

No Living in the Shadows

The Preeminence of Christ

By Rev. Billy Dempsey

Good evening folks. Let me ask you to open your Bibles if you would to Colossians chapter 2. I'll read verses 16 to 23 then provide some context before we walk through those verses together. Before we read God's Word let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, thank You for Your Word. We need its life, we need its nourishment, we need its teaching, its rebuking, its correcting, its training in righteousness. We need to see Your face. We need to hear the clarity of the Gospel. We have lived since the Lord's Day in a world of clanging, competing, compelling voices and we pull together here to hear the one voice that gives life. Speak to our hearts. Feed our souls. Let us hear the voice of the Shepherd whom we long to hear and can't wait to see. We make our prayer in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.

Beginning with verse 16, chapter 2 of Colossians; reading to the end of the chapter:

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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 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, 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.

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" (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.

All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever.

The Context of Colossians 2

We're kind of picking up here at the end of Paul's argument in chapter 2 of Colossians. Let me go back a little bit and provide some context so that we can understand these verses, I think, properly. If you look back up to verses 6 and 7 of chapter 2, Paul gives the believers at Colossae three guiding principles shaping their life in Christ, principles that refer to godly living, spiritual growth, theological understanding. Let me read verses 6 and 7. You'll see what I mean. "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." So he establishes those three guiding principles. In the next paragraph that I'll read here in just a second, verses 8 to 15, Paul issues, actually through the rest of the chapter he issues three warnings. In verses 8 to 15 he issues one warning. In our passage that I just read a moment ago we find the two other warnings.

Paul's First Warning: Let No One Take You Captive

But the first warning comes in verse 8 where Paul says, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ." That "elemental spirits of the world" - that's kind of confusing language but I think it's confusing in part to us because Paul is picking up their language, the language of the false teachers in Colossae. He's using their language so that people might understand more clearly exactly what they're teaching. And so that's why there's a little bit of confusion among the commentators I think about exactly what that means. So there's his first warning - "See to it no one takes you captive."

And from there, the next few verses, verses 9 to 15, a marvelous, densely packed statement that Kevin preached last week of what it means for us to be in Christ, bringing forward truths of our fullness in Christ. Remember, the false teachers in Colossae are talking about a fullness that they know of that's really apart from Christ. It sounds Christian but the more you dig into what they were teaching as Paul shows us here, it's not at all. It's not about Christ. They've separated from Christ. So they talk about a fullness apart from Christ. They talk about a freedom that's not a freedom at all; it's a bondage. And so Paul is saying, "Look, be careful. Don't let the false teachers take you captive." And it goes on with this densely packed statement of what it means to be in Christ. Let me just read it, verses 9 to 15, before we jump into our verses tonight:

"For in him," that is, in Christ, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful

working of God, who raised him from the dead. 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. He disarmed the rulers and authorities,” the elemental spirits of this world, “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him,” that is, in Christ.

And so it's a beautiful, marvelous statement of what it means for us to be in Christ. Now so from there the verses we're going to think about tonight, verses 16 to 23, we hear Paul's two remaining warnings, verses 16 and 18, and then in verses 20 to 23 Paul tells us what it means to be free in Christ - free from the world, free from the Law, and free from the flesh.

I. Paul's Second Warning: Syncretism and Returning to Old Covenant Rituals

Let's talk about this first, this second warning. Paul says in verse 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.” One of the things that we said as we first began to look at Colossians was that there was a syncretism, a joining together of different religious ideas. And here we've got in this verse a syncretism of pagan asceticism and old covenant regulations about feast days and about new moons and about Sabbaths, a syncretism between the prevailing and pagan ideas in Judaism. As a level of asceticism, self-denial has become mixed with a reference to the Jewish calendar of feast days. Notice the breakdown here. There's a forbidding - “Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink” - things you're not supposed to do. It's an issue of forbidding, of certain food and drink. I don't think a reference to the Old Testament dietary law, because the Old Testament dietary law had very little to say about drink. Asceticism was a hallmark of pagan religions. This could very well be a pull from the prevailing pagan religions of the Lycus Valley where Colossae is located. A requiring, not just a forbidding but a requiring. Don't let anybody pass judgment on you because you don't meet their requirement, their requirement that you observe the feast day, the new moon festival, the Sabbath observance. They're not talking about Lord's Day worship on the first day of the week; they're talking about the seventh day of the week. Notice the rhythm there - annual fest days that happened once a year, monthly new moon festivals, and weekly Sabbath day observances. Paul is saying to the Colossians, “Don't be intimidated by the rules and the condemnations of the false teachers. Don't be intimidated. Don't let them buffalo you. Don't let them pass judgment on you. Don't be intimidated by their efforts to cause you to tow the line that they've created.”

Why not? Because the false teachers are promoting a religion of shadows, but the substance, the substance has already come. The substance is Christ. Verse

17, "These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." Christ has come and He's coming in the fulfillment of His work. He's brought the fullness of all the promises, all the covenant promises God has made. He's brought the fullness of the blessing of the nearness and the presence of God, the blessing of being able to come into God's presence, the blessing of worshiping Him in spirit and in truth, the blessing of approaching Him without an earthly mediator - our Mediator is in heaven; our High Priest sits as His right hand praying for us, making intercession for us. Those are the blessings of fullness and Paul is saying, "What the false teachers are doing is adding a layer that separates you from God, a layer of shadows; the shadows have passed. We don't have need of the shadows anymore because the fullness has come. The fullness has come in Christ." In the old covenant the Law used types, symbols, feast days, the Sabbath, to prepare the people for the coming fulfillment in the person and work of Christ. "Christ has done His work," Paul is saying. "The fullness has come. The types are a shadow. Christ is the substance. Don't let the false teachers pass judgment on you! You have the truth. They're telling you lies!"

II. Paul's Third Warning: Asceticism and Loosening of Faith in Christ

The warning number three. Look at verses 18 and 19 where Paul says, "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism," that hardcore self-denial, "and the worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up by a sensuous mind, 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." The phrase, "disqualify you," another way to translate that is to rob you of your prize. Don't let anyone rob you of your prize. There's a real danger here. It's not a danger of a different flavor of theological ice cream. There's a real danger that these people, if they buy the lie that these false teachers are selling, they give away the Gospel, they lose their prize because they transfer their hope from Christ to something that is not Christ. Paul is saying, "Don't let anybody disqualify you. Don't let anybody take your prize, rob you of your prize." How might they be robbed? They might be robbed by being intimidated, enticed, to let loose their grip on Christ. You know that line about the false teachers who have not held fast to Christ, not held fast to the Head? They've let go of Christ; Christ is no longer their hope. Their regulations, their asceticism, their self-denial - that's their hope. That's what the false teachers have done and that's what they're encouraging the believers at Colossae to do. "We've got something better. We've got something extra. Yes! Thank God for the work of Christ," they would say. "Thank God for the cross," they would say. "Thank God for the empty tomb," they would say. "But we've got something a little extra. We've got a little bit more. We've got something that we can add to that that can bring you really close to God. They're encouraging the Colossian believers to let loose of Christ.

A Present-Day Problem

That happens today, too. That happens today, too. Go read, go read any of the literature that you find from Lakewood Church and you find a literature that encourages you to let loose of Christ, to overlook Christ, to let go of Christ and add, as Paul says, ideas puffed up without reason by a sensuous mind. Look at the prosperity gospel movement. Familiarize yourself. If you don't know about the prosperity gospel movement, go through Christian television sometime. Go through TBN - Trinity Broadcasting Network - and look at the prosperity gospel. I'm not saying everything on TBN is prosperity gospel but there is a boatload of prosperity gospel on TBN; look at it. And here the encouragement to let go of Christ and grab ideas that are puffed up from a sensuous mind. "Look at all you can have if you just do this, if you just do that, if you just go here, if you just go there. Look at all you can have!" Modern day false teachers, just as busy as the teachers in Colossae. That's why we have to be mindful. That's why we have to be mindful. That's why we have to pray for our elders. That's why we have to pray for our pastors that we will continue to preach and teach, from pulpit and Sunday School lectern and every Bible study, every D-group, that we will continue to teach the truth of God because there is a whole lot out there that's not the truth of God, that masquerades like the truth of God just like these guys are masquerading in Colossae as men who tell the truth about God and the Gospel.

They're enticing their hearers to let loose their grip on Christ alone and make room in their hands, in their hearts, for their particular set of ideas. Be aware of what's being said out there in the Christian world today and you hear very similar things. The false teachers purport to teach the Colossians how to be really close to God, "Let me show you how to have a really tight fellowship with God, how to walk with Him and be mindful of Him and be aware of Him," but they throw away the only way that there can be any growth in the grace of God and they teach the Colossians to do so too.

True Growth and Future Warning

How does anybody thrive spiritually? How do you grow spiritually? How do I grow? How does our church grow? How do our families grow spiritually? Did you hear that language from verse 19? Listen to it again - "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." How do you and I grow? How do we thrive spiritually? By holding fast to Christ, the Head. How does our church grow? By holding fast to Christ, the Head. What happens when the false teachers make converts and make disciples in the churches that Epaphras has planted? Remember, there are three churches that Epaphras planted. There was Colossae, there was Laodicea, there was the church at Hierapolis, all in the Lycus Valley there in south-central Turkey. What happens? Well the whole body is hurt. If the whole body is nourished from the head and the result, the end is that it grows with a growth that is from God, as the false teachers peel out one

and peel out another and peel out another to make disciples for themselves, the whole body hurts. The whole body is injured. It's not just a matter of, "Oh, they went off another way." It diminishes the church, it diminishes us, it diminishes the body of Christ. The body of Christ is robbed of their gifts and their graces. The body of Christ is robbed of an opportunity to minister to and serve them and grow in that process as well.

You know Jesus rebukes, in the seven letters to the seven churches, He rebukes the church at Pergamum and the church at Thyatira. There are good things that He commends in the lives of those churches but He rebukes them for this, that they tolerate in their midst, in the midst of their congregation, they tolerate false teaching. False teaching of the sort that corrupts the body. False teaching of a sort that causes people to let go of their grip on Christ. False teaching of the sort that leads to the grossest kind of immorality. In fact in Thyatira it was bad enough that the false teacher had an office! She was a prophetess! She was recognized and deemed a prophetess. Jesus called her Jezebel! He rebukes the church in Thyatira because they've tolerated her and He says, "I will come with judgment if you don't judge." He's jealous, He's jealous for the health and the purity, the nourishment and the wellbeing of His church. He calls us to be as well.

III. Freedom in Christ

Well those are Paul's three warnings. He moves in verses 20 to 23 to talk about what does it mean to be free in Christ. What does it mean to be free? The false teachers are promising freedom. Paul says right there in verse 15 that Jesus has disarmed the rulers and authorities and has put them to open shame. He's triumphed over them by the cross. What more freedom is there? But that's what the false teachers are promising. "Jesus has not made you free enough," it would seem they say. "There's more freedom than what Jesus has bought. Let us tell you how to have that more freedom." And Paul squares off against that kind of idea.

Union with Christ

Listen to what he says here at the beginning of verse 20. "If with Christ you were dead" - notice the use of their language - "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.'" Paul is talking about our union with Christ.

Let's remember that what Paul is teaching us right here - that when Jesus died, we died. When Jesus was raised to life, we had new life. Go back and reread those verses 8 to 15; you'll find Paul spelling it out there. He gives us His Spirit to dwell in us. That's because we are one with Him. And Paul even says in 1 Corinthians that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. He gives us His Spirit to dwell in us, His sonship, Jesus' sonship is our sonship. What's the reason that

the adoption that we are promised to be adopted by God - why does He adopt us? Because as we've come to faith in Christ God has united us with Him. We become God's sons and daughters just like Jesus is God's Son. His sonship becomes our sonship. His heaven is ours. His glory is ours. His reign is ours. We are united with Christ. When He died, we died.

Free from the World

And Paul is saying, "Why? Why are you enticed, why are you drawn to the elemental spirits of this world, the kinds of things these men are teaching when you're dead to this world? How can you return," Paul is saying, "to live as though you belong to this world?" Paul's saying, "You don't belong to this world because you died to it. When Christ died to it, you died with Him, and when He raised you again He raised you to new life, a new life that's apart from this world, a new life that transcends this world, a new life that goes beyond this world. How can a dead person," Paul is saying, "be bound to anything? When we died with Christ our tie to the motivating forces of this world, the shaping ideas of this world, the energizing principles of this world, all informed and shaped by the spiritual forces of darkness that are arrayed against God and arrayed against His people, our tie to this world was broken." Paul says Jesus broke it, as he talks about in verse 15, by "disarming the rulers and authorities and putting them to open shame." So we are free from this world because we are free in Christ. Paul says, "Why? Why do you live, why are you enticed by these false teachers to live as though you belonged here? You are made for someplace else and Jesus has ensured your future there. Jesus has ensured," Paul is saying, "your future there. That's where you life is." That's why he says in chapter 3 verse 3, "your life is hidden with Christ in God." It's a beautiful image. Paul says we're free. Don't be enticed by the false teachers' attempt to bind you more closely to this world. "You're free," Paul says. "You're free from this world."

Free from the Law

He says we're free from the Law. Look at this business of verse 21, "'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used) - according to human precepts and teachings?" The religion of the false teachers in Colossae, and if you listen to false teachers as you encounter them these days, the religion of false teachers in every age is a religion of loopholes and regulations. Did you catch what Paul says at the midpoint, the last phrase of verse 22? "According to human precepts and teachings." It's not even the Law of God that Paul is referring to that the teachers are teaching. It's not the Law of God; it's the law of man. It's traditions, it's regulations that people have come up with on their own. It's the teachers themselves who are now determining the law that's supposed to bind your conscience. Paul is saying, "What are you doing? You're free from that. You're free from that."

I'll give you a more modern day illustration. Back in the 70s, Debbie and I were

pretty deeply involved in the charismatic movement and some of you may have come out of the charismatic movement; you may remember this. Back in the 70s there came to be in many fellowships of the charismatic movement something known as the Shepherdship Movement. And it was the notion that people, and it's a Biblical notion because we see it in the church - elders are shepherds. And so people relate, within the body, people relate to someone who takes initiative to have, the word was "authority," to have authority over them. Now understand these are little living room fellowships. There ain't no church. There ain't no session. There's no governmental structure. These are people who just kind of have risen to leadership positions in those little living room fellowships and coffeehouse fellowships and so they take authority for people and people bind themselves or would bind themselves to these "shepherds." And those shepherds, you know it got to be pretty heavy-handed. These shepherds in these little living room fellowships would decide who married who. The shepherds would decide who would relocate where to do what kind of job. If you were a college student they would tell you what you ought to major in. They would tell you where to work. The best man in my wedding - Debbie and I married in 1975 - the best man in my wedding was deep into this stuff and told me that "Brother so-and-so" was his shepherd and he made a deal with God - "God, I don't always hear you so well but I think Brother so-and-so hears you pretty well. So if you want to talk to me, you tell Brother so-and-so and I'll do what Brother so-and-so says."

That's exactly what Paul is talking about right here. He's not talking about the Law of God that these people are promoting in the church; he's talking about the law of man that they elevate to a level that "God is speaking through my rules. If you're going to walk with God you've got to walk by my rules because I have God's ear and God has my heart and you've just got to believe me and follow me." It happens here, now, today. False teachers are looking for a way to dilute the Gospel and promote themselves. That's what happening in Colossae; that's what happens all around us. We have a tendency I think as fallen people to want to follow something we see. We want tangibles. And Paul is telling us the glory of the kingdom, the glory of what Christ has done, is in the intangibles. Not that all the tangibles are bad, but we have a tendency to exalt the tangibles and it leads to what's happening in Colossae. And Paul is saying, "Your life is hidden with Christ in God. That's invisible! You can't see it now. You have it by faith."

Free from the Flesh

Well finally, Paul says this - that we're free from the flesh. Look at the last verse, verse 23. He says, "These have indeed an appearance of wisdom, they look so wise, they promote self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh." Let me just cut to the bottom line. What does asceticism and severity to the body and an appearance of wisdom, a self-made religion - do you know where it ends up? It ends up in pride, it ends up in self-promotion, it ends up in self-absorption. There

is no thought of God, there is no thought of the glory of God, there's no lasting thought of what's good for the people who are with me in the body. It looks real holy but it's all about me. It looks real holy but it's all about me. Because a self-made religion is a religion I can do. A self-made religion is a religion I can accomplish and if I can accomplish it I feel really good about me. And if you want to feel really good about you, you do what I do. Let me show you how to accomplish my religion. Paul says that's death; that's not life. A life is hidden with Christ in the work that He has done on our behalf, sealed in His resurrection, stamped, verified in His glorification, and waiting for us to enjoy the fullness at the last day. Let's pray.

Father, thank You for Your Word, thank You for Your truth. Thank You that You know that we are idol makers and we make idols of falsehood that makes us feel good about ourselves and gives us a religion that we can accomplish. Help us, as we recognize that about ourselves, help us to love Your truth more, help us to love the Gospel more, help us to love Jesus more, help us to cling fast to the Head. He is our life and nothing else brings us life. Hear us, Father, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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