

Colossians 2:16-23  
*“The Emptiness of the False Gospel”*

**Introduction:**

In this passage Paul began to refute some of the specific things that were being taught in the Colossian Church. Along with attempting to pervert their approach to worship, the false teachers were attempting to lure the Colossian believers into embracing a form of “*legalism*”. Legalism in its various forms is the effort to try to merit God’s approval or acceptance through one’s own righteousness. This approach can be focused either on gaining God’s approval in an ultimate sense (gaining eternal salvation), or gaining God’s approval in a temporal sense (to secure blessings in this life). The false teachers in Colossae were promoting a type of legalism that they claimed was necessary to gain eternal life.

In verse eight, Paul had clearly expressed the central concern that led him to write to the Colossians. In that verse he warned the Colossians about the hollow and deceptive philosophies of the false teachers. This same central point is at the heart of this passage. In verse eight, Paul had justified his warning in two ways. Positively, by characterizing the teaching as human and demonic in origin, and negatively, by asserting that the teaching was not based on Christ. Repeating that warning in these verses, Paul wrote explicitly that this new teaching in Colossae was based on merely human commands and teachings, and indirectly, he wrote that it had its origins in the evil spirits of the world. Paul added that their teaching was askew because these teachers were not holding on to the head of the Church, Jesus Christ.

**I. False Ceremonialism: (vs.16-17)**

Paul began this passage by writing, “*So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths*” (vs.16). The first word in this verse, “*so*” is a translation of a conjunction that indicates that the warnings contained in this, and the following verses were rooted in what Paul wrote about the complete sufficiency of Christ in the previous verses (vs.8-15). The English verb “*judge*”, like its Greek counterpart, primarily refers to the process of discriminating or evaluating evidence about a person or a thing so as to make a decision about the truth of that person or thing. However, it can, as it does here, refer simply to the conclusion of that process, and when used in this way it refers to the pronouncement of one’s conclusion, the rendering of a judgment, passing sentence. Paul used an imperative form of this Greek verb, and that form conveys an exhortation. In this case, Paul was not urging the Colossians to refrain from judging others but was urging them not to be judged by others. Since the verb here has the sense of passing sentence, he was urging them to accept the condemnation of the false teachers. The implication then is that the false teachers were telling the believers in Colossae that their eternal destiny was at risk over matters of food, drink, festivals, new moons, and sabbaths. Paul was urging the Colossian saints to reject such pronouncements by those false teachers. The reference to “*food or drink*”

related to dietary codes, while the reference to “*a festival, or a new moon, or sabbaths*” related to the calendar of religious ceremonial events. Though there were Gentile cults that practiced similar observances, it is much more likely that the false teachers were attempting to convince the believers at Colossae to observe certain aspects of the Mosaic Law as part of what was necessary to maintain a right standing before God (though it seems that their interpretation of the Mosaic code was also influenced by popular pagan ideas). Therefore, Paul was warning the church to make sure they did not give in to the persuasive arguments of the false teachers. They were not to allow themselves to be brought into bondage to any of these ceremonial laws, for they had been set free, by God, through Christ, from those obligations. If the Colossians allowed these false teachers to sit in judgment over them in regard to these ceremonial laws, they would be living out their Christian lives in a way that was contrary to what they had originally been taught. This teaching was not only contrary to Paul’s teaching, it violated the consensus that had been reached by all the Apostles on these issues at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), which had taken place a dozen years earlier. Submitting to such teaching would have a devastating impact on their understanding of the faith and on their ability to live their lives in a way that was truly pleasing to God, because these teachings were hostile to the truth that is in the Gospel of Christ.

In order to understand why such teaching would be so compelling to first century Christians, we need to understand how Jews and Gentile proselytes were taught to view the ceremonial laws of the Mosaic Covenant. Above all, the purpose of the laws regarding what was clean or unclean was to teach His people an important principle about having a relationship with God. Ceremonial cleanliness related to an individual being fit to participate in the worship of the holy God in His Temple (or prior to its construction, in the Tabernacle). God’s presence dwelt in the sanctuary of the Temple, therefore this structure was considered to be a holy site, and because it was, those who were not cleansed of their sin were not to be tolerated within it. God was using the imagery of being clean to symbolize the idea of being morally pure. Therefore, those who were ceremonially unclean were to be separated from the place of worship, and this was meant to picture the reality that ultimately no one could be in God’s presence unless their sin had been cleansed away. Therefore, to be ceremonially clean granted an individual varying degrees of access to the presence of the life-giving God in the sanctuary, whereas being unclean, meant that to various degrees one would be separated from the life of God. By the time of the first century, this perspective was deeply ingrained in those who had been involved in Judaism prior to embracing the Gospel. Not only were the false teachers demanding obedience to dietary laws for cleanliness to prepare for heavenly temple worship in the afterlife, they also were requiring that the people observe the traditional Jewish holidays in order to be eligible for such temple worship. The reference to “*sabbaths*” relates to the question of whether or not, Sunday is to be seen as the Christian Sabbath, in which the prohibition of work still applies. Some Evangelicals argue that the only Sabbath observance that Paul was condemning here was that which was inappropriately connected to a wider religious

viewpoint, not Sabbath keeping in general. However, since Paul, without qualification, can relegate Sabbaths to shadows (vs.17), this certainly indicates that he did not see them as binding, and this makes it extremely unlikely that he could have seen the first day of the week as a continuation of the Sabbath. Instead, Paul was calling into question here the entire idea of Sabbath observance, for the language and logic of verse seventeen suggests that the primary problem with Sabbath observance was a failure to reckon with how the coming of Christ represented the fulfillment of such institutions. Therefore, in a similar way to Romans 14:5, this verse can validly be used to conclude that the observance of a Sabbath day was no longer a requirement for God's people in this the Messianic age.

Continuing in the same flow of thought, Paul next wrote that the things he mentioned in verse sixteen were, "*a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ*" (vs.17). Paul used the relative pronoun "*which*" to refer collectively to the prohibition against certain food and drink and the observance of special holy days. By referring to them collectively as a shadow, Paul was tapping into a popular Hellenistic image with its roots in well-known Greek philosophical speculation, wherein the contrast of "*shadow*" and "*substance*" were used to compare concrete things with those things that symbolically represented them. The Greek word translated as "*things to come*", could also be translated as "*what is to come*". This latter translation would naturally suggest that the things of which Paul spoke here were still to come from his perspective and that of his readers. But the context makes this interpretation extremely unlikely. That is why the NKJV translates the phrase as it does, to reflect that this phrase refers to those realities that have now come in Christ, but which were still to come from the perspective of the original institutions when they were established under the Old Covenant. Believers who belong to the new era of salvation that has come in Christ (through their incorporation into Him) experience the reality to which the Old Testament and its law pointed, and because of this Christians are no longer compelled to follow the ceremonial laws of that earlier era. The Colossian Christians, therefore, were not to let anyone insist that they observe the rules and ceremonies of that earlier era which now had passed.

The Greek word translated as "*shadow*", though it was literally used to refer simply to the shade cast by a source of light, it was also used in a number of metaphorical ways. The sense that it is used here by Paul is of a symbol that represents something real and tangible. The religious ceremonies of the Mosaic Law then were intended to symbolically represent spiritual realities that would be created by the coming Messiah. The comparison that Paul makes here is meant to convey the idea that the OT ceremonial laws, like a shadow, were transitory by nature. With the coming of the reality that they pictured, there was no longer a need for the shadow. Therefore, the false teachers were attempting to persuade the Colossians to believe in a distinctly different religion than what was revealed in the Gospel, and thus that teaching was to be resisted.

But it is helpful at the same time to recognize that the freedom from the Law that Paul wrote about here means the very opposite of license, and has nothing in

common with the sort of selfish individualism that has as its highest ambition to simply do whatever it wants. Rather, the whole aim of the freedom that Paul taught was that the pursuit of love be done because it is what one wants to do, rather than it being only something that one must do. Paul wanted his converts above all things to be holy, to live a life yielded to their Redeemer, who is also their Master.

## **II. Perverted Worship: (vs.18-19)**

As Paul continued, he wrote, “*Let no one cheat you of your reward*” (vs.18a). This eight-word clause in English is a translation of three Greek words that could more literally be translated as “*let no one disqualify you*”. The words “*your reward*” have no correspondence in the Greek text, they simply represent an elaboration on the Greek term that is translated in the NKJV as “*cheat*”. The Greek word itself means to disqualify, and this is why the NKJV added the inherent idea included in the concept, of not letting the false teachers deprive them of their rightful prize. There was extensive use of this term in contexts about athletic competitions. This particular word seems to be a stronger and more picturesque way of saying that these saints were not to allow themselves to be judged. In this context, the disqualification that is implied, is one’s standing in Christ. In some contexts, this Greek word was used to refer to someone acting as an umpire against someone in an athletic competition, in the sense of rendering an adverse decision against them. However, since the evidence for the use of this word with this particular nuance during Paul’s time isn’t very strong, it is best to understand it as simply a stronger word that conveys the idea of “*judge against*” in the sense of condemnation.

Then Paul went on to write about some additional matters concerning which these believers were not to allow themselves to be judged. The false teachers were apparently pressuring the Colossians to believe that they needed to be “*taking delight in false humility and worship of angels*” (vs.18b). The next teachings that the Colossians were to resist was introduced as things the false teachers “*delighted in*”. The Greek word translated as “*delight in*” basically refers to wanting or being willing to do a given thing. Since the word is used in reference to something that was being used as a standard by which to pass judgment on the Colossians, the translation “*delight in*” seems appropriate as it expresses that it was the enthusiasm of the false teachers in these things that the Colossians were being taught to emulate. Paul wrote that the false teachers delighted in “*false humility*”. This is actually a very interpretive translation, because in the Greek text there is no word that means “*false*”, Paul simply made reference to these false teachers delighting in “*humility*”. The reason that the NKJV chose this interpretive reading is because Paul would never have categorized genuine humility as something to be shunned, in fact elsewhere in this very letter Paul pointed these believers to humility as a virtue they were to pursue (3:12). In addition to this, the focus on a works-oriented way of gaining favor represents a manifestation of pride, not humility. Therefore, most likely Paul was being ironic or sarcastic, referring to what the false teachers felt demonstrated their humility, but which actually

demonstrated their arrogance. The expression “*delight in humility*” suggests that what Paul was referring to was not a claim to having a humble posture or manner before others, but rather engaging in acts of religious discipline that supposedly showed their humility. This interpretation fits well with the next thing that Paul said these false teachers delighted in. They also delighted in “*worship of angels*”. The words “*of angels*” in the Greek language represents what is grammatically known as a genitive expression. There is a certain ambiguity in this sort of expression because it could legitimately refer either to the worship of angels, or to worship by angels. In recent years scholars have favored the idea that Paul was referring to angelic worship of God. According to this interpretation the false teachers were seeking either to join with the angels as they worshipped God, or they sought to emulate that worship. Scholars point out that such a participation with angels in the worship of God in heaven is something that is featured in many Jewish mystical and apocalyptic writings, and that this idea fits well into the context, since later in this verse Paul wrote about these false teachers engaging in visionary experiences (which was also a prominent part of the worship that was written about in those ancient Jewish sources). However, from a purely linguistic point of view the phrase more likely means worship offered to angels rather than worship offered by angels, as there is no clear case where this particular phrase is used in existing literature in that particular way. It is also true that while many Jewish apocalyptic texts refer to angelic worship, and some refer to humans observing or imitating that worship, very few speak of humans actually joining with angels in such worship. Therefore, it’s questionable whether this simple phrase would have been capable of connoting such a relatively rare and complicated concept. Finally, is the matter of Paul’s choice of words, he did not choose the usual terms that are used in the New Testament to refer to the worship of God, rather he used a term that tended to be used by ancient authors that referred to pagan rituals and outward practices, but which did not focus on things like one’s attitude in worship, prayer, praise, thanksgiving and singing, which are all prominent aspects of New Testament worship. Therefore, it is far more likely that Paul was saying that the false teachers were involved in worshipping angels. This would explain why in this letter Paul put so much effort into accentuating the superiority of Christ over other spiritual beings (including angels). The effort to minimize the significance of angels in the minds of the Colossians would make perfect sense if they were being exhorted to worship angels. A plausible background for why the worship of angels might be compelling comes from the historical reality that in the first century it was common in both Jewish and Gentile circles to invoke help from angels or good spirits to ward off evil spirits and demons. This was true in general at this time, but particularly so in the geographic region of Colossae. Paul then would be characterizing this calling on angels and relying on them for protection as tantamount to the worship of angels. Historical research has demonstrated that there was a great deal of syncretism in the Judaism of first century Asia minor, and it appears that because of this, that some of the beliefs that the Jews had of angels was influenced by Hellenistic demonology.

Next Paul wrote, “*intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind*” (vs.18c). There is a textual issue in this verse that is revealed when we put two different translations of the first phrase of this clause next to one another:

| NKJV-2:18c                                               | NASU-2:18c                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| intruding into those things which <i>he has not seen</i> | taking his stand on visions <i>he has seen</i> |

The main difference relates to whether or not there was a negative particle in the original text. Most modern textual scholars are convinced that the negative particle “*not*” wasn’t originally part of the text. The next question relates to understanding the nature of what Paul was describing in this clause. In the Greek text this clause is made up of three words. The first word is a relative pronoun, best translated as “*which*”, and it functions as the object of the verb. And the finite verb is the next word, it means to see, and is in the perfect tense, meaning it describes an action that took place in the past, but that has an ongoing impact that lasts to the present. The final word is a participle, and it is translated in a variety of ways by different interpreters:

- Intruding
- Taking one’s stand
- Entering

The basic lexical meaning of the word is to enter into something. It can convey this meaning in either a literal or a figurative sense. The best reconstruction of what was intended in this clause is that Paul was referring to the false teachers’ entrance into something they had seen. Linguistic evidence points to the idea that the participle “*entering*” was used to refer to ritual initiation in the local mystery religions. This clause then refers to visionary experiences that occurred in that ritual initiation. The experience and content of whatever vision they claimed to have had served as the basis for the spiritual knowledge that these rival teachers at Colossae argued should give them authority over the saints at Colossae. In the visions which the false teachers claimed to have, they supposedly gained the insight that God wanted His people to observe the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law, engage in ascetic discipline, and worship angels. What these false teachers did is what false teachers often do, they were arrogant, priding themselves on their supposedly superior intellect, experience, and status, suggesting that the rest of God’s people should submit to them in light of these things. In response to this posture, Paul wrote that instead, the teacher was “*vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind*”. Throughout the letter, at various points, Paul referred to the source of the false teaching as being either singular or plural. The implication is that there was more than one person involved, but that it was led by one key individual. So, here the focus is on the leader among these heretics. The Greek word translated as “*vain*” refers to something that is empty or worthless. The Greek word translated as “*puffed up*” literally referred to something that was inflated or swollen. Just as with modern terminology this led to it being used figuratively to refer to pride. The

source of that pride was not a spiritual mind, but one governed by the teacher's fallen nature. This was a biting indictment of the character of this shamanistic teacher. He was profoundly arrogant. His unique spiritual experiences had caused him to see himself as superior to the Colossian believers, possessing knowledge that they did not have, and consequently he arrogated to himself the right to judge the Colossians, to disqualify them, and to dictate to them how they should live. Paul described this false teacher as being unjustifiably conceded. His conceit is given as the reason for the man's baseless assertions. Though he claimed superior visionary experiences, in reality he hadn't experienced anything but his own illusions, and his assumption of humility through his ascetic practices was actually fueled by pride. The ironic nature of the claims was further illustrated by the reference to his carnal mind. Paul was accusing the false teacher of having a mind that was controlled by his darker nature, which contradicted the man's claim of having had heavenly visions that gave him profound spiritual insight directly from God.

Next Paul wrote, "*and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God*" (vs.19). The Greek word translated as "*holding fast*" refers to grabbing or grasping something tightly. Though it can be used literally, the word is used here metaphorically, and negatively to refer to the false teachers as those who have not remained rooted in their relationship to Christ but rather had strayed from this. The overall expression means that they had lost connection with Him, probably implying that the false teachers had risen within the larger Christian community. In this verse, the metaphor of "*head*" refers both to authority and source, and through this metaphor Paul was conveying that the false teacher was not living in submission to Christ's authority, nor was he drawing spiritual life from Him. As the rest of the verse indicates, the metaphor of the human body governs Paul's imagery here. And the use of this imagery was not unique to Paul, many ancient writers used the analogy of the physical body and particularly the head/body relationship, applying it to a wide variety of subjects since the head was considered to be the animating and directing part of the body. The analogy would usually connote either authority or empowerment, and often both. The idea here is that Christ is the authority to whom the Church should look for its rules and commandments and as the One who empowers the members to grow spiritually. The Greek word translated as "*nourished*" means to be equipped in the sense that it is given what it needs to function properly. Paul wrote that this nourishment is furnished through the joints and ligaments which are used as channels to facilitate healthy growth. In Paul's metaphor here, each believer is said to be one that forms a vital connection with Christ the head. Each believer is pictured as being joined to Christ, and thus they all become the joints and ligaments by which the Church is supplied with energy and life. The heretical teachers, since they lacked real contact with Christ, cut themselves off from the source of spiritual vitality necessary for healthy growth. The Greek terms referred to here as ligaments and sinew refer to the small bands or fasteners that connected the parts of the body. The word "*ligaments*" refers to the tissues that connects bones to other bones within the joint,

and the word “*joint*” (more literally “*sinew*”) refers to the tissue that connects muscles to bones. Paul’s main point here is not how the members facilitate growth, but how the ultimate source of the body’s growth is Christ, its head. It is through Him that the body grows as God causes it to grow. The growth that Paul had in view here was probably the growth and maturity of the existing members of the body rather than the growth of the body by the addition of new members. The phrase “*grows with the growth from God*” identifies the ultimate source behind the growth of the body as God the Father. The presence of God and Christ as dual agents was already given in Paul’s description of the first creation (of physical things-1:16-17) and second creation (of the new person-1:18-20). Paul discussed the theology of Christian growth with two specific reference points that were foundations of the false teachings. The first was asceticism which related to the strict observance of the Law. In response to this Paul taught that the Christian has been forgiven and thus has satisfied the law’s demands. Therefore, no person should succumb to the critical and dominating spirit which prevailed in those circles. The second was angel worship, regarding esoteric and ecstatic spiritual experiences of worshipping the angels. Christians should realize that they need only Christ. The objective truth must prevail. What Christ did and what He taught us should determine our understanding of spiritual reality, not our experiences.

### **III. Worthless Asceticism: (vs.20-23)**

Next, Paul wrote, “*Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations*” (vs.20). The relationship between the verses here and the first verse of chapter three is obvious, the continuing focus on the teachings that characterized the philosophy of the false teachers indicates that these verses are more closely connected with the portrayal of the false teaching in the preceding verses than with what follows. They function as the climax of Paul’s discussion of this false teaching, and it leads naturally to the contrast to this teaching which is found in the next passage (3:1-7). The conditional clause that begins with the word “*if*” is framed as a first-class conditional clause. This sort of conditional clause indicates that the condition is assumed to be true for the sake of discussion. However, even though the condition is assumed to be true, it should still be introduced by the conjunction “*if*”, because this grammatical form was not used to make a statement it was used to invite the reader to consider the implications of the clause.

Using a more direct reference than before, Paul reminded the Colossian believers once again that they had died with Christ (in verse twelve he had written that that they were “*buried*” with Him, expressing essentially the very same idea), and that this death had separated them from “*the basic principles of the world*”. As observed when looking at verse eight, this expression referred to the “*elementary spirits*” of the world, the evil spirits that are in league with the devil in his resistance to God and His purposes. This title was an equivalent expression to “*principalities and powers*”. Here Paul began to directly challenge the claims of the false teacher. The use of this title “*basic principles*” again clarifies what Paul was writing about in the

previous reference to the worship of angels. While the false teacher may have believed that his worship was directed toward benign spiritual beings who were allies of God, Paul made it clear that this teacher was actually submitting to the evil forces that were hostile to God. Paul made it clear that these spirits were not of God, they were of the world. When Paul wrote that the believers had died to these spirits, he meant that any and all connection with them had been severed, they were completely cut off from the sphere of their authority, and thus they were not in any way subject to their power. Therefore, to give any acknowledgment to those spirits was contrary to the very nature of what it means to be a Christian. Of course, Paul was not implying that believers do not continue to live in the world. His point rather was that believers no longer count the world as their true home or as the place that dictates who they are or how they are to live. By dying with Christ, believers have been set free from this world and the spirits that have sway in it. Therefore, how foolish it is to submit to a set of teachings that has its source in worldly spirits. It is helpful to remember at this point that the Greek word translated as “*regulations*” is “*dogma*”. This Greek term was used in the first century in much the same way as it is today. It represented an essential part of a particular teaching, the rules or principles that gave structure and definition to a religion or way of life. Being dogmatized meant to come under the rule of this particular dogma. Since the dogma being circulated in Colossae was non-Christian, it was by nature hostile to a spiritually healthy Christian life. The problem at Colossae then was that the believers there were willingly embracing a system of thought that was contrary to Christianity.

Next, Paul, quoting the teachings of the heretic, wrote, “*Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle*” (vs.21). It is very unlikely that Paul was quoting the rules as the false teachers themselves presented them, rather, as the somewhat sarcastic tone of the staccato listing of these rules suggests, Paul was giving the Colossians his own interpretive paraphrase of what those rules amounted to. Though some interpreters associate these rules with various ascetic practices, it is more likely, given the general nature of the terms employed, that the three terms are simply an emphatic way of referring to the same food regulations that were addressed in verse sixteen, and that they in turn represented a collection of different laws regarding ceremonial cleanliness before God. And given Paul’s deep concern about these things, the false teacher must have been promoting these laws as part of the means necessary for attaining salvation.

Next, Paul wrote, “*which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men?*” (vs.22). Grammatically, the antecedent of the relative pronoun translated as “*which*” are the regulations noted in the previous verse, while the phrase “*perish with use*” refers to the material things that the rules related to. The reference to these things perishing was meant to express that they and the rules about them were by their very nature (since they involved physical objects) rooted in what is temporal, whereas the Christian life is by nature eternal. Paul’s point was that the heretical teaching was not in harmony with the basic nature of Christianity, which involves the change of one’s heart and

mind that leads to genuine holiness. Jesus made a very similar point in his rebuke of the Pharisees for their preoccupation with their own rules of ritual uncleanness (Mk.7:15). And both Jesus and Paul's teaching reflected a spiritual truism that was originally expressed by Yahweh Himself through the prophet Isaiah:

*"Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths, and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandments of men"*

Isaiah 29:13

This indicates that the type of idolatry that was manifesting itself among the Colossians was one where they were replacing the proper worship of God with a manmade set of doctrines that subverted the revelation from God.

The asceticism that was influencing the church affected both those who were Jews and those who were Gentiles. This was because similar ascetic practices were common in both Judaism and many Gentile religions and philosophies.

Next Paul wrote, *"These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh"* (vs.23). In the English language, the order in which words and clauses appear in a sentence is very important, it plays a key role in how the sentence is to be understood. Therefore, if one changes the order of words or clauses in English, it will invariably change the meaning of the sentence. This is simply not true in ancient Greek. Instead, the order in which words and clauses come in can also convey that those words and clauses are receiving emphasis. This is important because the order of the clauses in verse twenty-three gives an English reader a slightly different understanding of what Paul wrote than what Paul intended. In order to understand the structure of the verse, the reader must identify the main clause in the verse and then determine what it means, and this in turn will reveal which clauses are subordinate to the main clause. According to the leading Greek grammarians, the correct way to read the verse is to recognize that the main clause is *"false humility, and neglect of the body are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh"* (it is helpful to be aware that the conjunction *"but"* is not a translation of a Greek word in the text, but was inserted to make sense of the literal word order). Subordinate to this is the clause *"these things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion"*. As we examine the wording itself, we find that we have a similar situation in this verse to what we saw in verse eighteen. In that verse the translation inserted the word *"false"* to qualify the word *"humility"*, even though no Greek word for *"false"* was in the text. As noted, when examining that verse, this was done to clarify what the translators thought was the true idea in the text. In the same way in this verse, the translation inserts the words *"appearance of"* before *"wisdom"* even though in the Greek text there is no word that modifies *"wisdom"*. Again, though it is a questionable translation decision, the choice does reflect Paul's intended meaning. This is because the entire passage takes a strong negative attitude toward this system of teaching that was being disseminated in Colossae, revealing that Paul was diametrically opposed to it.

Therefore, it is very clear that Paul was speaking ironically or sarcastically. Meaning, that though the false teachers were declaring themselves to be wise, and though this was convincing to some, the reality was that they had only an appearance of wisdom. A wisdom of this world, a kind of wisdom that is at home in this world, but one that is foolishness in the eyes of God. Therefore, what has been implicit in Paul's argument throughout this letter to this point now becomes explicit. The claim of the false teachers that they offered a wise and comprehensive system of spiritual growth, was nothing but a sham. It couldn't be any other way since their teachings were not rooted in Christ. For Paul has made it clear that in truth, all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ (vs.3). The Greek word translated as "*self-imposed religion*" actually would be better rendered as "*self-made religion*". It is a type of idolatry, wherein one worships something of one's own making rather than worshipping the Creator in harmony with what He has revealed about Himself (a point alluded to earlier).

Then we come to the main idea in the verse, "*false humility, and neglect of the body, are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh*". And as it was in the reference in verse eighteen, again the word "*false*" modifying "*humility*" is once again an interpretive insertion. And, once again, it correctly reflects Paul's intended meaning. Though the teacher presented himself as a model of humility through his devotion to ascetic practices, the reality was that it was a mock humility masking a system of religion that actually pandered to human pride. I have called the practices that are alluded to in this passage "*asceticism*". Asceticism refers to a system of rigorous self-discipline wherein one engages in various sorts of religious practices focused on resisting the indulgence of physical pleasures. This sort of approach is found in one form or another in almost all religious systems in the past and in the present. The whole idea of asceticism is predicated on the idea that one must master one's appetites, or one will be mastered by them. It is an approach to morality that views pleasurable experiences as threats to one's spirituality. Ironically, Paul points out here that the "*neglect of the body, are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh*". Paul's point was not that there isn't any value in self-discipline at all. Instead, he was saying that the flaw in asceticism is at the very core of the system. The belief that a person can subdue the sinful impulses within oneself by continuously denying oneself pleasure. This is the "*neglect*" that Paul was referring to. Not of needs, but a consistent denial of desire. However, the reality is that desire itself is not the problem. The problem is the fallen nature that creates either evil impulses, or that drives a person to satisfy their legitimate desires in immoral ways. The power to overcome one's bondage to sin is found only through union with Christ in His death and resurrection. This is why Paul earlier referred to these important spiritual realities. Because Paul wanted to remind these believers that they already had what they needed in order to find acceptance with God and to achieve personal holiness. But instead, they were being lured away to follow a lie that would not give what was promised, but would instead steal from them the very things it promised to give them.

## Conclusion:

Paul had presented to the Colossians the fullness in Christ as the alternative to the false teaching they were receiving (vs.9-15). He did this to highlight the true solution to the problem of the flesh. In Christ, believers have the body of the flesh stripped off, curing the problem of uncircumcised flesh that in turn produced death. Paul's use of that language implies that the false teachers were promising through their attempt to placate hostile spiritual beings and their aesthetic devotional practices to take care of this problem of the flesh (the bent within fallen human humans towards self and the world, otherwise called the sinful nature).

Historically, people have always found the notion especially attractive to believe that the problem of sin lies outside of us, while the solution is found within. When one assumes this perspective then it naturally follows that we can use our inner goodness to enable us to deny those external temptations. The lure of asceticism as a way of managing the sin problem and finding true spiritual enlightenment is seen in many religions throughout human history. So, clearly it represents a natural impulse. However, it is a lie. In the Gospel, God has revealed to us that actually the problem of sin is found within us, while the solution to it is found outside of ourselves. The problem is we are born with fallen natures that are naturally attracted to evil and selfishness. This is what causes a person to sin, and until that inner nature is changed, sin cannot be defeated. That is why in the Gospel we are taught that the solution is in the person and work of God, who provides not only forgiveness for our sins, but who also transforms our hearts, progressively removing the wicked nature we had and replacing it with one that is righteous like His own.

Paul of course did not want to suggest that the appropriate discipline of the body is of no spiritual importance. He insisted that believers are to honor God with their bodies (I Cor.6:20), and this includes the refusal to allow ourselves to be dominated by improper desires. But the false teachers were both imposing rules on others that they had no right to impose and more seriously they were elevating their own rules and practices to the level of Divine commandments and were giving spiritual beings so much credit that they were in effect losing contact with Christ, the only real source of spiritual power growth. This was why the teachings of the heretics could not accomplish the subduing of the sinful nature as they had promised.

- A danger in false Christianity is the use of redefined language
- It sounds legitimate, it plays to worldly conventions, so it can be compelling
- The problem of the past (self-righteousness), the present (indifference)
- This was associated with the popularization of Evangelicalism in 60s & 70s
- Faith is timeless, not trendy, be suspicious of the ideas in age you live in