

Colossians 2:16-23 // Mere Christianity vs Religion

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[0 : 00] These are a shadow of the things that were to come. The reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you.

Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen. They are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. They have lost connection with the head from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belong to the world, do you submit to its rules? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.

These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Since then, you have been raised with Christ. Set your hearts on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above and not on earthly things.

[1 : 18] For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

This is the word of the Lord. Good morning, St. Silas. It's great to see you.

If you've not met, I'm Martin DeHair's the lead pastor here. And it would be great to meet you. Keep your Bibles open at Colossians chapter 2, page 1183.

Great to see a good crowd here at the half eleven. Half eleven, same last week as well. And you might be someone who loves the big crowd at half eleven. But if you are someone thinking, I like this church, but this is a lot of people, can I encourage you to try the 9.30?

It's a smaller group of people. There's plenty of room for more. And if some of you decided to go to the 9.30, it makes more room at the 11.30 for more guests to come.

[2 : 21] I don't want anyone to feel bad that this is your service. This may be the only one you can get to, and that's great and brilliant. You are free. But for those of us who think, well, I could easily make it for half nine, that might be a good way of finding a more manageable group to be part of.

So we're in Colossians 2. You can find an outline inside the notice sheet that will help you as we look at this together. But let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you so much for the gift of your spirit. As we've been remembering this morning, we praise you and thank you that your spirit alighted on Jesus and equipped him for his mission and ministry.

And we thank you for him sending your spirit to be with us. So, Holy Spirit, we pray that you will breathe on us now and you will fill us with a knowledge of your will that we might see Jesus clearly and know him better and be strengthened that we might bear fruit in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. So how do you scam a backpacker? Some years ago, I went backpacking. Someone asked me at the 9.30, was it just a few years ago?

[3 : 39] No, it was quite a lot of years ago. I went backpacking with a couple of friends. We started in Thailand. We, first full day of the trip, we were in Bangkok.

So we headed off where we were told in our Lonely Planet guide to go. It was the Grand Palace of Bangkok. That was where to head, fresh-faced, in our backpacking adventure.

But a polite, well-dressed, knowledgeable young Thai man approached us on the way and said, hi guys, you're just visiting? Are you heading for the Grand Palace?

Oh, I'm sorry. I don't know if you've not heard. It's actually closed today. It's a national holiday today in Thailand. Thailand, so you can't go to the Grand Palace.

I'll tell you what, though. I've got a friend who, he could, if you just give us some petrol money, he could drive you around. We could give you a tour of Bangkok in the car and show you the kind of hidden secrets, the sort of inside of you of the city instead.

[4 : 44] And we fell for it. And we went for the car trip. And after a few hours, we realized when we were taken to, like, our fourth souvenir shop that we were missing out on the grandeur of the Grand Palace of Bangkok.

And it wasn't a national holiday. We were just being sold a dummy. So how do you scam a Christian? How about you offer them more of God?

You offer them more. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter, Colossians, to a young church, where the thing that might catch them, that might deceive them, is the promise, you could get more of God.

Follow me. Of course, the thing that's tricky about that is that wanting more of God, that's a really good thing to want, is it not? But look at verse 8 that we picked up last week.

If you just look at chapter 2, verse 8, see to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world, rather than on Christ.

[5 : 56] It's remarkable when you think about it, that the Apostle Paul wrote those words while he was in prison. The very last words of the letter, he says, remember my chains.

He is in jail, but what drives him to get up and write to this church? What concerns him for this church? The danger he sees them in is not, watch out for those Romans.

They might put you in jail. Watch out for persecution that might cause you to give up. It's not, watch out for the lure of hedonistic pleasure that might lead you away from Jesus.

Because you think, oh, I just can't keep following Jesus anymore. I just want what the world can give me. His deepest concern is for something different that might take them captive.

It's the false teacher. It's the person in the church who, in the name of Christianity, says to them, if you want more of God, if you want to grow, I've got what you need over here.

[7 : 05] Come and have some of what I've been having over here. Now, as we pick up the argument this morning from verse 16, we have to start with what we heard last week. Paul protects the Christian from being led astray by showing them that they have everything that they need and could want in Christ.

Everything they need for life, for maturity, for fullness is found in Jesus. So that if you want to grow, you don't move on from him, you go deeper in him.

So in verse 6 of chapter 2, Paul urges them, just have a look up there, key verses for the whole letter, verses 6 and 7. So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him.

And then the three pictures of that, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. So the giant redwood tree we thought about last week, being rooted, so rooted in Christ that we have the vitality of a giant tree.

Being strengthened in the faith as you were taught. So like the skyscraper, strongly built and reaching to the skies in what we've been taught. And then the waterfall, verse 7, flowing out from us is thankfulness to Jesus as we more and more grow in our grasp of the wonder of his grace to us.

[8 : 33] There's the mature Christian, there's the key. Walk in him, keep living in him. The authentic Christian path to growth is to walk in the fullness of the relationship with God that we already have in Christ and grow in that.

But today, Paul gets specific about dangers that could lead the Colossians astray. And the problem, essentially, is religion. Religious add-ons to the Christian life.

Ceremonies and rituals, experiences and visions, restrictions and rules that all religions have. And you could be drawn into them as they kind of lead you off living for Jesus and him alone.

As somebody else kind of looks down on you in your Christian experience and life. And you feel that judgment of your simple Christian life.

And you get drawn and taken captive by what they offer. So in verse 16, the Apostle Paul says, Do not let anyone judge you. In verse 18, do not let anyone disqualify you.

[9 : 50] By some set of religious practices that they feel that you need to join in with. The false teacher sees you firmly planted in Christ.

And their verdict is, Nice start, but you are underqualified. You are going to be stuck in the spiritual slow lane unless you join me and what I do.

And Paul's aim is that whatever people say to us in the Christian life, whatever church they go to, whatever conferences, festivals, books that they've read, experiences, courses they've done, if they start to judge you, if they start to make you feel a bit disqualified or underqualified, you can say to them and to yourself, But I have Christ.

I have Christ. And so I need nothing else. I don't need what you're offering me. I have fullness of life in him. Now we were full of the positives of that last week in our time together in God's Word.

And I do feel like today, as we get in the specifics, it will feel a bit less positive. Because Paul wants us not to be taken captive. And in a crowd of this size, I take it that there will be some of us here who have already been taken captive.

[11 : 10] Who have fallen for some modern day versions of this. And added something to our spiritual lives that in reality is a detour from Christ.

It's a diversion from Christ. And so we may feel that some of this is quite confronting. And I just want to encourage you, as we're listening this morning, to consider whether Jesus is graciously inviting you personally to turn back to a life that's just built on him and him alone.

A life full of hope stored up for you in heaven. A life flowing with thankfulness to him. So to receive that gracious invitation from him, rather than having some kind of spiritual version of Stockholm Syndrome, where we've been taken captive, but we actually really like the thing that's taken us captive, and we won't let go.

So, don't be judged or disqualified. First of all, not by religious ceremonies, which are shadows of what you have in Christ. Have a look with me at verse 16.

Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a new moon celebration, or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come.

[12 : 30] The reality, however, is found in Christ. Now, those phrases that are grouped together, in verse 16, describe traditions from Old Testament religion.

So this is religion at its best. This is God-ordained religious practice, that for a season of the history of God's people, was the way that he taught them to practice their religious life, as teaching them to trust his promises.

But Paul says, all of that was like the shadow before the Messiah walks into the room. Jesus' life and work, if you like, they cast a shadow back through history, before he came.

Festivals, and seasons, and the priesthood, and the sacrificial system, and the Sabbath. These God-ordained patterns pointed forward to the coming Messiah, and the rescue that he would bring. And now, Jesus Christ has walked into the room. We don't look at the shadows anymore. We look at him. He has arrived. And we build our lives on him.

[13 : 42] Don't go back to the shadow lands of religion, he says. And in the first century, if you met a Christian in the Roman Empire, it would have been really obvious to you that there was something very different about them.

If you just imagine, a Christian in the Roman Empire moves into a new home, and they have a first conversation with their new next-door neighbor over the garden fence.

Good morning, Julius. Good morning, Maximus. Welcome to the neighborhood. And I hear you're religious. A follower of that Jesus figure.

Great. Religion is a good thing. Tell me more. Where is your temple, or holy place? Well, we don't have a temple. Jesus is our temple.

No temple. But where do your priests work and do their rituals? Well, we don't have priests to mediate the presence of God with us.

[14 : 43] Jesus is our priest. No priests. Well, where then do you offer your sacrifices to gain the favor of your God? Well, we don't need a sacrifice.

Jesus is our sacrifice. What kind of religion is this? And the answer is, it's no kind of religion at all. Now, if you'd visited a church in the first or second century, perhaps meeting in someone's home around the dinner table with Bibles open and praising God together, that would have been very obvious to you that this was very different from the religions you could see in the temples around the cities that you lived.

But when we look at the visible church around us today, around Glasgow and around the world, things have become more confused. Lots of church traditions have reintroduced those Old Testament patterns, calling the church leaders priests, having special places that you need to go to

or that in a church building some of us are not allowed to go to. Times and seasons, communion being refashioned not as an offering. So, communion being... We'll share communion later on today.

And the biblical picture of communion is that Jesus commands it as something that we receive to help us remember Jesus' death for us on the cross.

[16:15] But in lots of churches, it's become something that the priest offers. And by eating and drinking, we share in that offering of representation of a sacrifice to God as though Jesus' sacrifice alone is not enough.

And it's then not hard to think of ways that someone might judge you today in these kinds of ways with their church calendar as they judge you because you don't give up something for Lent or you eat meat on a Friday or something like that.

Now, with the church calendar, having times and seasons, seasons of fasting, seasons of feasting, I don't think there's anything wrong with a church calendar. I think it can really help Christians to build faith in Jesus into the warp and woof of the year.

The danger is when somebody makes that a requirement and they judge you because you don't join in in the same way as them. That's when it becomes unhelpful or dangerous.

Perhaps someone would suggest that the simple patterns of your church meetings or your spiritual life seem to them impoverished, lacking substance. And Paul protects us here by saying that religious activity gives you the shadows, but Christ is where the substance is.

[17:42] The danger for us is we can start to think it's the other way around. It's very popular today for Bible-believing Christians to be drawn into the idea of rediscovering the monastic traditions.

Books and leaders will tell us that there are forgotten sacred pathways to God. Coming to Him in Christ by His Word is one way for one group of people, but you can follow another sacred pathway. They bring into their spiritual lives the ten steps of St. John of the Cross and they want you to join in their program and climb the ladder to find the presence of God or follow the monastic rules of life to help you experience more of God.

And what is such good news about Colossians chapter 2 is it's saying you just don't need any of that because it's all in Christ.

You just have to stick with Him. Growing spiritually is not about climbing a ladder to get something you've not got yet. It's about deepening your grasp of what you already have in the gift that God's given you in Christ.

[18:58] But we find people who grew up in gospel churches and they move on. They move on to Eastern Orthodoxy or they move off to Rome, to Roman Catholicism because they think it's got more substance and evangelical church just felt to me like the shallow end.

Well, God says here is the depth. Here is everything in Christ. If you look at chapter 2 verse 3 as he talked about his ministry proclaiming Jesus, he says in chapter 2 verse 3 in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

So this is not shallowness. This is finding the depth of all the treasure of wisdom and knowledge.

The inexhaustible riches for our hearts and minds of knowing God are found in Christ.

Not in religious traditions and ceremonies. The second thing we mustn't get judged by then, not by visionary experiences disconnected from life in Christ.

Just read with me verse 18. He says, Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you.

[20:13] Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen. They are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. So the false teachers in Colossae are boasting about an ecstatic visionary experience that they've had.

Probably, reading between the lines, their experience that they're claiming is that they were brought into the heavenly temple. They went into the very presence of God where angels worshipped God and they could join in with the worship of angels in heaven.

And whatever visionary experience they've had, Paul says their reaction to it actually means it's done them more harm than good because it's pulled them away from Christ.

Verse 19. They have lost connection with the head from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

In other words, look at the picture there. Christians grow together when we are connected to Christ and He is our direction. He is our source of life.

[21 : 26] We are His body and we're bound together, ligaments and sinews like a body and we get our direction and our source of life from Christ, our head.

And when a Christian reacts to a visionary experience they've had by thinking, I'm special because of that, and people who've had that experience like me we're special.

One, they divide the body. It's like tearing an organ out of the body because they pull people away from the unity that we find under Christ.

And the second problem is that they stop growing themselves because they've disconnected themselves from the head, Christ, where it's as we listen to Him and only Him in the Scriptures that we find growth.

And we see examples of this today. People may well be granted by God in His goodness a visionary experience or a spiritual gift to encourage them in their faith.

[22 : 33] As and when that happens to any of us, and it will have happened to people here, I guess, praise God, receive it as a gift from Him. Paul himself had a visionary experience and he describes it in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 and as he describes it, he models for us a godly reaction, a godly response in humility to what the experience that God gave him, the vision.

But the person who has that is never to think they have become a higher level Christian. and it's so easy to fall for that. We read in 1 Corinthians about different spiritual gifts and one of them is a gift of tongues and there's different understandings of what the Apostle Paul meant by that and whether it still goes on today.

But for my money, I think, as I said when we looked at 1 Corinthians, that it's a gift I've experienced people using today and several times in my life I've experienced praying in tongues, praying to God and babbling in a language that I don't understand what I'm saying but it's been a deep encouragement to me in my faith at times of particular anxiety or significant moments in my Christian life.

But every Christian has the Holy Spirit. But for Pentecostal churches and a key marker of that massive movement, Pentecostalism, a key marker of being a Pentecostal Christian is they claim that after you've become a Christian when you were given new life by the Spirit, you still need to seek baptism by the Holy Spirit.

So rather than seeing those events as coming together, as I think the Scriptures call us to see, the Pentecostal says, it's great you became a Christian, Christian, now you need to seek baptism by the Holy Spirit and while you wait for that, you won't have the gift of tongues but once you get it, you'll be able to speak and pray in tongues.

[24 : 43] So you end up with a dividing line based on who has had an experience. If you haven't had it, you've got to seek more from God to get to level two.

And Colossians chapter two, again here, let's remember this is really good news because it reassures us when you meet someone, whatever experience they've had, whatever experience you feel you haven't had, you can say, but I have Christ.

I have fullness in Him. Fullness of God. Fullness of life. Others will say, you know, it's great that you like your Bible and you think highly of the Bible, we love the Bible, but you know, you're still in infancy as a Christian because you've not come to our prophetic center where we teach you how to open yourself fully to the full revelation of God.

It's at our conferences that you get a full encounter with God. It's there that you will learn the will of God for you. And we need to be able to say, I have Christ.

All the mysteries of God are revealed to me in Him. He is where I find God's plan. And whatever experiences God may have given to you, I am reassured that in Him I lack nothing.

[26 : 07] God has told me that in Colossians chapter 2. That's our second point. We're not to be judged by, first it was religious ceremonies, when in Christ we've got the substance, not the shadows.

second, by visionary experiences, when in Christ we have the full presence of God. And thirdly, don't be judged by man-made restrictions which lack the transforming power of Christ.

Let's pick things up again in verse 20. Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules?

Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. Now the Apostle Paul here uses that phrase, elemental spiritual forces, to describe worldly religion, pagan religion, religion that lacks the power of God.

He says it's man-made, if you look at verse 22. These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.

[27 : 18] Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

So you see his point there that these things don't even work. you can see the appeal of them. We are drawn to the idea that if we keep certain rules, it will make us more godly.

If we keep these rules and cut out good things in the world that the world would offer us and we pull ourselves away from those things, then we'll find that God approves of us more and we'll get more of God.

So we can be drawn to these ascetic rules and restrictions. actions. But God says they don't work. They don't actually change your heart, verse 23.

They lack value in restraining sensual indulgence. Now, how do we think about this here? I think it's important to say sometimes in the Christian life it's entirely right and appropriate and good to impose your own personal legalisms on yourself, disciplines that will help you in your fight against sin because they will help you avoid temptation altogether.

[28 : 48] A Christian struggling with addiction who chooses to change their walking route home to avoid the betting shop or the pub or the off license that might draw them in.

That could be a really wise personal discipline for a Christian. The Christian who decides I'm not going to watch TV when I'm on my own after 10 o'clock or a Christian who gets rid of their TV or gets rid of their smartphone or their computer because they're battling against watching pornography.

If these are someone's own personal choices to avoid temptation then praise God that God is at work in their life so that they mourn their sin and they want to be righteous and they are being wise in how they order their life.

The problem is when you do those things because someone else has pressured you into it and implied that is the Christian norm around here.

Either the Christian culture itself the church culture makes you think you have to keep those rules to be a grown up Christian or an individual makes you feel like that.

[30 : 02] And it's so easy for that to happen when the rules seem wise. someone gives up on social media and they find it liberates them.

They wake up in the morning and they find it easier just to open their Bible and pray because they're not checking Instagram. But then someone in their growth group says that they saw something on Facebook that they didn't like and they go are you still on social media are you? And suddenly the culture has changed hasn't it? What they've done with that wise step is made someone else feel judged and that they need to change or with what we watch it's one thing to say look I've decided I'm not going to watch any movies or TV anymore that's rated 15 or 18 because I've just realised it's not beneficial for me I just don't want that stuff in my head.

That is one thing but how easy it is then to think I'm righteous because I don't watch that stuff and then we hear a Christian talking about a movie or a TV series that's rated like that classified like that and we judge them and think ah once they've grown up a bit they'll see that you shouldn't watch that.

A Christian might start fasting once a week missing two meals in a day once a week because they find when they do that it expresses their hunger for God and it gives them the time to pray and really focus on God and their longing for Jesus' return.

[31 : 43] It looks to me from Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter 6 that he assumes that fasting would be a part of a Christian's life but we're not to feel bound by other people's rules about it their prescriptions what they found helpful doesn't become the norm for us.

Growing as a Christian as a disciple of Jesus is about what we already have in Christ and man-made rules and worldly restrictions are things that we've left behind now because we've died to those things and we have life in Jesus and crucially let's remember that point in verse 23 that Paul makes rules and restrictions that where you separate yourself off from things that tempt you they don't cure the heart problem inside if you want to sin you will still find a way to sin no matter how much you've distanced yourself from things so Paul turns next to what we're to do instead what will bring about the change in us that external rules never could and we're going to look at it more in

the next couple of weeks as we get into the second half of the letter but we're just going to look over into chapter 3 and finish with him saying set your heart on Christ have a look with me at chapter 3 verse 1 since then you have been raised with Christ set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of

God set your minds on things above not on earthly things for you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God when Christ who is your life appears then you also will appear with him in glory all through this section Paul has wanted us to grasp you have life from the moment you put your faith in Jesus you have spiritual life you are fully alive just see it back in chapter 2 verse 12 he said that you were buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in Christ God raised you as he raised Jesus from the dead verse 13 he said you were dead in your sins God made you alive with Christ verse 20 he says you died with Christ and now chapter 3 verse 1 since then you have been raised with Christ so knowing that we are alive fully alive with Jesus we have the full presence of God in our lives with him we are fully forgiven we experience with Jesus full victory over sin and death he says keep looking up to where

Jesus is and where you are with him chapter 3 verse 1 set your heart on him on things above verse 2 set your mind on things above where Jesus is keep looking up and keep looking ahead verse 4 to the day that Christ your life appears and you will appear with him in glory in other words he will transform you complete that transformation and reveal you glorious as he made you to be never wanting to sin again God assures us in his word it's so easy to get scammed to get tricked to get deceived to get misled God says in Christ you've got everything you need already it's a gift from him the path ahead is keep walking in him and we don't need the detour of human religion let's pray together gracious

God and loving heavenly father as we come together to your table now to receive bread and wine to remember Jesus sufficient sacrifice for us at the cross may you be at work to set our hearts on things above where Christ is to set our minds on things above where Christ is that by your spirit you would strengthen us to continue to live in Christ rooted and built up in him strengthened in the faith as we were taught and overflowing with thankfulness in Jesus name we pray Amen