**Courageously Protecting the Church**

**Romans 16:17-23 (ESV)**

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Today we’re going to be in Romans 16. We’ve been in this book for a bit over three years. We have one more message after this one. It’s kind of a sad moment in some ways, but what a precious gift God gave to us. I want you to take some time and just read from chapter 1 to chapter 16 sometime in the next two weeks as we round out our study together. Paul writes

***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 naïve.* ***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 Sosopater, 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.*

May God encourage us through His Word!

In his book, *A View from the Zoo*, Gary Richmond offers this warning about raccoons. He writes, “Raccoons go through a glandular change at about 24 months. After that, they attack their owners. Since a 30 pound raccoon can fight equal to a 100 pound dog, I felt compelled to mention this change to a young friend of mine named Julie, who had a pet raccoon. She listened politely as I explained the coming danger. I’ll never forget her answer. She replied, ‘It will be different for me.’ And she smiled and said, ‘Bandit wouldn’t hurt me. He just wouldn’t.’ Three months later Julie underwent plastic surgery for facial lacerations sustained when her adult raccoon, Bandit, attacked her for no apparent reason.” There is something in human nature that tempts us to believe that warnings are for other people and they are for other situations.We naturally think, “I know this kind of danger often happens to people in this world, but they are people who are not as smart or as talented or as kind or as righteous as me. I don’t think this warning is for me or for us.”

In Romans chapter 16, this passage is a warning passage. It’s God’s warning to His precious church in Rome, but also to us. He warns us here ofthe danger to a local church of members inside the fellowship who have become divisive.In pride, we must not think that this warning is for other churches; churches perhaps who are less doctrinally sound, perhaps who have people who are less spiritual, perhaps for churches who don’t pray as we pray or who don’t teach as we teach. This warning that God graciously gives to us in Romans 16 is for Bethany. It’s for us, so that we will be a people who courageously protect Jesus’ church from all enemies, both foreign and domestic; enemies that arise from inside the church as well as outside the church.

If you are taking notes, we consider this morning three encouragements. We’re going to really park almost all of our time on the first encouragement. And that is a warning. It’s a warning about divisive people. But then we’re going to talk briefly about a war that we would expect. Our battle really is not with flesh and blood. It’s not with the people who are divisive, it’s with Satan himself. He wants to undermine everything that the church is and does. And finally we’re going to talk about a wonder. That’s to say that God has given us sufficient grace for our need. We’re going to spend most of our time on this warning. And the warning is simple.

**A Warning:  Be watchful for divisive church members.**

***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.*

God is not warning us about divisive people who are outside the church, who seek to afflict the church as unbelievers. God’s focus is upon a danger of divisive people rising up from inside the membership of the church. We know that because of verse 18. He says

***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 naïve.*

He wouldn’t have to say that to the church at Rome if these were obvious idolaters and pagans. He had to say that because they were people who actually claimed, they raised their hands and said, “We serve the Lord Jesus.” He’s saying, “No, these people don’t.” So keep that in mind. There are people who are coming from the inside of the church who make great claims of passion for God, and yet are divorced from Him. They serve their own appetites. They have their own agenda. They have their own desires for being part of the church and of ministry in the church.

Note that Paul says that their influence in the church comes from “smooth talk and flattery.” It’s through their ability to communicate stories and winsome principles. It’s their ability talk in a way that when you listen to them you say, “That person gets me. That person understands what the problem is that I’m facing. So I want to listen to what that person would have to say to my life.” They’re very winsome. They use smooth talk. They also use flattery. “That person makes me feel very important.” It’s through smooth talk and flattery that they deceive the hearts of the naive.

Now, using the word naïve, he’s not condemning people who are naïve in the church. People who are naïve in the church are just simply people who are not spiritually discerning. They’ve not grown in their Christian life to be able to understand the fullness of the Gospel and its implications in their life and in their thinking and in their value system. So they’re uninformed. They don’t know enough. They’re so new in the faith that many naïve think that surely there’s not anyone in the church who has a corrupt heart. “I’ve come to the church. I’ve come to know Christ. I’m all excited about it. Surely that’s the way everybody else here is.” And they don’t realize that that’s not true of the church. In every church, there are people who have bad hearts. In every church, that’s true! That’s the nature of the kingdom of God in this present age. And if we’re naïve in our thinking and we look around and say, “Everybody loves the Lord like I love the Lord,” we’ll be wrong. We’ll be likely to be impacted negatively by them. And so he says make sure you watch out for these people who would take advantage of the innocent in the church. Of those who are naïve.

God describes the danger of sincere church members who in innocence listen to the arguments and they build relationships with these folks. They hear their complaints and they hear their justifications and think, “I’ve heard them. I know them. They love the Lord, too. Who am I to judge? Isn’t it wrong to judge the hearts of these folks? Besides, a lot of what they say makes sense to me! It’s not that I agree with everything that they say, but I think we need to listen to a lot of what they have to say.” And God’s instruction is pretty simple, isn’t it?

***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.*

Be on your guard against them! Be on your guard against people who speak in a way that diminishes other members of the church or who casts dishonor upon church leaders. That’s the way dissensions or divisions are created. Beware of people who draw others’ hearts into anger, into resentments, and into conflicts. Beware of people who make wild charges without substantiation. “But they seem so sure of their charges and their accusations. Surely there must be something to it.” Beware of those who create a party spirit where the church becomes divided into different groups. So we’re not united by our family, by Christ, by the assembly that we have for each other. But there are people who say, “We’re the spiritual people of the church. We’re the really great ABC class or Small Group class” or whatever group it is. Beware of those folks. Be on guard. Watch out for them! So who are these people who cause divisions that we’re to watch out for? Well, the Bible describes two kinds of divisive people.

Divisive Person #1: This person is orthodox in his or her doctrine but who is unloving and self-seeking in his or her heart.

This person participates in Gospel ministry. If you ask them to take a doctrinal test, they’re going to get all the answers right. But he or she disrupts love and mutual esteem in the church through self-promotion, through sins such as slander and gossip and harsh criticism. These resentments of this kind of divisive person are almost always placed upon those who are deeply involved in the labor or in the leadership of the church. They want to attack the significant people because they’re jealous of their influence. They’re jealous of their friendships. They’re jealous of how others esteem and honor them. And so their thought is, “I have to tear this person down in order to build myself up. I want the glory. I want the sense of greatness that others give to that person, for myself.” So, though they’re doctrinally orthodox, on the inside, their heart is very self-seeking. They see the church as a place where they can fulfill their own goals and dreams through their ministry. They talk about “my ministry” often, as opposed to the ministry of Jesus. And so ministry becomes about them and not about the Lord Jesus. It’s not about, “How can I be a servant in Jesus church? Whatever I can do, that’s what I want to do. I want to do whatever is best to bring the glory of God.” That’s not their heart.

Now, these are in contrast to godly shepherds and the attitudes that godly shepherds hold. So here’s the attitude that Scripture describes for godly shepherds. Godly shepherds say to the church, “Please come and talk with us about problems you have. If they are criticisms or if you have corrections for us, come with a humble heart, prayerfully, and with an open Bible.” We need to be people who are accountable to the body of Christ. We want that. We want you to sense an open path to come and talk to us about anything, about any concern or about any criticism you have. We submit to God. And so if you come and you show us where either in our teaching or in our behavior we are running contrary to God’s Word, we want to hear that. Please! That’s a way you can help us. That’s the heart of a godly shepherd.

On the contrast however, the ungodly attitude of divisive people is, “I’m not going to listen to correction of any kind. Don’t even talk to me about it. And I’m not interested in opening up the Bible with you and talking and having a biblical conversation about what is right in terms of behavior, what is right in terms of doctrine. In fact, I want to present to you the idea that if you do correct me very much, it’s going to go poorly for you. I’m not going to allow that to happen. And you should be afraid of confronting me about sin or confronting me about false doctrine. I will defend myself at all costs.”

Do you see the difference between the two? It’s not as though the church should not be a place where correction happens. The church is to be a place that is self-correcting. We are a people of sinners. We are a people who are in the process of becoming Christ like. And that’s true of every person, from the most significant leader of the church all the way down to the very brand new convert. That’s who the church is. That’s always who it is. We gather together because we are sinners and we say, “We need God’s grace. We need to confess our sin before the Lord. We need what God offers us.” But we come in submission to God and in submission to His Word. And that’s what binds us together. It’s Jesus Christ and His Word that binds us together. These kinds of divisive people were present in the church in Rome. Paul had never been there, but he had heard and he had known that some people inside that church were of this nature. He’s aware of them even before he visits Rome.

Do you remember how last week we talked about how Paul says, “I want to visit, but I haven’t been able to. But I’m going to, eventually”? And now he’s talking and warning about keeping an eye out for divisive people. He knows that they’re in there even though he hasn’t visited them yet. What’s interesting and fascinating is that four years later, Paul is finally going to get to Rome. He’s finally going to be able to visit the city that he told them, “I long to visit you and I hope to come to you.” But he doesn’t come as a free man. He comes imprisoned. So when he comes to Rome, he comes in chains and he is in a prison cell in Rome. And while he’s in Rome, he’s still an amazing blessing to the church because he’s sharing the Gospel with every guard. Can you imagine being chained to the Apostle Paul? “What are you going to talk about today, Paul?” Well, here’s what we’re going to talk about today. We’re going to talk about God and we’re going to talk about the Scripture. We’re going to talk about Jesus and His death, burial and resurrection. That’s what we’re going to talk about. And so there were some in the Roman guard that were becoming saved, and they were joining the church.

Wouldn’t you love to have the Apostle Paul have to spend two years in Peoria, IL? For whatever reason, if he’s in jail, wouldn’t you love for him to be there? Because he’s going to be a blessing to the church. All of the sudden, you’re going to see new people coming. How did you get here? “Well, I was talking to the Apostle Paul. He was in prison. I was his jailer. And he convinced me that Jesus is Lord. Can I be a part of your church?” Yes, you can be a part of it! This is fantastic! That’s what was happening. In fact, not only was it happening for the Roman guard, but just the common citizens were hearing Paul’s message because he was so zealous for God even from prison. And so the whole city was being impacted for the Gospel.

Now what do you think that the church at Rome would do in an occasion where Paul is finally able to come, but he’s suffering, he’s in prison, he’s miserable, he’s getting beaten, all of these things were happening to him. What would you think the attitude of the church would be toward the Apostle Paul? Wouldn’t it be, “Paul, you’re the greatest person and the greatest gift that God has ever given! We want to encourage you and we want to help you.” That’s what you would think would happen. And many in the church in Rome had that attitude, but not all of them.

There were some people in the church at Rome during that time who were thinking, “People used to be talking about me and how I’m such a great servant. Now they’re talking about this guy named Paul, and I don’t like that. So let me start telling some stories to them, whether I’m making it up in my mind or whether it’s some rumor, about the Apostle Paul that would cause them to believe that the Apostle Paul is not that great. In fact, let me start preaching with more boldness, so that people would think that I am more bold than Paul, because I don’t like that Paul is getting all this acclaim for being such a godly witness.” Who does that? The answer is that Christians do. You say, “Where do you get that, Pastor Ritch?” I get it from the Bible.

Look at Philippians chapter 1. Paul is writing a letter to the church at Philippi, a church that he planted, while he’s imprisoned in Rome. And he’s talking about the situation that he is enduring in Rome. And he’s telling them about how his imprisonment is actually for the glory of Christ. And in Philippians he’s going to say, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. So I don’t know whether I’m going to die here, whether I’m going to be executed or whether they’re going to release me, but either way, it’s for the glory of Christ.” That’s his attitude. And in describing to this precious church who he knows loves him and he needs encouragement, he’s describing the situation of the church in Rome.

**Philippians 1:15-17** Some (here in Rome) indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

They’re orthodox. He has nothing against the message that they’re proclaiming. But they preach Christ from envy and rivalry. “They’re jealous of me and they want to create a faction against me.” But others preach Christ from good will. He says, “There’s a lot of people in the church in Rome who are fantastic people! They preach Christ out of love. They love God. They love me. They love the church. They know that I’m put here because of the defense of the Gospel and that the unbelieving Jews got really angry at me for proclaiming the Gospel in Jerusalem. That’s why I’m here. They know that and they appreciate that.” These are members of the church in Rome. They are teachers. They are some leaders. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition. “This is my ministry. It’s not Paul’s ministry. How dare he diminish me by taking the focus off of me.” They don’t preach sincerely. They don’t preach out of a heart that says, “I just love God and I love God’s glory.” What is their heart? “They think that by preaching, they’re going to afflict me in my imprisonment.” Can you imagine? “I want Paul to hurt worse than what he is already hurting!”

What kind of demonic, satanic influence must be in a heart to have that attitude toward the Apostle Paul? Where does that happen? The answer is that it happens among Christians in Jesus’ church. Are these successful in their attempts to diminish Paul to other members in the church? In other words, are they actually convincing some people in the church that Paul is bad and they’re great? Is that happening? Can you imagine that they would ever be successful? I can’t imagine that they would ever be successful. But the answer is that yes, they are actually successful. There are some in the church who are saying, “I know you and I’m going to trust you and I’m going to follow you.” That’s why Paul has to deal with it. They’re actually convincing some in this church that Paul is the bad guy, while he’s in prison for the defense of the Gospel. How does that happen? I don’t know, except this is the spiritual dynamics of the spiritual battle that every church is going to face. It’s stunning, yet it happened in Rome in the 1st Century, and it continues to happen today in almost every church. Here’s what Jude says.

**Jude 1:18-20** In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions. It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit,

I believe we’re in the last times. He says, “Make sure you build yourself up in the faith through the Gospel, and you pray in dependence upon the Holy Spirit.” So the first kind of divisive person is one who is orthodox in their beliefs, but whose heart is corrupted by not having a sincere love for the brothers. The second divisive person that the Scripture talks about is

Divisive Person #2: This person is unorthodox in his or her doctrine, but may be extremely loving and cheerful in his or her heart.

In other words, they really do love everybody. “I just love everybody. I have great relationships. Everybody is great! I’m going to be encouraging. I’m going to be relating. I’m going to be connecting. I’m going to be serving and sacrificing.” But their message is twisted away from the true Gospel.

***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.*

The word “obstacles” means a road block. Paul is saying, “Don’t let some new teaching persuade you to abandon your simple devotion to Christ Jesus.” The picture Paul paints here is of young converts in the church who are now, because of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel, they’re on the path to glory. They’re on the path to eternal life. They’re on the path to heaven. They’re on the path toward Christ likeness. And the path is the Gospel. We walk on the Gospel. If we’re going to get to heaven, if we’re going to get to Christ likeness, we have to walk on this path called the Gospel of Jesus; its message, its doctrine. So they’re on that path, but then these false teachers come and put this big roadblock right in the way. Now they have a decision to make. The easy decision is, “Well, there’s a road block. I guess I’ll take this other path over here.” And if they take that other path, they will never ever, ever get to the Celestial City. They’ll never get to Christ likeness. They’ll never get to heaven.

So the Apostle Paul says to watch out for them. They put obstacles. I know it takes a lot of effort and a lot of energy, but you need to push through those obstacles so that you stay on the path of the truth. Be careful of anyone who teaches you a doctrine contrary to the doctrine that you’ve been taught by the Apostles, through the Holy Spirit. Paul writes a similar warning to the churches in Galatia 5 years earlier. But there, he’s much more strong and even strident against false teachers because they’re more pervasive there in Galatia. But listen to what he says.

**Galatians 1:6-9** I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

He says, “I was there when God planted this church, started this church, and I knew how simple your devotion to Christ was. I’m astonished that these false teachers are so quickly convincing you that the Gospel that was proclaimed to you is not true, and that this other, new gospel is true. I’m shocked by that!” The ones who trouble them are the divisive folks who are unorthodox and yet very loving and very winsome. They want to distort the Gospel of Christ. They want to twist it. He says, “Even if it’s an angelic messenger flying down on six wings and saying, ‘Here is what the real message from heaven is,’ let him be accursed.” That’s pretty strong language! After Paul says “let him be accursed,” that person who teaches false doctrine, after he says that, we’re not scratching our heads and saying, “Paul, what do you really think about people who teach false doctrine?” (Laughter!) Let him be accursed! We have the true Gospel in the written record as the Holy Spirit has given us this record of the Apostle’s Gospel. So we compare everything with the Gospel that God has already delivered.

The principle here that we’re learning is that doctrine matters. I know some folks would like to say, “Well, doctrine is not that big of a deal.” No! Doctrine really matters! What we believe about God changes how we relate to Him. Doctrine makes the difference between whether our worship is idolatry or whether it’s acceptable, true worship. That’s how significant doctrine is. It’s the divide between idolatry and true worship. Furthermore, doctrine matters in relation to life. What we believe about God determines how we live our lives. It’s the stream out of which all our values, all our priorities, our behaviors flow.

So then we ask the question. Okay, there’s a problem and you’re warning us to watch out for these divisive people, people who may be orthodox but unloving, or people who are unorthodox but loving. Watch out for both those kinds. What are we to do if we discover them? There are three action steps that are listed in Scripture. Two of them are listed here. A second one that I add is from Titus chapter 3, as we’ll see. But there are three actions given by God when you discover there is a divisive person in the church. The first action is to watch out for them. In other words, you say, “I’m not going to assume that they’re not here. I’m assuming that they are here.” That’s the issue. They’re bound to be here. Every church should know that they’re bound to be here. So let’s watch out for them. Secondly, when we see them we warn them. And then if they don’t listen to the warning, we have to remove them. Those are the steps.

Action #1: Watch out for them.

***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;…*

The Greek word for “watch out” is the word *skopeo*. We get the word “scope” from it. So if you are a sentry in the Marines, you have a scope and you’re looking at the enemy. You’re finding out their movements. You’re looking to find out where they are. An enemy you can’t see is much more dangerous than an enemy you can see. And so we don’t want to think, “There are no enemies around.” If you’re not looking for them, you’re likely not going to see them. And then they really can damage the church. So we’re going to look out for both kinds of divisive people.

Who is supposed to watch out? Well, I think every Christian is to keep their eyes open. But there is a special responsibility that God gives to leaders. I want to speak to the leaders of this church. God has placed a sacred responsibility upon the leaders, the elders of this church in specific, to watch out, to warn, and to remove. And if we don’t do that, we first are unfaithful to God’s calling, and secondly, we are very unloving to the people who God has called us to shepherd.

In Acts 20, the Apostle Paul is speaking to the elders of the church in Ephesus. He spent three years in Ephesus and had an amazing ministry. It’s the longest place he ever spent with anyone. So he knows these folks really well. He loves them dearly. This is the last time he’s going to meet with this particular group of men who he’s known for three years personally. And he wants to give them some last instructions before he leaves because he knows that he’s not coming back, and they need to shepherd the church. This is what he says.

**Acts 20:28-32** Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers**,** to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert,remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

He’s saying, “Pay careful attention to your own life and also careful attention to all your flock. Look out and know your flock and know what’s happening. You haven’t decided this. The Holy Spirit has given this charge. Part of caring for the church is protecting.”

How does Paul know that fierce wolves will come in from their own flock? Does he have some crystal ball where he can see that that’s what is going to happen in Ephesus? Does he have some special knowledge? No. He just knows that because he knows that’s what happens in every church. He says, “I know that if you’re an elder in a church, here’s what is going to happen. There’s going to be some people from your own midst, from your own number, that are going to rise. And they’re going to first look like a sheep, but they’re going to act like a wolf. And they’re going to have sharp teeth. And they’re going to begin injuring spiritually, the people in your church. And that’s on you! If they’re not stopped, that’s on you! You can’t blame them for the injuries that they are producing in the church and to the body. That’s on you! You have to act!”

Now he’s saying too, that you can’t create a fence so high in the church that wolves won’t come in. If we created a fence so high that kept all wolves out, none of us would be able to enter. So he says that’s not the strategy for how you care for the flock. You don’t care for the flock by making the entrance requirements so great that hardly anybody can enter into the church. But what you do is after you invite anyone who would profess Christ in sincerity, after you invite them in and welcome them in, you’re watchful over them. And you know that some of those who profess Christ and have this great story and seem to be great people, are going to be these kind of people who are wolves that devour the sheep. Know that!

No church is healthy when it is a safe place for wolves to harm the flock without fear of being confronted! Can I say that again? We have this idea that the church is supposed to be a safe place for everyone. And there’s a certain degree of truth to that. We want to be a place for all the wounded, all the sinners. We’re a family of sinners. This is who we are. We’re a people who have been redeemed and who have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness. We all started over here, and God placed us in the kingdom of His Son whom He loves. This is who we are. We were this people and we still struggle with sin to this day. And so this is a safe place for people who are bleeding because of spiritual wounds or because of wounds that are sometimes even self-inflicted. People say, “I want healing. I want to confess my sin.” We want to be a church that says, “This is the place for you. We want to love you. We want to help you become Christ like and to worship God. This is the place for you!” But the moment one of those sheep smiles and you see a sharp tooth with some blood on the end of it where they’ve bit another sheep, you say, “Time out! This is not going to be a safe place for you if you continue to have those fangs. We have to pull out those fangs. I know it might be painful, but we’re first going to warn you. Our eyes are on you. We’re not going to let this happen. This is not going to be a safe place for you because ultimately, if you don’t quickly listen to our warning, we’ll go to the second step and we’re going to remove you. We’re going to shut the doors and you just can’t come into this fellowship. You can’t be a part of it.”

Action #2: Warn them.

Now, he doesn’t say this in this text. This is where I draw from Titus 3. Notice what Titus says. Paul speaks to the same problem and he says

**Titus 3:10-11** As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

I don’t think there’s a long span of time in those warnings. It’s not like, warn him once, and then two years later warn him twice, and then two years later eventually don’t have anything to do with him. You warn him once. How long does it take for a person to repent of sin? You warn him once, you warn him twice, and after that, you have nothing to do with him. You remove him. But there is a warning step. I know it’s not printed here in Romans 16:17. In verse 17 it says to watch out for them and then it says to avoid them. But there is a Gospel influence that perhaps could come upon those who have been wolves and may become sheep. And I think that’s what Paul is driving at with Titus. Give them an opportunity, but do that through strength. In other words, don’t do that through patting them on the back and saying, “You’re a good person. I know you didn’t mean these things.” You say, “You have to stop doing this or you are in jeopardy in your life with God. God sees what you’re doing. He sees what you’re teaching. You have to stop it, and you have to stop it yesterday. You have to repent and receive the grace of God or it’s not going to go well with you with the Lord.”

So again, this warning is given I think to any Christian. Any one of us can warn a brother or sister that we see moving away from Christ and being divisive. But it really rests upon the elders. After all, Titus chapter 3 is written to Titus, who is an elder. He says, “Titus, you need to warn them. That’s your job.” I wish I didn’t have to have that job. I didn’t go to become a pastor in order to warn people who are divisive. I became a pastor because I love sheep. I love introducing people who don’t know Christ to Christ. I love helping sheep grow in their relationship with Christ. But guess what? God says, “When I called you to pastor, this is what I called you to. You have to do this. You have to warn. And sometimes, you have to take that last step. You have to remove them.”

Action #3: Remove them from the fellowship.

***17*** *…avoid them.*

The NIV translates it as, “Keep away from them.” That word literally means “turn away from them.” The New American Standard version in Titus 3 says, “Reject a factious man.” Reject him! You’re not part of the fellowship. As long as a divisive person is allowed to remain in the church, he or she will sow seeds of discord. They’ll harm the sheep. They’ll influence the whole church away from the love of God and from love for one another in the Gospel.

***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.*

When divisive people are not confronted, they’re not corrected, they’re not warned and ultimately removed, avoided, the whole church loses her ability to be wise as to what is good and to be innocent as to what is evil. That’s how these verses connect. Do this so that the whole church will be wise as to what is good and innocent to what is evil. This is the good influence.

Now remember, this is the Apostle Paul after…Remember in chapter 14 the Apostle Paul says in any of these matters where you open up your Bible and you say, “God hasn’t said ‘Thus sayeth the Lord’ on this matter, where it’s a matter of preference that is important to you and you think this is the best way to go, on all those matters, just accept one another. You don’t warn them and you don’t remove them because you have a disagreement over some preferential issue. You accept them. You love one another. This is the Apostle Paul who says

**Romans 16:16** Greet one another with a holy kiss.

So he’s emphasizing love. What he’s describing here is not contrary to love, it is an action of love. It’s an action of love first toward God and saying, “God, we want to be a church that worships You, not an idolatrous church.” It’s an action of love toward other members of the church who are sheep, and who would be injured and drawn in by the flattering words and the smooth talk of divisive people. And it is an action of love toward the divisive person, because if that divisive person is not warned and confronted, they will stand before Jesus on the Day of Judgment and it will not go well for them. And they will look at the elders of the church and say, “Did you know that I was going to have trouble on this day?” “Yeah, but we didn’t want to rock the boat. We were afraid that you would take a whole bunch of members with you. And we were afraid that you would create even more conflict if we confronted you. So we decided not to do that.” That’s not going to fly well with that person. That person is going to say, “Why didn’t you love me enough to confront me?” So this is an action of love. It’s not an action contrary to love. In verse 20, he talks about the war.

**A War: Satan relentlessly attacks Jesus’ church.**

***20*** *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*

Just quickly on that, this is the first time Paul talks about Satan in the entire letter of Romans. It’s the first and only time he’s going to talk about Satan, and it’s in connection with divisive people. He’s saying, “This is going to be hard, but know that it’s not the person you are fighting.” It’s not these people who are enemies, who are divisive in the church, so don’t treat them like enemies. Still love them with the Gospel. Love them strongly. But love them and know that your real battle is with Satan who wants to invade this church and wants to disrupt it and wants to ruin its testimony of faithfulness to Jesus.” He says, “And I want you to know that you have a conqueror on your side. His name is Jesus and He will soon crush Satan under your feet. I know it’s hard right now in the battle. You’re going to win! Make sure you follow Him, though. But Satan will be crushed! I know sometimes it feels like the battle is so strong with the individual in our lives. We think, “Satan is going to win this battle.” But the answer is no, he’s not. The outcome may not be the way we desire it, but Satan won’t win when we follow the Lord’s instructions.

**A Wonder: God gives grace sufficient for the church’s challenges.**

***20*** *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

He’s saying, “I know this is hard, but let me tell you something. The grace of Jesus will be sufficient for you as a church to live out these commands in a way that brings peace and joy and righteousness to the community. The grace of the Lord Jesus will be with you. Depend on Him. Lean on Him.”

I want to say two things as we close. First, this whole message has been about the church, to the church. And perhaps you’re sitting there and you’ve never trusted in Jesus as your Savior. So you’re not in the Church. The message of the Gospel of Jesus is that you are not in right relationship with God when you are born, and something has to change. God loves you and that’s why He sent Jesus to be your Savior. It was so that He could bring you into God’s family, into His own church, His own precious family, His body. And you can’t enter into that relationship with God and into that family simply through striving, doing good deeds, walking through religious motions. You have to believe in Jesus. You have to say, “God, I’m a sinner and I have nothing to bring to you except my sin. I need that cleansed. I know You love me and that’s why You sent Jesus, who died in my place, who suffered the punishment I deserve.” And so I would ask you: Won’t you do that? Is there anything keeping you from entrusting your life to Jesus? Right now, you can call out to God.

The last thing I want to share with you are some personal remarks. Paul closes very personally in verses 21-23.

***21*** *Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosopater, 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.*

He’s writing from Corinth and he’s talking about all his fellow workers that are there in Corinth. And he’s saying, “These guys care about you, too. Timothy cares about you. So do Lucius, Jason, Sosopater.” I hope in heaven when I see Sosopater, he doesn’t tell me I pronounced his name wrong. (Laughter!) Tertius, Gaius, Erastus, Quartus. There are eight people. He ends with some very personal remarks. I want to end with some personal remarks as well.

These instructions over the course of my time as a pastor have not been easy. In fact, they’re some of the hardest instructions that God gives to pastors. I think at times that I personally have been too slow to apply them. I look at myself and I think, “Well who are you Ritch?” I’m kind of a softy by nature. I don’t like conflict. I’m trying to find the fastest place to peace that I possibly can get. Let’s get there and then let’s move on. That’s who I am. I also realize that I’m a people pleaser. I want to smile and I want to see a smile back. That’s the only thing I really care about in my day a lot of days. If I smile and get a smile back, the day is great! That’s who I am. And these commands don’t really lend itself to that kind of person. You have to go outside of your personality in order to take these things very seriously.

And also, I recognize that I’m a pretty proud person. My pride convinces me that I can manage divisive people. “If you speak in this way to them, their divisive hearts will change into wonder, and the people around them will see what’s really right and true.” But I have this fear of man as well that says, “If you confront too strongly, then they’re going to influence people and then the people they influence will influence other people and it’s just going to be a big mess. So do you really want to do that?” And my own personal answer often is, no. I don’t want to do that. And I have been way too slow to do that.

I thank God for our elders. God is building a group of men who are strong in the Lord, who are faithful, who are wise, who are focused on the Gospel and focused on God’s glory. We’ve talked about these issues. And we’ve recognized that we have to trust the Lord in following His commands to us as shepherds. We cannot just sort of, in a desire to please people and be at peace, continue down a path of human peace. We’ve got to be faithful, believing that these commands are absolutely central to our responsibilities and to the health of our church. We can trust God.

**Proverbs 29:25** The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.

That means that when it comes to divisive people in our church, that we as elders must watch out for them. We must warn them quickly and directly. And if they don’t listen, we warn them quickly and directly a second time, and then we remove them. It’s not because we hate them, but because we love them and because we love God and we love this church. So what I would ask you to do is

1. Pray that the elders of your church will watch for, warn, and remove divisive people from the fellowship of the church when it is needed.

A lot of times, by the time a church does this, when we’re slow to obey Scripture, we do it more out of frustration. We’re finally so frustrated with this person that we have to do it. And now we’re all angry. That’s not the way to do it. Pray that we will do it with faith, with love, with gentleness. Pray that we’ll do it with consistency and with wisdom. But it has to happen or the church won’t be able to exalt Christ. Pray for your elders.

2. Pray that you will be a member that helps your church grow in love, in worship and how to have righteousness and unity. And pray that you will never unknowingly be used as an instrument of division.

He talks about the naïve. They’re not wicked people that get caught up with divisive people. They’re just naïve. They’re just not aware. They get their emotions drawn in. Just pray, “Lord, don’t let me ever listen to a divisive person who is slandering, who is gossiping, who is teaching something contrary and false doctrine that is leading people astray. Lord, don’t let me be that person.” Be willing to alert those when you see divisive members.

The final one is where we began with Romans 12. All of this flows from Romans 12.

3. Let’s be a church that presents our bodies as living sacrifices to God.

Let’s do it today. Let’s do it afresh. Let’s do it everyday, and God will change us.