

**Be Careful!**  
**Romans 16:17-27**  
**#71 in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans**  
**Faith Community Church – July 1, 2007**

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## **Introduction**

Please open your Bibles to Romans 16.

This morning I want to talk about a subject that may seem very unrelated to your life. I want to talk about the danger of false teachers and false teaching (or false doctrine).

Are Christians in America in churches like ours really vulnerable to wrong teaching, or is this something that was a problem in less sophisticated and educated times? Let me ask it another way: if Paul wrote this letter today, would it include the kind of warning that we will read in a moment?

The answer to both questions is “yes.”

We need to understand that how we think and how we live our lives is the product of ideas. Ideas shape us – they shape our belief system, our outlook, our values, our choices, and our behavior. And as I look around the Christian landscape today, I see a lot to be concerned about.

Where and how do we encounter this kind of false teaching today? How do we recognize it and what are we supposed to do when we encounter it? That is the subject of Paul's closing words, so let's read Romans 16:17-27.

## **Being Careful**

1. The first thing that we see is that there are people who pervert truth.

This is consistent with the numerous warnings in the New Testament: Nearly every NT book speaks to the subject – in some, like Galatians, 2 Peter and Jude, it is the main subject of discussion. Let's take a look at several passages of Scripture: Matthew 7:15-20; Acts 20:28-30; Galatians 1:6-8; 2 Timothy 4:1-4. These are representative of what the New Testament says. We see in them not only the expressions of concern and warning, but we see why this is so important.

In Romans, Paul identifies two characteristics of these false teachers, who are to be marked and avoided: In verse 17 he said that they teach contrary to the doctrine you have been taught, and in verse 18 he says that they serve their own appetites, using smooth talk and flattery.

## *Doctrinal Issues*

Please understand that this isn't a first century-only phenomenon! Our church was birthed at a time when people began rejecting the core elements of the Christian faith, giving their own definitions to beliefs that have been part of historic Christianity since its beginning. Now seventy years later, we're heading right back into that again.

There are people within the boundaries of the evangelical church who believe that:

- Christ's being punished for our sins contradicts the idea that God is love and amounts to divine child abuse.
- Christ is ultimately the Savior, but that people do not need to have faith in him to be forgiven.
- God really doesn't know the details of history because they haven't happened yet, so he can only do his best to anticipate and then react to the decisions people make.

Those of you who have been Christians for awhile and know Scripture recognize that those ideas contradict what the Bible clearly teaches. But that doesn't seem to matter to those who hold these beliefs – and teach them.

Many of you haven't heard anyone who calls himself a Christian teach ideas like this. But what is happening more and more is that these teachers – who have strong ties to the Christian community – are starting their own churches, are writing books published by major Christian publishers, and are influencing the thinking of the academic community. It is a matter of time before that filters down to our churches. Will you be strong enough in your knowledge of God's Word to recognize it?

### *Lifestyle issues*

And that just deals with the doctrinal issues. How about the lifestyle issues? All one has to do is turn on so-called Christian TV and you can watch hour after hour of incredibly wealthy men and women telling incredibly naïve people that God will make them healthy and rich if they will have faith enough, or give enough. What is hard is that people identify that with what you and I believe because the words that they use are the same as what we use.

### *The therapeutic gospel that is no Gospel*

And finally there is one of the most pressing dangers of all – a change in the focus of the Gospel. So many pastors and churches today pursue a gospel message that is focused on how I can find fulfillment, find my purpose, my place, my satisfaction, get over my hang-ups, deal with my dysfunctions. And in the process the most pressing need I have – my sin – is nearly ignored.

Dr. David Powlison, who teaches at Westminster Seminary in Glenside, wrote this:

In this new gospel, the great "evils" to be redressed do not call for any

fundamental change of direction in the human heart. Instead, the problem lies in my sense of rejection from others; in my corrosive experience of life's vanity; in my nervous sense of self-condemnation and diffidence; in the imminent threat of boredom if my music is turned off; in my fussy complaints when a long, hard road lies ahead. These are today's significant felt needs that the gospel is bent to serve. Jesus and the church exist to make you feel loved, significant, validated, entertained, and charged up. This gospel ameliorates distressing symptoms. It makes you feel better. The logic of this therapeutic gospel is a Jesus-for-Me who meets individual desires and assuages psychic aches.

The therapeutic outlook is not a bad thing in its proper place. By definition, a medical-therapeutic gaze holds in view problems of physical suffering and breakdown. In literal medical intervention, a therapy treats an illness, trauma, or deficiency. You don't call someone to repentance for their colon cancer, broken leg, or beriberi. You seek to heal. So far, so good.

But in today's therapeutic gospel the medical way of looking at the world is metaphorically extended to these psychological desires. These are defined just like a medical problem. You feel bad; the therapy makes you feel better. The definition of the disease bypasses the sinful human heart. You are not the agent of your deepest problems, but merely a sufferer and victim of unmet needs. The offer of a cure skips over the sin-bearing Savior. Repentance from unbelief, willfulness, and wickedness is not the issue. Sinners are not called to a U-turn and to a new life that is life indeed. Such a gospel massages self-love. There is nothing in its inner logic to make you love God and love any other person besides yourself. This therapeutic gospel may often mention the word "Jesus," but he has morphed into the meeter-of-your-needs, not the Savior from your sins. It corrects Jesus' work. The therapeutic gospel unhinges *the* gospel.<sup>1</sup>

That "gospel" is what you'll find in many of the books at the top of the list of best sellers among Christian authors. And it is a different gospel.

Point being – there are people who pervert the truth. Paul says to mark them and avoid them.

2. There are people who are especially susceptible to error.

Paul says in verse 7 that these false teachers, by smooth talk and flattery, "deceive the hearts of the naïve." No one likes to be naïve, but the word is not necessarily a negative word. It means to be unsuspecting (NASB) or innocent.

In this case it seems that Paul is concerned for them because a very good quality puts them at risk. He says, "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." It appears that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://sites.silaspartners.com/CC/article/0,,PTID314526%7CCHID598014%7CCIID2340064,00.html>

their willingness to respond to what they hear is a good thing as long as they are hearing truth, but that they also need to be discerning.

In order to discern, though, we need to be “wise to what is good.” It is only by our increasing knowledge of what is right that we can know what is wrong. Are you growing in your knowledge of God’s truth?

3. Ultimately there is a promise that God will win.

Verse 20 is not separate from verses 17-19, so we need to see it as a word of encouragement to them. Paul is telling them that the various struggles they face – and in this case in the arena of “truth wars” – will ultimately end in God’s victory. The NT writers often close their letters with assurances that God will preserve us, and that seems to be the case here.

Let me use an illustration to summarize what Paul is saying in this passage. When I was in my early teens, a friend of mine and I had several lawns that we were responsible for cutting. There was one particular job that we hated, because the homeowner had two of those annoying little yipping dogs. Despite their size, these two sorry creatures were prodigious in their output. Do you know what I mean? Cutting the lawn was like walking through a mine field. You had to walk with the mower out in front of you a foot or two or else you’d step in it. I think that is precisely what Paul is trying to say here, only the stakes are much higher. So be careful.

### **Conclusion**

So, after saying these words and sharing some greetings, Paul is right back where he began. If you compare verses 25-27 with the opening words of this letter (1:1-7), you will see that Paul’s great concern has been to share the Gospel that brings about the obedience of faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, and this to the glory of God.

Have you obeyed God’s command to turn away from your sin and place your faith in Christ? Do you stand before God forgiven? Are you living under the direction of the Holy Spirit as he renews your mind through His Word? If any of these things is lacking, I encourage you to believe in Christ and follow him.