

May 17, 2020

Nothing but Christ

Colossians 2:16-23

If you have died with Christ, man-made traditions and restrictions have no authority over you.

LTS: Heb. 10:23-28

There are two ways to fall off the balance beam of true religion. On the one hand you can fall into the error of flatly denying Christ and on the other you can fall into the error of adding things to Christ. Every religion in the world outside the broad umbrella of Christianity denies Christ. On the other hand, there are many professing Christians who get into trouble by adding philosophies and rules and traditions to Christ. This second error (adding to Christ) was the problem Paul was addressing in the church of Colossae.

As with the other concerns Paul has raised in this short letter, these ancient problems have managed to find their way into churches for 2,000 years. Even now, as you will see, they find fertile soil to grow and bear their poison fruit in the churches of our time.

The main point of this text is that if you have died with Christ, man-made religious traditions and restrictions have no authority over you.

Someone may observe that every generation of Christianity has added rules and traditions to their practice of Christianity. Why is that a problem? That's a good question, and Paul tackles it head on and without equivocation. In fact, he is down-right dogmatic in his response.

Why does Paul ward us away from man-made traditions and regulations in the practice of Christian living? Paul explains that if you have been united with Christ, man-made traditions, practices and regulations are nothing more than...

I. Religious Sanctimony and

II. Obsolete Shadows that turn our hearts away from the

III. Authentic Substance of Christ.

Let's begin by reading the text before us.

Read Col. 2:16-23

By now you know that Paul's letter to the Colossians is all about the supremacy of Christ. Paul is trying to help the believers in the church of Colossae learn that for Christians, Jesus Christ is All-in-All. Whether we are talking about salvation, sanctification, or Christian flourishing in general, Christ is all. As Paul says it, the hope of glory is "Christ in You" and you in Christ.

Because of our union with Christ God thinks of us as identified with Christ in every way.

- His righteousness is ours
- His Spirit is ours
- His death is ours
- His resurrection is ours
- His access to the Father is ours
- His eternal life is ours
- The Father's love and acceptance of Christ is ours
- Christ's love for people is ours
- The list goes on and on...

Because God thinks of us and identifies us "in Christ," he relates to us differently than he did before we were justified by grace.

The importance of this doctrine can hardly be overstated. John Murray describes Union with Christ as the central truth of the whole doctrine of Salvation. Likewise, Sinclair Ferguson describes Union with Christ as the heart of evangelical theology.¹ These strong statements affirm the biblical teaching that everything God has for us comes via union with Christ.

The young believers in Colossae needed to learn this because they were in danger NOT of losing their salvation, but of adopting a counterfeit spirituality that only served to weaken and dilute their vital relationship with Christ. This was NO small matter, and Paul was really concerned about it.

- 2:16 “Let no one pass judgment on you.”
- 2:18 “Let no one disqualify you
- 2:20: “Why do you submit to regulations?”
- Back in 2:8 he has already warned, “See to it that no one takes you captive...”

These are serious warnings! Paul understood our propensity for wandering away from Christ and becoming so entangled in religious traditions that our hearts get turned away from the Savior in favor of a religious system: one that people can attain and control. More specifically, Paul wards us away from...

I. Religious Sanctimony:

1. Sanctimony is defined as “*The action or belief that what one does makes him morally superior to others.*” That’s exactly what the errorists in Colossae were doing. They were judging these young believers to be spiritually inferior because all they had was Jesus.

¹ Pastor Edward Donley, Trinity Reformed Presbyterian church, Northern Ireland. 2001

2. What did the false teachers offer in addition to Christ? Well, pick up any evangelical commentary on Colossians and you will discover that no one knows exactly what all the intricacies of their religion were, but four particular errors stand out in the text before us. Think of them as four polluted streams that were poisoning the river of their fellowship with Christ.

3. The FIRST polluted stream of sanctimony that was poisoning their faith might be called Humanism. Paul mentions it back in 2:8 when he says, “*See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elementary spirits of the world, and NOT according to Christ.*” In the religion of these false teachers the final authority on things pertaining to life and godliness was NOT the Scriptures, but traditions of men.

4. As you know, human philosophy is an attempt to answer the big questions in life and existence. Most of the time, however, the starting points for such so-called wisdom are the inventions, imaginations, and precepts of men.

5. The appeal of such religion is that it always sounds so intellectual, so heady, erudite, educated, and superior. But for all its sanctimonious superiority the religious traditions or men actually bring harm rather than help to the church. Paul’s words to the church of Corinth seem appropriate here, where he said (1 Cor. 11:2-3),

For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. ³ But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. So, the first polluted stream is Humanism.

6. The Second polluted stream of sanctimony is what we might call Legalism. Notice again v. 16. Paul says, “*Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food or drink, or with regard to festival or New Moon, or Sabbath day.*”

7. Then in verse 21 we learn that they were saying of certain foods, “Don’t touch this, don’t taste that, and don’t handle the other.”

8. While we don't know all the specifics of what the false teachers believed it does seem that they borrowed heavily from the religion of Judaism.

9. Specifically, they were interested in the O.T. ceremonial laws regarding food, drink and holidays. They developed a system of rules regarding what one is permitted or forbidden to eat or drink. The message was, "It's certainly necessary to believe in Jesus as your starting point, but if you REALLY want to be spiritual, if you really want to flourish as a Christian you need to learn the food rules.

10. It's interesting to note, however, that while the O.T. declared many possible food choices to be "unclean," there really weren't any rules on drink per se. Apparently, these false teachers had created new restrictions. And they also had a high regard for religious holidays.

11. Festivals, New Moons, and Sabbath Days were part of the religion of Judaism. There were Yearly feasts (Day of Atonement), Monthly (New Moon), and weekly (Sabbaths). In their estimation, you couldn't be a mature and flourishing Christian if you opted out of these events. Even now, there are quasi-Christian groups that tell us that you aren't a mature Christian if your church doesn't gather on Saturday – the Sabbath. And others engage in the same sanctimony when they either require or forbid Christians to partake of certain foods or drink.

12. Now, before we go too far in censuring these people for judging one's spiritual maturity based on external practices and traditions, let's take a moment to look in the mirror.

13. Have you ever looked at someone and judged their Christian maturity based on

- Whether they put up Christmas decorations or enjoyed talking to their kids about Santa?
- What about the Easter Bunny or those unrighteous Easter eggs!
- I remember a time when it was a settled fact that going to a movie theater was carnal!
- And if a Christian woman wore pants (especially to church) she was clearly of questionable spirituality.

- Can a pastor have facial hair? And exactly how long can it be before it transgresses the rules of holy hair length? After all, everyone knows the biblical principle that “If your hair’s too long... their’s sin in your heart!”

14. Now, before you judge such people for being so judgy, are you bothered by the fact that I entered the pulpit with no tie? What if I wore a short-sleeved shirt? Of course, we all know that pastors who wear Hawaiian shirts in the pulpit are verified compromisers and apostates!

15. How would you feel if you came into the chapel and found that Kyle had erected a drum set, or allowed someone to play the electric guitar? Years ago when we introduced the Jimbe to our instruments for worship, some people actually left the church never to return - declaring, “The rock beat is evil in every form,” and “Christians practice paganism when the bongo’s in the background.” I actually had a young lady tell me that “Christian rock is like Christian murder.”

16. I suspect some of you are really uncomfortable with this conversation. But let’s remember what Paul is saying here. Therefore, don’t let anyone pass judgment on you over these superficial, external issues. In other words, don’t let them convince you that you are unspiritual or somehow deficient because you haven’t subscribed to these man-made regulations. None of that has anything to do with your fellowship with God in Christ!

17. If you are in Christ, you have everything God offers. Your focus should be on growing in Christ, learning Him, loving him, worshiping Him!

18. Now, don’t get me wrong. We are NOT in any way encouraging antinomianism (“No Law). Those who are In Christ actually love to obey the word of God. They strive to bring themselves under that authority of Christ in all things – not only in their food, clothing, and music, but even in their thoughts and words. In fact, Paul told the church in Corinth that whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God.

19. There are indeed governing principles in the Bible that tell us how to handle the gray areas of life where there is no clear command in Scripture. For example, we would never say that going to the theater to see a movie is inherently sinful. However, the authoritative scriptures instruct us with words like (Phil 4:8)
“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just,

whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

20. Paul cautions Timothy (2 Tim 2:22) to “Flee youthful lusts.” You see, beloved, the word of God is sufficient in itself to teach us what it means to walk in a manner that is consistent with being in Christ – to live in a manner that puts the concerns of others ahead of our own liberties. The word of God is sufficient. Why should we look the traditions of men? So, Paul cautions us to beware of Religious Sanctimony in the forms of Humanism and Legalism. The Third polluted stream of Religious Sanctimony we can identify as Mysticism

21. In v. 18 Paul says, “Don’t let anyone disqualify you by insisting on the worship of angels.

- A. The word “Disqualify” is *Brabeus* which was the name of the an official who served as an umpire in the ancient games.
- B. The Umpire sat in judgment over the contestants of the game. If the athlete broke a rule the umpire had the authority to disqualify him and declare him unworthy of the prize.
- C. The False teachers around the church of Colossae made themselves out to be the leading religious authorities. They viewed themselves as spiritual umpires who could declare that unless you play by our rules, you are disqualified from all God’s blessing upon your life.

22. Never-mind the repeated biblical narratives where the angels themselves refuse to be worshiped. Witness the apostle John’s encounter with an angel on the island of Patmos. But the false teacher’s Mysticism didn’t terminate in the worship of angels. Paul says (18) “they go on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by their sensuous mind.” It seems apparent that it was while they were worshiping angels that they received these ecstatic visions. But this is nothing new.

23. In the O.T. book of Jeremiah we read,

(Jer. 14:14) “And the LORD said to me: “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds.”

(Jer. 23:16) “Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD...’”

24. Sounds like it could have been written in our time, doesn't it? There have always been sanctimonious religionists determined to draw people into their error by claiming to have had a vision from the Lord. DO NOT BELIEVE THEM! YOU HAVE CHRIST!

25. So the first three polluted streams of Sanctimony are Humanism, Legalism, and Mysticism. The fourth polluted stream that threatened to poison the river of their fellowship with Christ is Asceticism. Asceticism is defined as *severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons.*

26. Now these were the ultra-humble false teachers. These were the men who dressed in shabby clothes, lived in caves, separated themselves from people, remained celibate, deprived themselves of food, and thought that true Christian flourishing comes when you deny yourself the pleasures of life to the extreme.

27. In verse 23 Paul says, these four sanctimonious philosophies of Christian maturity and Christian flourishing “*do indeed have the appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*”

28. You see, you can do all these things and still be viewed by God as fleshly. Why, because while these false teachers are very “Christian” in appearance they offer nothing more than human precepts, philosophies and traditions. “*Since you have died (in Christ) to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world do you submit to such regulations?*” Submitting to extrabiblical regulations invented by men is abject foolishness if you are “In Christ.” Such teachings are nothing more than different forms of Religious Sanctimony.

29. We have come to that part of the sermon when I have just about run out of time. So, let me close simply by reiterating Paul's message to the Colossian's and us:

If you have died with Christ, man-made traditions and restrictions have no authority over you. You are alive and free in Christ.

