

Do Not Expose Yourself To False Teaching

Have you ever been in this situation? A friend of yours comes to you all excited about a new book or a TV pastor she's been hearing. As she tells you some of the things this pastor or the book says, you start to feel uncomfortable, but you can't put your finger on why. You just sense that what your friend is all excited about doesn't quite agree with what your pastor has been teaching or what you have understood from reading the Bible. So you wonder what to do. You care about your friend and don't want her to be misled, but she seems so happy and so excited. Today's message from Paul's letter to the Romans may help you in this situation.

We are coming close to the end of this great, great epistle to the Romans. In the second half of chapter 15 and all of chapter 16 Paul decided to reveal his heart to the people of the church in Rome so that they might know him better. Having given them the theology of the Holy Spirit of God, which is justification by Grace through faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul then shares his heart so that they might know him as a person as well as a preacher, teacher, and apostle. Paul's purpose in doing this is that not only will they trust his teaching because of the genuineness of his heart, but that they might get to know him because he wants to come to Rome and he wants them to assist him in a desire he has for taking the Gospel message to Spain. Paul shares something of that desire in chapter 15. He also shares his commitment to do the will of God. He lets them see how totally committed he is to his apostleship and those things which God has placed upon his heart.

Last week we saw how deep Paul's love was for many of these saints in Rome. In the first sixteen verses we saw a catalogue of names of people who had a very important part in Paul's life and ministry. Paul had a great love for all the people in the church and he was the kind of leader who did not see himself as being above everyone else. Paul was a down-to-earth caring man and he showed it to all those who shared his love for Christ. He considered them friends and beloved co-workers. Paul's love for people appears over and over again throughout all of his epistles. We won't take a lot of time looking at all of the evidence, but look for example at what he says in Philippians 1:7-8:

7 It is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a very special place in my heart. We have shared together the blessings of God, both when I was in prison and when I was out, defending the truth and telling others the Good News.

8 God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.

In Philippians 4:1:

I Dear brothers and sisters, I love you and long to see you, for you are my

joy and the reward for my work. So please stay true to the Lord, my dear friends.

Then in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9:

7 As apostles of Christ we certainly had a right to make some demands of you, but we were as gentle among you as a mother feeding and caring for her own children.

8 We loved you so much that we gave you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too.

9 Don't you remember, dear brothers and sisters, how hard we worked among you? Night and day we toiled to earn a living so that our expenses would not be a burden to anyone there as we preached God's Good News among you.

This type of expression continues all the way down through verse 20 if you want to read it later.

People were an essential ingredient in the life of this marvelous apostle. Paul then provides us with a living example of how we should relate to one another. We should treasure one another, care for one another, love one another, and never intentionally hurt one another. This is the way people in a church should treat one another because that is the way Christ taught us it should be in the family of God.

Our vision for Village Church is that everyone in it will be so filled with Christ's love and the Holy Spirit that they will manifest it in every aspect of their lives. Many of you already do. However if it ever becomes necessary, your pastors will lovingly and privately talk with any individual who is not being loving or who is hurting another person in the congregation. If that individual then continues in such behavior, it may be necessary to apply church discipline as it is outlined in the Bible. We cannot allow the church to become a faction with a church name.

We are the church of Jesus Christ and we are not to forget that Jesus has entrusted us with His church and the guidelines for how it is to function. Far too many churches today allow things to go on that shouldn't be allowed to go on because no one wants to offend anyone else. Pastors fear for their security if they call someone to account for their behavior. It can be dangerous to call an influential church leader to account if his or her behavior is out of line. There is also the possibility that some might be offended if the church takes a stand on sensitive issues such as homosexuality, abortion, salvation through Christ alone, and the reality of Hell. Village Church will not hesitate to teach the truth that is found in the Bible, but at the same time we will show Christ's love to those who refuse to listen to the truth.

So Paul's ministry is filled with a love for the people of God. The book of Acts gives us many names of those individuals who were a part of that intimate fellowship of

laborers for Christ that surrounded the apostle Paul. If we had time we could begin with his ministry in chapter 13 and the four co-teachers and prophets who labored with him in the church at Antioch. We could continue right through Acts 28 and create a long list of people who were part of the fellowship with whom Paul shared his life and ministry. But nowhere in the entire New Testament is there as rich, comprehensive, and insightful a list of those who were a part of his life as in the sixteenth chapter of Romans. Truly we see, as Warren Wiersbe points out, that *“Paul was a friend-maker as well as a soul-winner.”*¹

So we see that this chapter reveals Paul’s heart for those who served with him. Certainly it is the mark of someone who is effective in the service of God that they are not only loved by the people who serve with them but that they love those people as well. I can say honestly that the greatest joy and privilege Betty and I have in our ministry here at Village Church is the relationships with those of you who labor alongside of us. You have enriched our lives in ways you may well not realize. We can only hope that the kind of love you have given to us has in some measure been given back to you.

Now as we began to look at last week, Paul expresses his affection in four different categories: **Commendation, cordiality, caution**, and then a list of **companions** at the end. Paul begins in Romans 16:1,2 by commending Phoebe for her hard work. Then in verses 3-15 we see Paul’s cordiality. We see in these verses a long list of people to whom Paul sends his greetings, an open display of loving affection for individual friends who stood alongside the apostle Paul. The cordiality section comes to a conclusion in verse 16. In summing up his love to all of these friends now residing in Rome, he calls on them in Romans 16:16 to:

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

This demonstration of physical affection is an old custom in the East. Even today on TV news we see dignitaries greeting each other with kisses on both cheeks. You can go all the way back into the Old Testament period and you will find this kind of kiss very common. It was a sign only of greeting and warm affection toward another person. Men kissed men and women kissed women. Men and women only greeted each other in this manner if they were close relatives. The New Testament church also used this expression of greeting and affection. So Paul asks them to greet everybody on his behalf in this way. What they are doing in effect is demonstrating their love in a visible, physical way. I would suggest to you that the kind of affection that is in some way communicated by a touch tends to break down barriers. In our culture the equivalent would be a warm handshake or a hug.

Paul also said in this verse, *“The churches of Christ greet you.”* Wouldn’t it have been wonderful to have been around when there were no denominations? Imagine being able to say, **“ALL THE CHURCHES GREET YOU”!** There were no Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Lutherans, or Methodists. All the churches had the same emphasis for ministry. Thus Paul could say, *“All the churches greet you.”* They all love one another.

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Right*, p. 172.

Look at Colossians 2:2-4:

*2 My goal is that they will be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. I want them to have full confidence because they have complete understanding of God's secret plan, which is Christ himself.
3 In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
4 I am telling you this so that no one will be able to deceive you with persuasive arguments.*

Paul and his friends knew what it was like to be knit together in love. So Love commends and love is cordial and that brings us to the third point:

3) Caution

Now we come to an issue that we wish were not necessary. But it was in the early church and it is even more necessary today. That is, caution against false doctrine. Paul often had to educate his readers to be careful about being influenced by heresy, or distortion of doctrine.

Love also at times expresses caution. Not only is Paul a friend-maker, he advises those he cares about regarding foes to avoid. In the middle of this expression of love Paul utters a word of caution. Because **it is the nature of love to protect and warn**. Love at its heart has a zeal for the safety, prosperity, joy, and blessedness of its object. Just think about the way you feel about your husband, your wife, your children, or anyone you love. If you really love that person one of your strongest instincts is for their safety and prosperity. You will never see the love of Paul demonstrated more completely than when you see it demonstrated in his words of caution.

In Acts 20 Paul says in verses 25-31:

*25 "And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again.
26 Let me say plainly that I have been faithful. No one's damnation can be blamed on me,
27 for I didn't shrink from declaring all that God wants for you.
28 "**And now beware!** Be sure that you feed and shepherd God's flock—his church, purchased with his blood—over whom the Holy Spirit has appointed you as elders.
29 **I know full well that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock.**
30 **Even some of you will distort the truth in order to draw a following.**
31 Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you.*

This is an act of love. Love has a motivation that warns and cautions those that are loved. Paul undoubtedly took his cue in this regard from **Jesus who repeatedly warned against false prophets and shepherds**. He also warned against false Christs. In the end times

there will be many who claim to be Christ. There will be deception. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15:

*13 These people are false apostles. **THEY HAVE FOOLED YOU BY DISGUIISING THEMSELVES AS APOSTLES OF CHRIST.***

14 But I am not surprised! Even Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light.

15 So it is no wonder his servants can also do it by pretending to be godly ministers. In the end they will get every bit of punishment their wicked deeds deserve.

In 1 Timothy Paul calls on Timothy to set things right in the church and correct the heresy that is leading people astray with an untrue message. In 2 Timothy Paul warns about false teachers and false prophets and the lies they teach. So it is the nature of love to do that. Let's look at Paul's warning in Romans 16:17:

*17 And now I make one more appeal, my dear brothers and sisters. Watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people's faith by teaching things that are contrary to what you have been taught. **STAY AWAY FROM THEM.***

This is what false teachers do. They teach something different than the truth and create a division. They bring conflict into the church. John Calvin said:

"Men are distracted from the unity of the truth when the truth of God is destroyed by doctrines of human invention."

Paul's major concern here is those within the church who appear to be Christians, but who are actually drawing people away from Christ and the truth. We see their characteristics in Romans 16:18, NAS.

For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

In other words, false teachers are divisive, self-serving, self-centered, and smooth talkers. They are quite clever, or seductive, in their attempts to lead believers astray.

False teachers inevitably come with human teaching. Sometimes they get very close to the truth, sometimes taking part of the truth and then distorting it. Love, as proposed by various church denominations today, is a far cry from the kind of love Paul proposes. Paul's love warns against error. The kind of love we too often hear about in the church today is kind of a sickly sentimentalism wanting to set doctrine aside in the name of so-called love. Any love that ignores truth so that it might promote *doctrines of human invention* should be rejected because that is not the essence of real love. All the talk about love and all the talk about unity that sets aside truth is the work of false teachers and false

prophets. All they want to do is create division.

Now you may be asking, how do we identify false teaching? John Stott suggests we ask the teaching three questions:

- 1) *Is it biblical?*
- 2) *Does it glorify the Lord Christ?*
- 3) *Does it promote goodness?*²

Verse 19 as rendered in the Phillips translation puts point three rather well: *“I want to see you experts in good, and not even beginners in evil.”*

What should you do when you come across false teaching? Do you debate it? Do you dialogue with it? No. If someone were to ask me if I would like to go on the *Larry King Live* program and debate with him and others about the infinite nature of God, and whether Jesus Christ is the only way to eternal life, I don't believe I would do it. If Larry wanted to give me that hour to preach and then give equal time to someone else to give their viewpoint, I would agree to that. Because, you see, I'm finding more and more that it makes no sense to debate or dialogue with heresy or error. It makes no sense to get caught up in their anger and resentment toward the message of the Gospel, because until they open themselves up to that message they will never accept it no matter how skillful a debater you are. The best approach is to simply share the truth of the Gospel and what Christ has done for you and then trust the Holy Spirit to work in the heart and mind of the listener. God is the One who will ultimately defeat Satan and his false doctrines. Paul says the only thing you do with false teachers is to recognize what they are and **avoid them**. If you know your Bible you'll be able to do that. If you don't then you're oh so easily misled. The world is jam packed with false teachers and many of them are in the church. Most people don't recognize them because very few Christians know their Bible well enough to really apply Stott's first test, is it biblical?

We are not to kill or argue or threaten or hate those who promote false teaching. Just **avoid them**, move away. I would like to suggest that in the study of the Word of God at advanced levels, there is a fine line between a helpful understanding of error and an exposure to error that sucks the life out of a well-meaning person. It has happened to a number of theological students with good intentions. They find themselves so involved in dialogue with error that it destroys their usefulness and only serves to raise their own anxiety. Does it make sense to take a young man or young woman who believes in Christ with all their heart and send them off to a college that attacks that belief?

I've been reading the book, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, which provides an interesting account of how non-Christian religions were introduced to the western world. The author, Harold Netland gives this interesting account:

“History is full of the ironies of unintended consequences, one of which is the fact that it was in part the very success of nineteenth century missions that

² Stott, John. *Romans*, p. 400.

introduced non-Christian religions to western audiences (Europe and the United States for the most part). *Western missionaries encompassed the globe, spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Asia, the islands of the Pacific, Latin America, and much of Africa, sending back to constituencies at home haunting images of millions of “heathen” and “pagans” opposed by spiritual darkness. Especially significant are the unintended consequences of the missionaries’ study of other religions and the translation of their sacred texts into European and American languages. For example, William Carey, early missionary to India, felt that missionaries needed to understand the religious context of those to whom they ministered, and thus, in addition to his translations of the Bible into Bengali, Sanskrit and Marathi, he also translated Hindu sacred texts into English texts.*

“Other works prepared by missionaries for the training of missionaries also had the effect of propagating in the West the very religions they were seeking to conquer. By the 1850’s there were many works explaining Buddhism with wide circulation among the increasingly better educated laity (general population).

“By the mid-twentieth century, Eastern influences were readily apparent throughout Europe and North America. Then by the 1990’s, the symbols of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taois spirituality were so prevalent that it was increasingly difficult to distinguish the East from the West.”³

In an attempt to carry the message of the Gospel to areas where non-Christian religions were flourishing, missionaries in effect introduced those religions to Christian Europe and America. The effect has been to undermine Christianity by offering all sorts of other alternatives to people. Perhaps these early missionaries, as well intentioned as I’m confident they were, should have paid a little more attention to what Paul wrote here in Romans 16:17, and I’ll read it again for you:

*17 And now I make one more appeal, my dear brothers and sisters. Watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people’s faith by teaching things that are contrary to what you have been taught. **Stay away from them.***

Love sounds this warning especially when we realize that all of us are susceptible to being tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine as Ephesians 4:14-16 says:

14 Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth.

³ Netland, Harold; *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, pp. 105,106.

15 Instead, we will hold to the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.

16 Under his direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

Paul says that we should see this kind of doctrine for what it is and get away from it. Stick to the doctrine which you've learned is true. Don't open the door for Satan to have his way with you. Paul then gives two reasons why these lying teachers are not worthy of your attention. Romans 16:18 (NRSV):

*18 For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but **their own appetites**.*

This is something that is repeated many times in the Scripture. These people are doing this to promote their own personal interests. They are self-serving. Look with me at Philippians 4:17-19:

17 Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example.

*18 For I have told you often before, and I say it again with tears in my eyes, that **there are many whose conduct shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ.***

*19 Their future is eternal destruction. **Their god is their appetite**, they brag about shameful things, and all they think about is this life here on earth.*

These people are into earthly things alone, gratification on the human level. They are into money, fame, ego, success. 2 Timothy 3:1-9:

*1 You should also know this, Timothy, that **in the last days** there will be very difficult times.*

*2 **For people will love only themselves and their money.** They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. **They will consider nothing sacred.***

3 They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control; they will be cruel and have no interest in what is good.

*4 They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and **love pleasure rather than God.***

*5 **They will act as if they are religious,** but they will reject the power that could make them godly. **You must stay away from people like that.***

6 They are the kind who work their way into people's homes and win the confidence of vulnerable women who are burdened with the guilt of sin and controlled by many desires.

7 Such women are forever following new teachings, but they never understand the truth.

8 And these teachers fight the truth just as Jannes and Jambres fought

*against Moses. Their minds are depraved, and their faith is counterfeit.
9 But they won't get away with this for long. **Someday everyone will recognize what fools they are, just as happened with Jannes and Jambres.***

When Paul talks about the “appetites” that false teachers are feeding, he is referring to a number of things, including food, alcohol and drugs, greed for money, and wrong sexual desires. If we were to explore the subject of false teachers in more detail, we would find that sexual perversion runs rampant. Paul gives the same instruction whenever he writes about false teachers: **Get away from these kinds of people.**

The apostles were united on this point. Peter has similar admonitions in 2 Peter 2:1-3, 10, 11, 14, 15:

*1 But there were also false prophets in Israel, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will cleverly teach their destructive heresies about God and even turn against their Master who bought them. Theirs will be a swift and terrible end.
2 **Many will follow their evil teaching and shameful immorality. And because of them, Christ and his true way will be slandered.**
3 **In their greed they will make up clever lies to get hold of your money. But God condemned them long ago, and their destruction is on the way.**
10 He is especially hard on those who follow their own evil, lustful desires and who despise authority. These people are proud and arrogant, daring even to scoff at the glorious ones without so much as trembling.
11 But the angels, even though they are far greater in power and strength than these false teachers, never speak out disrespectfully against the glorious ones.
14 They commit adultery with their eyes, and **their lust is never satisfied. They make a game of luring unstable people into sin. They train themselves to be greedy; they are doomed and cursed.**
15 They have wandered off the right road and followed the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved to earn money by doing wrong.*

Do you know why their lust can never be satisfied? Because only God in Christ, dwelling in the heart of a believer can subdue lust and greed. They don't have that subduing power. In verse 19:

*19 They promise freedom, but they themselves are slaves to sin and corruption. **For you are a slave to whatever controls you.***

Jude speaks virtually the same thing. Jude 12,13:

*12 When these people join you in fellowship meals celebrating the love of the Lord, they are like dangerous reefs that can **shipwreck you**. They are shameless in the way they **care only about themselves**. They are like*

clouds blowing over dry land without giving rain, promising much but producing nothing. They are like trees without fruit at harvest time. They are not only dead but doubly dead, for they have been pulled out by the roots.

13 They are like wild waves of the sea, churning up the dirty foam of their shameful deeds. They are wandering stars, heading for everlasting gloom and darkness.

And John stated in 2 John verses 10 and 11:

10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting;

11 for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.

Let's sum it up by saying this. **Some of the strongest language in all of Scripture is the judgment language that God pronounces on false teachers.** They may appear on the surface to be well meaning but they are not concerned at all with anything except their own gratification. Their only concern is themselves. They are not worthy of your attention. Who are these false teachers? Well, turn on almost any talk show and you'll find an example of a false teacher. Go to any church that teaches doctrine that isn't consistent with the Bible and you'll find a false teacher. Go to a movie that promotes sex outside of marriage or total self-centeredness and you'll find false teachers. Listen to anyone who teaches or promotes anything contrary to what is found in the Bible and you'll find false teachers. **Don't go there**, because it will ultimately cause you grief.

Now let's take a look at the second reason we shouldn't give such people our attention. Romans 16:18:

By smooth talk and glowing words THEY DECEIVE INNOCENT PEOPLE.

Boy can they talk and can they be clever! After all, Satan wouldn't use a klutz to teach false doctrine. He would use a smooth talking angel of light if he wants to get his point across. They use eloquence, flattery, and well chosen, polished, flattering lies that sound appealing, and consequently they deceive the hearts of the innocent. They gain one's attention and deceive their heart. They are selfish and seductive and they deceive with cleverness those who aren't yet corrupt. It happened in Corinth, they tried it in Rome, and they are at it today. Now Romans 16:19:

19 But everyone knows that you are obedient to the Lord. This makes me very happy. I want you to see clearly what is right and to stay innocent of any wrong.

Paul tells the church at Rome that their spiritual reputation is well known among the believers. This reminds me of what Paul said way back in Romans 1:8:

*8 Let me say first of all that your faith in God is **becoming known***

throughout the world.

Paul wants the Roman church to remain innocent of any wrong. Why? If they fall that would be a severe tragedy because of the wonderful reputation they have. Paul wants them to be wise about what is good and simple about what is evil. He warns them not to become expert about lies, deceit, and heresy. **Stay away from those things.** Run from those things. The greatest security we have against lies is to hold fast to the truth. That is why Philippians 4:8 says:

8 And now, dear brothers and sisters, let me say one more thing as I close this letter. Fix your thoughts on what is true and honorable and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

Colossians 3:16,17:

16 Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you wise. Use his words to teach and counsel each other. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.

17 And whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, all the while giving thanks through him to God the Father.

Paul tells them to keep their minds focused on what is good and pure and right.

People tell me they like to watch television and go to the movies to keep abreast of what is going on in our culture. Considering what is on TV and in the movies these days, you may go there to analyze culture but you are going to lose your analyzing power when all that trash and filth fills your mind. You know, **practicing sin only makes you better at it**, and if you apply yourself to it long enough it will find its way into your life. Sin dulls the sense of hatred of evil and cripples spiritual usefulness. Don't study false religions, don't study sin, but stick with truth and Godly obedience. If you want to know what a counterfeit dollar bill looks like, make sure you have a thorough knowledge of what the real dollar bill looks like and you will be able to spot a counterfeit a mile away. If you find such people in your church, give them a couple of opportunities to see the error of their ways, and if they don't, get rid of them. Romans 16:20:

20 The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

We can look forward to the day the spiritual warfare is over. God will win and everything will exist in perfection. I like that Paul says "*under your feet.*" That means we are going to be in on the victory. We are going to reign with Christ. Until then we are going to be engaged in spiritual warfare that demands all the best we have to offer. So let's give it our best until the Lord calls us home or we are raptured at His second coming.