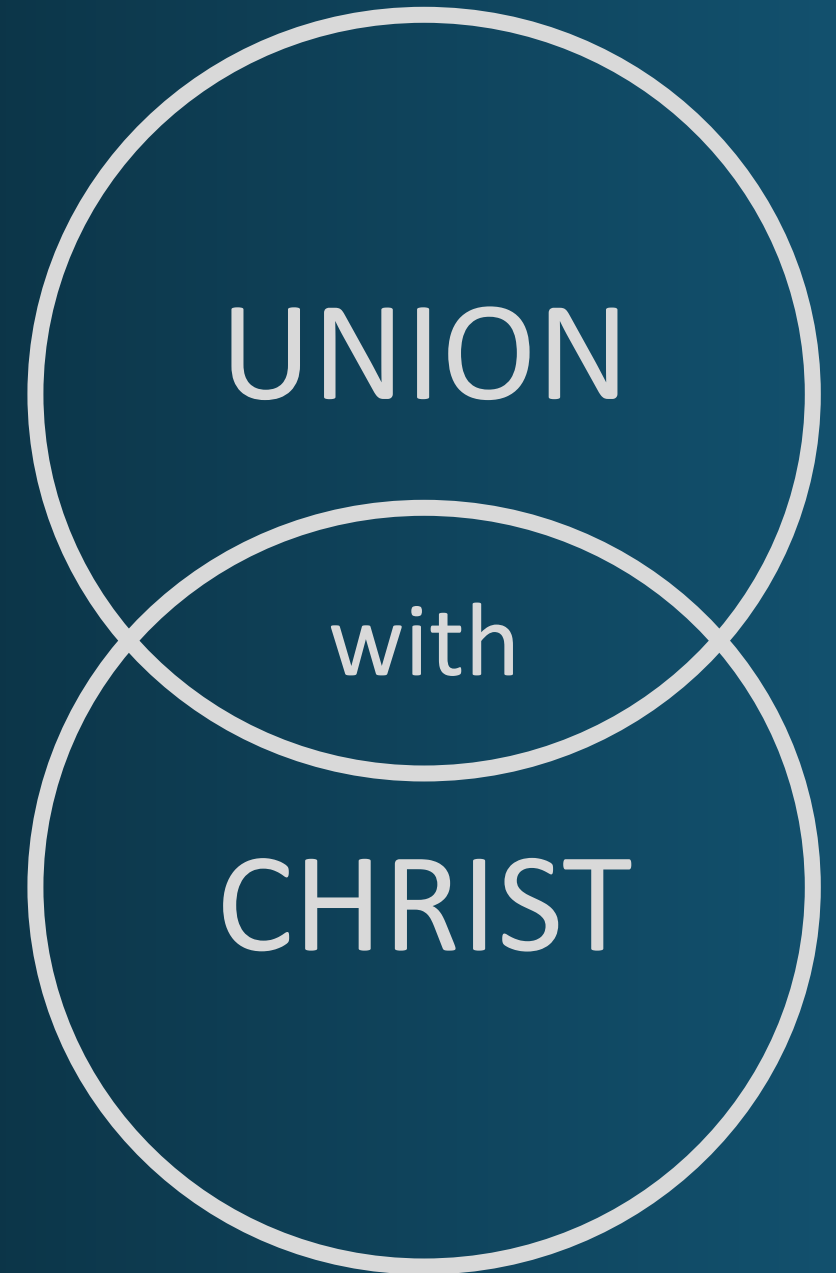


*Christ over All:
Paul's Letter to the Colossians*

“The Threats to
Union with Christ,
Part 2”

Colossians 2:16–23



TEXT – COLOSSIANS 2:16–23

THREATS TO UNION WITH CHRIST:

“Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

I. **Beware of False Standards**
(vv. 16–17)

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.”

II. **Beware of False Methods**
(vv. 18–19)

THREATS TO UNION WITH CHRIST:

“If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

III. Beware of False Outcomes (vv. 20–23)

I. Beware of False Standards (2:16–17) - REVIEW

“Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”

- Two categories of *false standards* of a particularly *Jewish* nature:
 - 1) **Dietary Laws** – the Mosaic Law distinguished between “unclean” and “clean” foods and drink.
 - 2) **Calendar Laws** – an ascending order of frequency; the terms echo OT categorization of special days of religious commemoration.
- These things had a purpose in the Mosaic Law—to cultivate faith in the coming Messiah; but He has now come, and their purpose is fulfilled.



“In order for me to become a Christian, the central pitch of Christianity to me would be getting rid of all the rituals, right? . . . I do more ritual than you [as a Catholic]. . . . Catholicism is more similar to Judaism than Protestantism by far. There’s no question. Because Catholicism . . . backfilled all the ritual.”

—Ben Shapiro, speaking to Michael Knowles

II. Beware of False Methods (2:18–19)

“Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind . . .”

- Four examples of *false methods*, of a particularly *pagan* nature:
 - 1) **Distorted Delights** – “**Self-abasement**” – the word for “humility” (as in Col 3:12); but here, from the context, it is a *mock* humility—an obsession with self that is twisted into asceticism.

“**The worship of angels**” – the *veneration* and *invocation* of angels in pursuit of communion with God; belief that angelic mediation was necessary, thus minimizing the role of Christ.

“Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind . . .”

2) Illegitimate Inquiries



- “Visions he has seen” – it was a common pagan belief that self-deprivation would lead to ecstatic interaction with the gods.
- Such “experiences” were seen as instrumental in making one more spiritual.
- Those who had these “experiences” then obsessed over every detail of the supposed vision.

“Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind . . .”

3) Baseless Boasting



- “**Without cause**” – the danger of these false methods is that they lead to *self-deception* and the baseless promotion of *self* as the *judge over others*.
- “**By his fleshly mind**” – instead of being based in reality, this self-esteem is the product of one’s carnal nature.

**“... and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body,
being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments,
grows with a growth which is from God.”**

4) Christless Connection



- **“The head”** – Christ (Col 1:18; 2:10), the sovereign, unifying, empowering One.
- **“The body”** – the church, those “in Christ” (see 1:18).
- **“Being supplied and held together . . .”** – the *unifying* and *connecting force* of Christ (see Eph 4:15–16).
- **“Grows with a growth from God”** – the only source of true spiritual vitality and growth.

Contemporary Parallels

- ✓ Obsession with externals.
- ✓ Desires for supernatural encounters.
- ✓ Claims of special revelations.
- ✓ Boasting in religious accomplishments.
- ✓ Asserting oneself as most qualified.
- ✓ Dissatisfaction with the simplicity of Christ and the gospel.

III. Beware of False Outcomes (2:20–23)

“If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as . . .” (v. 20).

- **“If”** – Paul assumes this condition to be true of his Colossian audience.
- **“You have died with Christ”** – Paul previously mentioned Christ’s death and resurrection (2:12); believers are connected to His death and resurrection through *spiritual union* (see also 3:1–3).
- **“To the elementary principles of the world”** – the fundamentals (the ABC’s) of a sinful, anti-Christ ideology; used back in 2:8.
- *Union with Christ in His death spelled the end to the bond that once bound the Colossians to these old views.*

“If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as . . .” (v. 20).

- **“Why?”** – Assuming the condition (“you have died with Christ”) to be true, Paul asks a rhetorical question.
- **“The world”** – the *sinful system*, made up in part by these “ABC’s.”
 - **“Submit yourself to decrees”** – “to put oneself under obligation to rules or ordinances.”
 - Essentially, Paul asks why the Colossian believers would go back to the tyranny from which they were freed through Jesus Christ (see Galatians 3:1–3; *5:1, 13).



“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer *to things destined to perish with use*)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?” (vv. 21–22).

- Paul provides three examples of the kind of “decrees” (prohibitions) with which the false teachers were attempting to burden the Colossians:



- 1) **“Do not handle”** – having extended exposure to something labeled as *unclean* (food, mundane objects).
- 2) **“Do not taste”** – partaking of food labeled *unclean*.
- 3) **“Do not touch”** – coming into contact with things designated as *unclean*.

“But a pure fast is what I created, with a pure heart
and pure hands. It releases sin. It heals diseases. It
casts out demons.”

—Apocalypse of Elijah 1:20–21

“Hence, in order to the putting of demons to flight,
the most useful help is abstinence, and food, and
suffering of affliction.”

—Pseudo Clement *Homily* 9.10





- The “stylites” were “pillar dwellers”—5th cent. ascetics who lived on the top of tall columns.
- Simeon Stylites the Elder was the first, who ascended a column in AD 423 and remained there 36 years until his death.
- The stylites believed that depriving their bodies of foods and comforts would bring them closer to God and ensure their salvation.

“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?” (vv. 21–22)

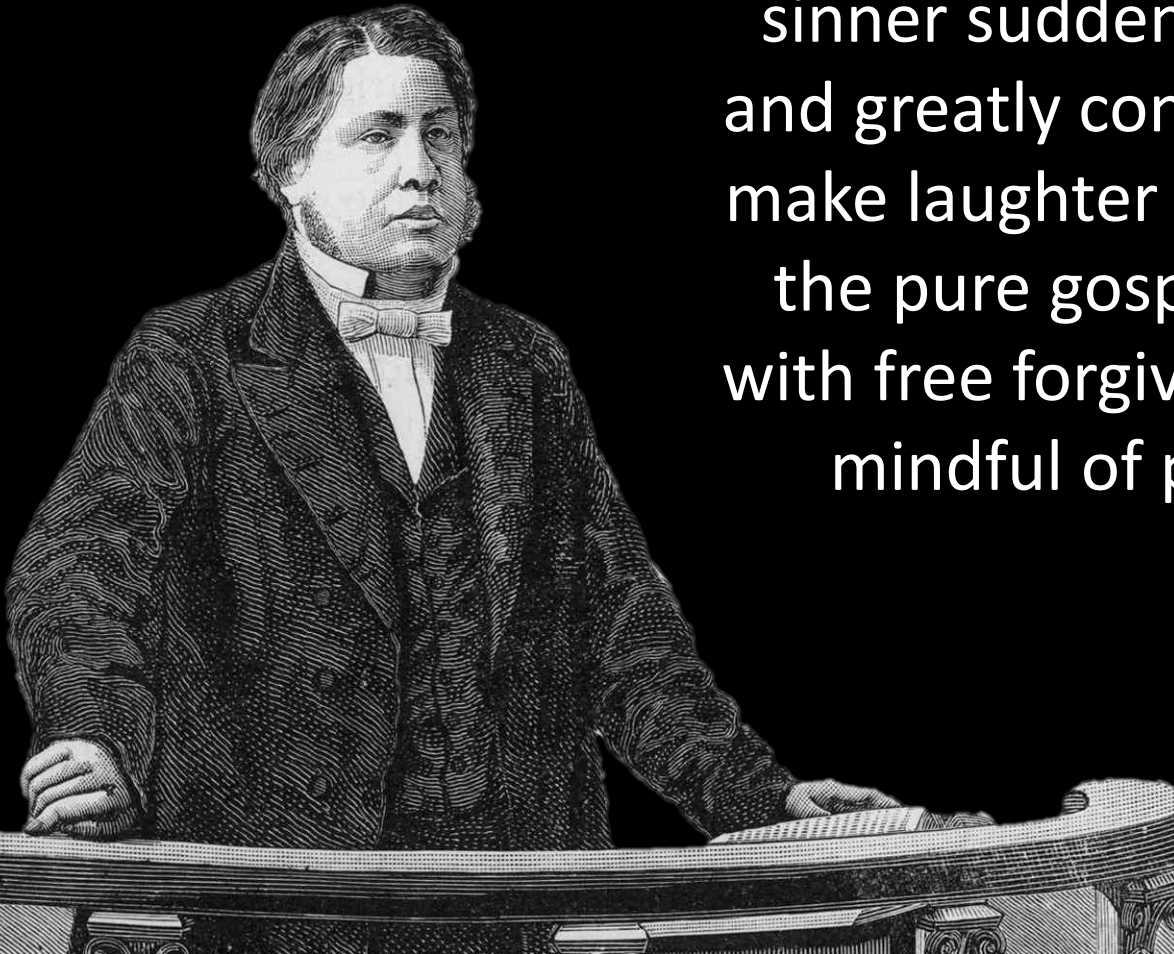
- **“Things destined to perish with use”** – these mundane, material things decay as they are used or eaten, turning into *nothing*.
- In other words, *these things are not what matter most; they are not ultimate realities!* See Matthew 15:11.
- **“The commandments and teachings of men”** – a reference back to 2:8; these laws are not *divine* in origin; see also Mark 7:1–13.
- Adding laws and prohibitions to the gospel is just as appealing to sinful flesh as abandonment to wanton immorality.

“These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (v. 23).

- Paul identifies the *false outcome*: **“the appearance of wisdom.”** He defines it in three ways (paralleling the three prohibitions of v. 21):
 - 1) **“Self-made religion”** – man-made, do-it-yourself religion.
 - 2) **“Self-abasement”** – external, feigned humility.
 - 3) **“Severe treatment of the body”** – self-flagellation.
- **“No value against fleshly indulgence”** – this approach with all its laws and efforts utterly fails to achieve that which it claims.

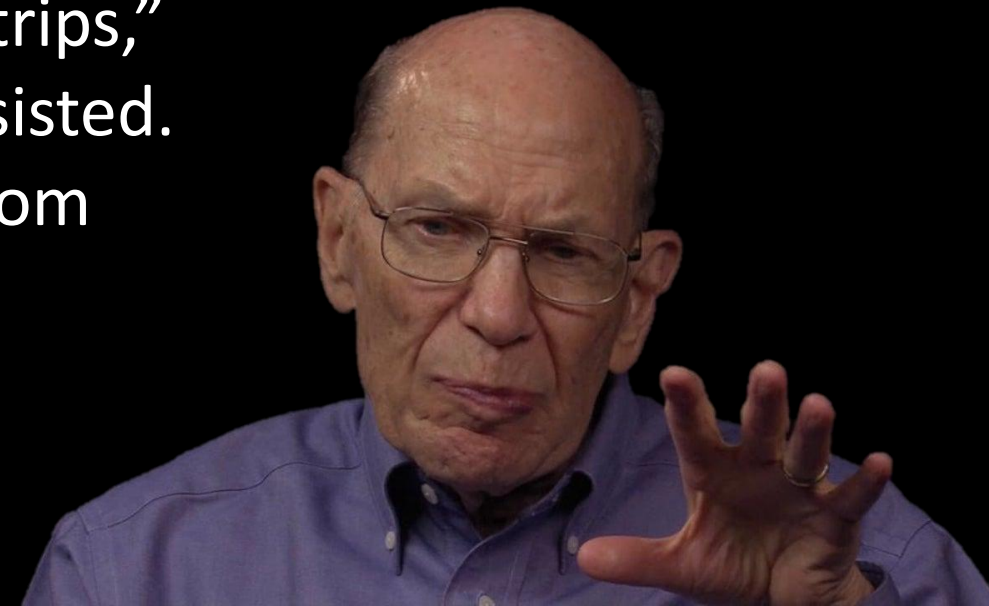
“It would appear that God does not know the best way of saving men, and men are so wise that they amend His methods! Is not this a refinement of blasphemy? It is a hideous farce to see a rebellious sinner suddenly become jealous about good works and greatly concerned for public morality. Does it not make laughter in hell to see licentious men censuring the pure gospel of the Lord Jesus and finding fault with free forgiveness because it might make men less mindful of purity? It makes one sick to see the hypocrisy of legalists.”

—Charles Spurgeon



“Aggravating all of these areas (of legalism) is a class of people who have come to be known as ‘controllers.’ These are people who are not willing to let you live your life before God as you believe He is leading you. They have all the issues buttoned down and have cast-iron opinions about all of them. These people only know black and white. There are no gray areas to them. They insist you live your Christian life according to their rules and their opinions. If you insist on being free to live as God wants you to live, they will try to intimidate you and manipulate you one way or another. Their primary weapons are “guilt trips,” rejection, or gossip. These people must be resisted. We must not allow them to subvert the freedom we have in Christ.”

—Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, 130–131



“Make no laws upon the saints where Christ hath not made any.”

—Walter Cradock



“The protest against the imposition of human authority on the Christian soul is made not in the interest of self-will, but from reverence to the only voice that has the right to give autocratic commands and to receive unquestioning obedience.”

—Alexander Maclaren

Application

- ✓ The sinfulness of sin manifests itself not only in gross immoralities but also in acts of fervent religious devotion.
- ✓ The misappropriation of Scripture leads to destructive error; the issue is not whether you use Scripture, but how.
- ✓ Never underestimate your own propensity to place confidence in religious achievement.
- ✓ Center your spiritual disciplines intentionally in the all-sufficient person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the gracious union you have with Him.

