

Colossians 2:16-23

So the spiritual life, our Christian walk includes warnings. Moses warned the Israelites not to forget the Lord once they settled in the Promised Land or you will end up in idolatry– Deut. 6:12. Jesus warned the disciples to beware of the greed of the Pharisees – Luke 12:15. Here in Col. 2:16-23 Paul gives us 3 warnings that if we fail to heed we will fail to experience our fullness in Christ – we will be disqualified from the prize. I'll define that shortly.

Now in order to enjoy our fullness in Christ, to live out our freedom in Christ to experience our completeness in Christ we need to heed the warnings given in vs. 16-23. Rocky covered the first warning last week where we learned that in light of our circumcision in Christ (one not made with hands or a physical circumcision but a spiritual one whereby the flesh is defeated) our burial and resurrection with Christ our being made alive from having been dead, having been completely forgiven by virtue of what Christ accomplished on the cross, therefore beware of legalism.

This morning we will look at 2 more warnings – beware of mysticism and beware of asceticism. These warnings are as relevant today as they were when Paul penned this letter. Social media proliferates false teaching. On every side the sufficiency of the person and work of Jesus Christ is openly or implicitly denied. Some claim visions and revelations from God; others equate spirituality with performance and still others claim insight into heaven and angels that surpass experience. None of these routes will produce fullness and freedom in Christ. They sound good, they look good, they appeal to your emotions, they seem exciting but in the end the result is not maturity and freedom but rather bondage.

I. Beware of Mysticism as a Means of Spirituality Col. 2:18-19

What is mysticism? Mysticism is a deeper or higher subjective experience based on some personal intuition that results in a greater spirituality. It's like saying, "Well, I've had an experience that I can't define, but I've touched God." It might be a vision, an emotional experience, a unique insight or a sense of the divine.

The danger of mysticism is that it leads to disqualification. NASB translates καταβραβεύω (kat-ab-rab-yoo'-o) as defraud but the word βραβεύω (bra-yoo'o) has the primary meaning "to award a prize in a contest". Therefore καταβραβεύω (kat-ab-rab-yoo'-o) *kata* meaning against, means to deprive of the prize or disqualify.

It is an athletic term where the umpire disqualifies a contestant because he has not obeyed the rules. The contestant is still a member of the team but he has been disqualified from winning the prize. You watch the Olympics, particularly the tack events. Each event has officials to verify that all the participants were within the rules. If one runs out of his/her lane the officials could disqualify them.

Paul says to the believers: Don't let anybody tell you you're disqualified, and you don't get the prize because you didn't attain the higher knowledge, because you didn't have this special kind of self-abased pious humility, because you didn't commune with the various angels, or because you've never had super visions. Note how Paul describes the mysticism the Colossians faced 18-19a. Four modifying clauses explain the specific philosophy. These are translated as "*delights in false humility and the worship of angels*"; "*goes into great detail about what he has seen*"; "*his unspiritual mind puffs him up*"; and "*he has lost connection with the Head*." The first three phrases speak of the specific claims of the false teachers; the last is Paul's evaluation of the seriousness of the doctrine.

Note the word "delighting" θέλων (thelo) meaning to take pleasure, to be fond of and take delight in. Thus the false teachers joyfully committed to these practices.

In Paul's day the mystics were delighting in humility (look how humble I am); worshiping angels (not good enough to go directly to God so we go through angels); visions (seen into a higher spiritual realm). In Colossae there was an ancient teaching (later called "gnosticism," meaning knowledge) which held that there is a hierarchy of angels between all human beings and God which must be placated and acknowledged, and that one's knowledge, which began in virtual ignorance, increased with such contact until at last one entered into the fullness of understanding of the Oneness of all things.

The worship of angels occupied a central place in the false teachers' appeal. The primary question is whether the expression is objective (worship given to angels) or subjective (worship with angels). Which would be more likely? If the situation reflects a pre-Gnostic and Gentile context, worship directed to angels makes good sense. If, on the other hand the situation reflects a more Jewish context then worship with the angels makes more sense.

Personally I think it is worship of angels but in either case worship to angels or worship with angels those participating in that activity bragged about what they saw in the process.

This worship of angels causes the individual to go "into great detail about what he has seen" (18) and while the word "visions" is not in the text the word gives the essence of what mysticism includes. The idea in this context seems to be that the individual in question loves to talk on and on about his spiritual experiences, but in reality they are only coming out of his own sinful flesh.

This worship of angels and mystical experience opens one up to the whole world of occult manifestations - astrology, Ouija boards, tarot cards and assorted holy men, psychics, swamis, yogis and gurus. All of these purport to offer help in increasing our understanding of who we are and what we can do, so as to fulfill the possibilities of our humanity.

What is the danger of that? The apostle puts it very plainly: it "disqualifies you for the prize." It will eliminate you from the race, removing you from the possibility of experiencing "Christ in you, the hope of glory." It is not loss of salvation but rather loss of fullness and joy.

Someone who becomes involved in this kind of teaching cuts himself off from the Head – vs. 19. When the head is cut off a human body, all life ceases. According to the apostle, the same thing happens when anyone has lost contact with his Head! He also loses connection with the whole body, which is the church. He is no longer fed by teachers and by shepherds (the "ligaments and sinews"), and, therefore, he stops growing completely.

This picture of the head and the body expresses a treasured union with Christ which forms the basis of all spiritual blessings in Christ. Employing this common metaphor of the body and the head, Paul declares that when one involves himself in mysticism, he will be disconnected from the head and second, he will starve spiritually.

The head was absolutely essential. Why? First, the whole body receives nourishment from the head. There is no other source of strength for anyone in the body. This means that whatever growing the church would do, it would do because of its connection to Christ. The false teaching threatened to sever that relationship. Second, without Christ, the Head, the unity of the body is disrupted.

Note the phrase "the entire body" or the "one body". It, the body, is healthy or grows as each one in the body – "joints and ligaments" supplies their part. True spiritual growth and maturity requires each one in the body. When one loses connection with the head he also loses connection with the whole body, which is the church. He is no longer fed by teachers and by shepherds (the "ligaments and sinews"), and, therefore, he stops growing completely. Paul here fights for the wholeness of the community (πᾶν τὸ σῶμα), the one body of Christ". In other words, the concern here is more ecclesiological than Christological: failure to hold to Christ is destructive of the body's unity and growth. This is similar to what Paul states in Eph. 4:11-16

Both the body (the whole) as well as the individual believer is connected to the head – Christ. Christ, rather than experiences, determines spiritual reality. The basic truth of Christianity is Christ. Christ is sufficient. Christ is all. Christ is God. Christ is Savior. Christ redeems. Christ is everything you need. Christ reconciles. That’s the message. You and I as believers in Jesus Christ are complete – 2:10.

As a Christian, you know who you need? Jesus Christ. You know what else you need? Nothing. You don’t need special visions. You don’t need conversations with angels. You don’t need some kind of self-imposed piety. Those things may be emotionally satisfying, enticing and exhilarating but they are destructive because to engage in such activities is to sever yourself from the head – Christ. To say you need something more is a satanic lie. Col. 2:10.

II. Beware of Asceticism as a Means of Spirituality Col. 2:20-23

Paul begins vs. 20 with a reminder of our connection to the death of Christ which takes us back to vs. 12-13. There is a strong emphasis in this letter on the person and work of Christ – it is deeply Christological.

This connection to the completed work of Christ is given to warn us of the dangers of asceticism. The dictionary defines an ascetic as somebody who lives a life of rigorous self-denial for the purpose of gaining favor with God. An ascetic is somebody who sells everything and goes and lives in a monastery, he may fast for days, pray for hours, thinking this makes him spiritual.

Your union with Christ in His death has caused you to die to the rudiments of the world. Your union with Christ in His death has caused you to be separated from human religion. And human religion is based on legalism, and mysticism, and self-denial, and all those works kinds-of-things.

Now, I’m not saying that there should never be any self-denial. We are called to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Christ – to discipline ourselves for godliness. But that self-denial, that discipline is not to gain something from Jesus but to express our love for Jesus based on what he has already done for us.

Vs. 20 reads like this: IF and you have so ‘IF’ could be translated “since”. Since a death has occurred, a death to the elementary principles (the ABC’s, the basics, and in the context here it refers to a worldly system of religion that seeks to gain a good standing with God by self-denial), since all that is true I have a question for you: Why are you living as if that death had not occurred, as if you were still in the world and therefore submit to these principles – do not handle, do not taste, do not touch?

The word translated “submit” is **δογματιζο** the noun of which is dogma. “Being dogmatized” meant to come under the rule of a particular dogma. Since the dogma was non-Christian, it was particularly devastating to Christian growth. The problem at Colossae was the people willingly embraced a system of thought contrary to Christianity. The system was enslaving not freeing.

This system of do’s and don’ts which runs contrary to the gospel is based on things that will perish (they are temporary while Christ and the benefits of knowing him are eternal) and they come from the thoughts of men (they are based on manmade ideas and concepts). Why do you accept that as dogma?

While vs. 23 is difficult to translate it is fairly clear in its meaning. While asceticism appears to have wisdom it actually accomplishes nothing. John MacArthur summarizes it this way: *All the regulations of this kind have a reputation for wisdom. They appear to be really the divine wisdom. Look at this. He keeps all the rules; he has the higher visions; he communes with the angels; he receives revelations. He’s in abject self-abasement and poverty, and it looks to be so good because of self-made humility and unsparing treatment of the body. But it is no value whatever; it serves only to satisfy – what? – the flesh. You know what it is? It’s simply and only carnality. You’re trying to glorify yourself as the one who can either save or make himself spiritual. Self-styled*

ritual, self styled mysticism, self-styled poverty for the sake of apparent piety and holiness just panders the flesh.

You know where else we see this today? When we make a list of do's and don'ts that define what a Christian is or what makes a Christian spiritual. You can't be spiritual unless you go to a prayer meeting. You can't be spiritual unless you speak in tongues. You can't be spiritual unless you have a vision or a dream. You can't be spiritual unless God speaks directly to you.

It wasn't that long ago when there were a number of books detailing stories of those who had died and gone to heaven but have returned to tell us what it is like. It is easy for believers to think that without an experience like that I can't be spiritual, I'm not complete.

So let me state it again – You are complete in Christ. He is the image of the invisible God. He is the supreme of all creation. He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth and everything visible and invisible that is in them. He is the One for whom all things are created. He is the One who holds all things together – the sustainer. He is the head of the body. He is the beginning. He is the Supreme One who was raised from the dead. He is the One in whom the Father is pleased. He is the One who reconciles all things to himself both in earth and heaven. He is the One who is in you – the hope of glory. He is the One in whom you are complete.

Conclusion

Warnings in life are there for your protection. Heed them and it will go well. Ignore them and suffer the consequences. So the warnings in this text, the spiritual warnings are there for our protection. Heed them and we will experience fullness and freedom in Christ. Failure to heed them will at best result in an unenjoyable Christian life and at worst no relationship to God at all. There is a danger that we will be robbed of our fullness, freedom and completeness in Christ. Since Satan cannot have us back he will try to make us ineffective, frustrated, judgmental and divisive. Legalism, mysticism and asceticism are all counterfeits and are combated by the reality of our completeness in Christ – our complete identification, our complete forgiveness and our complete victory. Therefore “keep seeking the things above where Christ is...”