

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "The Trap of Worldly Philosophy"

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 11/14/2010

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## **Introduction**

Today we're beginning a new section in our study of the book of Colossians. We are now at chapter two, verses four through ten, and I want to call your attention to those verses as we begin today. So if you're able to do so as you're listening today, please open your Bible with me to Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse four. The Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit writes these words:

Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

## **The Root Cause of the Crisis State of the Church Today**

This passage presents to us the most important teaching that Christians as individuals, and churches as a body, need to hear and act upon today. Now I know that I've just made a very sweeping statement, and I would not be making that statement if I could not back it up. This passage in the book of Colossians addresses

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the root cause of the crisis condition of the church as we find it today. This passage addresses the most essential problem that individual Christians and congregations of Christians confront today. That problem is the trap of worldly philosophy. That problem is what happens when individual Christians, and the church as a body, fall into the trap of being in subjection to the word of fallen man, instead of the Word of God.

We see the effects of this problem throughout the church today. Survey after survey is showing that much of the Evangelical church is unplugged from God's Word. Fewer than one Evangelical church member out of every six – less than 15% of the people in Evangelical churches – read the Bible even a couple of times a week. 35% never read it at all, and very, very few church members ever read the Bible systematically.

Today much of the Evangelical church does not believe what the Bible teaches. Nearly half of Evangelical church members do not believe that the Bible is totally accurate. Nearly half do not believe that Jesus Christ was sinless during His life on earth. Nearly 60% of Evangelicals believe that good works help to gain eternal life. In other words, they believe that salvation is not by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

Today, the Evangelical church is becoming increasingly immoral. Published surveys are showing high levels of immorality among Evangelical church members – people in the church living together outside of marriage, for example. And the divorce rate among Evangelical church members is essentially the same as it is in

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society at large. The sanctity of marriage and the family has largely been lost among Evangelicals.

And today, the Evangelical church is becoming increasingly ineffectual. Recent research has shown that most Evangelical church members cannot tell someone the plan of salvation, and most Evangelical church members cannot defend basic Christian moral positions from the Bible. And nearly 70% of young people are leaving the church when they reach adulthood, and one of the main reasons these young people give for leaving is that they no longer believe the Bible is true, and they say that the church has done little or nothing to answer their doubts.

I submit to you that the main reason the church is in this kind of condition today, is because individual Christians, and entire congregations and denominations, have become captive to the influences of false, worldly philosophies, instead of remaining rooted and grounded in the truth of the Word of God and in the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ. The church has, in many, many cases, fallen into Satan's most basic trap.

So this is why I say that the words we have before us here in Colossians chapter two deal with the root cause of the most serious issue the church is facing today – the trap of worldly philosophy. And so in this part of our series, beginning today, we're going to study two main things.

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## Vital Questions

First, we're going to see how God's Word tells us we are to recognize the trap. The trap is all around us, and that is why it is so easy for us to fall into it.

Second, we're going to see how God's Word says we are to avoid falling into the trap, and how we are to escape the trap if we find that we have fallen into it.

And so in this part of our series, as we look at Colossians chapter two, verses four through ten, we're going to ask, and answer, a number of vital questions:

- What exactly is the trap of worldly philosophy, and why is it a constant danger to the individual Christian and to the church as a body?
- What does it mean to be deceived with persuasive words? How is the Christian to guard against this?
- What does Paul mean here by "good order" in the church? What does he mean by "steadfastness in the faith"?
- What exactly does Paul mean when he says that the Colossian believers "received Christ"?
- What does it mean to "walk in Him"? What does it mean to be "rooted and built up" in Christ? What does it mean to be "established in the faith"?
- What are the "traditions of men"? What are "the basic principles of this world"?

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And then we'll also be asking some questions by way of application:

- Are you, as an individual Christian, falling into the trap of worldly philosophy? Is your church falling into that trap? How can you recognize when this has happened, or is about to happen?
- What does Paul mean when he says that "all fullness" is in Christ? What does he mean when he says that you, as a believer, are "complete" in Christ?

### **Paul's Great Assertion**

Now as we look carefully at these verses, we find that the Apostle Paul is making a great statement. He is making a far-reaching assertion. And that assertion is this: Worldly philosophy is the number one trap that Satan uses to undermine the individual Christian, and to undermine the church as a body.

Let me repeat this. It is vital that we get hold of this at the very beginning of our study of these verses: Worldly philosophy – worldly thinking – thinking the way the world thinks instead of the way God commands us to think – is the number one trap that Satan uses to undermine the individual Christian, and to undermine the church as a body.

Remember what we said in our introduction to chapter two in a previous message. In this chapter Paul is dealing with Satan's triple threat to the church – the threat of worldly philosophy, the threat of legalism, and the threat of man-made doctrines.

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Now, nothing in Scripture is by chance or by accident, and the order in which Paul addresses these three threats to the church is not accidental.

The hallmark of the writings of the Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is the fact that he always employs logic. He always writes things in order. There is always a logical progression. One point leads to another. Each new point builds upon the ones before it. And each new point prepares the way for the ones that will follow. The God of the Bible is the God of logic. Logic and reason are part of the very nature, the very essence, of God. And so it comes as no surprise that God the Holy Spirit employed logic as He inspired the men who wrote His very words in the pages of Scripture. The Apostle Paul was one of the most educated men of his day. No doubt he was trained in logic. And so God the Holy Spirit uses the vessel that He has prepared, to write the words that we have before us, in a logical order.

And so Paul here is making this great assertion: Worldly philosophy – worldly thinking – thinking the way the world thinks instead of the way God commands us to think – is the number one trap, the most basic tactic, which Satan uses to undermine the individual Christian, and to undermine the church as a body. It is the trap that leads to all the others. Why does Paul say this?

He says it because of the nature of worldly philosophy. He describes that for us in verse four, and again in verse eight: "Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words" (verse 4) – "Beware lest anyone cheat you through

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philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ." (verse 8)

What do these verses say about the nature of the trap that Satan tries to use to ensnare the believer at every turn?

### **The Ubiquity of the Trap**

First of all, Paul speaks here of the fact that the trap is everywhere. The trap of worldly philosophy is a trap to which all Christians are susceptible. Paul says to the Colossians, I rejoice in your good order and your steadfastness in the faith. But yet I want you to understand that there is something of which you must constantly beware. The enemy of your souls is out to destroy that good order. He wants to undermine your steadfastness in the faith. And the trap of worldly philosophy is the number one way in which Satan will try to do this.

In the first century world in which the Colossian believers were living, there were all sorts of philosophical traps. Gnosticism said that you needed a higher knowledge, human wisdom, in addition to Scripture, in order to really know God. Stoicism said that man had the ability, on his own, to achieve moral perfection. Epicureanism said that by seeking after worldly, sensual pleasures you could attain a state of tranquility, and freedom from fear, and even freedom from physical pain. Greek and Roman paganism said that a whole variety of gods controlled all the different forces that were at work in the world, and so you had to appease each of those gods in order to have peace and happiness and success. Christians in the first century were a small

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minority living in a world where the vast majority of people believed some or all of these things. They lived in an environment that was thoroughly polluted with worldly philosophy.

And likewise, Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are a small minority living in a philosophical environment that is thoroughly polluted with falsehood. Today, postmodernism says that there is no objective standard of truth, no objective standard of right and wrong, so everyone can do as he pleases. Postmodernism says that the worst thing that you can do is to think that the Bible is the sole source of truth, and that Christ is the only way to eternal life. That makes you intolerant.

Naturalism and materialism deny the supernatural, deny the existence of God. Evolutionism says that man is not the special creation of God but merely the product of billions of years of random processes of time and chance, so you just have to get through this life the best way you can, because there is no life after this.

I could go on. But for now it's sufficient to say that these are the kinds of worldly philosophies that surround Christians today just as closely as the air you breathe. These philosophies are everywhere you turn. They're in the media, and in the schools, and in government, and in entertainment. These philosophies hold sway in the world in which we live. The problem comes when these philosophies gain entry into the thinking of the individual Christian, and into the thinking of the church. And that is what has happened today.



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And so Paul is absolutely correct in asserting, first of all, that the trap of worldly philosophy is everywhere. It was true in the first century, and it is just as true, even more intensely true, in the twenty-first century.

### **The Essential Characteristic of the Trap**

Second, Paul speaks in this passage of the essential characteristic of the trap of worldly philosophy. The essential characteristic is that it involves deception. Beware lest anyone should deceive you, Paul says.

Scripture often speaks of Satan as the great deceiver. He sometimes appears, even to the church, as "an angel of light", Paul tells us in Second Corinthians. Satan's first act in the Garden was to deceive our first parents, and to lead them into sin. Paul warned Timothy that "evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived."

### **The Most Common Form the Trap Takes**

Third, Paul speaks of the form in which the trap of worldly philosophy most often appears. It comes in the form of enticing words. Beware lest anyone should use persuasive words to deceive you, Paul says. Words that on the surface may seem to make sense, may seem to be true – but if you exercise godly discernment you will find that these persuasive, enticing words are a lie, and not the truth.

Jesus said that Satan is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). Satan's first act in the Garden was to deceive Eve with enticing words – words that appealed to the

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three-fold lust that is at the root of all sin: “the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16).

Paul says, in our passage in Colossians chapter two, that the words that characterize the trap of worldly philosophy are words of *empty deceit*. In the original language, Paul is saying that they are words that may seem to be plausible, they may seem to make sense, they may seem to have merit. But in fact, they are words of empty deceit – literally, they are absolutely empty of the truth. There is no such thing as a half-truth in the eyes of God. There is truth, and there is error. There is no gray area, no neutral area, no middle ground, no comfort zone, between absolute truth and absolute error. Truth is absolute, and error is absolute.

### **The Bait in the Trap**

Fourth, Paul warns us in these verses of the content of the trap. The trap of worldly philosophy, Paul says in verse eight, is according to the traditions or the teachings of men, and according to the rudiments or basic principles of this fallen world. That is the bait in the trap.

The content is man’s fallen, false wisdom, not God’s genuine wisdom. It belongs to the realm of materialism and naturalism, the realm of things that are going to be destroyed, rather than to the realm of the spiritual and the supernatural, the things that are eternal. Later on, in Colossians chapter three, Paul warns believers to “set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (3:2).

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## **The Effect of Falling Into the Trap**

Fifth, Paul warns the Colossians about the effect of falling into the trap of worldly philosophy. The effect or the result of being deceived by worldly philosophy – by persuasive but empty words that contain man's false wisdom and not God's genuine wisdom – the effect is that it carries its victim off as a captive. Paul says, in verse eight, beware lest anyone spoil you (in the Old King James version) or cheat you (in the New King James version).

Neither one of those words really gives the full force of the original word in the Greek. Here Paul uses a word that appears only this one time in the Greek New Testament. The word has the idea not of someone simply being cheated, but of someone being carried off as a captive, of someone being brought under the control of another person, and being made to do that person's will. The word also has in it the idea of Satan carrying off the Christian himself as Satan's booty, carrying the Christian off in the same way that a pirate would carry off captured treasure.

And here we have another key fact that is behind the trap of worldly philosophy: Christian, Satan knows that he cannot have you for eternity. Satan knows that he cannot cause you to be cast into the Lake of Fire with him. Satan knows that your salvation is secure. Satan knows that you are going to spend eternity ruling and reigning with Christ. Satan knows that his own reign over this world and this world-system is going to come to an end.

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But while you are still living in this world as a believer, Satan will do everything he can to place you in bondage to the world-system of which he is the god. Satan will do everything he can to make you ineffectual and defeated as a believer. Satan will do everything he can to try to make you comfortable in this present world. Satan will do everything he can to try to get you to make peace with this world, and to forget the fact that you as a Christian are in a spiritual battle against the forces of this world-system as long as you live in this world.

### **What About You?**

So thus far we have seen these five characteristics of the nature of the trap that Satan uses to entice individual Christians, and entire churches, away from good order and steadfastness in Christ:

- We have seen the ubiquity of the trap. The trap of worldly philosophy is a trap to which all Christians are susceptible. It is everywhere.
- We have seen the essential characteristic of the trap: It involves deception.
- We have seen the most common form of the trap: It involves enticing words.
- We have seen the content of the trap, the bait that Satan uses to draw Christians into the trap: Human wisdom that is based in materialism and naturalism.

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- And, we have seen the effect of falling into the trap: Satan uses it to carry Christians off into captivity to this present world.

We're going to expand and deepen our focus on these truths in our next message. But I hope that as we have begun today, that perhaps by God's grace you have already begun to see these issues in a clearer light, or perhaps you have been reminded just how large and serious a problem this is. Perhaps even now the Holy Spirit is pinpointing things in your own life, your own thinking, that need to change as you come to grips with these truths. If that is the case, praise God for it, and open your heart, open your mind, to the urgings of the Spirit.

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