

Mid Week • Colossians 2

INTRO

As I mentioned last week, we can only understand Colossians as we see it against the backdrop of heresy that prompted Paul to write the letter.

The last 2 verses of chapter 1 and the first 3 of chapter 2 reveal the kind of intense emotional reaction Paul had when Epaphras, the pastor of the church at Colosse, told Paul about the false teaching that was now endangering the Church.

Look at v. 28 of Chapter 1 . . .

28 Him we preach,

Paul didn't preach a philosophy, a moral code, a set of religious rules.

He preached Christ!

For Paul – as we sang tonight – it was all about Jesus!

warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.

See Paul's goal – see his vision?

His aim was spiritual maturity for those he ministered to.

He didn't just want to put a few notches on his gospel gun – he wanted to see men and women conformed into the image of Christ.

He wanted to see them band together in communities that would present a visible alternative to the world.

So he says he warned and taught everyone in all wisdom.

How important it is to not only warn, but to teach.

Teaching *equips*, while warning *cautions*.

If all we hear is warning, we only know what not to do.

If all we hear is teaching, we aren't cautioned against the dangers that are inherent in a fallen world.

A balanced ministry has both warning and teaching.

It directs us in where to walk and where not to walk.

Paul did both – and in it all, his goal was to present each and every person to Christ as a mature expression of God's grace and truth.

29 To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.

The words *labor* & *striving* are *athletic* terms.

They refer to the strenuous effort put forth by the determined runner to win the race or the wrestler who's locked in combat in the arena.

Our English word *agony* comes from word translated "striving."

Paul sees himself and his co-workers as engaged in a battle against error and deception.

But he has a vision of victory – what it looks like is men and women who stand free of sin and death and who not only enjoy the promise of heaven, but who live in such a way that they show the reality of the Reign of Christ in

their every day lives.

Paul knows this is his calling, what he has been energized for – and he knows he is a champion as he works and wrestles for the Lord.

- 1 **For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh,**
- 2 **that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and *attaining* to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ,**
- 3 **in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**

When Epaphras had brought word to Paul in Rome of the error that was now threatening them, it caused Paul to agonize for them.

Already the false teaching of gnosticism was starting to tear at the fabric of the church, so Paul prayed fervently that their unity would not be disturbed, but would grow even more strong.

The Gnostics claimed Jesus was a lower functionary in the Kingdom of God.

So Paul prays that they would realize Jesus is the sum total of God's revelation and that all wisdom and knowledge is to be found in Him.

There are no super secret mysteries that they have to ante-up to gain, as the Gnostics claimed.

If there was any mystery before, it has now been made abundantly clear through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the preaching of the gospel.

Again – note this – for Paul – it's all about Jesus!

If a person wants to be wise and possess knowledge – then it is to be found in Christ!

Friend – do you want to be wise?

Do you want to possess knowledge?

In this age – called the Information Age if you truly want to be in the know – then make Jesus your aim and do what Paul did – agonize, wrestle, strive, labor, work, to know Him and make Him known.

For in Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

CHAPTER 2

- 4 **Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.**

It's at this point that Paul is going to launch in to a formal refutation of the false teaching of the Gnostics.

You see, their error was so dangerous because they used persuasive arguments.

They had adopted Christian terminology, but they had stripped the words of their true meanings and had poured new meanings in to them.

This is a favorite tactic of the cults – they take words that are precious and central to the gospel of Christ, gut them, and then stuff them with lies.

When you talk with a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon about Jesus, they nod their heads and seem to agree on so many points – but the

Watchtower Jesus and the Mormon Jesus are not at all the Jesus of Scripture.

The Watchtower Jesus is the archangel Michael and the Mormon Jesus is the spirit brother of Lucifer and the spiritual offspring of a god named Elohim and *one* of his many celestial wives.

Grace does not mean to a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness what it means to you and me.

Salvation doesn't mean the same thing.

On and on it goes . . .

Paul's method of dealing with error was to proclaim the truth and to warn his readers that there is false teaching and false teachers out there who do spin a convincing sounding line – so beware!

5 For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ.

6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,

7 rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.

Paul begins by reminding them of the simplicity of the gospel and the power of the Spirit that had originally come to them.

They had already made a good start in the things of God, and they needed to be reminded of the fact that there was never any hint in the gospel that there was something else, something deeper, some new truth they had to attain in order to *really* be saved.

The hope of heaven and of enjoying an intimate relationship with God had been promised from the start.

It was this whole package that had seen them grow so quickly and changed so dramatically.

Paul wanted them to step back and take an objective look at themselves and see that their power to live the Christian life and see its fruit born consistently from their lives was the result of their dependence in Christ alone.

They didn't need some new teaching, some deeper knowledge.

They needed to just abide in what they already had.

Friend, be cautious in the extreme of any group or movement that suggests there are deeper truths, deeper insights and special knowledge that is only for those who have been enlightened.

There are some men and women making the circuit today and who appear regularly on certain Christian TV programs who claim they are getting special revelations from God.

They lean forward and stare in to the camera and say something to the effect that this isn't for everyone – not everyone is enlightened enough to receive this, but here is a new word from the Lord for this age.

This is nothing but a re-heated gnosticism – and Paul utterly rejects it.

8 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.

A pastor was concerned about an adult business that had opened near a school.

His protests finally led to a court case, and the defense attorney did all he could to embarrass the pastor.

“Are you not a pastor?” the lawyer asked. “And doesn’t the word *pastor* mean ‘shepherd’?”

The minister agreed.

“Well, if you’re a shepherd, why aren’t you out taking care of the sheep?”

The pastor replied, “Because today I’m fighting the wolves!”

Paul shows his pastoral heart as he writes these words – BEWARE!

Watch out!

“Beware lest any man carry you off as a captive” is the literal translation.

The false teachers did not go out and win the lost, no more than the cultists do today.

They “kidnapped” converts from churches!

Isn’t it interesting that most members of the cults were at one time associated with a Christian church of one denomination or another.

How is it possible for false teachers to capture people?

The answer is right here:

These “captives” are ignorant of the truths of the Word of God.

They become fascinated by the philosophy and empty delusion of the false teachers.

This philosophy of the false teachers is “hollow and deceptive” (Col. 2:8, NIV) for reasons Paul lists here . . .

To begin with, it’s the *tradition* of men and not the truth of God’s Word.

The word *tradition* means “that which is handed down.”

The important thing about *any* teaching is its *origin*: Did it come from God or from man?

There is a whole body of supposed wisdom that has been collected throughout the generations that has come down to us today.

And while many people take it as truth, in fact it is based only in tradition and it gains its authority by having been assumed to be true because it’s been repeated so many times.

For instance – How many people think the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves” is scripture?

In fact, it isn’t.

How about these . . .

1. "Cleanliness is next to godliness."
2. "Honest confession is good for the soul."
3. "We are as prone to sin as sparks fly upward."
4. "Money is the root of all evil."
5. "Honesty is the best policy."
6. You only go around once in life, you gotta grab for all the gusto you can

The false teaching of the Gnostics was dangerous because it appealed to man's hunger for significance and for the attaining of wisdom.
Man's fallen pride moves him to believe, wrongly, that real wisdom, that which is worthy of being sought after, has to be worked for.
That it's hidden and only attainable by those who have proven themselves worthy.
You see, pride drives us to want to earn our salvation so that we may boast – so we can say, “Look what I!!!! did!
This desire, in itself, is a long-seated tradition and is the motivation for so much of the error that underlies all man-made religion.
And it's something that drove the Gnostics.
So Paul is saying – beware tradition.

Another reason the false teachers' were able to capture the attention of people was because they appealed to the “the basic principles of the world.”
The Greek word translated “basic principles” here means “one of a row or series.”
As Paul uses it here, he's referring to its *classical* or *technical* meaning.
The word was used for the elemental spirits of the universe, the angels that influenced the heavenly bodies.
Really, it spoke of *astrology*!
The gnostics believed that that long line of spiritual emanations from God were attached to the planets and stars and that they held influence and sway over people's lives on earth.

So you see what Paul is saying here in v. 8?
Beware lest you get caught up in an enticing but empty system that is based on the mere traditions of human wisdom or seductive arguments about the power of the stars over your life.
What Paul says here should give us sufficient cause to analyze every assumption of human philosophy and science on one hand and to categorically reject astrology and horoscopes on the other.

Look at v. 8 once more . . .

8 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.

There is another manner in which this verse speaks powerfully to our own time. It has to do with the divorce forced on the life of the mind by modernity. What I means is this: Classically, theology was the mother science. Theology was the queen from which all other intellectual pursuits were birthed.
During the European Enlightenment, all that was changed and theology was divorced from philosophy.
Then, philosophy *replaced* theology as the mother science.
Once that took place, the natural sciences like biology and botany and physics were forcefully ripped from their theological base and became

pursuits unto themselves.

It's no wonder that the theory of evolution came in to existence at this time in history.

Man was looking for an escape from the biblical and theological origins of man.

How this plays out today is this:

Well meaning Christians have no problem believing in the bible and in evolution at the same time.

What they fail to realize is that evolution is entirely incompatible with the Biblical reality.

Millions of Christians have been taken captive by the godless theories and ideologies of evolutionary biology and anthropology without even realizing it.

When they see science and theology as covering different realms and that they can co-exist while contradicting one another, they have really capitulated to the world and have been taken captive by the traditions of men and not according to Christ.

It's theology that gives us the cause, reason, and whereto fore for who, what, when, where and why of our origins *and* our destiny.

Science is the handmaiden of theology, not the master or the competitor.

And when science holds theories that contradict scripture, it is science that must yield, not scripture.

Where we see this battle between science and scripture most clearly played out is in the schools, colleges and universities.

9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;

10 and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

Why follow empty philosophy when we have all fullness in Christ?

That's like turning away from a cool mountain stream to drink at a muddy hole.

Paul gave the true and lasting antidote to *all* false teaching: "All fullness is in Christ, and you have been made full in Him.

We saw this word "fullness" last week.

It's the Greek word *pleroma* and means "the sum total of all that God is, all of His being and attributes."

The highest point in gnostic religious experience was to share in the *pleroma*.

But, for them, it was the culmination of a lifelong pursuit of mystery and exacting observance of religious rituals and hard-kept rules.

For the gnostics, there was a deep divide and barrier between God and man that was only bridged by hopping from star to star and angel to angel until eventually you arrived at the *pleroma* or fullness of God.

The gospel of Christ says that the bridge from earth of heaven is as wide as one man – Jesus Christ and that it is simple faith in Him, the kind of faith that even a child possesses gains us entrance.

Paul nukes another Gnostic error here – that Jesus didn't possess a body.

Remember they believed that matter was evil – therefore, Christ didn't really

possess a body.

Paul refutes that and says that Christ is all the fullness of God in bodily form!
Not only that, but Jesus retained His body *after the resurrection!*

It was a glorified body, to be sure, but it was *real*.

After His resurrection, our Lord was careful to assure His disciples that He was the same Person in the same body; He was not a ghost or a spirit.
Paul takes the fullness of Christ one step further – not only does all the fullness of God dwell in Christ, but *every believer shares that fullness!*

In v. 10 he says, “And you are complete in Him.”

The tense of the Greek verb indicates that this fullness is a *permanent experience*.

When a person is born again into the family of God, he is born *complete* in Christ.
His spiritual growth is not by *addition*, but by *nutrition*.

He grows from the inside out.

Nothing needs to be added to Christ because He already is the very fullness of God.

If Christ truly dwells in us, then His life will break out in our lifestyle.

Just as the grave could not hold Christ because the power of the resurrection conquers death, so the resurrection life of Christ will break out of the fallen habits and patterns of our lives.

The seed that is hidden in the soil will eventually spring to life – and when it does, it doesn’t matter what lies above it – it will emerge and break through into the light.

There may be rocks or even slabs of granite – it matters not – they will all be shoved aside in the face of the persistent and undeniable force of life resident in that seed.

In the same way, if Christ indwells you, His life will break through and progressively consume your entire lifestyle.

So – if there is no evidence of growth in being conformed to the image of Christ, it is only reasonable that there is not internal change – not resident Christ.

You know what verse 9 & 10 teach us?

They teach us that the fundamental test of any teaching is,

“Where does it put Jesus Christ—Where does it put His person and His work?”

Does it rob Him of His fullness?

Does it deny either His deity or His humanity?

Does it affirm that the believer must have some “new experience” to supplement his experience with Christ?

If so, that teaching is wrong and dangerous.

11 In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

12 buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

Because the Gnostics believed matter was evil, they tended to put the body under close scrutiny and applied harsh discipline to it.

They found in the Jewish moral and ritual code some appealing rules and applied them to their followers.

One of these was circumcision, which they saw more as a magic ritual that initiated someone into the higher levels of spiritual enlightenment.

Paul writes here to the predominantly Gentile church of Colosse and tells them, they do not need to submit to circumcision made by the hands of men because they have already been circumcised by the Spirit of God in the area of their lives that really matters – the heart.

Actually, Paul's words here are a bit complex when he speaks of the circumcision of Christ – so follow closely as I explain . . .

11 In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

12 buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

The circumcision made without hands refers to the work the Holy Spirit did when He convicted them of their sin, they repented and came to faith in Christ. That faith identified them with Christ so that when He died on the cross, they died.

Christ's death was a circumcision – a cutting away of the flesh.

Their union with Christ in His death means they experienced a cutting away of *their* flesh dominated lives.

All of this was evidenced by their baptism.

So they didn't need to go to someone now and submit to *literal* circumcision because they had already experienced a more important cutting away of sin and the flesh through faith in Jesus.

Just as circumcision was given to the descendants of Abraham as a sign of their being in covenant with God, so the Cross and our identification with Christ through baptism is the sign of our entering in to a new covenant of life.

13 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses,

14 having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

15 Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

We covered these verses Sunday so tonight let me just say that once again we see how Paul subsumes all spiritual beings *under* Christ and shows how redemption is summed up in Him.

16 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,

17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

Why is it that inevitably, if we do not stay true to the message of grace,

Christianity ends up getting redefined as a system of rules and regulations?
And your relationship with God ends up being defined by what you wear, what
you eat, who you hang with, and what version of the Bible you read?

Look at what Paul says here –

16 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,

17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

The ritual law given at Mt. Sinai was meant by God to point people to Jesus, but once he came, they were to see it as fulfilled in Him.

Dietary regulations, and the keeping of special religious days would all be consummated in their new relationship with God based on faith and the grace of God.

Truth wouldn't be something as mundane as the arrangement of food on a plate, or special days on the calendar.

Truth would become their inhaling and exhaling and would be the bookends for each and every day.

Religion wouldn't be something one *does* out there, but would be something one *IS* in here.

There is nothing wrong when a believer, out of a heart-felt desire to be faithful to the Lord decides not to eat certain foods or decides to observe a specific day as unto the Lord.

The problem is when that person then judges others because they do not possess the same convictions.

This applies to most personal convictions that deal with issues that aren't black and white in scripture.

Look at what Paul says –

16 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,

It's fine if you set yourself a certain standard – but you ought not set it for another if it isn't something clearly defined in the Word of God.

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,

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.

Here is Paul warning them as he said he did in 1:28.

He is concerned that the elitist mentality of the Gnostics will create a sense of insecurity and doubt on the part of the believers in Colosse.

So he warns them against being deceived by their false show or religiosity.

They talk so high and mighty and make themselves out to be so super spiritual.

The fact is – they're a bunch of pompous charlatans

Their error is seen in something as simple as the fact that they do not hold Christ as the Head from who all flows.

Paul is now going to use some piercing logic to dismantle the argument of the Gnostics . . .

20 **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—**

21 **“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,”**

22 **which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?**

23 **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.**

Paul moves in these verses from speaking about observing the Jewish law to adopting an *ascetic* lifestyle that was popular among many ancient peoples and continues to be popular to this day among all kinds of religions and groups. What he says is – if Christ has brought the truth and the end to man-made religion, why go back to a slavish observance of those self-imposed rules when you’ve already enjoyed the real thing?

When I was a about 10, my family visited Disneyland and I got to drive one of the Autopia cars. [explain]

It was cool cause I was too young to drive and that was as close as I could get to actual driving.

Then, I turned 16, got my license and had my own car – a Volkswagen Beetle.

When I was 17, I revisited Disneyland and once again rode the Autopia cars.

Guess what – it wasn’t near the thrill it was when I was 10, in fact, it was a colossal bore!

And you know why.

Once you’ve done the real thing – the fake and imitation just doesn’t cut it.

In man’s desire to prove himself worthy of the higher life, he’s subjected himself to all kinds of harsh regulations that govern everything from his diet to his clothing.

But the Christian has died with Christ to the rules that govern this world.

We’ve been liberated from the Autopia of “Do not touch, do not taste” into real life through the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Of course, living by a narrow set of religious rules looks good to the eye of man because again, our fallenness moves us to believe that true religion has to be attended by work – hard work.

Self-denial and rigorous discipline give the impression of asceticism that surely must mark one’s deep religious nature.

Honestly – if we were to set a man up here with a shaved head, long beard and uncut fingernails, with sandaled feet and a saffron robe, with a drawn a gaunt expression from long days without food, and next to him set a man dressed in an Armani suit with thick, well cut hair, manicured nails and a healthy, smiling countenance and asked 100 people off the street to say which looked the more

holy – which would they pick?

The problem with mere asceticism is that it is negative, not positive.

It's all about "Do not" rather than "Do."

The power of Christ in the life of the believer does more than merely restrain the desires of the flesh: *it puts new desires within him.*

Nature determines appetite.

The Christian has the very nature of God within (2 Peter 1:4), and this means he has godly ambitions and desires.

He does not need *law* on the outside to control his appetites because he has *life* on the inside!

Paul says at the end of v. 23 that the harsh rules of the ascetics "lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence".

If anything, they eventually *bring out* the worst instead of the best for the simple reason that asceticism FEEDS the flesh by starving it.

It fuels pride by providing a thin veneer of religion.

CONCLUSION

It must ever be the aim of the believer to keep Christ pre-eminent, not only in his or her theology and doctrine, but in the heart.

No law, no rule, not self-imposed discipline can ever supplant the primacy of Christ.

What makes us good, bible believing Christians is that we embrace that truth that we are saved by grace through faith *alone*.

But once we get there, do we continue to believe that or do we think that once we get in to the door of heaven, we have to maintain our presence by our own efforts?

No – we are complete in Christ.

It's all about Jesus!