

## **“Christ Is All and In All”**

### **Paul’s Exhortations to Hold Fast to Christ #4**

#### **“Why do you submit yourself to decrees?”**

**Intro:** Paul’s purpose in Colossians 2 is to warn the church concerning the dangers of a false religion that threatened their relationship with Christ. Each of Paul’s exhortations in Colossians two can give us insight into how to avoid the influences of false religion.

*The first exhortation “walk in Him” teaches us that the best defense against false teaching is active obedience to the Lord’s teaching.*

*The second exhortation “let no one take you captive” teaches us that Satan presents his false teaching under the guise of “philosophy” or love of wisdom and truth.*

*The third exhortation “let no man judge you” teaches us that false teachers may take legitimate commands of God out of context and bind them improperly upon others.*

*The fourth exhortation “let no one keep defrauding you of your prize” teaches us that false teachers can be identified by two key features: 1) they are motivated by pride while pretending to be humble; 2) they substitute their personal “revelations” for the authoritative word of Christ.*

**The key thought in each exhortation is that false religion takes us away from Jesus Christ. Therefore Paul summarizes his argument in this section by reminding the Colossians of what their experience with Christ in baptism means to them. Notice these two statements:**

*If you have died with Christ.... (2:20-23).*

*If you have been raised up with Christ...(3:1-4)*

**Let’s focus our attention tonight on the first part; next week on the second part:**

*If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. (Colossians 2:20-23)*

***The false religion affecting the Colossians appealed to them to practice an ascetic lifestyle.***

*Asceticism is the religious doctrine that one can reach a higher spiritual state by rigorous self-discipline and self-denial.*

*Apparently the false teachers to which the Colossians had been exposed gave a series of rules and regulations concerning their use of physical things. Paul does not tell us what the things were, but simply alludes to the decrees themselves that stressed an ascetic way of life.*

*Do not handle!*  
*Do not taste!*  
*Do not touch!*

***The features of this ascetic lifestyle***

*It was of human origin (“self-made religion, according to the commandments and teachings of men”)*

*It was designed to promote “self-abasement” (by denying oneself of legitimate pleasures it would be presumed one would enhance one’s personal humility)*

*It dealt harshly or severely with the body (since bodily need is often the root of sinful desires, it was thought that treating the body harshly would cultivate a discipline against sensual desires)*

***Paul acknowledged two things about this ascetic way of life***

*It had the appearance of wisdom.*

Paul admits that such a lifestyle might seem to be helpful in bringing the flesh under control. Apparently the false teachers believed that denying the body of various things would supposedly strengthen the will against sinful appetites.

Perhaps the logic went like this:

By abstaining from my favorite foods I will be able to resist gluttony.

By avoiding sexual relationships I’ll be able to resist adultery and fornication.

*It was of no value against fleshly indulgence.*

Following ascetic practices really doesn’t eliminate sinful desires.

It may in fact promote them instead.

***God’s answer to asceticism***

***In baptism the believer is transported from “the world” into the “kingdom of God” (Cf. Col. 1:13)***

Every person finds himself in one of two realms. Either he is living in the world or he is living in “heavenly places”. Paul reminds his readers that in a sense they were no longer “living in the world”.

*For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, (Colossians 1:13)*

Therefore his desire is to focus on the spiritual things of the heavenly kingdom of God rather than the physical things of our present world.

***In baptism the believer dies to the elementary principles of the world and comes under the authority of Christ.***

When we are “in the world” material things often have dominion over us. It is these to which we are often attracted and enslaved.

Yet the disciple has by God’s grace been elevated to a new plane and a new way of thinking. He has died to the elementary principles that dominate the unbelieving. Ill. with a college graduate. Where do you

go from here? He answers, "I'm thinking about enrolling in my childhood kindergarten!" Absurd! Right?

But there is a spiritual version! Paul asks, "Why submit to the things from which you have been delivered?"

***The material things that often dominate us prove themselves to be unworthy of dominion over us in that they perish in the very use of them.***

I remember a person who was once addicted to alcohol describing a revealing moment in his thinking when he had to admit that he had allowed himself to become the slaves of a yellow liquid in a glass! Or why come under the dominion of foods which are destroyed in their very eating?

### **Application for us**

***Throughout the centuries various religions have sought to enhance spirituality by ascetic practices.***

*A quick look at religious history would reveal many examples of ascetic living in oriental religions like Hinduism and Jainism; but even so-called Christian religions were not immune from this practice.*

In his letter to Timothy Paul spoke of an imminent apostasy involving two ascetic practices:

*But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. (1 Timothy 4:1-3)*

*In Roman Catholic tradition there was the practice of monasticism, self-flagellation (common in the Middle Ages as a means of bringing the body under control), and celibacy. (Would you say the ascetic practice of not marrying has made the Catholic priesthood more holy?)*

***We may have never participated in these; but we too may need to beware of ascetic tendencies in our own faith. Some question may be helpful.***

Have we substituted rule keeping for a relationship with the Lord?

Through the years Christians have been subjected to a lot of "rules" that God never gave. Maybe well-intentioned preachers and teachers thought if we could "hedge" the truth with what we thought would keep people more spiritually minded or avoid what were our interpretations of how to apply inward principles:

No card playing

No TV

No going to movie theaters

No caffeine

No clothing that exposes the knee

No tobacco

The list of taboos is endless.

I don't mean to suggest that the Christian doesn't use judgment in whether or not to participate in these things. I do mean to say that such rules can reflect a modern asceticism just like that which Paul was addressing in Colossians. We can't prove that we're faithful Christians because we've conformed to somebody's list of "thou shalt nots"!

Do we measure our spirituality by the lawful things we're willing to give up, or because we are willing to push ourselves to physical exhaustion?

Do we have to do more than His commandments ask us to do?

Do we feel we have to give up what God didn't ask us to give up in order to be more spiritual?

Is fatigue next to godliness?

Amazingly we may find ourselves congratulating ourselves on our spirituality while proudly judging others who don't have the "discipline" that we have to avoid the things that we avoid.

Do we insist that giving up real enjoyment somehow increases our spirituality? Or that we must somehow make ourselves miserable to be a true Christian?

Do we think that we must pay "penance" for our bad deeds rather than merely repent and trust in the sacrifice of Christ to forgive us?

These could simply be modern forms of ascetic thinking.

By all means, obey every command of God. Willingly sacrifice whatever you will for Him; but beware of the belief that giving up something or denying oneself of authorized pleasures makes us more spiritual.

***Two final points:***

Asceticism is not the same thing as moral discipline

*... but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:27)*

The enjoyment of what God has authorized may make us more spiritual if we receive it gratefully and praise Him for it.

*For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; (1 Timothy 4:4)*

**Conclusion: This is in part Paul's answer to religious asceticism. It requires that we learn to see physical things properly. But there is more. In the paragraph that follows Paul will give us further insight into how to avoid the influences of ascetic living and instead really grow in our spiritual life.**