

Colossians 2:20-23

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Paul shows the separation and inconsistency of claiming to follow Jesus but remaining tied to the principles of this world.

Throughout Chapter 2, Paul has encouraged the believers at Colossae to stay committed to the message of Christ, to not be led astray by the peripheral and secondary distractions that others in this time were espousing as requirements to become righteous in God's sight. He sets up a rhetorical question in verse 20: *if you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world...*

This is a statement of condition. It is clear Paul is assuming this statement to be true. He has spent much of the letter celebrating that the Colossians have shared in Christ's death and have now acquired new life.

The phrase *elementary principles* ties directly with the usage of the same word in Colossians 2:6, where Paul tells the Colossians not to be deceived. The Colossians would likely recognize this phrase *elementary principles* as a reference to circumcision. To be circumcised means committing to follow the Jewish religious rules.

When we believe in Jesus, we are placed into His death (Colossians 2:12). When we believe in Jesus and receive the free gift of eternal life, He circumcises our hearts (Colossians 2:11). Therefore, it does not make sense to submit to religious rules as though they will bring us into righteousness. Paul is encouraging the Colossian believers not to submit themselves to religious rules, but rather to walk in grace.

Given that Christ has paid all our debts, and we are now in Christ, and Christ is in us, Paul asks: *why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit to its decrees*. Interestingly, here Paul asserts that religious rules that relate to daily activities (food and drink), religious festivals (tradition) and spiritual disciplines (Sabbath) are *decrees* given by authorities who are of the *world* rather than being of God. Jesus rebuked Jewish religious leaders for having perverted commands God gave for the good of His people to instead be burdens they could not bear (Matthew 23:5,14; Mark 2:27). The purpose of these leaders was to gain prominence among men. This is not the value system of God, but of *the world*.

Christ cancelled our debt on the cross (Colossians 2:14). It was a debt we could never pay, and now it has been cancelled. This is reality to be received by faith. Accordingly, it is futile and even absurd to subject ourselves to rules made by men as though it will in some way appease (pay back) God. To live this way is to live apart from the reality that we are in Christ, because we are living as if we were *in the world*. Our true citizenship is now in heaven (Philippians 3:20). We owe allegiance to God as our king. Why are we submitting to petty tyrants and their religious rules?

What Paul is calling out is the inconsistency of living a double life. The Colossians cannot claim a life dependent on the supremacy of Jesus and then turn around and act/think/talk as if following the rules is the real key. If they do, they are out of alignment.

The Greek word for *submit yourself to decrees* is “dogmatizo.” It is where we get the word “dogma.” It means *to be subject to ordinances*. This is the only time this word is used in the New Testament. When men assert that others have to follow their rules “Because God said so” or because “God will punish you if you don’t,” they are usurping an authority that belongs only to Christ.

The goal of a good leader is to point people to the true head, which is Christ. Those who desire worldly control over people (and their resources) typically use *decrees* to place people under their headship. Paul exhorts the Colossian believers to avoid submitting themselves to such people. It is their choice, and they need to choose wisely. The New Testament emphasizes that true leadership exercises authority to serve, but does not lord over, as is the case in the world (1 Peter 5:2-4). It also conveys that it is up to each believer to discern whether a leader/preacher/teacher has a lifestyle that is obedient to Christ, and listen only to those people (Luke 7:15-20).

Paul gives some examples of these kinds of *decrees*: “*Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!*” (*which all refer to things destined to perish with use*). These elemental guidelines are based on the material world—*handle* (or “grab”), *taste*, *touch*. Paul is using these as examples of rules that have no true spiritual benefit. They are rules intended to place people under the control of fleshly leaders. They do not point people to Christ. Rather they deceive. Jesus paid a debt we cannot pay, and it is extinguished. We should not allow people to manipulate guilt in order to gain control over us. Neither should we replace faith in Christ with a list of superficial moral obligations.

It is apparent that the only way for such fleshly leaders to gain power over us is if we *submit* to them of our own will. Paul is pointing out to the Colossians what choices they can make that are in their best interest, and what choices they can make that are detrimental to themselves. It is not in our best interest to submit to those attempting to gain control over us. They use edicts (*Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!*) in order to bring us under their submission. We should exercise the volition God granted us to steward by faith, not *submit* to these sorts of *decrees*.

These superficial rules like *Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch* refer to things destined to *perish with use*. They are not spiritual, and they are not eternal. And if we *submit* ourselves to their rule, we neglect the reality that our debts are already completely forgiven (Colossians 2:14). Further, we forsake a head (Christ) that has our best interest at heart, and instead follow fleshly leaders whose desire is to exploit us for their own gain.

Rather than following the teachings of Christ, which lead to life, we find ourselves living *in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men*. Not only are we living as though our infinite debt has not already been cancelled, we are also following a head that will exploit us.

These rules are things which man has co-opted for his own fleshly benefit. Tangible things we (as humans) can easily understand and control. Following rules like *do not handle*, *do not taste* and *do not touch* can perpetuate an illusion that we control God. If we use rules to control God (making God forgive us because we followed the rules, for example) then the rules become an instrument that leads to idolatry. The essence of idolatry is the illusion that we control God.

This does not mean the principles men turn into rules are bad things in and of themselves—Jesus made clear that Sabbath was given as a great benefit for humanity. It means that when we turn something intended to benefit into a means of control and coercion, we twist it into something detrimental. Something that is at once both more (in terms of our focus and attention) and less (in terms of its true value) than it was intended to be.

The *commandments* and *teachings* of Christ should supersede those of man. Christ's teachings are intended for the benefit of each person. The commandments of men inevitably deteriorate into acts of coercive exploitation. God's concern is with the heart. God desires that we choose a right perspective, and make choices that seek the best for others (1 Corinthians 13:3). The opposite of this is men making rules in order to control and exploit others.

Men who make rules, condemn others, and thus gain control tend to be shrewd. Paul notes that *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*. It seems here that we are dealing with religious leaders making religious rules. These are rules that have *the appearance of wisdom*. In the case of the Sabbath, it is without controversy that living this principle is for our best. However, the religious leaders take a good principle and twist it into something that is no longer of God, but rather is *self-made religion*. When we follow such people, no longer are we following Christ as our head. Now we are following a *religion* that is *self-made*.

The practices may look good. They appear like *wisdom* without the real heart of wisdom. The word for *appearance* here is actually the Greek word “logos,” the word for “word” or “speech.” So, we call this wisdom but it is not actually wisdom.

When Paul calls this *self-made religion*, what he means is something like “a worship of our wills,” meaning either that we worship what we desire or that we end up worshipping ourselves (an extreme pat-on-the-back) for having the “will” to follow these rules. Either way, our religion is not the true religion of Christ, which tells us to focus on serving others. Rather it is a religion of our own puffed-up ego. Ironically, this *self-made religion* includes practices of *self-abasement and severe treatment of the body*. Perhaps rather than fasting to seek God, they are proving to themselves and others that they are worthy. Their *severe treatment of their own body* is actually a twisted means of elevating themselves. Some people come to enjoy self-destruction because it gives them a sense of control.

We do actually control our choices, within the limits God allows, and we can make self-destructive choices. Paul desires that the Colossians recognize the folly of following such religious teachings, and encourages them to avoid submitting to such people. Paul desires that believers make life-giving choices.

What is the problem with all of these religious rules? At the end of the day they just don't work. Following religious rules might have all of the appearance of goodness and effectiveness, *but they are of no value against fleshly indulgence*. All of these moral gymnastics we do to help make ourselves feel right and good only prove two things: we are adept at self-deception and we are not capable of being holy on our own.

These religious rules which are supposed to be necessary to make us righteous and pleasing to God are, in reality, *fleshly indulgences*. We are following ourselves in the name of following God. Our lot is likely that we will get swallowed up in these self-justifications. We will tell ourselves we are so good in most areas, this one little thing is not a problem. Or we will worship our emotions, and start to think that a thing is good just because of how it makes us feel.

In the end, our flesh will take these elementary principles and use them to its own advantage. It will take us, who are free, and lead us back into slavery—slavery to our flesh (Romans 6:15-16). When we follow our flesh, we choose the consequences of the flesh, which is the wrath of God (Romans 1:18,22,24,26). We bring it upon ourselves, in the name of religion.

We need something else. We need Christ, crucified and buried. We need to choose to walk in the Spirit, engaging His resurrection power to serve others with our gifts. We need to follow Christ as our head. Without partnering with Him, surrendering to Him, everything will fall within a kingdom of our own making. If we miss this opportunity, we miss out on the rewards of the inheritance God has laid up for us (Colossians 3:23).

Biblical Text

²⁰ **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,** ²¹ **“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!”** ²² **(which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?** ²³ **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.**