

Sermon Growth Guide

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LOVING AND WISE | Romans 16:17-23

November 15, 2026

Key Verse: Romans 16:19. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.

Big Idea: Divisiveness and conflict can destroy the friendships of Believers. They betray the beauty of the church community. We must be both wise to what's harmful and innocent of harm.

Foundations

Beginning in v17, Paul makes an abrupt change in the flow of his letter. Aware of conflicts within the Roman church, he returns to his teaching on unity and love.

Paul urges the Roman church to "watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way ." Was he referring to Jews who desired stricter adherence to the Mosaic Law, Gentile believers who struggled to embrace moral constraints, or agitators seeking to destroy the church. These factions steered others from the "teaching they had learned." They served their own agenda, not the purpose of Christ. Today we still struggle with legalism, the acceptance of promiscuous lifestyles, corruption, and hostilities between members of the same church.

After encouraging his readers, "Everyone has heard about your obedience" Paul goes on to say, I want you to be aware of what is harmful and to be harmless in your own actions. I want you to be wise about evil and blameless (innocent) of doing evil. Jesus tells us to be shrewd snakes. Peter says be watchful, the devil prowls like a roaring lion.

In his unusual benediction in v20, Paul promises the God of Peace will utterly defeat Satan and until that time, the grace of Jesus will keep you. God is sovereign even in our trouble.

Paul begins Roman 16 by asking the Roman church to greet his dear friends. At the end of this section, a different set of friends greet the Roman church. The Church: One body made up of Jews and gentiles, women and men, free and enslaved, wealthy and poor united in the love of Christ Jesus. Threatened but never defeated.

Understanding God's Word

Read Romans 1:8, 16:17-23 and for background Acts 18:2-4. Luke explains that in Corinth Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla who were exiled by the Roman Emperor Claudius in 49AD. According to the historian Suetonius, this ruling was the result of conflicts in the Jewish synagogues regarding Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Paul commends the Roman church for their obedience. Read Romans 12: 9-21 for Paul's beautiful description of what obedience looks like.

Applying God's Word

We survived a contentious, divisive and ugly political season. Pastor Tim asks, "How do we keep a community healthy and united?" Forgiveness was his answer. Discuss why forgiveness matters. Is there someone you need to forgive or to ask forgiveness of? Are you privy to subtle divisions in the church? How can you bring unity? (For personal reflection: Does Jesus call you by name?)

Witnessing God's Word

A new command I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. by this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:34 Greet one another. Introduce yourself. Welcome the stranger. Walk them to the Belonging Booth. Invite them to coffee in The Commons. Witness by your love. Build unity.

What I love about Scripture is that it is honest. Romans 16 is this long list of friends, a rich celebration of the sweetness of friendship's kiss. It is the longest list of friends in the Bible. Digging into it reveals this supernatural, wide-ranging, mixed community called the church: Jews and Gentiles sharing space, women and men in leadership and service, Romans and barbarians, rich and poor; some are slave names, some names sound high society, and some names we know from history. There are people from all around, from Jerusalem to Asia Minor to Greece to Italy, all brought close by the fellowship of Christ, so near in Christ, that the relationship is as intimate as a kiss. We are In the Company of Friends. But…the Bible is not so naïve as to suggest this will always be easy. This brother/sisterhood is so beautiful we should appreciate it, we should be grateful for it, we should wonder at it, we should cultivate it, and it is so beautiful a gift we should be ready to defend it. We used to send our kids out the door with a little encouragement, "Be loving and wise!" "Mom, I'm going to football practice." Be loving and wise. Our passage today says to be both. In the Company of Friends, be Loving and Wise.

This is hard, isn't it? I thought Jesus was always about bringing people together, including everybody, making everyone feel welcome and safe. Then these verses come along, "watch out for," "stay away from," "don't talk to" and "don't allow." Friendship, Christian community, does not mean accepting harm or passively allowing bad behavior. Love corrects as much as it accepts. Tolerance of divisiveness or gossip is no way to cultivate a community of faith or nurture true friendship in a church. Those who are in leadership, and all of us together, must keep our eyes open and stay alert for behaviors and attitudes, the root of bitterness that could grow up and divide the church or betray the beauty of the company of friends. We must be loving, above all, but also wise.

"I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them." (Romans 16:17) Within a community of love, a supernatural community where Christ has brought us together by his grace, by his very blood shed for us, there is still going to be conflict. People are still going to people; we are going to people it up. What then? "For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people." (Romans 16:18) This is a remarkable insight. Some people stir up controversy because there is something inside of them that needs it. It serves their own appetite, their own dyspeptic belly. They need the rumors, the drama, the secret meetings because of something unhealthy going on inside themselves, some thirst, some appetite. Smooth talk and flattery draw kindling to the fire. Who doesn't love to be included in a juicy piece of gossip? Who doesn't feel important when someone promises, "Come over here and I'll tell you the real story?" But that stuff is poison to the company of friends. Have you ever had a burst pipe you didn't know about? Behind the walls it drips and drips, mold and mildew build, wood starts to rot and decay. Hidden damage. That's gossip, rumor, division. Watch out. Keep away.

Particularly, as Paul is particularly concerned about, when it comes to teaching another gospel, a different doctrine. The true good news is clear: we are sinners, but Christ came and died for us, we have a Savior, and he rose from the dead and guides us today. We have a Lord. Others come with other versions of good news—but it's not good news. It's bad news. Watch out. Keep away. Paul is confident they will. "Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent

about what is evil." (Romans 16:19) I'm not worried you are going to fall into the lies. You're already too connected to Jesus to do that. Obedience to Jesus straightens this stuff out in time. Paul says, "I just want you to stay wise as much as you stay loving. Be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." That's different from naïve.

In the 80's a movie came out pretending Jesus was only a man, scared and terrorized by God, it turned the whole gospel into a horror movie. It was very popular. I didn't want to watch it, but I wanted to know what was in it. A friend said, why don't you watch it in the library, so you study it, not just watch it. That's what I did. It's like reading false gospels. I've studied the Gospel of Thomas and the rest. I know what is in there. It's nonsense. Jesus said, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." (Matthew 10:16) Ignorance and naivety get you nowhere. Daniel said of God, "He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him." (Daniel 2:22) That's wisdom. I don't have to embrace darkness to know what is in there and what is not.

Paul, like Peter, wants his churches aware, watchful, ready, because we are not only fighting a political fight or a psychological fight. It's a spiritual fight and we have spiritual opponents. The beautiful community of friends is a target of the evil one. Satan would love to tear down the company of friends called the church. Peter wrote, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8) Paul told the Corinthians to watch out, "in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes." (2 Corinthians 2:11) Keeping the community watchful and prepared is critically important. When people start up with rumors and division, when our appetites are teased and we want a little drama, a little rumor, a little gossip, that's where the Devil steps in to make it worse, exaggerating rumors, spinning up gossip and multiplying lies until good looks evil and evil looks good—those are the schemes. But we know how it turns out in the end. "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you." (Romans 16:20)

Then there are a few more names to connect. These are people in Corinth with Paul. Timothy who went on to pastor the church in Ephesus and got those letters that are in the Bible. Lucius. Jason, maybe the guy who harbored Paul and Silas in Thessalonica. Sosipater. Tertius, the scribe. Gaius, a fine Roman name, who was probably the owner of a Roman villa. Erastus, we think was an Aedile in Rome, kind of a City Manager, along with Quartus who may have been a slave. Quite a mix. All a part of the company of friends.

How do we keep such a community healthy and united? Remember, Satan will be crushed. Don't worry about that. In the meantime, let the grace of our Lord Jesus rule. A company of friends will not survive without grace. Peter once asked Jesus how many times he should forgive. The classic view was three times. That was the common teaching. Peter knew Jesus was pushing more grace. "I bet Jesus will be impressed with twice the normal. Six times. Six plus one! Seven!" "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'" (Matthew 18:21-22) Forgiveness has just got to be part of the story, part of the lifestyle. A community full of grace. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. That's loving. Forgiveness doesn't always lead to reconciliation. That takes two. It doesn't always happen. Forgiveness is a single-player game, just you. You must forgive, but sometimes reconciliation isn't possible. You can't take responsibility for the other

person's behavior. Either way, you must forgive: "...as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." (Colossians 3:13) Grace pervades and the fellowship needs defending. Loving and wise.

I was reminded, thinking of all this, of a chapter each of our four kids went through. The name-caller chapter. They would come home from school, lip quivering, teary-eyed. "Jimmy called me a snotface again!" "I'm sorry. What can we try?" Give them some agency, you know? You wish you could tell them, "Hey, listen, there's something going on in Jimmy that just isn't healthy. There is a psychological wound inside Jimmy causing him to lash out in an effort to gain control over his own tragic world." That's not going to work. "Did you tell him you don't like being called a snotface?" That's nothing. Of course they did. "Maybe try telling the teacher that Jimmy calls you a snotface." Eh. "Maybe we just don't talk to Jimmy anymore, how about that?" "No, that won't work." "Why?" "He sits right next to me." Okay. Well, what? "Have you tried punching Jimmy in the nose?" No. That's not the way to go. That's behavior modification from a generation ago! Some of you know. No, we never suggested that. We would eventually say, "You know you're not a snotface, don't you? So what if he says that? You know who you are." Be loving and wise. I am rubber, you are glue.

How does Christian community survive the bullies and the name-callers? Romans says don't allow the drip, drip, drip behind the wall; the gossip in the shadows. Also, be careful who gets to call the names. There is only one name-caller to listen to. Satan is a name-caller, but his names don't stick. Divisive people are name-callers, but those names don't last. There is only one who calls you by name who knows your name. "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you." (Romans 16:20) Only one name-caller counts. Jesus. He's the one who keeps the company of friends together.

I love reading this list of friends of Paul; I try to imagine them, picture their faces or imagine how they talk, with what little we know. Let your imagination picture them as he calls out their names. They all mattered to him. They all mattered to each other. Paul called out their names. But the only name caller we need is Jesus. He does not forget you. He names you his own. How can a community like the church be built out of people who are so separated, so distant from one another? Jesus stepped into the breach to bridge an infinite distance. Between sinful us and Holy God was a chasm, an existential breach, an infinite distance, as far as life is from death. Jesus gave his life, took the death, and bridged the gap, suspended between Heaven and Earth, arms extended as far as East and West. If his arms reach out that far, then all of us are within his grasp. As far as we think we are from one another, we are all held within his arms, between his loving arms. He names you his own. He remembers your name. "See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." (Isaiah 49:16) It doesn't matter what others call you; only that Jesus calls you, and calls you by name.