

False Teaching

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits^[a] of the world, and not according to Christ.

¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.¹⁸ 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,¹⁹ 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.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—²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?²³ 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.

Have you ever played a who am I game before? Basically, I will say some things about a person and you have to guess who I am from what I say. Here we go: As a young man I started interpreting dreams. It was my destiny to save my family and my nation from death. I was betrayed by my brothers, my boss' wife, and forgotten in prison. When I was finally released from prison I was put in charge of the country. Who am I?... If you are thinking that it is Joseph son of Israel in the OT, you are correct. Want to try again? I was born under a special star. I did not receive much formal education, but as I grew up I became known for my spiritual insight. When I was a young man, I started preaching. In order to confirm my ministry I was given the ability to work signs. I could tell what was wrong with people. I also had the ability to know what sins people had committed. Today I have followers all over the world. Who am I? This one is harder. Do you have a guess? If you said William Branham, you are correct. Mr. Branham is called the “voice of God” by his followers. In the 1940s and 50s, his ministry grew up around his many eccentric doctrines and the claim that he spoke for God.

The difference between false and true doctrine is not as simple as which one sounds the most believable. I do not know which of these two people's stories sounds more believable to you, but both of them have elements that sound strange to our modern ears. We are so accustomed to think in material or tangible ways. The people of the Bible were not gullible, or at least not any more gullible than we are today. They were trying to know God. We are trying to know God. They were trying to make sense of their lives. We are trying to make sense of our lives. In Colossians 2:8, 16-23, the Apostle Paul warned the church against the rise of false teaching. There are several layers to his warning, but to summarize what Paul is saying we can look at it through the lens of legalism and syncretism. I realize that these terms are not in the text, but they are sufficiently familiar to us that they help shape our thoughts around what Paul warned the churches about. Legalism is the religious tendency to make tangible and practical things central to the practice of our faith. Rather than have the emphasis on God and his work, the emphasis is put on our faithfulness to certain things. For example, obedience to strict dietary customs, length of

prayers, number of times a week a person fasts...the list could go on. Christians are not unique in this tendency. It is part of sinful human nature. You can find legalism in all religions. It proves itself false because it puts the emphasis on man relating to God. Or to put it another way: man is shaping the way God must respond. If you do something for God, God will do something for you.

On the other hand, syncretism seeks to blend one set of ideas with another to make the opposing ideas seem to fit. This applies to our discussion this morning because there is a temptation in our hearts to blend the ideas and practices we are familiar with in one area of our lives with our faith in Jesus. We are either not able or not clear sighted enough to know our danger.

Before looking at the verses themselves, I want to draw your attention to certain fact: Paul's warning comes with some encouragement. Paul said if they are in Christ they have already received forgiveness for their sins and new life. Moreover, Paul says that in Christ God has defeated all the powers that seek to rule over us. As we think about the warning together during this time, I do not want us to despair. Emphasizing our efforts and blending of our older ways of thinking with our new faith are easy temptations. It was a common problem in the time of Jesus. It was a common problem going back to Moses and the Exodus. Perhaps the reason for this lies in the fact that we are striving to relate to God in terms that we are most comfortable with. Verse 23 says that "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." We all want to please God and understand him. However, the efforts of legalism and syncretism only cloud our path.

Colossians 2:8 "Captive to Philosophy and Empty Deceit"

In Colossians 2:8, Paul introduces the threats he perceives that are present in the church. He says, "See to it that on one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ." The command sounds simple: "don't be taken in by these ideas." However, how easy is it to stand firm against these things? For each person hearing this sermon there are natural temptations and weaknesses of heart. Moreover, there are things that do not appeal to us. I say all of this to say this: that even if we do not see how someone else could be taken in by false teaching, we should be careful because we could be next.

Paul says we are not to be taken captive by philosophy or empty deceit. I wonder what comes to your mind when you read those words. Most people (me included), find philosophy very difficult to understand. We rarely read books of philosophy. So I don't think that we are tempted to adopt a new philosophy by reading books or attending philosophy lectures. So are we free from the influence of philosophy and empty deceit? I do not think so. Paul mentions being taken captive by philosophy in two specific areas. First he says "according to human tradition." After that he mentions "according the elemental spirits of the world." Again we could attach our more common expressions of legalism and syncretism here, but we need to take note of how these categories applied in the Colossian context. As in most other churches in the early church period, the Colossian church probably had Jewish and non-Jewish Christians present. Among some of the Jewish traditions of that time were those that emphasized keeping strict additional rules that prevented a person from breaking the Law of God. On the other hand, the Gentile Christians had pagan backgrounds that had entirely separate philosophies. The desire to continue religious practices or blend new ones into the church would have been dependent on the Jew/Gentile divide in the church. The church here in Japan has these categories in some ways reversed.

The older religious practices that one might be tempted to hold on to have very little relation with your Christian lives. These are often considered traditions. On the other hand there are many other religious influences around us that we could try to blend with Christian teaching to make it fit within Buddhist or Shinto teaching. There have been many to have tried this in the past. How should we think about these things? Our divide between legalism and syncretism is helpful at this point. The human tradition element in verse 8 points to our ever present need to do something in front of God; to perform. The elemental spirits of the world part of verse 8 reminds us that there is a temptation to find some new teaching or new idea that can help us understand deeper truths. Both of these things fail in their goal. That is because they fail to point us to Christ. “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily (Col 2:9).”

Colossians 2:16-17 “Let no one pass judgment on you for not keeping human traditions”

In verses 9-15, Paul encouraged the church by reminding them again of the work of Christ on their behalf. So when he returns to the subject of false teaching in verse 16, the readers of this letter have before them a comparison of the work of Christ. Paul says

“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.

(17) These are a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”

The phrase “pass judgment” in verse 16 is where I get the word legalism from. There is a desire to elevate not just human performance before God, but also to look down on the people around us that are able to do what we are willing to do. Paul’s encouragement for the church is to not let people pass judgment on them for not prioritizing these particular expressions of Jewish practice. For example, the need to maintain a kosher diet was abolished. It became a matter of conscience for Jewish Christians and for Gentile Christians living among primarily Jewish Christians. The same can be said for Jewish festivals, new moon celebrations, and Sabbath traditions. The emphasis here is not that these things are bad in themselves, but that they do not bind the conscience of the Christian. In fact, they should not have bound the conscience of Jews either, but “human tradition” is a strong factor. The reason these things are no longer binding is because even in their OT command form they were there to point to the coming Messiah, our Lord Jesus. In Christ, we have received the promises of God’s presence with us that God gave to the Israelites in the OT. We should not feel obligated to follow Jewish customs to be faithful Christians. Likewise, Christian traditions can be given this level of authority. Authoritatively saying that Christian is sinning if they drink alcohol is part of some Christian traditions, but it is not found in the Scriptures. For the sake of time I will leave this here, but there are other examples of Christians elevating things to a place of priority for the sake of making it easy to relate to God and to look down on others. The thing to remember in this is that these human traditions are not binding on us because we are in Christ. His law of love for God and love for neighbor is our guide. Our conscience is bound by not my fear of human judgment, but by the powerful sacrifice of Christ Jesus our Lord. Why walk away from such a great salvation just so we can feel like we are contributing something to it?

Colossians 2:18-19 “Don’t be disqualified by compromising the gospel.”

In juxtaposition to the conscience binding we found in verse 16, we find a warning not to be disqualified in verses 18-19.

“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angel, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

(19) and not hold fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.”

Verse 18 gives the impression that Paul has a specific person or false teaching in mind. He says “puffed up with reason by his sensuous mind.” If he does have a specific person and false teaching in his mind, we don’t fully understand what it is. There were many false teachings going around in the 1st century AD that said the physical world is evil and only spiritual things can be good. Paul mentions asceticism and the worship of angels. Asceticism is the strict withholding of food and comforts to rid the body of dependence on this world. This idea should be familiar to most of us. The worship of angels is not very common today, but we can readily understand the temptation I think. Angels are the closest beings to the presence of God. They reflect his glory. They do not have physical bodies like us. Likewise, visions are direct messages from God, so you can see the appeal of these things. They all give the impression of closeness to God as well as access to deeper truths. The problem with all of this is that it is fool’s gold. It looks and sounds amazing, but in the end it has no value. It takes the emphasis off of Christ and points to our experience. The final determination of truth in this way of thinking is the way we feel. If we feel that something is true then we treat it as such. This is precisely what is meant by syncretism: mixing Christian teachings and other religious practices to discover deeper truths and to make the Christian faith more palatable to non-Christians. However, in Christ we find all the hope, love, and strength we need. After all, in Christ meet God himself. If we look somewhere other than Christ for God things we are wasting our time. Note the warning of disqualification. “Let no one disqualify you...” We can be disqualified in at least two ways. We can be disqualified by our lifestyle and by our confession of faith. If we are indulging our sinful desires, we disqualify ourselves. Likewise, if we hold beliefs that are contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures we are disqualified. We would not be fit to teach in the church or lead others. Embracing and teaching other people to embrace reliance on something other than Jesus is both dangerous and disqualifying. We should be extremely slow to embrace new teachings, especially when they come from sources of visions, messages from God, or new ideas discovered from sources outside of the Bible itself.

Colossians 2:20-23 “In Christ, you have all you need.”

The Apostle Paul says this himself in verses 20-23.

“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— (21) ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (22) (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? (23) 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.” There is something strange going on in these verses. The categories that we have been using to help us grapple with what the AP is saying in this passage seem to have disappeared. The line between legalism and syncretism has blurred. The “do not handle, taste, and touch” commands could refer to either side. He starts verse 20 by mentioning the elemental spirits. In verse 22, he says that these regulations refer to things that perish. They are simply earthly things that we are given the freedom to use. This is much closer legalism than syncretism.

So what is going on here? I think the answer is pretty straightforward. When you have two things that seem like extremes the two extremes are actually pretty close to each other philosophically. Both legalism and syncretism are actually attempts to give assurance and make God more present to man. They both pull us into efforts to increase our spirituality in ways not prescribed for us in the Bible. One might want to make excuses for personality and sin, while the other is trying to make us all copy cultural elements from days gone past. The point of the AP is that whether you are trying to copy today’s culture

or yesterday's, we are missing the mark. Jesus is both our goal and the means of getting to the goal. He is everything we need.

Now it is easy to say that Jesus is everything that we need, but it is another thing altogether to embrace it. We need to stop and examine what it means for Jesus to be everything we need. In verse 23, the AP mentions stopping the indulgence of the flesh. He says that legalism and syncretism can promote self-made religion, but it is not good at stopping the indulgence of the flesh. He is of course saying that the opposite is true. Faith in Christ Jesus and walking by faith can help us. When our lives are built on the foundation of Christ Jesus. When he is our head, our lives begin to take shape around his character. Very few people in the world ever have anything bad to say about the character of Jesus. Self-sacrifice, love for the needy, and self control were modeled by the Lord. The Christian's desire to make Christ known and to call people to submit to Jesus as Lord is what people find offensive. Let us be his ambassadors. Living faithful lives of dutiful obedience to his word. We have died to the world. It no longer rules over us. Our lives are hidden with/in Christ. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Embrace the Lord Jesus by faith. Be washed in the waters of baptism. Walk in the power of the Spirit of God.