

Message #9
Colossians

Kurt Hedlund
7/4/2021

HOW RELIGION CAN MESS UP YOUR LIFE COLOSSIANS 2:16-23

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Uncle Sam is 245 years old today. History really is “His story.” The providential hand of God is evident in our nation’s history. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were actively involved in the birth of our country. Jefferson, of course, made the greatest contribution to the Declaration of Independence. But John Adams also contributed to the final draft. On July 3 Adams sent a letter to his wife in which he expressed his hope that this founding of the country would be remembered in future history by singing and noisemaking and other celebrations.

Adams and Jefferson became especially close friends when they spent time in England several years later. They toured the English countryside together in 1786. When they got involved in government upon their return to the new nation, they became political opponents. Later in life their friendship was renewed.

(PROJECTOR ON--- THOMAS JEFFERSON) Thomas Jefferson died in 1826. He became unconscious on July 2. He died at 1:00 in the afternoon on July 4 at Monticello as the bells in nearby Charlottesville, Virginia, rang in the distance, celebrating the anniversary of Independence Day.

Meanwhile, in Quincy, Massachusetts, on that same day, John Adams (JOHN ADAMS) lay very sick in bed. A couple of hours later he whispered loud enough for several in the room to hear, “**Thomas Jefferson survives.**” In reality Jefferson had been dead for several hours. At 6:20 that evening the heart of John Adams stopped. According to his friend John Marston who was present, there was a final clap of thunder which shook the house, the rain stopped, and the sun broke through “**bursting forth... with uncommon splendor at the moment of his exit... with a sky beautiful and grand beyond description.**” (*John Adams*, David McCullough, p. 647) All of this happened on the fiftieth anniversary of Independence Day. (PROJECTOR OFF) Remarkable!

Independence Day, of course, is a story about freedom from oppression. We Christians are all about freedom. We follow One who came to set people free from the greatest oppression, the oppression of sin and its consequences. The great church leader Augustine said that true freedom is not choice or lack of constraint, but being what we are created to be.

The comparison which you have heard me make is that the best possible life comes from living according to the Divine owner’s manual which we have been given. Paradoxically this freedom involves a certain kind of bondage. Martin Luther wrote in his little book *On Christian Liberty* in 1520, “**A Christian man is the most free lord of all,**

and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.”

The passage before us this morning talks about this freedom and responsibility that we Christians have. It also describes how manmade religion has a tendency to mess us up. The Apostle Paul wrote the little New Testament book of Colossians when he was a prisoner in Rome. He got a report from a small church in a small town in western Asia Minor that there were false teachers who were threatening to lead the Christians astray. So in this letter he provides a summary of the basics of the Christian faith. He stresses the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. In the passage before us he describes how religion can mess up a Christian's life and threaten the freedom which we have been given by God. Let's see what he says.

I.

First, in vv. 16 & 17 of Colossians #2 (p. 984), Paul speaks about THE DANGER OF LEGALISM. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE DANGER OF LEGALISM) He writes, **“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”**

Whenever we see a “therefore” at the beginning of a passage, it is good to check the previous context to find out what it is there for. In the preceding verses we find that the author stressed the deity of Christ and argued that His death on the cross paid the penalty for the sins of the world and disarmed the rulers and authorities, which probably is a reference to evil forces of the spirit world. Back in v. 8 Paul warned his readers not to allow their religious freedom to be taken away by wrong beliefs. Now Paul says that the Colossian Christians shouldn't let anybody judge their behavior in several areas.

We don't know the exact nature of the false teaching that Paul was confronting at Colossae. We know a lot about the heresy of Gnosticism that was there a hundred years later. It may be that many of the elements of this philosophy were already present at this time. The most information that we have about the heresy at Colossae comes from what is implied in these verses in our passage today.

Apparently there was some Jewish influence in these wrong beliefs. For the Jews were the only ones who practiced observance of the Sabbath. They also had observances that involved new moons and feasts. The Hebrew Bible had restrictions involving food, too. It really didn't place any restriction on what Jews drank, however. So there may have been other influences at work in this false teaching.

The Old Testament did tell the people of God that there were certain foods that they should not eat. Observant Jews still observe those restrictions today. The coming of Jesus and His death and resurrection changed those requirements. He created a new covenant with the people of God.

In Mark #7 (PROJECTOR ON--- MARK 7:19) Jesus declared all foods to be clean. After the Ascension, Peter in Act #10 (ACTS 10:15) had a vision in which God confirmed to him that all foods were now clean. In 1 Timothy #4 v. 3 (1 TIMOTHY 4:3) the former Jewish rabbi Paul declared, "... **God created [all foods] to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.**" It should be noted, however, that in the original Greek in the small print--- and a lot of translators miss this-- - mushrooms and cauliflower are supposed to be excluded.

Christians throughout much of church history have continued to promote observance of the Sabbath. They have pointed to (EXODUS 20:8) the Fourth Commandment which says, "**Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.**" One problem with that belief is that the Sabbath that this commandment was talking about was Saturday, not Sunday.

The main problem with thinking that Christians should observe the Sabbath is that its observance was intended by God as a sign of the adherence of the Jewish people to the covenant (EXODUS 31:17) that God had made with His people through Moses at Mt. Sinai. "**It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel.**" Certain physical blessings were promised to the Hebrew people when they followed the Sabbath law.

The basis of our relationship with God today is not the Mosaic Covenant, but the New Covenant instituted by Christ. Thus it is that the Fourth Commandment is the only one of the Ten Commandments that is not repeated in the New Testament and applied to Christians. (ROMANS 14:4) In Romans #14 vv. 4 & 5 Paul says, "**Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.** (ROMANS 14:5) **One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.**" Here in our passage the apostle also makes it clear that it is wrong for someone to judge a Christian for how he does or doesn't observe the Sabbath. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It is OK for a Christian to have convictions about what his or her diet should be. It is OK, and probably wise, for every Christian to have some kind of day of rest each week. But the problem comes when we try to impose our convictions about these matters on others. The problem comes when we are critical of somebody who mows the lawn or goes to a football game on Sunday. Paul tells us not to let somebody act as our judge in this regard.

Paul says that such Old Testament restrictions are a shadow of what is to come. The Old Testament laws had a purpose. One important part of that purpose was to point people to the coming Messiah. The feasts of Israel picture the coming of the Messiah. The Passover feast, for example, was designed to show that a lamb from God was needed to atone for the sins of the people. First Corinthians #5 v. 7 (PROJECTOR ON-- - 1 CORINTHIANS 5:7) says, "**For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.**" Jesus in His death was the fulfillment of the shadow of the Passover.

Hebrews #10 v. 1 (HEBREWS 10:1) says, **“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.”** Christ was the final sacrifice. He was, and is, the substance and form behind the shadow.

The false teachers at Colossae were promoting legalism. (PROJECTOR OFF) Some Christians and some churches today are guilty of doing the same thing. They focus on the negatives in the Bible. Then, like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus, they add their own rules about things like dress and behavior and diet and entertainment choices. They equate spirituality with living by these standards. That is just not how spirituality works.

There are absolute standards of right and wrong in the Bible. But Christianity is not primarily a code of conduct. It is primarily a personal relationship with Christ. Spiritual maturity comes not from following a list of “Thou shall nots.” It comes from cultivating a relationship with Jesus. If you really love someone, you don’t focus on avoiding the things that make that person unhappy. You focus on the positives. You focus on pleasing and serving and getting to know the person whom you love. So it should be in our relationship with Jesus.

II.

The second danger that Paul acknowledges is THE DANGER OF MYSTICISM. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE DANGER OF MYSTICISM) He describes that in vv. 18 & 19. Mysticism is described and defined in various ways. This is one definition that I have encountered. (MYSTICISM DEFINITION) Mysticism is **“an individual’s struggle to attain a clear vision of reality, and the transformation of consciousness that accompanies such vision.”** In this broad sense all of us Christians are mystics. We follow a Savior that we can’t see. We worship a God who is invisible and has no physical form. We claim that we are transformed by our new perception of reality. (ROMANS 8:16) In Romans #8 v. 16 the Apostle Paul says, **“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”** That is a subjective, mystical assurance that is intended to be the experience of every Christian.

Paul is warning the Colossian Christians in our passage about a different kind of mysticism. (PROJECTOR OFF) In v. 18 he writes, **“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind...”**

The loss involved in this disqualification is probably the blessings and rewards that come from following Christ. The term translated here as “asceticism” is literally “humility.” The Bible generally recognizes humility as a virtue. But this context suggests that Paul has a negative sense in mind. Some scholars argue that the word “humility” was a term used in many religions of the day in reference to practices of self-denial. Some Jewish writers said that humility and self-denial would lead to visions of the

heavenly realm. Given what Paul mentions next, that would make sense. For the apostle goes on to speak about the worship of angels.

The Gnostics of a hundred years later believed that there was a whole hierarchy of angelic beings that stood between God and the earth and mankind. They promoted worship of these heavenly beings. It could be that the false teachers in Paul's day had similar beliefs and were promoting the worship of the same spiritual beings. The Bible makes clear in a number of places that only God is to be worshipped. Several later church leaders from Asia Minor mention problems with people in their churches worshipping angels.

Paul also implies that these false teachers were taking their stands on visions. Probably they claimed to have visions of these angelic beings. Probably they were claiming that they had received instructions from these angels that had implications for the Christians. But the apostle says that these supposed visions only inflated them. It made them proud, when there was no reason for them to be proud. Either their visions were the figments of their own imagination, or they were visions from evil angels.

In the Bible we do find godly people who have genuine visions of God or heaven or angels. There are a couple of things that should be noted about their experiences. First, the general reaction of these people to their experiences is fear and humility. Isaiah declared when he had his vision, "**Woe is me, for I am undone!**" Paul indicates that the Colossian false teachers were filled with pride about their spiritual experiences.

The second thing to notice is that most of the Biblical figures who experienced visions had them rarely. As far as we know, the patriarch Joseph only had one dream that would qualify as a vision from God. Abraham had only a handful of divine encounters in his long life. Daniel had five visions in his life that we know about. Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, had just one vision. Mary, the mother of Jesus, had just one that we know about. Joseph had two. The only vision of angels that the disciples had was that of Peter and James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. The great Apostle Paul had perhaps five visions in his long ministry.

Some people today, Christians and non-Christians, talk about visions as an almost daily experience. A number of years ago a pastor friend of mine brought along a blind Christian acquaintance, whom he had recently met, to a lunch meeting. This fellow proceeded to dominate the conversation and to recount supposed visions of Jesus that he had experienced just that day. From my perspective it was ridiculous, and clearly this guy was puffed up by his supposed encounters with God and by his real "in" with Jesus.

Today there is a certain emphasis on spirituality in some parts of the secular world. A lot of it is related to the New Age movement. Even Oprah talks about spirituality. Sometimes the people involved speak of vision-like experiences. Some involved in more openly occult practices speak of spirit guides and heavenly visions. Most genuine Christians recognize these things as fraudulent or not of God.

But there is also a danger from unhealthy mysticism in the church of Christ. This is especially evident in the more extreme parts of the charismatic and Pentecostal movements. People take their stands on visions that they have supposedly had from God. In our recent national elections there were a number of supposed Christian prophets who claimed that God had told them that Donald Trump would win the election and would serve a second term beginning this year. Clearly they were false prophets.

(PROJECTOR ON--- DAVID WILKERSON) David Wilkerson had a remarkable ministry with the gangs of New York City. He established Teen Challenge, a drug rehab ministry. Later he became the pastor of Times Square Church. In 1973 he wrote in book from a vision (THE VISION) that he supposedly received from God about things that were going to happen in the future. Some of this vision involved near term predictions. Other predictions concerned the more distant future. Looking at his predictions today I conclude that this was not a divine vision. He was not accurate. For example, one of his near term predictions was that there would be a huge earthquake in a few years in the United States that would be many times more severe than the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and that it would happen in a part of the country not accustomed to earthquakes. That just did not happen. This was false prophecy.

Some of you remember 40 or 50 years ago when Oral Roberts (ORAL ROBERTS) reported that he had a vision of a 900 foot Jesus who told him to build a big Christian hospital in Tulsa. (CITY OF FAITH MED. CTR.) He did, and he used millions of dollars sent in from Christians around the country to do it. But Tulsa already had plenty of hospital beds. The hospital went bankrupt in 1989. What a waste! (PROJECTOR OFF)

I believe that it is possible for Christians to have supernatural encounters with God today. But it may be less often than Christians claim, and we need to be cautious about putting too much stock in such spiritual experiences. They could be from our own imagination or from some other source.

In v. 19 Paul identifies the problem that can come from placing too much emphasis on mystical experiences. He writes, **"...and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God."** The false teachers at Colossae were getting into angels and visions and mystical experiences. Their focus was not on Christ. Likewise we need to be careful not to get drawn in by Christians or non-Christians who place an undue emphasis on mysticism or spiritual experiences or visions or angels. We need to keep our focus on Christ and His written Word.

III.

Finally, in vv. 20-23 we are exposed to THE DANGER OF ASCETICISM.

(PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE DANGER OF ASCETICISM) In v. 20 Paul says, **"If--- and it could be legitimately translated as "since," because the original Greek grammar does not imply doubt--- since with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations..."**

We have learned in earlier messages that the term “elementary spirits of the world” was typically used in the first century to describe the fundamental elements of earth, air, water, and fire. Some Gentiles treated these things as gods, or they associated spiritual beings with them. The false teachers at Colossae were somehow buying into these ideas. The Christians are no longer bound to these forces. So they shouldn’t submit to decrees that have origins with evil spiritual forces. They aren’t from God.

According to v. 21 the false teachings include the admonitions: **“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!”** Probably these restrictions have to do with food and drink. Perhaps he is quoting lines that the false teachers use.

In v. 22 he continues, **“...(referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?”** One problem is that these restrictions come from men and not from God. Another problem is that the restrictions have to do with things that perish, that are used up. They have little eternal significance in themselves. Probably he is talking about food, which is gone once you eat it. God has intended these things to be enjoyed, in moderation of course.

In v. 23 the apostle describes a couple of more problems with these restrictions. He writes, **“These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”**

We tend to be impressed with religious people who go on long fasts, who give up pleasurable activities, who go off into the wilderness to meditate. Certainly this is religious activity. But religion can mess up one’s Christian life. Paul calls the asceticism promoted at Colossae “self-made religion.” It has an origin in man, not in God.

The heretics in Colossae seemed to promote the later Gnostic belief that matter is evil and spirit is good. For this reason it was seen as good to deny the body its natural desires. The way to free the good spirit in man from his evil body was to deny the wants and needs of the body. Some eastern religions promote that kind of thinking today.

Unfortunately that kind of thinking has crept into Christianity from time to time down through the centuries. John Wesley (JOHN WESLEY) once bought into it. The son of a pastor he went to college at Oxford. He became head of a Christian group known as the Holy Club. John Wesley set the standard by attending church regularly, reading the Bible and praying daily, and visiting prisoners, sick people, and the poor. Two days a week he fasted. Often he slept at night on the floor. But years later he spoke of this period of his life and confessed that he feared death, did not really know God, did not understand the Christian gospel, and had no saving relationship with Jesus.

(PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul characterizes such a life of extreme self-denial as being “of no value.” It is worthless. It reflects a wrong view of the physical body and of Christianity. Our physical

bodies are not evil. They are the temples of the Holy Spirit. They are to be treated with respect and care.

The grammar of the last part of v. 23 is very difficult. Scholars are uncertain about exactly what Paul was trying to say here. I am inclined to think that our ESV translation is close to the truth in saying that these practices “**are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.**” There is a certain appeal to our sin nature in such asceticism. Self-denial can make us feel proud. It can make us feel religious. It can make us feel deserving of God’s goodness. That is wrong. The basis of a right relationship with God is faith in Christ through His grace, not in our good works.

Some great people of God in the Bible and in church history have lived simply. There is value in that. Jesus in His earthly life had little by the way of material possessions. But there is a danger from asceticism when we go to the point of not taking care of our physical body and our legitimate physical needs. Jesus was also criticized for going to banquets and parties and apparently having a good time.

The false teachers at Colossae were religious people, but Paul was critical of them. For their religion was threatening to mess up the lives of the Christians. We face the same danger today. There are religious people around us who would seek to get us caught up in legalism and mysticism and asceticism. We Christians should obey God and His laws. But we should not buy into legalism. We shouldn’t get caught up into following man-made rules as a way of earning God’s approval.

We also need to avoid unhealthy mysticism. It is good to pray and meditate and seek the reality of the God who is there. But we should not be caught up in a pursuit of visions and mystical impressions and spiritual experiences. We are to live by faith in the God who has revealed Himself to us in His Word.

We Christians should also be disciplined in our behavior. There is a Biblical basis for self-denial and fasting. But it should not be to the point of endangering our health and well-being. It should not be to the point of being unable to enjoy the good things that God has given us to enjoy. It should not be to the point of thinking that we can earn God’s approval or manipulate Him by our self-denial.

There was another fellow who came from a very religious background. At a fairly early age he memorized most of the Bible. He went to seminary and studied the Bible in the original languages. He became very self-disciplined, perhaps to the point of asceticism. For he got into the habit of fasting twice a week. He was also very conscious of rules. He became a fanatic about what he should and should not eat. He was very strict about how religious holidays should be observed. He was also judgmental toward those who didn’t follow his own code of behavior.

Then one day he had a mystical experience. It was a good mystical experience. For on the way to Damascus he encountered the risen Christ. Saul the Pharisee became Paul the Apostle of Christ to the Gentiles. He learned the key to the Christian life.

(PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 5:1) He later wrote, **“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (ROMANS 5:2) Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God..”**

Obey God’s law, but don’t become legalistic. Meditate upon the triune Godhead, but don’t become overly mystical. Exercise self-discipline, but don’t fall into unhealthy asceticism. Live by faith in the grace that the Lord Jesus Christ has extended to us.

PRAYER

LORD’S SUPPER

If history really is His story, then it is good for us to observe national holidays and to remember key events in our nation’s past. Certainly this is true for us Christians. Jesus told us to remember His death. As I pointed out in the message Paul called Jesus our Passover. The Jewish feast of the Passover was the occasion of Jesus’ death. Paul also pointed out in our passage that the Jewish feasts were but a shadow of things to come.

Now we can look back and see those shadows in the Passover observance. The Passover was established to remind the Jews of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. The Lord’s Supper is designed to remind us of our deliverance from slavery to sin. According to Exodus #12 the central feature of the Passover was the sacrifice of a lamb. Jesus was called the lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world.

The lamb which was sacrificed needed to be an unblemished male. Jesus was a man who did not sin. The lamb was to be set aside and tested before he was sacrificed. Likewise Jesus was tested before He was crucified. The lamb was to be killed at twilight. Jesus died at twilight. In order for the sacrifice of the lamb to be effective in protection against the plague of death, the blood had to be applied to the doorpost of the home. Likewise the sacrifice of Jesus is effective for us only when His blood is applied to our lives, when we truly put our trust in Him.

Silent prayer. Remember Jesus’ death.

Invite you to come up and get the elements.