

Colossians – September 21st, 2014 – Colossians 2:18-23

New aspects of Gnosticism that we discussed last week – reviewed

1. Since all matter is evil ... and the body is matter, it is therefore evil. This “fact,” as declared by the Gnostics, caused their ethics of living to gravitate towards 2 opposite positions:
 - a. one needs to obey many rules, starve, beat, and deny the body's needs – called asceticism
 - b. one can do anything he/she wants since only the spirit matters – called antinomianism
2. One can have true salvation and relationship with God only by getting to Him through the ladder of beings that exist between God and humans. This is done through having right knowledge, correct passwords, knowing proper rituals, etc.
3. Since one must get to God by climbing through the ladder of beings that exist between Him and humans, it is important to know angelic genealogies.
4. All the rules of the ascetic lifestyle need to be known in order to be kept and to enable one to properly deny the body. Thus, one needs to know all about Jewish new moons, Sabbaths, and all kinds of other religious rituals.
5. Only those who know the rules, the passwords, the rituals, can make it. They are the elites who have “knowledge.” If you want to make it, you must follow and learn only from the elite, those with the inside knowledge. (“Gnosis” = “knowledge”)

We have entitled this entire series on Colossians, “Countering New Teachings.” New (and false) teachings always have and still do drift through Christian churches. Some of the new teachings, if accepted, are fatal to the life of a church. The above Gnostic beliefs were being taught to the Colossians, which is why Paul feared for their spiritual health. After clearing up their understanding about who Jesus is, Paul gave them 3 important warnings. We have already looked at the first two, verse 8, “See to it that no one takes you captive;” verse 16, “Let no one act as your judge in regard to” what Paul sees as peripheral matters, yet matters that could ruin the Colossians walk with the Lord. We now come to the third warning.

Warning number 3

Vs. 18-19 – “Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels ... not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body ... grows with a growth which is from God.” In this verse, “prize” refers to one's spiritual reward which comes from God. “Defraud” = “deprive someone of something by use of deception.”

The new teachers at Colossae were promoting the lifestyle mentioned in point 1a.) above, that is, the ascetic lifestyle, where one obeys many rules, abases (degrade, humble, bring low) the body and its needs. One of the leading Gnostic teachers in the second century tied himself to a high cliff with the point of a jagged rock sticking in his back. For days, he showed everyone how he could abase his body's needs and its comforts. This was to help him in his spiritual growth. [Don't eat this, don't touch that, tie yourself to a rock and be in pain.]

Do you see why correct doctrine is so important? “Doctrine” = the body of teachings or instructions regarding a “belief system.” For the Christian faith, doctrine is extremely important. I have always believed and taught, that “**wrong doctrine leads to wrong living.**” Good theology (teachings about God) is life to the soul. A person can be off in some peripheral area

of the Christian faith and although his salvation may be perfectly intact, yet that wrong doctrinal thinking nearly always leads to wrong living. Obviously, in the Colossian church, wrong doctrine could have led to not only a rejection of Christ, but twisted and destructive living. Hence, Paul says, "Let no one defraud you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement."

Additionally in vs. 18, "Let no one defraud you of your prize by ... the worship of the angels." The unwholesome preoccupation with angels came about as a result of Gnostic belief in points 2.) and 3.) above. In the Bible, angels are seen to be fellow servants of the Living God along with us. They minister to us and help the Lord with the administration of His kingdom. Though very cool, angels are never to be worshipped nor held out as necessary to our salvation. But fallen angels, such as Satan, are more than eager to get humans to pay attention to them. He wants worship himself, so is it any wonder that his minions are also eager to help humans walk down the path of worshipping them? That being the case, we must ask, "From where did some of these false teachings about angel worship come?"

Pay close attention to the explanation in verse 18 as to the source of some of these teachings. They are being brought to you, not by General Electric, who bring good things to life, no, no. They are coming from any person who "takes his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind" (vs. 18b, c). Do you understand that? Someone came along and said, "I had a vision from God ... and here is what He told me." Now, how do you judge the validity of that claim, my friends? For example, let's take a man, oh, let's just pick a common name oh ... Joseph Smith. Some of you may not know who Joseph Smith was, but he was the founder of the Mormon Church, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints." He claimed to get his revelation about the new church that he was about to begin from "a vision." He got his "vision" from God, through an angel whose name was "Moroni." Mormonism started in the 1820's, in Palmyra, New York. Smith's "vision" began an entire branch of religion that has grown into millions of people. Many other humans have had "visions" that carry people down the wrong path. How do you get around this "I had a vision" phenomenon? You can hardly get around that. You say (pause) "No you didn't." "Yes I did." "No you didn't." "Yes I did." "No you didn't." "Yes I did." How do you beat this problem? They say, "Don't tell me that God didn't speak to me, He did!"

How about this one? "God told me you were going to marry me." I've heard that one used ... by the way, I didn't use it. But I've heard it used by the guy who was trying to coerce the girl into marrying him. "God told me in a dream that you were going to marry me." "No he didn't," "yes he did," "no, he didn't," "yes he did." I always tell girls who have been told that by the guy, "You tell him, 'well when He tells me, I'll agree to marry you'." Until that day, sit tight.

How does one proceed when this "vision" situation arises? Here are some Biblical guidelines on the matter. Jeremiah 23:25, "I have heard (this is God speaking) what those visionary prophets say, the ones that prophecy falsely in my name, saying, 'I had a dream. I had a dream'." God says that He didn't send them. So what do you do when someone purports to be giving you direction for your life as the result of a dream? The answer comes in Isaiah 8:20. What if I stood up here and said, "Friends, you are not going to believe what happened to me last night. I had a vision and here is what God told me." What are you going to say ... "No you didn't." "Yes I did." "No you didn't." "Yes I did."

This is what God advises. When a person comes up with a vision or prophecy supposedly from God and he presents it to you, take that vision and its content, "To the law and the testimony. If the law and testimony don't speak according to the vision, it is because there is no dawn in it" (Isaiah 8:20). If the vision is not in harmony with God's law and His previous "testimony," guess

where it came from? The “law” refers to the law of God and the “testimony” is an open expression that refers to the Bible. You want to know if my “vision” is from God? Let’s take the content of the vision and compare it to what we know to be the word of God. If the vision and God’s previous word (which we know is truth) don’t align, it is because the “vision” has no “dawn,” that is, no “light” in it. It comes from the dark side. The Colossians were naïve, they were young Christians, it takes time to mature, and here is this new teaching that claimed to be based on a fresh vision from God. But God says, “Wait a minute. Take the content of the message to the law and the testimony” and compare it. Someone might say, “Well, I don’t yet know enough of the Scripture to be able to contrast or compare this new teaching.” My counsel would be to take that new vision you’ve heard to someone you trust, who in the past has shown wisdom in knowing the things of God and the Scriptures, and ask them about the situation. Do this before getting baptized into some new religious teaching. In case you don’t have access to a person such as I just described, then know that Walter Martin’s book, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, provides tremendous help and protection down these paths. Walter Martin’s great great grandfather was Brigham Young, second prophet of the Mormon Church. His life’s work was exposing the false teachings of many different cults and protecting Christians from getting drawn into destructive religions.

Deuteronomy 13:1-4 teaches us the same thing. “If a prophet, or visionary, arises amongst you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder comes true, and then he says, ‘let’s go after other gods that you have not known,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer, for the Lord your God is testing you, to find out if you really love Him.” Have you ever noticed how new Christians are suddenly confronted with all kinds of new religious teachings? Teachings that wouldn’t have interested them in the least two months earlier? But now, suddenly, as if it’s a test, the new Christian is exposed to something goofy. The devil doesn’t want to idly stand by and let the person grow in the Lord. The Lord allows this to occur in order to test the heart of the new believer. Deuteronomy 13 alludes to this very phenomenon. I’ve seen it happen many times. Don’t become a believer in “pamphlet religion.” It may be a test. Stick with the text of the Bible, which we know to be true.

Lastly on these false visions, notice what Paul says in verse 18c. These new teachers are “inflated without cause by their fleshly minds.” The NIV says, “puffed up.” That word “inflated” or “puffed” up is pretty interesting. The Greek is “foo-see-o-o.” Look at that, 6 vowels and 2 consonants. Greek words are so interesting to me. Do you know of any English word that has 6 vowels and 2 consonants in it? Fascinating. At any rate, “foo-see-o-o,” the verb means to “inflate with air,” to “blow up with air.” Using the colloquial language of Paul’s day, he is declaring that these people are full of hot air!! For real, Paul says, “Don’t listen to these fleshly people; they are full of hot air.” The teaching regarding the worship of angels and the abasement of the body does not come from God at all.

Vs. 19 – The new teachers at Colossae were trying to give the Christians a different way to approach God. The new teachers were trying to give the Colossians the “Super-duper program” to reach up to God. But Paul says, “They do not give the super-duper program, they are trying to give you the super-**blooper** program. That is not the way you grow in Christ, that is not the way you get spiritual, that is not how you become a Christian. Instead of their way, there is a better path for growth, and Paul calls it the “holding fast to the head” program. The “head” would refer to the head of the church, who is Jesus Christ. Let’s read vs. 19 again. The new teachers are teaching abasement, and the worship of angels, but are “not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body ... grows with a growth which is from God.” See that? Paul urges us to “hold fast to Christ.” I would like to ask you, the peanut gallery, your opinion on this matter. If the key to maturity, if the key to growth, if the key to the Christian life is wrapped up

with “holding fast to the head, Christ,” what does that mean and how do we do it? Who has some ideas?

Some answers:

1. Being in the Word regularly, i.e. the Bible. Maintaining a good study, a true study, a faithful study, keeps us holding fast to the true Head of the church. If our only Bible time comes from Pastor Jeremy’s message on Sunday morning, we lack nourishment. Imagine only drinking water on Sunday morning to quench our physical thirst. On Monday through Saturday, we get constant input from the world. Imagine trying to equalize those six days out with a 30 minute “word from God” on Sunday morning! It’s hard to “hold fast to the head” in those circumstances.
2. Applying the word of God. You can study the Scriptures and have them in your head but not your heart. Holding fast to Christ is more than knowing His precepts and His ways. They must also be in one’s heart, lived out in daily life. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” said the Head of the church (John 14:15). A friend of mine, Gus Lambrides, who is now in glory and who left this earth when in his latter 90’s, use to constantly stress the importance of living for Jesus daily and not just knowing about Jesus. He would quote John 14. Listen to the verses in that John 14:15 and following section. Jesus urges us who love Him to keep “MY commandments.” Not man-made commandments, but “MY commandments.” Jesus goes on to say, “He who has My commandments, and keeps them ... it is he who loves me, and I will love him ... and I will (watch this, watch this) **and I will disclose myself to him**” (John 14:21). Do we have a sense that Jesus is distant from us, that there is no spiritual dynamic going on in our hearts? Could it be that we have not studied about Jesus and worked out moral sin in our life by keeping Christ’s commandments, thus not feeling the deep and tender “disclosure” of Christ to our souls!! We hold onto Christ by studying the Scripture, yes, by prayer, of course, but beyond that, there is a “doing” and not just talk. Because a “doing” of Christ’s commandments has something built into it that is very special. “I will disclose myself.” Can you imagine having a deep and ongoing relationship with your spouse if you are having an affair? It can’t happen. Instead, the sin puts a wall between the man and the woman as well as between us and God. Obedience is one way we hold fast to the head.
3. Maintaining a true belief about who Jesus really is. A co-worker of mine recently said, “My God would not judge a person like that and take them to task over that activity.” She went directly against what God said were His opinions in black and white verses. I said to her, “Be careful that you do not make the God of the Bible out to be a god of your own making.” She didn’t like the fact that God would call something evil and worthy of judgment when she thought that activity was okay. Her belief in who God truly is changed, to fit with her hopeful thinking. This is not the way to “hold fast to the head.”
4. We can “hold fast to the head” by staying in contact with other Christians who love the Lord themselves. What great encouragement can be gained by being with those who love Jesus, perhaps a lunch, coffee, a Bible study, small group, Sunday school class.
5. Pray daily. Can you imagine a marriage where there is no communication except incidental on Sunday mornings? How wholesome could that be? Prayer sometimes feels one-sided, as in, I am the only one talking here. But prayer needs to be figured out and pursued by those who want to “hold fast to the head” growth program. Discuss with the Lord, the daily events of your life and your concerns. Also, give Him plentiful thanks for what He has given us and for our salvation.
6. Trust Christ alone for your salvation. If we add to that message, we are in danger of going beyond Jesus and not holding fast to Him. 2 John 8-9, “Watch yourselves that you might not lose what we’ve accomplished and you lose your full reward. Anyone who goes too far and

does not abide in the pure teaching of Christ does not even have God. The one who abides in Christ's teaching, he has both the Father and the Son."

7. Allow your gift(s) to be used for service in the church community.

It needs to be observed at this point, that this "Holding fast to the head" sounds nearly identical to our lesson of four weeks ago (August 24th) when we spoke about "walking in Him." Paul's formula for growth and maturity is quite different from the Gnostic approach. His formula relates to our building a relationship with Christ, not attempting to maintain peripheral "do's and don'ts," things that we are told are important, such as: "don't grow this out, don't cut that off, listen to this, don't listen to that, wear this, don't wear that, don't play this, don't go there, etc." As we "walk in Him," and "hold fast to Him," Paul says that we "grow with a growth which is from God." We have vertical growth, growth between God and us; we have horizontal growth, growth between others and ourselves. As we "walk in Him" and "hold fast to Him," it is easier to forgive, it is easier to overlook wrongs, it is easier to accept others' quirks, which quirks we all have. Other methods of growth are wrong-headed and misguided in Paul's view.

Vs. 20-23 – In exasperation, Paul asks, "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were still *living in league with the elementary things* in the world, do you submit to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch'! things which perish with the using (like food); things which represent the commandments and teaching of men? Obedience to these things have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but they are of NO value against fleshly temptation and tempering fleshly indulgence." Paul simply can't understand why people who have been set free from "religion" and who have been accepted by the Living God would want to put themselves back under the man-made "works" program.

Law-giving and law-keeping

Early in the life of the nation of Israel, God gave them "The Law." In my early days of Bible reading, I saw references to the "Law" (or "law") in the New Testament and it confused me. I thought of the "law" in terms of "thou shalt not go over 65 mph when driving;" "thou shalt not steal office supplies at Target;" "thou shalt not kite checks;" etc. I was visualizing America's societal laws when I read about the law (or Law) in the Bible. I eventually came to understand more of this "Law" matter.

Not only are there laws given (the legal system) that govern life in the United States, God also gave His rules for living to His people. Where might we find the major body of God's laws delineated in the Bible? They would be in the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), the portion of the Bible that is known as the "Torah," which is Hebrew for "Law." When God gave Moses the law, He gave it in 3 distinct phases. Those phases are known as: The Moral Law, the Civil Law, and the Ceremonial Law. Jesus said that there are "weightier" and "lighter" aspects to the law (Matthew 23:23). The "weightier" matters of the law are found in the Moral Law of God, that is, the 10 commandments, which give us moral guidelines by which to live. The "lighter" matters are given in the Ceremonial Law.

The Ceremonial Law is defined as "The ordinances, rituals, and the ceremonies that aided in the service of God, the means of approach to God, and the worship of God." In other words, they related to the sacrifices, the cleanness/uncleanness laws, and everything associated with the tabernacle and the worship of God.

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, the ceremonial law was no longer needed and was abrogated (done away with, abolished, annulled). It was no longer needed since Jesus inaugurated a new way of approach to the Father, not through animal sacrifices, but through His own body. As Ephesians 2 says, He “abolished in His flesh ... the Law of commandments contained in the ordinances.” Hebrews 7:12 says, “When the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.” Thus, the ceremonial law and all its food, Sabbath, and holiday regulations, were done away with, they were no longer needed. Hebrews 8, especially verse 13, informs us that the ceremonial law was intended to be in effect only until the time of Jesus’ death on the cross, of which the ceremonial law merely foreshadowed.

But what is the point of all of this? A lot of the “Don’t taste, don’t touch, don’t drink, don’t do this, keep the Sabbath this way, etc.” was part of the ceremonial law that GOD GAVE!!! Thus, some of the law-keeping that the Gnostics burdened the believers of Colossae with were actually laws that came from God Himself. No wonder the Colossians were easily confused about the “necessity” of law-keeping. How do we navigate through this matter? The Scriptures will help us.

Legalism

Legalism has two separate aspects to it. It is defined:

- 1.) as law-keeping to merit salvation.
- 2.) as man-made law-keeping to advance our sanctification.

Regarding number 1.) above, Galatians 2:16 reads, “we are not justified by works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall NO flesh be justified. Rather, we are justified by faith.” And Galatians 3:21b says, “If a law had ever been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would have been based on Law.” But “life” does not come by law-keeping. It never did, not even in Old Testament days.

Regarding number 2.) above, sanctification (maturity) comes from working sinful lifestyles and sinful practices out of our life and by maturing more into Christ-likeness, living more closely in accordance to God’s Moral Law (the 10 commandments). Man-made law-keeping OR the keeping of God-given Ceremonial law that have been done away with after Christ’s death on the cross, has nothing to do with spiritual maturity. Jesus said, Matthew 15:7-9, “You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you saying, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. In vain do they worship Me, teaching as their doctrine the precepts of MEN’.”

Conclusion

How in the world, Paul asks, can one think to live according to the “elementary principles” of this world after the grace/faith program has set us free from those burdens and given us LIFE! “Don’t grow this out, don’t touch that, don’t wear that, don’t listen to that, play Rook and not solitaire,” all of these, along with the myriad of other human derived teachings have nothing to do with spiritual growth. Vs. 23, yes, “these things have the appearance of wisdom, but all that is nothing more than self-made religion” which has no power against the draw and power of sin. “Let no one defraud you of your prize.” Instead, “walk in Him,” “hold fast to the head,” who is Christ.