

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Sainthood: Real & Counterfeit" (Colossians 1:1-3, 2:18-23)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/8/2012

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Today we are continuing a new phase of our study of God's warning to the church that we find at the end of Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. In these verses we find a strong warning against the evil tyranny of man-made doctrines, counterfeit doctrines.

The Apostle Paul mentions four specific kinds of counterfeits in this passage. Right now we are focusing our attention on the second of the four, which is the evil of counterfeit worship in the church. So once again, if you are able, I hope that you will turn with me in your own Bible to Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. This is the Word of God:

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head [that is, to our Lord Jesus Christ], from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations — "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

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These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:18-23)

Satan's War Against the Church

As I mentioned a moment ago, in this passage the Apostle Paul under divine inspiration warns us against man-made doctrines, counterfeit doctrines. He warns us against the evil tyranny of four specific categories of counterfeits. First of all, he warns against submission to counterfeit authority, and we have already studied that point in some detail. Secondly, he warns against engaging in counterfeit worship, and that is our present focal point. And the Lord willing, as we move on we are going to take up two other evils that Paul warns against. Thirdly, he warns against the use of counterfeit intercessors. And fourthly, he warns against the deception of counterfeit revelation.

Counterfeit authority. Counterfeit worship. Counterfeit intercessors. Counterfeit revelation. Satan, the enemy of Christ, the enemy of the Church, stands ready at all times to bring these evil tyrannies into the church, often in very subtle ways. Satan seeks, at all times, to undermine the spiritual life and testimony of the individual believer. Satan seeks, at all times, to undermine the spiritual life and testimony of the true church.

In First Timothy 3:15 Paul tells us that the true church of Jesus Christ, the church of the living God, is "the pillar and ground of the truth." The true church, in the

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Greek the *ekklesia*, the called-out ones, the ones who are called of God by His Spirit and cleansed from their sins by the blood of Christ, the body of believers – the local assembly of believers in particular – is designed by God to be “the pillar and ground of the truth.”

The force of the original language is that the true church of Jesus Christ is to be the *mainstay* of the truth. The words that are used in that verse carry the idea of *stability* – stability in the truth, the truth as it is found in the Word of God alone, and in the person of Jesus Christ alone. In John chapter seventeen, Jesus prayed, Father, “sanctify them” – sanctify Your church, set them apart from the world and the world’s thinking – “by Your truth. Your Word is truth.”

That is God’s plan and purpose. And so Satan is constantly at work to attempt to frustrate that plan and purpose of God. Satan is at war against the church. And one of the main ways in which Satan wages his warfare is by introducing counterfeit worship into the church – by introducing things that are not true worship according to the Word of God.

Four Vital Questions

Now as we approach this second category of counterfeits, we are following the same pattern that we followed as we examined the evil of counterfeit authority. Let me remind you again that this involves asking and answering four vital questions.

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The first question, which we answered in our last message, was this: How did the warning that Paul has set forth in this passage in Colossians chapter two apply to the people to whom it was written – the Colossian believers in the middle of the first century? In our last message we saw the answer to that question: The Colossian church was witnessing the beginning of a heresy that would plague the church from their day all the way through the centuries until our day. The heresy of counterfeit worship.

In their day this evil counterfeit took the form of the worship of angels. People who were influenced by pagan Greek philosophy and pagan Greek religion brought this into some parts of the early church. These people were influenced by polytheism – the worship of many so-called deities. But the heart of the heresy was that man, not Scripture, determines how to worship and what to worship.

Let me repeat that, because it is a vital thing to have in our minds as we move on: The heart of the heresy that first appeared in this part of the early church was the false teaching that man, not Scripture, determines how to worship and what to worship.

And so now, with this in mind, we are going to focus our attention on a second question: How has this same evil manifested itself in subsequent church history? What do we find, in the nearly two thousand years since the time of the Colossians, that has posed a similar kind of danger to the church? What kinds of counterfeit

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worship do we find in church history, and how does Colossians chapter two apply to those things?

And then, the Lord willing, in a future message we are going to address a third question: How does Colossians chapter two address this evil in our day? What counterfeits have become part of the church's so-called worship today? What things must the church forsake and remove, today, in order to be faithful to the one true and living God, and to Him alone?

And fourthly and finally, the Lord willing, in a future message we are going to turn our attention away from the counterfeits, and bring our focus back to the genuine article. We are going to consider this question: What is the true worship of God, according to Scripture? This is a question on which there is widespread confusion in the visible church in our time.

Church History: Roman Catholicism's Counterfeit Worship

And so now we turn our attention to our question for today: How has this same evil of counterfeit worship that first plagued the early church – how has this same evil manifested itself in church history? What kinds of counterfeit worship do we find in church history, and how does Colossians chapter two apply to those things?

During the past two thousand years, the greatest and most long-standing champion of counterfeit worship has been the Roman Catholic church. Roman Catholicism's false worship has been one of the greatest spiritual plagues of church history. Roman

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Catholicism's counterfeit worship is rooted in the same false teaching that plagued the Colossian church in the first century. It is rooted in the false teaching that man, not Scripture, determines how to worship and what to worship.

The Roman Catholic church teaches that people must worship four things that God has never commanded His true church to worship. Rome says that people must worship saints. Rome says that people must worship relics. Rome says that people must worship Mary. And, Rome says that people must worship the Pope.

Now, you will not hear the representatives of Rome say it in quite this way. And that is because there is another false principle of Roman Catholicism that lies behind and beneath all of the others. Rome claims that what it is promoting is not worship, but "veneration". Not worship, but veneration. Roman Catholic teachers try to make that distinction. Veneration is not the same as worship, they say. We are only venerating saints. Only venerating relics. Only venerating Mary. Only venerating past and present Popes. But dear friends, they are making a distinction when in fact there is no distinction.

Let me explain why this is true. When you give the adoration to other persons and to other objects that is to be reserved for the one true and living God alone, that is nothing less than counterfeit worship.

When you give the love, the reverence, the devotion, the adulation – and yes, the veneration – to other persons and to other things when that love, that reverence, that devotion, that adulation, that veneration rightfully belongs to Christ alone – you may

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call it by whatever name you like, but it is still counterfeit worship. It is, in fact, idolatry.

The Counterfeit Worship of Saints

As I said, Roman Catholicism commands the worship of saints. Let me explain what this involves. Over the centuries, the Roman Catholic church has designated over 10,000 dead people as "special friends of God" who, they claim, can obtain favors for the living.

Roman Catholicism practices the veneration of "saints" – and as we said a moment ago, that veneration is, in fact, worship. In fact, in Roman Catholic terminology it is called *the cult of the saints*. In fact Roman Catholic literature speaks of the *worship* of saints. Roman Catholicism says that these designated saints are "special friends of God." Rome says that these people can be asked to intercede for those still on earth. In Roman Catholic teaching, a saint can be designated as the patron saint of a particular activity or profession. A saint can be prayed to, they say, in order to prevent disasters or heal illnesses.

Now, there are many parallels between the Roman Catholic doctrine of saints and the worship of angels that we find in Colossians chapter two. There are many parallels between the Roman Catholic worship of saints, and the ancient pagan Greek and Roman belief in a pantheon of many gods who had special powers in specific areas of life. Each one of those gods was to be prayed to. Each one of those gods was to be the object of devotion, in order to gain each god's favor as needed. The Roman

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Catholic doctrine of sainthood is one of the many areas in which the Roman church has blended elements of paganism, both old and new, into its false version of Christianity.

Who Is A True Saint?

Now all of this leads us to a question that we must now answer. If the Roman Catholic teaching is a false view of sainthood, then who is a true saint? To put the question more directly: Who is a saint according to Scripture? What is the definition of a saint, not according to man's word, but according to God's Word?

Let me remind you of the answer that we found in one of our very first messages in the study of this book of Colossians, all the way back at chapter one, verse two. Paul addresses this letter that we are studying "to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse." The saints and faithful brethren. Who are these people? Who is a saint, according to the Word of God?

To answer that question we must begin with the meaning of the word in the original language of Scripture. We find that the New Testament word for "saints" is the Greek *hagiois*, which means "holy ones" or "set-apart ones."

According to the Word of God, the one and only thing that qualifies someone for the title of "saint" is saving faith in Jesus Christ. We find throughout the New Testament that all people who have saving faith in Jesus Christ are called the saints

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of God. Hebrews chapter ten verse ten tells us that the saints are those who "have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

Sainthood is not granted by man, but by God. Sainthood is not a status that is conferred upon some dead person by canonization based on subjective, man-made criteria. Sainthood is not rooted in pagan superstition, as Roman Catholic counterfeit sainthood is. Sainthood is a God-given identification, not for the dead, but for the living, and it is rooted solely in the objective criterion of a saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The saints constitute the membership of the true Church of Jesus Christ. At the beginning of First Corinthians Paul makes the point that he is addressing not merely a *visible* local church, a church that is in all times and places a mixture of believers and unbelievers, but he is addressing members of the *invisible* Church which is made up only of those who have been set apart in Christ – that is, he is addressing the body of true believers. The saints are the true Church, and the true Church is made up only of the saints.

Furthermore, the saints constitute the membership of the true Church not only locally, but universally. The title of "saint" applies to all believers, in all times and in all places. In his greeting to the Corinthians, Paul emphasizes the fact that the saints are "all those in every place who are calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" for salvation. All the saints — in every part of the earth — they are all one body in Christ.

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And, the saints are not only all believers in every place, but all believers of all time. The Old Testament uses the companion Hebrew word for saint thirty-nine times, from Deuteronomy all the way through to Zechariah, to describe true believers in the Savior who was to come, the Lord Jesus Christ. The saints are not New Testament believers only. The Biblical definition of a saint encompasses every believer in Christ, from the very beginning of time to the end.

The words "faithful brethren" in Colossians chapter one verse two would be more accurately translated "believing brethren." And this is reinforced by the fact that Paul attaches the words "in Christ". In the very next verses, it is their belief in Christ for which Paul expresses thanksgiving. It is the saints who are the believing brethren, and the believing brethren who are the saints – the holy ones, those who have been justified by faith in Christ and set apart as His own. No other person has legitimate claim to the title, and no one but God in Christ can confer it.

Are You a Saint?

It is for that reason that Paul finishes his greeting to the Colossian believers with these words in chapter one, verse two: "Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul uses that phrase over and over in his epistles. "Grace and peace" to all the saints in every place.

Grace is the way in which true salvation comes about — the unmerited favor of God. And peace is the result. Paul writes in Romans chapter five verse one, "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God." The warfare is over. We are no

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longer the enemies of God. We have been reconciled to God, declared "not guilty" before Him. And therefore, Paul says in Colossians chapter three verse fifteen, "let the peace of God rule in your hearts." Let it control you. Because you are saved, because you are a saint of God, let the peace of God have control of your heart.

Dear friend, if you are trusting by faith alone, in the Lord Jesus alone, by God's grace alone, for salvation — then the Word of God declares that you are a saint. And as a saint, Colossians chapter one verse twelve declares that you are qualified to partake in the glorious inheritance of the riches that are in Christ Jesus, both now and in the life to come. You are going to inherit the new heavens and the new earth as your eternal dwelling place with Him. And Ephesians chapter one tells us that as a saint of God you have the indwelling Holy Spirit as the down-payment, the guarantee, of that inheritance.

But perhaps as you are listening to this message today, you realize that you have never received grace and peace from God. You have never admitted to God that you are a sinner. You have never admitted before God that you cannot save yourself from eternal damnation.

Dear friend, if that is where you stand today, then I must tell you that you stand, at present, outside the kingdom of God. You are not qualified to be a partaker of the inheritance of the saints. You have never been reconciled to God by receiving the free and gracious gift of salvation that God has made available only through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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But if you have come to understand that you need to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin; if you understand that you need to walk in newness of life in Him; if you understand that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way that you can be qualified to be a partaker of the glorious inheritance that God has for his saints — then I encourage you to not let another moment pass, call upon the Lord right now, and ask Him to save you. Thus you will become a genuine saint of God for eternity. And if you are taking that step today, we would count it a privilege to help you confirm and more fully understand your new-found faith in Christ.

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