

“Be Wise in What Is Good”
(Romans 16:17-20)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. The Lord tells us to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.
 - a. That is, we are to study to know the good and do it.
 - b. And we are to remain ignorant of evil and avoid it at all costs.
 - (i) We only need to know enough about evil to make sure we steer clear.
 - (ii) The Lord has not called us to make a study of it and certainly not to do it.
 - c. This is one of the reasons the Scripture doesn't elaborate on evil to any great extent.
 - (i) It tells us it exists.
 - (ii) It explains what it is in general terms, and where necessary gives us some specifics.
 - (iii) But God doesn't want us to focus on it to any great extent, because the more we do, the more we'll be tempted to go down that road.
2. The Lord teaches us a great deal about this wisdom in the book of Romans.
 - a. I won't review it all now, but just remind you of the last two weeks.
 - b. Paul told us that to be wise in what is good, we must become servants.
 - (i) It is those who labor hard, who give up their time, who give their resources to the Lord's work, who are willing to move out of their comfort zones and suffer, in order to serve others, either by bringing them the Gospel or by building them up in Christ, that are blessed.
 - (ii) The one who humbles himself the most and becomes the greatest *servant*, that is the one who will be most honored in Christ's kingdom.
 - (iii) To know this is to know what is good.
 - (iv) To live this is to be truly wise – as the Jews understand wisdom.
 - (v) Look at the book of Proverbs – it's not just a rule book, but a practical book of application.
 - c. Paul told us something else about being wise in what is good, and that is that we should greet one another with a holy kiss.
 - (i) We are a family, and to love and embrace one another as brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers in Christ, is true wisdom.
 - (ii) God loves and desires unity, and to honor God through obedience is wise.
 - (iii) As we'll see, this love and unity will also spell the defeat of the devil.
 - d. To be wise in what is evil and innocent in what is good would be to study ways to get around God's clear commands.
 - (i) To come up with excuses why I don't have to serve, to give, to sacrifice, but to spend all my time and resources on what I want.
 - (ii) To justify my grudges and to separate from my brethren, not to greet them cordially or not try to work through my differences, is to be wise in what is evil.
 - (iii) But remember, God hates evil, therefore, to be wise in them is foolish.

B. Preview.

1. This morning, the same thing as last week is addressed, but only from the opposite perspective. Paul tells us we are not only to greet one another with a holy kiss, we are to keep watch for and avoid those who will try to destroy our unity.
 - a. We need to remember that besides the Spirit of God working in our hearts and in the church, there is also our flesh and the evil spirit.
 - b. Satan wants to divide and conquer us, not only because he hates God, but also because he realizes that if stand together in the love of Christ, we pose a threat to his kingdom.
 - c. This is why he will do everything he can to make us wise in what is evil and innocent in what is good: in this case, to divide or stumble us.
 - d. But we must be ready.
2. This morning, we will look at three things:
 - a. The threat: what Paul warns us of that threatens our spiritual unity and well being in Christ.
 - b. The solution: We are to watch out for those who do these things and turn away from them.
 - c. And finally, the victory: what the Lord will do to Satan if we remain wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil: crush Satan under our feet.

II. Sermon.

- A. First, look at the threat: what it is Paul warns them of that threatens their spiritual unity and well being in Christ: “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned” (v. 17).
 1. What were they faced with?
 - a. “Those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned” (v. 17).
 - b. Dissension is another word for division; *e.g.*, a dissenting voice is one that speaks against the motion or what the main body wants to do.
 - c. Hindrances refer to spiritual barriers: the things that cause people to stumble, or sin.
 - d. Both of these are contrary to the teaching when they learned:
 - (i) That they are to preserve the spirit of unity in the bond of love.
 - (ii) That they are not to stumble a brother or sister, but do everything in their power to help them walk with and serve the Lord.
 - e. There are those outside the church and within that bring these threats, and they are dangerous threats.
 2. How do these individuals cause these problems to arise?
 - a. Not merely by their presence, but by their tongues.
 - b. The tongue is the most powerful weapon the Lord has given us.
 - c. It can either be used for good – for God’s purposes – or for evil – for the devil’s purposes.
 - d. James tells us, “With it we bless *our* Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9).
 - e. When it used for the devil’s work, it does a lot of damage. Again, James writes, “So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and *yet* it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the

very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison” (vv. 5-8).

- f. Paul writes, “By their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting” (v. 18).
- g. This is to be wise in what is evil and innocent in what is good.

3. Paul reminds us that not all dissention or offences are bad, just those “contrary to the teaching which you learned.”

- a. If we’re going a bad or sinful way, if we believe things that are heretical, we need to be stopped.
- b. Sometimes speaking the truth can cause division in a group that is going the wrong way, sometimes they can become offended at you.
- c. That’s a good thing, not bad. Jesus taught the truth and divided and offended many.
- d. But it is always wrong to cause division among or to stumble God’s people when they are walking in His ways.
- e. God commands unity and condemns division. He everywhere tells us to build up other and not tear them down.
- f. He takes the breaking of this commandment very seriously.
- g. And so Paul urges on them this warning.

B. Secondly, what is the solution? What are we to do when faced with those who cause these kinds of problems? We are to watch out for them and not listen to them.

1. Paul writes, “Keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances” (v. 17).

- a. Since this is a serious threat, you need to keep your eyes open.
- b. When you’re at the Grand Canyon, you watch to make sure you don’t get too close and fall over the edge.
- c. When you’re in the bad part of town at night, you’re careful to make sure you’re safe when getting in and out of your car.
- d. You always pay attention when your well-being or that of those you love is at stake.
- e. Well that is exactly what is at stake, and so Paul says keep your eyes open.
- f. If you see someone like this, keep your eyes on them, so that they don’t catch you in their trap of gossip or false doctrine.
- g. Being ready is the best defense you can have.

2. Secondly, we are to “turn away from them” (v. 17).

- a. We are not to associate with those who continue to sow the seeds of division, who divide brother against brother, sister against sister.
- b. The Scripture warns us not to be around those who are given to sin; if we do, we’ll soon find ourselves struggling with the same sin: “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’” (1 Cor. 15:33).
- c. Instead we must separate ourselves from them: “‘Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you’” (2 Cor. 6:17).
- d. Scripture says, “Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned” (Titus 3:10-11).

3. This brings us to the crux of why we should turn away from them: Because of what is at the heart of their problem.
 - a. “For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites” (v. 18).
 - b. Those who cause divisions and stumble brethren are not the servants of Christ.
 - (i) The Spirit moves us to work toward unity.
 - (ii) But Satan and the flesh move us to destroy the work of God.
 - (iii) Those who continually divide the brethren and stumble them either through divisive gossip or false teaching are serving the devil, not Christ.
 - (iv) Certainly even Christians can fall into this sin: but it is a very serious sin we should repent of at once when we come to our senses.
 - c. The Scripture says we need to keep our eye out for those who do these things.
 - (i) “They deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting” (v. 18).
 - (ii) Those who are watchful and ready won’t be as easily deceived by them.
 - d. And when we identify them, we are to turn away from them.
 - e. To do these things is to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.
- C. And finally, the victory: what the Lord will do to Satan if we remain wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil: Ultimately, if we can guard against these intrusions and preserve our unity and spiritual well-being, we will overcome the enemy of our souls.
 1. Paul commended the Romans for their obedience and he rejoiced in it: “For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you” (v. 19).
 2. But obedience can quickly be eroded and the saints can fall if they do not behave wisely and so Paul exhorts them:
 - a. “But I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil” (v. 19).
 - b. This is the only thing that will preserve them.
 - c. If we can successfully persevere in the Lord’s truth – be wise in the good and innocent of evil – we will also be preserved.
 - d. More than that, we will enter into Christ’s victory over Satan.
 - (i) Our unity will spell Satan’s defeat.
 - (ii) As Christ crushed the head of the serpent on the cross, so He will subdue Satan under our feet.
 - (iii) Rather than using Satan to chasten us for our division, disunity and stumbling one another with more of the same, he will use us to destroy the works of the devil.
 - (iv) If Satan can divide and stumble us, he has nothing to fear.
 - (v) But if we stand united, he knows he will be crushed.
 - (vi) And so I urge you, brethren, be wise in what is good – know what is good and do it, preserve the unity, build up one another and don’t tear down – and be innocent in what is evil – keep your eyes on those who cause dissention and hindrance; warn them once or twice, but then turn away from them if they don’t repent. Amen.