

12. Christ is the Substance of our Hope!

Col. 2:16-23

2000 years ago, in the ancient city of Colossae the Christians were under attack ...

...but not an attack from outside the church ...

... an attack from within.

In the church of Colossae there were false teachers “inside” deceiving people and leading them astray.

I want to make it clear that these people who were deceived didn't hate the church.

.. they didn't desire to destroy or corrupt the body of Christ

... it was never their intention to endorse heresy.

In fact, those people who followed these false teachers most likely did so because they wanted to know the truth and to have a closer relationship with God

... And this was the very thing these false teachers played upon to deceive them.

The reason cults, false teachers and Christian sects get followings is because they promise people things they want things the Word of God never promised.

... SO, before you become judgmental about how gullible these Colossae Christians were just consider:

- Americans spend \$33 Billion dollars a year on weight loss products
- American men spend \$4 billion a year trying to prevent baldness
- Every year hundreds of men spend anywhere from 75 to 250k for risky surgery to increase their height by 3 to 5 inches believing the increased height will improve their chances to succeed in life.

- This man (Paul Karason from Washington State) turned blue because he believed consuming a silver nitrate compound would cure his dermatitis.



As humans we are very susceptible to believing what we want to be true...

So, when these false teachers in Colossae began to offer these young and hungry Christians

- Biblical teaching that was even **more correct** than the teachings of Epaphras
- A way to be **more spiritual** than even the Apostle Paul
- A lifestyle **more holy** than the lifestyle of Timothy

The people were so hungry and desirous for “MORE” some of them jumped at the opportunity.

However, instead of producing better Christians these “lies” these “false teachings” divided the people

... *“I understand the bible better and you are not supposed to eat that food, or drink that drink, and by the way you are worshipping God on the wrong day” ... that’s legalism.*

Or ...

... *“I see angels, I have visions and dreams, God speaks audibly to me ... and you don’t” ... that’s mysticism.*

Or ...

... *“I go without food, I sleep on the floor instead of a bed, I don’t handle, touch, or taste ungodly things and I keep myself separated from those who do” ... that’s separatism.*

As you can see, **legalism, mysticism, and separatism** aren’t anything new ...

... those temptations and dangers that promote self-righteousness that existed 2000 years ago still exist today.

... and just as Paul warned the Colossians, today he is warning us about three dangers.

1. Legalism (16-17)

¹⁶ Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day-- ¹⁷ things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col. 2:16-17)

Notice how Paul words the first phrase ... “no one is to act as your judge.”

Extremists are often self-righteous ...

Have you ever met an **environmentalist** or a **vegan** or a **social activist**?

- I care more than you.
- I am more disciplined than you.
- I’m better than you.

The same thing happens in Christianity ...

... sure it was for different reasons but it’s still the same thing.

A legalist is someone who thinks they are better at understanding the truth and following the rules.

What you need to understand that one can become a legalist at either extreme.

- I am a better pastor because I've been to seminary, learned from professors and I have a degree.
- I am a better pastor because I didn't go to seminary, I haven't been corrupted by those professors, and the only degree I need is CBG ... "Called by God."
-
- I'm a better Christian because I wear a tie to church
- I'm a better Christian because I don't wear a tie

Fill in the Blank:

- I'm a better Christian because I _____ or because I don't _____

The legalist declares:

You are only a good Christian if you believe what I believe the way I believe it and you follow the rules as well as I follow the rules. (or don't follow the rules)

... God will accept you only if your faith looks exactly like mine.

Apparently, these false teachers were going around BULLYING people:

"Why are you eating that or drinking that."

... This intimidation was, in fact, contrary to the teachings of Christ himself.

Jesus said in **Mark 7:14-23** that it is not what goes into a man that defiles him (in other words, what he ate), but what comes out of his heart.

In **Acts 10**, Peter, who was struggling with associating with Gentiles or not, was on the rooftop and had a vision where the Lord told him it is not about what you eat anymore.

Paul writes in **Romans 14:17** that "The kingdom of Heaven is not about eating or drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." But these bullies walked around judging people of their diet.

... They were BULLYING the Christians in Colossae by saying:

“You are unspiritual because you don’t celebrate Passover, Pentecost, Feast of Tabernacles, or any of the festivals listed in Leviticus 23 ... you don’t keep the sabbath.”

Paul says these things don’t matter, they were only shadows pointing to the promised redemption, shadows anticipating something greater ...

Here is what Paul is saying,

These feasts ... these ceremonial and dietary laws ... these special days ...

... they cannot save

... keeping them doesn’t earn grace

... they were only shadows pointing toward something else

... so we don’t need them anymore because **Jesus has come in the flesh!**

We don’t need to celebrate a festival commemorating the historic event of God feeding the Jews in the wilderness ...

... Jesus the **bread of life** has come.

You don’t need to celebrate Passover ...

... Christ **the true Passover is here.**

There is no need to legalize the sabbath day ...

... **Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath**

Stop hugging the shadows!

Quit trying to push people backward.

Don't be a spiritual bully who focuses on the externals!

Stop trying to earn your salvation by promoting or boycotting this or that **holiday**, this or that **dietary plan**, this or that **feast day**

... just simply put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ because he (and he alone) is the true reality
... the real substance.

2. Mysticism (18-19)

¹⁸ Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. (Col. 2:18-19)

Mysticism is an approach to religious life that **emphasizes experience over everything** else.

... in other words what you feel, what you experience, is more important than what you believe or what your practice.

Some names you might recognize who were Christian mystics:

- Peter Lombard
- Francis of Assisi
- Meister Eckhart
- Joan of Arc
- Menno Simons
- Blaise Pascal
- Gerhard Tersteegen
- T.S. Elliot
- A.W. Tozer
- Watchman Nee

Some movements you may be familiar with

- Gnostics
- Quakers
- Mennonites
- Moravians
- Pentecostals

There is nothing wrong with having an emotional Christian experience ... some of these people and movements were used by God.

It only becomes problematic when **our default hope for trusting in our salvation** is an experience rather than the truth.

... or when we view the faith of our selves or someone else because we or they had a lesser “spiritual experience.”

That was the problem in Colossae.

These false teachers were claiming that the faith of some were more valid, more real, because they worshipped angels or because they had experienced some religious vision.

Look at the phrase **“let no one defraud you of your prize” ...**

... that phrase seems to imply that these false teachers were acting like some kind of “judge” or “referee” determining whose “experiences” were more spiritual or credible.

... some people, whose had “bigger experiences” were being held higher.

And Paul gets fairly harsh with his condemnation of them ...

He says that they are **“inflated” or “puffed up” without cause in their fleshly minds ...**

... in other words, they were self-righteous and getting the big head.

Throughout the Word of God, we see that believers experience the power and presence of God ...

... some have a passionate intimate relationship with the Lord.

But nowhere ... NOWHERE in the Bible do you see **Christians going through some intense religious experience with no explanation or purpose.**

Even at Pentecost, in Acts 2, when an incredibly supernatural thing happens, and the Holy Spirit comes down on the disciples as tongues of fire ... **it wasn't an experience for them ...**

... it wasn't to make them "feel God" or "know God's power" ...

(and I'm sure they did in both cases)

... the event in Acts 2 occurred to empower those people in the upper room to speak the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, with those of every nation.

... this wasn't about "feeling and experiencing God" so that they would know they had "felt and experienced God" ...

... God was giving birth to the church for the spreading the gospel.

But that's not how we tell it, is it?

Sometimes, "in our fleshly minds" as Paul puts it, we prefer the **overly emotional**, the **spiritually dramatic**, the **over-the-top** moments ...

... we prefer the "*heaven came down and glory filled my soul*" **to the** "*living by faith in Jesus above, trusting confiding in his great love* ... "

Certainly, there are incredible moments of emotion in worshipping God, but those moments don't start with the emotion, **they start with the truth generating faith** in the inward man.

The problem with mysticism is that it teaches that one can live or act in such a way that they can "manufacture" or "manipulate" the Holy Spirit into working and moving.

We can't artificially make ourselves grow spiritually.

For the record, the Holy Spirit goes where He wishes, and neither you nor I know where it comes from or where it goes (Jn. 3:8)

This why Paul says in verse 19- when we hold fast to Christ and are **supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God**

We cannot make ourselves grow; only God can grow us spiritually.

I have this seed and this soil. Now if I were to tell you that I was going to make something grow here, right now, would you believe me?! No! I could tell you, "I'm going to make this plant grow with my bare hands." But it's not going to happen, is it? Why not? Because I have no power in myself to make this plant grow. But what can I do? I can water it, I can give it sunlight, I can make sure the soil is healthy but only God actually does the growing! In the same way, we can't make ourselves grow by trying to artificially create some spiritual experience. We can, however, put ourselves in a position where God will grow us.

How? Paul tells us in verse 19.

By **holding fast to the head** which is Jesus Christ!

By **knowing Christ and learning more of Him** through God's Word.

It is not some "epic spiritual experience" that we seek, **but Christ Himself.**

3. Separatism (20-23)

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. (Col. 2:20-23)

No one would deny the fact that we live in a world filled with sinners, sin, and all forms of evil.

Although Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, prayed to the father that the followers of Christ would not be taken out of the world but kept in the world...

... **Christians have been trying to separate and isolate** themselves from the evil in the world.

These false teachers in Colossae believed anything having to do with the physical was bad...

... They believed that the more “holy” a person was the more they would try to separate from the physical world.

... this belief became so strong that by the 3rd and 4th centuries some people would climb fifty-foot pillars and live on top of them for years completely separating themselves from the world ...

[**Simeon Stylites**, spent the last 36 years of his life on top of a fifty-foot pillar.]

Certainly, I don't know of anyone today doing such a thing ... but that same attitude still exists.

Don't handle this ... don't not taste that ... don't touch the other!

Paul says this attitude and behavior appears to be wise, but this is “self-made” religion, and it has no value.

... and why does it have no value?

... Because no matter how “holy” it looks it is really **just another way of gratifying the flesh ...**

... **inflating the ego.**

“Look how holy, separate, and righteous I am.”

We are in the world for a reason.

While we are to avoid sin, and pursue Godliness, that doesn't mean that we need to separate ourselves from the world!

We need to remember at the end of the day our goodness, our holiness, our righteousness comes from God.

The Priest with Dirty Clothes by R.C. Sproul.

It's a story about a priest who was given the chance to preach his first sermon before the king.

He just received his priestly garments and he was very eager for this opportunity. But on the way to preach, his clothing became dirty with mud, and he couldn't get them clean in time.

When he got to the castle, the people stared and the court jester ridiculed the priest and told him he wasn't fit to stand before the king with such filthy garments. The king agreed but told the priest to come back next week with clean garments; only then would the king allow the priest to stand in his presence.

But even with a week's time, the priest couldn't get his garments clean. They were ruined. Neither could he get a new set of garments. The bishop only gives out one pair. What could the priest do? He would never be able to stand before the king in such filth.

Fortunately, someone told the priest to visit the king's son, the prince, because he could help. So, the priest went to the prince and, after hearing his dilemma, he agreed to help the priest.

All the he had to do was show up the next week to stand before king and the prince would take care of the rest.

The priest was afraid, but he trusted the words of the prince.

When the priest arrived at the castle, he stood before the king once more in his dirty clothes. Once again, the people stared and the jester railed at the priest. The king asked him why he didn't clean himself up, that he wasn't allowed in the king's presence displaying such filth.

Just then, the prince entered the room.

He approached the priest, took off his robe and put it on him. It was the most beautiful robe anyone had ever seen.

Now, the king would allow the priest to preach in his presence because he was clothed in the robe of the prince and his filth was covered. And he was promised that any time he came to stand before the king, the priest could wear the prince's robe.