

Real gospel people

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 16. And we've reached now this last chapter of this extraordinary letter of Paul to that infant church there in Rome, in the capital of the then world empire.

So we're going to read from verse 1 through to verse 23, or verse 24. You'll see which doesn't exist there. If you want to know why that is, ask me afterwards.

Some manuscripts include an extra version there of the second half of verse 20, but that's why there's no number 24, just in case that's worrying you. So relax, be at peace, and concentrate on what actually is there.

Romans 16, verse 1. I commend to you, says Paul to the church in Rome, I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Kentria, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you.

For she has been a patron of many, and of myself as well. Greet Prissa and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risk their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.

[1 : 23] Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Eponetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.

Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family, or I think better here, as the NIV translates, those who belong to the household, or the house of Aristobulus.

Greet my kinsmen Herodian. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the household, or to the house of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphena and Tryphosa.

Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother also, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncretus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobus, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them.

[2 : 37] Greet Philogulus, Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympus, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the churches of Christ greet you. I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions, and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.

Avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. And by smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the hearts of the naive.

For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you. But I want you to be wise as to what is good, and innocent as to what is evil.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Timothy, my fellow worker, greet you.

[3 : 40] So Delucius, and Jason, and Suspiter, my kinsman. I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you.

Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you. Amen. May God bless to us this his word.

Well, do turn with me, if you would, to that passage that we read together, Romans chapter 16, page 950, if you have a visitor's Bible. A passage all about real gospel people.

As we've seen in these last few weeks, Paul wrote this letter to a good church, the church in Rome. It tells us in chapter 15, verse 14, that they were full of goodness, full of knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

It was a good church. But, Paul goes on to say that he has written to them quite boldly on some things. Nevertheless, why is that?

[4 : 49] Well, because even a good church needs reminding all the time that they need more than just the right gospel precepts in their minds. They need real gospel passion in their hearts.

They need to remember to share the ministry that they do share in, the privilege of true worship, the worship that God delights in. That is, the priestly service, as Paul calls it, of bringing people to God, bringing outsiders to God who have come to know him through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And therefore, because we share that privilege with the apostles, we share also the great priority of the apostles, that of witness, of ongoing mission to the whole world.

And he wants to tell the church here in Rome that they share in that real gospel partnership. And we saw last time in verses 25 to 33, the last part of chapter 15, that that means two things, according to Paul.

It means sharing in material provision for the church in all the world, and also in mutual prayer. Provision and prayer, both for the people of the gospel and also for the ongoing progress of the gospel.

[6 : 06] So the Greek churches were sending money to the persecuted saints in Jerusalem. And the Roman church, says Paul, were to give their money to preserve Paul's ongoing journey to Rome and then on to Spain with the gospel.

And now in these last verses of the epistle, in chapter 16, Paul presses this real gospel partnership home in a very personal and vivid way. And it's personal.

Because real gospel partnership cannot happen without real, live gospel people. And that's the calling of every single believer in Christ.

We're bound together in Christ in a partnership with God's people for Christ. I wonder if you noticed when we read how often that phrase keeps popping up in these verses, in Christ and in the Lord.

I counted at least ten times, maybe there are more, verse 2, welcome Phoebe in the Lord. Verse 3, they're workers in Christ Jesus.

[7 : 10] Workers in the Lord. Again and again all the way through this passage. True gospel people are fellow workers in Christ for the Lord and in the Lord.

Now Paul records more personal greetings here in this chapter than he does in all of his other letters put together. Now probably that's because he hasn't yet been to the church in Rome in person so he doesn't know them all and it's natural for him to pick out those that he does know and perhaps those that he knows of to make some connection with the church in Rome.

It's a bit like we might do if you hear that somebody's going to a church in another place where you know some people you say, oh give our love to so and so. We know them. But I think there's more to it than that here.

You'll notice that Paul is very careful to specifically greet several different groups of people. There are probably about five house churches at least that are referred to here.

The various congregations that made up the Christian community in Rome. It's very obvious in verse 5 the church the congregation we're told that met in Prisca and Aquila's house. But it's probably there also in verses 10 and 11 as I said the household of Aristobulus the household of Narcissus and probably also in verses 14 and 15 where he mentions the brothers who are with them the saints who are with them.

[8 : 34] Now these are probably different groups meeting together in house churches and as we know from reading chapter 14 and 15 it's very likely there may have been some tensions between these groups or people in these groups.

Some of them perhaps with foundation some of them without foundation. Therefore it was important when Paul was writing that he made clear to all the saints who read the letter whom he knew to be true gospel people so that they would welcome one another so that they would partner with one another in the Lord as well as at the same time to warn them the various marks of those who are not true gospel people the kind that he tells us in verse 17 that they're to watch out for.

Now that's vital isn't it in real Christian ministry and real Christian mission if it's to be possible. We've got to be able to know the difference between real gospel people and false gospel wreckers.

There's no room for naivety in that is there? Jesus himself is very plain just read Matthew chapter 10 verse 11 and following where Jesus instructs his followers to greet warmly and to partner with those who are worthy co-workers in the gospel but likewise just as clearly he says you're to shake the dust from your feet.

On those who are not true gospel people. You can't work with them. That's why Paul here you see is laying out his own personal recommendation references if you like to commend these people that he knows truly are in the Lord.

[10 : 10] And he does it in that very personal way and in doing so he illustrates for us the kind of qualities that do mark out true gospel people. And he's encouraging the Roman church but he's encouraging every church to be themselves just that kind of true gospel people.

And we will be true gospel people Paul tells us if we recognize and welcome true gospel workers and if we recognize and watch out for false gospel wreckers.

So first then how do we recognize and welcome true gospel workers? Well verses 1-16 and verses 21-23 we see here how Paul warmly commends the characteristics of real true gospel people.

And therefore he shows us the kind of qualities that he affirms and that he values in the church. And above all they are workers. True gospel people will always be true gospel workers.

Workers together in the Lord and for the Lord. Look at how frequently through this passage Paul uses that word work or workers. So verse 3 Prisca and Aquila fellow workers in Christ Jesus.

[11 : 27] Verse 9 Urbanus a fellow worker in Christ. Verse 21 again Timothy my fellow worker. Or verse 6 there's Mary who worked hard for you.

And the same in verse 12 Persis working hard and so on. All the way through this passage working. Now what marks out all of these true gospel people that Paul is endorsing is that they are all true gospel workers.

Now probably very few of them if indeed any of them were what we would call workers in full time ministry who are supported by the church. But clearly they are all people who are focused totally on working for the gospel of the kingdom in every way possible in every way open to them.

And indeed that kingdom work that Paul is speaking about clearly in this passage clearly has many many different sides to it. And everybody is contributing their part to that work.

It's just an example of what Paul wrote in chapter 12. Do you remember back in chapter 12 verse 5 and 6 where he says though we are many we are one body in Christ and individually members of one another.

[12 : 41] Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us let us use them. And he speaks about all the many different gifts that God has given. Well let's just note then in this passage some of the specific aspects of this hard work that marks out real gospel people as workers.

First of all we notice that real gospel workers use their wealth for the Lord. Phoebe is the first name in verse 1. We've just had a little baby Phoebe joining our fellowship here.

What a name she's got to live up to in this example here. This Phoebe we're told was a servant of the church at Kentria near Corinth. Some versions translate that word as deacon.

A deacon of the church. It may be that she did have a clear office in the church. Or it may be that Paul is just simply flagging up that she was a willing servant of the gospel. Anyway whatever that may be it was very likely she was the one who was bearing this letter to the church in Rome.

So obviously she was a trusted woman a competent woman and probably she was somebody who had business interests of her own that caused her to travel to Rome. It's very unlikely that she was being supported or paid by the church because Paul says actually it was the other way around.

[13 : 58] He says she's been the patron of many including Paul himself. That word really means that she was very likely a significant benefactor in the service of the gospel.

So she was very probably an example of one of those fine Christians in business who put their business opportunities and their travel and their wealth fully in the service of the gospel.

As have others who were better off financially as it seems to be here putting their houses at the service of the church. Prissa and Aquila and these others we mentioned. Gaius. Gaius hosting Paul and the whole church it seems.

The real gospel people it's natural for them and it's joyful for them to use their wealth to use all their worldly opportunities to work for the gospel as fellow workers in the Lord.

That might be something as simple as having a spacious house and a garden and using it for the activities and outreach of the church. We were recently with some people we know who have a large garden and indeed a tennis court and a swimming pool.

[15 : 05] But they use it constantly for the service of the church. Every youth group in the area, every alpha supper in the area, everything like that uses their garden for the sake of the gospel and they say this has been given to us to use for the Lord.

But it's more than that too isn't it? Paul's own ministry would have been impossible without the significant funding of patrons like Phoebe and others. And that's how it's always been.

I'll never forget Dick Lucas once saying to me some years ago in his inimitable way, yes dear brother he said, the widow's might, though pleasing to God, will not run the church. And isn't that true?

The church needs money. And all the way through history there have been people, particularly in some cases wealthy patrons who have done an enormous amount for the sake of the gospel.

Read the biographies of people like John Newton or John Wesley and many others, you'll find that there were those who funded their ministries and made possible enormous things that would never otherwise have happened.

[16 : 09] Fifty years ago here in Scotland, it was the patronage of two wealthy American ladies that made possible the funding of the work of William Still and my father and his brother and others by providing them with secretaries, providing them with tape recording equipment and printing presses when such things were unheard of in churches, so that gospel work could be multiplied, so that ministry could be sent around the country and around the world.

They funded and made possible the Creef Ministers Conference, which for some 30 or 40 years has encouraged Christian ministers in this country. Similarly, I worked in London for the Proclamation Trust, and indeed, in the finding of our own Cornhill Scotland here.

These things simply would not be there, were it not that some real gospel people were real gospel workers with their wealth that God had given them for the Lord.

They made these things possible. Real gospel workers use their wealth for the Lord, and where people have been given much, they see that this is given not to them, but for them to use for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, though, real gospel workers use also their wisdom for the Lord. Priscilla and Aquila, not only opened their home for the church's people, but they had a great ministry of training and encouraging many that was so widely felt that Paul says in verse 4, all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks for them, along with Paul himself.

[17 : 43] It seems that here were another couple who were used greatly wherever they went. In Acts 18, you'll see that Paul met them in Corinth, where they hosted him, and where he was greatly blessed by their fellowship.

It tells about how they went on to instruct and train, using their wisdom to help Apollos, another great gospel teacher, and help him become more effective in his ministry. 1 Corinthians 16 tells us that they went on from there to Ephesus, where they hosted a church in their house there.

And no doubt there, they also had a wide-ranging ministry. So clearly, they were the kind of people who used every opportunity that God sent them, wherever they were, to use both their money and their minds for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some years ago, I met an American man who worked for one of the great big oil companies, and as a result, he moved all over the world, and wherever he went, he was able to use it for extraordinary gospel witness.

So he did a spell in Delhi, and he lived in an enormous house surrounded by diplomats and government ministers and business people and so on. But he opened that house for Bible studies for all kinds of people.

[18 : 53] And he would say it would make him laugh, that here he would have a Bible study at seven in the morning for a whole group of Dalits, the very lowest caste and despised of the Indian culture.

And as they were going out of one door, in would be coming the ambassador to some country and the president of some great oil company. And he'd be having a Bible study with them as well and seeking to evangelize them.

And he used that opportunity, the same with many other places that he was stationed for exactly that kind of thing. When I was in London, he used to get calls from all over the world and he would never quite know where he was going to pop up next.

Once he phoned up and said, I'm phoning from Rio. I've been here for about six months and the pastor in my church here is a great guy but he really needs some help and training so I wondered if I could bring him to your younger ministers conference.

And so he did. He hopped on a plane with him, paid for his ticket, came along to the conference, stayed with him and took him away again. To mentor this young pastor, to encourage him, to use his wisdom, yes, and also his means and his substance to disciple and to encourage some of the Lord's people.

[20 : 02] He was a modern day Aquila, I suppose. It doesn't have to be jet-setting, of course. Most of us don't have that lifestyle. But it just takes a mindset. Wherever you work, wherever you study, there will be ways, won't there, of sharing your life with others for the sake of the gospel.

Meeting up with one or two colleagues where you work for prayer or support. Meeting up with others in a Christian union group in your college or in your school or university. Real gospel people always are looking for ways that they can share what wisdom they have and what they've been given, what they've been taught.

To share what they know of the Lord with others for the sake of Christ. Of course, that's not always easy. So we need to note also a third thing here that real gospel people always show courageous witness for Christ.

Aquila and Priscilla risked their necks for Paul, we're told. Look at verse 7. Andronicus and Junia, they were fellow prisoners with Paul for the gospel, went to prison with him.

It's interesting, if you read the commentaries, you'll see that what the scholars obsess with in verse 7 is whether Junia really was Junia or whether she was a he, Junius. Almost certainly is Junia, female by the way.

[21 : 23] And also whether they were well known to the apostles, as our version says, or well known among the apostles as some others. In other words, were they actually apostles? Pages and pages about all that sort of thing.

Well, if they were apostles, then Paul's clearly not using the word in the specific sense of the 12 plus Paul. He's using it in a much more general sense that he sometimes does, such as in 2 Corinthians 8 verse 23, meaning, I suppose, missionary messengers.

But that's not what Paul's interested about this couple. What interests Paul and what Paul cares about isn't linguistic nitpicking. What interests Paul is that these beloved fellow workers were people he could depend on with his life.

That they were courageous witnesses who would stand with him, even if it meant going to prison, even if it meant risking their own very lives. real gospel people, real gospel workers, stand with their brethren when they're suffering for the truth.

And that means a lot. Because when courage is required, the fact is, friends, that many, alas, will fade away and disappear. We know that was true for Paul.

[22 : 35] Read 2 Timothy chapter 4. He tells us there that when he became a focus of opprobrium, when he was in trouble with the authorities, no one came to stand by me, he said.

All deserted me. Even some of those who had hitherto been close colleagues in ministry, they fled away. And it's a hard place to be when you're a servant of the gospel.

When others are distancing themselves, when others are saying things, oh, they're extremists, they're hardliners. We don't want to be seen associating with people like that. Well, friends, some of us are discovering today in Scotland exactly what that means.

And you discover in that situation, you discover who real gospel brothers and sisters are. They're the ones who will risk their necks with you and for you. They're the ones who will stand with you regardless in courageous witness for Christ.

That's why I think Paul singles out these two couples, particularly in a detailed way in all this great list. he's showing that these are people who are worthy of respect, who are worthy of leadership in the church.

[23 : 46] They are real gospel workers that you can trust, especially when times are tough and when courage among Christians seems to be in short supply. Real gospel people are courageous witnesses.

Fourth, notice that real gospel people are marked by a fellowship where women are hard at work for the Lord. Do you notice how many of these names that we read here are women? It's not just Phoebe, the servant-hearted patron.

It's not just Prissa or Priscilla and Junia who are trusted and courageous fellow workers with Paul. There's Mary, verse 6, a hard worker for the church.

I don't know, maybe that refers to prayer perhaps. It sounds rather like Epaphras in Colossians 4 who's always laboring on the church's behalf. Perhaps it was, no, that it was many other things too.

Verse 12 tells us of another gaggle of women who are workers in the Lord, Tryphena and Tryphosa. I know they sound like a rather formidable pair to me. Tryphena and Tryphosa.

[24 : 50] And the beloved Persis, that's another lady, another worker who works hard, notice. Interestingly in this list it's all women who are told work hard for the Lord.

And these women no doubt were working hard in all kinds of different ways. And much of it, no doubt, was in a specifically feminine and domestic way.

Giving a touch that's so necessary. And such a blessing in itself in the church. Look at how Paul makes that point so appreciatively and so definitely in verse 13 where he talks about the mother of Rufus.

She's been a mother to me as well, says Paul. Now if that Rufus is the same Rufus that Mark mentions in Mark 15, then this woman is the wife of Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of our Lord Jesus.

And here she is, lavishing motherly care on the apostle of Christ, Paul himself. And Paul found it a huge blessing. It's sometimes said, you know, that Paul the apostle was a misogynist, that he was anti-women.

[25 : 54] Well, that's evident nonsense even just from reading these few verses here, isn't it? Of course, Paul is clear in many places about the God ordained ordering of leadership and headship both in the home and in the church.

So is the whole Bible. But he's equally clear that both men and women together are and must be fellow workers in the Lord. And a church with real gospel workers will be marked by women hard at work for the Lord.

Of course, the problem is in many churches today, you'll find that it's marked only by women and only by women doing any work at all for the Lord. That's sadly because so often women have been pushed into the roles that men should have been shouldering with the result that men then take a back seat and then men disappear altogether.

That's been disastrous in so many churches in our land today. And no, don't make women into men. Let them be women. Women workers for the Lord. Don't despise the wonderfully feminine gifts that only women can bring to the church.

The mothering of somebody in ministry like Paul or a young person in ministry. I'm so thankful to God for one or two such women. When I was a student in Aberdeen, women in the church there who were mothers to me.

[27 : 14] And many others are thankful in just that way. So don't dare anybody disparage that motherly ministry. As though somehow that's just inferior, that second rate, as different to being some kind of upfront preaching ministry.

No, not according to Paul. And don't hold back, by the way, if you're the mothering type. Fulfill your ministry. Be a mother to some of the young students, some of the young men in the congregation here.

To young mothers who are trackled to death with their own babies and kids and needing your support and encouragement, somebody more experienced. Or together with your husband, like Priscilla and Aquila, opening your homes to be parents, surrogate parents to those who need it, who are far from home, who need the warmth and the love of a family and friends.

Or just the sensitive listening ear that's so natural to most women and seems to be so foreign to most men. The listening ear that enables you to pick up on somebody in need.

It enables you to get alongside someone, engage with them, help them, share your life with them. Whatever their age or whatever your age or their situation or yours. Real gospel work needs real gospel women.

[28 : 32] Eager co-workers, glad, eager to be working as women. Not trying to be men. What a blessing to Paul that he had so many that he could call fellow workers in Christ.

And what a blessing to any church when that's so. Finally, notice how real gospel workers are marked by real warmth in the Lord. These verses give us such evidence, don't they, of the blessed ties that do bind our hearts in Jesus' love among real gospel people.

Several of Paul's letters echo what he says here in verse 16 about greeting one another with a holy kiss. Peter calls it in 1 Peter 5 a kiss of love. If you're new to Glasgow, by the way, don't get confused.

That's very different from a Glasgow kiss. It's a great deal more affectionate than that. But as somebody has said, a bit less affectionate than a French kiss, somewhere between the two.

It's just the warmth of real greeting. It's the warmth of real family, isn't it? Not effusive, not necessarily. Of course not. Although there are times when it's right to greet somebody or perhaps to part with somebody with a real hug, a big bear hug.

[29 : 43] It doesn't have to be effusive. But it's just the very opposite of the cold formality, the sort of formalized distance that's so typical of dead religion.

For we've all been to church services, haven't we, where it's like sitting in the doctor's surgery. Everything's cold and formal. Everyone's just avoiding each other's gaze and in a little bubble of their own.

No, says Paul, it's not that. We're family within our church and indeed beyond our church with all true gospel people. All the churches of Asia, he says, greet this Roman church with the same warmth.

And Phoebe, he says, must also expect a welcome worthy of the saints, worthy of her and worthy of them. There can be no isolationism or coldness among real gospel people.

We recognize that we're fellow workers in the Lord, wherever we come from. And the visible warmth between us is evidence of that. That we're family, that we're brothers and sisters.

[30 : 49] That we really love and care for one another. I was so encouraged this week when somebody in the congregation came to see me to tell me that he'd been meeting up quietly in the background with a friend who had been far from the Lord and far from church for some time.

He was seeking to restore him in a spirit of gentleness, as Galatians 6 puts it. Showing the warmth of a brother. Showing the real family welcome that's worthy of the saints.

But he was telling me about several other young men that he was meeting up with in recent years in a similar way. And what an encouragement that was to me to know that real hard work of a fellow worker in the Lord going on in the fellowship here.

And it struck me as I was reading Paul's words here of his great appreciation of these gospel workers, just how much I thank God constantly for so many of you fellow workers who are doing these things.

And if Paul's so open in his thanks and encouragement of them, then, well, I should be likewise, shouldn't I? Indeed, we all should be to one another perhaps much more than we are. I came across these words quoted in my father's Bible notes this week, which I think are worth thinking about.

[31 : 57] Listen, don't keep the alabaster boxes of your love and tenderness sealed up until your friends are dead. Fill their lives with sweetness. Speak approving, cheerful words while their heart can be thrilled and made happier by them.

The kind things you mean to say when they're gone, say before they go. The flowers you mean to send for their coffins, send to brighten their hours before they leave them. If my friends have alabaster boxes laid away full of fragrant perfumes of sympathy and affection which they intend to break over my dead body, I would rather they bring them out in my weary and troubled hours and open them that I might be cheered and refreshed by them.

I'd rather have a plain coffin without a flower or a funeral without a eulogy than a life without the sweetness of love and sympathy. Let us learn to anoint our friends beforehand for their burial.

Postmortem kindness doesn't cheer the burdened spirit. Flowers on the coffin cast no fragrance backward over the weary way. Well, real gospel people do that.

There's warmth between them. They recognize and welcome with thanksgiving other real gospel workers whose wealth and wisdom is harnessed in Christ's service, whose witness is courageous, whose women are serving gladly.

[33 : 18] And where warmth and real family is evident in the reality of that brotherly love. Let's not be afraid to encourage one another to be real gospel workers like that, to thank those who are and to honor them.

There must be warmth among real gospel people. But, of course, that warmth that Paul speaks of so much in verse 16 isn't something that's fuzzy and undiscerning.

Because Paul is ever the realist and he doesn't stop. He goes on to verse 17. And though he wants us to welcome and recognize real gospel workers, he's also very clear that the church is to recognize and watch out for false gospel records.

And that's what verses 17 to 20 make very clear. And we can't ignore these verses either, can we? There will always be those, Paul warns in verse 17, who will work against the warm and harmonious partnership described in this chapter.

Divisive people, he calls them, who create obstacles to real and effective gospel partnership because, notice, because they deviate, he says, from the doctrine that you have been taught the truth of the apostolic gospel.

[34 : 38] The gospel that humbles all alike under God's grace. And that leads all alike under God's lordship and rule. Only that true gospel of grace can unite people in warm and courageous and sacrificial service in the Lord.

Only the true gospel can do that. But a false gospel inevitably causes fracture in relationships. Causes bitter division because, as verse 18 says, people are not serving Christ, but serving themselves, serving their own appetites.

They claim to be serving Christ. Of course they do. They use all the language of Christ and of Christianity. But it's a different Jesus that these people are talking about. Like the minister who I heard on television justifying his own and others' immoral sexual relationships.

He smiled sweetly and he said, we don't judge, we prefer the Jesus way. We welcome all. Now that sounds so lovely, doesn't it? It sounds so gracious. But the Jesus he is speaking of there is not the real Jesus.

He's no Jesus at all. The real Jesus, yes indeed, said, no, I do not condemn you. But went right on to say, go, therefore, and sin no more.

[35 : 57] The real Jesus said, if your eye or your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. Better to enter life maimed, crippled, than with two eyes be thrown into the hell of fire.

That's the real Jesus. But you see that kind of smooth talk, that kind of flattery, that kind of telling people what they want to hear, Paul says in verse 18, it deceives many.

But that kind of talk is not serving Christ, our Lord Christ, the real Jesus. It's the opposite, he says. It's serving self. And serving self and your own appetites is, according to the letter to the Romans, the very essence of sin and rebellion against God.

Romans chapter 1, it's serving the creature, not the creator. That's the essence of sin. Romans chapter 2, it's self-seeking, that is disobeying the truth, that is obeying unrighteousness, that leads only to wrath and fury.

And so Paul's clear in his warning, verse 19. It's not enough, he says, just to be obedient, that is to believe the gospel and follow God in faith. We are to be wise as serpents, as well as innocent as doves, as Jesus himself put it.

[37 : 10] Wise, says Paul, in recognizing the gospel, recognizing the good, and in welcoming true gospel workers. But innocent as to what is evil and not good, and people who in fact are false gospel wreckers.

Wreckers of the faith, he says, deviant in doctrine. Wreckers of the truth. Deceivers of people. And wreckers of the church.

They are those who cause division. What Paul is saying is that there were then, as there are now, and as there always will be within the orbit of the church, there will be people and movements who purport to serve Christ and use all the language of serving Christ, but only serve self.

They are evil, he says here in verse 19. They're serving sin. And ultimately, if you look at verse 20, what lies behind it all is that they're serving Satan himself.

And Paul's very clear in his instruction how to respond, verse 19. Be innocent in regard to their evil. That is, have nothing to do with it. Or you could sum it up in those two words he gives at the end of verse 17.

[38 : 28] Avoid them. Don't greet these kind of people with a holy kiss. Don't greet these people with a welcome worthy of the saints.

Don't give them any welcome at all, he says. Avoid them. No help. No patronage. No credibility. Certainly no authority. You simply can't share partnership in the Lord.

You can't share service in the Lord with those who plainly do not serve our Lord Christ, but serve their own appetites and their own self-rule. It's impossible. So Paul's command is clear.

Avoid them. You're to actively distance yourself from them, he says. But it's not you, notice, not you, says Paul, who are divisive.

It's not you who are causing division in the church, who are causing schism. A lot of people today who feel that schism, division in the church, is the great sin. No one must ever divide from corrupted churches.

[39 : 30] Well, even if that is so, certainly there's no real biblical foundation for such a saying. Even if that is so, Paul is very clear here. The schismatics, he says, are not those who separate themselves.

They are those who cause the separation by their deviant and deceptive and utterly devilish divisiveness. Creating obstacles. Contrary to the doctrine that the church has received once and for all from the apostles of Christ.

Watch out, says Paul, for those who cause such division. Who do not serve our Lord Christ. Whose smooth talk and flattery deceives the naive.

They are false gospel wreckers. They cause division, but you must avoid them. It comes a time, as Jesus himself said, when such people will not receive you or listen to your words.

The words of apostolic truth. And you are to shake the dust of your feet against them when you leave. Those are strong words, aren't they? The poignant words in the days in which we live.

[40 : 41] Paul's words could have been written very much for the church in the West in the 21st century. In a day when there are those who cause great divisions. Who lay stumbling blocks. Who deceive many naive within the professing church.

who destroy the truth of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we ourselves in our own nation, in our own denomination, are living through thinking exactly how it is that we must obey Paul's commands here.

Avoid them. Because we must obey the apostolic commands of the apostles of Christ. But let's not forget in the midst of that, the huge encouragement also in this chapter.

Because there are, and there always will be, says Paul, many real gospel people and real gospel fellowships that we can work with. And we can welcome.

And we must welcome warmly and generously, both locally and globally. One of the blessings of recent months has been the sense of shared partnership that we have with real gospel people the world over.

[41 : 44] Just the kind of partnership that the bulk of this chapter speaks of. Indeed, one of the blessings of the crumbling of old denominational alliances in the UK and in the western nations at large is that real gospel people are coming together much, much more than ever we have before.

United by the primary things that really matter. A shared love for Christ and for his kingdom and for evangelism and for mission. Christianity brought together by these primary things, not merely the secondary things such as church government and modes of baptism and things like that.

And surely that can be only good. It's ludicrous when you think about it. Ludicrous. That so many churches are bound together in denominations where they agree perhaps with a view on church government but are utterly divided upon the very central heart of what the Christian gospel really is.

And yet at the same time divided from other true gospel people over these mere trivialities like church government and things like that. Instead of being able to partner actively and in a material sense with them, their true gospel family.

So let's heed Paul's very simple instruction in this chapter. Let's be encouraged at what really matters in gospel fellowship. Recognize and welcome real gospel workers.

[43 : 11] And recognize and watch out for false gospel records wherever they are and avoid them. But the real gospel people welcome them. Work with them. Work with them in the Lord and for the Lord because you are one in our Lord Christ.

And don't forget as we close that great encouragement in verse 20. Our God says Paul is the God of peace. And he has promised to crush Satan utterly in the end.

Now we're still longing for that day. Of course Romans tells us that. We groan. We're saved in hope. Waiting eagerly for the day when that salvation will at last be complete. Until then there will always be great struggle.

There will always be the joy of real gospel fellowship amid the sorrows of gospel wrecking sin. Right till the very end. And so we need to be watchful.

And we need to be battling right till the very end. But this verse reminds us that we are on the victor's side. We are with the God who will establish his peace.

[44 : 18] His eternal peace. And even now Paul's telling us along the way there will be many victories through his grace.

As Satan is trampled he says even under our feet as we walk with God as real gospel people serving not ourselves but our Lord Christ.

Serving him together with all fellow workers in the Lord as real gospel people. What a word of encouragement that is as we close.

And may the grace says Paul of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us to that end. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we thank you that you have set us not only in families of local churches but within the one worldwide family of your grace.

help us we pray to be those who love and cherish and welcome all true gospel people wherever they find themselves wherever we find them.

[45 : 25] Help us to be wise knowing and discerning those who wreck the gospel and are not of Christ. blessed. But together with all your people may we be strengthened day by day in the truth that is in Jesus.

His gospel may go forth and bring many to faith to join us in your glorious family of love. We ask this in Jesus name.

Amen.