

ROMANCING THE SAINTS AT COLOSSAE

Studies in the Book of Colossians

*“If Ephesians can be labeled the epistle portraying the ‘church of Christ,’
then Colossians must surely be labeled ‘the Christ of the church’”
unknown*

Text

Colossians 2:16-23

Topic

You are warned about the doctrines of men that lead you away from the Lord and into the darkness of legalism, mysticism, and asceticism

Title

“Beyond the Shadow of a Doctrine”

Introduction

With the possible exception of Peter Pan’s, a “shadow” is something that cannot exist by itself. It’s only reality is in what produces it.

In Colossae the believers were being troubled by an odd combination of false teachings. They were being told that these doctrines were the next step along the path of Christian maturity.

The apostle Paul saw things differently and correctly. The believers had come out of the shadows and into the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The kinds of things that were now being pushed upon them would hinder, not further, their walk with the Lord.

False teachers are always, in every generation, beckoning believers to come into the shadows to discover some new ‘old’ truth that will supposedly enhance walking with the Lord. There is a certain mystique, a certain attraction, to the shadows. But there in the dark we lose sight of the reality of the light and life of the Lord.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Will Stumble If You Stray Into The Shadows Of The Doctrines Of Men, and #2 You Will Stride If You Stay Out Of The Shadows Of The Doctrines Of Men.

#1 You Will Stumble If You Stray Into
The Shadows Of The Doctrines Of Men
(v16-19)

You may have heard of contemplative prayer. It has been growing in popularity among Christians since at least the mid-nineties. Contemplative prayer, also known as 'centering prayer,' is a meditative practice where the practitioner focuses on a word and repeats that word over and over for the duration of the exercise. According to one of its proponents, this is how it is done:

Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes (Thomas Keating).

Contemplative prayer is a mystical technique borrowed from Eastern religions and New Age cults.

So is *Lectio Divina*. It is derived from a Latin word that means *holy reading*. It is an ancient method of slowly reading the scriptures in a repetitive fashion in order to encounter the presence of God. This practice has been kept alive in the tradition of Benedictine monks.

More-and-more churches and Christian campuses are embracing these and other such techniques. They are the very kind of things Paul would call "shadows" at best.

So we've come to that section of this letter in which the great apostle names names. It's a list of the false and misleading practices that the Colossians and every Christian in every generation must beware of.

Colossians 2:16 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,

The first century church was initially comprised of Jews who were born-again. The Jewish believers continued to do things like circumcise their sons and keep the annual feasts. Early on, however, they recognized that these were cultural things no longer required for salvation. These were things that Gentiles who became born-again need not practice.

Enter the Judaizers. These were Jews who taught that everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, must, in fact, continue to keep the Old Testament Law with its rules, rites, rituals, diets, dress, and days. They were prone to “judge” the Colossians. It’s a word that means constant criticism for their not keeping the Law and its ceremonies.

Paul mentioned five specific areas that were being promoted by these Judaizers:

1. “Food” refers to the particular prohibitions of the Old Testament dietary laws.
2. “Drink” probably means they were wanting everyone to avoid alcohol the way a priest must under the Law.
3. “Festival” is the requirement that all males make a pilgrimage to the Temple at Jerusalem during the major feasts.
4. “New moon” means they wanted everyone to observe the Jewish ceremonial calendar generally.
5. “Sabbath days” would include all the scriptural and extra-scriptural teaching about resting from sundown Friday through sundown Saturday.

Simply put, to be a real Christian these guys taught you must convert to becoming a Jew and keep the Law.

Nope!

Colossians 2:17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

The purpose of all these things was to prepare you for the coming of Jesus Christ. They all prefigured and typified Him. He is the “substance” that

they all pointed towards. Now that He has come we are out of the shadows and in the light.

It would be like talking to someone's shadow instead of talking to them. The next time someone, for example, tries to get you to 'keep' the sabbath, remember that they are trying to shroud you in a shadow. You run the risk of missing the substance. Simply put, you do not get more 'spiritual' but, in fact, are taking a huge step backward. Actually, you are stumbling backward. As Paul put it,

Colossians 2:18 Let no one cheat you of your reward...

Because of the particular root verb used, this phrasing can have one of two possible meanings:

1. It can mean that at the reward seat of Jesus Christ in Heaven those who are stumbled in the shadows will suffer a loss of reward.
2. It can also be an exhortation to not let the judgement of these false teachers force you into adopting their practices.

I think it's best to take it both ways. Don't give in to their judgements and thereby lose your future reward.

Judaizers were just one of the problems in Colossae.

Colossians 2:18 ...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,

Four more things that were going on in Colossae:

1. "False humility" is when you want others to see and say how humble you are. It is all outward, all for show. This happens when you let people know how early you rise and how much time you spend in prayer and how often you fast. Things like that.
2. "Worship of angels" seems to refer to the thinking that you cannot approach God directly but must go through a mediator, like an "angel," who is close to God. Today this would apply to praying to Mary or to deceased saints.

3. "Intruding into those things... not seen" is the claim to having special visions or revelations from God. While we believe the Bible teaches there is the gift of prophecy and that we can still have dreams and visions, they must always be measured by what is already written in the Bible.
4. "Vainly puffed up by [your] fleshly mind" relates to those who are proud of their intellect. I would apply it to anyone who thinks that they've got God all figured-out because of their particular system of theology.

All these practices promote self rather than the Savior, so Paul reminded them that Jesus was preeminent:

Colossians 2:19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

False teachers always promote their doctrines as things that will mature you and take you deeper into the Christian life. Paul said they do just the opposite. Following them you "don't [hold] fast" to Jesus. He compared it to a human body. In a normal, healthy, growing body the head directs everything. Disconnect the head and the body will deteriorate.

The same must be true in the spiritual realm. We must remain vitally, personally, intimately connected to Jesus Christ as our "Head." All these practices thus far listed, and those to come, put distance between you and the Lord while promoting a deeper, fuller experience. They disconnect you rather than nourish you.

The simple joy of a relationship with Jesus needs to be guarded. There is something about religion and mysticism that is attractive to our unredeemed flesh. It always seems more spiritual to practice something like contemplative prayer than to simply talk to the Lord as we would talk to a friend. It's never more spiritual. It is a return to shadows that will cheat us now and later.

#2 You Will Stride If You Stay Out Of
The Shadows Of The Doctrines Of Men
(v20-23)

There were still more false teachers at Colossae. It's always that way. Though something might be more popular at any given moment, these false doctrines are always with us in some form or another. As Paul described more things to beware of he also put some strength in our stride, beginning with the amazing statement of verse twenty.

Colossians 2:20 Therefore, if you died with Christ...

"If" means *since*. Paul was stating a fact. You "died with Christ." When you become a Christian, the moment you are born-again God sees you as if what happened to Jesus happened to you.

There are a lot of advantages to being dead. You wouldn't have to be worried about paying your taxes if you were dead. Any pending litigation against you would cease. You'd have no mortgage to pay. You wouldn't care about what has happened to your retirement.

OK, you're not physically dead so those things still apply. But you are spiritually dead and resurrected. Therefore you can live in the material world from a spiritual perspective. And that is what Paul next described.

Colossians 2:20 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 -
Colossians 2:21 "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,"

What Paul destroys in these verses scholars call *asceticism*. Think monastery. Asceticism involves rigorous self-denial on the physical level in order to achieve a spiritual result. Things like not speaking for a period of time; or sleeping on a hard bed without a mattress. Or worse: actually harming yourself by whippings and such.

Bottom line: Those kind of material things cannot affect you spiritually. Besides, you are already "dead" and don't need to do any of them!

Paul listed three specific ascetic practices:

1. "Do not touch" is technical language for practicing sexual abstinence if married or remaining celibate and single. While there is a gift of celibacy, and you can remain pure until married, abstaining from sexual

pleasure is not God's will for mankind and it cannot make you more spiritual.

2. "Do not taste" refers to adopting a particularly restricted diet that you believe is more biblical and that will therefore make you more spiritual. Of course we should watch what we eat for health reasons. But beyond eating in moderation and using common sense, we can eat and enjoy anything we want.
3. "Do not handle" means even coming into contact with so-called 'forbidden' things must be eliminated. Hence some people who want to be more 'spiritual' drop-out of regular society to live monastically. It was never God's design for us to drop-out. We are to be in the world affecting it for the Lord.

Paul's conclusion regarding ascetic practices is in verse twenty-two:

Colossians 2:22 which all concern things which perish with the using - according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

"Perish with the using" is a good description of physical things like food and drink. Sin occurs when we abuse things. Spirituality cannot be achieved by their non-use. Truth is, those who choose asceticism as a lifestyle permit the physical world to overshadow the spiritual realm. Everything is about outward, material avoidance and abstinence. It doesn't affect desire for those things. It can, in fact, enhance desire and lead to horrible abuses.

Paul called things like this "the commandments and doctrines of men":

- "Doctrines" refers to what they believed.
- "Commandments" refers to the specific rules and regs they established.

The key thought here is that these are additions to God's Word made by "men" who have a wrong perspective. They are concentrating on the physical in hopes of touching the spiritual. They are not things taught by Jesus or the writers of the Bible under the Holy Spirit's inspiration.

The whole topic of Christian discipline would fall into this category. Let me just say this. Paul often compared the Christian to an athlete. Now the athlete in his or her purest form competes for the joy of the sport itself.

Thus you train and strain not because you must but voluntarily. Nobody is forcing you; the drive is internal.

The same should be true of us as Christians. If I discipline myself it is *not* to become more spiritual but because I already am 'spiritual' and enjoy my relationship with the Lord. I want nothing in my life that will hinder that joy.

Colossians 2:23 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.

This might be a summary of this section:

- "Self-imposed religion" sounds like what the Judaizers were promoting.
- "False humility" marked and marks mysticism.
- "Neglect of the body" sounds like asceticism.

None of these things have any "value against the indulgence of the flesh." The "flesh" is your unredeemed human body with its propensity to sin by gratifying itself. You can't fight the "flesh" with your flesh! Abstaining from certain foods doesn't kill the desire for them. It might enhance desire.

The "flesh" was overcome once-for-all at the Cross. Jesus does more than restrain the desires of the "flesh." He gives you new desires, spiritual desires, to replace them.

As one writer put it, "You don't need laws on the outside because you have life on the inside."

These three things - legalism, mysticism, and asceticism - pretty much sum-up what troubles Christians in every generation. Most times false teachings are an odd combination of all three. They sound spiritual. They are promoted by people who seem more spiritual than you.

But if they smack of any of those things they are shadows that will stumble you. Don't lose your stride by turning aside and embracing a shadow when you already have the substance in Jesus Christ.