

## IX. Living in Christ

April 28/29, 2010 Colossians 2:16-23

**Aim:** To see that living in Christ means rejecting man-made legalism, mysticism, and asceticism.

Chapter 2 of Colossians is full of warnings from Paul about the teaching of the false teachers in Colossae. In verse 4, he warns them against being deceived by persuasive words. In verse 8, he warns them against being kidnapped by empty and vain philosophy. In verse 16, he issues a warning against being judged. In verse 18 he warns against being cheated out of a reward. And in verse 20, he cautions against submitting to man-made regulations.

The churches in the Lycus Valley faced the danger of spiritual intimidation. False teachers were telling them that Jesus Christ was not sufficient, that they needed something more. These people believed they were privy to a higher level of spiritual knowledge and the secrets of spiritual illumination. This higher, hidden truth was beyond Jesus Christ and the Word. The 'something more' that the false teachers offered was a syncretism of pagan philosophy, Jewish legalism, mysticism, and asceticism. In 2:8-23, Paul mounts a frontal attack on the Colossian heresy. He has already dealt with philosophy (2:8-10) and presented Christ's sufficiency (2:11-15). He continues his refutation of the Colossian heretics by dealing with legalism (2:16-17), mysticism (2:18-19), and asceticism (2:20-23).

The central point of verse 8, an exhortation not to follow the false teaching, is also the heart of vv. 16-23. This paragraph gives us the only really specific explicit information about the false teaching in Colossae. Unfortunately, while explicit, the information Paul provides is not always clear. Interpreters differ significantly on the interpretation of some of the things that Paul says about the teachers and thereby reach quite different conclusions about the overall shape of the teaching.

### A. Warning against Legalism (Col. 2:16-17)

#### 1. Legalism

In short, the problem was a first-century form of a problem that reasserts itself at regular intervals in the history of the Christian church, namely legalism. The legalist is a person whose first response to a situation is to say within himself, 'what we need round here is some rules.' This of itself may not be a bad thing, but the legalist goes on to insist on rules that God does not insist upon. Anything that is commanded in the Word of God is binding on the conscience. Anything that is not found there cannot be applied with the same rigor.

Legalism is the religion of human achievement. It argues that spirituality is based on Christ plus human works. It makes conformity to man-made rules the measure of spirituality. Legalism is useless because it cannot restrain the flesh. It is also dangerously deceptive, because inwardly rebellious and disobedient Christians, or even non-Christians, can conform to a set of external performance standards or rituals.

The idea that spirituality can be quantified provides an unfortunate basis for pride and judgmentalism. The flesh finds doing truly spiritual things difficult (cp. Mt. 26:41). But the flesh has no trouble with religious rules and regulations. There is an authentic lure to legalism.

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

However, legalism spawns judgmentalism. Judgmentalism is miserable for the judged and the judging, because it shrivels their souls.

In Romans 14 Paul makes the point that it is often an act of Christian love to defer to the scruples of others (cp. Rom. 14:5-6). Paul made the point that it is not merely courteous but an act of love to curtail our freedom of action when that might cause unnecessary offense to another believer whose conscience is as yet somewhat immature. In Romans 14 we meet the ‘weaker brother,’ the Christian whose conscience is as yet ill-informed and hypersensitive. Thus, the only legitimate reason for restraining Christian liberty is to protect a weaker Christian brother or sister.

The situation in Colossae, however, was different. The people who were troubling the church members were not immature believers who had yet to learn how to think through their moral choices in a biblically informed manner. They were, in fact, people with decided and settled convictions. The ‘weaker brother’ of Romans 14 is unsure of his ground and feels threatened. The new teachers in Colossae knew exactly where they stood and did the threatening. The Lord’s people were being cowed by those who usurped authority over their consciences.

### 2. Judgment (2:16a)

*‘So let no one judge you ...’*

The ‘therefore’ (‘so’) at the beginning of verse 16 connects the theology about the ‘fullness of Christ’ in vv. 10-15 with Paul’s exhortations to resist the false teachers in this verse and following. Because it is in Christ that you have spiritual fullness, Paul is saying, do not let anyone impose upon you a program of spiritual development that does not have Christ at its heart.

‘Judge,’ like its Greek equivalent (*krinō*), can have a neutral or negative connotation. The word here is clearly negative, paralleled by being ‘taken captive’ in v. 8 and being ‘disqualified’ in v. 18. The latter parallel in particular could suggest that Paul means not just that the false teachers were ‘criticizing’ the Colossian Christians, but that they were pronouncing God’s judgment upon them.

‘Judge’ here means ‘intimidate.’ They must not let themselves become browbeaten or cowed. It would seem that the false teachers who had come to the region stipulated that their followers should observe certain rituals before they could experience the ‘fullness’ of Christ. Paul thus tells them not to sacrifice their freedom in Christ for a set of man-made rules.

Paul enumerates two sets of issues on the basis of which the false teachers are ‘passing judgment’: food and drink, and the observance of special religious days.

### 3. Diets and Days (2:16bc)

*a) Doing What They Shouldn’t (2:16b)*

*‘...in food or in drink...’*

While Paul does not directly say so here, his reference to ‘rules’ such as ‘do not handle’ and ‘do not taste’ (vv. 20-21) make it clear that the false teachers were advocating abstinence from some kinds of food and drink. Our text gives no information about just what foods or kinds of drink were being prohibited. The Old Testament law, of course, prohibits the eating of certain food deemed ‘unclean,’ but it does not generally prohibit any kind of drinking. However, we should

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

at least keep open the possibility that the Colossian false teachers' abstinence from food and drink had its origins elsewhere, since many ancient Greco-Roman philosophical and religious traditions also featured prohibitions of meat and wine.

Paul's comment about 'food' (*brōsei*) and 'drink' (*posei*) here suggests that the newcomers believed that the Old Testament dietary laws should be binding on all Christians (cp. Lev. 11). If anything, they went a step further. The Old Testament food laws said nothing at all about drink. The Nazirites abstained from alcohol, but this was entirely voluntary on their part. It seems likely that the members of the church in Colossae were being told that kosher food and teetotalism were both essential for godliness.

Of course, this goes against the teaching of the New Testament (cp. Mk. 7:18-20; Mt. 15:1-20; Acts 10:13-16; 15:28-29; Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8). The New Testament Scriptures are unified in telling us that all food and drink are lawful. Of course, dietary principles are a good idea. But dietary discipline is not a sign of spirituality. We are not to judge others, or allow anyone to pass a religious judgment on us, in regard to food and drink.

Does this tussle in a first-century church have anything to say to modern believers? Every generation of Christians tends to develop a set of unwritten rules. They are often largely negative. In effect, they are evangelical taboos. Do these things, and you are written off as being worldly. The continual challenge before each generation of believers is to make sure that we don't mistake the commands of Christ, which are binding, for the evangelical version of the 'traditions of the elders,' which are at best voluntary.

### *b) Not Doing What They Should (2:16c)*

*'...or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths...'*

It is virtually certain that the false teachers were advocating (rather than criticizing) observance of special days. An Old Testament/Jewish derivation for the false teachers' insistence on keeping certain religious days is very likely. The threefold 'religious festival' (*heortē*), 'New Moon celebration' (*neomēnia*), and 'Sabbath day' (*sabbatōn*) is common in the Old Testament (e.g., 1 Chr. 23:31; 2 Chr. 2:3; 31:3; Ez. 45:17; Hos. 2:13).

The Christians in Colossae were also being reproached for their failure to keep festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths. Paul has lumped together in one phrase the whole Jewish calendar, with its observance of yearly feast days, monthly sacrifices, and weekly Sabbaths. A festival was one of the annual Jewish celebrations, such as Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Lights (cp. Lev. 23). Sacrifices were also offered on the new moon, or first day of the month (Num. 28:11-14).

A casual reading of this verse would suggest that Sabbath observance is treated as entirely optional: one must not judge another Christian over it. But a number of interpreters argue that this kind of reading fails to reckon with the context in which the Sabbath is being observed in our passage. Only Sabbath observance that is connected inappropriately to a wider religious viewpoint is here being condemned.

Most of the believers in the Lycus Valley had emerged from a pagan thought world where it was assumed that seasonal rituals were also a way of paying due respect to the celestial powers that control the movement of the heavenly bodies, which in turn, have an impact on events on this earth. Were the newcomers advocating a blend where the outer framework of Jewish ritual catered for a mindset governed by assumptions that were actually pagan?

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

This was one form of a process called syncretism. Syncretism involves the fusion of different, even conflicting elements of religious thought. Syncretism is attractive essentially because it is a way of minimizing the collision of cultures that occurs when the claims of Christ come into conflict with the claims of religious, social, and family tradition. It is, at heart, a way of modifying Christianity so as not to cause offense (except to God!).

In Colossae, the pattern was much the same as it had been over food laws. Believers were judged to have failed because they had not met a set of expectations that were not actually an essential part of Christian discipleship.

### 4. Shadow and Substance (2:17)

*‘...which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.’*

In verse 17, Paul shatters the words of the false teachers. Paul states very clearly that food laws and the observing of special religious days were merely a shadow of the things that were to come. This shadow/reality comparison points to a probable contrast between Old Testament and New.

It is wrong for anyone to pass judgment on someone else over the matters mentioned in verse 16, because these matters are only the ‘shadow’ of the reality that Christians now find in Christ. In referring to them (collectively) as ‘a shadow,’ Paul taps into a popular Hellenistic image with its roots in Greek philosophical speculation. Plato had famously used the contrast of ‘shadow’ and ‘substance,’ or ‘reality’ to compare the material realities to their corresponding ‘ideals.’ The most famous example of the imagery comes in the allegory of the cave (*The Republic*, 514A-520A). This comparison is usually between ‘shadow’ (*skia*) and ‘form’ or image’ (*eikon*), but it could also be expressed, as Paul does here, versus ‘substance’ (*sōma*). A good example of the general contrast, using just these terms, is found in the Jewish philosopher Philo, who spoke of the ‘letter’ of the Old Testament as the ‘shadow,’ while his own allegorical interpretations were the ‘substance,’ the ‘higher values ... [that] really and truly exist.’

But Paul, like the author to the Hebrews, who applies the same contrast in a similar way (Heb. 10:1), uses popular language to convey a historically oriented contrast between one era and another. He signals this orientation with the phrase ‘that were to come,’ which refers to those realities that have now come in Christ but were still to come from the perspective of the original institutions. Believers who belong to the new era through their incorporation into Christ therefore experience the reality to which the Old Testament and its law pointed. And they are no longer compelled to follow the laws of that earlier era. The Colossian Christians should not let anyone insist on their observing the rules and ceremonies of the earlier era that has now past.

Ancient writers typically used the word ‘form’ in contrast to ‘shadow.’ Paul, however, chooses to use the word *sōma*. This word can be translated ‘reality’ or ‘substance,’ but, of course, more often it is translated ‘body.’ And since Paul uses this word in Colossians to refer to Christ’s own body (1:22) and to the ‘body’ of the church (1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15), it is often thought he used this particular word to convey a theological point, namely that the ‘substance’ to which the shadow pointed is the Christian church.

A shadow is by its very nature, insubstantial. It only takes its shape from the solid object that casts it. But whereas a shadow is flimsy and ethereal, the substance is solid and tangible. In Paul’s mind, the religious system of Israel prior to the coming of Christ was like a shadow – ephemeral and transient. The coming of Jesus, however, meant that the shadow had been

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

replaced by the substance. That which was only ever meant to be temporary, because it was a pale silhouette of something much greater, should fade away. It had been eclipsed by the brilliant reality that it prefigured.

The apostle was not saying that they should cast aside all previous requirements and eat whatever they fancied, nor was he saying that they should ignore special events in their calendars. He was emphasizing that they were no longer bound by legalism. Christ had fulfilled the law, and the Old Testament regulations found their fulfillment in Him. Because Christ had come as the fulfillment of the symbols, why should the Colossians observe the shadow when they had the blessings of the reality?

Paul wanted to provide ammunition for browbeaten Christians. They should let the main thing be the main thing, and concentrate not on flimsy externals, but the beauty, glory, and sufficiency of Jesus Christ, priest and sacrifice for the people of God. The new teachers were making an enormous fuss about mere shadows, confusing the ephemeral with the solid and substantial, a transient and passing system with something permanent and enduring.

### **B. Warning against Mysticism (Col. 2:18-19)**

#### **1. Mysticism**

Mysticism may be defined as the pursuit of a deeper or higher subjective religious experience. It is the belief that spiritual reality is perceived apart from the human intellect and natural senses. It looks for truth internally, weighing feelings, intuition, and other internal sensations more heavily than objective, observable, external data. Mysticism ultimately derives its authority from a self-actualized, self-authenticated light rising from within. This irrational and anti-intellectual approach is the antithesis of Christian theology.

Christian mysticism *per se* is not evil, for its goal is a deeper knowledge of God. What Paul is talking about here is a deceptive mysticism which is not rooted in Christ. In the context here, it is a mysticism derived from the pretense and imagination of the Gnostics.

Verse 18 is arguably the most difficult verse in Colossians to interpret.

#### **2. Mystics' Deception (2:18a)**

*'Let no one cheat you of your reward...'*

The translation 'disqualify' reflects the use of certain forms of the Greek word used here (*katabreauō*) to refer to the negative verdict of an umpire in an athletic contest. The form of this verb is found only here in biblical Greek and is very rare elsewhere. The basic verb (*brabeuō*) in Paul's day seemed most often simply to mean 'judge' (see Col. 3:15).

In this case 'reward' does not mean our reward in heaven, our salvation, but the full enjoyment of our faith as believers. There are shady operators who can rob a Christian of what is rightfully his. Yield an inch to them, and we may end up losing the joy in believing that is our due.

Paul had also told them not to let themselves be kidnapped (2:8) and not to be intimidated (2:16). These repeated warnings all stemmed from the fact that the fellowship in Colossae had fallen prey to a group of new teachers whose distinctive emphases were potentially very damaging to the spiritual well-being of individual believers and the church as a whole. At this point in his argument, Paul went on to suggest that the newcomers were the spiritual equivalent of burglars.

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

While they claimed to enrich the believers in Colossae, there was actually a real possibility that they would impoverish them.

### 3. Mystics' Teaching (2:18b-d)

They gave enormous weight to things that did not concern the heart of the gospel. Three things in particular stand out.

#### a) *False Humility (2:18b)*

*'...taking delight in false humility...'*

The first is 'false humility' (*tapeinophrosunē*), which the false teachers delighted in. The verb 'delight in' (*thelō*) can also be translated 'insist on.' Paul is describing what the false teachers themselves are delighting in.

It goes without saying that the truly humble man is not aware of his humility. The New Testament generally speaks positively of this virtue (e.g., Col. 3:12), but it is clear in this context that Paul does not think the false teachers' interest in 'humility' is a good thing. Humility is elusive. The false teachers were 'taking delight' in their 'humility,' meaning their supposed humility was nothing but ugly pride. They were pretending to a humility that they don't really feel. It was like that of Uriah Heep, one of the most contemptible characters of English literature, who said, 'I am well aware that I am the 'umblest person going' (chapter 16 of *David Copperfield*).

Some commentators suggest that the Greek word translated 'humility' has connotations of asceticism, or self-denial, with particular reference to fasting. If that view is correct, the newcomers had told the believers in Colossae that they needed to humble themselves by taking up the path of self-denial. This would be a necessary prelude for a special experience of enlightenment. Going without food would make them more receptive to the blessing that God has in store for those who are willing to take the path of restraint and moderation.

There is a genuine strand of Christian teaching that emphasizes both self-discipline and authentic meekness. The new teachers, however, were advocating a bogus form of humility. The classic problem of asceticism is that the focus is all on externals. It becomes a way of accumulating merit. Depriving the body of pleasures may have some limited value in teaching it who is master, but the real work has to be done on what we are inside.

#### b) *Worship of Angels (2:18c)*

*'...and worship of angels...'*

Second, the spiritual burglars in Colossae made much of the 'worship of angels' (*thrēskeia tōn angelōn*). This phrase can be interpreted in one of two ways. The first is to worship angelic beings, while the second is to worship in the style or manner of angels.

#### (1) Angel Worship

The traditional interpretation is preferred (by Moo). It is supported by linguistic analysis of the Greek phrase, which is more likely to mean 'worship offered to angels' than 'worship offered by angels.' A key concern of Colossians has been to accentuate the superiority of Christ over spiritual beings (1:16, 20; 2:10, 15). Such a concern to minimize the significance of angels would make very good sense if, indeed, the false teachers were worshipping them.

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

The false teachers loved to act humble and say, ‘We are not good enough to go directly to God, so we begin humbly with one of the angels, which, if we are correct in spirit, will elevate our requests through the hierarchy to God.’ For a professing Christian to worship angels would imply that there were other mediators between God and man than the Lord Jesus Christ alone (cp. 1 Tim. 2:5). The Bible strictly forbids the worship of angels (cp. Mt. 4:10).

The practice of offering worship to angelic beings did indeed become a problem in this region of Phrygia some centuries later. A synod was held in Laodicea in AD 363 which decreed, ‘It is not right for Christians to abandon the church of God and go away to invoke angels.’ The early Church father Theodoret, commenting on Colossians 2:18, wrote, ‘The disease which St. Paul denounces, continued for a long time in Phrygia and Pisidia.’ The archangel Michael was worshipped in Asia Minor as late as AD 739. He was also given credit for miraculous cures.

This error may not be what Paul had in mind (according to Arthur). He wrote at an early period in the history of the Church, probably too early for a serious error that taught that angels could be worshipped alongside, and in addition to, the one true God revealed in Scripture to have taken hold.

### (2) Angel-Style Worship

By ‘worship of angels,’ Paul could also have meant ‘the kind of worship that the angels offer,’ or ‘worship angel style.’ This view of the passage has gained considerable popularity in recent years. According to this interpretation, the false teachers are seeking to join with the angels in the worship of God. Such a participation with angels in the worship of God in heaven features in many Jewish mystical and apocalyptic writing.

This would fit in with the kind of elitism that the newcomers favored. They would suggest, in effect, that we cannot expect to be truly blessed until we worship as the angels do.

#### c) *False Visions (2:18d)*

*‘...intruding into those things which he has not seen...’*

Third, Paul describes the use of visions by the newcomers. Paul’s use of the word ‘he’ at this point has led some to wonder whether he had one particular teacher in mind. There is also a vigorous debate as to whether English translations of the Bible should include the word ‘not’ at this point. Some ancient texts do not include it. If we were to follow them, the problem would lie not so much with what the man has *not* seen as with what he *has* seen. In short, this man did not derive his teaching from Scripture alone, but claimed direct revelation from God.

In addition to practicing false humility and worshipping angels, the false teachers were taking their stand on visions they had seen. The verb ‘intruding’ (*embateuō*) can be taken in a metaphorical sense, ‘go into detail about.’ In this view, the false teachers are ‘hung up on’ the visions that they have been receiving. Like many heretics and cultists down through the ages, they claimed support for their aberrant teachings in visions they had supposedly seen. There is no need for extrabiblical revelation anymore (Heb. 1:1-2).

The phrase used here, going ‘into great detail about what he has seen,’ is a technical phrase used in that day to describe someone being admitted to a higher grade in one of the mystery religions. Through this, they claimed to be on the inside.

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

Paul saw this as the domain of the spiritual pickpocket. Guide people away from the Bible, and vagueness, even fantasy, takes the place of clarity. When the Bible is explained, God speaks. Move away from propounding Scripture, and the voice of God is heard progressively less often.

### 4. Mystics' Character (2:18e-19)

#### a) *Puffed Up in Himself (2:18e)*

*'...vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind...'*

Paul warns the Colossians not to be intimidated by the false teachers' claims. Far from being the spiritual elite they thought themselves to be, they were inflated without cause. Because of their supposed insights and connections with the spiritual realms, the Gnostics were proud and puffed up. Advertising humility, they were filled with huge conceit.

'Puff up' translates a verb (*phusiuomenos*) that occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in 1 Corinthians (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4). Its basic meaning, 'blow up, inflate' (as one might blow up a bellows), suits it beautifully to express the idea of arrogance. The arrogance of the false teachers expressed itself in their arrogating to themselves the right to stand in judgment over others.

'Unspiritual' translates *sarx*, (often 'flesh'), which Paul uses here in his typical fashion to refer to that which belongs to this world and which therefore often fails to take into consideration the truth of the 'spiritual' realm.

The intimidating display is all pretence. There is no real justification for the swollen image he presents, for it has no real substance behind it.

To summarize this difficult verse (v. 18), then, we find Paul to be asserting four things about the false teachers: 1) they put a great deal of stock in ascetic practices, perhaps to induce visions; 2) they are so concerned with calling upon angels as a means of protection from evil forces that they are practically worshipping them; 3) they focus on visions they have experienced, perhaps citing the content of those visions in their teaching; and 4) they display, perhaps because of their boasting about visions, an arrogance that reveals a worldly orientation.

#### b) *Not Holding Fast to Christ (2:19)*

*'...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.'*

A further problem with this kind of person in Colossae was that he was not as focused on God as he liked to think. His mind was dominated by ways of thinking that would be normal outside the church. 'They have lost connection with the head' (*on kratōn tēn kephalēn*) probably implies that the false teaching has arisen from within the larger Christian community. The false teachers were apparently professing Christians, who, because of their preoccupation with rules and spiritual beings and visions, had lost contact with the only effective source of spiritual growth. Working from a metaphor that Paul has introduced earlier in Colossians (1:18; 2:10), Paul calls Christ 'the Head.'

This is the root of their problem: the false teachers had (and have) no part in the true Body of Christ. Conversely, this was (and is) the answer for those who want to steel themselves against their delusive teaching. We must hold fast to Christ, the Head.

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

The metaphor of the human body governs Paul's imagery here. Since the head was considered to be the animating and directing part of the body, the analogy would usually connote either authority, or empowerment, or both. Christ's authority is the focus in 2:10, but in 1:18 and here probably both the ideas of authority and of 'source of provision' are in view.

There has been some discussion about the exact denotation of the Greek words translated 'ligaments and sinews' or 'joints and ligaments.' It appears that both terms referred to the small 'bands' or 'fasteners' that connected the parts of the body. 'Ligaments' (*aphōn*), the tissue that connects bones to other bones within the joint, and 'sinews' (*syndesmōn*), the tissue that connects muscles to bones (also 'tendons'), are therefore appropriate English renderings. It makes sense therefore, for Paul to say that these parts 'support' and 'hold together' the body. The first verb that Paul uses (*epichorēgeō*) means 'make provision for, 'furnish,' and many commentators conclude that it must refer to the nourishment supplied by the ligaments and sinews to the body. Of course, this strains to the breaking point the underlying analogy, since ligaments and sinews do not function this way.

It is probable that Paul introduces the imagery here to suggest the same point he explicitly makes in the Ephesians text (Eph. 4:15-16): the body of Christ grows as its members, or parts, support and learn from each other. Paul's main point here is not how the members facilitate growth but how the ultimate source of the body's growth is Christ, its head. It is through Him that the body 'grows as God causes it to grow.' The 'growth' (*auksēsin*) Paul has in view here is probably the growth in maturity of the existing 'members' of the body rather than the growth of the body by the addition of new members. For it is the matter of how individual believers find spiritual 'fullness' that is the precipitating issue in the letter.

Today, this brand of mysticism is most commonly seen in the charismatic movement—where Scripture is a distant second in importance to visions and revelations. When such intimidation came from the sixteenth-century mystical charismatics of Martin Luther's day, the great Reformer was very firm with them, clinging to biblical revelation and the centrality and sufficiency of Christ. In particular, the followers of Thomas Mūnzer and the radical Anabaptists gave great prominence to the work and gifts of the Spirit—and to mystical knowledge. Their cry, expressing their suprabiblical experience, was, 'The Spirit, the Spirit!' Luther replied, 'I will not follow where their spirit leads.' When they were granted the privilege of an interview with Luther, they gave their cry, 'The Spirit, the Spirit!' The great Reformer was not impressed and thundered, 'I slap your spirit on the snout.'

### C. Warning against Asceticism (Col. 2:20-23)

#### 1. The Definition of Asceticism

Most of Colossians 2 has been taken up with warning the believers in Colossae what would happen if they gave a hearing to the newcomers who claimed to offer a more sophisticated and fulfilling version of Christianity. Now in these last verses of the chapter, Paul brought his warnings to a conclusion. He did so by posing a searching question. The thrust of the question is: 'Given that you no longer belong to the world outside the church, why live by its standards?'

An ascetic is one who lives a life of rigorous self-denial. Spiritual discipline is good. But here, Paul warns against extreme asceticism. Asceticism has its own seductiveness. Asceticism feeds the flesh by starving it. God may call some to a life of self-denial. Many missionaries, for

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

example, have by necessity led ascetic lives. They did not do so, however, as an attempt to gain spirituality.

The new teachers imposed a code of conduct on their followers. Believers in Colossae were being enticed to fall in with these demands. Paul wanted them to understand that it was completely inappropriate for a Christian to submit to a set of regulations imposed by anyone other than Christ Himself.

### 2. The Contrariness of Asceticism (2:20)

#### a) *Died with Christ (2:20a)*

*‘Therefore, if you died with Christ...’*

Paul wanted his readers in Colossae to understand that these things have no claim on the believer because each and every Christian has ‘died with Christ’ (cp. Gal. 2:20; Rom. 6:1-10). When Christ died there is a sense in which the believer died with Him and is now a new person altogether. Through their union with Christ, the redeemed are set free from man-made rules designed to promote spirituality.

The ‘if’ clause reminds us of a key theological point that Paul has made earlier: believers have ‘died with Christ’ (v. 12). Conditional clauses in Greek often assume the reality of the condition. That is clearly the case here. Paul is not simply stating the fact that we have died with Christ; he is inviting us to consider whether, indeed, we have died with Christ and thus ponder its implications.

Given that the Christian has ceased to live under the way of these things, because the person that he once was no longer exists and he is a new person altogether, it is absurd and irrational for him to go on living like an unconverted person, as though the things that once controlled him still had a right to do so. The focus of Paul’s logic is devastating. If I really am a new person, I should be different.

#### b) *Basic Principles of the World (2:20b)*

*‘...from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—’*

But Paul’s concern in this verse is not simply to remind us of our death ‘with Christ,’ but to indicate the effects of that experience, that we have been set free from the evil powers of this world.

Paul once again uses the phrase from verse 8, ‘the basic principles of the world’ (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*) in opposition to being in Christ. Paul was saying that the teaching of the newcomers was rudimentary. Its origin was not in what Jesus taught, but in the ‘world’; in other words, these were the kind of opinions that arise among men who will not submit to God. Far from being advanced teaching for the spiritually sophisticated, it was all very elementary and basic.

However, there is good reason to understand Paul to be saying that the teaching of these men was according to the ‘elemental spirits.’ There are powers at work that we cannot see, powers that influence the minds of people without their knowing it (cp. 1 Tim. 4:1). It is sobering to reflect that the religious convictions of a large proportion of mankind are actually shaped and molded by invisible but malicious intelligences bent on leading people away from God.

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

The construction in Greek that Paul uses here emphasizes the reality of being set free from the power of these ‘elemental forces.’ Many people in Paul’s day lived in fear of these ‘forces’ and sought ways to live in harmony with them. The sense of bondage to these powers appears to have been what made the false teachers’ program especially seductive. Paul is therefore at pains to show that Christ’s victory over the spiritual beings that are included in the ‘elemental forces’ was complete and final (vv. 14-15) and that the people who are in union with Christ share in that victory. In this and the following verses it becomes clear that the main ‘remedy’ for appeasement of the ‘elemental forces’ being suggested by the false teachers was a set of rules focusing on an ascetic lifestyle.

Paul’s point is that believers no longer count the world as their true home or as the place that dictates who they are or how they are to live. By dying with Christ, we have been set free from the elements of the world, and we no longer therefore ‘belong’ to the world over which they rule. How foolish, then, to continue to submit to the rules of this world! ‘Submit to its rules’ (*dogmatizesthe*) has the sense ‘permit yourselves to be put under,’ ‘to be dictated to.’

Our death in Christ has freed us from the ‘elemental spirits of the universe,’ the demonic powers of this world which promote and thrive on human asceticism. Because we died with Christ, they have no actual power over us. To practice asceticism is to adopt a world system of religion, based on the ‘elementary principles of the world.’

### 3. The Futility of Asceticism (2:21-22)

#### a) Prohibitions (2:21)

“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle...”

Paul now provides some examples of the rules that the false teachers were trying to impose on the Colossian Christians. It is most unlikely that he is quoting the rules as the false teachers themselves presented them. Rather, as the somewhat sarcastic tone of the staccato listing of those ‘rules’ suggests, Paul is giving us his own interpretive paraphrase of what those rules amounted to.

The list of prohibitions in verse 21 (‘do not touch, do not taste, do not handle’) shows us their ideal for the truly enlightened man. He would abstain from certain foodstuffs and pleasures. They were apparently arguing that living in harmony with the ‘elemental forces’ required abstinence from certain food and drink, perhaps especially the eating of meat and the drinking of alcohol. By framing the prohibition with the word ‘taste’ (*geusē*) rather than ‘eat,’ Paul can include with one word both eating and drinking.

The verbs for ‘touch’ (*apsē*) and ‘handle’ (*thigēs*) are similar; there is little basis in the Greek for any difference at all between the verbs: both mean simply ‘touch.’ Probably both of the prohibitions of touching are Paul’s way of mockingly summarizing the general approach to the physical world that the false teachers were taking.

This kind of outlook is common in many religions. The orthodox Jew is kosher. The Muslim abstains from eating pork and will not touch alcohol. The Mormon will not drink tea or coffee. Buddhist monks are forbidden to sleep on luxurious beds, handle money, eat food after midday, indulge in entertainments, or wear ornaments or perfumes. This mentality is so pervasive that many people automatically assume that any religion is basically about going without pleasures and imposing austerities on ourselves. Roman Catholics do without various things during Lent.

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

In their circles it is also assumed that those who have a religious vocation must make a vow of perpetual celibacy.

Of course, it suits the enemy to present religion in this kind of light. This is, firstly, because a religion of rules distracts people from the true heart of Christianity, which is a personal relationship with Christ and a life-changing experience of His grace, His wonderful kindness to the undeserving. Secondly, it appeals to something in human nature. We prefer the idea that the way to God should be based on merit. It flatters our sense of ourselves.

### *b) Perishable (2:22a)*

*‘...which all concern things which perish with the using—’*

In verse 22-23 Paul justifies his rejection of the false teachers’ rules by making three points: 1) the rules have to do with matters of the world; 2) the rules reflect human and not divine teaching; and 3) the rules cannot bring spiritual transformation.

Asceticism is useless because it focuses attention on perishable things. Paul goes on to insist that not only is a religion that is based on rules not authentic Christianity, but it does not even make sense. In the first place, this is because it concerns things ‘which perish (*phtharan*) with the using (*apochrēsei*).’ We cannot build for eternity by investing in perishing things a degree of significance that goes far beyond their actual importance (cp. Mt. 5:17-20). By all means eat halal meat or be a vegetarian if you must, but neither course of action will affect your soul. The religions of this world are often obsessed with external things; Jesus is more concerned about what we are like at heart.

### *c) Man-Made (2:22b)*

*‘...according to the commandments and doctrines of men?’*

Paul goes on to give a second reason why a religion based on rules defies all logic. The rules are man-made. Why should we pay attention to rules that our Savior Himself does not insist upon? (cp. Is. 1:12; Mt. 23:4).

Paul’s point is that the false teachers have been making far too big a deal of matters that do not get to the essence of true Christian spirituality: the change of heart and mind that leads to true holiness. Jesus made a very similar point in his rebuke of the Pharisees for their preoccupation with their own rules of ritual uncleanness (Mark 7:17). Paul’s criticism of the false teachers’ rules for being ‘based on merely human commands’ (*entalmata ... tōn anthrōpōn*) ‘and teachings’ (*didaskalias*) sounds very much like Jesus’ characterization of the Pharisees’ traditions (Mark 7:7-8). To be sure, Mark 7:7 is quoting Isaiah 29:13, so it could be that Jesus and Paul are independently using the same Old Testament text. But it is more likely that Paul, even if he has Isaiah in mind, is also alluding to Jesus’ teaching.

## **4. The Impotence of Asceticism (2:23)**

### *a) Appearance of Value (2:23a)*

*‘These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body...’*

This verse as a whole both summarizes and concludes Paul’s rebuttal of the false teaching. Appropriately, then, the three specific components of the false teaching that Paul enumerates in the initial subordinate clause have all been mentioned previously in the paragraph: ‘self-imposed

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

worship’ is related to ‘the worship of angels’ (v. 18); ‘false humility’ has also been mentioned in verse 18; and ‘harsh treatment of the body’ refers to the ascetic practices of v. 16 – ‘what you eat and drink’ – and the prohibitions of v. 21.

These matters, notes Paul give to the false teaching an ‘appearance’ or ‘reputation’ of ‘wisdom’ (*sophia*). We should recall that Paul has labeled the false teaching a philosophy (*philo-sophia*) in verse 8. Now what has been implicit in Paul’s argument all along becomes explicit: their claim to offer a wise and comprehensive system of spiritual growth is nothing but a sham. For ‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ are found in Christ (2:3).

The false teachers’ system, Paul says, consists, first of all, in ‘self-imposed worship.’ This is the translation of yet another rare word (*ethelothrēskia*). The term may have been chosen by the false teachers to gain accolades for themselves: they have freely chosen a form of worship that involves such ‘rigor of devotion.’ The second source of purported wisdom is their insistence on ‘false humility,’ which is the same word as in verse 18 (*tapeinophrosynē*). The third characteristic of the false teachers’ program, ‘harsh treatment of the body’ (*apheidia sōmatos*), refers to the ascetic practices of the false teachers who embraced various disciplines, especially fasting and the avoidance of certain food and drink (vv. 16, 21).

There is no doubt that a religion of taboos and self-imposed privations can be attractive. Paul conceded that people are impressed by that kind of think. It has ‘an appearance of wisdom.’ At best, however, it is ‘self-imposed religion.’ Those who practice it are enslaving their consciences to their own religious fantasies. Asceticism might make a person appear spiritual, because of its emphasis on humility and poverty, but it serves only to gratify the flesh. It is a vain attempt to appear more holy than others (cp. Mt. 6:16-18).

Onlookers conclude that someone has paid a heavy price for his enlightenment in terms of ‘neglect of the body.’ If someone has gone without certain pleasures and denied himself the fulfillment of legitimate appetites, if he has borne pain, discomfort, and inconvenience, there will always be some who are ready to conclude that they are in the presence of a spiritual giant.

### *b) No Real Value (2:23b)*

*‘...but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.’*

Paul wanted his readers to understand, however, that the most damaging aspect of a religion of man-made rules is that it cannot achieve its object. Such rules ‘are of no value (*timē*) against the indulgence (*plēsmonēn*) of the flesh.’ They cannot conquer the tendency of the flesh to indulge its appetites. By ‘the flesh’ (*sarkos*) Paul does not so much mean our physical bodies as the unregenerate nature, with its selfish appetites and desires. Either we are governed by the Holy Spirit of God, or we are dominated by ‘the flesh.’

Paul’s use of this language here may imply that the false teachers were promising, through their attempt to placate hostile beings and their ascetic devotional practices, to take care of this problem of the ‘flesh,’ the bend within fallen humans toward self and the world, the ‘sinful nature’ or ‘sinful impulse.’ It is especially attractive to think that the problem of temptation, which can be viewed as a struggle to allow one’s mind to control one’s body, could be solved if only the body could be subdued through harsh treatment. Indeed, the lure of asceticism as a way of managing the sin problem and finding true spiritual enlightenment is seen in many religions through human history. It is a natural impulse.

## Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 9

But the false teachers were both imposing rules on others that they had no right to impose (vv. 16 and 18) and, more seriously, elevating their rules and practices and giving spiritual beings so much credit that they were, in effect, losing contact with Christ, the only source of spiritual power and growth (v. 19). It is for this reason that the ‘regulations’ of the false teachers could not accomplish the ‘subduing’ of the sinful nature that they were promising.

The great nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Alexander McClaren wrote, ‘Any asceticism is a great deal more to men’s taste than abandoning self. They will rather stick hooks in their backs and do the “swinging poojah” than give up their sins and yield up their wills. There is only one thing that will put the collar on the neck of the animal within us and that is the power of the indwelling Christ. Ascetic religion is godless, for its practitioners essentially worship themselves. As such, we are not to be intimidated by it.’

### D. Summary

The reality is this: ‘in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,’ and in Him we have been made full (2:9-10). But we can lose the benefits of that fullness very easily. We can fall to *legalism* and its attendant self-righteousness, joylessness, and judgmentalism. We can succumb to *mysticism* and develop a proud, elitist spirit which contributes nothing to true worship. We can get into *asceticism*, thinking it will make us more holy, when actually it will feed our flesh.

The answer to legalism is the continual realization of the grace of Christ. The answer to mysticism is an understanding of how profoundly we are related to Christ. The answer to asceticism is the reckoning that we have died, been buried, and are resurrected with Christ. The answer is where it all began: at the foot of the cross. Food, special days, and harsh treatment of our bodies will never bring us nearer to God; only holy living in obedience to Christ will bring us blessing.

For next time: Read Colossians 3:1-11.