

We Interrupt This Letter...

When the Roll is Called Up Yonder – Part IV

Romans 16:17-18

Introduction

We are all aware of the fact that almost any product we purchase today, comes complete with a warning label of some sort. In an effort to avoid even the most foolish lawsuits, companies now include warnings that reveal the utter lack of common sense among their consumers. Some warnings that I have uncovered include:

- a baby stroller with the warning: “Remove child before folding.”
- a brass fishing lure with a three-pronged hook on the end that warns: “Harmful if swallowed.”
- an electric hand blender with the warning: “Never remove food or other items from the blades while product is operating.”
- an electric drill made for carpenters that warns: “This product not intended for use as a dental device.” (Your dentist probably uses one of these.)
- a cardboard car sunshield that keeps sun off the dashboard warns: “Do not drive with sunshield in place.”
- a 12-inch rack for storing compact disks warns: “Do not use as a ladder.” (Someone probably tried this and as a result, broke their leg and sued the company.)
- an interesting warning label on a cartridge for a laser printer reads: “Do not eat toner.” (But you’re in college – and you’re hungry – and it’s late at night . . .)

- many household irons come with the warning: “Do not iron clothing while on your body.” (Okay, how many of you have done this? Me too!)

If you are like most people, you never even bother to read the directions, much less the warning labels.

The truth is that life is filled with warnings, and for good reason. It is not at all rare to read or hear of a tragedy that occurred because a warning was not heeded.

One example is the time, twenty years ago, when the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded after take-off, killing all seven members of the crew. Later investigation revealed that NASA had ignored the warning of engineers that cold weather could affect the O-rings and allow fuel to leak – which it did, causing the Shuttle to explode moments after take-off.

More recently, findings of the 9/11 investigation uncovered the now-famous warning from an FBI office in Arizona. They had sent the warning that Arab pilots were suspiciously training at U.S. flight schools.

More than ever, we realize the need for a system of warning.

It was in 1963, during the Kennedy Administration, that the Emergency Broadcast System was initiated. This was to allow the President to address the entire nation in an emergency and provide necessary warnings or instructions.

You are probably familiar with the 35 to 40 second test of this system, which is now called the Emergency Alert System. There is a colorful pattern on the television screen and an obnoxiously loud tone, followed by the familiar phrase, “We interrupt this program for a test of the Emergency Alert System.” This system can be used for national emergencies, as well as for local weather emergencies.

I have listened online to old radio shows in which the program was interrupted by breaking news about the Battle of Normandy in World War II and the surrender of the Japanese nation. It always began with the words, “We interrupt this program.”

These words have a way of grabbing your attention, don’t they? They herald something significant – perhaps a special warning that might mean the difference between life or death.

If you have heard our last few discussions, the letter of Paul to the Romans has been making its concluding remarks with one greeting after another. Then, almost suddenly, Paul stops and begins to dictate a warning – a severe warning that is filled with pathos and passion.

Warning – Watch Out for False Teachers!

In Romans chapter 16, Paul interrupts his greetings beginning with verse 17. Look at his words in Romans 16:17-20.

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you leaned, and turn away from them.

For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

Then Paul goes back to greetings in Romans 16:21.

Timothy, my fellow worker greets you, and so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen.

Sandwiched between a series of one greeting after another is this rather passionate series of alarms. It is as if Paul says, “We interrupt this letter for an emergency situation with life and death implications.”

Paul seems to interrupt his closing words with a warning. It is so sudden that some believe it was not part of his original letter, but was added later. However, there is no reason to doubt that Paul, at this point in greeting his beloved friends and fellow workers, is compelled out of love, to throw in another warning.

Frankly, Paul was always warning the church.

After three intense years among the believers in Ephesus, Paul’s final words, primarily directed to the Ephesian elders of the church, were a severe and passionate warning. He said, in Acts 20:28-31a,

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Therefore be on the alert . . .

Paul warned the Galatian believers with strong words regarding their slide back toward justification by works. He wrote,

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; (Galatians 1:6)

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church ended with a final warning to watch out for one who,

. . . does not love the Lord . . . (I Corinthians 16:22a)

Paul’s final words to Timothy warned him that people will naturally gravitate to preachers and teachers with spiritual sounding platitudes that “tickle their ears” and promise them self-satisfaction rather than challenge them through sound doctrine to pursue selfless living (*II Timothy 4:3-4*).

So it is not unexpected that Paul interjects a serious warning to the Roman believers at the end of his letter.

Paul is basically warning the Romans of false teachers. Why? There are two reasons:

- first, because they divide the body (verse 17);
- secondly, because they deceive the believer (verse 18).

Look again at Romans 16:17a.

Now I urge you, brethren . . .

This is literally, “I beg you,” or “I beseech you.”

This word “urge” is the word used by Paul in the previous chapter when he begged the believers to pray for him (Romans 15:30). It is the same word used in Romans 12:1a, when Paul wrote,

. . . I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice . . .

This word was used in Paul’s day by a commander challenging his troops before they went into battle.

It is used in the ultimate speech where the difference can be life or death.

Now false teachers do not announce themselves. Heresy does not crash through the front door; it sneaks in the back door.

The especially dangerous thing about the devil is that he does not always attempt to destroy churches by attacking them – he sometimes joins them. The doctrines of demons are often accepted by a majority vote of the body.

Paul says, “This is an emergency warning to my beloved friends! Be alert that false teachers will bring two things:”

. . . dissensions and hindrances . . . (Romans 16:17a)

The words “dissensions” and “hindrances” are far more serious than hair splitting over minor interpretations; or about immature believers who are divisive because of some personal issue.ⁱ

Notice the way Paul connects the dissensions and hindrances to the last phrase in Romans 16:17,

. . . contrary to the teaching which you learned . . .

Paul is warning them to watch out for those who challenge and undermine divinely revealed apostolic teaching – this is the faith – the teaching.ⁱⁱ

“Follow them,” Paul warns, “and there will be hindrances to your faith.”

The word “hindrance” is from “skandalon,” which gives us our word “scandal”. It is the Greek word that refers to the bait stick of a trap. As soon as the animal pulled at the bait tied to the stick, the stick – or the “skandalon” – was pulled away and the trap was sprung.

Paul is not thinking of moral scandal or scandalous behavior, he is warning of doctrinal scandal – that is, the adding of something to the gospel that will trap unsuspecting believers in some doctrinal error.ⁱⁱⁱ

The warning sounded in the first century and it must sound in the twenty-first century. Whether it is to:

- someone trapped within Catholicism – believing that the works of penance and mass must be added for salvation;
- the Protestants who sprinkle their babies to ensure their place in the covenant;
- the Church of Christ that insists believers be baptized by immersion in order to secure their salvation;
- the Seventh Day Adventists who insist that worship must take place on Saturday and all who worship on Sunday are following the mark of the beast – and are condemned.

This list goes on and on.

The harshest words of Christ were directed toward the religionists of His day who so burdened those who wanted to worship God.

During the days of the Old Testament, the law required that any animal sacrificed must be unblemished. By the time of Christ, the temple had appointed inspectors who were to examine the animal. These inspectors charged a fee, which in today’s economy, would have been equivalent to five dollars.

As a practice, the inspectors rejected the animals by finding some fault with them. In this way, the pilgrims would have to buy one of the temple animals which were raised and kept by the priestly system.

The only problem was the exorbitant cost of temple livestock. Outside the temple system, an ordinary pair of turtledoves would range from fifteen to twenty dollars. In the temple, in the court of the Gentiles where animals were sold, a pair of turtledoves would cost as much as four hundred dollars!

This was nothing less than extortion in the name of God.

It is little wonder that the first thing Jesus did when He arrived at the temple was fashion a whip and clean house. He said to them,

. . . you have made [My house] a den of thieves. (Matthew 21:13 KJV)

In other words, “You are selling access to God. You are stealing from those who want to worship God. You are charging fees for forgiveness.”

This was not the first time and it was not the last time religion sold forgiveness.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther lit a torch that became the Protestant Reformation. Even though he was a faithful Catholic monk, he was already beginning to preach against the doctrine of indulgences – the belief that by praying a prayer or buying a candle or taking a mass one could earn time off from purgatory. He was also preaching that justification was by faith alone and that the scriptures, not the church, were the final and ultimate authority. It was his cry of “sola scriptura” – the scriptures alone – that helped solidify the primacy of God’s word.

It was when Johann Tetzel came to Wittenberg selling special indulgences that Martin Luther was deeply stirred. Luther wrote 95 theses, or 95 statements, that he wanted debated by the ecclesiastical scholars of his day.

Luther objected to Johann Tetzel’s teachings to the people. Tetzel had been commissioned by the Pope to raise money for the renovation of St. Peter’s in Rome. As he sold indulgences or certificates of sins forgiven, Tetzel was preaching this sentence, quoted and rebuked by Luther in his 28th thesis, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” Tetzel was saying, in other words, that when the people gave their money to the church, one of their deceased loved ones would get out of purgatory.

Tetzel was selling plenary indulgences – or complete indulgences. The indulgence could not only be applied to a loved one, but to the buyer. They could literally, buy their way out of purgatory and into heaven.

This and other issues finally unglued Martin Luther and the Reformation was soon under way.

Martin Luther wrote in his 32nd thesis: “Those who believe that through letters of pardon (or these certificates of indulgence) that they are made sure of

their own salvation – [they] will be eternally damned along with their teachers.”

It is no wonder the controversy exploded.

You might say, “That’s old stuff – why raise an issue that happened five hundred years ago?”

Only six years ago, the plenary indulgences of Martin Luther’s day reached another climax when the church declared the year 2000 a special year of Jubilee. The Pope made available once again, plenary indulgences – not partial, but complete absolution or pardon through the earning of an indulgence. He opened the doors of St. Peter’s cathedral in Rome and other European cathedrals, promising that during this year – the year 2000 – that those who made pilgrimages to these sacred sites would receive a complete indulgence. Literally, all their time in purgatory would be immediately commuted and they could go straight to heaven.^{iv}

This is nothing less than selling access to God; charging fees for forgiveness.

Paul is saying, “Keep your eye on those who deviate from the teaching which you have learned.”

Now if you think I am being too hard on Catholics, just wait. I am getting to the Protestants and will do my best to offend everyone.

Not only is Paul deeply concerned over false teachers who have departed from the truth – the faith – he is deeply concerned over false teachers who misrepresent the truth and deceive the body.

Notice again Romans 16:18,

For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

They are literally, smooth talkers – “chrestologia” – they use fair, plausible speech. Literally, they are smooth and positive in their speech.

Peter added his warning when he writes,

. . . there will . . . be false teachers among you . . . Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words . . . (II Peter 2:1-3)

Paul told the Corinthians that these false teachers will talk about Jesus, but they are really preaching a different Jesus (*II Corinthians 11:4*).

This is like the false teaching of Mormonism that today, would say they have placed their faith in Jesus as their Savior.

The name is the same, but it is a different Jesus altogether – not the incarnation of the one true and living God, but one of many gods.

These false teachers, according to Paul, are slaves, not of the Lord, but of their own desires – their own belly or literally, their own appetites.

They are driven by self-interest and self-gratification; sometimes for fame, for power over their followers, always for financial gain. Many of them enjoy pretentious lifestyles, they are involved in sexual immorality as a rule rather than as an exception.^v

Paul wrote of them to the Philippian church and said,

[Their] end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. (Philippians 3:19)

The trouble is that they pretend to speak for God. They seem to speak for Christ. They seem to be interested in the gospel. However, the truth is that they are really interested only in themselves – their work; their name; their bank account; their power.

When their speech is evaluated in light of the faith, they will be introducing another gospel; a false Christ – ultimately, a false hope. Their gospel is positive, but it is pointless.

Paul warned the Colossians,

See to it that no one takes you captive through . . . empty deception . . . (Colossians 2:8)

Jude said that these false teachers are,

. . . flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage. (Jude 1:16)

This is true whether the advantage is fame, a following, self-satisfaction that they seem to be helping people, or a number of other reasons.

Televangelists are multiplying like rabbits in our generation. Many of them have a message that is empty deception.

They will tell you that all you need to do is claim your “divine lottery ticket” and you will have everything you ever imagined. Of course, the lottery tickets come by way of their ministry, so if you will send them your seed gift of faith, you will get your ticket in the mail.

Ladies and gentlemen, Jesus is not a genie. We cannot rub a lamp and expect Him to jump out and give us whatever we want.

The true gospel is not a call to self-fulfillment, even though that might sound appealing; the true gospel is a call to self-denial.

The gospel of self-fulfillment was made popular in our modern American world by Norman Vincent Peale when he introduced the power of positive thinking. He was the original modern American “chrestologia” – smooth, positive speaker.

Peale’s message was picked up by Robert Schuller, and more recently, by Joel Osteen. These men have huge ministries and attract thousands of people to their services and their writings.

Their message is fairly simple, and terribly deceptive. God wants you to be happy – your greatest problem is a low self-esteem and negative thinking. What you need to do is to elevate your mind and your self-image; put an end to your negative thinking and speaking. You need to focus on what will make you fulfilled and happy and pursue those things because God wants you to be successful and healthy and happy – His greatest goal is your success.

In Robert Schuller’s book, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, he wrote, “It is precisely at this point that classical theology has erred in its insistence that theology be ‘God-centered’ and not ‘man-centered.’ . . . If we follow God’s plan, we will feel good about ourselves and that is success.”

He wrote further that the gospel is not about being a sinner, but about a low self-image. In fact, he made the comment that “once a person believes he is an unworthy sinner, it is doubtful that he can be [saved]. How twisted is that?”

How contrary to the truth is that?!^{vi}

Christianity is no longer giving up everything for the pleasure of Christ, but getting everything for our pleasure from Christ. The goal of God is no longer His glory, but our gratification.

This is the reason Robert Tilton can tell his television audience, “Not only is worrying a sin, being poor is a sin when God promises you prosperity.” How different from the Son of Man, who did not even have a place to lay His head.^{vii}

How different this is from those who stood for Christ and were, as Hebrews recorded,

. . . destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, [living] in . . . caves and holes in the ground. (Hebrews 11:37b-38)

God's inspired record declared of these people that they were,

men of whom the world was not worthy . . . (Hebrews 11:38a)

Two thousand years ago, Paul sounded a warning! He said, "Let me interrupt this letter with an emergency message – watch out for man-centered, self-absorbed, self-exalting, sin-denying salvation, scripture-diluting, ego-flattering teaching."

Paul warned Timothy of this very thing when he said,

. . . time will come [when] men will be lovers of self . . . (II Timothy 3:1b-2a)

It is little wonder then, with this false gospel, that man cannot be condemned. Man is not really a sinner; the gospel is not really necessary.

When asked on nationwide television if someone who does not believe in Jesus Christ is going to heaven, Osteen replied, "I don't know . . . I'm going to leave that up to God."

Even when the talk show host, Larry King, persistently asked him about people who denied the deity of Christ, Osteen would respond, "I'm going to leave that up to God."

This may strike you as a positive, kind response. I believe it is a betrayal of the gospel.

Yes, we are to leave it up to God, but God has already told us what He decided.

God said it through Peter, who preached,

He [Christ] is the . . . corner stone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:11-12)

God declared it centuries earlier, through Isaiah, the prophet,

I, even I, am the Lord, and there is no Savior besides Me. (Isaiah 43:11)

The problem is not that preaching the gospel is confusing. The problem is that now, more than ever, preaching the gospel requires courage, and that seems to have gone missing.

The true gospel cannot be preached without sin and hell and condemnation and a cross and bloodshed and guilt and death.

Where are the leaders in our generation who will say with the apostle Paul,

. . . I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes . . . (Romans 1:16a)

Anything else is an empty promise.

The gospel is really bad news first, and then, when we admit our sin and depravity and guilt before God and seek to run from it into His everlasting arms, we discover there, the amazing grace of God that saved a wretch like me and like you.

Application

Now what do we do? Paul provides some very practical advice to implement today.

1. First, we are to identify false teachers.

Notice the first part of Romans 16:17 again,

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances [or traps] contrary to the teaching which you learned . . .

Find out who these people are and keep an eye on them. Watch out for them!

I can imagine the believers in Rome, after reading this, gathered together and said, "Who in our city is preaching and teaching contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ?"

We need to keep our eye on these people. The Greek word for this is "skopein," which means, "to mark; to observe". "Skopein" gives us our word, "scope". We see this word in microscope, which we use to carefully observe, and in telescope, which we use to watch from afar.

We are to put these people under the lens of scripture and carefully analyze their teaching, so that we do not get caught unaware; do not get duped.

They are smooth talking speakers . . . there is appearance without substance.^{viii}

Augustine, centuries ago, said of these false teachers, "Beware the man who abounds in eloquent nonsense."

Paul writes, "Watch out for them."

Notice Paul gives this command to the assembly! As an assembly, we are to guard the truth – and guard one another.

I do not know about you, but I need the discernment of other believers to help me see things I miss – to evaluate errant teaching I might not catch.

We need each other to guard against false teaching.

2. Secondly, not only are we to be alert to false teachers and identify them, but Paul commands us, in effect, to avoid their influence.

Note again Paul's words in the latter part of Romans 16:17,

... *turn away from them.*

We are to evaluate them, but not be influenced by them.

Lenski writes that Paul's use of the *ekklino* means to incline away from them.^{ix}

Keep up your guard; stay critical in your thinking. Do not be, as Paul writes in the latter part of Romans 16:18, among those who are deceived because of unsuspecting hearts.

Paul interrupts his letter with an emergency broadcast signal for the saints. He writes, "Let me warn you because you are my beloved friends."

Paul did not shake up the assembly because he did not care; he warned them because he deeply cared.

Steve Farrar, who spoke at our church this past summer, wrote in his book, *Standing Tall*, about a family who had taken shelter in the basement as a severe storm passed over their town. The radio warned that a tornado had been spotted. When the storm had passed, the father opened the front door to look at the damage. A downed power line was emitting a shower of sparks in the street in front of their home. Before the father realized what was happening, his five year old daughter had run near the edge of the lawn, heading for that sparkling wire in the street.

"Laurie, stop!" he yelled.

Laurie just kept going.

"Laurie, STOP!"

Laurie ran right for the enticing cable.

"Stop NOW, Laurie!" he screamed as he ran after her.

But Laurie reached the cable first and grabbed it, and was instantly killed.

It looked like fun; it seemed like something good to experience, but it was not only fatal, it was deathly dangerous.

In this text, Paul effectively tells the church in Rome that they have at least two needs. They have:

1. A need for discernment.

Paul basically tells the church to wise up! Look around; be aware; think critically; do not believe everything you hear! Just because it is positive, smooth, pleasant, and makes you feel important, does not mean it might not be deadly.

2. A need for humility.

Paul tells the church to not only wise up, but to listen up!

Perhaps you are thinking, "I'll never get caught up in false teaching – I can spot heresy at two hundred yards."

Your challenge may have nothing to do with false teachers – it may have everything to do with false living. And you are being warned.

Maybe God, at this very moment, through this passage of scripture, is interrupting your life with a very important announcement – with a warning; with a challenge.

Take the warning seriously. This interruption with an emergency signal could be the difference between life and death.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/15/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ John MacArthur, *Romans: Volume 2* (Moody Press, 1994), p. 372.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ James Boice, *Romans: Volume 4* (Baker, 1995), p. 1929.

^{iv} David J. Engelsma, "A.D. 2000: Year of Jubilee," http://www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet_79.html.

^v MacArthur, *Romans*, p. 374.

^{vi} John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe* (Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 4.

^{vii} Boice, p. 1931.

^{viii} Sam Gordon, *Fighting Truth Decay* (Ambassador, 2002), p. 81.

^{ix} R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Romans* (Augsburg Publishing, 1936), p. 916.