

THE MESSENGER'S FINAL WARNING: MARK DIVISIVE PEOPLE ROMANS 16:17–20

Introduction

Divisiveness and evil are always a threat to the local church. The reason can be simply stated: people have problems, even believers. The fact that we live in a corrupt and depraved world means that people become disgruntled, disappointed, unhappy, selfish, sinful and in some cases evil. Even the strongest believers become contaminated with corruption by having to live in the very air of a sinful world. It is because of this that Paul warns the church and its believers: mark divisive people. Watch out for them: be cautious; take note and keep an eye on them, for they are a constant threat to the church.

- I. Mark divisive people and avoid them (vv. 17-18).
- II. Mark what is good and untainted with evil (vv. 19-20).

I. *Romans 16:17–18 Mark Divisive People*

Mark divisive people and avoid them. Note: this warning abruptly cuts into Paul's greeting to the Roman church. Paul is greeting various believers in the church whom he has met on his travels throughout the world. All of a sudden, he interrupts his greeting and issues a severe warning. The abrupt interruption is *not an afterthought*; it is the final exhortation needed by a strong church — an exhortation against an event that is bound to happen: the seeping in of divisive people. A divisive person is a person who...

- grumbles
- complains
- criticizes
- murmurs
- gossips
- is argumentative
- causes strife
- acts out of pride, ambition or selfishness
- is unloving
- teaches a different doctrine

The most effective way for Satan to get a foothold into a strong church is to quietly and insidiously move a divisive person into some teaching or leadership position where he can influence immature believers. Paul knew this, so he left the warning until the end of his letter. It is a warning that must be heeded by a strong church if it is to keep its witness for the Lord.

There are three reasons why a divisive person must be marked and avoided.

1. A divisive person causes division and lays stumbling blocks in the way of growth. Note exactly what is said: a divisive person acts “contrary to the teaching which [believers] have learned.” He causes “divisions and obstacles.”

⇒ The word “division” (*dichostasias*) means standing apart, being separate, causing cleavage.

⇒ The word “obstacles” (*skandaia*) means laying a stumbling block in someone's way or causing someone to fall.

- a. The divisive person acts “contrary to the teaching you [believers] have learned.” The teaching of God and of Christ is simply stated:

1 John 3:23 *And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*

Genuine believers have trusted God's Son. They have accepted Christ as their Lord, giving all they are and have to Him; and they do love one another, having committed their lives to carry the teaching of Christ to the world.

However, this is not true with a divisive person. He acts *contrary* to the teaching of God and of Christ. He opposes...

- the Lordship of Christ
- the teaching of Christ
- the love of believers
- the mission of reaching the world with the gospel: the glorious news of life in Christ, life that is both abundant and eternal

- b. Avoid them because of the terrible devastation that a divisive person can do to the strength of a church. The term “keep away” (*ekklinatē*) means to shun, to turn away from, to remove oneself from. Get away from them and have absolutely nothing to do with them.

- c. Watch the divisive person. The word “watch” (*skopeite*) means to keep one's eye on, to look at, to observe, to focus upon, to contemplate, to scrutinize. Note: it is the divisive person himself who is to be *avoided and turned away* from, not just his sin. We are not to have anything to do with a divisive person...

- for we give the appearance of approving what he is doing.
- for we run the risk of being influenced and stumbling over what he says and does.

Mat 18:7 *“Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!”*

Mark 9:42 *“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.”*

Luke 11:17 *Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: “Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall.”*

1 Cor 10:31-32 *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God.*

1 Cor 1:10 *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.*

1 Cor 3:3 *You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?*

2 Cor 6:3 *We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.*

Phil 1:27 *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.*

2. A divisive person does not serve Christ, but his own desires. The word “appetites” (koiliai) means the stomach and its physical appetites. A divisive person is gripped by...
- selfish desires
 - personal urges
 - wanting his own way
 - base ambition
 - physical appetites
 - getting what he wants

Note: Scripture clearly says that divisive persons do not serve Christ. They call themselves *Christians*, but their Lord is not Christ. They are not committed to His honour and glory and mission, but to themselves — to getting and doing what they want. The divisive person is still given over to the things of this, unspiritual, carnal, sensual and secular world.

Phil 3:18-19 *For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.*

3. A divisive person uses flattering speech to deceive. He uses smooth, persuasive and reasonable words to lead people to take sides with him. He talks and acts godly, and he shows interest and concern for those whom he wants to convince. But note what Scripture says: the motive of the divisive person is to deceive. He wants others...
- to think as he thinks
 - to walk as he walks
 - to follow as he follows
 - to believe as he believes
 - to live as he lives
 - to talk as he talks

The result of his divisiveness is tragic: he deceives the naive, that is, the unsuspecting, the innocent, the immature, the carnal, the unspiritual, the newborn believers.

Titus 1:10-11 *For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group [religionists]. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach — and that for the sake of dishonest gain.*

2 Tim 3:5-7 *[Men] Having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds*

of evil desires, always learning [the latest philosophy, theology or novelty] but never able to acknowledge the truth.

II. **Romans 16:19–20 Strong Church**

Mark what is good, and untainted with evil. A strong church, such as the Roman church, must constantly be marking and focusing upon *what is good and untainted with evil*. If a strong church fails to know and do good, it will be penetrated by evil (divisiveness) and it will become a weak church. Therefore, a strong church must always, with the utmost diligence, be looking for what is good and untainted with evil. Three reasons are given for this charge.

1. A strong church such as the Roman church is obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the very reason for its strength: the church has been obedient to the Lord, doing exactly as He commands. The believers have been...

- a. Living soberly, righteously and godly in this present world.

Titus 2:12-13 It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

- b. Ministering to the needs of people even as He ministered.

Mat 20:28 “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

John 20:21 Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

- c. Witnessing to all far and wide, fulfilling His mission.

Mat 28:19-20 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Mark 16:15 He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”

Acts 1:8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The result of such a dynamic obedience is a strong testimony that is spread among all men. People know where to go when they need help: they know where the obedient believers are who are truly following the Lord.

2. A strong church must be wise to know what is good. Its people must grow more and more in *goodness* — in knowing what is good and what is evil. Believers must be *wise*...

- to *search* for what is good and untainted with evil.
- to *know* what is good and untainted with evil.

The word “innocent” (*akerios*) means unmixed, unadulterated, pure, without any mixture of evil. The idea is that the believers of a strong church must constantly mark, focus and concentrate upon what is good in order to keep the bad out of its fellowship. The way to keep evil out of a church is to focus upon the good. The way to demonstrate spiritual wisdom is to concentrate upon the good; then evil will be recognized for what it is, and it will be rejected.

The point is this: a strong church must not only avoid evil (v. 17); it must not allow evil to penetrate its fellowship. It must not allow a divisive person to stir up the “naive” (unsuspecting) believers of the church. A church must be wise: it must mark and focus upon what is good and untainted with evil. It must be wise enough to spot evil and to stop its penetration into the fellowship.

3. God will soon give victory over Satan. The meaning of “soon” does not mean shortly, but *quickly* or *swiftly*. The idea is *not* that God is coming soon to destroy Satan, but when God acts to deliver His people from evil and divisiveness, Satan will be quickly defeated. His work against God's consecrated people (a strong church) will last only for a moment. The “God of Peace” will restore peace swiftly and quickly to the fellowship of a strong people. But note: the defeat of Satan and divisive persons is conditional. A strong church must do what has been said: mark and focus upon what is good and untainted with evil. God will bless a church that is obedient and concentrating upon Christ and His mission.

Note another fact: God is going to bruise Satan under the *believers' feet*. It is the *feet of the believers* that God uses to bruise Satan. When genuine believers of a strong church do what God says, then God will act to deliver His people from evil and divisiveness.

Luke 10:19 *“I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.”*

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

1 Cor 10:13 *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

James 4:7 *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

1 John 4:4 *You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ■*