

“Deception, Avoidance, Wisdom and Innocence”

Romans 16:17-24

Dave Dorst, December 4, 2005, PHCC

Have you played the game Minesweeper? It comes on all new PCs, of which I just got a new IBM ThinkPad. The object of the game is to click on tiles that are numbers, and therefore safe, while avoiding the bombs, which end the game. The way you tell where the bombs are is that every numbered tile refers to the number of bombs surrounding it: ex. if there is a 3 tile, that means of the 8 tiles circling it, there are 3 bombs. By turning over adjacent tiles, you can figure out and mark the bombs with a flag.

I tell you all that to introduce the theme of my sermon- Mark and avoid!

Romans 16:17-24 (ESV) says this: **“17** I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. **18** For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. **19** 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. **20** The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. **21** Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. **22** I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. **23** Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.”

The sermon from two weeks ago compared Paul’s three benedictions at the end of Romans to a lover who just can’t stand saying goodbye. I see a different analogy in this week’s passage: Paul is acting like a dad sending his oldest child off to college for the first time. You see, 12-15 have been full of practical advice about how to implement the theology of the first 11 chapters, and now chapter 16 sees him greeting all kinds of people. But just as it seems he’s going to sign off after these greetings, he launches back into warning the Roman church about people who would come among them and cause divisions. It’s like a dad who has spent the whole week helping his son pack for college, going over how important studying, staying sober and finding the closest PCA church are. Finally the family says their goodbyes, but just as the son is pulling out of the driveway, dad gets in a few more words about not signing up for credit cards or letting his roommate use his car.

So who are these people that Paul is warning against? It’s uncertain by this text or any other Scriptures who exactly Paul is speaking of. And just as well, it’s not specific people that we need to know about, but characteristics of people that Paul is concerned about. It’s possible that Paul wasn’t even thinking about specific people, though he could have had a warning that the Roman church was threatened by these things. Let’s look at their characteristics:

1) These are people who are not serving Christ, but their own appetites- some translations say their own stomachs, which could be a reference to Jews who kept the strict dietary laws, but it is more likely just Paul’s saying that these people at the core are trying to satisfy their desires/personal interests. They have gotten into the churches to accomplish their own ends, not to learn of Christ and His ways.

2) They use flattery and smooth talk- these are not necessarily angry or confrontational people. More likely, they are the opposite. Perhaps there is a word in here for those who find themselves listening to a teacher or leader in their church who always wants to reassure and never wants to challenge. Teachers that tickle itching ears.

3) They deceive naïve people- we know from the history of cults that many of the followers are churchgoers, even baby Christians who have not been grounded in the essentials of the faith, and been led away by leaders like Jim Jones and David Koresh, who distort the Scriptures.

4) They put obstacles in the way of the believer- their true motivation is not to see people get closer to Christ, but turned away.

5) And finally, they cause divisions; they split the church.

Why was it so important to Paul that the early Christians be so watchful of those who taught things contrary to his teachings? We tend to forget how fragile “the teaching” was back then. Imagine living in the time when the New Testament was not yet put together- the Jews had the Old Testament in scrolls and learned it from childhood. But the Gentiles knew very little of the Old Testament. And while the letters of Paul were circulated between churches, there was no guarantee that a particular church had read or seen all of them. So Paul had to constantly remind the churches and their leaders to stick to the teaching they had received, whether verbal or written. He charges Timothy to “guard the trust.” They did not have the luxury that we do of having the full NT in front of them to search for answers whenever a question arose. Not that we take enough advantage of that...

So what is our response to these dividers/deceivers?

- 1) Avoid them- don't burn them at the stake as too many Christian leaders, both Catholic and Protestant, have done throughout history; don't plead with them to come around. Paul says very distinctly- mark them and avoid them. Keep an eye on them and stay away. I'm not sure exactly what that looks like, as our doors are open to anyone wanting to come in, but I imagine it's the same idea behind the phrase “flee temptation.” Just stay away from those you know are trying to distort the gospel for their own ends.
- 2) Continue to obey the teaching. Paul commends the Romans for their obedience.

Indulge me if I'm getting up on my soapbox, and perhaps going beyond the passage, but I want to talk for a minute about doctrine. I've had many conversations through the years, including a few recently with well-meaning Christians about doctrine. Most of them boil down to this: why do we even bother with theology- why can't we just make it simple? Jesus died for us and that's all you need to know. We're just trying to prove how smart we are by using the big words, etc. And there is real validity to what they say: we need to establish the basics of the faith and concentrate on them. The message of the Bible is not very difficult- Jesus loves me this I know. But what I find interesting is that the same people who raise the objections that theology has not value place a very high priority on knowledge in other areas. One of the guys I talked with basically re-built and re-furnished a house this past summer. He spent 40 hrs. a week at work, then went and spent at least 40 hrs. on this house that they eventually sold for a great profit. He was going into some detail about all that he had to do, and eventually we changed the subject when he realized my eyes were glazing over. Thanksgiving weekend involved a lot of watching football. What makes football even more exciting is when you know what kind of strategies the offense and defense are using. To the non-football fan, phrases like “run the option” and “3-4 defense” mean very little. But to those who enjoy football, it makes the game so much more interesting. If you tried to get us to just look at football as one guy either passing or handing off to another guy while the other team tries to stop us, we're going to wonder why you're dumbing down the game and making it less enjoyable.

Why is theology any different? I want a mechanic who knows all the technical language and potential problems before he works on my car. I want my doctor to know as much as he can about the human body before he operates on me. Why should we not expect our pastors and leaders to know as much as they can? People make fun of Presbyterians for emphasizing learning so much, but I don't want to sit under a pastor who doesn't know the difference between limited atonement and unconditional election. I've actually been with youth pastors who all agreed that the less formal schooling in theology you have, the more legitimate your ministry probably is. Talk about throwing out the baby with the bathwater! How are we to know where the error is if we are anti-doctrine? We need balance- both Jesus-inspired passion and love for people, and good teaching of sound Biblical wisdom.

- 3) Be careful- be wise in the good, innocent about evil. Paul is restating Jesus' “I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10:16) There is a thinking in the world today that goes something like this: “We can't shelter our kids. They have to learn about what the world is really like if they are going to survive...” While I acknowledge that there is a balance, and there is a time to teach kids about war, sex and other mature things, I'm going to err on the side of caution, as I want my kids to be “innocent about evil” like Paul says. My son Wesley is really the

picture of innocence right now, and many of your kids are too. I realize that is not going to last forever, but I want it to last as long as it can, and I want to be more like that.

There's a great line in Rich Mullins' song "Growing Young"- "I've gone so far from my home, seen the world and I have know so many secrets I wish now I did not know." I'm glad I understand how the world works, and that I have an understanding of human depravity so that I'm not easily deceived- reading the Bible will give you an education on incest, adultery, brutal murder, etc. But I wish I hadn't seen and heard a lot of things, or participated in them as well. There is a time where we must choose innocence, as well. As we grow up we are exposed to so much junk, that it is a real choice to reject that and not strive for the "deeds of darkness," and I think that's what Paul is getting at here when he tells us to be innocent about evil.

Verse 20 is a reassurance and blessing- This is akin to when I warn my kids not to talk to people they don't know, I explain that some people who don't love Jesus might want to hurt them and take them away. But then to reassure them I say, "but don't worry, Daddy won't let that happen- nobody's going to get you." Paul is doing something like that here- "Stay away from the deceivers... be wise and innocent- but don't forget that God will crush his enemies and give you his grace."

It's no secret that I can't wait to see The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, and this phrase makes me think of the scene where Aslan crushes the white witch. It is also a very definite reference to the very first mention of the Messiah- all the way back in Genesis 3:15- Satan's punishment from God for tempting Adam and Eve is: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." We cooperate with God's action to "crush Satan under your feet."

The final four verses- 21-24 are Paul's listing of who is with him as he finished the letter. You can just imagine everyone sitting in Gaius' house in Corinth as Paul dictates the letter to Tertius- perhaps they were all eager to say hello to the Christians in Rome, though it is unlikely any had met them. A quick look at who these people were:

Timothy- Paul's protégé, a full-time minister of the gospel

Lucius, Jason and Sosipater- most likely not Paul's relatives- he probably means "fellow Jews"

Tertius- a slave who was acting as Paul's secretary for the letter

Gaius- most likely a wealthy man who either made his home available for the church to meet in, or had many members of the church dine there. Paul was staying with him in Corinth.

Erastus- a city official

Quartus- another slave that Paul calls a brother

On both ends of this letter- Corinth where he was writing and Rome where he was addressing- there was a church full of great diversity. Here we see slave and free, important public official and full-time minister, wealthy and ordinary- all part of the church in Corinth, united by their love of Christ.

Conclusion:

If you're wondering whether the Roman church listened to Paul's warnings or not, we have a report from Paul in Philippians about the Romans- "Some (here) preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good will. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains." (Philippians 1:15-17)

The question is- will we learn from Paul's warnings? Will we be swayed by those who have their own agenda and cause divisions and draw us away from the gospel by smooth talk and flattery? Or will we stand true to the Scriptures, marking those who want to divide and distract and avoiding them, not allowing them to get a foothold in our churches?