

False Spirituality

Text:

Colossians 2:16-23

“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. 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, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. If 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-- "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (referring to things that all perish as they are used)--according to human precepts and teachings? 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.”

Introduction:

Most of the rest of this letter to the Colossians is going to be taken up with describing what the true life in Christ looks like, and in exhorting and commanding us to live that kind of life. However, before taking up what we could refer to as true spirituality, Paul first discredits and exposes the false spirituality of the heretical teachers. This passage takes us to the heart of what we have referred to as the Colossian heresy, which is really a false spirituality, that is a false way of understanding how we relate to God and how God works in our lives.

This is the most difficult and discussed passage in the entire letter. It is filled with terms and words borrowed from the heretics that are difficult to understand. Since the Colossian heresy, whatever it was, did not last, and its perpetrators have left us no written documents, we know it only from the Apostles polemic against it and, we can only speculate as to what it actually was. This is not a great problem for us, as what is important for us is not to know a first century heresy that quickly passed from the scene, but to understand what the Christian life really looks like as it is presented in the rest of the epistle, in Paul's other letters, and in the rest of the New Testament.

Whatever this heresy taught, and we will try to give a brief description of it, Paul says that it is useless in producing the true fruits of the Christian life. In chapter 3 verse 5 he will exhort us to

“mortify our members which are upon the earth”. This is one side of the consistent teaching of Paul and the New Testament. Sanctification or spiritual transformation consists first in putting to death or mortifying the old nature, which he often refers to as the flesh; then allowing the Holy Spirit to produce in us a new life, the life of Christ that is characterized by the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance”. All true spirituality consists in these two things. The person growing in the Christian life will always be getting rid of the sinful patterns of behavior that characterize the life outside of Christ, and he or she will always be growing in righteousness. Paul uses several images throughout his epistles to describe this process. He talks about putting the old nature to death and cultivating the new. He talks of taking off the old as if it were old worn out and filthy clothing and then putting on the luxurious new clothing of the righteousness of Christ. He talks about fleeing all that belongs to the old life and pursuing all that pertains to the new. Whatever image he uses he is always describing the same reality. The old sinful life must go and it must be replaced by a new life of love and righteousness, a life like the life demonstrated by Christ during the “days of his flesh”, and produced by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Given this truth, the last verse of our text, verse twenty three, explains the problem and why Paul is so insistent that the Colossian believers not be taken in by this false teaching. This verse, as does most of the passage, presents some difficulties of translation, but most translators have opted for translating it in a way that indicates that whatever the false teachers were teaching it did not help conquer the flesh, but it actually promoted the works of the flesh. The American Standard translation put it this way: “Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and severity to the body; *but are* not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh.” This clearly indicates what Paul is trying to say. The teaching may have been impressive, and the people may have been somewhat awestruck by the practices of its promoters, but it was useless in helping the believer overcome sin, hence a dead end road in the true goals of the Christian life. Other translations, give it a slightly different nuance which is even stronger implying that not only do such practices not help us in defeating sin, they actually make us more sinful, they become new avenues of sin, new ways of satisfying the flesh that are even more deadly.

Here is a brief picture of what was going on. I cannot absolutely guarantee its accuracy, but it is close enough for us to grasp the problem. The false teachers were teaching that the goal of the spiritual life was some sort of mystical experience which consisted in being transported into the spiritual world and participating in the worship of the angels. Those who had not had such mystical experiences were being looked down upon, and were not considered to be truly spiritual. The way to such mystical experiences, according to these teachers was first by ritual practices; eating and drinking certain things, keeping certain rites on the right days, and secondly by ascetic practices; “touch not, taste not, handle not”. Scholars have spent a lot of time searching through the contemporary literature and trying to define with precision what all of these things refer to and to determine if they are of Jewish or pagan origin. For our purposes, it is not essential that we know. What is important to know is that wherever they

came from, they did not come from Christ, and that their practice did not bring people closer to Christ and to achieving the goals of Christ, but led them in the opposite direction. In the next chapter of the letter Paul will lay down his positive teachings about the Christian life, and this will be what we need to grasp in detail. What we need to retain from this passage is not so much the content of the false teaching, but the reasons why Paul warns us against it. False teaching will come and go. False spiritualities will come and go. The result of following them will always be the same. Instead of producing true holiness and genuine spirituality, and enabling us to achieve the purposes for which Christ called us, they will lead us into frustration and unfruitfulness.

What I want us to see, primarily, from this passage are Paul's reasons for warning us against these false teachings. The passage is organized around two warnings: "Let no one judge you" (verse 16), "Let no one disqualify you" (verse 18), and a question: "If you are dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world are you subject to ordinances? In each case Paul gives them a reason why they should reject the teaching that is being imposed upon them, and in each case that teaching is based upon a reality related to Jesus Christ. Thus in this passage as in the rest of the letter the subject is Christ. Remember our theme, Paul's theme. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge have been communicated to us in Jesus Christ. Therefore we must keep walking in Christ just as he was communicated to us. What the false teachers are teaching them is not according to the Christ tradition and it will not lead them into truth and holiness, because it is not according to Christ. Let us then look at the three realities about Christ that Paul emphasizes here in refuting the false teachers. They are:

- Christ is the reality behind which religious ritual is only a shadow, verse 17
- All teaching that does not come from Christ cannot promote our spiritual well-being, verse 19
- We have died with Christ and risen to new life in him, the powers of this world have no more power over us, verse 20

Three images will help us grasp the problem with this false spirituality. They are:

- Focused on the shadow
- Severed from the head
- Afraid of the dark

I. Focused on the Shadow

One of the problems of first century church life that has to some degree persisted throughout the history of the church was the legalistic observance of Jewish rites. This included things like food regulations and holy days. Paul laid down his basic rules about such things in Romans 14.

He says in this chapter that such things are of no real importance in the Christian life, the practice or the non-practice of them does not make us better or worse, however, we should be charitable towards those who continue practicing them, and all of us should seek peace in all things.

In the passage we are looking at it is not certain that the practices referred to are all of Jewish origin. What Paul says is that, even if they are, they belong to the old order of things. These things, he says were only shadows, or as the writer of Hebrews says: “shadows of good things to come”. The reality that casts the shadow is Christ. To cling to such shadows once we have the reality would be like someone continuing to gaze at the photo of a distant loved one after the loved one had returned and was present with them. A picture can serve to remind us of the person in the person’s absence, but honoring the picture more than the person when the person is present would border on folly. In the same way, focusing on the signs that pointed to Christ when Christ is already present with us is to focus on something that is, at best, of a very secondary nature. Unfortunately, Christians have been in the past, and continue to be overly focused on the unimportant to the detriment of the essential. To do so is to let others judge you in matters where there is no need to judge. The overall result for all is that we lose sight of the real goal and make the Christian life a caricature of what it really is.

II. Detached from the head

All good things come from Christ. He is our life and the source of our life. Jesus, himself, said that we must remain attached to him, that the branch cut off from the vine has no life in it and is useless. The only thing that helps us spiritually in the end is that which comes from Christ. The test, then, of all Christian teaching is: does it derive from Christ? Does it bring others into living relationship with Christ? Does it cause the life of Christ to increase in his people? If not, it has no place in his church. In verses 18-19 Paul warns against such teaching. He warns us against following a teaching that would disqualify us; that would trick or beguile us out of our reward. It’s rather like that commercial on TV where the adult is trying to trade the boy a very shabby cardboard car for an exquisite toy car and trying to make the boy feel like he is getting a good deal. Even the kid realizes he is being bamboozled. This is what Paul is warning us about. Don’t let someone turn you away from the reality of genuine spiritual life in Christ with some esoteric spirituality that in the end is nothing more than a valueless, gaudy bauble.

He then says in verse 19 that the problem with these teachers is that they are severed from the head, that is, they are cut off from Christ. Wherever their teaching is coming from, it is useless for producing the true goals of the Christian life because it does not derive from Christ. In France there is a saying when someone drives poorly that he must have gotten his driver’s

license from the equivalent of a box of Post Toasties. The image fits. All spiritual teaching that is cut off from its source, from the head is only a cheap imitation without value or authority.

III. Afraid of the Dark

The question that Paul asks the Colossians in verse 20: “If 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?” is rather like asking a child “why are you afraid of the dark?” after having turned the lights on and had him look under the bed, and in the closet to see that there really weren’t any monsters there, only to have him tell you once you turn the lights off again: “I’m scared”.

As we saw last week one of the accomplishments of Christ on the cross was to defeat the spiritual powers of evil and to lead them in a victory parade across the universe so everyone would know that their powers have been broken. Paul has insisted in this letter that these “principalities and powers” have no power against Christ, and he has told his readers that they need not fear them and that they have participated in Christ’s victory over them. Christ has turned the light on for them, but they are still afraid of the dark. The false teachers are using this fear to get them to revert to their former superstitious practices. They think that through certain rituals, by not eating certain things, not touching certain things they can have victory over them. This is foolish. Only Christ breaks the power of evil.

Paul then says that such things may put on a good show; they may have an appearance of wisdom, but they are without power. In fact he says they are counter-productive; they will lead you not into the light, but back into the darkness. Such things he says will not produce the good fruit of the Spirit, but they will promote the works of the flesh.

Conclusion:

There is a true spirituality. There is a real Christian life, a life that overcomes sin and increases in holiness. This life flows from Christ. It cannot be imitated. True Christian teaching leads us into this life. We will be examining it in detail in the rest of this letter, but first let us be warned against anything that is not according to Christ, that focuses on the shadow, that is cut off from the head, and that gives power to the darkness.