

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 16: 14-19

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank God, it's time to read the Bible again. Let's continue to read Romans Chapter 16. We will read verses 14 to 19. Let's continue to read Paul's greeting to church in Rome.

Verse 14: "Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren who are with them."

Here Paul mentions five names: Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, and Hermes. Who they were we do not know today, but their names share a common feature: they were all names typically given to male slaves at that time, and they were likely all unmarried brothers. These five brothers began to care for other brothers who had similar backgrounds and ways of life, and they formed a gathering. Paul especially sends greetings to them and to all the brothers who are with them.

For the church life to be carried out in a practical way, the needs of every saint must be cared for. These brothers who were slaves did not have freedom of movement and very likely could not attend the church meetings regularly. The church in Rome was able to raise up some brothers with responsibility among them to care for the saints who shared the same way of life.

In fact, the church today is the same. Some saints, because of their occupations, are not able to attend the Lord's Day worship regularly. The church therefore needs to consider whether it can change the time or the location, and send two or three saints with responsibility to specifically care for the needs of these saints who cannot regularly attend the church gatherings. Of course, the most important thing is to raise up from among these saints some who are able to take responsibility in service. Just as in the church in Rome, five brothers who were slaves were raised

up, and together with them there was a group of brothers who received their service; this is truly beautiful.

Verse 15: “Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.”

This is another gathering. Paul mentions Philologus and Julia, who should be a married couple and the primary ones bearing responsibility in this gathering. Nereus and his sister should be brother and sister, along with Olympas. Of course, today we do not know exactly who these people were, but those whom Paul was able to name should have been saints with responsibility in the church, as well as all the saints who were with them.

We can imagine that this gathering was probably composed mainly of households. Compared with single brothers, the relationships among this group of members would have been much more complex. Therefore, the serving saints needed to give special care to the relationships between husbands and wives, between parents and children, between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, as well as to those with financial difficulties at home, shortcomings in caring for the elderly, and needs in raising young children. These named saints were likely known to Paul, and Paul also knew that they were serving a group of saints with backgrounds similar to theirs; therefore, Paul especially sends greetings to the saints who were gathering together with them.

Verse 16: “Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you.”

Although Paul had not yet gone to the church in Rome, he was very clear about how the church there functioned. He knew many people, and the names he mentioned alone number twenty-seven: among them were Paul’s very close coworkers, such as Priscilla and Aquila; apostles, such as Andronicus and Junia; members of the imperial household, slaves, serving brothers, and laboring sisters.

Most remarkable of all is that the church in Rome was able to care for the needs of every group.

We can imagine that, in addition to the whole church gathering together for worship, there were at least five different meetings, very likely similar to the small group gatherings in churches today. The first was the church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila. This is the only gathering that Paul explicitly calls a church. However, in Greek, the word *ekklesia* is translated today as “church,” and its original meaning is simply an assembly or a gathering. Perhaps because Priscilla and Aquila were more mature and their gifts were more evident, the meetings in their home had already developed into the form of a church. This is precisely a model for church planting today.

It began with a household that had responsibility, first opening their home as a place for gathering. Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers by trade. They first became acquainted with Paul in Corinth and worked together with him making tents; later they followed Paul to Ephesus, and perhaps afterward were sent by Paul back to Rome. Their financial situation was probably not well off, and therefore holding meetings in their own home would not have been an easy matter.

I believe that all the saints who have opened their homes know what it involves: tidying up before the meeting, taking care of things afterward, and always being prepared to receive unfamiliar gospel friends. This is a long-term pressure and a loss of personal freedom, and it requires a considerable measure to open one’s home week after week for the saints to gather. Priscilla and Aquila had such a gift, enabling them to develop the gathering in their home into a church.

The second gathering was in the house of Aristobulus, and this assembly was probably composed mainly of members of the imperial household. The third gathering was in the house of Narcissus, a wealthy family, and perhaps both the family members and their slaves were able to have a meeting together. The fourth was the one we just read about, developed by Asyncritus and the others—a

gathering that cared for single brothers. The fifth was centered on Philologus and Julia, developing a gathering focused on households.

It is very healthy for the church to naturally produce gatherings like these according to people's backgrounds and needs. Of course, communication between the different small groups must also be maintained in order to preserve the unity of the church. Therefore, Paul instructs them to greet one another with a holy kiss, maintaining holiness. Paul also sends greetings to the saints in Rome on behalf of the churches among the Gentiles.

The church in Rome had a healthy church life, and the mutual acceptance among the saints was very sweet, while also attending to the needs of individual groups, dynamically establishing gatherings to meet those needs. The church in Rome was truly enviable, precisely because their acceptance was healthy. After sending greetings, Paul specifically reminds them to be on guard against certain people with ulterior motives, so that their existing sweet and healthy church life would not be destroyed by them.

Verse 17: “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.”

Paul specifically warns the church in Rome to be on guard against three kinds of people. The first kind are those who cause dissension among you—people who create division within the church, enjoying spreading gossip and stirring up quarrels, causing disputes. Matthew 5:9 says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” As children of God, our responsibility is to make peace. Those who create division and cause strife cannot be called children of God.

The second kind are those who cause you to stumble. The lifestyle and words of these people often become a stumbling block for others. Young or immature saints in the church may not be able to discern and are easily tripped up by them. Romans 14:13 says, “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.” Mutual

judgment within the church can easily become a stumbling block for others. We must not only avoid judging others ourselves but also avoid those who are inclined to judge.

The third kind are those who depart from the teaching they have learned. In the Chinese Union Version, this is translated as “道,” but the meaning here should be closer to “teaching” or “doctrine,” so translating it as “instruction” is more appropriate. The foundation of every church is Christ, and that is never in question. However, the saints who build up the church do so according to their understanding of Christ, and their understanding of Christ becomes the church’s teaching. Naturally, these teachings can be refined and perfected as the saints read the Scriptures together and pursue Christ together, making the church’s instruction increasingly complete. This is a process of growth for the church together, which is also what Ephesians 4:13 describes—the process of arriving at unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.

However, there are some people with ulterior motives who promote certain teachings. Of course, if the teachings they promote are contrary to the Scriptures, they are heretical and must not be followed under any circumstances. Even if the teachings they promote fall into a gray area but are clearly different from the teachings the church already has, these too must not be followed.

In Paul’s time, the greatest disturbances to the Gentile churches came from the Jews. Strictly speaking, it was not from unbelieving Jews, but from Jewish believers from the church in Jerusalem. They emphasized the Old Testament ceremonial law, forcing Gentile saints to be circumcised and to observe festivals and dietary regulations—all of which departed from Paul’s teaching. Since the Gentile churches were established through Paul’s ministry, any saints promoting different teachings were, in Paul’s words, those who had departed from the teaching they had learned. Their words and actions undermined the healthy life of the church. Paul therefore says, “I urge you to be on guard and avoid them.”

The word “avoid” in Greek is *ekklino*, which is composed of two parts: *ek*, meaning “out,” and *klino*, meaning “bend.” The compound word therefore carries the meaning of “turn away” or “change direction.” Thus, the Chinese Union Version’s translation as “躲避” is accurate. What is particularly notable is that Paul does not instruct them to expel these people from the church; rather, he tells them to avoid them—do not listen to their improper words, and do not follow their improper actions.

Here we see that the church should be lenient in accepting individuals, but strict in guarding the teaching of those individuals. This aligns with what Paul said earlier—that we are to accept people, but not necessarily their teachings; it is consistent. Allowing these people to remain in the church life is done in the hope that the Holy Spirit may work in them, and perhaps one day they may come to genuine repentance.

Verse 18: “For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.”

Paul continues to describe the three kinds of people mentioned in the previous verse: they are not truly serving our Lord Christ. If they genuinely regarded Christ as Lord, their words and actions would never depart from Christ’s teaching. Paul says that they serve their own stomachs. They are a group of people with ulterior motives, serving themselves for their own gain—whether financial, for power, or for personal comfort. Within the church, they hold higher influence and greater visibility, and so they use smooth and flattering speech to entice the hearts of honest people.

There are indeed many honest people in the church. Honesty in itself is not a problem, but because of a lack of spiritual discernment, they are easily deceived. Paul especially teaches us to accept people according to God, according to Christ. Therefore, we must also accept saints whose faith, theological views, or worship

practices are not entirely aligned with ours. However, accepting a person does not mean accepting their teaching. Honest people often fail to discern between a person and their teaching, so in accepting the person, they unknowingly accept their teaching as well. Because they are easily deceived, this leads naturally into the next verse.

Verse 19: “For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.”

Your obedience has become known to all. The church in Rome was a church very skilled at accepting people. We can see from the various gatherings of different groups within the church that it was not an ordinary church. There were gatherings in the homes of the imperial household, in wealthy households, among brothers who were slaves, and gatherings centered on family members. They were willing to submit to one another and receive one another. This healthy condition had already become known throughout all the churches, and so Paul rejoices over them. Truly, this was a healthy church.

But Paul exhorts them to take another step forward: “wise in what is good, innocent in what is evil.” The Chinese Union Version’s translation is beautiful, meaning that in good things we should be wise, able to learn quickly, and in evil things we should be simple-minded, unable to learn them no matter how we try; essentially, it encourages people to do good and avoid evil. Yet Paul’s meaning goes beyond this—he is aiming much deeper than that.

“Wise in what is good”—if we look at the original text, it is not simply “clever,” but “wisdom.” Good deeds are connected to God, because only God is truly good; that is, we are to have wisdom in matters related to God. Wisdom and cleverness are different: cleverness relates to worldly matters, to understanding situations and how to handle them, and is therefore more natural or worldly. Wisdom, on the other hand, is connected to the Spirit, for true wisdom comes from God. Paul’s meaning, then, is that in matters related to God, we are to have wisdom that comes

from the Holy Spirit, enabling us, through the Spirit and by obeying the Spirit, to put it into practice in our daily lives.

"Innocent in what is evil"—God is the source of all that is good, and conversely, Satan is the source of all that is evil. Anything not connected to God is evil, and in matters of evil we are to be innocent. The word translated as "innocent" originally means "simple" or "pure," not "stupid" or "clumsy." This Greek word appears only three times in the New Testament. One occurrence is in Matthew 10:16, where it is translated as "gentle as doves." Another is in Philippians 2:15, where it is rendered in the KJV as "harmless" and in the NIV as "innocent," meaning sincere and without deceit. That is, in evil matters we are to be pure like children, just as Christ was originally sinless. The word "sinless" in the original text literally means "without knowing sin." In other words, with regard to evil, we should not investigate or explore it; it is best not to touch it at all. Once we become involved, over time we can be corrupted along with it. After humanity's fall, our nature tends toward evil, so in matters of evil we must remain simple and pure. Dear brothers and sisters, Paul's reminders to the church in Rome are, in fact, reminders for all churches today.

Let us pray together: Lord, thank You. Through Paul's greetings, we see that the church in Rome had a truly healthy church life, which also inspires our admiration. They excelled in accepting one another, resulting in a vibrant and healthy church life. Yet Paul also reminds us to be on guard against those who cause division, those who cause others to stumble, and those who depart from sound teaching. We ask You, Lord, to grant us spiritual wisdom, so that in our church there may be a healthy acceptance of one another, attention to the needs of every saint, wisdom in matters related to God, and simplicity in matters of evil. Bless the church and the church life in which I am placed. We pray this in the holy name of our Lord Jesus Christ.