

“Christians Beware”

Colossians 2:16-23

June 25, 2017

I. Introduction

Although they may not say it out loud, the majority of people in the world have concerns about life after death. Some say—really hope—that all people will eventually make it to heaven. They say things like, “*As long as a person is sincere and doing his best, it will all work out.*” But Jesus said, “**I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me**” (John 14:6). Others hope that they will do enough good things to “earn” their way into heaven, but Romans 3:23 says “**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**” There is a plethora of ideas for salvation, but the Bible says that there is only one way to be saved from an eternity in hell—as Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:31, “**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved-- you and your household.**” Or as Romans 10:9 says, “**If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**”

This seems rather straight forward, but for some people this is too easy—in many cultures, if one wants something of great value, one must work hard to earn it or steal it. A promise of eternal life in heaven is obviously of great importance, so it would seem that one would have to expend great effort to get it. Even Christians who have accepted God’s gift and have believed the words from Ephesians 2:8-9 which says: “**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast**” can be lured into a works-based faith. This is what Paul was dealing with. False teachers had come and taught the young Colossians believers that there was more to salvation than just *believing*—something of such great value needed more than just “faith.”

Paul had been refuting that idea from the beginning of the Letter to the Colossians. He reminded the Colossian Christians of the supremacy of Christ—it was through Jesus’ death and resurrection that

they were reconciled with God. In [Colossians 2:15](#) he wrote that it was Jesus' death on the cross that defeated “the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Now he was ready to attack 3 heresies or false teachings head-on beginning with Legalism.

II. Christians Beware

A. Beware of Legalism Legalism is the religion of human achievement. It teaches that spirituality is based on Christ *plus human works*. It makes conformity to man-made rules the measure of being spiritual. But believers are complete in Christ—Jesus has provided complete salvation, forgiveness, and victory. In [Colossians 2:13](#) Paul wrote, “He forgave us *all* our sins (not just some ALL), having canceled the written code, with its regulations.” The Galatian Christians had the same issue—in [Galatians 5:1](#) we read, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery,” i.e. a bunch of rules. Similarly, Paul told the Colossians, “Don't let anyone judge you,” i.e. don't sacrifice your freedom in Christ for a set of man-made rules.

No self-appointed judge can have any right to pass judgment on believers or decide who qualifies for a share in the inheritance of the saints. Only Christ can be their judge and He is also their deliverer—writing about how Christians were to receive each other, Paul wrote in [Romans 14:1](#), “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.” The person who judges a believer because that believer is not living under particular Jewish laws or any other perceived “spiritual” laws, is really judging Jesus Christ. Such a person is saying that Christ didn't finish or complete the work of salvation on the cross, and that we must add something to it. He is also saying that Jesus Christ is not sufficient for all the spiritual needs of the Christian.

The false teachers in Colossae were claiming a “deeper spiritual life” for all who would practice the Law of Moses. They were telling the Colossians that it was not enough to have Christ; they needed to keep the Jewish ceremonial law as well. Under the Old Testament system, certain foods were classified as “clean” and “unclean.” But Jesus made it clear that the dietary laws of the Old Covenant were no

longer in force—turn to [Mark 7:14-19](#). In [Romans 14:17](#) Paul wrote that “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Peter was reminded of this lesson when he was on the housetop in Joppa—turn to [Acts 10:9-16](#). [1 Corinthians 8:8](#) puts it this way, “But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”

The legalistic system didn’t involve only food, it also involved days. The Old Testament Jew was commanded to keep the weekly Sabbath, which was the 7th day of the week. It, like the other Old Covenant holy days that Paul mentions, is not binding under the New Covenant. [Exodus 31:16-17](#) says that the Sabbath was the sign to Israel of the Old Covenant. Because Christians are under the New Covenant, they are no longer required to keep the signs of the Old. Nowhere in the New Testament are Christians commanded to observe the Sabbath. For that matter, Christians come together on the first day of the week, [Revelation 1:10](#) calls it the “Lord’s Day,” to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost which was also on the 1st day of the week.

[Galatians 3:24-25](#) says, “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.” The Law reveals sin and warns of the consequences of sin, but it has no power to prevent sin or redeem the sinner. Only God’s grace can do that. In [Colossians](#), Paul wrote that the Law is but a shadow; in Christ we have the reality, the substance—[Hebrews 10:1](#) says, “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-- not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.” Jesus Christ is the reality, so why go back to shadows when we have Jesus instead.

B. Beware of Mysticism Another heresy that was rearing its ugly head in Colossae was mysticism. Mysticism is the belief that a person can experience the spiritual world completely apart from the Word of God or the Holy Spirit. It looks for truth internally, weighing feelings, intuition, and other internal

sensations more heavily than objective, observable, external data. The false teachers in Colossae claimed to have visions and the ability to make contact with angels. In bypassing the Word of God and the Spirit of God, they were opening themselves up to all kinds of demonic activity—2 Corinthians 11:14 says that “Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.”

The Bible strictly forbids the worship of angels, Jesus told Satan in Matthew 4:10, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” In Revelation 19:10 when John fell at his feet to worship an angel, the angel said, “Do not do it! I am a fellow-servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!”

Basically, this mystical ceremony was wrapped up in a false humility that was actually an expression of pride. “I am not good enough to come directly to God,” the Gnostic would say, “so I will start with one of the angels.” Trying to reach God the Father through anyone or anything other than His Son, Jesus Christ is idolatry. Similar to John 14:6, 1 Timothy 2:5 says, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.” The person who worships through angels or saints now in heaven does not prove his humility, for he is not submitting to the authority of God’s Word. Actually, he shows a subtle kind of pride that substitutes man-made traditions for the Word of God—Paul wrote in Colossians 2:18, “His unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.”

In addition to practicing false humility and worshiping angels, the false teachers were taking their stand based on visions they had seen. Like many heretics and cultists down through the ages, Joseph Smith and Mormonism comes to mind, they claimed support for the “weird” teachings based on visions they had supposedly seen. There is no need for extra biblical revelations through visions—turn to Hebrews 1:1-2. We have all we need in Jesus Christ and the Word of God.

Paul warned Christians not to be intimidated by the false teachers’ claims. Far from being the “religious elite,” they “had lost connection with the Head, i.e. Jesus Christ.” Turn to John 15:4-5. Instead of someone to be copied, the false teachers were someone to be pitied, they were really nothing. They

didn't have the Holy Spirit. Just like the Pharisees in Jesus' day ([Matthew 23:27](#)), they were whitewashed tombs filled with dead men's bones.

C. Beware of Asceticism Paul warned of legalism and mysticism, and finally he warned of asceticism. An ascetic is one who lives a life of rigorous self-denial. Ascetic practices were popular in the Middle Ages: wearing hair shirts next to the skin, sleeping on hard beds, whipping oneself, not speaking for days (maybe years), going without food or sleep, and so on. It continues today, the church has been intimidated for centuries by those who advocated poverty as a means to spirituality. Such people forget, as we read in [1 Timothy 6:10](#), that money itself is not the root of evil, but the love of it. To practice asceticism is to adopt a worldly system of religion based on abstinence and self-denial in relation to foods and/or activities.

Asceticism is useless in that it focuses attention on things “[destined to perish with use.](#)” Paul wrote in [1 Corinthians 6:13](#), “[Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.](#)” Back in Colossians Paul wrote that there is no spiritual value in keeping commandments “[based on human commands and teachings.](#)”

Paul closed by writing that 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. Jesus warned His disciple in [Matthew 6:16-18](#), “[When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.](#)” As one commentator put it, “*Ascetic religion is godless, for its practitioners essentially worship themselves. As such, we are not to be intimidated by it.*”

III. Conclusion

Legalism is a popular thing today as well as in Paul's day because you can "measure" your spiritual life—and even brag about it. Legalism is deceptive, because inwardly rebellious and disobedient Christians, even non-Christians, can conform to a set of external performance standards or rituals. Outwardly, their practices seem to be spiritual, but in reality, these practices accomplish nothing spiritual. We aren't to measure ourselves against others but against Jesus Christ; as [Philippians 2:5](#) says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus."

There's a fascination with "religious mysticism" that attracts people. Learning mysteries, being initiated into the inner secrets, having contact with the spirit world all seem exciting. But these practices are condemned by God—in the laws of Moses it was punishable by death ([Leviticus 20:6](#)). The true Christian glories in Christ and not in his own experiences. A true Christian follows God's Word, is led by the Holy Spirit, and as he abides in Christ, he experiences blessing and fruitfulness. There is no other experience that relates him to the Head, Jesus Christ.

In terms of asceticism, many are quick to criticize the ancient monks, the oriental mystics, and the Hindu and Muslim fakirs; but we fail to see this same error in our churches. While there are automatic connections between physical discipline and health, there is no connection between such discipline and holiness. If we deliberately abstain from some food or drink to keep from hurting a weaker Christian, that is one thing. But we must not say that our abstinence makes us more spiritual than another brother who partakes and gives thanks to God-- [Romans 14:6](#) says, "Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God." While it is certainly better to exercise self-control than to yield to the physical appetites of the body, we must not think such self-control is necessarily spiritually motivated.

We, like the Colossians, must not be intimidated by those who would make something other than knowing Christ through His Word a requirement for spiritual maturity. We know better— Christ is all sufficient, [2 Peter 1:3](#) says, "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through

our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” To resist the lure of asceticism, mysticism, and legalism, we must look to God. Every Christian needs to know what this book says; Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” You trust Him for your eternal life, why not trust Him here on earth?