

*All Roads Lead Here: Wise, Innocent, and Established*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Psalm 103:17-22; Mark 12:28-34; Romans 16:17-27*

Our final Scripture reading today is the final section of Romans, chapter 16, verses 17-27. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy and inspired Word. “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. Timothy, my fellow worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives. I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings. Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him-- to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

Some things go together that we'd never expect. Generations of Americans grew up on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Does jelly sound like it goes with peanut butter? No, but it works pretty well. Europeans dip their French fries in mayonnaise. Not our thing, but fries and ketchup are pretty spectacular. Go into Canada and they put gravy and cheese curds on French fries and. Sometimes, a combination you didn't think would work turns out great.

Wisdom and innocence sound like contradictions. We think we can't be both. Wise people have learned a lot. They are no longer innocent in their areas of expertise. Innocence usually means that you don't know about a subject; you're ignorant; you're naive. But today, Paul wants believers to be wise and innocent at the same time – wise about what pleases the Lord but innocent about things that don't. That's how he wraps up his letter to the Romans.

Last week, Paul sent his greetings to all sorts of people in the Roman church. This week, he adds an addendum to his teaching before he sends greetings from the people in his church and closes with a benediction of blessing. What hasn't he mentioned? He wants to warn the Romans about those who might lead them astray...teachers who dispute the gospel, who divide congregations, who teach ideas that put obstacles in their way, who are ultimately self-centered.

This section is vague to us, but later letters by Paul and historical writings fill in the gaps. The first major heresy, the first profoundly wrong and dangerous teaching the early church faced, was that of Judaizing. This teaching was so prevalent that the apostle Peter grew scared of those practicing it; he had to be rebuked by Paul, recorded in Acts 15.

The Judaizers said Christians had to become Jews, that you had to follow all the laws and rules of ancient Judaism. They said you could not be saved by Jesus if you weren't circumcised like Jews were. All the ritual laws and purity laws, the laws about what to eat and not eat, the Judaizers said the Gentiles were bound to those. Salvation wasn't just about trusting in Jesus and living morally; it was about living according to ancient Jewish customs and traditions.

Paul attacked the Judaizers thoroughly in his letter to the church in Galatia. He taught that the Judaizers were destroying the good news of Jesus. No one could ever be made righteous by following the Jewish law; they needed Jesus to save them from the law. So why would they make a new believer in Jesus follow the old law that no one could keep?

Christians are to keep the spiritual and moral law, the universal law to love the Lord your God and to love your neighbor as yourself, the Ten Commandments and the moral laws based on them. On the other hand, the ritual law was now superceded; it was dead and gone. The Judaizers put the obstacle of the law in the way of people who wanted to trust in Jesus. So when he writes to the Roman believers, Paul makes sure they know to stay away from them.

There were other false teachers too, like the Gnostics that said salvation came through hidden knowledge that Jesus gave only to His closest disciples, knowledge very different from what the Bible teachers. They taught that only the soul mattered, not the body. Some said the real road to salvation was to get rid of all bodily pleasures and distractions; if your body liked it, don't do it because it's bad. Others said, if the body doesn't matter, do whatever you want if your body likes it because it doesn't really matter anyway. Both views neglect that God created many things for our good and pleasure as long as we enjoy them the way God meant for them to be enjoyed. Again, the Gnostics split churches and paved the way for sin.

That brings us to our major question of the morning: *what teachings should have us on the defensive?* The false teachings that Paul and the early church dealt with are not the false teachings we have today. It's helpful that Paul didn't address only the particular teachings of his day but let this stand as a warning to all of us. We have our own issues in our own day.

My friends over at Trinity Lutheran have been doing a great sermon series recently on these; they have called their series *Fake News*. Each week, they've taken on a thought that's very popular among modern Christians but goes against biblical teaching. The first was, "all religions lead to God." Another was, "God helps those who help themselves." A third is, "God wants us to be happy." Another is, "Christianity is primarily about going to heaven when we die," rather than having joy in a relationship with God both now and always. All of these sound good, but they aren't biblical and they can actually ruin our relationship with God.

What others are there? The most popular teaching in modern American spirituality is the health and wealth gospel, that God not only wants you to be happy but healthy and wealthy, and that all you have to do is name your blessing and claim it – but it's not biblical. Some portions of the church have thrown out the moral law, especially concerning what God says about sexuality. Others have thrown out teachings on hell, teachings on serving the poor, the list goes on. The truth is, there are a ton of teachings out there that aren't the teachings of Christ.

The real question is, how do you know? How can you tell the real news from the fake news? How can you sift through and get only what's right? It's what Paul said: *we should be wise about what is good and innocent about what is evil.*

Jesus came to rescue us from sin, and His blood washes us clean of it. Our relationship with Him does more than that, though. It brings us peace and joy. Our desires change as we grow closer to Him. And one of the ways our desires change is that we want to become more like Him. We are glad when we are free from sins that we used to carry around like baggage and couldn't quit. We love when He is glorified in us, and we love when we grow wise in His ways.

We become wise in what is good by turning to His words on a regular basis. We listen to what He has to say. The Romans gave Paul joy because they were "full of obedience," which means they were in fact wise about what is good. Paul wanted to make sure no one stole that from them. Simply put, to get that wisdom, to know how to obey God, be in the Scripture. There is no better source for the wisdom we want as Christians. Trusted Bible teachers and scholars help us, of course, but staying in God's Word will make us and keep us wise.

Being in regular conversation with God will help us to grow in wisdom, too. As Jeremiah 29:12-13 says, "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." Godly wisdom, wisdom about what is good, doesn't come from any earthly source. God is the root and grounding of what we mean by what is good. Other people can try to define goodness, but it fails if it's not rooted in a Christian worldview. So approach the LORD daily, and no matter if you're wise about anything else, you will be wise in His ways.

So how about the flip side: how do we remain innocent concerning evil? Ultimately, the best thing the Scriptures say about staying innocent of evil is not to go near it. Repeatedly in the Old Testament, the Israelites are warned not to make treaties with the people around them and intermarry with them because God says, "they will be a snare to you." The more they became entangled with their pagan neighbors, the easier it was for them to fall into the worship of the pagan gods. The Bible calls a few things "snares" – wealth gained through lying, adulterous women, the fear of man over the fear of God.

The repeated idea is that close proximity to evil eventually turns your heart towards evil. Evil doesn't always corrupt us because it's alluring or tempting. Evil can seep in slowly to change our hearts and attitudes simply by its familiarity. How is it that attitudes about marriage and divorce, abortion, sexual relationships of all kinds, changed so quickly in American culture? The changes have seemed sudden, but they haven't been. We've just had the ideas plugged into our culture subtly in the last sixty years. TV shows, movies, newspapers, media have pushed against Christian morality here and there, bit by bit. We didn't take a gigantic leap into post-Christianity in America; it happened baby step by baby step. We became familiar with evil, and it didn't look so bad any more.

So again, how do we remain innocent concerning evil? Stay away from it. Think before you turn on the next piece of media you consume, and be willing to turn it off. Care about those people at work and school and in the neighborhood who believe differently than you, love them, invite them to church, but don't expect that they will give you good moral or spiritual advice. I really care about the people in our gaming group deeply, but they aren't where I turn in a spiritual crisis. Don't focus on the news every day. What I see on Facebook is that people's hearts and attitudes get cold and unfeeling when they hear bad news day after day, bad news that often times has absolutely nothing to do with our daily lives.

And don't open the door to sin even a crack. I say this as much for myself as for everyone else, but if we're going to stay innocent, we have to stay watchful. An alcoholic can't hang out at a bar just for the conversation. In the same way, we have to avoid situations that trigger our weaknesses. If you can't watch a sporting event without getting angry, don't watch. If you can't meet up with a certain group of people without gossiping, don't meet with them. It sounds so simple, but it is harder than it looks.

Until we reach eternity, a part of us is still going to like sin. To remain innocent, or to regain our innocence, the solution is vigilance against sin. In Ephesians 5:3, Paul says, "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people." Not a hint means staying vigilant.

And there's good news! After gently warning the Romans about staying wise and innocent, he says, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." Victory is coming! This is not a battle we win; it's a battle God wins on our behalf. We do not crush Satan under our feet; God does the crushing. Our wisdom and innocence is part of our new life in Christ. We are watchful, but we don't do this alone. God is the one who empowers us; He is the one who grants victory. And He gives us each other. When you struggle, when you feel defeated, we have each other to rely upon. God gives us the church, His people, so that when we fight against sin in our lives, we have backup. We have people behind us, with us, encouraging us.

After sending greetings from his fellow workers, Paul finishes with his benediction: "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ!"

Paul adds a third thing that he prays for, that he's gladdened for, from Christ for all of us – that we might be established in Christ. In Greek, the word "to establish" means to build someone's beliefs up so that they won't change. It's building a wall that won't fall over but will stand firm against an assault. He establishes us for His own glory through the revelation of Jesus, His only Son and our Messiah. Through Jesus, we are made confident of victory and certain that despite all obstacles, we are saved and will become like Him. On His foundation, our faith becomes a brick wall impossible to take down. Our ability to be wise and innocent is established by Him.

You know, there are days when it seems like everything is topsy-turvy. Just yesterday I was driving Jackson to robotics in all the snow, we had to get our hot water heater replaced at a cost of way too much, my sinuses were nuts due to all the weather. When those bills hit and the car is swerving around the road and I've got a killer headache, I know I'm a mess.

That's when I rely on the fact that I'm established in Jesus, not in myself. There are some mornings where I can barely get out of bed; I'm not all that reliable. But Jesus is, and Jesus will get me through all of those things because He has the power to establish us in His own goodness, His own nature. That's why we glorify God; that's why we worship Him and praise Him and come together every Sunday to magnify His name. Because every good thing in our lives comes from Him, and He is our cornerstone that holds us firm against the storms of life.

When we're established in Jesus, when our faith is truly grounded in Him and we're confident in Him, we move past the basics. We're no longer worried about coming to church out of fear – yes, God is our judge, He will judge the world, all people will be judged, including us – but our primary motivator isn't to avoid hell and eternal punishment. We don't come out of obligation, of the idea that "it's the right thing to do." We don't even necessarily come because we like the music or the sermons or anything else about the service.

We worship because we've fallen in love with this amazing God who loved us first, who sent His Son on our behalf, who lived and died and rose again to show us that God's love conquers even death. And that love we have for God isn't something from deep within us; God Himself planted it there. And what God puts in our hearts will never go away.

So little in this world is truly established. I saw pictures from the Dinnages this week of huge buildings, established, grounded buildings in Taiwan halfway on their sides after the earthquakes. The best and biggest and strongest we can build comes tumbling down in an instant. But what God establishes never comes down. As Jesus told in the parable, those built on the solid rock, those who put Jesus' words into practice, when the storms beat down and the rains come and the winds blow, they do not fall.

Are you wise in goodness and innocent in evil? Are you firmly established on the rock that is Jesus Christ? If you don't feel you are, turn to Him today. Trust in Him. As the book of Romans has shown us again and again, it's not about you earning your way to God through hard work. Just come to Him in your weakness, in your frailty, trust in Him and His strength, and Christ will take care of you. He will take away the guilt of your sin and establish in you a foundation on which you can truly be wise and innocent. They aren't contradictions at all, it turns out. We can be both in the perfect measure. And as we grow in the grace of God, we will know His peace and presence. To Him who can do all this belongs all the glory and honor and power forevermore. Amen.