

# THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

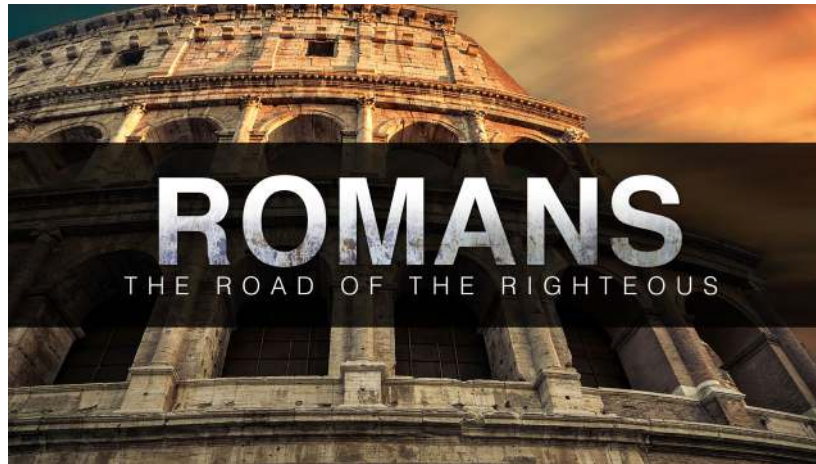
## Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 16:17-20

Written By

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March 22, 2020



From Romans chapter 1, verse 1, through chapter 15, verse 13, Paul has told sinners how to get right with God by placing their faith in the person and redemptive work of the Messiah, Jesus, and how saints should live in light of their new relationship and standing with the Holy Trinity. With his closing remarks starting in chapter 15, verse 14, through chapter 16, verse 16, we learn how to walk with God by studying the life of Paul, coupled with that of many saints he sends greetings to in Rome. All of this, of course, should lead to two logical questions: One, am I rightly related to God by faith in Jesus? If not, now is the time to settle your answer to that all-important question. Two, am I living a holy life in light of my new spiritual standing? Or in other words, “Am I really maturing in my Christian life?” If your growth is minimal, then now is the time to head toward explosive growth by radically choosing godly thinking and behavior over its godless versions.

Starting with verse 17 of chapter 16 Paul throws us a proverbial rhetorical curve ball. Just as he wound up his closing greetings to the Roman saints, he stopped, grabbed his shepherd’s staff and spoke to the sheep with a word of warning. Why did he do this? Because he knew while all the saints in Rome would work on seeking to implement the rich and practical spiritual truths he had taught them, the ‘ol Devil would seek to undermine the wonderful unity in their church.

<sup>17</sup> Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> The

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

Whoa. Tough words located right in the middle of tender words. Makes you sit up and take notice, doesn't it? For sure. So much for those who believe the shepherd should always speak in a loving, nice, and highly positive fashion.

With the Devil on the prowl, the wise, mentally astute leader knows when to encourage the flock and when to warn them so they are individually and corporately protected from spiritual attack, resulting in the diminishing of spiritual power and impact. You know how this works. Show me a compromised Christian or a disunified church and I'll show you one who or which will not accomplish much for God. Why? None of this is attractive to the lost who hate hypocrisy and infighting. They see enough of this in their secular lives, and they are looking for far different when they look at Christians and the churches they attend.

So, thank the Lord for a shepherd like Paul, a godly leader who told the church what they needed to hear. And just what did he tell them? His carefully chosen words give the answer to a pivotal question:

### How Do We Safeguard The Unity Of Our Church? (Rom. 16:17-20)

Church unity is a beautiful thing. There is nothing greater than a body, like ours, which is full of love, acceptance, and compassion for each other regardless of who we are. There is nothing greater than a body, like ours, which loves the Lord and wants to follow hard after Him, regardless of the cost. There is nothing greater than a body, like ours, which loves the Word of God and seeks to uphold it in a hostile and spiritually dark culture. There is nothing greater than a body, like ours, which trusts and follows your spiritual leaders at all levels, and who defends and seeks to protect each other. There is nothing greater than a body, like ours, which is given to prayer for each other, to acts of selfless service, and which has a deep desire to stay externally focused on the lost we encounter each and every day. Our unity is, most certainly, amazing, refreshing, and uplifting, and it has enabled us to accomplish much for God over the years.

Unity, however, is much like the outer skin of an egg. The spherical shape serves to protect the egg, yet all it takes is a strategic blow to cause a fracture to form. How many churches have you encountered in your Christian life which succumbed to a blow designed by the Devil to destroy the unity of the body? The first time I caught wind of this strategy I think I was around eleven or twelve years old. I heard my parents, who were leaders in our church, talking about how a group of disgruntled people had formed a group whose sole goal was to get rid of Dr. Lind, the gifted Bible teaching pastor who had led me to Christ? I remember stepping uninvited into my parent's conversation and asking in complete shock, "Why would anyone want to do that to our pastor?" Their reply taught me much about church life and how to protect it.

Having planted and worked in countless churches, Paul knew firsthand about the importance of being constantly vigilant regarding safeguarding bodily unity so the church could be a light set on a hill. As he had shared with the Ephesians leaders in Acts 20:28-31, he paused here to teach these saints how to safeguard their church in Rome so it could do much for Christ. The principles we glean from his wise words are as applicable today as they were 2,000 years ago. Working our way through them and following his grammatical usage, we can readily identify Paul's path for protecting our most precious commodity, unity. That path begins with what I'd call . . .

## The Road To Safeguard Unity (Rom. 16:17)

Passionately Paul pauses and challenges the saints in Rome to listen and learn from his proven track record of protecting church unity:

<sup>17</sup> Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.

From this short verse, two hermeneutical words come to the forefront: *who* and *what*. Yes, who are we to keep on the lookout for, and what should we do when we encounter them.

“Keep your eye on” is an infinitive of purpose which tells us how we are to constantly function. The Greek word here is *σκοπεο* (σκοπεῖν, the infinitive version). It speaks of careful inspection of something or someone. When my father worked the line as a U.S. Customs officer, he did this constantly as he surveyed people. One time while working the truck gate, he checked out a double rig gas truck . . . you know, the kind made of mirror-like aluminum. He climbed atop the rig, opened the hatch, looked in, and saw gas. So, he climbed down.

In his gut, however, he said he just felt there was something edgy about the driver. So, he climbed back on the unit, opened the hatch, rolled up his sleeve, and thrust his arm into the gas. Bam. In about a foot and a half his arm bottomed out. The smugglers had built a false bottom. Once the agents took the trailers apart they found each packed to the hilt with white bricks of pot. I remember the picture they took of man father standing proudly in with his find. I’m also glad he was an observant man, a man who paid attention to details when interacting with people. What my father did as an agent, Paul counsels us to do as saints for the Devil is always seeking to smuggle those into an unsuspecting body whose goal it is get the people loaded on the drug called dissension.

Two words tells us specifically who we are to be on guard against. “Those who cause dissensions,” and [those who cause] “hindrances.” Believe it or not, some live to create dissensions wherever they go be it the secular or sacred world. This type of person is not happy until they have pitted people against each other, and created chaos where peace had existed. The word Paul employs here is *dichostasia* (διχοστασία) and it means to live in a state of being factious. These folks are not really interested in providing real, viable answers to help people move forward, nor are they desirous of creating anything. They are all about creating schisms and factions between people, while all the while presenting themselves as being so wise, concerned, and caring. Right. We see plenty of them in politics around here, don’t we?

To read through the New Testament is to see the types of divisions these pernicious, problematic people create. I will just touch upon a few.

- *Personality divisions*: Who is following which leader? (1 Cor. 1:10-15)
- *Sexual divisions*: What perversion are you tolerating? (1 Cor. 5:1-5). This is huge in our culture as we are being bullied into accepting various forms of sexual perversion as now viable, even though God clearly says otherwise.
- *Legal divisions*: Who is suing who and for what? (1 Cor. 6:1-11)
- *False worship divisions*: Who is worshipping in an inappropriate fashion? (1 Cor. 10:14-22)
- *Grey area divisions*: Who is pushing their Christian freedom for the sake of proving a point? (1 cor. 10:23-33)
- *Doctrinal divisions*: Who is deviating from sound doctrine? (1 Cor. 15). “Surely,

- Paul, the physical body is not resurrected, therefore, Christ was not resurrected.”
- *Leadership divisions*: Who is vying for more control and power (3 John 9-12). Diotrephes certainly comes to mind. The disciples, too, as they constantly jockeyed for who would be the greatest among them (Mark 9:34).
  - *Devil's advocate divisions*: Who is always taking a position which runs counter to truth? The Pharisees certainly fit the bill here. They disagreed with everything Christ taught and did.
  - *Traditional divisions*: Who is saying we must obey/observe what religious tradition not found in the Bible? (Matt. 12:1-3; 15:1-2). Again, the Pharisees were masters at this technique.
  - *Marital divisions*: Who is saying what about divorce? (Matt 19:3ff). Once more the factious Pharisees had watered down what God said about divorce so they could move from wife to wife almost at will.

You get the picture. Your responsibility as a member of this church body is to pay strict attention to anyone who is skilled at pitting saint against saint, all for the sake of spirituality, of course. Know anyone like this?

As a young pastor I have seen my share of the divisive person. I hired a staff member once who seemed great on paper, but his performance behind the scenes was something quite different. He no sooner arrived than all kinds of arguments broke out between once peace-loving saints. At one point a rumor went around that one of our children's leaders had sexual issues. After much investigation we discovered that our new staff member was passing all sorts of disinformation (some potentially felonious) around in order to create havoc so that end the end I would be fired and *he could take my job*. He did not have a job long after this divisive activity came to light. Once he left, unity naturally flowed back to the body. Paul was right. You need to keep your eye on a divisive troublemaker so they do not negatively impact the body.

A second person Paul says saints should be on the lookout for is one who causes “hindrances.” You will automatically know this word when I say it, *skandalon*. That's right, we get our scandalous from this Greek root. According to Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, this word speaks of a physical trap someone sets:

σκάνδαλον, ου, τό (s. σκανδαλίζω; non-bibl. pap; PLond 1338, 25; 1339, 10 [both 709 A.D.]; LXX, Aq., Sym., Theod.; PsSol 4:23 [but not in Test12Patr, EpArist, Philo, Joseph., apolog.], then Christian wr. Later word for σκανδάληθρον [Aristoph. et al.]; s. Hesych. and Phot. s.v.). ① a device for catching someth. alive, *trap* (PCairZen 608, 7 [III B.C.], where written σκάνδαδον) w. παγίς, used metaph. (Josh 23:13; Ps 140:9; 1 Macc 5:4; Is 8:14 Sym. and Theod.) Ro 11:9 (Ps 68:23).<sup>1</sup>

Applied to church life, Paul says this type of person sets traps in relation to sound doctrine. What does this mean? It means they, who embrace false and/or unsound doctrine, start posing questions to attack sound doctrine and those who hold to it tenaciously.

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<sup>1</sup>William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 926.

The Sadducees and Pharisees, the religious leaders of Christ's day, did this to Him all the time. They posed seemingly innocuous questions in order to entrap Him so they could shut him down. The questions were anything but innocuous, but were highly loaded. I submit to you one case in point.

<sup>23</sup> On that day *some* Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Him and questioned Him, <sup>24</sup> saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies, having no children, his brother as next of kin shall marry his wife, and raise up an offspring to his brother.' <sup>25</sup> "Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother; <sup>26</sup> so also the second, and the third, down to the seventh. <sup>27</sup> "And last of all, the woman died. <sup>28</sup> "In the resurrection therefore whose wife of the seven shall she be? For they all had her." <sup>29</sup> But Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures, or the power of God. <sup>30</sup> "For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. <sup>31</sup> "But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God, saying, <sup>32</sup> 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living (Matt. 22).

Did you see what they did? They, who did not believe in the doctrinal truth of the resurrection, asked Christ a question about the resurrection in order to make Him look bad. He dispensed with them in quick fashion, did He not. Really, this is no different than the person who is a relativist, who does not believe in absolute, arguing that truth is absolutely relative. Right. Many arguments leveled against Christianity are just that: logically self-defeating.

There are always those pugnacious, provocative people who can't wait to get into a church where they can start asking their "Gotcha" questions. They, who do not embrace sound biblical teaching, seek to attack those who do in order to make the person in question look bad, feel defensive, feel powerless, look ignorant and so forth. Again, I've seen my share of these trap setters in my pastoral career and Christian life. They ask questions but they really do not want answers.

- Is God intolerant?
- Will God, who is loving and kind, really send people to hell who don't believe in Jesus?
- How could the Bible be the only holy book out of many holy books?
- Since the Bible is full of so many errors why should we trust it?
- Doesn't Jesus love people for who they are?
- How can you believe in a literal creation by God as showcased in Genesis one?
- How can God be just when there is so much evil and suffering in the world?
- Why should we believe that science and faith are not contradictory when there is so much evidence to support the fact they are miles apart?
- Don't you think it wise to believe that a family is any grouping of two or more people, regardless of their gender?
- Since God cannot control something like the spread of the Corona Virus, doesn't this mean He is not all-powerful, nor is He all-loving?

We will stop there because I'm sure you get the point. When certain people start dropping these questions into conversations, they are usually setting traps for believers to get crushed in so the trap setter can advance their godless, carnal position, be what it may. Again, I ask, know anyone who does this? Know anyone who has a track record of rolling Socratic questions like grenades into Bible studies, private conversations, and the like? Know anyone who is perpetually posing questions and making statements which undermine the sound, true teaching of the Bible? Take note of them, Paul says. Why? Because left unchecked they can, and will, destroy unity in the body.

## The Response To Safeguard Unity (Rom. 16:17b)

Once you have identified a person who matches this criteria, who seems to be walking on this problematic road, what should you do? Paul gives you the much needed advice:

<sup>17</sup> Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and **turn away from them**.

Here the Greek word, *ekklino* (ἐκκλίνω) literally means to steer clear of prickly shrubs. No kidding. As a former gardener, I have learned, at times, the hard way which bushes are painful to touch. Sometimes it is a no brainer, like with a rose bush, and some times it is not, like with a holly plant with all of its deep green, glossy leaves. Once you know what constitutes a prickly bush you stay away from it, don't you?

The same, Paul commands with this imperatival verb, applies to people who appear to be present in order to wreak havoc on the local body of Christ. It may take you a few conversations to figure out what they are all about, but once you do, you are under divine instruction to control the contagion by not giving it any air time. How can they disrupt the body if they can't get verbally through to the body? It will be most difficult for them.

No, this does not mean you do not make an attempt to engage them. Jesus fielded provocational, problematic questions from devious, destructive people. So, too, did Paul. On another occasion the Pharisees posed another loaded question to Jesus, who dared break from their legalistic view of the Torah:

<sup>1</sup> Now it came about that on a *certain* Sabbath He was passing through *some* grain fields; and His disciples were picking and eating the heads *of grain*, rubbing them in their hands. <sup>2</sup> But some of the Pharisees said, "Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" <sup>3</sup> And Jesus answering them said, "Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, <sup>4</sup> how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?" <sup>5</sup> And He was saying to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Luke 6).

The Law said farmers should leave the edges of their fields post-harvest for the poor to glean from. This showed that God did, in fact, care about meeting needs of people over that of observing a strict view of not doing work on the Sabbath (Deut. 23:25). In addition, David's warriors ate from the cherished and holy Bread of the Presence in the Temple when they were finished, and God did not castigate them for doing so.

Once more, the inspired Scriptures demonstrate God is more concerned about the needs of people than laws. And the "law" in question here before Christ was man-made, not God-made;

hence, Christ was free to disregard it to feed His hungry disciples. This tense encounter was one of many Christ had with these factious, disruptive, and trap-oriented religious people. He would eventually turn from them. He did so when He started speaking in parables (Matt. 13), and as Israel's religious elite constantly rejected Him, He turned to anyone and everyone, including Gentiles, for the sake of the gospel (Matt. 22:9ff). During His trumped up trial, He finally became completely silent . . . with just a short, but brief, divine rebuttal of the false High Priest:

<sup>62</sup> And the high priest stood up and said to Him, "Do You make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?" <sup>63</sup> But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." <sup>64</sup> Jesus said to him, "You have said it *yourself*; nevertheless, I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26).

Learn from Christ's model. We can, and should engage, to a point. But wisdom says there comes a time when you must turn and shun the person because their motivation is impure and their actions are destructive to body life. Paul says as much writing

<sup>23</sup> But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels (2 Tim. 2, NAS).

<sup>23</sup> Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels (2 Tim. 2, NIV).

Here's is one more:

<sup>10</sup> Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, (Tit. 3:10).

Regarding this verse, William Barclay gives us some sagacious insight:

It is Paul's advice that contentious and self-opinionated people should be avoided. The Authorized Version calls that kind of person the heretic. The Greek is *hairetikos*. The verb *hairein* means to choose, and *haireisis* means a party, or a school or a sect. Originally, the word carried no bad meaning. This creeps in when someone sets private opinion against all the teaching, the agreement and the tradition of the Church. Heretics are simply people who have decided that they are right and everybody else is wrong. Paul's warning is against those who have made their own ideas the test of all truth. We should always be very careful of any opinion which separates us from the fellowship of our fellow believers. True faith does not divide people; it unites them.<sup>2</sup>

Unity is safeguarded, therefore, when the problem person is confronted (with truth) and then ultimately shunned for their disingenuous behavior. To continue to engage them is to give them a platform to create greater havoc and to poison the minds of the unsuspecting. Take a look at

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 3rd ed. fully rev. and updated., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 298.

how you function in the body and ask yourself a very practical, pertinent question: Am I spending way too much time debating and discussing truth with someone who shows a perpetual hatred and hostility to the faith and to saints? Are our discussions based on me embracing their personal views at the expense of what I know the Scriptures teach? Do they exhibit a spirit which will never disregard the vacuous nature of their position no matter how much biblical/logical truth give them? If you can answer “yes” to any of these questions, it may be time to move on and let them know why. And why should you take a bold step like this? To preserve bodily unity, which is the very thing Christ prayed for prior to His crucifixion (John 17). This point, of course, segues into Paul’s next point:

### The Reason To Safeguard Unity (Rom. 16:18)

The *gar* (γὰρ) connective at the head of this sentence serves to give us the reason for the previous prescriptions.

<sup>18</sup> 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 (Rom. 16).

These slick, typically pseudo-academics, typically the spiritual intelligentsia of the church (viz., spiritual legends in their own minds), are really driven by their own insatiable appetites. Those appetites could be power-based, ego-based and so forth. They are slaves to these appetites, be what they may, and if you listen to them they will make you slaves too. Ah, but they are so crafty with their speech, aren’t they? They are skilled at flattering people, which is nothing more than praising someone insincerely because they want something from them. Yes, they will worm their way into your life by verbally schmoozing you, by getting you to think they really care about you, and that they think you are all that and a bag of chips when it comes to spirituality. Once they get their foot in the door is when they start doing their destructive work of deceiving you.

Let me illustrate how this works.

When I was a young pastor, I encountered a woman like this. She served in the church and seemed super nice. Liz and I even enjoyed her and her husband socially on many occasions. However, when it became apparent that she had a real problem with gossip, she became my worst enemy because I addressed the gossip, as any shepherd should. Eventually, she started befriending other ladies in the church with the goal of turning them against me by polluting their minds with untruths about me as a leader. One of our great young mothers got sucked in by this lady, and by the time she called me to tell me her concerns she had been so polluted by the vicious gossip by this woman, this young woman could not tell truth from error. She had been deceived and that deception resulted in bodily disunity in many areas.

Paul warns us about them in 2 Timothy:

<sup>3</sup> For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. <sup>4</sup> They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Tim. 4).

This is a good snapshot of how the disrupter works. He or she tells you what you want to hear by flattering you, by telling you what will be easy to hear, and, then, before you know it you are



deceived and listening to them . . . while you are not listening to the truly godly people in your life. If you have been duped and you now realize this reality, then I'd say it is time to embrace truth and truth-tellers and move away from a deceptive person bent on creating chaos between saints.

### The Request To Safeguard Unity (Rom. 16:19)

Like a wise shepherd, Paul stops here and encourages the saints in Rome. He lets them know he knows how mature they are in Christ:

<sup>19</sup> For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore, I am rejoicing over you,

Talk about a way to build up the church so it stands strong and true when godless people attempt to disrupt unity. This is brilliant. However, Paul, is also a realist. He knows that even the strongest saint can be sucked into the vortex of vicious, vile, venomous people. To counter this, he adds this proviso:

but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.

In other words, be students of what is good, holy behavior and you won't be as prone to succumb to godless, disruptive behavior. Further, to be "innocent in what is evil" means, I think, you are so in love with the good you do not even think in evil terms. Years ago my Christian CPA told me about a church secretary who embezzled thousands of dollars from a local church. When I asked him how she did it, my question was met with a blank stare and absolutely no comment. After a few uncomfortable moments, I realized why he wasn't saying anything. He did not want me, the innocent saint, to have in my mind how a devious person thinks and operates.

Interesting.

The troublemaker wants you to learn from their trade so they can spread more mayhem. But if you are so in love with truth and wholesome behavior, bodily unity will be protected by the mere fact you are not going to be prone to being educated in the ways of evil. Ask a troublemaker how to destroy the unity of church and they can pull out a black book and give you the sordid details. Ask a saint how this could happen and you should be met with someone who'd say, "I actually have no idea what you are talking about, and why would you talk like that anyway?"

Innocence. It's a wonderful tool for shutting down problematic people.

### The Realization Of Safeguarding Unity (Rom. 16:20)

In the present we are called to do our part to protect the unity of the body of Christ. It can be a daunting, emotionally draining experience. However, we must, as Paul teaches, keep our eyes on the future.

<sup>20</sup> The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

After the seven-year tribulation, after the millennial reign of Christ, God will finally crush Satan, who is really the instigator behind all secular and sacred mayhem. No more will he be able to split churches, nor cause Christian friendships to be broken and tattered by godless means. At the end of time, God will cast the Tempter into the eternal Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:10), and then we shall know peace which will never been overthrown by chaos. Oh, what a day that will be.

This eschatological truth Paul develops leads me to be excited about many things:

- Good, not evil will triumph . . . because the Crusher is [emphasize] coming.
- Light will overpower darkness . . . because the Crusher is coming.
- Truth will overcome falsity . . . because the Crusher is coming.
- Love will overcome hate . . . because the Crusher is coming.
- Unity will replace disunity . . . because the Crusher is coming.
- Life will overcome death . . . because the Crusher is coming.
- True religion will replace false religions . . . because the Crusher is coming.
- Logic will put down illogic . . . because the Crusher is coming.
- Godliness will trounce godlessness . . . because the Crusher is coming.
- Peace will subdue chaos . . . because the Crusher is coming.
- Decency will dominate over indecency . . . because the Crusher is coming.
- Wholesomeness will replace perversion . . . because the Crusher is coming.

So be encouraged, saints. You ready for the Crusher? His name? Jesus, the Christ.