

## Complete: Resisting Disordered Spirituality – Colossians 2:16-19

Did you know that one of the fastest growing religions in the United States and the United Kingdom is Wicca? There are now more than 1.5 million people in the US who identify as witches and it's growing quickly. Now, maybe when you hear about a witch you think about old TV shows that humorously present witches with magical powers, but this is something people take much more seriously than that.

The rise of Wicca points to a growing interest in spirituality in our culture. Many people are saying that this is a reaction to the secularism that has dominated western culture for quite a while. Secularism is the idea that the material world is all there is. The only thing that exists is what we can experience through our five senses. This belief reached its height about 20 years ago with the rise of the New Atheists, like Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins. Now we are seeing a reaction to secularism in the culture.

People are increasingly interested in spirituality. In other words, they are starting to think that there's more to the universe than the material. Maybe there are spiritual powers out there. And people want to connect with these powers and experience them and so they start to explore the spiritual realm. But many people want to explore the spiritual realm on their own terms rather than an organized system of belief, like Christianity. And so, they adopt certain practices from eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, and they try to get in touch with spiritual powers through wicca and the occult.

What's fascinating about this for us as Christians, is that this interest in the spiritual resembles the culture of the Roman Empire and the NT more than a purely secular culture does. In many ways our culture is sliding back toward paganism and spirituality, which is quite similar to the environment in which Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians. But of course, Paul did not embrace this pagan spirituality, and he certainly didn't want it mingling with Christianity. Paul's concern for the Colossians is that they would remain focused on Christ and connected to Christ and not give into the syncretism that was threatening their walk with Christ.

Last week we began looking at Paul's most direct attack on the false teaching threatening the church in Colossians 2:8-15. Look with me back at verse 8. The only command in that section was found in verse 8. But that's not the only command Paul has for them regarding the false spirituality they are facing. He gives two more in our text for today, Colossians 2:16-19. And these two commands form two warnings for the Colossians and for us. So, here's what we will see **2 Warnings to Keep us from Disordered Spiritual Lives.**

### **1. Don't Trust in Spiritual Strictness (vv. 16-17)**

Last week we looked at verses 8-15 and the focus of Paul's teaching about Christ in those verses is on salvation. It's on the benefits that Christ has provided for us in forgiveness and because of our union with Him.

Now beginning with verse 16 he moves to the growth process of the Christian life. The false teachers were telling the Christians that there were certain requirements placed on them if they were to fully experience spiritual growth. Notice that these requirements come in two categories; things you need to avoid and things you need to participate in. Look at verse 16.

The false teachers wanted the Colossians to abstain from certain foods and certain drinks. Then they demanded that they keep certain days as special and celebrate them in a particular way.

Now, I've told you before as we have studied Colossians that it's very difficult to know exactly what the false teachers were telling the Colossians. It's hard to fit the teaching into a clear category. Both categories sound very Jewish. Jews had certain food laws, although they didn't require people to abstain from anything particular to drink. Jews had certain days they kept out of religious duty to honor God. And these 3 mentioned in verse 16 sound very Jewish and are even mentioned in the OT.

But it's also true that most religions tend to require people to stay away from certain foods and to keep certain days as holy. So, is Paul against any sort of rules or requirements for Christians? Of course not.

And Paul is not against self-discipline to grow in the Christian life. Listen to what he says elsewhere. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. So, what is the problem that he has here in verse 16 with what the Colossians are being told? Look at the command he gives at the beginning of the verse.

Apparently, the false teachers were pronouncing judgment on the Colossians for not following their prescribed list of rules and regulations. They wanted the Colossians to avoid certain foods and to keep certain days that went well beyond what Scripture teaches and moved the Colossians away from the heart of the faith. They were telling the Colossians that if they really wanted to grow and reach spiritual wholeness and fullness that they must follow this spiritual regimen.

And Paul directly addresses this in verse 17. Look there. Notice the contrast between shadow and substance. A shadow indicates that something real is there, but a shadow is momentary and has no real substance to it. This language is used elsewhere in Scripture to show the difference between OT types, laws, and people, and the substance which they point to, which is Christ. Listen to Hebrews 10:1. This is what Paul is getting at in verse 17 when he says they are a shadow of the things to come. Now that Christ has come, we must pay attention to Him and see all of this as pointing to Him.

What this means for the Colossians and for us is that we can't let any spiritual program or extra rules or self-discipline or anything draw us away from the substance, from Christ. It can be tempting to begin to associate growth in Christian maturity with spiritual strictness, with extras, and with add-ons. Paul does not want us to be taken captive by those who insist on spirituality laced with additional regulations.

Often the demands of spiritual strictness will be placed on you to supposedly bring about life-changing spiritual experiences. And this is our next warning.

## **2. Don't Trust in Spiritual Experience (vv. 18-19)**

We have another command in verse 18. Look there. To disqualify is to rob of a prize and to condemn. The idea is that you violated the rules of the race and so cannot win. Paul clearly doesn't want this for the Colossians. So how were the

false teachers going to disqualify them? 4 Ways and 3 of them are found in verse 18. Insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind.

Let's talk about these 1 at a time briefly. To insist on asceticism is to require self-denial and harsh treatment of one's body with the belief that this will help you spiritually. Here's a modern definition that I think helps. *the doctrine that a person can attain a high spiritual and moral state by practicing self-denial, self-mortification, and the like.*

Look down to verse 23 for a further explanation of this. This harsh treatment of your body is supposed to prepare you to worship like an angel, which is the point of the phrase "worship of angels". The idea is that you bring your body under control and you discipline your mind and this raises you to a new spiritual level of worship.

Second, the false teachers were going on and on about visions they had seen. They were claiming this higher spiritual level and then talking constantly about visions and spiritual insights they had received. When you put these first two together you get the third, which is to be puffed up without reason. Spiritual pride is the result of seeking these visions through asceticism.

When you put these three actions of the false teachers together you get a pursuit of and trust in spiritual experiences. Here's how one author explained this: *This interpretation suggests that they were seeking to gain spiritual experiences which they did not know firsthand. They were always seeking new insights and experiences beyond what they knew to be reality...The best explanation is that the false teachers were inducing spiritual experiences and hoping to make them the norm for worship. Such a "spiritual orientation" is a treadmill. The seeker of these experiences can never be satisfied, and the experience becomes the hermeneutic and the authority behind spiritual life. So-called spiritual experience is everything.*  
– Richard Melick

It's very easy to get pulled onto this treadmill. To constantly get caught up in the pursuit of the next spiritual high or the next worshipful moment. It's very easy for

you to find people online or on TV who are talking about visions and experiences they have had and then claiming authority from God because of those visions. How many books are there out there of people claiming to have gone to heaven and come back again? And they are happy to tell you about it if you will buy their book and sign up for their seminar for a fee.

It's very common for people to talk about their faith and their salvation as primarily based on a spiritual experience. I'm not saying people don't have spiritual experiences, but this is often the center and ultimately becomes what people trust in.

Paul understood this emphasis on spiritual experiences to disqualify the believers at Colossae because they ultimately weren't doing the 4<sup>th</sup> thing he mentions, which is at the beginning of verse 19.

Who is the head? Look back to 1:18 and verse 24. The problem seems to be that some were beginning the Christian life and slowly being tempted to trust in spiritual strictness and spiritual experience rather than holding fast to the Head. And why should we hold fast to Christ rather than to strictness and experience? Continue in verse 19.

Christ is the head and supplies everything the church needs and everything that every part of the church needs. It's vital that we all stay connected to Christ and not to anything else. The result of connection to Christ is found at the end of verse 19. Growth that is from God. This isn't talking about numerical growth, although that may happen. This is talking about real and genuine spiritual growth. The kind the false teachers were confused about. They were offering disordered growth and not growth that is from God.

What does growth from God look like? Listen to Colossians 3:12-17. And this growth happens to all of us together, as the body of Christ, when we stay centered on and connected to Christ and don't allow disorder to creep into our spiritual lives. Let's pray.

### Sermon Reflection Questions – 5/3/26

- How have you heard the phrase “spiritual but not religious” used?
- How do you understand the differences between secularism and spirituality in our culture?
- Have you seen an increased interest in spirituality in those around you who aren’t believers? If so, what does this look like?
- How does Colossians 2:16-19 relate to Colossians 2:8-15?
- Explain what “spiritual strictness” means in 2:16 and why Paul is concerned about it.
- Spiritual strictness typically comes in one of two categories: things to avoid and things required. Can you give some modern day examples of these that Christians are sometimes tempted with?
- Where else does the Bible use the contrast between shadow and substance?
- What are the four ways the false teachers were trying to “disqualify” the Colossians? Explain each of them as you mention them.
- What is asceticism? What would a modern day example of this be?

- What are some ways we can be tempted to make spiritual experiences the primary focus of spiritual growth?
- How does one hold fast to the head?
- How would you describe growth from God in the local church?