

## Prayer

Thank You, great and merciful Lord God; for You have broken the power of evil before the eyes of the whole world! May we always rejoice in the power of the Cross of Jesus Christ, in His death upon the Cross, in His removal from the Cross to the tomb, and in His departure from the tomb in glorious life-affirming victory! All praise be to You great and mighty God of Miracles and Salvation! AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Ask the Holy Spirit to come on you in fire and like a dove; ask Him to give you His gifts*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray this week about political parties. Pray about the financing of parties in your country, and if it is in the best interests of all.*
- *Give thanks for the grace of God shown to you in everyday life*
- *Pray for the leadership of major world institutions and agencies*

## Meditation

Lord God Almighty:

Grant us days of joy;  
    when we are happy with life and content in You  
Grant us days of mercy;  
    when our hearts go out to all who need Your love;  
Grant us days of faithfulness;  
    when we will not let other people down;  
Grant us days of grace;  
    when we look with favour on those around us;  
Grant us days of kindness;  
    when our actions speak louder than our words;  
Grant us days of patience;  
    when we know we can trust You, come what may;  
Grant us days of blessing;  
    when we are a help to others, and they to us;  
Grant us days of peace;  
    when all is well with us, and we may rest in You;

Lord God Almighty;

Grant us knowledge of true godliness, so that we live it, every day.

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## Bible Study - Romans 16:17-27

<sup>17</sup> I urge you, dear friends, to watch out for those who cause dissensions and trouble, contrary to the Gospel principles you were taught. Avoid them. <sup>18</sup> For such people do not serve our Lord who is the Christ. They serve their own greedy agendas, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the innocent. <sup>19</sup> For although your obedience is known by everyone, so much so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good and open about what is evil. <sup>20</sup> The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy, my fellow-worker, greets you; as do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my fellow-countrymen. <sup>22</sup> I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord. <sup>23</sup> Gaius, host to me and to the whole church here, greets you. Erastus, the city clerk of works, and our brother Quartus, send you greetings. (<sup>24</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you; Amen.)

<sup>25</sup> Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages past <sup>26</sup> but is now revealed, and is made known to all the Gentiles through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the everlasting God for them to obey by means of faith; <sup>27</sup> to God who alone is wise, be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

## Thought for the day

### **Text**

#### Romans 16:17

<sup>17</sup> *I urge you, dear friends, to watch out for those who cause dissensions and trouble, contrary to the Gospel principles you were taught. Avoid them.*

### **Thought**

There are many texts within the Bible that are a delight to read and give us great spiritual nourishment. However, the advice in this text is straightforward but rather negative; avoid dissention and wrong teaching!

In fact, to keep this advice could be a good source of spiritual nourishment. Too many have become gullible and believe anything they hear from a preacher or a leader. But what the Bible tells us to be discerning about all things, to weigh them up according to God's Word, and keep focussed on Christ. Part of this means avoiding dissention and wrong teaching.

## Review

We have finally reached the end of Paul's letter to the Romans! After the long list of greetings in the previous verses, there are three simple parts to this final ending. Firstly, he gave a blunt warning against false teaching. Secondly, he sent greetings to the church at Rome from those who were with him as the letter was written, including some fascinating references including one from Tertius, the man to whom Paul dictated the letter (see 16:22). Thirdly, he concluded the letter with a benediction giving glory to God (16:25-27). This benediction is a mystery, and different from Paul's usual style in concluding letters; there is a long history of debate going back to the second century AD concerning whether this was really written by Paul. Nevertheless, it is a fascinating conclusion to a letter that is one of the most influential ever written.

It is too easy to become caught up in the intrigue of some of the scholarly debates about the mysteries surrounding parts of this passage (though we will look at them later). Why should Paul write a stern warning at the end of a letter which in almost all other respects is positive (except perhaps for ch.13), and which aims to set out the Gospel of Christ? Then, why does this blessing appear; 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you'; and in each ancient document at our disposal they appear either in verse 20 or verse 24, but not in both places and not in both (I have included them as verse 24 otherwise we would not have a verse 24!)? Lastly, were the last three verses truly written by Paul, or as some suggest, by someone else? There is a long standing theory that these were added by a heretical leader called Marcion who was keen on preaching God's Word as a 'revelation of mysteries' (see 16:25,26) and had an unhelpful and well-documented habit of re-writing some of Paul's letters to include his own opinions?

These are indeed interesting leads, but after many centuries of discussion and debate, the church has accepted that the text we have is God's Word, so we will treat it as such. With this in mind, the warnings given by Paul in verses 17 to 20 are best read as a general caution to all Christians. Paul was always concerned to preserve the apostolic teaching of the Gospel, which depends on our acceptance of the sacredness of Scripture. Throughout the history of the church, some have departed from this historical heritage, both inside and outside the established churches. Paul's advice was absolute; such people 'do not serve our Lord who is the Christ' (16:18) because they act according to their own opinions and attempt to sway some of God's people away from the Gospel by force of intellect and strength of character. I am reminded of what was said to me by a notable academic when I trained for Christian ministry; 'there will always be scoundrels, but a scoundrel with a PhD is a danger to the church and all humanity'.

Paul had confidence in the 'Gospel principles' (16:17) which the Roman church was built upon. Perhaps this was due to the apostles Andronicus and Junia (see 16:7) who had earlier gone to Rome; but however the truth of the Gospel was established, it meant that 'the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.' (16:19). It remains true for all God's people that the historic truth of the received Gospel is the only guarantee of our future and our victory over evil. This is surely a reason for the greatest of thanks to God.

Finally, Paul speaks boldly in the final benediction of the fact that God establishes His church according to the Gospel and the 'preaching of Jesus Christ' (16:25). Furthermore, this is not something which is dependent upon us, but on God's revelation of Himself 'through the prophetic Scriptures' (16:26). The

Gospel does not depend upon our interpretation, but on our obedience to the God who has been active throughout history in His own work to bring all people and creation back to Himself. This, surely, is the general theme of the whole of Romans, and this benediction is a good reflection of it.

### ***Going Deeper***

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Paul's warnings
- Paul's greetings
- The benediction

## Going Deeper

We will now look at each of the three sections of this passage in turn and address some of the features mentioned in the review. If you were to read a scholarly commentary, you would find a great deal of contention about some of the issues raised, but there is no need for us to be carried away by problems, because there is plenty of godly truth to be found in the text.

### ***The warning***

Despite the fact that most of the letter to the Romans was written positively about the meaning of the Gospel and what it means in terms of practical Christian living, Paul knew from his experience that Satan was capable of getting into the church and creating trouble. He had spent his life founding churches such as that at Corinth, only to be placed in a position in later years where he had to write later on to counter speculation, and also the teaching of people who had a personal agenda or an understanding of God and the work of Christ which was far removed from that of the teaching and experience of the disciples and the early apostles, including himself. A read through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, or Colossians or Philippians, for example, will show this clearly. He had little regard for such dissent from classical Christian faith, and used words about such teachers which implied their motives were greed and personal gratuity (16:18).

It is no wonder that Paul adds to the end of this great letter a general warning, and his advice is classic Christian teaching. He tells God's people to hold firm to the historic truth of the Gospel and avoid all who lead people away from this standard. In the midst of this advice, Paul talks of those who by 'smooth talk and flattery deceive the hearts of the innocent.' We could assume that there will always be Christian people who are 'innocent', and in some places within the Bible, 'innocence' is regarded almost as a virtue. However, what was in Paul's mind was the great need for God's people to 'grow up' in faith and not remain theologically underdeveloped. In Romans 12:1f. Paul called for God's people to grow in faith and be 'renewed' in their minds. Paul knew that such renewal by the power of the Holy Spirit was available for all people. The disciples were not chosen by the Lord because they were intelligent or extraordinary people; they had a little faith (Matt 8:26), and were made into amazing people by God. The same can be true of all who place their trust in Him today. We are not all called to be theologians, but we are called to use our intelligence to know the difference between the genuine Gospel of Christ and the imitations of it used by people who try to lead God's people astray.

This is why God's people need to read the Word and pray; and be armed against Satan's temptations to build religions rather than the Kingdom of God through Christ (16:20).

### ***Greetings***

With Paul at the time of writing the letter were Timothy, Paul's long time companion and chosen 'heir' in leadership. Paul's letters to Timothy testify to the close relationship between these two, which began when Paul met the young Timothy in Derbe, near Lystra (Acts 16:1). We know little about Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, the other three people mentioned (16:21).

The passage becomes more interesting when we hear of Tertius, the man responsible for writing this great letter to the Romans. It is obvious from other letters of Paul that he wrote by dictation (see Galatians 6:11), nowhere else do we get to know the name of the person who wrote. It is suggested, and quite probable that after writing verse 22, Tertius handed the pen over to Paul to complete the letter. Something similar happened at the end of 2 Thessalonians (2 Thess 3:17). To write the last few sentences of a letter in his own handwriting would be like a 'signature' of authenticity, verifying that the contents of the letter were genuine.

Of the remaining names in verse 23, two are interesting. It is reckoned that 'Gaius' is the same person as the man named as 'Titius Justus' in Acts 18:7. In the Acts story, Paul was given refuge in this man's house after being rejected by the local synagogue in Corinth, and he appears in 1 Cor. 1:14, named as 'Gaius' and one of the first converts in Corinth. Clearly, Paul was a guest at the house of Gaius Titus Justus when

writing the letter to the Romans, and his name is therefore included in the list of greetings (though we need all three references to ensure that this is the one and same person we are talking about!)

The other interesting name is Erastus (16:23) who is designated as a 'clerk of works' in this text. If you read other translations of Romans, you will find that he is sometimes called 'city treasurer' or 'commissioner of works'. So who was this convert to Christianity? At the time of the writing of Romans (perhaps in the late 50's AD) he was a city employee involved in public works, and the word which describes him in Greek ('oikonomos') gives us no reason to say any more. However, a group of archaeologists uncovered a pavement in Corinth in 1929 which has an inscription which implies that one 'Erastus' of high public office, had a pavement laid at his own expense and for the good of the people of the city, around 30 to 40 years later! Because of this finding, it is reckoned that Erastus the Christian rose through the ranks of public service professions in Corinth and became a wealthy and influential man. Paul certainly lived with people blessed by the Lord not only in their faith, but in their public life as well!

### ***The Benediction***

The interesting part of the benediction is the way that Paul talks of the Gospel as a 'mystery ... kept secret'. Paul's language here is similar to that used in Colossians (Col 1:27f.) where Paul was attempting to argue against heretics who tried to make Christianity sound like a 'mystery' religion, popular in the Roman Empire of those days in which people progressed through the ranks of the religion by being told different degrees of 'mystery' which would lead them ultimately to the 'truth'.

Paul would have none of this, which is why he spoke of the mystery as having been 'revealed'. Some people have thought this passage very strange because Paul talks about a mystery kept secret for 'long ages' (16:25) and presumably revealed in Christ Jesus, but what he says is this 'but is now revealed ... made known to the Gentiles through the prophetic Scriptures ...' The problem is this. How can the Gospel be a mystery revealed in Christ Jesus, when it was available previously through the prophets?

If you think about this from a Biblical perspective, however, and also with some knowledge of the words of Jesus, then the answer is obvious. Jesus made it clear that the prophets were essential to an understanding of the Old Testament Scripture (e.g. Matt 13:14f.) etc. which revealed God's eternal purposes for the Messiah and the salvation of the world. Indeed, it was essential to Jesus' ministry that He explain to His own people that Moses was not final arbiter of God's law as had been assumed, but it was the prophets who explained God's purposes in the law and in the rest of Scripture. Paul, as is clear in this passage, clearly understood this aspect of Jesus' teaching. Also, it was the Old Testament prophets who realised that God's purposes would be fulfilled throughout the whole world (not just the Jewish nation, but including the Gentiles) by the coming of the Messiah. Unfortunately, it is something that is not fully understood to this day.

Paul finishes by giving glory to God. No other ending is fitting for such a work of power and theological significance.

## Application

Discord and disharmony is the enemy of God's people, the church, and Satan will use every means to create unhappiness and division amongst God's people to this very day. In each of Paul's letters there are words of warning which are direct and need to be heard at least as much as the more famous 'nicer' parts, such as 1 Corinthians 13, or Romans 8 or 12 for example. Paul's warnings in each of his letters are highly direct and expose a great deal of false religious practice in the life of the church today, as well as his own day. It is quite possible that Paul was aware his letters would be kept and preserved in some form, and he may well have understood that what he wrote would have a prophetic role in the church, with each part of what he said having some value that God would use for future generations. In almost every warning of Paul's, he cautions God's people to beware those who teach anything other than the historic truth of the work of Jesus Christ and the Gospel as passed on by the disciples to the early church. Our task today is not to 'get back' to this original form of Christianity, but to receive the truth that has been passed on to us and give it to others who will follow.

Lastly, it is worth noting how Paul concludes his letter with a blessing from the Lord. This practice asks us to consider whether we honour God sufficiently within our speech, manner, conduct and writing to each other today. There are simple ways of doing this, but many of our conversations, emails, letters and other forms of communication, even within the church, make little effort to give thanks to God or offer blessing. Some have abandoned all honour of God except what is done formally on Sundays! Surely there has to be a way in which we give glory to God more naturally and honestly in the midst of the everyday features of life, whether in writing of emails and letters, or in speaking or telephone conversations. After all, we do owe our whole life and being to God!

## Questions (for use in groups)

1. What should the church be warned about today? Is there anything within Paul's words in this passage which are particularly important?
2. How relevant is it to have 'important' people in the life of the church today, and what contribution can they make to the Gospel?
3. Discuss things that Christians can do to give blessing to each other and honour God in everyday life.

## Discipleship

### Discipleship issue in this text

- *Care in discerning the truth about God's Word and the Gospel*
- *The victory of Christ*
- *God salvation plan for all history*

### Personal comment:

*The end of Paul's letter to the Romans brings a feeling of having studied a great work. There is so much within this letter, it bears reading over and over again. I have studied this reading many times, but I have never plumbed its depths; I feel I am scratching at its surface. However, unless I do this I know I will never understand the Gospel, and I am drawn back to it time and time again.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If you were asked to write down what you regarded as the essential Christian faith passed on through the ages, what would you write? Perhaps this is a task that you could do over a week, read it through and assess your own response.*
- *Another way of assessing what you have considered would be to talk about it to someone else, and another important way of looking at this would be to pray.*

## Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ. You hold the secrets of the whole world, and You have revealed them to us through Your life and death. We look for the physical secrets of the world, its artistic richness, and the psychological complexity of your creation; but You have revealed yourself to us spiritually by love; and we are content with this amazing revelation! Thank You Lord God; AMEN

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