

Beware of Spiritual Fraudsters
February 5, 2017

Have you ever been part of a fad? A fad is defined as "a custom, style, product, or activity, that many people are interested in for a short time". Fads develop around types of music, styles of dress, toys, electronic devices, cooking utensils, and activities. Pet rocks and flash mobs come to mind. What fad have you been hooked on?

In the same way, there are people who never settle on one religion. They jump from one to another, to another. They are attracted to each new teaching that comes down the pike. They like to hear of new ideas and spend their days debating them.

You may know someone like this, who jumps on one religion or philosophy after another. They don't seem to believe in much of anything. They just live to follow the next new theological or philosophical idea.

There are some people on a quest for the truth of God. And they try different religions looking for something that rings true in their heart. Others are not really interested in truth at all. They just seek different kinds of experiences that center on religion or spirituality. They are spiritual junkies.

There were such people in the first century living in the city of Colossae. They had connected to the church there. Maybe they had been attracted to the church by the love the Christians lived for each other. Many people in that day were attracted to the Christian faith because of how the Christians lived. They were not partial to anyone, but treated everyone the same, They treated rich and poor, slave and free, men, women, and children with kindness and respect. Christianity was the only religion in that world to do so.

These folks had come to the church, but had not really accepted the gospel. They were involved in non-Christian spiritual practices. And there was the danger of the Christians being drawn into these non-Christian activities and beliefs. Paul the missionary has written to warn them of their danger. We pick up Paul's letter in chapter two, verse 18.

Colossians 2:18 (NIV) Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels **disqualify you for the prize.**

The prize is our salvation in Christ Jesus. It includes all the blessings he has already reminded them of. I reviewed them with you in this series. I remind you of just two.

- We are reconciled to God through Jesus, 1.20
- We were forgiven all our sins, 2.13

He lists ten in all between chapters one and two. And these 10 are not all the riches we have in Jesus. But they reveal the depth of the riches we have in Christ Jesus. Now, considering the value of these blessings, why would we do anything to mess that up? Why would we jeopardize those blessings by deserting Jesus? We would not intentionally do so. But we might get attracted by some false teaching, not realizing it is false, and be led away from Jesus. That was the danger that lay before the Colossian Christians. That is the danger that confronts us still today. Let's see what they were being tempted by.

Colossians 2:18 (NIV) Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize.

The word humility in this verse is not speaking of a humble attitude you might adopt. It refers to practices of self-denial. The common word for such practices is asceticism. We can define asceticism as "practicing self-denial, especially for spiritual reasons". Asceticism is denying yourself basic comforts or pleasures. For example, fasting is a form of asceticism. This is denying yourself food. Christian fasting is to sacrifice the desire for food, for a time, in order to focus more on prayer. While Jesus has not commanded us to fast, many Christians around the world do so.

But there are extreme forms of asceticism like living on bread and water for weeks and months, bathing, if at all, only in cold water, sleeping on the floor or ground, and whipping oneself with cords to inflict physical pain.

There are several different reasons that motivate such people to such extremes. Some people do such things to seek some kind of spiritual experience they believe to be produced in their discomfort or pain. Others do so in an effort to master their fleshly desires. Still others do so in hopes of impressing God and earning blessings from Him.

Yet God does not ask such things of us. He does not expect such things of us. Instead, He wants us to believe His promises to us in Jesus. God wants you to believe and live the blessings that are already yours in Christ. We are already fully accepted by God in Jesus. Humble yourself before Him and accept what is available to you.

Last week we looked at his first point. His first point is that we were freed from the Law of Moses. In Christ we are free from God's previous commands to those under the first covenant. That is one of the great blessings we have in Christ.

But people like rules to live by. So, often, people will make up their own religious rules. Paul speaks to that today. The ascetics like to make rules, not only for themselves, but for others too.

Colossians 2:20-22 (NIV) Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?" These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.

Before the Reformation, Martin Luther was a monk. This was before his conversion to the gospel. He was struggling to be right with God, to have peace with God, to feel that peace within himself. He would lie naked in his cell all night long in the bitter cold and he beat his body and tortured himself, trying to find peace of heart.

To the non-Christian, that sounds reasonable. That sounds like a reasonable effort to gain God's attention. But look what Paul says about such practices.

Colossians 2:23 (NIV) Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

All of man's efforts at self-religion are empty of power. All of man's efforts at self-denial produce no real inner change. In such activities they appear dedicated and disciplined, but inwardly sin rages unchecked. The anger, resentment, greed, lust, pride and other sins of the heart continue to wage war against them.

Man cannot win God's approval through self-made efforts at self-denial. Man can't earn god's blessings through asceticism, no matter how extreme. Only the Holy Spirit of God has the power to make us clean inside. And one of the blessings we have in Christ is that the Holy Spirit does His work of transforming us. Believe it. Expect it. Work with it. But don't try to substitute for it.

But people like rules. I know, there are lots of rules you don't like. But most of us like the rules we make ourselves. And we usually make rules that we find it easy to keep.

Even Christians can fall into this. It is a form of legalism. We define being a good Christian by rules. In the not-too-distant past there were many churches that had rules like "No drinking, no dancing, no card playing, and no going to movies." Christians would use such rules to define good Christians from bad Christians, or mature Christians from immature Christians, or even Christians from non-Christians. So if you were at a church that frowned on going to dances, and you went to a dance, they might accuse you of not being a Christian at all.

Legalism is still rampant in some churches. There are churches that pressure vegetarianism. There are churches that pressure certain modes of dress. There are churches that do not allow musical instruments to be played for worship. There are churches that allow only some kinds of musical instruments. There are churches that expect other Christians to fast and wonder why they do not.

While those who make and keep the rules may not boast of their success in rule keeping, you will not sense a spirit of true humility in them. You get more an attitude of spiritual pride. You sense they are thinking, "I'm a better Christian than you are, because I do these things and you do not." This is why Paul uses the description of false humility to describe them.

But there is another false teaching to watch out for.

Colossians 2:18 (NIV) Do not let anyone who delights in false humility **and the worship of angels** disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.

Here we see that some false teachers were promoting the worship of angels. They supported this by claiming to have had visions from angels. Angel worship was common among both Jews and non-Jews. In their imaginations they built hierarchies of angels. They believed that angels served as intermediaries between God and mankind. And so great attention was given to angels.

However, the Gospel says there is only one mediator between God and mankind. **The only mediator between God and us is Jesus.** Jesus is God and so can represent God to us. Jesus is also human, and so He can represent us to God. This is the importance of Jesus being both God and man. Do not try to substitute an angel or anyone else as your mediator with God.

Not too many years ago there was a lot of interest in angels among people in our country. Several books about angels became popular. For a Christian, there is a danger here. The danger is that you become bored with Jesus and start bouncing from new teaching to new teaching. This is a move away from Jesus. Look what Paul warns about such a person.

Colossians 2:19 (NIV) He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

Who is the head? What is this body he writes of? He told them earlier in his letter.

Colossians 1:18 (NIV) And he (Jesus) is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

Jesus is supreme. Jesus deserves our worship. It is right to worship Jesus, but wrong to give that worship to someone else. The apostle John, in the book of Revelation, is told twice by angels not to worship them instead of Jesus.

If you pursue angels, the devil, an evil angel, will be glad to lead you away from Jesus. He can produce counterfeit spiritual experiences. He can do some miracles. That is how he draws some away from the truth in Christ Jesus.

Be warned that if you bypass Jesus, there will be no hope for you. You will forfeit the blessings available in Christ. Don't let anyone disqualify you for the prize.

Invitation

Creating your own religion is tempting. Many in our world have adopted that idea. That is the idea that any road of religion will get you to God. But this idea assumes that God has not revealed to us the one right path to Him. That is a big assumption. It ignores the evidence in favor of Christianity as God's way for us. It ignores the message of the Holy Spirit speaking to your heart, convicting you of sin, of the truth of Jesus, and of the coming judgment before God.

Man's pride keeps him from Jesus. Humble yourself before Him today... and be saved from your sins.