

Why & How To Be Watchful—Romans 16:19—6/2/2013

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Keywords—false teaching, discernment, decision making,

As we pick up our study of Paul’s letter to the Romans, let’s begin today by reading the context where we are in chapter 16.

Follow along as I read Romans 16:16-20. [READ]

We’re in this section between the greetings TO people and the greetings FROM people that come next.

And we’ve learned that this section is about relationships, about love and encouragement in the family of God in Christ.

From the commendation of Phoebe that began chapter 16 to the holy kiss of verse 16, we find caring family language, gratitude & affection.

When we treasure such relationships, we want to protect them.

For example, when I’m away a week from you all, I think of how precious my fellow leaders and friends and your families and ministries and personal encouragement are to me.

And I pray that I won’t do anything wrong to mess it up and that God will protect you and our fellowship and ministries and that He will encourage us with lasting fruit for His glory.

Just as much as loving parents want to protect their kids from the danger of running into the street and getting hit by a car, so loving Christians want to protect one another from whatever may harm us.

It’s that passion for loving protection that springs up in verses 17-20 in between the greetings TO people and FROM people.

If you love people, you will want to protect them spiritually from false teachers and sinful influences and deceitful enticements.

Parents, if you love your kids, you will be involved in their daily activities and relationships and talking with them and shepherding their hearts and directing their decisions.

1st Corinthians 15:33 says bad company corrupts good morals and we want to guard our hearts and the hearts of our kids from bad company.

Of course, yes, we want to be a witness to evangelize bad company, but that means we are the one actively influencing not the one going along with the crowd being influenced.

And that command for evangelism is also for Christians, not for children who are learning but may or may not be Christians yet.

Young people—you need to be aware that wrong ideas will come to you through friends and people who seem cool and they may make you feel cool and appeal to your pride or lusts.

We want to warn you because we love you and many of us have tasted what the world offers and it’s not happy and it’s never what it seems.

But one shock of the warning of Romans 16:17 that we saw two weeks ago is that it cautions against the danger of bad company rising up IN the church, not from outside it.

It is a warning to be watchful of those who cause dissensions and hindrances within the church either locally or universally.

It’s a warning to keep an eye on those who go against the truth that the Apostles have handed down in the NT.

And that eye on them is not for the purpose of hanging out with them or following them or listening to their side.

It’s instead for staying away from them.

Staying away from those who oppose truth is a protection because false teachers are slick and winsome and can deceive the unsuspecting.

False teachers don't show up looking like the devil.

They show up, as 2nd Corinthians 11:14 warns, like an angel of light, sounding good but twisting enough truth to be totally bad.

They show up in Christian bookstores & on Christian radio & TV & at Christian conferences & on conservative news outlets.

Their lies even show up in the temptations we face in our own hearts and their deceptions probably are at work in issues we are blind to.

So we need to wake up and be on the alert about false teachers.

When we studied verses 17-18, we outlined those warnings by saying that false teachers (1) cause trouble against truth, (2) serve self not the Savior, and (3) seem endearing but are deceiving.

And as I said before, this isn't just about being right or appearing to have it all together.

If and when those are our motives, pride is our problem.

Guarding against false teaching is really about loving people.

Error is always harmful and sin is always destructive.

So if we love others, we will want to protect them from the wreckage of sin and error in this life and the life to come.

That's how the context of relationships raises the red flag of warning about the dangers of dissensions and smooth-talking deceivers.

That's a little review of where we've been in verses 17-18.

But now look at the first word of verse 19—what is it?

Unless you have an NIV, the first English word is 'for.'

The NIV often doesn't translate transition words, but other versions rightly translate the Greek word 'gar' to begin verse 19 with an explanatory 'for.'

And here's where we get into what we'll cover today.

Within the context of the warnings of verses 17-18, verse 19 gives us more reasons to be watchful and more ways to be watchful.

So as we examine verse 19 today, I'm going to outline for you 2 reasons to be watchful and 2 ways to be watchful so that you can guard yourself and others from the dangers of error & sin.

We can be helped in protective love in relationships by these 2 reasons to be watchful & 2 ways to be watchful that we find in Romans 16:19.

With that in mind, let's consider why verse 19 begins with the explanatory word 'for' by reading verses 17-19 again. [READ]

Follow the line of reasoning here—verse 17 says to watch out for trouble-makers and verse 18 tells what they are like and then verse 19 begins with another reason the Romans should watch out for them.

Think of verse 19 beginning with the word 'because' to see how confusing this can be—watch out for false teachers that are selfish & deceitful because your obedience is well-known.

Catch that—for, or because, your obedience is well-known, watch out.

Why in the world does the widespread report of the Roman Christians' obedience add another reason to guard themselves?

Why does a good reputation increase the need for protection?

I think there are two reasons that apply to the Roman church and also give us 2 helpful reasons to be watchful today.

The first reason is maybe the most obvious once you think about the question of why a good reputation increases the need for protection.

When you consider why the vast broadcast of the Romans' obedience is given as a reason to watch out for trouble-makers, I think we have to remember the importance of our reputation.

Think of it—would a moral or doctrinal failure be worse for me or for my former pastor John MacArthur who has 40+ years of faithful ministry and an international influence on churches everywhere?

I don't want to fail, but I think Dr. MacArthur has had far more impact on far more lives and churches than I'll ever have.

So a fall by someone like MacArthur or Tim Tebow would be far more discouraging to Christians and a far greater victory for evil.

And verse 19 literally says the Romans' obedience has reached to all so their testimony was very well-known.

Obviously, 'all' there doesn't mean every living being on the face of the planet, but it probably does indicate that all the churches planted in the known world at that time had heard of the church at Rome.

Especially with Rome as the capital of the Empire, it would be more likely to be heard about by believers and unbelievers.

And in the greetings we noted some real possibilities that Christians were known even in Caesar's household.

So the testimony of these Christians was significant.

They were held in honor for their faithful response to the Gospel and their example of following Christ.

That's what's said in the 1st part of verse 19 and it is given as a reason for them to exercise the protective love of verses 17-18.

And the clearest link of WHY their widespread testimony was reason to be on the alert is that their testimony mattered.

Because of their wide-reaching testimony of obedience, they needed to be on guard to remain faithful to Christ so that His name would not be shamed & His Word dishonored.

Do you see that link?

One reason for the Romans to be watchful was because their testimony was important in the world they lived in.

And guess what?

That's also reason #1 why WE need to be watchful.

You need to guard your own soul and protect others, #1, because your testimony is important.

I told you I'd outline 2 REASONS WHY we should be watchful and 2 WAYS HOW we should be watchful.

So this is the 1st REASON WHY we should be watchful.

#1—be watchful BECAUSE your testimony is important.

By testimony I mean your example and reputation.

As my kids headed out yesterday with my wife to visit a gathering of her relatives and I couldn't go, I told each of my older four kids this point.

I told them their testimony was important—that their example to their distant cousins and great aunts and uncles and so on was important.

Our testimony is how we live Christlikeness before those around us and what we are known by.

And if we want to honor our Lord Jesus Christ, we should care about the testimony of Him we present to those who know us.

The Roman Christians had a well-known testimony of obedience flowing from their faith in Christ that he had mentioned to begin this letter. [1:8]

Now he points to that good report as reason to guard against those who cause dissensions & do not serve Christ.

Don't let such slick false teachers fool you because it would harm the reputation of the Lord Jesus that you serve.

And that applies to us too whether we are well known throughout the world or we are only known by a small circle of family and friends.

Your testimony matters because people are watching you and forming ideas about Jesus based on how you live and speak.

If you fall into sin and error it brings reproach on Christ in the minds of all who know you.

In other words, you give Jesus a bad name if you fall into error.

In contrast, if you stay faithful to Jesus & keep growing & serving Him, other believers will hear & rejoice.

And we want to give other Christians reason to rejoice, right?

That's what Paul mentioned next in verse 19—that the Roman Christians were cause for his rejoicing.

He connected their obedience, therefore, to his rejoicing.

Because they obeyed so well and it was known so widely, he rejoiced.

And he did not rejoice because he founded that church or because any recognition came back to him.

He rejoiced, like we all should, any time faithful Christians are widely known for their obedience to the Lord Jesus.

That's a marvelous thing that moves us to delight.

So we should be aware not to get deceived by false teachers or internet chat room friends who seem so nice but are really so dangerous because we don't want to steal anyone's joy in God's work.

But there's another reason the Romans' well-known obedience should move them to guard against false teachers.

Not only does a good testimony make someone a target of evil.

But a track record of obedience, especially for young Christians, can make them think they are invincible.

Since their obedience was well-known, they could have been tempted to think they were the example that could not fail.

They could proudly be tempted to think they could not be deceived by false teachers because they had obeyed well so far.

And even in their relative youth as a church, they could have been yet untested by the enticements of false teachers and naïve to the dangers.

They could have been among the unsuspecting that verse 18 says could be deceived by smooth and flattering speech.

So Paul warned them yet again in the second half of verse 19.

Before we get into the specifics of those warnings, let's just note a 2nd reason then to be watchful against error and sin.

#2—be watchful because you are not invincible.

#1—be watchful because your testimony is important.

And #2—be watchful because you are not invincible.

And invincible is I-N-V-I-N-C-I-B-L-E.

And as anyone who's watched or read superhero stories knows, invincible means unbeatable or unconquerable or indestructible.

So I think Paul is implying that the Romans need to remember that their well-known obedience did not make them invincible.

They could be deceived by false teachers and they needed to watch it.

They could be swept away in divisiveness or tripped by a stumbling block thrown down a false teacher.

They could succumb to flattery or get ensnared by evil.

They were not invincible.

So they needed to be watchful, to be on guard, to be ready to fight error and defend the truth and think rightly and resist temptation.

And the same can be said of us today, right?

We are not invincible and so we need to be watchful.

We need to welcome Christian leaders to watch over our souls & welcome all Christians to share in mutual accountability.

I don't know why we try to put on a face like everything is ok when it's obvious to anyone who knows us that all is not ok.

Not one of us is perfect and we need to admit that not just theologically but personally and practically.

I don't mean we need to share every thought of temptation that comes our way but we need to open and honest in asking for help.

We need to admit that we are susceptible to greed and pride and lust and laziness and selfishness and self-absorption and anxiety and despair and a host of other temptations.

We need to ask each other for prayer and receive questions about why we have issues in this or that area.

We don't need to hide our issues as if others can't see them or as if hiding them is going to make them better.

And we don't need to act like we can never fall or be tripped up.

Listen—you may be a member of a solidly established Bible teaching church and you may grow up learning more biblical truth than anyone you know, but that doesn't mean you can't get tricked or tempted or tied up in trouble.

A healthy dose of humility is helpful to keep us ever watchful against sins in our own lives and against errors around us.

As 1st Corinthians 10:12 says, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”

So we need to be watchful (1) because our testimony is important and (2) because we are not invincible.

And those 2 reasons why to be watchful lead us into the 2 ways how to be watchful that we find in verse 19.

The 1st way we find in verse 19 HOW to be watchful is by increasing your skill in goodness.

Point #3—and way #1 HOW to be watchful is this—be watchful BY increasing your skill in goodness.

Read verse 19 again. [READ]

I stated this point to be watchful BY increasing your skill in goodness.

I used the word skill because sometimes people think wisdom is just knowing stuff.

But though wisdom includes knowing truth, it also includes knowing how to USE the truth, how to discern error with the truth, and how to apply the truth carefully to all of life.

So that's why I used the word "skill" in goodness to describe what's stated in verse 19 as being wise in what is good.

Being wise in what is good means knowing what is good and being skilled at living what is good.

It means being adept at putting goodness into practice.

It means being able to wisely discern the difference between good and evil and to love the good and hate the evil.

It means treasuring up truth and believing it and growing in delightful enjoyment of what is truly good.

It means increasing in the experience of goodness in life.

It means what Romans 12:2 explains as proving that God's will is good, pleasing and perfect.

That's one way HOW to be watchful—get good at goodness.

Ever improve your pursuit and passion for what is morally and spiritually and biblically good.

Don't treat what is good like it's a nice option if you have time or it's an ideal to talk about but not something practical for life.

Being wise in what is good requires knowing that we must seek more wisdom and grow in goodness always.

And the link here in verse 19 is that by growing ever wiser in what is good we will be better protected against what is evil.

The more we stoke the fires of God's glorious goodness in our lives, the less the short-lived sparks of evil will tempt us.

The greater the magnetic wisdom we feel drawing us toward goodness, the lesser the attraction toward evil will be.

So we guard ourselves from error and sin by ever seeking to increase our skill in goodness.

That's strategy #1 how we should be watchful—and it's point #3 today—be watchful by increasing our skill in goodness.

Then lastly, we should be watchful by decreasing our involvement with evil.

Point #4—Be watchful by decreasing your involvement with evil.

Strategy #2 for how to be watchful—be watchful by decreasing your involvement with evil.

That's from the last phrase of verse 19—be innocent in what is evil.

That word innocent means unmixed and pure, like a metal that's refined so well that it's doesn't have any corruption or undesirable elements in it.

Paul applied that idea to the Christian approach to what is evil.

He did not say try a little bit and see if you can handle it.

He did not say try it to see if you like it or if it really seems so bad.

He did not say get as close as possible without crossing the line

He did not say to expose yourself to what is evil enough that you can develop immunity to it.

It's not like he says you can watch enough trashy immorality that you think it doesn't bother you anymore.

It's not like he says you play enough violent games that you think it doesn't influence your view of people or relationships.

It's not like he says you should call all people legalistic or prudish or whatever if they question your choices.

It's like this—he said be innocent, undefiled, unmixed, with evil.

So if something is evil, we should not want to toy with it or wade into it or mix with it or try it or taste it or dabble in it.

The way to guard against evil is to stay away from it and to become increasing inexperienced with it, to become less and less involved in it.

Passages like this guard against taking Christian liberty as a blank check to try evil or excuse indulgence.

Christian liberty is freedom to get as close to Christ as possible, not freedom to test the boundaries of sin.

Christian liberty should never be an excuse to rationalize sin.

And look young people—if you have not experienced much evil in your life, then be thankful and glad and never feel a need to try evil.

You will save yourself a lot of trouble and you can show Christ as far more glorious if you stay away from evil and never bother to experience it at all.

Be innocent in what is evil by never starting to mess with it and steer clear of paths that lead into temptation toward evil.

You'll face enough evil from temptations in your own heart so you are far better seeking to be innocent in what it evil.

To be innocent in evil means you flee influences that pump wrong ideas into your head through music or books or entertainment.

It means you realize that being cool is the wrong goal because it usually means trying to be as much like the lost, empty world as you can to get acceptance from others.

And if we are in Christ, we are already accepted and don't need to find it from others by trying to be like the world.

We can live in the world without being like the world.

So this 2nd strategy for how to be watchful is by decreasing—that means making less—your involvement with evil.

And just so you know that this isn't the only place these strategies come up, listen to a few others NT verses.

In Matthew 10:16, Jesus said “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.”

He meant we need to be wisely discerning yet purely undefiled.

And in 1st Corinthians 14:20, Paul said “Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.”

In other words, don't start evil because it's enslaving or what our world calls addictive and we don't need to give it a chance to trap us and try to control us.

1st Thessalonians 5:21-22 says to “examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.”

Romans 12:9 says “Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.”

John MacArthur said this—“Many Christians rationalize watching degrading movies and TV programs by claiming they need to be familiar with the ways of the world in order to better analyze secular culture and be better prepared to witness to those who are worldly. But it is not necessary to sift through garbage to recognize it for what it is, and the more we are around it the more we pick up its stench. The more willingly we associate with evil, the more it will drag us down to its level.” [377]

In contrast to toying with evil, MacArthur said this—“To use a popular analogy, the only reliable way to recognize a counterfeit bill is to be completely familiar with the genuine bill. The only reliable way to recognize evil is to be thoroughly familiar with the good, and the only reliable way to learn what is good is to learn God’s Word.” [377]

We can find that same advice in NT passages like Philippians 4:8.

Philippians 4:8 says “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”

That’s a great way of stating verse 19—be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.

Be watchful (1) by increasing your skill in goodness, and (2) decreasing your involvement with evil.

Why should we be watchful?

Be watchful (1) because your testimony is important and (2) because you are not invincible.

And for how to be watchful—be watchful (1) by increasing your skill in goodness and (2) by decreasing your involvement with evil.

That’s why & how to be watchful from Roman 16:19.

What does God want to do with that in your life today?

Maybe you don’t know the God of all goodness & need to begin there.

If so, we’d love to help you if you’ll come talk with us afterwards.

In the meantime, watch this ceremony we’re going to observe & pray for understanding of the Savior remembered in it.

And if you do know the God of goodness in Christ as your Lord and Savior, then take some time for examination as we prepare to remember Him in communion.

As we approach the Lord’s Table, ask yourself some questions.

What’s your testimony in various relationships and settings?

How’s your humble honesty openness to be vulnerable & get help and share your needs with others for prayer?

How are you increasing your skill in goodness?

Are you decreasing your involvement with evil? How?

What more do you need to do to flee evil?

Respond to God’s Word working in your heart and prepare to remember Christ in a worthy manner.

Take some time quietly alone and then I’ll lead us in prayer.

[The Lord’s Supper]