

Avoid False Teaching; Stay Focused on Christ

Colossians 2:16-23

Throwback. How many of you had a “mixtape” back in the 80’s?

- A mixtape was your own customized cassette tape, which included songs from your favorite artists. (Now, the youngsters do it with Spotify or other platforms).
- I remember listening to the Top 100 on the radio, and hitting record when my favorite songs would come on.
- A mixtape might be filled with a great variety of songs that you would probably not find on a single tape: some hip-hop, some rock, some reggae...
- (Of course, you could make a themed mix-tape, like Matt Sigmon, who used to send Shauna a mixed tape in the mail with the latest 80’s *love songs*! The secret to 25 years of marriage together!).

In Colossae, some were doing this with religion.

- They had made their own mixtape religion – a bootleg religion - the Colossian Heresy.
- It was a mixture of Jewish practices with pagan elements. (Ceremonial & Cultic)

We don’t know all of the elements in this heresy.

- Paul doesn’t give a 1, 2, 3 of this teaching. He does not present in theological form.
- But here in this text, he does give us some elements of it
- It’s a hodgepodge of beliefs.
- It’s called syncretism.
- Syncretism has many elements of various religious beliefs and practices blended in.

In many cases, it is “Jesus + Something Else.”

- But “Jesus + Something” is not the gospel.
- Paul’s message in Colossians is “Christ is enough.”

I have mentioned various types of syncretism in parts of Africa (Jesus + tribal beliefs)

- Around the world and can you can find
 - Jesus + animism mixed
 - Jesus + witchcraft.
 - Jesus + paganism (NOLA Tarot Card)
- In America it often includes
 - Jesus plus prosperity theology
 - Jesus + mystery cults
 - Jesus + another Testament
 - Jesus + political ideology
 - “Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism”

Syncretism is not the good news!

- You can’t improve the gospel. And if you add to it, you lose it!
- Syncretism is deadly.

In Colossae, most of this false teaching was based on **Judaism** (see *circumcision, diets/days, shadows; etc*). But it includes other elements of **superstition, visions, asceticism, the worship of angels, and so on.**

Paul's point is simple:

**Avoid false teaching, and stay focused on Jesus
because if you have Christ then you have *all you need for spiritual power and growth.***

Remember 1:28 – “warning everyone” Here is an example of Christ-centered warning – he warns about the dangers of false teaching.

A Bit of Review and Some Context

This text is a continuation of thought from the previous verses.

Paul's letters are a bit like eating Cheese Pizza...

- Have you ever taken a bite of pizza, and have all the cheese come off with that one bite?
- Paul's letters are like that; as you take a bite (like v. 16-23), you realize that it's all connected to what came before and what will come next.

Verse 16: The “**Therefore**” is a connecting word... continuing the flow of thought **from v. 6...**

2:6-7 – The Christian life in miniature. You don't move on to something else!

6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, **7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.**

So the Christian life involves: **Consistency, Stability, Memory**

1. **Consistency** – as you received him as *Lord*, so **go on** walking in him...
2. **Stability** – “rooted and built up in him & established in the faith, just as you were taught”
 - A. **Relational component** – “rooted and built up in him” (cf., 2:5)
 - “**Abide in Me**” (**John 15**)
 - It's not super mystical; the word means **“remain.”**
 - Remain in Christ; keep loving Christ. Don't look elsewhere.
 - B. **Instructional component** – “est in the faith, as you were taught.”
 - Instruction and relationship go together.
 - **This is how you're stable** – do you have enough teaching; are you abiding?
3. **Memory** – abounding in Thanksgiving
 - It involves never forgetting who Christ is and what He has done!

That's the Christian life in miniature.

Verse 8 – This is connected to our text too in terms of *subject matter*.

- Don't let them take you **captive.**
- **16-23 further expound v 8: Philosophy, empty deceit, human tradition, elemental spirits...**

Verses 9-15: is connected to our text in terms of subject also... stated positively...

You should avoid this philosophical mumbo jumbo because you have Christ!

Why is Christ all you need for salvation, security, satisfaction, power and growth?

- Christ's person (2:9)
- Christ fully satisfies (2:10).
- Christ has changed us inwardly (2:11-12)
- We have been made alive with him (2:13)
- Christ has forgiven us, cancelling our record of debt (2:13b)
- Christ has delivered through his victorious death (2:14-15)

So don't fall for this Colossians heresy when you have this Christ!

You don't need these extra additives.

Structure (2:16-23)

Structurally text under consideration falls into 3 sections.

In each part, there is (1) an exhortation/question, followed by (2) a mention of particular issues that the false teachers were mandating, and then finally, (3) we find Paul's evaluation of these issues/teaching.

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Part 1 (2:16-17)

- A. Exhortation: Let No One Condemn You (2:16a)
- B. Issues: Diets/Days (2:16b)
- C. Evaluation: They substitute the transitory for the substantial (2:17)

Part 2 (2:18-19)

- A. Exhortation: Let No One disqualify you (2:18)
- B. Issues: Asceticism, worship of angels, visions... (2:18b)
- C. Evaluation: They substitute the speculative for the vital (2:19)

Part 3 (2:20-23)

- A. Exhortation: Do not Submit the Rules of Those Who Appear Wise (2:20)
- B. Issues: Regulations, Human Precepts (2:20-22)
- C. Evaluation: They substitute the impressive for the effective (2:23)

Summary:

- A. The repeated exhortation is clear: Do not let them condemn/disqualify/reject/control you.
- B. It's also clear that this list of issues is a syncretistic philosophy riddled with errors.
- C. It's clear that this teaching is not helping people, but actually detracting from Christ who is the only source for salvation, security, satisfaction, power, and growth. It's like Paul is saying, don't eat Spam when you have steak! Spam is another illustration of syncretism... you don't know what's in that stuff (even though they say it has six ingredients!)

So let's look at these three sections under the headings of those evaluations:

#1: Don't Substitute the Transitory for the Substantial (2:16-17)

A. Exhortation: Let no one pass judgment on you

- "Passing judgment" – that is condemning, disqualifying, excluding you...
- **Do not let anyone impose upon you a philosophy of spiritual growth that doesn't center on Christ!**

B. Issues: Diets/Days (v. 16)

Diets. Apparently some in Colossae claimed that for spiritual growth and spiritual fullness one needs to return to the dietary laws of the Old Testament.

- Of course, practically speaking, **having a good diet is a good idea.**
- **But this was different than you choosing to cut carbs, or salt intake, or get your moose tracks ice cream consumption under control.**
- Keeping the food laws was a very **emotional issue in the NT period** (1 Cor 8; Rom 14:1-15:13).
- Many of the first Christians were from a Jewish background, and they had followed certain **dietary regulations that were part of the Old covenant.**
- Some Jews would have died before violating these regulations.
- One consequent of the coming of Christ was that these food laws were set aside. (**Mark 7; Acts 10**)
- Christians can now eat from the non-Kosher menu, but these false teachers in Colossae did not get the memo!
- They were teaching **you couldn't eat this, and you should eat that.**
- "Faith in Christ is good, but to truly be faithful you need to have the right diet" they said.

Days

- Jewish concern for special days grew out of their desire to obey the OT.
- God commanded his people to observe days – weekly (Sabbath), monthly (new Moon), and the feasts (annual)
- The false teachers were saying you're not faithful if you don't follow these traditions.

- Paul states clearly in Romans 14 that all foods are clean, and that the stronger Christian views all days alike.
- Here he says: **Paul says, “Don’t let anyone condemn you regarding these things.”**

Why? Because these things are a shadow... the substance/reality belongs to Christ.

C. Evaluation: They [false teachers] substitute the transitory for the substantial (v. 17)

If you have the solid reality, then you don’t need to be fixated on the shadows!

- **You don’t have to despise the shadows.**
- As a Christian, you may go back and to Leviticus 16 (Day of Atonement) and be greatly moved by that passage, perhaps you even more than a NT passage may move you.
- But **you look at Lev 16 in light of the solid reality!**
- **Don’t get fixated on the shadows**, on the foreshadowing, the pointers; let them lead you to Christ.
- **There are lots of shadows just in Colossians**
 - Exodus
 - Promised Land
 - Temple
 - Wisdom
 - Circumcision
 - Days/Diets
- **We read of these in light of the NT reality now; we don’t despise them, but we see how they are fulfilled in Christ.**

Problem: This was a hard change for many with Jewish scruples (even for Peter).

- We know that **people don’t like change.**
 - 1903 Henry Ford went to get a loan and was told, “The horse is here to stay. The automobile is a fad.” Wrong!
 - But that was a great upgrade in transportation.
 - **And who wants to go back to typewriters when you have modern computers?**
- It was even harder for people to make **this religious change.**
- But Paul is saying “**Don’t revert back to these old customs when the new covenant days are here.**”
- **Don’t substitutes the transitory for the substantial.**

These shadows were pointers, signs.

- I’ve used the illustration of a road sign before. If you’re on a trip, and you are dying to use the restroom, and you see a sign that says “Restroom 2 miles ahead,” you don’t and sit under the sign! You press on the gas and get to where the sign was taking you.
- These signs in the OT pointed to Christ. Go to him.

Another way to think about them: the shadows had **a built in obsolescence** to them the way certain products to today.

- Manufacturers build products that have a limited time of usefulness.
- You know, you can't repair your washer or dryer; you have to replace it (or if you want to repair it, you have to do it for 2/3 of the price of a new one!).
- Your phone/IPad/Computer has that built in obsolescence...
- It's kind of like that with the story of redemption: there were these systems, and ways of doing things that had a built in obsolescence to them.

Summary: “Don’t let these false teachers fixate you on preliminaries, the foreshadowings, the pointers to Christ. He is the reality to which they point, and you have him!”

#2: Don’t Substitute the Speculative for the Vital (2:18-19)

A. Exhortation: Let no one disqualify you (18a)

- There may have been saying certain Christians were not qualified to enter certain worship experiences.
- Food laws were associated with worship. (Mystery worship)
- But Paul has stressed – that we are clean through Christ, and we have a new heart because of Christ, and we are therefore acceptable to God.
- Don’t let anyone “Disqualify you” – God has already qualified us! (1:12-14)

B. Issues: (Asceticism, Worship of Angels, Visions, Arrogance (18b))

4 Parts here:

(1) These false teachers promoted ascetic practices, probably to induce visions (18a)

18a: They were trying to impose a false idea of “**humility**” (Gk) (asceticism).

- Paul uses this in a scornful sense; some kind of abasement, a scheme of fasting, a scraping humility.
- This kind of asceticism, self-denial was probably tied to mystery religions.
- It was often done to stimulate visionary experiences.

(2) These false teachers are so occupied with calling on angels for protection, that they are essentially worshiping them (18b)

18b: The worship of **angels** –pagan practice.

- This is not speaking of the worship angels engage in.
- It is worship **directed to angels**, most likely associated with the calling on angels for protection against evil powers.
- There are all sorts of inscriptions in Turkey re angels – appealed to in worship and prayer, asking for aid against other angelic powers, and so on.
- Today there are literally hundreds of books of angels.
- Angels exist, but they must not to distract of us from Christ, nor should we worship them

(3) These false teachers are all about *visions*, probably citing them in their teaching as authoritative (18c)

18c: The false teacher’s authority: things they have seen. “**Visions**.”

- There's nothing new under the sun.
- It's a unique word; **consulting an oracle, being involved in mystery rites.**

Many have claimed mystical experience through the years and garnered quite a following.

- **Oral Roberts:** God was going to take his life if people didn't give several million – God was holding him hostage.
- **Other Examples:** Some recent documentaries show how many have taken a ride on the crazy train following certain Gurus who developed their own syncretistic faith.

Your vision is not authoritative; God's Word is.

(4) These false teachers possess a spiritual **arrogance** as a result of their views and "experiences" (18d)

18d: Mysticism brings “conceit” – he is “puffed up without reason.”

- One question we should always ask when evaluating a teacher is, “Who is being exalted?”
- False teachers do not exalt Christ.
- True gospel preachers and teachers are Christ-exalting.

Don't let them disqualify you! Their teaching is whack.

- What should you do?

C. Evaluation: They substitute the speculative for the vital (v. 19)

They had lost contact with the only true means of spiritual vitality: Christ!

19: Here's what's vital: Holding on to the head... Christ.

- Spiritual growth is found in clinging to Christ. (“Growth” = Maturity)
- He is the head; the Head is sovereign, control
- Head is sustainer...
- Faith is not just profession but a vital union
- False religion, bootleg religion, doesn't hold on – It lets go of Christ and grabs something else.
- **Christian, hold on to your life-giving Savior!**

Colossae, “Jesus is fine, but you need this ascetic practice, this vision, you need more angel worship, etc.”

- But you don't need Jesus **and something else. You need Him.**
- **Stay close to him. Abide in Him. Remain in him.**

Screwtape Letters... It's about a demon named Screwtape.

- It's a collection of fictional letters written to Screwtape's demon apprentice, Wormwood.
- Screwtape is counseling Wormwood on how to tempt human clients from practicing Christianity.

- In one letter that Screwtape writes to Wormwood, “Dear Wormwood ... What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of mind I call ‘Christianity And’. You know—Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing.... Christianity and Spelling Reform. If they must be Christians let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some fashion with a Christian coloring. Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing.
- His counsel? Keep this Christian distracted from Christ by adding something to Christ – philosophies, mysticism, asceticism, fashions... divert their attention away from the Old Gospel.
- “Christianity and” is not dead.
- Paul’s counsel: Stay focused on Christ – that’s where spiritual nourishment is found.

*We drink of Thee, the Fountainhead,
And thirst our souls from Thee to fill.*

(Bernard of Clairvaux)

Why drink from any other fountain when you have Christ?

#3: Don’t Substitute the Impressive for the Effective (2:20-23)

A. Question: Why do you them control you? (2:20)

20: “If” (“as if the case, or “since) – **you died with him** (ch 3; “raised with him”)

- We are free from this old world... We have new life as new creations...
- You are freed from the control of these things... Put wha is earthly to death?
- “Why do you put yourself under this regime?” Paul asks.

Elemental Spirits:

- The things of this world, the evil powers in the world...
- You have been set free from them through Christ’s death on the cross (2:15).
- But many people in Paul’s day lived in fear of these “forces” and sought ways to overcome them, like these ascetic, mystical practices.
- He says, “You died to them – because Christ has triumphed over them.”
- They failed to understand the gospel, and the fullness of Christ, and our freedom in Christ.

B. Issues: Regulations, Human Precepts (v. 21-22)

21: Do not handle, taste, touch...

- Probably food regulations, but it may have also included the insistence on avoiding other things in creation that God has given us to enjoy.
- Human beings have long been drawn to impressive and dramatic acts of self-denial in their search for God, in search of peace.... you see it in all sorts of ways today.

22: They are destined “to perish”

- Regarding food, there's nothing of consequence; it's going to perish,..
- It's not going to have a difference – **stomach to sewage.**
- It has no lasting value!
- **Paul is saying: "They are making too big of a fuss over something that is not the essence of true Christian growth and godliness."**
- Jesus made this point as well – it's not what's outside of you, but what's inside of you that's the problem (Mark 7:15).
- Previously, Jesus called out this “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (7)

It has **no divine authority**. It is “**according to human tradition**”

- Why do you let these teachers micromanage your life?
- That's cultish.

This kind of extra biblical legalism is common today.

- Legalists love to give you extra biblical rules (**human regulations**) to follow that will not work even if you kept them!
- Legalists tick me off...
- It distorts the gospel; it puffs up the self-righteous; it leads others to despair; it's joyless; and most of all, it diminishes the glory of Christ and our freedom of Christ – that which Christ died to give us.
- I don't feel bad for being upset about them, after all, Paul called the Judaizers, “Dogs,” Jesus: Whitewash Tombs, John the Baptist, “Brood of Vipers”
- Examples: dress code, no dancing, no Oreos....
- Other groups – No insurance, no contact lenses, and remove seat belts (for that's not walking by faith); married couples should never have sex for pleasure, only procreation; you should take no oaths; no consulting attorney allowed...
- We could no on. Avoid it.

Error: They substitute the impressive for the effective (v. 23).

23: It has the appearance of “**wisdom**” –

- “Look at these people they are so committed; look at what they put themselves through.”

Paul alludes to the **effective** when he says: “**It does not stop the indulgence of the flesh.**”

- It doesn't do anything to overcome the power of sin from a self-centered nature.
- **It doesn't touch it, even though it may look impressive.**
- You can put on a good show if you are disciplined, **but it doesn't get to the root of things.**
- **You can't fight a tank with a BB gun!**
- **You need spiritual weapons to overcome fleshly desires!**

The church father, Jerome, described how removing oneself from the culture, and taking on an ascetic lifestyle does not stop the indulgence of the flesh:

Oh, how often I imagined that I was in the midst of the pleasures of Rome when I was stationed in the desert, in that solitary wasteland which is so burned up by the heat of the sun that it provides a dreadful habitation for the monks! I, who because of the fear of hell had condemned myself to such a hell and who had nothing but scorpions and wild animals for company, often thought I was dancing with a chorus of girls. My face was pale from fasting, but my body was seethed with passionate desires within my freezing body, and the fires of sex seethed (in George, 388).

Did you catch that? All of those ascetic practices, and the desires of the flesh still seethed.

So what do you need? What is effective?

It is inward transformation of the Spirit of Christ.

But people will try everything else.

Someone gave me an example of man-made invention that was created to stop the indulgence of the flesh; I looked it up because I was skeptical, but apparently it's true.

- If you are looking to be self-controlled in regard to sexual sin, then you according to some gurus in the 19th century, you need to eat more Graham Crackers!
- There was a 19th century health fad that was being promoted in order to quell sexual urges, Grahamism.
- One writer says: "Originally a bland biscuit made of unrefined flour, the Graham Cracker was part of a comprehensive diet and lifestyle system created by Sylvester Graham in response to what he deemed to be the single greatest health scourge facing Americans: sexual desire. Like any decent diet craze, Grahamism tore through the American collective culture in just a few short years, acquired thousands of ardent followers, challenged food, health and hygiene habits, incited a mob of bakers, and cost the job of at least one pepper-loving professor. Sylvester Graham was a Northeastern evangelical minister during the temperance movements of the 1830s." He believed that sexual urges came from the American diet – "flavorful, fatty, and meaty dishes." (Adee Bruan)
- So that's what you need — more bland food. Eat more cardboard!
- It won't stop the indulgence of the flesh!
- I'm not saying that there is no connection between your diet and your actions; but let's be real, you need more than Graham Cracker's to control sexual temptation!

You don't need to move to the desert, and you don't need more Graham Crackers!

- You need more of Jesus Christ.
- You need Colossians 3!!!
 - See, Colossians 3, is connected as well....
 - Paul says holiness involves living with a heavenly mindset; living in light of your new identity, in light of Christ's victory, in light of your security, and in light of your destiny -- and then put sin to death, and put on Christ.
- More on this Christ-centered spiritual growth in the next two weeks.

Conclusion:

There are new deviants always coming up...

What do we do? Avoid false teaching and stay focused on Christ.

Look back though the text:

- 1. He is the substance. All the types and shadows, it's all about Him. We are children of the new covenant, enjoying all the saving benefits of the Messiah.**
- 2. We died with him. You have been raised with him. We have new life in him; new power through him; new ability to say no to sin and yes to God in holiness.**
- 3. We are attached to him. He is the life giving head.**

Drink from no other fountain, than from your all-sufficient, all-satisfying Savior.