

Introduction

Karen and I are enjoying being back in Georgia. When we lived in Florida, we looked forward to moving to Georgia, and when we did, we really liked it. When we were in New Mexico, we missed Georgia, and now that we are back in Georgia, we are glad to be back. Even though we really like being in Georgia, there is something here that I have to watch out for: poison ivy. I am very allergic to poison ivy, and I have had some bad cases in the past, which were not very pleasant. As bad as the itchy rashes are, the medicine they prescribe, prednisone, which is a steroid, is equally bad. Prednisone gets me wound up so much that I cannot sleep. Therefore, I am always on the lookout for poison ivy. I see it when other people are not aware of it. I see it in bushes, hedges, trees, along the road, and just about everywhere. I don't just watch out for poison ivy, I avoid it. I stay as far away from it as possible, so that I don't accidentally get a case of it. When I can't avoid it, or it is in a problematic area, I take steps to eradicate it. There was some poison ivy growing by the shed that Chad and I built, and I used an herbicide to kill it. There were some large 3-4" diameter poison ivy vines growing in the trees between my mother's house and our house. I took an axe to cut those vines, then sprayed all the other poison ivy around it with the herbicide.

Our message today is from Romans 16:17-27, and it is the conclusion to Paul's letter to the Romans. It is not about poison ivy, but in Paul's concluding remarks, he urges the saints in Rome to watch out for those that cause dissensions and hindrances, and to avoid them. People that cause dissension, division, and hindrances in the church are like poison ivy. They spread their poison to others and cause irritating rashes in the church. The remedies for those infected by their poison is not very comfortable for anyone, and gets everyone worked up, so there are some similarities. God wants us to watch out for those that cause dissensions and hindrances and turn away from them. Let's read our text.

Paul's Exhortation to watch out

1. **Watch out** (Rom 16:17)
2. **Turn away from** (Rom 16:17-18)
3. **Be wise and innocent** (Rom 16:19-20)

(Rom 16:17–20) “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. {18} 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. {19} For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. {20} The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.”

1. **Watch out** (Rom 16:17-20)

In Paul's first letter to Timothy he wrote, “Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scriptures, to exhortation and teaching.” Paul did not just teach this, he lived by it. Even though Paul was a teacher, and not an exhorter, he exhorted people and churches regularly. Knowing the truth and understanding the truth is important, but it does not profit until it is applied in our lives. Our passage today is an exhortation from Paul to the church in Rome.

(1 Tim 4:13) “Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.”

Paul exhorts the saints in Rome to keep their eyes on those who cause dissensions and hindrances. Knowing that there will be those that do this is not enough. He urges all of us to be watchful for those that will cause dissension and hindrances. We must keep our eyes on those who cause dissensions.

(Rom 16:17) “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.”

In the KJV, it says, “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” On one hand, I don't believe the term, “mark” is correct. The Greek word is skopeo (Strong's G4648), which means to look, see, or regard. A telescope allows us to see from a distance. A microscope allows us to see small things. A periscope allows us to see all around us. Episkopos is the Greek word for an overseer, one of three terms for a pastor in a church. I believe the NASB is correct in telling us to keep our eye on or watch out for those that cause dissension. I think marking someone goes beyond the idea of looking or watching for them. On the other hand, in the context of the whole verse, Paul tells us to turn away from them or avoid them. Who do we avoid, or who do we turn away from? We are to turn away from or avoid those that cause divisions or offenses, so in one sense we have had to mark them in order to do that.

(Rom 16:17) (KJV) “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.”

The KJV uses the terms divisions and offences, and I think those are correct. We need to be watchful for those that cause division and offenses. The Greek words used are dichostasia (Strong's G1370) and skandalon (Strong's G4625). Dichostasia is a compound word, dis (from duo) and stasis, which means to have a position or stance. The compound word means to have two opposing positions or stances, which is a division. Skandalon means a snare or trap or something that makes you fall. It is often translated as a stumbling block.

What are the things that bring division? Division means to see apart or differently. Therefore, having a different vision is something that will bring division in a church. I believe it is important to have a clear vision, mission, and set of core values. Vision is who you are. Mission is what you are going to do, and your core values are how you are going to carry out your mission. Some churches have a mission statement for a vision statement. While that may not be correct, it is far less of a problem than a church that does not have a clear vision and has people in the church with different visions.

I have tried to be very clear about our vision and mission at the Connection Church. We are a community of believers (church) that are connected to God and with one another.

Our mission is to help people connect with God and with one another. How are we going to accomplish that mission? The early church had some building values that they were devoted to. The early church was devoted to the apostles' teaching, to prayer, to fellowship, and to breaking bread. I believe that these four building values help people connect with God and with one another. We are a community of believers that are connected to God and to one another, and we are helping people connect to God and one another by building according to the pattern of the New Testament churches.

(Acts 2:42) “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

How do we help people connect with God? For believers, we want to help people connect with God in worship, prayer times, study of God's word, and in fellowship with other believers. For unbelievers, we help people connect with God through sharing the gospel with them.

How do we help people connect with one another and have meaningful relationships? We believe that one of the best ways is through small groups or Connection Groups. Relationships are not best developed in corporate worship, but in one-on-one and small group settings. As we grow, we will train small group leaders and our small groups will be a key element of church life. We want to provide a structure that will facilitate and promote strong relationships.

There are a great variety of churches today and their visions are different. There are gathering churches, and they usually have great worship and a good preacher, but the majority of people are not in small groups or relationally connected. Many of these do not even believe in church membership; their focus is on providing a positive experience for people to attend. There are other churches that have seeker services. They try to get people to attend so that they can hear the gospel. If you believe that church services are for equipping the saints, you will struggle going to a church that is trying to win the lost in every service. The vision is important, and if you have a different vision than the church, you could create division.

The vision of our church is very dear to my heart. I believe that our service to the Lord should flow out of a passionate love for the Lord. When people are touched by God and are experiencing God in their lives, they will naturally tell others. When people are not experiencing God in their daily lives, telling others about Christ becomes an outward duty. Therefore, I do not want the vision and mission to be about works, but relationship. We want to love God with all of our hearts and love our neighbor as ourselves. I train people in evangelism, and I think we should be equipped to share the gospel, but I believe that it is more effective when people are excited about Jesus. Recently, Tom had an experience with the Lord. Consequently, he was telling everyone about the Lord. He couldn't help but share the Lord.

In context, division comes out of different doctrines. Paul said, "who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned." The early church suffered from legalistic Jews teaching that the Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be saved. The purpose of Barnabas' and Paul's visit to the elders and apostles in Jerusalem in Acts 15 was to help resolve this doctrinal issue. There are some doctrines that I see as non-essential doctrines for unity. I would include the pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, post-tribulation doctrinal positions in this group. Essential doctrines are ones like the trinity, the authority of the Scriptures, etc. If someone does not believe in the deity of Christ, that is a major issue.

(Rom 16:17) "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them."

The second group that Paul addressed are those that cause hindrances or offenses. Jesus used the same word in Matthew 18:7, saying, "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks (skandalon)! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!" Jesus said that these people who are stumbling blocks will come. Paul tells us that we need to be watching out for them so that we can protect people from being hurt or offended.

(Matt 18:7) "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!"

Offenses often cause division, particularly unresolved offenses. An unresolved offense can quickly turn into bitterness, and when that happens, many people can get offended. Communication goes down and walls go up, and reconciliation is difficult at this point. In Hebrews 12:15, God exhorts us to see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled. The Greek word that is translated as, “See to it,” is the same Greek work, skopeo. We must watch over and see to it that these offenses do not turn to bitterness. When many people get defiled, you have a division in the church between the offended and the others. It is fitting that Paul exhorted them to watch out for those that cause divisions and also offenses, as sometimes they are linked.

(Heb 12:15) “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;”

There are a great many other things that can cause offenses. Hypocrisy in the church can create a lot of offenses or stumbling blocks. In Matthew 23, Jesus gave eight woes to the scribes and Pharisees, and He addressed them as hypocrites. He said that they shut off the kingdom of heaven from people, and they do not allow those who are entering to go in. They were hindering people from following God. Paul told us to watch out for those who are creating hindrances. It is important for you and I to walk the talk and be doers of the word. We have to be light and salt to the world.

(Matt 23:13) “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.”

(Matt 5:13–14) “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. {14} You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden;”

We need to watch out for those that cause division and offenses, particularly because since Jesus said it is inevitable that there will be offenses or stumbling blocks. Sooner or later someone will get offended. One of the things that we can do to help create a healthy church is to teach people how to work through these conflicts and offenses. We need to instruct and exhort people to forgive one another. Our text is not about how to resolve offenses, it is about watching out for those that cause offenses.

2. Turn away

Paul does not just say to look out for those that cause division and offenses, he tells us to turn away or avoid them. I believe this is talking about someone who is in the habit of causing division and offenses, not a single incident. We all sin, and sin negatively impacts others and offends. We must learn to forgive one another and work through those offenses. But for those who are in the habit of causing offenses and dissensions, Paul tells us to turn away or avoid them. There are many people that God tells us to avoid. We are to avoid those given to anger, lest we learn their ways. We are to avoid gossipers. We are to avoid fools, as the companion of fools suffers harm. We are to avoid evil men and women. The problem with spending time with those that cause offenses is that we can become part of the problem, and compromise our own character and reputation.

(Rom 16:17) “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.”

In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, he gave a similar word, only it was not an exhortation, but a command. He said, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.”

(2 Thess 3:6) “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.”

The church in Thessalonica was not the only church that Paul warned. In Acts 20, Paul met with the pastors from the church in Ephesus. He gave a similar warning to them. He told them to “be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock.” He said that “savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” Paul concluded by exhorting them to “be on the alert.” There were unruly and divisive people in the early church, and they are still around today. We need to watch out for them and keep away from them. The leaders of the church need to be particularly on guard to protect themselves and the flock.

(Acts 20:28-31) “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. {29} I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; {30} and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. {31} Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.”

Paul gives two reasons to avoid those that cause division and offenses. First, they are slaves of their own appetites. They are not slaves of Christ, but slaves of their own desires. They are living for themselves instead of living for Christ. Self-willed people can create a lot of problems for leadership, because they are not submitted to authority, and they can create problems for everyone else. Selfishness is a major cause of strife. There was strife in the church at Philippi, and Paul addressed it, telling them, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, and with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also the interests of others.” A humble, selfless, and considerate person is not going to cause divisions and offenses.

(Rom 16:18) “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.”

(Phil 2:3–4) “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; {4} do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”

The second characteristic of these people that cause division and offenses is that they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting by using smooth and flattering speech. When I managed a golf course in Florida back in the 80's, I had a young man apply for a job as one of my assistant

professionals. He was very polite and smooth. He answered, “Yes sir,” or “No mam.” He hustled, and dressed nicely, and in every appearance he looked like the ideal employee. I was unsuspecting and consequently was quite deceived, as this man turned out to be on drugs.

When I was in prison ministry, I came across a number of smooth talkers, and I learned not to believe anything. There was a saying, “How do you know when a drug addict is lying?” The answer is, “Every time his lips are moving.” I was no longer unsuspecting, but was suspicious of everything. In the church it is more difficult. We are unsuspecting, and we believe the best in people. It is easier to be deceived. It is also more painful to us when we get deceived in church. How do we discern motives and keep from being deceived? I believe we have to look at the fruit of people's lives. Jesus answered that question for us in Matthew 7:15-20. He said, Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but bad tree bears bad fruit... So then, you will know them by their fruits.” We can't go by smooth and flattering speech. We can't go by outward appearance. We must be fruit inspectors.

(Matt 7:15–20) “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. {16} You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? {17} So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. {18} A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. {19} Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. {20} So then, you will know them by their fruits.”

A number of years ago a couple of families started coming to our church in New Mexico. They immediately volunteered to serve and to greet. It initially appeared like they were going to be great additions to our church. But the fruit began to show very early. One of the women told people that she was going to preach in a couple of weeks. I had not invited her to preach, or even discussed this with her, but she was already telling people that she was going to preach. The motive of this woman was to draw people to herself, gain position, usurp authority and to take control of the church. I discovered that she did not believe in the authority of the Scriptures, and would not submit to the leaders in the church. She was very forceful and lacked humility. We want people to serve, but we need to be careful about people coming in. We need to observe the fruit of their lives. Jesus' words are very apropos.

There was another woman that started to come to our church. She came to prophesy and pray for people. She was like a sponge, trying to soak up all the attention she could. Unfortunately, she was a false prophet. She considered herself as the apostle over the area and as such, she could come and go and have her way in all of the churches. She would not submit to authority, and was living in sin. She taught against the deity of Christ, and I had to ban her from attending our small groups, and from ministering to people in our congregation. Her fruit was not good. In fact, she had restraining orders filed against her by thirteen different churches in Albuquerque. She was going to take advantage of any unsuspecting church. There are still ravenous wolves that want to take advantage of the flock today.

3. Be wise and innocent

After Paul's admonishment to them, Paul encourages them. He tells them that he has heard a report of their obedience, and he was rejoicing over them. That had to make the saints in Rome feel good that they had developed a reputation among the churches of being obedient. Then, Paul

shared his motive in admonishing them. Paul wanted them to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. He wanted them to mark those who caused division and offenses so that they could remain innocent in what is evil, and be wise in what is good.

(Rom 16:19) “For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.”

This is not the first time that Paul has written about being wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. Paul spoke about evil eleven times in Romans. In Romans 12:9, he said, “let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.” Being wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil begins with a resolve to abhor or hate what is evil and to cling to what is good. One problem we have is that we love or enjoy some things that are evil. We need a fear of the Lord that abhors and hates the things that God hates. If we hate what is evil, it is much easier to cling to what is good.

(Rom 12:9) “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.”

In Romans 12:17-21, Paul taught us never to pay back evil to anyone, and not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good. Just because someone else does something wrong to us, we should not commit a wrong in retaliation. We cannot say that the other person made me sin. We have a choice when someone does something evil to us. We can confront them and try to resolve the matter. We can forgive them. But, we cannot pay them back with evil. We must overcome evil with good. If we are going to be wise in doing what is good, and innocent in what is evil, we must learn to overcome evil with good.

(Rom 12:17–21) “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men....{21} Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Paul ends his exhortation with a promise and a blessing. He promises that the God of peace will soon crush Satan under their feet. When the church is unified and living in harmonious relationships with one another, it will be victorious. Jesus said that if a kingdom or house is divided against itself, it cannot stand. The opposite is true, when the divisions and offenses in the church are eliminated, and the house is unified, that church will stand. God will crush Satan under its feet.

(Rom 16:20) “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.”

(Mark 3:24–25) “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. {25} If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.”

Paul's blessing is that the grace of the Lord Jesus be with them. In many of Paul's letters to the churches he blesses them with the grace of the Lord. In the last verse of the Bible, John ends with the same benediction, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.” Paul and the early church understood the importance of living in the grace of the Lord. That is something that we should all pray and bless one another with.

(Rev 22:21) “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.”

Conclusion and Applications

There are a few people that I have met that do not get poison ivy. We had our oak trees in the front yard trimmed at the house we are currently living at. The branches were hanging on the power lines and needed to be trimmed. There was some poison ivy growing up the Willow Oaks and the man doing the trimming said he was not allergic to it. He reached over and started pulling it down with his bare hands. I appreciated him removing it for me.

Most of us are not like this man. We do not want to be anywhere near poison ivy. Most of us do not want to be part of a church where there are divisions and offenses. We want a safe place to worship the Lord. We want our houses to be safe havens, and the Lord wants His house to be a safe haven for us. Therefore, God exhorted us through the apostle Paul to watch out for those that cause divisions and offenses. God also wants us to be innocent of evil and wise in what is good, so He tells us to avoid those people that cause offenses.

Prayer

Father God, thank You for the wisdom that is shared in this passage. Help us to be a church that is unified. Help us to be careful to preserve the unity of the Spirit. Help us to learn how to deal effectively with offenses. Give us discernment so that we can recognize and avoid those who are divisive and give offenses. Help us be wise in doing good and innocent of evil. Father, we ask You for abundant grace and favor. May we be a safe place for people to come, and grow in their faith. May we be a light to those in our community. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Q & A

- How do you balance the idea that we are to accept one another (Romans 14), and yet mark others (Romans 16)?
- What does it mean to avoid those that cause divisions and offenses? Does that mean to avoid fellowshiping with them, or is it to avoid all contact?
- How does avoiding someone compare with the church discipline outlined in Matthew 18:15-17?
- What are some indications that someone is trying to flatter you rather than giving a genuine compliment?
- Paul ends with a blessing that the grace of the Lord Jesus be with them. How much grace do we give to those who appear to be divisive or offensive?
- What is the key to not being offended by others?

Introduction (Rom 16:17–20)

1. **Watch out** (Rom 16:17, 1 Tim 4:13, Acts 2:42, Matt 18:7, Heb 12:15, Matt 5:13-14)

2. **Turn away** (Rom 16:17-18, 2 Thess 3:6, Acts 20:28-31, Phil 2:3–4, Matt 7:15–20)

3. **Be wise and innocent** (Rom 16:19-20, Rom 12:9, 12:17-21, Mark 3:24–25, Rev 22:21)

Conclusion and Applications