



[Romans 16:17-20](#)

(17) Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. (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. (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. (20) And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you. Amen.

New King James Version

This section begins with disfellowshipping because it is a biblical means of dealing with brethren who are trying to deceive others. We often speak of disfellowshipping those who cause *division*. Any kind of deception will cause division. After a while, deceived people do not believe the same things as the rest, and this difference causes separation.

Those who are disfellowshipped, who are causing divisions and offenses, are doing things contrary to true [doctrine](#). So, Paul says we must avoid them. This is part of the effort, the diligence, that it takes to keep from being deceived ourselves. We must especially avoid them in situations where they have the opportunity to influence our beliefs.

Now, if we should meet them on the street, a polite, social "hello" would be fine. But we should avoid getting into a conversation, argument, or discussion about doctrine. We need to keep that away from ourselves because it is part of our effort to keep from being deceived. We should not let it even touch us, if we possibly can, because we are supposed to be keeping ourselves *pure* spiritually and physically. We especially do not want false ideas to get into our heads and begin doing their dangerous work.

Paul says that such deceptive people are serving, not [God](#), but their own belly. This may

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sound like all they are doing is trying to get food or trying to "live off of" the saints. But what it means is that they are *stoking their own desires*. It is a symbol of a person doing something for his own gratification.

They were deceiving to please themselves in some way. They are not doing it to please God, obviously, because if they were, they would be telling the [truth](#). But since they are telling falsehoods and lies, deceiving the brethren and causing divisions, they are obviously not pleasing God in any way. What they are gratifying in themselves could be anything.

Because what they are saying is contrary to what God teaches, he says that they have to use smooth words and flattering speech—or, we could say "plausible arguments" and "a neat turn of phrase." They use *deceptive methods* as in advertising. Some people can do this without even knowing that they are doing it. They couch things in such a "nice" way that it makes it sound good. And before we know it, we are thinking, "He could be right. He's such a nice guy. I had him over for dinner one time; and he just regaled us with stories. He always thanks you, and he compliments everything you do. He's just such a great person. And, you know, I can't understand how such a nice guy could be saying anything that is 'bad' because he's so 'good.'" Before long, we are taken in. He has used smooth or flattering speech. He comes across well. He dresses nicely, and his arguments seem plausible.

So, as it says here, the simple are taken in. Paul means the innocent, those who are not looking for evil. They are guileless, and they think everybody else is as guileless as they are. They are harmless, like doves, and unsophisticated. They do not see "bad" in anyone.

This is how we are supposed to be! A few of the qualities of [love](#) mentioned in I Corinthians 13 are concerned with this. Christians should be willing to believe all things, [hope](#) all things, endure all things. This is why we are so gullible at times because we do not have a core of steel in our beliefs. We have allowed it to soften into a core of marshmallow, so that we are easily bent in the wind. Remember, we need to be wise as serpents and simultaneously harmless as doves.

Paul's advice comes in verse 19: "Be wise in what is good and simple concerning evil." In practical terms, this means that we *do* what is right and have nothing to do with what is wrong. In doing so, we are "wise." [Wisdom](#) has to do with how we act. It is very practical. Knowledge is mental, and understanding is mental and spiritual. But wisdom is both of those things and physical. It is what we *do*. It is what we *say*. It is how we live life

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If we walk in wisdom, then we do not trip, and we should not be tripped by anything that comes along to make us stumble. Paul says that we should be *wise* in what is good, meaning that we *do it!* It is wisdom to do what is good.

But we are to be *simple* concerning evil. This is related to "simple" in verse 18, but it is not the same word. This "simple" in verse 19 means "pure, unadulterated, unmixed." If we mix a little evil with good, what do we get? Human nature. We will get what we have been all of our lives. This is what happened in the [Garden of Eden](#). Eve took the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and it produced [this world](#). Paul says, "We're not supposed to do that! We've had enough of that. What we need to do is to do what is good and have nothing to do with what is evil." In a sense, we are looking for the Tree of Life, which is all good and no evil.

His advice is very simple and easy to understand. It is how we keep from being deceived: *Have nothing to do with evil!* We must keep evil at arms length at all times.

So, in summary, *do not dabble with questionable beliefs*. Do not even consider them! Avoid them at all costs. "Stick to the trunk of the tree," as we have said many times in the past. Do not skitter out along the branches where only squirrels can safely go. If we hang from a twig, we will find ourselves fallen to the ground—not even on the tree any more.

Another way that we could put it is *stay away from the edge of the cliff*. If we get too close to the cliff, we might fall off. If there is an earthquake, it will shake us off! Some things are out of our control. If we are at the edge of the cliff and something big happens, we might not have a handhold. We would tumble over the edge and be lost. The smart thing is to stay as close to the side of the mountain as we can, hang on for dear life, and never let go. As much as lies within us, we should not even think about evil. Stay away from it. Avoid it.

Paul says to *avoid even the appearance of evil*. That is how far we are supposed to stay away from it. Not just if we are doing evil or thinking evil, but even if somebody might come along and think that what we are doing is evil.

Paul ends in verse 20 with the comfort that God will put away the evil—and the Deceiver—soon. So we only have to do this for so long. But as long as we have to do it, let us do it well. We need to have that "core of steel" for as long as we need it. Then we will be given strength—in the resurrection—to do it all the time, because we will *be* good. At that point, we will have developed the character to be that way all the time ourselves. This is how God is. He cannot be tempted by evil. That is what we are striving to

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become!

— Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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