

Studies in Colossians  
Today's Lesson 2:16-23

- I. Introduction, 1:1-14
  - A. Salutation, vv. 1-2
  - B. Prayer of Thanksgiving, vv. 3-8
  - C. Prayer of Petition, vv. 9-14[Excursus: The Preeminent Beauty of Christ, vv. 15-23]

- II. The Role of the Apostle 1:24-2:5
  - A. The Ministry of the Apostle, vv. 24-29
  - B. The Concern of the Apostle, 2:1-5

- III. The Warnings of the Apostle, 2:6-23

There are two clues as to the structure of this section composed of two paragraphs. Each begins with the word, "therefore," which should tell the reader that an inference or implication is being made by the apostle. Each paragraph contains a warning cast in the negative ("not" and "do not," vv. 7, 16).

- A. The way to honor God, vv. 6-7

- 1. The exhortation, v. 6

Faith is the way to God through Christ, not by doing nor avoidance in doing (people want to merit redemption or, at least, suppose that their Christian life is better than others because of their superior obedience). Faith, taking God at His word concerning the person and claims of Jesus, is the path to redemption and to sanctification.

- 2. The manner, v. 7

This verse is composed of four participial phrases. The first states an event in the past with continuing relevance. The remaining three are present tense indicating continuous action. Conversion or redemption is a one-time, completed foundation for the characteristic (we have been rooted deep and we are growing up). The results of growth are progressive maturity and stability as well as thankfulness and appreciation.

- B. The danger of rampant pagan rationalism, vv. 8-15

While the error that Paul seeks to address continues to be debated by the scholars, the apostle is not casting philosophy, as a discipline, into a negative light, just the misapplication of it (Paul frequently uses reasoning to make his points). Philosophy is a form of natural revelation; it emphasizes the function of reason in knowing. Unfortunately, the modern mind has elevated reason from a *method* of knowing to reason as the

*source and origin* of knowing (truth is the sum of what is observable and repeatable, the seen without regard to the unseen). When reason usurps Scripture, error ensues. As a source of religious truth, Tertullian was correct when he wrote in the third century, “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the academy with the church?”

1. The warning against pagan rationalism, v. 8

a. The declaration, v. 8a

“Philosophy” and “empty deception” are parallel descriptions of the cultural tendency to elevate the accomplishments of natural reason and denigrate Christian truth-claims (a single article governing two nouns connected by “and”).

b. The manner, v. 8b

“Traditions of men” and “elementary principles of the world” suggest the natural origin of rational ideas. It is how the world thinks! The first phrase describes the conclusions men come to (it is of human origin) while the second the sources they used (human ingenuity).

c. The contrast, v. 8c

The things originating from natural sources stand in contrast to what has been revealed supernaturally through Christ by the Spirit and delivered to us in written form.

2. The plea, vv. 9-15

Paul’s answer to the captivating peril of false, winsome teachers is to focus on the truth, the person of Christ and His redemption! To be preserved from error is to become a student of the truth; in knowing the beauty of truth you will be able to discern the ugliness of error.

a. That divine truth is in Christ, v. 9

The first reason we should be guided by Christ, not the mere wisdom of human intellect, is that Christ is one-of-a-kind. In Christ alone is the embodiment of divine wisdom. The present tense of the verb, “dwells,” explicitly indicates that Jesus was not a mere man endowed with wisdom for a time; He is forever God.

b. Our life is in Christ, vv. 10-12

1) The completeness, v. 10

The word “fullness” in v. 9 is repeated here. Just as God fully resides in Christ, we reside in Christ. Nothing is lacking in our salvation from the divine viewpoint. To sustain the point, Paul adds that Christ is supreme over all other authorities.

2) The cleansing, v. 11

The cutting of the flesh signified our separation from corruption. This has been accomplished by Christ, not Jewish ritualism. Through Christ, we have been spiritually circumcised (of the heart), redeemed, cleansed, separated from evil.

- 3) The new life, v. 12  
Paul is describing metaphorically our regeneration as baptism.
- c. Our redemption is in Christ, vv. 13-15
  - 1) Life through forgiveness, v. 13  
The plight of all mankind is a hopeless one because, though living, they are apart from the life of God and wayward (transgressions, “missing the mark”) that is caused by our twisted natures (“uncircumcision” is a metaphor of the presence of sin in us). God brought life because of Christ to us, meaning forgiveness, the cancellation of the debt of our sins.
  - 2) Life through payment, v. 14  
This verse explains how the forgiveness of God came to us. The “certificate of debt,” legal evidence of obligation in written form, of the charges against us have been erased or wiped away (the verb appeared first in the verse placing emphasis on it). “Nailed to the cross” is quite the metaphor.
  - 3) Life through “another’s” triumph, v. 15  
The irony of it all is that where one would expect defeat (the cross), there was victory (resurrection). “Rulers and authorities” may refer to political structures, satanic spiritual forces, or both. Christ’s death brought defeat to evil and triumph over it evidenced by the resurrection. William Williams hymn, *In Eden*, is apropos.

*Faith, see the place, see the tree  
Where heaven’s prince instead of me,  
Was nailed to bear my shame.  
Bruised was the dragon by the Son,  
Though two has wounds, there conquered one-  
And Jesus was His name,  
And Jesus was His name.*

C. The danger of rampant religious rigorism, vv. 16-23

Legalism is not the presence of rules and regulations requiring adherence; it is an attitude concerning obedience that is the issue. When people believe that unwarranted or unrequired rules makes one a better or superior Christian, that is legalism. Legalism is the belief that an action brings one into the favor of God, creating a special status in so doing; it is the belief that God’s favor can be earned through our obedience. It is putting something in the place of Christ who is everything!

The phrase, “let no one...” occurs in vv. 18, 20 alerting the reader to the apostle’s two additional warnings. Both warnings have to do with

corruption of Christian teaching in the churches. The two are interconnected.

1. The problem with legalism, vv. 16-17

a. Stated, v. 16

The stipulations that Paul lists have to do with the Mosaic Code suggesting that the early church grappled to understand the relationship of Judaism to Christianity. False teachers came among the Christian churches arguing that a true Christian was a follower of Moses.

b. Reasoned, v. 17

The Judaism of the first century was not biblical Judaism; it was a twisted, man-made perversion of it (Matt. 5). The Law of Moses functioned to point beyond itself to a profound reality; it served to prepare one for the coming of Christ. To read Moses correctly is to understand that he pointed to Christ (John 1:17, Heb. 9:10).

2. The problem with ascetic, hyper-spirituality, vv. 18-19

a. Stated, v. 18a

The second error that Paul counteracts is the notion that specific religious practices (practices not mandated by Scripture) can bring no one an elevated spiritual state.

b. Described, vv. 18b-19

Five phrases characterize the false teaching:

- 1) “delights in humility” or the spirituality of self-denial, moral rigorism, self-deprivation as a religious ideal.
- 2) “worship of angels” as divine mediators, higher spirits that can bring us into heaven.
- 3) visions
- 4) self-deception, false confidence, pride
- 5) separated from allegiance to Christ, the source of true spiritual growth

3. The Conclusion, vv. 20-23

a. Stated, vv. 20a

The “if” does not suggest that Paul’s audience is in danger of losing what they have gained; the “if” is a first-class condition and can be translated as a fact (since or “if you have... *and you have*”). “Having been buried with Him in baptism...” (v. 12) indicates that a death has occurred.

*Though some writers see the “if” as expressive of a contingency, that a believer can believe and later not believe, losing what they had gained as a result, the context does not support this conclusion. 1) Paul is writing to a corporate unity in each locale, the church, not*

*individuals (“you” is in the plural). 2) The topic is not the loss of salvation; it is the damage that comes through retrogression to ideas we know to be wrong. 3) “If” introduces a dependent clause with the verb in present indicative tense that it is stating a fact (if the verb were in the past tense, it indicates something that is not true [second class condition]; if the verb is in the subjunctive mood, it is probable [third class condition]). Hence, what we have here is a rhetorical “if;” it is a polite command. Something like, “If you play with fire, you will get burned;” it is a warning couched in a mild command.*

“From elemental principles [teachings]” seems to be the false thoughts of human imaginings. It is natural religion being rooted in the thought that we must do something to earn God’s favor. It is a failure to understand that true religion is the story of God bringing His favor to us through Christ’s work for us, His peace through the violence of His cross.

b. Reasoned, vv. 20b-23

1) The incongruity of it, vv. 20b-21

To order our lives by what we have left behind is destructive and illogical. If we have seen the foolishness of seeking to please God apart from what Christ has earned for us, it is crazy to fall back into what we know is wrong. One translation captures the language rather clearly (NLT), “You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world...” In this construction, “if” indicates that something is assumed true for the sake of an argument (If this is true, then that is true).

2) The temporality of it, v. 22

Any attempt to earn the favor of the infinite God while neglecting the great truth that our salvation is a purchased gift from God through the cross of our atoning Savior, will come to nothing. It is not eternal truth; it is a deceptive delusion.

3) The emptiness of it, v. 23

Salvation through what we can do does not merit God’s love, even if abstinence and self-denial are theoretically valuable, and is fruitless regarding our pleasing God. Christ has rendered us pleasing. Rigorism or legalism is not the way to “walk in Him (v. 6).”

## Thoughts

1. Christianity is unique among the numerous belief systems. Not so because it claims truths undiscoverable by reason, but in the assertion that the life it

promises comes to us as a purchased gift that satisfies all the demands for our acceptance (perfection). Legalism, even Christian legalism, says the opposite. It says we must do something; we must be something, we must know something that others cannot grasp. Legalism says I can earn God's favor; the Bible says that Christ has purchased God's favor. Legalism says I can add to what Christ has done, improving my status, Christianity says that Christ has done all we need, that we are complete in Christ no matter how broken we might be in life. Are you trying to earn God's favor? Do you realize that Christ is sufficient for all your deficiencies? Have you learned to rest in Christ's accomplishments? Do you know that seeking to add to His accomplishments is a declaration of His insufficiency?

2. The gospel message, the good news, is that salvation cannot be earned, increased, or decreased. It is not a quality that can be measured; it is a state of being. The German King Maxmillian I left instructions upon his death in 1519 that his body was to be emaciated, limbs broken, and teeth crushed so that when he appeared before God, He would have pity for him and allow him into heaven. Pity does not merit the life of God; death is required. Not our death, but the death of God's gift. Tragically, Maxmillian never realized that we cannot move God to mercy without infinite merit, which only His Son possesses. Have you given up trying to earn life? Do you realize that someone else has done that for you? Have you accepted God's divine gift of His Son for you?