

COLOSSIANS BIBLE STUDY

Colossians 2:01-23 (b)

Lesson #11

Introduction

Last week we moved into chapter two of our study of the book of Colossians. Now we all know that Paul didn't divide his letter into chapters, but he had, in his opening sentences, presented a vivid picture of Jesus Christ, and His position of preeminence in the master plan of God. And now, building on this foundational information, Paul begins to draw some conclusions which pertain directly to the situation in the church at Colossae. Chapter 2 of this epistle is Paul's direct response to the heresies of asceticism and angel worship which had been introduced into that church. Now let's continue to read what Paul says about these things to the churches:

Christ versus the Colossian Heresy

1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you, for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me in person. 2 [I want] their hearts to be encouraged and joined together in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding, and have the knowledge of God's mystery—Christ. 3 In Him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. 4 I am saying this so that no one will deceive you with persuasive arguments. 5 For I may be absent in body, but I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the strength of your faith in Christ.

6 Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in Him, 7 rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

8 Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, based on human tradition, based on the elemental forces of the world, and not based on Christ. 9 For in Him the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily, 10 and you have been filled by Him, who is the head over every ruler and authority. 11 In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of the Messiah. 12 Having been buried with Him in baptism, you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. 13 And when you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive with Him and forgave us all our trespasses. 14 He erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it out of the way by nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and disgraced them publicly; He triumphed over them by Him.

16 Therefore don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a sabbath day. 17 These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is the Messiah. 18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm and inflated without cause by his fleshly mind. 19 He [this person] doesn't hold on to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, develops with growth from God.

20 If you died with Christ to the elemental forces of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations: 21 [Such as] "Don't handle, don't taste, don't touch"? 22 All these [regulations] refer to what is destroyed by being used up; they are human commands and doctrines. 23 Although these have a reputation of wisdom by promoting ascetic practices, humility, and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value against fleshly indulgence.

Col 2:1-23 (HCSB)

Last week we discussed verses 1-15, so this week we'll just briefly summarize those verses to refresh our memories and then continue on with the rest of the chapter.

Verses 1-5:

In verses one through five Paul reminds the Colossians that he's currently in prison for having done nothing other than preaching the gospel about Jesus Christ. But nevertheless, he still wants to encourage their hearts so that they may have the full assurance of understanding about the mystery of Jesus Christ. He continues on in verse four telling them that he's saying these things to them so that no one will deceive them with persuasive arguments, and draw them away to another teaching. He goes on to acknowledge to them that he may well be absent from them in body, but that he's indeed with them in spirit, and he's rejoicing over them to see the strength of their faith in Christ Jesus.

Verses 6-12:

In verse six Paul introduces the first of two "therefore" statements. Here in chapter 6 Paul says *therefore* as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walked in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. Paul reminds them that they were taught the truth, and encourages them to walk according to that truth as it had been presented to them by the faithful minister Epaphras. In effect, he's asking them not to deviate from that which they've been taught, but rather to remain steadfast in that teaching they had received.

In verse eight he issues a warning. He tells them to be careful that no one takes them captive through philosophy and empty deceit, based on human tradition, based on the elemental forces of the world, and not based on Christ. Because in Christ the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily, and they have been filled by Him, who is the head over every ruler and authority that exists. He reminds them that they have been crucified with Christ, and resurrected with Christ, all of which has taken place through faith in Christ and nothing else.

Verses 13-15:

By having disobeyed a commandment of God, man has made himself guilty of sin. The divine penalty prescribed by God for sin is death. (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23) It is because all have sinned (Rom 3:23) that the scriptures may categorically declare to all, that when we were dead (that is both by Godly decree and by spiritual condition), in the uncircumcision of our flesh, (still attached to our sin) **He made us alive**, and **forgave us all our trespasses**.

By this act, performed by His Son Jesus, God the Father triumphed over the fallen and disobedient angelic powers and authorities and disgraced them publically. Disgraced then how? By triumphing over their best efforts to ruin and destroy those precious and chosen elect of God, whom He had predestined to be His children for eternity. They had given it their best shot. They had enticed the elect into sin, and thought by doing so that they had won the battle over the eternal destiny of mankind. But God had a different plan from before creation, and the angelic powers and authorities were right then and there shown that they were totally impotent and powerless to thwart the plan of the almighty sovereign God.

Appearances mean nothing. The grandest human and angelic logic amounts to nothing. God does as He well pleases, and nothing prevents Him from achieving His purposes. The victory that the fallen angels were so sure of was made into nothing. By all appearances they had won the victory for the eternal souls of man, having brought every one of them under the just penalty of death for sinning against the commandments of God. The situation seemed to be a lock. After all, God had Himself declared that sin must be punished by death, so how could God prevent His elect from suffering the fate His own proclamation without breaking His word? And they knew that God doesn't break His word.

They must have been very self confident, probably even cocky, in light of the apparent impossibility on God's part for winning this battle. But then, at the precise and preplanned time, the mystery is unveiled. The mystery hidden from ages past but now made known to angels and men. Jesus Christ, the divine mystery of God who was from eternity past, long before either angels or man were ever created, predestined to be the redeemer of man, and their sure and certain hope of glory. His substitutionary death completely satisfies the certificate of debt that is against all those who believe, by nailing it to the cross of Jesus Christ, who did, by His own act, pay it in full for all who are His.

Now I want to make sure that we don't misunderstand what's being said here. Because I was taught some things about these verses as an early Christian that aren't correct. The verse says that something that was opposed to us, and that put us under obligation, was taken out of the way and nailed to the cross. I was taught by this church that the thing that was opposed to us, and taken out of the way, was the commandments of God. This false interpretation is antinomian, and it's obviously not at all what's being taught.

For example, if an armed robber is granted a pardon for his crime he's free to go home, but he certainly isn't free to continue committing armed robberies. The pardon was for his penalty of prison time, it wasn't an abolishing of armed robbery as a crime. Please don't make this mistake of interpretation as my early church did. They taught that the commandments of God were no longer applicable to New Testament saints. Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:17-20 make it crystal clear that the saints of God are obligated to live and observe the commandments at an even higher level than the Old Testament ever taught. Not to qualify for salvation, but to testify to it, and glorify God for it.

So, now that we're clear, it was the Godly pronounced penalty of death for sinning that was our certificate of debt. And this was also the opposition mentioned to our taking our place in God's kingdom. So, this is what Jesus abolished and nailed to the cross, the certificate of the debt of death for our sins that was opposing our eternal destiny.

What a shocking turn of events for those powers and authorities who had been openly taunting God for Millennia. This must be the second worst day of their lives. The worst day still awaits them and is described in the book of Revelation. On that day of Christ's resurrection God openly disgraced those demonic powers through the work of his beloved Son, and He did it publically before all. While Jesus was being publically humiliated before man because of us, the demons were being publically humiliated before the host of heaven as a display of the power and glory of God.

So then, what's our conclusion from these verses so far? That God's plan, and our life and righteousness, is based entirely and solely on believing in this Jesus, who is the great eternal mystery of God. By knowing and understanding this, we shouldn't be easily deceived, even by the craftiest of false teachers. But, we must ever be watchful, and always examine things carefully, (1Ths 5:21-22)

Verses 16-17:

16 Therefore don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a sabbath day. 17 These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is the Messiah.

All of the preceding revelations of Jesus Christ and the gospel now leads to another "therefore" statement. Which is to say that it should produce a result. What result? Well, many to be sure, but in the immediate context of this discussion, the result that no one should take you captive to their false teachings by imposing on you meaningless regulations as to what you can or can't eat, what you can or can't drink, what traditional festivals you have to observe, or what precise day of the week you must assemble to worship. Nor should our attention be diverted off of Christ towards angelic creatures or earthly beings. Christ died for the express intent that He himself would be the mediator between God and man, and neither He nor the Father will tolerate any other false, self proclaimed alternate mediators. (1Tim 2:5)

The Jews especially were steep in rules, some to be sure were recorded in the Old Testament and taught by Moses. They were told what they could and couldn't eat and drink, and various other statutes and ordinances. They weren't to associate with gentiles, or allow them into certain parts of their Temple. These things had been taught for generations, and had become the symbolic gestures that defined worship. But Jesus told them that they did these things by simple rote, and their hearts were really far from Him, even as they blindly practiced these rites and ordinances.

6 And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. 7 'But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'

8 "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." 9 He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. Mark 7:6-9 (NASB)

Again, let's be careful to rightly understand what's being said and what's not being said. First it's important to understand the distinctions between the commandments of God, as He recorded them on the stone tablets, from the many ordinances that He gave the Jews for their practice as they awaited the arrival of their Messiah, and the endless array of just plain human traditions that the Jews had added over the years themselves. It was something like taking your dinner plate and pouring everything on it into a blender. When it's done it's impossible to distinguish one ingredient from the other. And this is what the Jews had done with the laws and ordinances of God and their own practices and traditions. They had been so thoroughly blended that they couldn't tell the difference. And the result was that they could manipulate the circumstances most any way they wished to fit their immediate needs. And for this Jesus rebuked them sternly, as we just read from Mark 7:6-9. They were expert manipulators, and likewise is much of today's professing Christianity.

When Peter was on the roof of a friend's house, he received a heavenly vision from God that resulted in him being told that some things that used to be considered unclean and untouchable for the Jews in the past, were now to be considered cleansed by the blood of Jesus. This referred generally to the ordinances of food, drink, festivals, and days; but especially the place of the gentiles as being made acceptable among those chosen of God. This wasn't a reversal of God of His position on anything, but was the result of His predetermined plan, whereby He had intentionally put certain things temporarily off limits until their time for release had come.

He did this to show that they were a shadow, a preview of coming attractions. By using various objects, rituals, foods, and practices, God provided understandable examples of the manifold aspects of Christ for His elect to see; and by these things to better understand the principles they represent. Therefore, these things are said to be a shadow of what was to come. But the substance of them, that is the real meaning that's behind them, and the real reason for them, is that they symbolically represent various aspects of Jesus Himself. Why were some things off limits? Because they hadn't yet been cleansed by Jesus. Why are some things okay now if they weren't before? Because they've now been cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, and are therefore no longer to be considered unclean.

A good example of this is the teaching of Jesus where He was speaking to His disciples about His imminent crucifixion, and He told them that they should be glad that He was leaving His earthly body because by doing so He could then send them something that they otherwise couldn't receive. Let's look at those verses:

*4. ...I didn't tell you these things from the beginning, because I was with you.
5 "But now I am going away to Him who sent Me, and not one of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' 6 Yet, because I have spoken these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. 7 Nevertheless, I am telling you the truth. It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don't go away the Counselor will not come to you. If I go, I will send Him to you. 8 When He comes, He will convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment: 9 about sin, because they do not believe in Me; 10 about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will no longer see Me; 11 and about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.*

12 "I still have many things to tell you, but you can't bear them now. 13 When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth. For He will not speak on His own, but He will speak whatever He hears. He will also declare to you what is to come. 14 He will glorify Me, because He will take from what is Mine and declare it to you. 15 Everything the Father has is Mine. This is why I told you that He takes from what is Mine and will declare it to you.

John 16:4-15 (HCSB)

The Role of the Spirit:

16 "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; 17 that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, [Why?] because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

18 "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 "After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; and because I live, you will live also. 20 "In that day you will know that I am in My Father,

and you are in Me, and I am in you.21 "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him."22 Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, "Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?"23 Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him.24 "He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me.25 "These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you.26 "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.27 "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Don't let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.28 "You heard that I said to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.29 "Now I've told you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe.30 "I won't speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me;31 but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me.*

John 14:16-31 (NASB)

From these verses we see that Jesus was telling His disciples that they could receive something after His crucifixion and resurrection that they couldn't otherwise ever receive. Without His substitutionary death for sin, the disciples were unable to receive the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In fact, they weren't even able to understand what that meant. The New Covenant gifts of a new heart and a new mind were only possible within a cleansed vessel. Only afterward did they comprehend what He had been telling them. The elect of God, chosen from before creation, were all waiting for the propitiation of Jesus, to receive the gift that had been planned from eternity. And receive it we did, but only when He was ready, and had performed all the planned events that were the necessary prerequisites.

And now, all the rituals and ordinances that pertained to the shadows are no longer applicable, since the substance Himself has come, and the shadow has fulfilled its purpose. Let's not ignore the substance and still try to embrace the mere shadows. Jesus has fulfilled the meaning of all the shadows, and now we worship Him, not them. We're foolish if we let people act as our judge in matters of what we eat, or what we drink, or what day we assemble to worship, or if we keep diverse festivals. Because these festivals, and days, and feasts, were all specifically designed as symbolic types pointing us to Jesus Himself, and foretelling His arrival. (Some things decreased, others increased)

But again, just like Judas, there are many who hang around, and claim to know Jesus, but theirs, like his, is just an act, and for them these shadowy things are all they have, so they stubbornly cling to them and try to teach others to do the same. But to those who truly know Jesus, these are simply dim shadows that have faded away under the blazing light of Jesus Christ, by His perfect life, His substitutionary crucifixion, His power of resurrection, and the promised gift of His indwelling Spirit to all who believe.

It isn't angels who died for our sins, and it isn't angels that indwell our spirit and work their sanctifying and transforming work in our hearts and minds. It isn't dead saints who intercede for us at the throne of God and mediate Gods mercies to humanity. It isn't the sweet and gentle Mary who brings us to God and sways His favor toward us. All these things are ancient and popular substitutes, modern day idols, stubbornly clenched in the fists of those who have never experienced the gift of saving faith and regeneration of spirit. These things and practices are their only link to the hope of heaven, and escape of judgement. So they guard them jealously, lest they admit to themselves their true condition.

These are logical enough to the human mind, and seem like they should gain favor in the sight of God. And anyone can partake in them by simply following some particular rituals. And, if one's whole concept of Christianity is based on how well we keep these traditions, then they'll stubbornly try to protect them. Just like the Jews who had blended the true words of God with their own self made regulations and traditions, the very same is true for that body called Christianity, and we like them, have difficulty discerning what's the truth of God, from what's the traditions of men.

We separate into whole denominations based on our particular ideas, that are based not on a proper interpretation of scripture, but on our own human misunderstandings of them, and then we stubbornly protect those misconceptions just as the Jews did theirs, while the whole time missing the true Messiah and the meaning His message. Only the names have changed, the practices of mankind have stayed exactly the same, and will continue to do so until the Messiah comes Himself. We can't change this situation anymore than the Jewish prophets could, because we weren't meant to. God sent Jeremiah to preach to the Jews knowing full well that they wouldn't listen to him. He even told Jeremiah that in the beginning. This is the case because that victory of righteousness over evil has been specifically reserved by the Father for His Son Jesus, at His glorious and spectacular return.

Furthermore, there's no end to those who claim to have seen visions, heard speaking, and performed miracles. People will drive a thousand miles to see a miraculous picture of Jesus on a tortilla, and claim it's a genuine miracle. Some will claim to be able to heal you if you give them enough money and have enough faith.

Others actually profess to being Jesus himself, and amass a loyal following that will literally give up their lives for him. When "things" and "practices" become just as important to us as Jesus Himself, and what He taught, then everything inevitably begins to deteriorate from there on a spiraling course that ends up with the "things" being everything and Jesus Christ just being a meaningless name that we use to endorse and justify our pet practices. We stamp the "Jesus" label on whatever we've invented as our particular doctrines and practices. We honor Him with our lips, but our hearts are far away from Him, just as He told the Jews. (Mark 7:6)

It's precisely because such things as these really do happen all the time, that the scriptures must constantly deal with the issues of truth versus error. It's human nature to try to avoid conflict, but to avoid conflict by intentionally not confronting error has severe consequences. Often it takes time to see them, but eventually all error brings similar results.

Paul could have just told Epaphras not to worry, it wasn't anything serious, and to just go back to Colossae and try to get along with these church goers that were a little off course, and God would eventually bring them around. But that's never how the bible treats false teachings, or those who propagate them. In every case the bible refutes the error itself by showing the truth, and then exposes the teachers of it, and demands their repentance or shows them the door.

The bible doesn't teach tolerance of heresy in the churches. However, the bible does acknowledge that there are differences of opinions among the members over various matters, (Rom 14) so every church should pray continually for men with spiritual discernment, who can distinguish between what's dangerous heresy and what's simply personal opinions. Both do exist, and need to be discerned rightly and dealt with accordingly. Doing nothing about false teachings and heresies is rarely, if ever, the right response. But discerning a dangerous teaching or heresy from a personal preference is a gift of God, and every church needs such men.

A very famous preacher defines discernment as the ability to distinguish truth from error and from half truth. I think this is a very good definition, and it's this ability that enables a church to assess what's true from what's false, and the degree of threat that it poses; so that a proper response is formulated. Not too light, and not too harsh, but appropriate for the situation. Only those who are well versed and well grounded in the scriptures will be able to serve this function in the churches. Otherwise, emotions, opinions, and traditions, will surely rule the day.

We must not be deluded of our prize. Jesus Christ, who is the substance of all the shadows, is for us the only object of worship, and He has freed us from blind observances of rituals and human traditions. He has freed us from our previous bondage to sin, and we need not punish or mutilate our flesh, as His was already brutally mutilated on our behalf, once and for all.

Paul makes it clear that it's useless to damage our bodies to try to renew and transform our fleshly desires. Transformation is achieved by the renewing of the mind, (Rom 12:2) not by the physical abuse of the flesh. And we accomplish this by consciously putting to death the deeds of the flesh, and presenting our bodies a living sacrifice to the will of God. **But to do this we must rightly know what the will of God is**, and this can only be found in the scriptures. It isn't something that's attained by sporadic cursory reading, but only by prolonged systematic study, combined with continual prayer for the spiritual understanding that was promised by the Holy Spirit.

As we begin to grow and gain more knowledge of the will of God, we begin to consciously and decisively reject doing those things that our flesh nature desires, because God has told us not to. And conversely, to begin to do those things that our flesh nature doesn't want to do, because God has told us to do them. And furthermore, He's made us want to do them. This is how we fight against the flesh, by denying it its way over our lives, not by severe denial of its natural needs, or torturing and mutilating it physically.

Conclusion:

There will always be those who try to make the church, and worship, something ritualistic and procedural. Usually because that's all they know and understand. Whole churches, even whole denominations are in existence today that rest almost entirely on foundations that are of human contrivance. They have laid another foundation, and are now building on it with wood, hay, and straw. They think they're serving God, but just like the Jewish Pharisees at the time of Jesus, they are actually serving a system that has evolved from the emotions and perceptions of fallen man.

Just like the Jews used the authentic writings of Moses to justify their actions, so today every system has a book that they use to support their position. And there are many who use the bible just as the Jews used Moses, but it's only effectual when its rightly understood and interpreted. Only the right interpretation of scripture is scripture, everything else is false. If we read something out of the bible and then misinterpret its meaning, then we do not have the divine scriptures, we have error. So the scriptures spend very much time dealing with error and how to confront it and deal with it; as Paul is doing with this letter to the Colossians, and virtually every other letter that he wrote in the New Testament.

But to be fair, there's also a growing popularity for churches that are eager to cast off all form and procedure; where anything and everything goes. Come as you are, no boring preaching, short homiletical sermons that tickle the ears with pleasantries. Espresso coffee in the foyer, laser lights and live entertainers in the sanctuary, no rules or expectations. Just come as you are and have fun worshiping. If there was ever a time when we had it all, this is surely that time.

From the many and diverse traditions of Roman Catholicism, to the plethora of ultra liberal universal churches of the day, there's no limit to the possibilities that are available when the word of God, rightly divided, is substituted by the teachings and musings of men.

However, the answer to both is the same. To truly and rightly know the mind and heart of Jesus Christ, and a thorough and proper understanding of all the things that He taught. To rightly know, and joyfully do His will, is the sanctifying and motivating process prescribed by God for bringing His elect into conformity with His Son. This is a work of God in the hearts of His chosen, and He's doing it day by day in their lives through the power of His word, made effectual on His elect through the working of the indwelling Holy Spirit. To Him alone be the glory forever. Amen

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