

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

INTRODUCTION

- A. An outline of the Epistle to the Colossians
 - 1. Introduction (1:1-14)
 - 2. Doctrinal Instruction (1:15-29)
 - 3. Warnings against false teaching (2:1-23)
 - a. Encouragement to persevere in the faith (1-7)
 - b. True doctrine is found in Christ (8-15)
 - c. False doctrines of men (16-23)
- B. Review of last week
 - 1. Christians should be captivated by Christ and not by the world.
 - 2. Everything a person could hope for may be found in Christ.
 - 3. Our spiritual victory was secured at the cross.
- C. Note on this week's text: Colossians 2:16-23 addresses the Christian's need to pursue Christ Who is our fullness and Who set us free from sin. This section focuses on three errors promoted by false teachers in an attempt to enslave them in human religion, vv. 16-17, legalism: Jewish based rituals; vv. 18-19, mysticism: visionary experiences; and vv. 20-23, asceticism: self-denial.

COLOSSIANS 2:16-23, FALSE DOCTRINES OF MEN

- A. Pursue substance not shadows (16-17)
 - 1. False teachers tried to control Colossian believers by making them follow legalistic rules (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.*
 - a. Some false teachers were Judaizers who taught that spiritually mature Christians must follow Jewish regulations.
 - 1) They wanted to limit Christian freedom by prohibiting legitimate activities or requiring others.
 - 2) They were *passing judgment* on others.
 - a) Romans 14:3, *Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.*
 - b) Romans 14:10, *Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;*
 - c) Romans 14:13, *Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.*
 - b. Paul declared that Colossian believers must not submit to those who were judging others based on obedience to dietary and festival observances.
 - 1) Dietary restrictions included food and drink.
 - 2) Festival observances included annual, monthly and weekly events.
 - 3) R. Lucas, *Now since Paul clearly does not approve the prohibitions of the visitors, we must assume that their teaching in this regard was not personal and voluntary, but compulsory for all who would attain spiritual perfection.*
 - c. Christians are free from the Law's legalistic requirements.
 - 1) *Therefore* looks back to 2:13-15, where the Colossians were reminded that God had cancelled their debt because payment was made in full by Christ.
 - 2) God declared that all foods may be eaten, 1 Timothy 4:3, *who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.*
 - 3) The Sabbath is the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated in the New Testament, Galatians 4:9-11, *But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*
 - 4) Most Jewish celebrations were intended to look forward to the coming of Messiah, Robert Wall, *Thus, for the Christians to participate in these Jewish celebrations was tantamount to a denial of Jesus' messiahship.*

2. Paul reminded them that Christ is the substance of their faith (17), ***These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.***
 - a. The dietary and festival observances are shadows of future realities.
 - 1) *shadow*
 - a) It means *that which foreshadows a later reality, of ceremonies under the Law.*
 - b) Hebrews 10:1, *For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.*
 - 2) Thoughts on shadows in the Old Testament
 - a) M. Anders, *Paul informs us that rule keeping is just a shadow: there is no real spiritual substance.*
 - b) Johnson, *The offerings were reflections of the one genuine saving offering at the cross, the priesthood was a foreshadowing of the priestly ministry of Christ, and the kings of Israel faintly suggested the coming King of kings and Lord of lords. The new age, then, is not the extension of Judaism; rather, Judaism was a mere shadow of the present age projected into the past.*
 - b. That which is substantive is Christ.
 - 1) *substance is the reality in contrast to the foreshadowing.*
 - a) N. Geisler, *A "shadow" is only an image cast by an object which represents its form. Once one finds Christ, he no longer needs to follow the old shadow.*
 - b) J. Eadie, *Its feast is daily, for every day is holy; its moon never wanes, and its serene tranquillity is an unbroken Sabbath.*
 - c) R. Lucas, *There is no need to return to 'shadow-land' to find reality: for in Christ, at last and finally, the substance has come.*
 - 2) A story of substance over shadow, J. McGee, *I remember that during the days of World War II, I performed the wedding ceremony of two wonderful young people here in Pasadena. (We knew a number of young men who went to war, and some of them gave their lives.) This young fellow was sent overseas, and while he was gone, his young bride carried the biggest purse I have ever seen (and I have seen some big ones). In that purse she carried a huge photograph of him. Most people carry a little bitty picture with them, but not this girl; she carried a photograph that you could have hung on the wall. She was everlastingly drawing it out and showing it to people. She'd say, "Isn't he handsome?" (Between you and me, he wasn't what I would call a handsome boy. He was a wonderful boy, but he was not handsome.) Then the day came when the war was over, and he was coming home. She went all the way to Seattle, Washington, to meet him. Now what do you think she did when she saw him coming down the gangplank? She hadn't seen him in a couple of years. Do you think she took out that picture and looked at it? Do you think she looked at the picture and said, "Isn't he wonderful?" I don't think she even had that picture with her! She saw him and when she saw him, she didn't need a picture—she threw her arms around him.*

Many of us need to get off the merry-go-round of attending seminars, adapting gimmicks, jumping through everybody's little hoop, and taking a shortcut to the abundant life. Have we really arrived? Some think they have. Let's stop carrying around a faded photograph when we have the reality—"Christ in you, the hope of glory."

- B. Seek relationship not experiences (18-19)
 1. Some false teachers based spiritual maturity on religious experiences (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,***
 - a. He warned them not to disqualify themselves by succumbing to false teaching.
 - 1) Christians are in a spiritual race, 1 Corinthians 9:24, *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.*
 - 2) There is a prize to be won, 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, *According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*

- b. Other false teachers came promoting another way to have spiritual fullness.
 - 1) These came from a pagan, Gnostic background.
 - 2) It appears that false teachers were *insisting* on adherence to their rules.
 - 3) There were three components of their teaching.
 - a) *asceticism*
 - 1] It means *lowliness of mind*, or *humility* but in this verse, it means *false humility*.
 - 2] The *asceticism* or false humility refers to rituals like fasting and self-denial noted in verse 23.
 - 3] 2 Timothy 3:5, *having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.*
 - b) *worship of angels*
 - 1] Their asceticism gave supposed support to their emphasis on worship on a higher plain than could be attained through Jesus only.
 - 2] H. Spence, *...angel-worship commended itself as the mark of a devout and humble mind, reverent towards the unseen powers above us, and made purely Christian worship seem insufficient.*
 - 3] M. Anders, *The mystical experience began with initiation into ascetic rituals which led to supernatural visions in which the individual was ushered into the heavenly realms to worship the angels who emanated from God or to join with the angels in the worship of God. The worshiper would then return with all kinds of stories about what he [had] seen in his vision.*
 - c) *visions*
 - 1] The literal translation is *about the things he has seen*.
 - 2] The force of this phrase is the contrast between divine revelation and these human experiences.
 - 3] T. Constable, *Such ideas gave those who had them a false sense of pride. Rather Christians should get our direction from Christ by divine revelation and enjoy growth that He brings to pass rather than growth that is not genuine.*
 - c. Paul declared that emphasis on such practices does not give spiritual fullness but gives one false pride.
 - 1) *puffed up*, means to be proud, arrogant.
 - 2) *without reason*, means without cause.
 - 3) *by his sensuous mind* is literally *by his fleshly or unspiritual mind*.
 - 4) A person who pursues spiritual fullness not tied to Jesus Christ becomes unjustly proud because of his carnal experiences, G. Osborne, *The terrible irony is that they claimed to be joining the angels as they worshiped God—to be proud of their God connection—while in reality they had nothing to do with God.*
 - 5) It is a human attempt at spiritual fullness by short-circuiting God's way which is always through Christ, W. Wiersbe, *When we strive for 'spiritual perfection' or 'spiritual fullness' by means of formulas, disciplines, or rituals, we go backward instead of forward. Christian believers must beware of mixing their Christian faith with such alluring things as yoga, transcendental meditation, Oriental mysticism, and the like. We must also beware of 'deeper life' teachers who offer a system for victory and fullness that bypasses devotion to Jesus Christ. In all things, He must have the preeminence!*
2. Paul reminded them that spiritual maturity comes through a growing relationship with Christ (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.***
 - a. Paul used the illustration of the body to show the foolishness of such false teaching.
 - b. They had lost connection to the Head Who is Christ.
 - 1) Ephesians 4:15-16, *...we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*
 - 2) John 15:2, *Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*
 - c. Christ is the One who spiritually nurtures those in His body, the Church.
 - 1) N. Geisler, *True spirituality does not come by compliance with laws (which are only a shadow) but by connection with the Life (who is the reality).*
 - 2) G. Osborne, *They had drifted away from the centrality of Christ and so had lost the solid foundation for their faith. There can be no truth in a religion that ignores Christ.*

- C. Focus on the inside not the outside (20-23)
1. Paul cautioned the Colossians not to base their lives on what they don't do (20-21), *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 - "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"*
 - a. He reminded the Colossians that when they trusted Christ they died to their old natures.
 - 1) *If* can be translated *since* the construction is a clause that describes a condition true to reality.
 - 2) In Christ, our carnal nature died and was replaced by our spiritual nature.
 - a) Romans 6:2, *By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?*
 - b) Colossians 2:13-14, *And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*
 - b. They are no longer controlled by the *elemental spirits of the world*.
 - 1) In verse 8, it was noted that this can also mean *elementary principles*.
 - 2) The emphasis here is on elementary principles.
 - 3) Galatians 2:19, *For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.*
 2. He explained that such behavior appears religious but doesn't control one's sinful nature (22-23), *(referring to things that all perish as they are used) - according to human precepts and teachings? 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.*
 - a. The error of asceticism or self-denial is its attempt to be spiritual by dealing with the flesh.
 - 1) It deals with temporal issues, *things that all perish as they are used*.
 - a) Paul gave examples in verse 21, *do not handle, do not taste, do not touch*.
 - b) Matthew 15:17, *Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.*
 - 2) It satisfies one's pride by appealing to the flesh.
 - a) It is man-made religion that a person can do without the need of Christ.
 - b) M. Anders, *It certainly looks spiritual when someone goes through all sorts of sacrifices supposedly to bring them closer to God.*
 - c) J. McGee, *It is the pride that says, "I deny myself, and I don't do these things. Just look at me, I'm really sprouting wings, and I shine my halo every morning."*
 - b. Such prohibitions don't produce life but lead to enslavement to the flesh.
 - 1) It is a man-made attempt to be spiritual by obeying rules and regulations.
 - 2) It doesn't bring the body under control, *stopping the indulgence of the flesh*.
 - a) The external acts don't hinder the inner urges.
 - b) A. MacLaren, *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.*
 - c) N. Geisler, *Neglecting the body, Paul argued, does not nourish the spirit.*
 - c. Note NIV translation of verses 22-23, *These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.*

CONCLUSION

- A. T. Constable, *The emphases of these false teachers are still with us today. The first is "higher" knowledge (Gnosticism). The second is the observance of laws to win God's love (legalism). The third is the belief that beings other than Christ must mediate between people and God (mysticism). The fourth is the practice of abstaining from things to earn merit with God (asceticism).*
- B. M. Anders, *When Jesus is given control, He not only gives us the Holy Spirit to fight against the flesh, but He also gives us new desires as well. We don't need rules for the outside because we have the Spirit on the inside. We simply need to yield to him.*
- C. Seek God's approval not man's.