

Series Colossians

This Message Don't Go Back to the Shadows

Scripture Colossians 2:16-23

Paul, the writer of the letter to the Church in Colosse, was a truly unique person. He was supernaturally called by Jesus to “carry the name of Jesus before the Gentiles” of the Greco-Roman world “and before the people the Israel” (*Acts 9:15*). He evangelized and established churches in numerous cities of Asia Minor and Europe. His explanations of the gospel became the foundation of Christian theology.

In spite of his busy travel schedule, Paul maintained his connections with believers in many locations. His letters revealed his great concern for the maturity of believers and the purity and health of the Church. Most of his letters were written to provide spiritual direction for the followers of Jesus and to correct serious issues which affected believers. He was not afraid to speak very plainly about such issues when he thought it to be necessary.

In his letter to the Colossian Church, Paul combined positive teaching with strong warnings of spiritual danger. We are currently in chapter 2. The section from verses 8 through 23 contains three warnings. In the previous message we thought about the first warning: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy” (verse 8). Today we will think about the other two warnings, which are in verse 16 “Do not let anyone judge you,” and in verse 18 “Do not let anyone disqualify you.”

Read Colossians 2:16-23

We don't know if it was just one individual, or a group, who were negatively influencing the believers at Colosse. It is my opinion that the false teaching began with one influential individual. We can assume that he was a member of the fellowship, a believer. We can assume that he was respected by other believers, perhaps because of his age or prestige. After all, if this prominent teacher had not been a fellow believer, and had not been an “insider,” neither he nor his ideas would have been given a second thought. Those are my assumptions, but in this message I will refer to “teachers,” plural.

The false teachers had strict rules about what people should eat and drink and about the observance of religious times and seasons. Concerning foods, it is not known whether the reference is to the Old Testament law about clean and unclean foods or not. The rules may have been about fasting since many religious people deprived the body of food in their efforts to obtain righteousness. Both of these kinds of rules suggest an Old Testament Jewish influence.

The teachers also advocated the keeping of prescribed festivals and celebrations. The terms “Festival,” “new moon,” and “Sabbath” represented annual, monthly, and weekly religious observances. According to the Old Testament law, Jews were required to gather for three special festivals each year. The Jewish calendar was based on the phases of the moon, and the reference to the Sabbath day clearly points to Jewish habits, for only Jews kept the Sabbath. It appears that the incorrect teaching was based on loyalty to Old Testament patterns of religious behavior.

The main point of Paul’s letter is that these rules were not necessary since Christ had provided a complete and sufficient salvation, a salvation based on the grace of God and not on required human activities. It was Paul’s contention that the Colossian believers had been set free from such regulations and traditions, and that their standing before God was not determined by their observance or nonobservance of certain regulations. Hence, Paul instructed the Colossian believers to “not let anyone judge them” based on the observance of religious rules.

According to Paul, all such legal requirements were but “a shadow of the things that were to come.” Just as it would be foolish for a person to try to grasp hold of a shadow, Paul wanted his readers to understand the futility of trying to gain a righteous standing through legalistic practices. “Shadows” represented the realm of the Old Testament. “Shadows” anticipated the reality of the New Testament. “The ‘reality’ (substance) was to be found in Christ.” Paul wanted his readers to understand that all the treasures of spiritual fulfillment foreshadowed in the Old Testament were in Christ alone, and that any teaching which was focused on efforts to obtain a relationship with God that had already been provided was clearly misleading and unnecessary.

In Paul's mind, it was totally illogical for individuals who had already placed their faith in Jesus Christ to turn back to shadows. I hope you remember his instructions: "Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him" (*Colossians 2:6*). The members of the Church in Colosse had entered into a relationship with Christ Jesus by faith, not by the keeping of rules. As believers, their on-going growth in the knowledge of Christ would also be through faith and not through the observance of religious regulations. The whole aim of Paul was for believers to enjoy the fullness of relationship with Christ Jesus, and he knew this was possible only through faith.

The third specific warning is in verses 18 and 19, "Don't let anyone disqualify you," that is, "cheat you," or "rob you," "of the prize." Behind the phrase was the picture of a judge or umpire at a competition. He had the authority to remove a competitor for not following the rules. In the context, Paul was saying: "Let no one deny your claim to be an authentic believer." The false teachers were seeking to impose certain behaviors and rules on believers and, if their teaching was accepted, then the believers would be disqualified and lose their prize.

In the first part of the letter Paul mentioned that the believers at Colosse were already "qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints" (*Colossians 1:12*). He knew that any emphasis on rules would remove believers from the benefits of faith in Christ Jesus that they already had.

According to Paul, the people who were promoting the false teaching "delighted in false humility and the worship of angels." These phrases point toward the influence of the Greco-Roman culture. Let me explain what I mean. The pagan Greek philosophers had a dualistic way of thinking about the world. They believed that all things related to the spirit were good and that all physical and material things were evil, and that the spiritual and the physical worlds were so opposite that they had no connecting points.

The implications of this were far-reaching. For example, because of their belief in the inherent evil of matter, it was impossible for Greek philosophers to accept the incarnation of God in Jesus. According to the philosophers, Jesus could not be truly human if he was conceived by God's Spirit, nor could He be truly God if He was human.

It seems that the false teachers were integrating this philosophy into their Christian faith. They agreed that God was so lofty and holy that He could not have any connection with anything that was physical and evil. According to them, this meant that Christ could not be dwelling in believers nor have anything to do with them directly. They insisted that intermediaries were necessary. That's why they considered the worship of angels to be necessary.

The teachers thought they were being humble in selecting angels to be their intercessors, rather than appealing directly to God Himself. It would have been their opinion that believers were arrogant and misinformed if they insisted that Christ was in them. The term, "false humility," refers to the attitude which thinks "I am human and therefore evil. God is so holy that He cannot have anything to do with me directly. The only way I can connect with God is through His servant angels."

The teachers insisted that their worship of angels rather than the supreme God was an expression of humility, but, to Paul, it was a false humility based on twisted thinking. Such teaching was undoubtedly confusing to those believers who had been taught that the all-sufficient Christ was in them and with them.

Paul wrote that the false teachers "go into great detail about what they have seen." The meaning of the Greek language in this phrase is not entirely clear, but it seems that the teachers were claiming their authority on the basis of visionary experiences. There have been numerous religious leaders through the ages who claimed to have received special visions of secret things. Such people begin to think that they are superior to ordinary men and women because they know something that others don't.

Paul was very clear about the attitudes of the teachers at Colosse: they had "unspiritual minds puffed up with idle notions." The word translated "unspiritual" is, literally, "of the flesh." In other words, these influencers had minds controlled by their human nature. They clearly had not received their enlightenment from the Holy Spirit. Rather, they were filled with their own fanciful ideas.

Next was an even more explicit criticism about the spiritual condition of the teachers. According to Paul, they had lost their connection with the Head of the Church. This suggests that they had started out properly, but drifted away. This can happen to every believer who becomes detached from the Source of spiritual life and growth. And when some in the Church lose their hold on Christ, the fellowship of believers loses its unity and cohesiveness. The “whole body” is no longer knit together as it should be. The result is spiritual impoverishment and the slow drying up of true God-given resources.

The condition for spiritual growth is very simple: All guidance and nurture in the body of believers must come from Christ, the Head of the body. Every member of the Body can benefit from this guidance and nurture if each member of the body holds fast to the Head.

We can turn Paul’s illustration around by asking, “Just how much life remains in the body after the head is separated from the body?” Spiritually, when that happens, the Church is no longer a solid, God-honoring Church. When the connection with the Head of the Church is lost, that’s when people get strange notions in their heads, when false information is proclaimed, when men begin to promote their ideas rather than God’s, and that’s when there is confusion and division among members.

Verses 20-23 are the climax to Paul’s appeal to the believers at Colosse. He wants them to remain faithful to Christ and to reject the ideas and teachings which will hinder their spiritual growth. He has warned the believers about the character of the new teaching. He concludes with a very direct and pointed application question: “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why do you continue to submit to its rules?”

The word “died” refers to the time of the believer’s conversion, when he or she enters into fellowship with Christ, and is thereby delivered from “the basic principles of this world.” The phrase, “basic principles of this world,” appeared in the first warning (*Colossians 2:8*) which we thought about last week. The phrase is a reference to the influences of the supernatural powers of evil on human behavior. Believers do not have to submit to the rules and influences of this world because, by faith, they are identified with Christ who has “disarmed such powers and authorities, ... triumphing over them by the cross” (*Colossians 2:15*).

The false teachers did not believe that the salvation of Jesus was sufficient for them. They followed rules and practiced behaviors that they thought would help them gain additional favor with God. They were trying to earn salvation by self-effort. They did not recognize the grace of God.

Any believer who accepts such teaching and goes back to the behaviors of self-help returns to a spiritual state or condition to which they were supposed to be dead. To die to “the basic principles” means to be liberated from such a condition once for all.

In verse 22 Paul states that the rules which prohibit certain activities are “destined to perish with use.” The reason is given in the latter part of the verse: “because they are based on human commands and teachings.” This is a way of saying that there is no eternal value in such spiritual teaching. This is in contrast to what God has done in Christ. The things that Christ has accomplished are permanent and eternal.

The rules of the false teachers in Colosse had the appearance of wisdom and sincerity. An outsider who would observe their worship practices, their humility, and their efforts to control their lives, would be impressed. To the observer, they might have seemed to be reasonable and wise people, but, in reality, their lives were not directed by God.

Paul brought his denunciation of the false teachers to an end with a series of condemning statements: Their rules for worship were “self-imposed.” It was a case of men choosing religious practices for themselves without authority from God. Their humility was not authentic. It actually generated pride. Their self-inflicted painful treatment of their bodies was their way to obtain favor with God. Unfortunately, stated Paul, their practices had “no value in restraining sensual indulgence.” In other words, the practices did not help these teachers to develop Christ-like attitudes. They remained earthly minded. There was no spiritual value in what they were doing. The religion of the false teachers was essentially the religion of the fallen world.

Paul understood the gospel as bringing people from slavery to freedom, and he recognized that false teaching would put believers back on the road from freedom to slavery. Paul did not want his readers to be enslaved to the world, to the law, or to the flesh. All those who have put their faith in the sovereign Lord Jesus Christ are set free from human ideas about religion.