

## The Preeminence of Christ Defended – Colossians 2:8-23

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### Introduction

The apostle Paul was concerned – concerned for a church for whom he had never met but for whom he loved dearly and prayed for constantly.

False teaching in Colossae had arisen and threatened to derail their walk with and growth in Christ. The believers there were being told they needed more than Christ and that somehow, He was not enough to make them complete – to be “filled” as it were.

Paul’s argument in this letter is profound. He first tells the Colossians what he constantly prays about for them in 1:9-14. This sets his ministry objective:

*9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; 11 being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.*

He then:

- Recounts all that God the Father through His Son has done on their behalf in 1:13-14, “*13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*”
- Describes the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God – the One of Supreme Rank - Preeminent in all things. There is no one above or before Him. He Jesus, has reconciled them and all believers for all time to Himself (1:15-20)
- Shares his own (Paul) suffering and struggle for them so that they would know “*Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (1:27) – that they might become spiritually mature – that they might know God’s mystery and the assurance such knowledge gives, “*which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (2:2-3)
- And then Paul gave the Colossians the charge to “*walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as {they} were taught, abounding in thanksgiving*” – 2:6-7

Now having described, declared, and demanded the preeminence of Christ, Paul defends the Preeminence of Christ to God’s people in Colossae. This was a time to fight, and Paul was in full fighting mode here. He tells us, “Look nowhere else, Christ is all we need!”

### The Responsibility to Defend (2:8)

*<sup>8</sup>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.*

Paul gives a serious warning at this point. *“See to it that no one takes you captive”*. *“See to it”* is a call to constant vigilance because of danger. And *“takes you captive”* gives sense of being kidnapped or carried away as a spoil of war by a conquering army. This is the responsibility we have been given. It is serious. False teaching is always a threat to distract us from Christ or to enslave us again to old beliefs. The stakes are high – be watchful. Do not get taken captive.

Paul then gives what to be on guard for:

The first is philosophy. *“Philosophy”* simply means the love of wisdom. How can there be anything wrong with loving wisdom? The general body of philosophy has always been around and many study it. It attempts to answer the questions of all men such as *“whom am I?”*, *“where did I come from?”*, and most importantly, *“how do I live and where am I going?”*. Man is wired to ask these questions. Now the answers are often nonsense considering man cannot truly know Wisdom apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

But Paul is not against the study of philosophy. Rather, he is talking about a particular philosophy of the false teacher(s) – a dangerous one that attempts to lead the believer away from a full comprehension of Christ’s superiority in all things. He says do not let someone lead you astray with his philosophy.

Such philosophy includes empty deceit. It sounds good – it sounds learned and sophisticated. It may even be profound. But it means nothing. However, once its main point is accepted, then everything all the teaching flowing from it may sound rational. And what makes such false teaching so dangerous, is that its teacher is often highly respected and moral and really impresses by his sincerity.

Undergirding this philosophy and / or empty deceit appeals to human tradition. They say this is not new but originated from ancient times. They simply say it is now brought to light because it is needed for today’s problems.

Human tradition cannot be assumed to be right. It can often be simply error passed down from one generation to another. The Jews adding so much to the Word of God over the years did not make it right. And defective philosophy passed on or built upon old philosophy is simply error.

The root of such philosophy and empty deceit develops according to the elemental spirits of the world – demonic forces. Satan is ultimately behind any philosophy which detracts from the supremacy and preeminence of Christ. Such a philosophy cannot be neutral. Either it points its hearer to Christ or it does not. This is the standard. In Colossae, the philosophy of the false teaching pointed people away from Christ. Such teaching robs the believer of assurance. And Paul is sounding the alarm...

### **The Reasons to Defend (2:9-15)**

Paul says such philosophies are not necessary. Why? Well, look at verses 9-10:

*<sup>9</sup>For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, <sup>10</sup>and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.*

### *The Fullness of Christ (2:9-10)*

Christ is the fullness of deity, and by faith we are filled in Him.

The “fullness” and “filled” terms are given intentionally by Paul. It seems the false teachers used them to indicate the negative or the missing. They taught the Colossians there was a lack of completeness or fullness. They were told they had not been taught enough – they lacked filling... They were also told this was the support for the adopting the many emanations of gods that led to God plus the worship of angels per the Gnostic beliefs so popular at the time.

To the contrary, at His incarnation, Jesus indwelt a human body. He, being God, did not do so in part but in full. He did not come as a superhuman – simply a step above the average man but as full deity in human form. He is infinitely more than “like” God. He is God. And the good news is He has made a human body His home without ceasing to this day in His glorification, and will do so for eternity. His indwelling is permanent! Kent Hughes writes, “*God’s creation shows us His fullness but in Christ we see the face of God. Christ is the only vessel or temple in existence where the Divine glories are stored. Look nowhere else!*”<sup>1</sup> Christ is the fullness of God.

As they / we as believers “*have been filled in Him*” – not in the future but since the day they received Christ by faith, and then forever. The believer partakes of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4), is able to understand truth, recognizes God’s will, and has fellowship with God. And as we saw in Paul’s prayer in chapter 1, He fills us with wisdom, strength, and courage.

And we are not filled with just anyone. Remember we are filled with Christ, the One who is head of all rule and authority (2:10).

And there is more... We are also filled in Him by the fact of our participation in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. We read verses 11-13:

*<sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him ...*

#### *Our Participation in His Death (2:11)*

When we think of circumcision, we think of the physical cutting away of a small part of flesh from a baby boy shortly after birth. This act was first commanded of Abraham by God in the Old Testament followed by his physical descendants. In accordance with the Law, Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21).

But Paul is speaking of circumcision in a different way here. He uses it as a metaphor. Christ was circumcised at the cross also, but this involved the violent and cruel removal of His entire body as He suffered and died there. And as a result, by faith, the believer is circumcised spiritually throwing off his or her body of flesh. We participated in Jesus’ death in this way.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon* (Westchester, Crossway, 1989), p. 72

### *Our Participation in His Burial (2:12a)*

Likewise, we participate in Jesus' burial. After Jesus gave His life on the cross, He too was buried validating the truth that Jesus died. Paul says that our death was validated as well. How can that be? We are still physically alive. No, Paul is saying that we, by Christ's burial, our old life was buried too. The old, flesh driven life is over – rendered out of commission. Remember our recent study in Romans 5-8. Freed from the law of sin and death, we can now serve the Lord in spirit and truth.

### *Our Participation in His Resurrection (2:12b-13a)*

Our participation in the work of Jesus does not end there – see verses 12-13. When the Holy Spirit breathed into us new life and we received Christ and His atoning work for us by faith, we were then raised to new life spiritually, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father. Once dead in our sins, now alive. Once spiritually uncircumcised and dead to God, now alive to Him.

Now this is not a resurrection to new life in the future but to new life now! Is this your experience? I am not speaking of your circumstances – they may not have unchanged and perhaps they have even gotten worse (from an earthly perspective at least) but you are looking at them far differently; with a joy and a hope knowing God personally and His sure promises for today and for the future.

How can this be true that we share in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection? Well, because God said so!

And there is more in verses 13-15:

*<sup>13</sup> 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, <sup>14</sup> by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup> He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*

### *Our Forgiveness in Christ (2:13b)*

Notice what Christ has also accomplished in His saving work. Verse 13 gives the words that all men and women so desperately need to hear: We are forgiven! Oh, what good news. Being unforgiven by the God who has created us is a dreadful place to be. It warps our being and our day-to-day living. Nothing can ever be truly right. We experience an emptiness that cannot be filled. Guilt is unyielding and a great tyrant. But through Christ's work, we are forgiven – a forgiveness that can never be taken away. As a result, God calls us friend. The war is over.

### *Our Acquittal in Christ (2:14)*

And how were we forgiven? Verses 14-15 tell us. In His suffering and death upon the cross, Christ canceled the record of debt against us. Do you realize you had a personal record of debt against you before you were saved? This record was an IOU each of us issued to God promising to obey Him. For the Jew, it was a pledge to keep the Law of God. Remember the Israelites at Mt Sinai promising to obey God as the mountain shook, if He would only go away? And also, when they promised to obey standing between the two mountains before entering the Promised Land? For the Gentile they made the same

promise to God via the conscience He gave them – see Romans 1-2. In both cases, how did that work out? Each moment, each day was a fail – 100%, followed by another promise to do better the next day followed by failure again and the cycle repeated over and over...

And this promise to God was binding. God held and holds us to it – every bit of the Law's legal demands. He cannot let it slide else He would not be God.

So each of us had a record of debt to God. Some of you may still have one ...

But this cycle ended at the Cross. By virtue of His perfect and satisfying sacrifice before God, Christ canceled this record of debt, setting it aside. Did you hear what I just said? Our debt has been canceled. In ancient times, a scribe could erase a scroll by simply wiping it away with a cloth. So Christ has wiped away our record of debt. He simply nailed it to the old and rugged, but wonderful cross. Our sin and guilt was swept away at the cross. No more futile attempts to keep an impossible promise.

I know you have heard this over and over, but this begs the question: have you ever recovered from this staggering truth? Or do you say, "whatever" ...

### *Our Victory in Christ (2:15)*

This is not the only thing that happened at the cross. Satan and his crew were defeated there. They no longer have an ultimate power over those who receive the Christ. Yes, they are still making a mess down here, enslaving unbelievers and tripping up God's people from time-to-time. But their days are numbered. The lake of fire awaits, and the countdown has begun. The demons in the pigs in Matthew 8 asked Jesus if it was time for their torment. They are ultimately powerless. At the cross, Jesus won, and Satan lost.

In His triumph Jesus humiliated them publicly. Paul's language for the Colossians would have been familiar. When an ancient king defeated another and took over his kingdom and country, there would be a parade. The victors would march the defeated king and what was left of his soldiers, servants, and citizens before a celebratory crowd. First, they would march the material spoils of war (captured weapons and treasure of the land) followed by its people who often were pathetic figures begging for mercy and for their lives to be spared. Lastly, the vanquished king, all symbols of his splendor and power stripped away, would bring up the rear, and stirring the loudest shout from the crowd. A defeated king and his subjects often going to their death and at least to a remaining life of cruel slavery.

Such is the plight for Satan and his demon crew. Who would want to join and be identified with this bunch of rebel losers? Why would we as God's people ever want to adopt any Christ denying philosophy from Satan – no matter how shiny it appears? Our Lord and Savior is filled with the fullness of God. Christ is the head of all rule and authority (2:10) holding their very futures in His hand. Why do we need anything more? Christ is the whole fullness of God, and we are filled in Him. He is preeminent in all things - all sufficient for our lives.

Paul says, "*See to it that no one takes you captive*" to anything else.

### **Responses Expected (2:16-23)**

So the choice is clear; choose human wisdom or come to Christ. Sadly, many will choose the way of human wisdom, authored by the elemental spirits of this world. Paul gives us three of the most common responses in verses 16-23. All will ultimately rob the believer of Christ's filling and hinder their walk with Him. And each promise to achieve something good and noble in the Christian life but do not deliver. The first is legalism in verses 16-17:

*False Religion - Legalism / Judaism (2:16-17)*

*<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*

Legalism. So much can be said here – rules and more rules with emphasis on presenting a person for public consumption (i.e., the outward appearance).

In the Colossian situation and in other New Testament churches, Jewish food and drink and special day observances were laid upon the Christian. Having been saved by faith in Jesus Christ, the old stuff was re-applied. If you wanted to show your spirituality and depth of commitment, then you needed to return to Moses and do these things.

Our flesh is attracted to legalism. In many ways, it is far easier to set outward rules and regulations – easier to take inventory of how we are doing (and more importantly, how others are doing!). Our “walk” with Christ then is more measurable...” let me see, I ate only this, did not drink that, and went to the festival – all in all a good week. Now Joe on the other hand...”

Christians can easily fall back into legalism. It is characterized by: <sup>2</sup>

- A judgmental heart
- No joy
- An unhealthy and unbiblical uniformity
- A surface faith

Be careful – this way of living and thinking creeps up on us. Legalism occurs often when we are not walking in the Spirit and not obeying the Word. It occurs when we do not realize the grace of God which fills us in Christ. Do not let it take you captive.

Note that Paul is not prohibiting certain food and drink and celebrations. These things are a matter of conscience. But rather, not to be judged by others for what we observe. In the same way, we are not to judge others. And he is saying in the big picture, these things are simply signposts for promises to come of which many had been fulfilled already in Christ's first coming. They are not critical to our walking with Christ (in fact they hinder our walk). Knowing Christ and recognizing who He is and what He has done for us is the substance or the “meat” of our Christian life. Remember He is sufficient.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83

Legalism promises to make us acceptable to God, but fails since it ignores the only the only Way to God, through Christ, the substance. Legalism not forsaken is false religion.

A second response taught by false teachers comes in the form of false revelations through mysticism in verses 18-19...

*False Revelations - Mysticism (2:18-19)*

*<sup>18</sup> 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, <sup>19</sup> 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.*

Mysticism is not evil per se since its goal is simply a deeper knowledge of God.

But the mysticism Paul is warning about here was deceptive. It promised a deeper knowledge of God and a path to spiritual growth apart from Christ. But at its core was a false humility – the negative sense of asceticism or self-abasement. Such false humility was simply an ugly spiritual pride. And these false teachers delighted in it. These teachers had great imaginations and lived lives of pretense. They were the spiritually elite, the pretenders who attempted to deceive but were deceived themselves.

This teaching also incorporated the worship of angels – a teaching prohibited by the Scriptures. Remember the apostle John when he tried to worship an angel in Revelation? No, angels worship God and are not to receive worship of any kind. Worshipping angels robs God of the worship He deserves. And worshipping angels deprives the believer of true worship.

The false teachers also came up with detailed dreams and visions – subjective experiences that they taught as truth – a truth apart from God’s Word. This practice lives on today in the Christian world. {give example}

And the worst part of this teaching is that if you do not participate in or adhere to this mysticism, you are considered disqualified from the faith – marginalized, left behind. You are less than spiritual and without saying it, deemed not to desire a deeper knowledge of God. This certainly must have discouraged the Colossian believers and we know it does today. Christians are left to think they are missing something. And people by nature do not like to be left behind so believers will go along with it – a sort of peer pressure.

The ultimate problem with mysticism is that Christ is not at its core. Therefore, growth in Him cannot occur. Many cults have been born through mysticism.

Now there is such a thing as Christian mysticism. Again, there is nothing wrong in its goal. But there are problems with how it works. It elevates experiential knowledge and thrives on the mysterious to achieve spiritual growth. It is based in the individual and feelings, emotions, and experiences are paramount. It easily defends itself by saying, “Who are you to deny my experience?” Christian mysticism tends to place the Word of God aside or as secondary. Subjective experience trumps what the Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches we know God through His Word (and obedience to it) and fellowship with Him through the ministry of His Word. Biblical Christianity is part individual relationship with God and part a community relationship with God. Christian mysticism is not wrong in everything but is wrong most of the time and most often leads to error, sometimes deadly.

Paul then closes this text with a third response in verses 20-23:

*<sup>20</sup> 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— <sup>21</sup> “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” <sup>22</sup> (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? <sup>23</sup> 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.*

#### *False Regulations - Ascetism (2:20-23)*

Included in what died in the Colossian believers spiritually when they died with Christ, was a death to the elemental spirits of the world that Paul has been warning them about. The problem is they were forgetting it. He says in effect, “if now alive to Christ, why are you subject to this world system?”. Namely they were subjecting themselves to an abundance of regulations – regulations that involved severe denial from what God gave them to enjoy in this life specifically foods and other necessities. “Deny yourselves of these basic things”, it says, “punish the body. This will keep you from sinning and make you more holy and acceptable to God. By adopting these practices, you will look wise in the world’s eyes.”

But this was and is not true. The problem was no matter to what level of self-denial and punishment of yourself you reach, it does not work in making you more like God and less “fleshy”. Outward measures to stop sinning have never worked. Ask the monks and nuns who locked themselves away from the outside world how it is going for them.

And besides, the Lord never calls us to do this. Rather, He commands us to deny ourselves to the right to our life and its self-pleasing goals and instead, lay it down for Him. This is harder than denying ourselves of the things God has graciously given to us to enjoy and to sustain us; food, drink, etc., is it not?

Outward transformation comes from the inside - a renewed heart and mind, and not by punishing our bodies. Only a new heart and mind with its eyes set on things above, namely the Christ, the Preeminent One, will stop the indulgence of our flesh and transform us. And there, the soul finds the filling it needs and for which it longs.

#### **Reflect and Respond**

- Where are you today? Are you full in Christ or do you seek additions or substitutes? Is Christ not enough for your marriage, family, friendships, career, or free time?
- Do false philosophies or traditions reside in your heart and life? Perhaps they were brought over from before your conversion that you never gave up or perhaps you returned to later? Remember those already believers at Ephesus in Acts 19 who practiced magic arts who were convicted and confessed their practices and then burned their magic arts books – confess and “burn” these things in your life if any. Have you substituted legalism for substance in Christ,

Christian mysticism to grow spiritually rather than the biblically authorized means of growth, or unbiblical regulations for overcoming the flesh rather than seeking or being filled with Christ and His grace to do so?

- Meditate on who Christ is and what He has done for you. Do you realize 1) by faith you participated in His death, burial, and resurrection? 2) In Christ, your sin has been wiped away, you are forgiven? 3) You stand in victory with Him
- Jesus Christ, the God Man, is the fullness of deity and we are filled in Him. How can we look anywhere else? How can we lose when filled with Him?
- Our soul's capacity to be filled with Christ is not fixed, but can grow. Study and apply the Word, be regular in prayer, and worship and fellowship every chance you get. The more of Christ we take in, the more we are filled with Him.