

10/28/2021 – Colossians, The Faithful Disciple

Unit III: Lesson 2, A Faithful Disciple's Sufficiency Is In Christ

Reading: Colossians 2:6-23

SUMMARY

Paul begins this section by summarizing the position of strength for the Colossians. The real "tradition" that the Colossians have received is CHRIST HIMSELF. THERE IS NO PLACE ELSE TO STAND. It is in continued personal fellowship with Christ that the Gospel continues to be real life for them. Their foundation has already been laid in Christ. It is life lived in that reality that continues to be built up and increase in firmness of faith. THE UNFAILING MARK OF A HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY IS THAT THIS LIFE IN CHRIST LEADS TO UNFAILING GRATITUDE TO GOD FOR WHAT HE HAS DONE IN CHRIST.

Paul then attacks the "additions" that the heretical teacher suggests are necessary for real "spirituality." The worship of the "elemental spirits of the universe" does nothing but return the Colossians to bondage under forces that Christ has already conquered! CHRIST IS THE FULLNESS OF DEITY IN BODILY FORM! They already have "fulfillment" in Him. Far from being an "advance" in faith and piety, the new teaching is a retrogression to life under the old bondage which Christ has conquered.

Baptism is the surest evidence that they have already died and risen with Christ. They are dead to the old life characterized by sin and trespass. By their own admission, they were morally and spiritually bankrupt. Christ has erased the list of transgressions completely and expunged the debt. He did this by nailing that list of accusations to His cross along with those made against Him and putting them to death. Furthermore, Christ has led the hostile powers through the streets behind His conquering chariot, having stripped them of all their weapons that can be used against us!

LEGAL DEMANDS BELONG TO THE OLD LIFE AND ARE NOT EVIDENCE OF INCREASED SPIRITUALITY! They are the product of human vanity and completely disregard the living sovereignty of Christ. Indeed, they cannot even help us overcome the impulses of our old corrupt nature. Ascetic practices that are self-imposed were part of the old age before Christ. Now that Christ has redeemed us, HE IS THE SUBSTANCE OF THE NEW LIFE.

The heart of the problem, Paul points out, is that REAL HUMILITY IS NEVER SELF-CONSCIOUS. THAT KIND OF "HUMILITY" IS ROOTED IN PRIDE AND SHOWS THAT THE INDIVIDUAL ADVANCING IT IS REALLY NON-SPIRITUAL AND ALIENATED FROM GOD! He has lost touch with the Head - with Christ - from whom the Body derives everything it needs for health and growth. "Voluntary additions" to Christian faith or life leads inevitably to THE IDEA OF MERIT ON OUR PART AND ACTUALLY INDULGES FLESHLY PRIDE. SUCH "WORKS" DO NOT ADVANCE PERSONAL FAITH OR PIETY BUT HINDER THEM!

A CLOSER LOOK

Verses 6-7:

"As therefore . . ." – Having stated his divine commission and the essence of the mystery of the Gospel, Paul will now proceed to show the Colossians the real meaning of the heresy being promoted in their midst.

"received Christ" – The Greek word here for "receive" is the technical term for tradition in the ancient world. What Paul is saying is that **THE "TRADITION" OF THE COLOSSIANS IS CHRIST HIMSELF. DON'T GET TANGLED UP IN NEW HUMAN TRADITIONS THAT WILL DRAW YOU AWAY FROM HIM.** Again, the preaching of Epaphras is given full certification by Paul. Note that Paul also makes it personal when he says, "you received." **THEY HAVE NOT RECEIVED A SYSTEM OF IDEAS BUT A PERSONAL CHRIST. CHRISTIANITY IS ALWAYS RELATIONAL – IT IS RELATEDNESS TO A PERSON, JESUS CHRIST, NOT TO A SYSTEM OF DOCTRINES, TRADITIONS, OR IDEAS!**

"live in him" – The Greek literally says, "Walk in him." This is the language for the tenor of the whole moral life. **IT IS IN CONTINUED PERSONAL FELLOWSHIP WITH CHRIST THAT THE GOSPEL IS CONTINUED IN THE LIFE OF THE DISCIPLE.**

"rooted . . . built up . . . established" – In the Greek these are participles. The first, "rooted", is in the perfect tense, indicating something as an established condition. **THE FOUNDATION OF LIFE HAS ALREADY BEEN LAID IN CHRIST.** The second, "built up," is in the present tense, indicating something that is ongoing. **THE ONGOING CHRISTIAN LIFE IS CONTINUALLY IN THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTION.** The third, "established," is also in the present tense. **AS THE CHRISTIAN LIFE GOES ON, IT IS PROGRESSIVELY INCREASING IN FIRMNESS.**

NOTE: IT IS CHARACTERISTIC OF ALL OF THE DISTORTIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES THAT THEY EITHER ATTEMPT TO CHANGE THE FOUNDATION (CHRIST AND HIS WORK), ADD SOMETHING TO THE WORK OF CHRIST AS NECESSARY FOR SALVATION. OR SUGGEST THAT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS NOT A PROCESS OF GROWTH IN WHAT WE ALREADY HAVE IN CHRIST. LEGALISM ATTEMPTS TO ACHIEVE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. LIBERTINISM SUGGESTS WE MAY LIVE AS WE PLEASE SINCE WE ARE ALREADY SAVED. PAUL SUCCESSFULLY COUNTERS BOTH POSITIONS HERE.

"just as you were taught" – This is another endorsement of the preaching and teaching of Epaphras.

"abounding in thanksgiving" – Paul lays great stress on thanksgiving throughout this letter **AS THE UNFAILING MARK OF A HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY (1:12, 3:15, 17, 4:2).** **UNFAILING GRATITUDE TO GOD FOR HIS SALVATION IN CHRIST IS ONE OF THE SUREST DETERRENENTS TO DISTORTIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.**

Verses 8-23:

The real heart of the heresy comes out in these verses. A brief overview shows that the false teacher or teachers felt that the simple Gospel of Epaphras needed additions. These additions included:

1. An additional philosophy (vs. 8),
2. A system of astrology (vs. 8),
3. Circumcision (vs. 11),
4. Ascetic rules and regulations (vs. 16, 20-23),
5. Worship of angels.

These verses clearly mark the heresy as a combination of Gnostic and Jewish ideas. The intellectual and the astrology come from Gnosticism and ascetism, rules and regulations from Judaism. It may be that the insistence by the Gnostics on special knowledge afforded the opportunity for the Jewish insistence that the law was that special knowledge.

NOTE THAT HERESIES AND DISTORTIONS OF THE GOSPEL ALWAYS ADD SOMETHING TO GOD'S WORK IN CHRIST!

Verse 8:

"prey of you" – This language reverts to 1:13 and pictures the false teacher as a marauder who attacks the Kingdom of God and carries his captives away as spoil.

"philosophy and empty deceit" – This is the only place the word philosophy appears in the New Testament. In the ancient world everything that had to do with theories about God, the world, and the meaning of human life was called a "philosophy." What Paul is referring to is the fantastic system of speculation being propounded in Colossae. It is "empty deceit." It is nothing but "human tradition" **AND NOT THE TRADITION THEY HAD RECEIVED ABOUT CHRIST.**

"elemental spirits of the universe" – **HERE IS THE HEART OF THE ERROR.** The Colossians were being taught to propitiate these elements or angelic beings instead of giving their allegiance to Christ. **THE HEART OF PAGANISM IN ALL ITS FORMS IS TO PROPITIATE OR MANIPULATE FORCES GREATER THAN OURSELVES – INCLUDING GOD – IN ORDER TO WIN THEIR FAVOR. THIS IS MAN-CENTERED AND MAKES SALVATION A WORK INSTEAD OF GOD'S GRACE IN CHRIST!** The Greek word here for "elements" is *stoicheia* and means astral divinities who control the spheres and are thus masters of human fate. What Paul is combatting is a kind of **ASTRAL DETERMINISM AND CULT PRACTICES** such as ascetism, taboos, and angel worship which will propitiate these astral spirits and enable the devotee to attain fullness of life.

Verse 9:

"whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" – The Colossians have Christ, the personal revelation of the Father, the one Mediator between God and man, the One in whom the plenitude of deity is embodied. **WHAT ELSE IS NEEDED?**

Verse 10:

"you have come to fullness of life" – Literally the Greek says, "you have been fulfilled in him (Christ)." The verb here is in the perfect tense and **IMPLIES THAT THE PROMISED FULFILLMENT IN WORSHIPPING THE ASTRAL ELEMENTS IS ALREADY REALIZED IN CHRIST! FOR PAUL THE BELIEVER IS ALREADY IN COMMUNION WITH GOD. NO SPHERES OR ASTRAL BEINGS BLOCK HIS WAY!**

"who is the head of all rule and authority" – **CHRIST IS SOVEREIGN LORD OVER ALL CREATION INCLUDING THE ASTRAL BEINGS AND POWERS. FAR FROM BEING AN ADVANCE IN SPIRITUAL MATURITY, THIS WORSHIP OF ANGELIC BEINGS AND ASTRAL POWERS IS A RETROGRESSION INTO BONDAGE TO POWERS WHICH CHRIST NOT ONLY CREATED (however now alienated) BUT HAS CONQUERED!** "Head" in ancient Greek usage also says that these "elemental spirits" derive from Christ whatever powers they are able to exercise!

Verse 11:

"circumcision made without hands" – The physical circumcision the false teacher demands is needless, since the Colossians have already gone through a spiritual circumcision – baptism.

"putting off the body of flesh" - "Flesh" is Paul's favorite word for the *corrupt personality as a whole* – what we are apart from the saving grace of God. That old nature has been cast away ("put off") like a filthy garment.

Verses 12:

"buried raised" – Baptism for the Christian **IS INCORPORATION INTO CHRIST AND, THEREFORE, INTO HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION WITH ALL THEIR SAVING SIGNIFICANCE. THE OLD LIFE UNDER ASTRAL POWERS – INDEED, UNDER ANY AND ALL BONDAGE – IS DEAD AND THE NEW LIFE OF CHRIST HAS BEEN RECEIVED.**

Verse 13:

"dead in trespasses" – Under the power of sin, we are dead to God and everything pleasing to Him.

"God made alive together with him" – The new life of baptism is sharing in the new life which Christ received when He rose from the dead. The old life was marked by transgressions and offenses against God. Now we are new and forgiven people.

Verse 14:

"having cancelled the bond" - "Cancelled" here is a beautiful picture. Scribes in the ancient world used either vellum, a reed-based paper, or parchment made from animal skins. Both were expensive. The type of ink used did not sink into the material. Because of the expense, documents were reused **BY ERASING THE PREVIOUS WRITING. THAT IS THE WORD HERE FOR "CANCELLED."** CHRIST HAS COMPLETELY ERASED THE BOND OF

DEBT. The word "bond" here is the word for an acknowledgement of debt written in one's own handwriting and handed to the debtor. WE WERE BANKRUPT BY OUR OWN ADMISSION! CHRIST HAS COMPLETELY EXPUNGED THE DEBT!

"nailing it to the cross" – This is perhaps best understood in the light of the accusation nailed to Christ's cross. HE HAS NAILED ALL ACCUSATIONS AGAINST US TO THAT SAME CROSS AND PUT THEM TO DEATH!

Verse 15:

The whole picture here is of a military defeat. The vanquished hostile powers are led by Christ through the streets behind His chariot, stripped of their arms and in captive chains. The picture comes from the triumphant procession of a Roman general. FOR PAUL THE ENSLAVEMENT OF LIFE TO LEGAL ORDINANCES BELONGS TO THE UNREDEEMED LIFE STILL SUBJECT TO THE ELEMENTAL SPIRITS! That is the meaning of "legal demands" in verse 14 (Cf. Gal. 4:9).

Verses 16-23:

This entire section deals with the "legal demands" that are characteristic of the life still under bondage. The Greek word for "legal demands" is dogmata. NO ONE IS EVER MORE DOGMATIC THAN THE LEGALIST! Paul's argument is two-fold here. In verses 16-19 he points out that such legalistic demands are the product of human vanity and disregard the living sovereignty of Christ over all areas of life. In verses 20-23 Paul shows that such demands belong to the worldly order that Christians overcame in their baptism and cannot help us overcome the impulses of our lower nature.

Verse 16:

"food drink" – Here is an indication of the Jewish element in this distortion.

"festival new moon sabbath" – Yearly, monthly, and weekly cultic rites and observances are meant. Notice how life is regulated under law. THE CONDEMNATION HERE IS OF ASCETIC (self-denial) PRACTICES.

Verse 17:

"shadow substance" – Various ascetic practices were for the old age before Christ. They were evidence of "what was to come." "WHAT WAS TO COME" IS CHRIST, AND HE IS ALREADY HERE – WITH THE FREEDOM OF THE GOSPEL! HE IS THE "SUBSTANCE!"

Verse 18:

"disqualify self-abasement" - "Disqualify" is a picture from the games, the race for a prize. The point here is that the Colossians should not let anyone impose on them arbitrary standards of Christian conduct or make them feel inferior (typical of the legalist) because their life is not governed the way the legalist declares to be necessary.

"taking his stand on visions, puffed up" – This ties in with the previous verse. "Self-abasement" is a question of humility which is voluntarily assumed. THE LEGALIST IS ALWAYS ONE WHO IS CONFIDENT OF HIS SUPERIOR HUMILITY! HE PARADES EXCEPTIONAL PIETY AND – HERE IN COLOSSAE – APPEALS TO "VISIONS " (SUPERIOR INSIGHT). BENEATH THIS OBVIOUS SHOW OF HUMILITY IS AN OVERWEENING *PRIDE*. SELF-CONSCIOUS HUMILITY IS NO HUMILITY AT ALL!

"sensuous mind" – The word behind "sensuous" explains the problem. It is the word for "fleshly." THE REAL PROBLEM WITH THIS FALSE HUMILITY IS THAT THIS INDIVIDUAL HAS NO SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT AT ALL! Paul asserts that the boasting of the heretical teacher about his vaunted revelations, secret lore, and superior insight are nothing but products of his own mind, A MIND ALIENATED FROM GOD (fleshly)!

Verse 19:

"head" – This is the key word in this verse. In ancient physiology, the "head" was not only the seat of directing intelligence but was the source and center of all vital forces, supplying the body with everything it needs for health and growth. The heretical teacher SHOWS THAT HE HAS LOST TOUCH WITH THE HEAD – WITH CHRIST – FROM WHOM THE BODY DERIVES EVERYTHING IT NEEDS FOR HEALTH AND GROWTH!

Verse 20:

"world" – The meaning and significance of baptism become plain here. "Regulations" belong to the old life and the old world, ruled by the elemental spirits. IN BAPTISM, THE CHRISTIAN "DIED" TO ALL THAT.

Verse 21:

This verse gives us samples of the negative prohibitions that go with legalism and asceticism. THE STERNEST ASCETICISM CAN EXIST ALONG WITH AN INSUFFERABLE SPIRITUAL PRIDE, ONE OF THE SUBTLEST AND MOST DIFFICULT OF THE "WORKS OF THE FLESH" TO CORRECT!

Verse 22:

"things which all perish" – One of the laughable parts of this kind of legalistic asceticism is that IT DEALS WITH THINGS THAT PERISH IN THE VERY USE THAT IS MADE OF THEM. Jesus pointed that out to the Pharisees (Matt. 15:17-18). Food is eaten, digested, and passed on as excrement. THE IMPOSITION OF PROHIBITIONS FROM WITHOUT CANNOT CREATE A NEW NATURE WITHIN!

"human precepts and doctrines" – These prohibitions are of human framing and lack entirely any divine sanction.

Verse 23:

"rigor of devotion . . . self-abasement . . . severity to the body" – The key word here is the Greek word *ethlothreskeia* – translated here "rigor of devotion." Literally, the word means "will-

worship." We might say "self-made cult" or "faked religion." THE TERM MEANS THAT THE HERETICAL TEACHER THOUGHT HE WAS OFFERING GOD A VOLUNTARY ADDITION TO GOD'S BASIC REQUIREMENTS. HERE LIES THE ROOTS OF "WORKS OF MERIT" – WORKS "OVER AND ABOVE" THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE WHICH ARE MERITORIOUS. There is certainly nothing wrong about voluntary worship, humility, or ascetic self-denial (Paul himself practiced it from time to time with "vows"). What is distorted here IS THE NOTION THAT SUCH SUPER-WORKS GAIN MERIT, PLACE GOD IN OUR DEBT, OR MAKE US SUPERIOR TO OTHER CHRISTIANS!

"indulgence of the flesh" – Far from being "superior," such works of "merit" ACTUALLY INDULGE OUR SINFUL "FLESH" BECAUSE THEY ARE ROOTED IN PRIDE – THE WORST SIN OF THEM ALL!

Questions for Discussion

1. How do you react to the statement: "Christianity is not a body of doctrines to be believed, but a relationship to be lived"?
2. From the notes, discuss some of the attitudes and stances that are characteristic of heretical teaching. How prevalent are these today? Can you give some examples?
3. What is the attitude that almost always characterizes the "super pious"? How and why does this continue to infest the human race, even in the Christian Church?
4. React to this statement: "You are always stressing baptism like it were some sort of magic. I want the full life of the Spirit!"
5. What does the concept of Christ as the "Head" say about the continuing health, life, and growth of the Church? Give practical illustrations of how Christ's "headship" shows itself in a Christian congregation.