away at faith. It was a Christian college professor that led my brother astray to the point that he denied his faith.

Growing up in this little Christian bubble of Lynden is dangerous, we let down our guard, we are unsuspecting, we think we are safe and not in danger. Warning is loving, warning is grace, warning is true kindness.

## **16:17-18**

**Romans 16:17-18** 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. 18 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.

Paul says, I appeal to you, I urge you, he is earnest about this. This is as serious as it gets. Souls are at stake, lives are in the balance. Eternity is on the line.

You might be tempted to think Paul is writing about people out there in the world, strangers, pagans, but he is writing to the church, he is warning about those in the church.

Paul is warning about false teachers, false preachers, false professors, about false shepherds. They are in the church, at Christian schools, in Christian communities, they are smooth, slick, deceiving, they tickle the ears, they say what we want to hear.

**Matthew 7:15** Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

**Acts 20:28–29** Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. . . . I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

**II Timothy 4:3** 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, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Why is Paul constantly warning Christians of the danger? Because he knows we are in danger, we are too trusting, too naïve, too easily deceived, caught off guard, too vulnerable to Satan. If we weren't easily fooled, we wouldn't need warnings and or shepherds who warn us.

Ask yourself, are you easily drawn in, easily unsuspecting, easily influenced, quick to believe what you hear? Or do you have a well-developed spiritual gift of suspicion and check things out first?

In the past I have warned you about all the prosperity gospel preachers, health and wealth preachers, name it and claim it preachers. I have warned about Joel Osteen.

The danger is real because they are sharp, engaging, very articulate, well spoken. In a word, they are really nice and well liked, popular, they have a lot of followers and a lot of likes.

I warn you to be careful of celebrity pastors and some TV preachers, especially those who ask for money and live lavish lifestyles. Watch out for those who are in ministry for gain, for their bellies, their pocketbook. Watch out for those who are not accountable, are not under elders.

Watch out for those who appeal to the emotions, who draws crowds, watch out thinking numbers means God's blessing, watch out for those who minimize sin and repentance, who promise an easy life. Watch out for those who let culture determine what is right or wrong.

Beware of anyone who denies the Trinity, or the full deity of Jesus, or the trustworthiness and truth of the Bible, those who deny an eternal hell or preach universalism (everyone will ultimately be saved like Rob Bell). Who deny the penal substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, or that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin.

Watch out for people who are attracted to novelty, who come up with creative, new insights, new revelations, but wander from the Bible to pursue the latest and the greatest.

**Acts 17:21** All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

One example of this is the New Apostolic Reformation at Bethel church in Redding, CA with their modern-day apostles, new divine revelations, where modern-day prophetic words are elevated about Scripture.

Examine your own life and relationships. Be aware personally of people who cause you to sin, who among your friends stir up sin or cause division in your mind or among other friends. What is leading you astray? Your phone, internet, social media, letting culture tell you what is right, silencing your own conscience?

The best way to know the truth is to know the Scripture. *Be a Berean.*

**Acts 17:11** These Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

If you neglect the Word of God you will be easy prey for the next wolf in sheep's clothing. Part of the reason false teachers have such large followings is spiritual blindness which comes from spiritual laziness. We don't bother to check and test and read. If we blindly follow blind guides we should not be surprised if we end up in the ditch.

Test everything by Scripture.

Test of the fruit of behavior, test their character.

Test for sound doctrine, for teaching the pure gospel of justification by faith.

Use the creeds and confessions of our faith as simple guides to right doctrine.

Stay connected to your church, to brothers and sisters who can keep you grounded.

Don't get caught up in division and strife and majoring in minors and disagreements that don't matter. Don't get caught up in conspiracy theories. Don't even go there.

We don't need to waste time speculating about things that either don't matter or have very little to do with us. We don't need more information about the latest conspiracies.

The reason conspiracy theories keep going is because they are alluring, they tickle our ears, they draw us in and lead us down endless rabbit holes.

**II Timothy 2:23** Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.

Pursue God and the Gospel, pursue righteousness that leads to life, seek wisdom not worldly knowledge. Christians care about the truth, and that truth is found in the Bible and in proclaiming the Gospel. We don't follow cleverly disguised myths. We don't have secret knowledge or codes or handshakes.

To these warning I want to add a warning about email and internet scams. This is a fatherly pastor speaking to my flock to be especially careful. It grieves me to think of anyone of you being taken advantage of.

Just in the past couple of weeks, I have been assaulted by dozens of emails, Costco, Disney, Peacock, Brightspeed, and just last night a second invitation from Punchbowl. The Costco one almost got me, an offer of one of those wagons for hauling your gear like you see all the cool soccer moms have out at Bender field. I almost clicked and then I Googled it and confirmed the scam. Then I noticed the email address and knew immediately it wasn't real.

AI is making scams and fraud more sophisticated and dangerous. Check the email address every time. Never send money, never buy gift cards and pass on the card number. Don't click, don't share info, check everything. Ask your kids/grandkids. Verify before clicking.

**16:19**

**Romans 16:19** 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.

I know your obedience. Paul had said something similar in Romans 15.

**Romans 15:14** I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to

instruct one another. 15 **But** on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God.

He is honoring them, praising them, commending them for their Christian faith.

But. But. Nevertheless. I appeal to you, I urge you, I admonish you. Be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.

J.B. Phillips: "I want to see you experts in good, and not even beginners in evil."

That's nice sounding, we can all agree with it, but doing it is another matter. We have in us by the Holy Spirit the desire to do what is good and right. **But** we have in us by our sinful nature the desire to fill our minds with evil or sinful or impure things. And sometimes we deceive ourselves into thinking we need more of an understanding of evil or error in order to fight it.

Do you think you can dabble with evil and stay pure? That fire always burns us. Flee from evil.

To know evil and to indulge evil, poisons your soul and creates huge hurdles to overcome spiritual, mentally, emotionally. There is enough sin and evil in our own hearts, we don't need to compound it with more from the outside.

Keep your eye out for what is evil, wicked, impure, unholy. Turn away from evil, turn away from those who are evil. Stay innocent with regard to evil.

Be an inexperienced novice regarding evil. Don't be curious about evil, don't keep clicking and following. Curiosity killed the cat, and carnal curiosity kills the soul.

Be aware how entertainment today has completely normalized and legitimized evil and impurity. Recognize how your own heart and mind have become desensitized to seeing sin over and over. Confess this and turn back.

Keep innocent. Keep it simple. Love God, love your neighbor. Trust in Jesus. Love the good people, fight the bad people. Hate sin. Turn away. Avoid them. Become experienced and mature in good.

Are you an expert in good? Or are you an expert in evil? Are you known for your interest in what is good? Or are you known for your interest in what is evil? Think of what you read when you're browsing online. Think of the books and television you enjoy. Think of your social media intake. Do you love good, or are you mesmerized by evil?

Enjoy what is good, not evil. Watch what is good, not evil. Ponder what is good, not evil. Read what is good, not evil. Use social media for good and not for evil. Most of all, do what is good, not evil. (Tim Challies)

Ask yourself the simple question, will this glorify God? Start with Scripture.

**Psalms 119:9** How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.

**Philippians 4:8-9** Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

As you go out into the world to pursue knowledge and wisdom whether in school, in the workplace, in the experiences of life, I urge you in the strongest possible way, be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. Guard your heart and mind.

I hate what I know of evil and sin and impurity. It has done me no good and has only hindered me spiritually. As I get older I grow more weary of sin and evil and impurity. I am tired of sin and sinful ways and thoughts. Like Paul, I am tired of doing what I don't want to do and not doing what to do.

Death looks good to me. I try to imagine being completely free from all sin and sinful thoughts and desires, from all fears and failures. Besides seeing Jesus and being in His presence, this is the thing I look forward to the most. To be completely free of all temptation, and the constant assault of evil and the evil one.

To have Satan fully and finally and completely crushed.

And what is what we will consider more fully next week in verse 20.