

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "False Humility, False Worship" (Colossians 2:18-23)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/17/2012

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Today we are entering a new phase of our study of the warning against the evil of man-made doctrines, which we find in Colossians chapter two. So once again, if you are able, I hope that you will turn with me in your own Bible to this passage – Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. The Apostle Paul writes these words to the Colossian church – chapter two, 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 [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?

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)

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## **A Fourfold Warning**

As I said, today we are entering a new phase or a new section in our examination of God the Holy Spirit's warning against the evil of man-made doctrines. This is a warning against a tyranny that can ruin the spiritual life of the individual Christian, a tyranny that can ruin the spiritual life of the church as a body.

We must not permit man-made doctrines to gain a foothold in our own thinking individually, or in the thinking of the church as a body. We must reject all man-made doctrines and cling only to God-made doctrines – sound doctrine as we find it only in the written Word of God.

We must reject all counterfeits. We must cling to that which is genuine. And we must know the genuine article intimately and thoroughly, so that we can recognize the counterfeit when it comes along. That is why the systematic reading and study and preaching and teaching of the whole counsel of God, the entire Word of God, is so vital.

Now let me remind you that in this passage the Apostle Paul under divine inspiration warns us against four specific categories of counterfeits. First of all, he warns against submission to counterfeit authority. Secondly, he warns against engaging in counterfeit worship. Thirdly, he warns against the use of counterfeit intercessors. And fourthly, he warns against the deception of counterfeit mysteries, or counterfeit revelation.

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## **A Four-Step Approach**

Now thus far in our study of this section of Colossians chapter two we have focused on the danger of counterfeit authority. But today we are going to begin considering the second category of counterfeits that Paul warns against, and that is the evil of engaging in counterfeit worship.

Now as we approach this second category of counterfeits, it is my intention to follow the same pattern or procedure that we followed as we examined the evil of counterfeit authority. Our pattern or procedure involves four steps.

First of all, we need to understand how the warning that Paul has set forth in this passage related to the people to whom it was written. How did this apply to the Colossian believers in the middle of the first century A.D.? What was going on that presented such a danger to the individual believer and to the church in that day and in that situation? What was it that was so dangerous, that it required such a strongly-worded warning as the one we find here? What kind of counterfeit worship were men seeking to impose upon the Colossian church?

Secondly, we need to look for similar problems 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 worship do we find in church history, and how does this same Biblical warning apply to those things?

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Thirdly, we need to be aware of similar problems in the church in our own time. What kinds of counterfeit worship do we find in the church in the twenty-first century? How does this same Scripture address the problems and evils of our own time?

And fourthly and finally, we always need to bring our focus back away from the counterfeits, and we will finish our study of this matter by focusing our attention once again on the genuine article. What is the true worship of God, according to Scripture?

### **False Humility, False Worship**

And so this is the pattern we are going to follow, and we begin today with our first step.

What was going on in the Colossian church in the middle of the first century, which presented such a danger to the individual believer and to the body of Christ? What was it that evoked such a strong warning from the Apostle Paul?

For the answer to that question, let me call your attention once again to verse eighteen: "Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels..." Now, in the original Greek of verse eighteen, two things are connected. Paul was telling the Colossian believers this: He was telling them that one of the dangers of permitting man-made doctrines to enter into the church is that

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people will follow after those who delight in false humility and delight in worship of angels.

The words "taking delight" in this verse refer to both things – false humility and the worship of angels. The words "taking delight" in the original language have the sense that someone takes pleasure in a thing because he is devoted to it. So Paul is warning the Colossians of the danger that is posed by people among them who are in fact devoted to false humility, and devoted to false worship.

### **True and False Humility**

Paul uses the word that is translated "false humility" twice – the first time in verse eighteen, and again in verse twenty-three. In verse eighteen he couples false humility with false worship. He is emphasizing that the two things go hand-in-hand. In verse twenty-three he goes on to call such false worship what it truly is. He calls it "an appearance of wisdom" – that is, a false appearance of wisdom. The false appearance of humility in this man-made doctrine contributes to a false appearance of wisdom. There is a double falsehood. And it also involves, verse twenty-three, "self-imposed religion" – literally, self-made or man-made religion. Religious doctrine that has been invented by sinful man under the influence of Satan.

Now, what is it that marks out this so-called humility as false humility rather than genuine humility? It is simply this: The people who exhibited this kind of so-called humility took delight in it. They were not devoted to Christ; they were devoted to their outward show of humility.

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What is the difference between false humility and true humility for the Christian? True humility is something that marks out the life and thinking of the true believer in Christ. But the truly humble Christian is in submission to Christ. The truly humble Christian is thinking of Christ first, His Word first, His authority first. As John the Baptist put it, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

But this was not the kind of humility that was exhibited by the false teachers who were troubling the church at Colosse. What they were saying in effect was this: "We're humble, and we're proud of it." When you take delight in humility, as these people did, it is actually pride.

And what does God's Word say about such pride?

Proverbs 16:5 – "Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord; though they join forces [against God], none will go unpunished."

Proverbs 15:25 – "The Lord will destroy the house of the proud..."

Habakkuk 2:4 – "Behold the proud: His soul is not upright in him. But the just shall live by his faith."

1 Peter 5:5-6 – "...be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time..."

And again in James 4:6-10 – "'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Therefore submit to God. Resist the Devil and he will flee from you."

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Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up."

And Paul speaks of such pride specifically in relation to man-made doctrines:

First Timothy 6:3-5 – "If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself."

True humility is rooted in the knowledge of Christ. Remember Jesus' own words, in Matthew chapter eleven:

Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you [notice] and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28-29)

"Learn from Me," Jesus says. Literally, "be in the habit of learning from Me, and be in the habit of putting that learning into practice." And why must we learn from

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Christ alone? "Because," He says, "I am gentle and lowly in heart." I, Jesus, will teach you to be gentle and lowly in heart.

The word "lowly" in the original language describes someone who has no pretense about him. No falsehood about him. What you see on the outside is what is true on the inside. That is true of Christ. It must be true of us.

And so Paul is warning the Colossian church: There are people among you who are making a pretext of an outward humility, when they are not really humble at all. Inwardly, they are proud as proud can be. They are not holding fast to Christ the Head of the Church. They are holding fast to themselves. They are holding onto the flesh. They are "vainly puffed up in their fleshly minds."

And in such a wretched and ungodly spiritual condition, they are trying to impose counterfeit forms of worship upon the church. Forms of worship that God has not ordained. Forms of worship that are not the true worship of God. Do not have anything to do with these people or with their false worship, Paul says. "Let no man cheat you of your reward" in Christ.

### **Worship of Angels**

Now what was the nature of the specific kind of false worship that these people were seeking to impose on the Colossian church? Paul calls it "the worship of angels." Now if we were to look at those words in the original Greek by

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themselves, lifted out of context, it would be possible to translate those words in two different ways.

Alternative number one would be to translate them as “the worship given by or instituted by angels.” And some commentators have tried to say that this is what Paul was speaking against. But this interpretation ignores the context. It ignores the spiritual situation that was threatening the Colossian church, and threatening other churches in that region. It also ignores what we subsequently find in the history of the church, in the decades and centuries that followed.

These factors support the other alternative for translating these words. What we find is that “the worship of angels” in context literally means “angel worship.” Worshipping angels.

Now, why would people promote such a thing? Why would people try to bring such a thing into the church? Once again, we need to remember the situation that the Colossian believers faced. They were a Christian minority among a pagan majority, just as we are today. And one of the leading pagan influences that they faced, every day, was the religious philosophy that would later become known as Gnosticism. The Gnostics had a very confused and un-Biblical view of God and His created order, because their beliefs were rooted in polytheism – a belief in many gods.

The ultimate form of God is remote, the Gnostics said. The ultimate form of God cannot not be known or accessed directly. But God has many components, the Gnostics said. God takes the form of many lower beings.

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And so these people were telling the Christians, "You are wrong to think that you can worship God directly. You are wrong to think that you can access God directly in the person of Jesus Christ. That is a proud thought. No, you must be humble. You must approach God by worshipping these other lower beings, these many components and celestial servants of the great and unknowable God. You must worship angels."

This worship of angels involved an outward show of humility. An outward show of what was supposed to be a superior reverence for God. Oh, I can't approach God directly. I can't worship God directly. I, a mere man, must worship these lower forms. I must worship God through these intermediate beings. And perhaps, perhaps, somehow I can reach the distant and unknowable God in this way.

### **Angel Worship Forbidden – "Worship God!"**

But what does Scripture say? The Word of God clearly and emphatically forbids the worship of angels. Let me mention just three passages that deal with this.

Satan, who himself is an angel – Satan, who often comes to the church transforming himself into an angel of light, Paul tells us – Satan tried to cause our Lord Jesus Christ to sin during the temptation in the wilderness by causing Jesus Himself to engage in angel worship. Matthew chapter four, verse eight –

Again, the Devil took Him [Jesus] up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.

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And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You [notice] if You will fall down and worship me" [if you will worship an angel]. Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" (Matthew 4:8-10)

Twice in the book of Revelation we see the Apostle John prevented from worshipping an angel. In both cases, John is so taken up, so moved, by a portion of the revelation that he has been given from the hand of an angel, that he wants to fall down and worship the messenger of God.

Revelation chapter eighteen, beginning at verse twenty-one, we find that "a mighty angel" reveals the final fall of prophetic Babylon, and the final triumph of the Lord God omnipotent who reigns forever. And then in Revelation chapter nineteen, verse ten we read this:

And I [John] fell at his feet [fell at the feet of this mighty angel] to worship him. But he said to me, "See that you do not do that! I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

And again in Revelation chapter twenty-one, beginning at verse nine, an angel reveals to John a vision of the New Jerusalem. And in chapter twenty-two, beginning at verse eight, we read this:

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Now I, John, saw and heard these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel who showed me these things. Then he said to me, "See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God."

And in the book of Hebrews, that great revelation of the significance of the Old Testament types and symbols concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, how does the writer begin? He begins, in chapter one, by declaring the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ to the angels. He declares that the angels are not components of God, but the creations of God, His ministering servants. He declares that Christ came into this world, for a time made a little lower than the angels as He took on a human body, in order to suffer for sin and open the way to the very throne room of God once and for all.

"Let all the angels of God worship Him" the writer declares (Hebrews 1:6). Let us, the writer says in chapter four, come boldly, directly, before the throne of grace – not through a host of angels, not through lower beings, but through the intercession and the worship of God the Son Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **The Significance of These Things**

Dear friends, you may be wondering why, in our day and time, we should be concerned with all of this. What is the significance of it? The significance of it is

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the fact that the Colossian church was witnessing the beginning of a heresy that would plague the church from that day until the present day.

First it would plague the churches in the region of Phrygia, in which Colosse was located, for many centuries. And as time went on, as the centuries went on, this heresy would spread far beyond Colosse. Christian writers of the late third and early fourth centuries, over 350 years after Paul warned the Colossians about this evil, tell us that the worshipping of angels was still a problem in some parts of the church.

Once a man-made doctrine enters the church, it is difficult to stamp it out. Even when we think that a man-made doctrine has been eradicated, we must remain on our guard, because the same evil is likely to appear again – perhaps in the same part of the visible church, or perhaps in some other part of it.

Virtually all cults and false religions base their teachings on some vision or revelation that some man or woman has supposedly received. And later in our study of this section of Colossians we are going to deal specifically with the evil of counterfeit revelations. But at this point it is sufficient for us to say this one thing with certainty: All such claims are false. The claims of these intruders into the church at Colosse were false.

That is what Paul tells the Colossian believers in chapter one of this same epistle. Jesus Christ is God's final and complete revelation to mankind. The doctrine of

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Christ is the only authoritative doctrine. Let no one cheat you with man-made doctrines that can lead you into such evils as counterfeit worship.

Reject self-made religion. Reject any form of polytheism – and in upcoming messages we are going to see that there are many such forms, even within the visible church. It may surprise you to know that we can find such things, even among some who would call themselves Evangelicals in our own time. Worship the Triune God alone. Worship God as He commands.

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