

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Beware of 'Progress in Theology' " (Colossians 2:18-23)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 3/11/2012

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If you are able to do so as you listen today, I hope that you will take your Bible and turn with me to Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. The apostle Paul is warning us about the third of Satan's triple threats to the church, and that is the threat of the tyranny of man-made doctrines. I'm going to begin by reading this passage as we take it up once again today. Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen:

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, 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? 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)

Today's Epidemic of Man-Made Doctrines

Dear friends, this passage places before us one of the most vital matters for you as an individual Christian, and for the church as a body of believers. The Bible is just as

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up-to-date and up-to-the-minute as it could possibly be. Nothing could be more relevant for our time and for our circumstances. The Evangelical church is experiencing an epidemic of man-made doctrines. Nothing could be more valuable to us than this passage of the Word of God, as we come to grips with this aspect of the great spiritual battle in which we are engaged as believers. We must be prepared to recognize these things when they come, and we must be ready to reject those who persist in teaching such things.

And so, as we take up God's warning against man-made doctrines once again today, let me review for you what we have covered in our first three messages on this vital subject.

First of all, we considered the question of context. It is vital for us to understand the place that every verse occupies within the Word of God, and the purpose for which every verse is given to us within the Word of God. And so, we have seen the place that this warning occupies within Paul's inspired letter to the Colossian church. The theme of Paul's letter is the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ in all things – in creation, in salvation, in the church, and in genuine Christian ministry.

Man-made doctrines rob the Lord Jesus Christ of first place. The One who has placed all authority in the hands of Jesus is God the Father Himself. Man-made doctrines usurp the rightful authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. The central characteristic of man-made doctrines, and the central characteristic those who invent them, is that they rob Jesus Christ of His authority.

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Secondly, we considered the way in which man-made doctrines come into existence. Man-made doctrines come into existence because some individual, or some group, or some institution, dares to tamper with the pure Word of God. Man-made doctrines add things to the Word of God, they subtract things from the Word of God, they deviate from the Word of God. And we have seen God's warnings, all through Scripture from beginning to end – do not tamper with My pure Word. Do not add. Do not subtract. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left.

But this is, and always has been, Satan's method of attack. Ever since the Garden of Eden, Satan has been placing doubt in man's heart about the authority and truthfulness of God and His Word. Throughout time, Satan has been appealing to the pride of man, telling man that we know better than God, and that we decide what God's Word really means or doesn't mean. Once again, this is an attack on the authority and the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ. But specifically, man-made doctrines are an attack on the authority and preeminence of Christ's pure written Word.

Thirdly, we have considered the source of our greatest defense against man-made doctrines. Our greatest defense is the fact that God has preserved His pure Word for us in the original languages.

For the last 150 years in particular, Satan has been at work in the Evangelical church in a very special and subtle way. Satan has convinced the majority of Evangelical pastors, teachers, and scholars that we do not in fact have the inerrant Word of God in our hands today in the original languages. Thus Satan has attacked

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the inerrancy of Scripture at the very root, at the very source, and he has been highly successful in this deception. And in the past 150 years we have seen the opening of a floodgate of man-made doctrines in the church. We have seen the proliferation of cults. We have seen many churches develop doctrinal distinctives that have no basis in Scripture.

And today, we see men (and women) in pulpits on television who invent a new doctrine out of their sinful minds on one Sunday morning – and because of the speed of communication in our day by means of satellite television and the Internet, that new doctrine, that new lie, that new deviation from the Word of God, spreads around the globe within days and weeks, literally at the speed of light. And it infects other people. It infects other churches. In our time, Satan who masquerades as an angel of light is doing his work at the speed of light. And Scripture calls those who invent man-made doctrines Satan's ministers – Second Corinthians 11:15.

Those Who Would Cheat You

The Apostle Paul tells us that man-made doctrines threaten to cheat the believer of his reward in Christ. Paul says, "let no man cheat you of your reward." Now this is very interesting in the original language. What Paul is describing for us is the role of an umpire or a judge in the Greek Olympic games.

He is saying that the inventors of man-made doctrines are like an umpire or a judge who would unjustly deny you the prize for winning a race or some other sports contest. Paul is not describing an honest judge making an honest judgment. Paul is

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not describing a judge who would say, "I am disqualifying you because you didn't play by the established rules of this event." No. Paul is describing a dishonest umpire, and unjust judge, who says, "I am taking away your prize for winning because you did not play the game by my rules – my arbitrary rules, the rules that I invented on my own."

Those who invent man-made doctrines sit in unjust judgment over those whom they have no right to judge, and they judge them on grounds that have no basis in Scripture. Those who invent man-made doctrines are saying, I am going to judge you by your conformance – not to Scripture, but to my rules. If you don't conform to my invented doctrines, it means you aren't willing to be submissive to authority within the church. It means you aren't willing to listen to those who know more than you do. And if you persist in this, it probably means you aren't really a Christian.

How many of us have heard this? Turn on the television or the radio today, and if you listen with Biblical discernment you will hear an epidemic of it.

"Progress in Theology"?

Often these people come in very subtle and cunning ways. They pretend that they are going to show you something about the true Christian faith that you did not know before. They pretend that they are going to show you some improvement upon Christian teaching, over and above that which you have previously known. During the past 150 years, one of the bywords in Evangelical Christian academia has been

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“progress in theology.” We need to make progress in our theology, they say. We need to blaze new trails. We need to explore new territory.

Dear friends, the Word of God is complete, and it is settled. Its theology is settled. Paul tells us here in verse eighteen that those who invent their own doctrines are intruding into things that they have not seen, things that God has not revealed as the body of Christian truth. God has set the boundaries of the theological and doctrinal territory in which we are to live and learn. By definition, the only thing new in theology is heresy. You can count on that.

The False Humility of False Teachers

Often those who invent man-made doctrines will deceive many people through a display of false humility. Often I have heard people say this about a man who preaches error, about a man who invents his own doctrine. They say, “But he’s such a good man. He’s such a humble man.” Dear friends, listen to what Paul says in Galatians chapter one: “If we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel to you than that which we have preached, let him be accursed.” It doesn’t matter if that man or angel comes to you in a display of outward humility. Our subjective judgment of a man’s supposed humility is not the issue. Truth is the issue. And it is a life and death issue.

Charles Spurgeon said this. He said, “If the life of the man should be blameless as the life of Christ, but he preaches to you something other than the pure truth of Jesus

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Christ, take no heed of him. He wears the sheep's clothing, but he is a wolf underneath."

Likewise, those who invent false doctrines are often very eloquent. They have a way with words. They can be witty. They can be glib. They can twist a lot of Scripture by quoting it out of context and distorting its actual meaning. They can overwhelm you with theological terms. They can be very convincing.

But dear friend, do not let your faith stand in the words of men, but in the pure Word of God. We live in a day when many men speak very eloquently and very persuasively to promote all kinds of evil. But far better is the man who stammers out the words of the truth of God, than the man who spews forth evil with great flowing eloquence. Having begun in the Spirit, dear friend, do not attempt to continue in the flesh. Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart.

Understand the genuine way of God. Submission to the genuine authority of Christ and His Word results in submission to truth, and a proper desire to serve God in truth.

When the Lord confronted Job out of the whirlwind, Job said this: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5-6)

When Peter saw the power of Christ demonstrated, Luke tells us that Peter "fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!'" (Luke 5:8)

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When Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on His throne in heaven, he said, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah 6:5)

These are not the true heart attitudes of those who invent man-made doctrines. Paul tells us here in Colossians chapter two, verse eighteen that these people are exhibiting a false humility, just as he tells us a few verses later that they are promoting a false wisdom. Inwardly, Paul says, such a person is "vainly puffed up in his fleshly mind." What the false teacher says has "the appearance of wisdom," Paul says in verse twenty-three. But it is in fact of "no value" for the real need of the Christian life, which is our being conformed more and more to the image of Christ by the mortification of our sinful flesh. That is true humility.

Scripture also describes this kind of false humility in other passages. This is how God views such false teachers, and this is how they will be judged.

In Second Timothy 3:5 Paul says that these people have "a form of godliness but [are] denying its power. And [he says] from such people turn away!"

Titus 1:16 – "They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work."

1 John 2:4 – "He who says, 'I know Him,' [that is, I know Christ] and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him."

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The Just “Reward” of False Teachers

Scripture tells us clearly how Christ will deal with such false teachers. Jesus said this in Matthew chapter seven, beginning at verse sixteen:

You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day [the Day of Judgment], “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Matthew 7:16-23)

The Nature of True Judgment and True Reward

Scripture also tells us the nature of the true judgment of the faithful Christian, and the nature of the Christian’s true reward. Christ is the righteous judge, and He will reward the believers on the basis of how they lived in the light of the eternal truth of God’s pure Word. First Corinthians chapter three, beginning at verse ten, Paul says this:

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According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day [the Day of Judgment] will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.

If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work [that is, if any true believer's work] is burned [because it is not of the truth, and therefore not worthy of Christ's approval, Paul says], he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

Let No Man Cheat You of Your Reward

Dear friend, let no man cheat you of your reward. Build with the gold, silver, and precious stones of the pure truth of Christ, not the wood, hay, and straw of man-made doctrines. Our Lord Jesus Christ says this, in Revelation chapter twenty-two:

Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last. Blessed are those who do

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His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city [the New Jerusalem]. But outside [eternally separated from God] are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie. (Revelation 22:12-15)

And so the Apostle John says this, in the book of Second John beginning at verse eleven:

Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. (2 John 8-11)

Let me leave you today with these words of encouragement from Hebrews chapter ten, beginning at verse thirty-five:

Therefore do not cast away your confidence [your confidence in Christ and in His Word], which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise:

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And then the writer quotes Old Testament promises of God –

“For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.”

But, the writer to the Hebrews says, true believers “are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. (Hebrews 10:35-39)

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