

Self-Imposed Religion (Colossians 2:16-23)

Paul's letter to the Colossians is designed to protect its readers from deception.

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

As a Christian, you need to be on guard against deceivers who would rob you of a right relationship with your Savior. God has given you this Bible so that you can be informed, so that you can understand who your God is, what He has done in history, what He has promised to do in the future, and what He expects from you in the present. This is a really valuable Book. We need to know what it says and we need to know what it means.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Paul is combating what is called the Colossian heresy. There were teachers in Colossae who were poisoning the pure truth of the Gospel with ideas from secular philosophy. There are teachers today who are anxious to poison the pure truth of the Gospel.

Let me just repeat, right here at the outset, that Jesus Christ is all you need. Jesus told us clearly:

"This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." (John 6:29)

People are always trying to add something to the simplicity of the Gospel and in this letter, Paul attempts to set us straight. He does so by presenting Jesus Christ. He tells us who Jesus is. He is the God-man; 100% human and at the same time 100% God.

*For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are **complete in Him**, who is the head of all principality and power. (Colossians 2:9-10)*

Jesus Christ is all you need. He has done the work necessary to reconcile you to God. The One who created the universe entered His creation via the womb of a virgin, lived a perfect, sinless human life, then sacrificed that life on the cross to pay the penalty for every sin you ever committed, every sin you are going to commit. And then He was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. He lives now so you can enjoy a living relationship with Him. And all He asks of you is that you just believe. Confess Him as Lord, believe God raised Him from the dead, and you will be saved.

The first ten verses of chapter 2 tell us who Jesus is. Verses 11-15 tell us what He accomplished, and the rest of the chapter tells of the implications for us.

I would sum up Paul's conclusions like this: Jesus finished the work; don't you dare try to add anything to it! It is profoundly insulting to your Lord to try to augment His salvation with anything. Jesus is not interested in your secret knowledge. Jesus is not interested in your asceticism. Jesus is not interested in your self-imposed religion.

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those

things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—"Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:16-23)

In verse 16, "So" refers back to who Jesus is and what He has accomplished. Because Jesus is the fullness of God, because He has already purchased your salvation, Paul is saying "Don't let anyone judge you."

The word here in the Greek is *krino*. The implication has to do with rendering a verdict and carrying out the sentence. It is different than simply distinguishing from right and wrong, which we should do. To *krino* somebody is to put yourself in the place of God. Paul says don't let anybody do that!

Look at the examples he uses: food or drink, festivals, new moons, Sabbaths. These were all things required under the Mosaic Law. Paul should know, he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He was a Pharisee. He was externally blameless with regard to the Jewish Law. He was zealously persecuting the early Church because He foolishly thought he was honoring God. But after he had an encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road, he counted all that stuff as dung! (Philippians 3:8)

Don't let anyone judge you for not carrying out these external requirements of the Law. Jesus has fulfilled the Law on your behalf.

Yet we humans are notoriously religious and we just want to do stuff that will justify us before God.

Now, I want to make a distinction here, and it is really critical that you understand the distinction: We should, with the help of the Holy Spirit, behave in a manner that pleases God. That's not the issue. We error occurs when we think we are justifying ourselves by our pious behavior, that our behavior somehow makes us more righteous than others. And we error when we place restrictions on other people's behavior that are not at all supported by scripture.

Let's consider the keeping of the Sabbath. It's one of the Ten Commandments:

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. (Exodus 20:8-10)

In the Old Testament economy, even gathering sticks on Saturday was a capital offence. But here, Paul says:

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, (Colossians 2:16)

Why? Because all these things were encoded in the Law designed to point us to Jesus. These things ...

*... are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.
(Colossians 2:17)*

Let no one judge you with regard to these things, says Paul. So is it okay to keep the Sabbath? Yeah, but **you don't have to**. And if you do keep the Sabbath, you really aren't earning any heaven points. In fact, if you attempt to justify yourself by keeping one point of the Law, you are obligated to keep the whole thing.

Good luck with that!

So when is the Sabbath, anyway? Should we keep the Sabbath on Saturday or Sunday? That's a subject that can generate a heated discussion! The early Church gathered and celebrated on Sunday because that is the Resurrection Day. They didn't just remember Christ's resurrection one day a year. They did it every week. (And by the way, that's what we should be doing today and on every Sunday. It's the Lord's Day! Let us remember what He accomplished!)

But let me hit you with another verse:

One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. (Romans 14:5)

In other words, it's not a requirement, it's a personal preference. Paul goes on to say this:

He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. (Romans 14:6)

Paul is trying to explain it is not what you do that is important, it is the attitude with which we do it that is important. If you want to be a strict Sabbatarian and do absolutely no work from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday, go for it. But you are not required to do so and you **must not** judge your brother or your sister if they set aside Sunday for worship. In fact, you must not judge yourself on whether or not you keep the Sabbath.

Whatever you do, do it to the Lord. Whatever you do, do it in a way that honors and glorifies Jesus. Render your thanksgiving to Him. Offer the sacrifice of praise.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. (Romans 12:1)

One more thing about Sabbath keeping, and then I'll stop beating that particular horse.

Jesus said: *"The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath."* (Mark 2:27)

It was a day set aside for rest and worship and in Christ, we can enjoy perfect rest. He fulfills the Sabbath for everyone who believes in Him. So the Sabbath Law is no longer a requirement but the Sabbath principle is still very much valid. We should all set aside one day a week to rest from our regular labor. My day is Tuesday. It doesn't always work out, because emergencies and surgeries happen on Tuesday as often as the other days of the week. But I do my best to abstain from regular work on Tuesday. Even so, I don't take a day off from worship. I sit down with my Bible just like I do on every other day. I ask the Lord to guide my steps, just like I do on every other day. And if something comes up, I sure don't feel guilty if I need to make a trip to the hospital or something!

The trouble with self-imposed religion is that it promotes false humility. Look again at verse 18:

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, (Colossians 2:18)

In the cultural context, this false humility probably refers to those Gnostics who thought they could become spiritually superior by denying themselves comforts of the flesh. Some of these folks would lead a severe, ascetic existence. They would shun all personal possessions. They would fast often and eat only the meanest food. One who lived on moldy bread might be considered more pious than one who ate fresh bread, for example. Some of them wouldn't bathe. They would abstain from relationships with the opposite sex, which probably wasn't that hard to do since they didn't bathe.

This angel worship Paul mentions very likely involved an obsession with the infinite number of "emanations" they believed came from the remote, holy God. We are not to worship angels. In the Bible, we find that every time a human being fell down before an angel, they were told "Don't do that!" Angels are powerful, intelligent beings, but did you know that Christians will be of a higher rank than angels when we get to heaven?

Do you not know that we shall judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:3)

As these false teachers were doing all this stuff, they became vainly puffed up by their fleshly mind. In other words, they were really proud of their humility. (Tell me that's not ironic!) But true Christian faith always seeks after Jesus Christ first of all. These false teachers were not ...

... holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. (Colossians 2:19)

As a church body, that is what we need to be doing. We need to hold fast to our Head, who is Jesus and we need to hold on to one another. We need to grow in our knowledge of Him, and it is not a "secret knowledge". It is available to every one of us in the pages of this Book. As we read our Bibles, and discuss what we have read, as we learn together, we grow and that growth, that increase nurtured by the Holy Spirit is completely of God.

If you are a Christian, you are dead to the world. You have been crucified with Him and you rose with Him to live abundantly in Him.

Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—"Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? (Colossians 2:20-22)

It's a rhetorical question. It's a long one, I admit, but it anticipates an answer and the correct answer should be, "No, I don't subject myself to worldly regulations when it comes to the things of God. I don't subject myself to self-made religion." At least I shouldn't and neither should you.

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:23)

Do you want to live godly in Christ? Do you want to live a life that pleases your Lord? Do you want to live a life that glorifies your God? Then stop trying to do it from the outside in. That is self-imposed religion.

You have to let God do it from the inside out. Seek Jesus! Draw close to Him and He will change you from the inside out.

God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

You know, one passage of scripture I find really interesting is found in Matthew 25, beginning with verse 31. Turn there with me, will you? Jesus is teaching about His second coming.

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' (Matthew 25:31-36)

But here's what I want you to notice: The response of the righteous.

"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' (Matthew 25:37-39)

The righteous didn't even realize what they were doing. They had not been trying to conform to an external set of requirements. They were not concerned with any kind of self-imposed religion. What they did, they did because God had changed them from the inside, and they served their Lord naturally, without even realizing it.

Of course, they would hear that wonderful commendation:

And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' (Matthew 25:40)

Don't trust in self-imposed religion. Trust in Jesus!