

Crush the Snake

Romans 16:19-23

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As we finish our series in Romans, we do so like Midwest spring breakers in Florida, savoring every last moment.

Savoring on we shall go into the middle of chapter 16, five verses that include eight names, one Jesus quotation, and one prophecy about the arch enemy of God. It doesn't outline well, so we will just take it as it is. Remember the setting! Last week we looked at verses 17-18 and the abrupt warning from Paul about divisive people and doctrinally errant teachers. Romans 16 is like a Christmas card. Warm. Greetings. Love. Then suddenly, a sharp warning. As we saw, he identifies these divisive and doctrinally deviant people as hiding their greed behind attractive personalities and smooth-talking eloquence. Paul says, look out for them and avoid them.

"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. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you" (Romans 16:19-23 ESV).

Corinth ♥ Rome

Better said, Corinthian Christians love the Roman Christians. There are eight names here. All of them Corinthians sending their greetings to Roman Christians. They likely don't know any of them personally. Maybe Aquilla and Priscilla. Yet all of them send greetings and love. *Hey Rome, Corinth loves you! All of our greetings to all of you! Why?*

Here's the formula: As a Christian, anyone Jesus loves, we love. This sort of kinship toward other Christians has always distinguished healthy Christianity. This is why when you are on a trip and happen to meet other Christians randomly, there is an instant rapport. You're a Christian. God loves you. Jesus died for you. Me too. This affinity is based on the truth that we are all one in Christ. Same baptism. Same Spirit. Same gospel. Same Savior.

Now a few highlights in these greetings. *"Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you"* (Romans 16:21). We are likely going to spend more time on Timothy's story on Mother's Day in a few weeks. For now, we note that Timothy was Paul's closest associate. Paul calls him his *"beloved and faithful child"* (1 Corinthians 4:17). Timothy was Paul's right-hand man. I'll note that the New Testament has 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy. There is no 1 and 2 Titus or 1 and 2 Philemon. But Timothy gets two New Testament letters in the canon of Scripture. Timothy was surely known to the Roman Christians and his greeting warmly received.

We skip down to Tertius, *"I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord"* (Romans 16:22). *Wait! I thought Paul wrote Romans! Here Tertius says he wrote it. What gives?* Tertius was Paul's secretary. Paul dictated Romans and Tertius wrote it down. This was a common practice in that day and it's likely that Paul didn't personally handwrite any New

Testament letters we attribute to him. But he was the author. Like this sermon. Did I write it? Yes. But who put words on the page? A computer and an HP printer.

"I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write" (2 Thessalonians 3:17).

Paul would take the quill and write the final section of the letter in his own handwriting. It was a way to authenticate that it was actually from Paul. *"See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand"* (Galatians 6:11). That he wrote with large letters has caused speculation that Paul's thorn in the flesh, which he asked God to remove, was some kind of eyesight ailment. Cataracts or who knows. There were no corrective lenses back then. No Lasik surgery. When your eyes went, they went. We should be thankful for these [glasses]. Without them, I would live a very different life.

So, Paul talked. Tertius wrote. Let's note this makes Romans even more astonishing. When I write my sermons, I write, go back, and edit. Cut and paste and review and redo. I've heard it said, *"There are no sermons that are written, there are sermons that are rewritten."*¹ It is difficult to do that when everything is handwritten. Perhaps a second draft, but largely, Romans displays the extemporaneous brilliance of Paul and the power of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. How else could such a theologically technical and precise letter of this length be spoken in one take? An amazing one-take wonder.

So, we pull back and see the warmth of greeting and care. We note individual names and people. It emphasizes our point from two weeks ago that the church is people. Remember, *here is the building, here is the steeple. But never forget, the church is people.*

"For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you" (Romans 16:19). I don't know if I know of a single church that has a reputation for obedience. Do you? *We tried for it with our pandemic, to be known for obeying Scripture in submitting to the authorities over us.* But I don't know of any church lauded for their obedience. Churches are typically known for other things—their attendance size. Their music. Their ministry programming. Their facility. Their this or that. I never hear *that church is amazing in their obedience.*

This was the Roman reputation and was admired by many, including Paul. When you are asked, *tell me about your church,* would any of us lead with, *Bethel Church? We're very obedient.* Yet obedience is a mark of a genuine church and a genuine Christian. He ends like he began in chapter 1 regarding obedience,

"...through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations" (Romans 1:5).

Obedience is conformity to the moral law of God and our calling as disciples of Jesus. Not as the condition of salvation but the consequence of it. It's not the root but the fruit. Don't mistake that. The moral rearrangement of our lives in Christ comes after, not before or as a condition, to God extending grace to us. We are saved by faith, which is itself a gift, but we show we are saved by directional obedience toward the will of God. Apparently, there was a lot of that going on in Rome. Hopefully here in our church in Northwest Indiana as well.

Now we get into the core of our message today. *"I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet"* (Romans 16:19b-20).

¹ Source Unknown.

These two sentences complement each other. Both describe the Christian's relationship to evil. The first, to an evil world. The second, to the evil one. What is evil? Evil as the opposite of good. The absence of good. Evil as the opposite of that which is upright and morally beautiful. Since God is light, evil is darkness. 1 John tells us humans love darkness. Love evil. Evil entered the created order in Satan's heart. It flowed from him to the fallen angels. And then to Adam and Eve, and through them to us.

But Christians are children of the light. We are called to walk in the light (1 John) as Jesus is the light of the world. Here, Paul gives a strategy for Christians to live in an evil world but not be of the evil world.

Wise With the True, Good, and Beautiful

"I want you to be wise as to what is good" (Romans 16:19).

Wisdom is to know something fully and deeply and to apply it practically to your life. The good is all things consistent with God's will, his word, and his world. God called the original creation, very good! *"Wise as to what is good"* means to pursue those things that uplift and ennoble the soul. Fill your mind and heart and life with knowledge and experiences that enrich and enhance God's will in your life.

"Finally, brothers, 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" (Philippians 4:8).

As we pour into our minds the true and beautiful, our desires increase for that which pleases God. And as the bucket fills with good, it leaves less room for impure thoughts and desires.

Paul may be quoting Jesus who said in Matthew 10:16, *"Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."* Snakes are shrewd and clever. Be shrewd in this world AND be innocent towards evil, like a dove—a symbol of purity.

As Christians, we have the Holy Spirit within us and a capacity for an inner relish and delighting in the things of God. This new delight is truly one of the huge blessings in becoming a Christian. Everything good is connected to the glory of God. Even eating and drinking are activities we connect with the goodness and glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). That's why many of us say thank you to God before we eat. The poor atheist has no one to thank for his medium rare steak with a luscious side potato, fresh salad, and savory strawberry pie. That's my dream meal. What should I taste as I eat it? Theology. I taste the goodness and beauty of God. As I do, I'm being wise toward what is good.

As Romans has taught us, nothing is better than the gospel. Nothing is more wonderful than the amazing work of God to make me righteous forever by the work of Jesus for me. As the fulness of all God's goodness toward me is savored, I am being wise toward what is good.

Paul says, fill your heart with the true, the good, and the beautiful. By doing so, it leaves little room to relish the opposite. The opposite of good is evil and the opposite of beautiful is moral ugliness. The profane. The perversion and distortion of what is good.

Evil is a parasite. Evil can only pervert what is morally and essentially good. Satan has never created anything. Satan is a parasite on the infinite good of God. Evil twists and perverts the good. What should be our posture toward evil?

"I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil" (Romans 16:19).

A Posture of Purity Toward Evil

Being innocent toward evil is not naïve or like an ostrich with its head in the sand. We live in a sinful world. It's all around us. It's inside us. We cannot escape it no matter where we go. But as Luther said, *"You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair."*

"I want you to see you experts in good, and not even beginners in evil" (Romans 16:19 Phillips). With good, PhD; with evil, preschool. Swim in the deep end of the good. Don't dip your toe in the shallow end of evil. Get the idea?

I have such a picture of this with my daughters right now. They are still young and haven't been exposed to the harsh realities of the world. Profane words don't mean anything to them. They don't know what's vulgar. That's going to change, and I hate to think of the evil they will be exposed to and struggle with that like we all do.

We live in a profane world that doesn't love the light; it loves the darkness. It delights in the rude and the banal. It loves scatological talk and jokes. It snickers at sex. It takes no delight in a pure marriage bed but anything sexual outside the marriage bed is delighted in. There is nothing sacred in the world. It is crude, rude, and views us as prudes. Taking that, here's a translation: *Toward good be a dude. Toward evil be a prude.*

I remember in junior high, I was in sports, so there were always afterschool practices and games. Inevitably my dad would be carpooling other teammates. I'm sure it's still true but I remember thinking, *there's nearly nothing my Dad could say that these other guys couldn't see a double meaning in and sexualize it somehow.* They'd smirk and snicker and whisper in the backseat. It didn't help that my dad would play Christian radio in the car. Unbelieving junior high boys aren't into Gaither music. I was some weird combination of totally embarrassed and kind of proud of my dad.

The union hall. The locker room. The teacher lounge. The steel mill. The wherever. These are all places we have to be, live, work, eat. What should the Christian do? Delight in the good. But evil? Don't delight in that. We don't snicker and affirm it. And we definitely shouldn't be entertained by it.

A huge problem today among Christians is how the constant flow of entertainment desensitizes us to the profane. Such that I fear many of us are not innocent toward evil but are delightfully entertained by it. John MacArthur once said, "We should not be entertained by the sins for which Christ died."² The sensuality, the nakedness, the Lord's name being misused or plotlines that glamorize sin against God, all of these play with our hearts. Our flesh loves that stuff and urges more.

If corporations will spend 5 million dollars for a 30-second Super Bowl ad assuming those 30 seconds will influence our spending habits, what does the daily exposure to entertainment that glamorizes evil do to our desires? What would our Netflix accounts say about, *innocent*

² John MacArthur, Source Unknown.

toward evil? What does *Game of Thrones* do a Christian man? A hormonal teenage boy? As one small, but popular example. I urge all of us to apply this verse in every area of our lives but pastorally, I think our entertainment choices are a clear and present danger to our spiritual lives. There is a chapter in my book *Eyes Wide Open* on how to redeem these things.

But I have to know what the world is doing so I can stand against it! That is naïve and stupid. I have a good friend who was a significant Christian leader. Somehow, he heard about chat rooms where people communicate simply for the purpose of sexual hookup. He told me, *I was just a little curious about it. I wondered what it was like.* So, one day he got on just to see what these crazy people were saying. His observation became obsession and then participation. He met a woman, who he confessed to me later, he didn't even know her name. It cost him dearly. He lost his wife, his family, his reputation, and his job.

Innocence doesn't mean I don't know what profanity means or I am ignorant of the way the world is. It means I guard my heart against it and fill my desires with good things. One more strategy.

Wait for It

I'm sure you've seen videos where they say, *wait for it.* What does that mean? *This may take a while but eventually there's something worth seeing here.* Paul finally says, *Wait for it.*

"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20 ESV). It's noted that Paul writes the entire book of Romans without mentioning Satan.³ Some people see Satan everywhere and everything is Satan's doing. In most of what the gospel and living the Christian life entails, Satan or the demons are not in the foreground.

But that's not to say that in the story of redemption, Satan isn't a huge part. This verse harkens back to Genesis 3 when God says to Satan, *"He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel"* (Genesis 3:15 NIV). Jesus' victory on the cross was a crushing blow to Satan. But he is still alive and powerful and active. He is still our enemy and the promoter of evil in our lives.

Too often, it feels like evil is winning. What a year we have had where it feels like evil is winning. Another cultural battle lost. Another marriage broken. Another child wayward. Another church split or key leader fallen. Sometimes it feels like the whole world is just going to pot. What do we do? *Wait for it.*

"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20 ESV). Really? When? He says here, *soon.* It's been nearly 2,000 years since Paul wrote this. Apparently, his *soon* is different than our *soon.* But remember, with God, a day is like a thousand years (2 Peter 3:8). For God, Paul wrote this two days ago. What do we wait for? Final victory when God crushes Satan.

"And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the

³ John Piper, "The God of Peace Will Soon Crush Satan Under Your Feet," [desiringgod.org](https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-god-of-peace-will-soon-crush-satan-under-your-feet), November 12, 2006, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-god-of-peace-will-soon-crush-satan-under-your-feet>.

saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:7–10).

That’s what’s coming. So, what do we do? We wait for it. We wait patiently. We wait wisely. We wait innocently. We wait for it, confident that it’s coming. *God will crush Satan*. Here’s another way to say it—A Mighty Fortress:

*“And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath willed
his truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure,
one little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly powers,
no thanks to them, abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours
through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill:
God’s truth abideth still;,
his kingdom is forever!”⁴*

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⁴ Author: Martin Luther (1529), Translator: Frederick H. Hedge (1852). “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”