

COLOSSIANS
Warnings Against Religion
Colossians 2:16-23

INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx said, “Religion is the opiate of the people.” Marx looked at Church with its vast wealth, its stupefying rituals, its meaningless customs, its commitment to endless traditions, its inability to help the common man and the pampering of the rich, and he concluded that religion puts people to sleep to real issues of life. While Karl Marx and I would agree on very little, I too believe that religion is the opiate of the people.

By religion, I mean any religious system that insists on man-made rules and standard of works to be saved or to keep one saved. A system that substitutes anything for Jesus Christ is a works system and any works system is religion. In one sense, true Christianity is not a religion but a relationship with Jesus Christ. True Christianity is personally knowing Christ who died for one’s sins and who was raised from the dead and is alive today. By the above definition of religion, it is possible to be religious and not regenerate, serving feverishly and not saved and a churchman and not a Christian. Some people endure religion and others enjoy salvation. It is natural for all men to be religious but it is supernatural to be Christian.

What the Apostle Paul does in Colossians 2:16-23 is to set his face like a flint against any and all forms of religion which rob the Christian of the true joy of knowing Christ and being liberated from the slavery of religion. You remember the Apostle Paul is refuting the heresy of Gnosticism, which had entered into the Church of Colosse. These heretics were highly influenced by Old Testament Judaistic practices and insisted that a Christian had to have Christ and be circumcised, Christ and keep religious holy days, Christ and separate themselves from the world so as not even to handle, taste or touch if they were to be truly saved, or spiritually or mature. Paul argues with all his wits that one must have Christ alone for salvation and preserve Christian liberty, protecting the true church from religion, legalism, false theology and asceticism.

WARNING AGAINST LEGALISM 2:16,17

Shunning Judgment (16): ***Therefore, do not let anyone judge you...***

The “therefore” goes back to what Paul has been teaching in the previous verses. What he is about to say grows out of two concepts. First, we are told in Colossians 2:9,10: ***“For in Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form, and you (you Colossian Christians) have been given fullness in Christ.”*** Because Christ is fully God, Christians are full in Christ, complete in Christ, sufficient in Christ. All Christians need for salvation and living is a dynamic, vital relationship with Jesus Christ by faith. They need nothing or no one but Christ. Second, Paul has just stated to the colossians that all the Mosaic Law has been nailed to the Cross in Christ’s

death. The moral law of the old Testament is still in force for the Christian under the New Covenant but the curses and penalties of the moral law found contained in the Ten Commandments are no longer held against the Christian. Also all the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law were put to an end at Christ's death, so the Christian is no longer obligated to keep any aspect of the ceremonial law such as circumcision, feast days, holy days, and sabbaths.

Paul tells these Colossian Christians, "Do not let anyone judge you." These Gnostics were saying that the ceremonial regulations of the Mosaic Law were necessary for salvation. They were judging as to what a Christian could or couldn't do about things that were no longer relevant to Christianity at all. These heretics were binding the consciences of Christians about things which were done away with in the New Covenant and the Law of Christ.

It is very important that we understand Paul is writing about ceremonial law not moral law. The moral law, which is summed up in the Ten Commandments, is still binding on Christians - you shall not lie, steal, murder, covet, commit adultery, have other gods, get angry, participate in premarital sex, be involved in homosexuality or lesbianism; it includes positive commands to keep the sabbath holy and to honor parents. However, the Christian is under no part of the ceremonial law, which was for the nation of Israel alone and were object lessons pointing to Christ who was to come.

No Christian is to be judged about anything not specifically taught in the Bible. Religious legalism takes many forms in Christian circles but in every case we are specifically told not to judge our brothers or sisters on these matters which are done away with or not even mentioned in scripture. ***"You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgement seat."*** (Rom. 14:10).

Shedding Ceremonial Law (16b): ***...by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath Day.*** -- This is all Jewish ceremonial law and was part of the Jewish calendar. "Religious festivals" were annual feasts like the Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. "New Moon celebrations" were monthly feasts and "Sabbath Day" included the weekly sabbath and other appointed sabbaths. The Gnostic heretics were saying Christians had to keep these regulations of the ceremonial law or they were not saved. The "eat or drink" refers to the dietary laws of the old Testament, and some have applied it to partaking or abstinence in the drinking of wine.

By the time the Book of Colossians was written (A.D. 62), Christians were observing the sabbath on Sunday, the day the Lord was raised from the dead, and not on Saturday. Surely these Gnostics were saying Christians had to worship on Saturday, and if they did worship on Sunday it had to be the old Testament style with all the negatives - no kindling a fire, no cooking, no pleasures, no recreation, no travelling or whatever. These heretics were forcing ceremonial law on Christians. These Gnostics were legalists because they were adding some works to salvation or for spirituality.

Christians are not to be judged on their observance or non-observance of the ceremonial law because it had nothing to do with salvation, spirituality or maturity. Paul didn't care if Christians practiced the ceremonial law as long as they did it out of their own conviction and did not try to force it on other Christians as a condition for salvation or spirituality. ***“Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man considers one day more sacred than another, another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”*** (Rom 14:4-8). Moral law says we are to keep the sabbath holy and it is a day of rest, but to add anything else to the Christian sabbath is to live under the Old Covenant and not the New Covenant. Yet, if some Christians want a strict observance of the sabbath and others a more liberal observance, it is O.K. Let each person be persuaded in his own mind.

Legalism takes many forms in Christianity. Some Christians believe it is wrong to wear make up, nice clothes, earrings, drink wine, drive fancy cars, dance, listen to certain kinds of music or whatever. A person is not a legalist if he does not do these things himself, but he becomes a legalist when he says others must conform as well. Others must not do these things if they are going to be saved or spiritual. As Christians, we must all conform to the moral law of God, but in the area of ceremonial law and man-made rules and regulations, there is liberty. We are set free but not to sin but to serve Christ in freedom and liberty. We have been emancipated to follow Christ. Christ has not saved us to squeeze the joy out of life but to make us a joyful and balanced people who love life. ***“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God...”*** (I Cor. 10:31,32).

Serving Christ Not The Shadow Of The Law (17): ***These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*** -- All the ceremonial laws in the Old Testament were shadows. Christ fulfilled the Sabbath, not the moral law, but all the ceremonial trappings surrounding it.

Paul's point is that Christians should not get hung up in the shadows but get involved with Christ the substance. We need only Christ and no one else to save us and make us spiritual.

To live in the shadows, to get involved in legalism, to be religious and unrelated to Christ is not progression but regression in true Christianity. We have been emancipated from these shadows and taboos, why should we go back under them? Christ rescued us from all tyranny of legal rules. Why would we want to enslave ourselves again by going back under Jewish legalism?

WARNING AGAINST ANGEL WORSHIP 2:18,19

False Humility: ***Do not let anyone who delights in humility...*** -- These Gnostic heretics had a voluntary, self-imposed, mock and phony humility about them. It was a sickly, self-abasement and self-mortification. They outwardly looked so humble but inwardly they were filled with error, pride and hypocrisy. These heretics oozed with religiosity.

False Doctrine: ***And the worship of angels disqualifies you for the prize.*** -- The heretics worshipped angels and claimed that if others did not worship angels they were not saved; they were disqualified from the heavenly prize.

Apparently this false humility was related to angel worship. The heretics said they were too sinful, too needy, too poor to approach God directly so they went to Him through angelic mediators who would intercede for them.

Angel worship is a little far fetched for us in 1987 but we have just as serious an error taught among Christians. There are some who say Christ is too difficult to approach in prayer so they approach Him through Mary His mother who will intercede for them. This has led in some Roman Catholic countries to a worship of Mary, and even suggesting that she is a co-redemtrist with Christ. This is pure religion and has nothing to do with true Christianity. It is nothing but superstition.

False Visions: ***Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen...*** These heretics were claiming to have supernatural visions and special communication from God. This, of course, would make them better and holier than ordinary men and women. They were in reality imaginary and alleged visions but no one could prove it because it takes place in the area of human experience. They were mystics in religion.

There are many mystics in the Christian Church today who claim special contact with God, who claim God has spoken to them or even appeared to them, and naive, misguided and superstitious Christians believe them. Recently we had a famous evangelist claim God spoke to him and said he would die if he did not get eight million dollars. This is mysticism at its best and there is no way of proving it or disproving it.

False Connection: ***He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by the ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.*** -- The last defect of the heretical teachers is the worst of all. They are not connected up with the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. They do not hold on to the Head. When people are not connected to Christ and do not hold fast to Him, they fall into religion. In fact, they identify religion with ritual. They become dependent on ceremonies and substitute ritual, custom and tradition for Christ.

Not all ritual is wrong but it can easily deteriorate into rote and get us into a rut. Ritual is meaningless if it is substituted for Christ. We must be careful about people who say they need beads to pray, stain glass windows, beautiful architecture, dim lights, soft music, incense or prayer books to help them worship. They claim this puts them in the mood to worship and stirs their feelings. But in reality, all we need is Christ and a living, dynamic faith in Him, and He will give us all the feelings we need. Beware of substituting any ritual for Christ, lest you lose your hold on the Head of the Church.

WARNING AGAINST ASCETICISM 2:20-23

Asceticism Is Not For Christians (20): ***Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules.***

The Gnostic heretics were very big on the ascetic life, and Paul warns against this for Christians. An ascetic imposes man-made rules on himself and other sin in order to gain favor with God. These Gnostic heretics and all ascetics see the body as evil and contend that the way to holiness and godliness is to deny all of the bodies' desires, refuse its appetites and cut its needs down to a bare minimum. For the ascetic, the body is a thing to be punished and it is to be treated as an enemy. The body is to be brought under subjection by pure external means. They believe by controlling the body by external methods, they can reduce the inner flames of lust.

Paul makes it very clear that we died with Christ on the Cross; therefore, we died to all man-made rules of the world about what is worship and religious. Since we have died, why in the world do we want to go back to that from which we were delivered? The religious rules of the unsaved mind and world are destructive to the soul. In fact, they are an opiate, deadening one to the reality of Christ.

Asceticism Is Of No Value (21-22a): ***Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!? These are all destined to perish with use...***

Asceticism says that Christians are to have no contact with the world. There is to be total separation from anything evil. This hyper-separation leads to isolation from the real world.

Asceticism in the history of the Church has lead to the appreciation of Mary, the depreciation of marriage and the exaltation of the single state for clergy. In the third and fourth centuries, people starved themselves until they were emaciated, thinking this was the way to be religious and please God. To bathe and care for the body was thought of as sinful. The body was so neglected that it became a breeding ground for fleas. People really believed this pleased God. In the tenth through the sixteenth centuries, monasticism was thought to be the ultimate way to please God, some men and women, dedicated to God, went into monasteries and nunneries to escape the wicked world around them. In the middle ages and even today clergy and laymen beat their bodies with whips, crawl on their knees until they are raw and bloody, and deny themselves every pleasure in the name of God, but this is not Christianity but religion.

We evangelicals are not exempt from our forms of asceticism. We tell people they can't dance, can't have a glass of wine, can't dress in certain clothes, can't go to movies, can't be seen in certain places and yet there is no biblical moral law against these things. It may be wise not to do some of these things in our culture for the sake of testimony, but we must discern what is biblical and what is cultural, so we can discern what is true Christianity and what is religion.

When Paul says, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" He probably has in mind certain foods and beverages which the Gnostics thought were sinful. Paul says these things are consumed, eliminated through the body and left in the latrine. ***"Are you so dull?" he asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.'*** (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean)." (Mark 7:18,19).

Now Paul is not saying that it is all right to put things in the body which will harm it like excessive amounts of alcohol or soft drinks, illegal drugs or great amounts of sugar. In context, he is speaking about man-made rules about food and drink.

When trying to determine what is right and wrong for you to do as a Christian ask these basic questions: 1) Is there any biblical moral law or principle that forbids it? 2) Will it cause my Christian brother to stumble? 3) If Christ were beside me, would He do it with me? 4) Will it hurt my witness and testimony?

Asceticism Is Of Human Origin (22b): ***Because they are based on human commands and teachings.*** - Asceticism is based on human reason alone. There is no basis for it and it is all made up in the religious mind of man. In the next verse, it is called "self-imposed worship" or "man-made worship." It is false worship, which man thinks pleases God, but it does not and never will because God is interested in the heart and the body.

Evangelicals even have their man-made worship. They must have church on Sunday morning even though the early church met on Sunday evenings. We must meet at 11:00 a.m. even though we know this was a western custom because people had to do the chores before they came to church. We must meet for only one hour when we know the early church met for many hours and some Christians would meet all day. We must wear our dress up clothes to church even though we know that is strictly western for the church was where people got most of their social life. We must have an evening service even though God does not require it, but we believe really serious Christians have an evening service. We must have a certain order of worship. We must have a Sunday School when it is never mentioned in scripture. These things mentioned may not be wrong in and of themselves but they are cultural not Christian, and most certainly are of human origin. They can become a type of evangelical religiosity.

Asceticism Is Ineffective (23): *Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with a self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.*

Ascetics with their black robes, long beards, bare feet, soft speech and pious platitudes seem to be so pious, right and good. But it is self-imposed based on man-made religion.

The Apostle Paul says asceticism has no value in restraining the lust of the flesh. One can create all the external rules he can think of to stifle inward lusting and sin, but it won't work. Prohibition did not stop people from making and drinking alcohol. Drug laws do not stop people from using drugs. Why? Men need inward motivation to change and only Christ can give that inward motivation. Rules and regulations will never be a check to the flesh. In fact, rules only stir up more inward lusts to do the thing forbidden, for somehow sin is more exciting. True Christianity works on the inward man, giving him new desires to please God and to keep the commands and principles of scripture. Christ creates inner life and this in turn gives us a desire to keep the moral law of God because we love God for all He has done for us in Christ. We Christians have been liberated from ceremonial law, from legalism, from asceticism but we have not been set free to sin but to serve Christ out of a heart of appreciation for our so great salvation.

CONCLUSION

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We must not think of Christianity as a rule book religion, but as a living, real dynamic relationship with Christ.

We must not let legalism and asceticism squeeze the joy out of our Christianity. We have been liberated from these things and must not go back under them lest we get bogged down in religion, which will work on us as an opiate, deadening us to the truth of Christianity. Christians have been liberated and must fight for that liberty. ***“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.”*** (Gal. 5:1).

We Christians must not confuse legitimate Christian discipline of the body motivated by love for Christ with the man-made rules of asceticism. Christians are to keep the moral law as it is poured through the New Covenant and the Law of Christ. But Christians do not have to obey man-made, legalistic rules unless they want to. However, if they do, they must not seek to make others conform to their convictions.

We Christians must seek to live the Christian life in the power of the Holy Spirit in obedience to Christ. Inward motivation for Christ will produce a control of the flesh.

We must be careful to tell our children the truth about Christianity, helping them understand what is man-made and cultural. If you tell your children certain things are sin when they are not, sooner or later it will all catch up with you. They will grow up, read the Bible and find out you were not telling them the truth. They probably will rebel and say, “Mom and Dad lied to me about dancing, wearing flashy clothes, listening to music, use of wine, length of skirts and hair, so they also probably lied to me about Christ as God, the only way of salvation, heaven, judgment and hell.” You see we must be able to distinguish between what is cultural, man-made and ceremonial from that which is true, biblical Christianity.