

False Philosophies

Introduction. Today, with advanced media capability, there is an onslaught of false teaching of unprecedented proportions. On every side, the sufficiency of Jesus Christ is either openly or implicitly denied.

False philosophy has infiltrated the church in the guise of psychology, which is all too often viewed as a necessary supplement to God's word. In Colossians 2:16-23, false teachers were telling churches in the Lycus Valley that Jesus Christ was not sufficient, and they needed something more. These people believed they were privy to a higher level of spiritual knowledge and the secrets of spiritual illumination. This higher, hidden truth was beyond Jesus Christ and His word.

The "something more" that the false teachers offered was a syncretism of pagan philosophy, Jewish legalism, mysticism, and asceticism. Because the Colossians had Christ, and He is sufficient, they did not need to be intimidated by the false teachers. We are going to examine three false philosophies which were drawing the Colossians away from Christ.

I. **Legalism**

- A. Legalism is the religion of human achievement. It argues that spirituality is based on Christ plus human works. It makes conformity to man-made rules the measure of spirituality.
- B. The false teachers were telling the Colossians that it was not enough to have Christ, they also needed to keep the Jewish ceremonial law. The false teacher's prohibitions about food and drink were probably based on the Old Testament dietary laws (Leviticus 11). Those laws were given to make Israel as God's distinct people and to discourage them from intermingling with the surrounding nations.
 1. Jesus warned against legalism (Mark 7:14-19). The Pharisees were not wrong in their initial approach to the scriptures, but went astray when they encircled the law of God with their traditions.
 2. Paul did as well (Romans 14:17). That the dietary laws are no longer in force was illustrated by Peter's vision (Acts 10:9-16).
- C. A shadow has no reality; the reality is what makes the shadow. Jesus Christ is the reality to which the shadows pointed (John 6:41; 1 Corinthians 5:7). Any continuing preoccupation with the shadows once the reality has come is pointless.
 1. Paul's point is simple: true spirituality does not consist merely of keeping external rules, but of having a heartfelt desire to be

- faithful to the Lord.
2. We must not sacrifice our freedom in Christ for a set of man-made rules. To become entangled again in a legalistic system is pointless and harmful (Galatians 3:13; 5:1). Legalism is useless because it cannot restrain the flesh.
- D. Some have the mistaken impression that legalism is a strict, literal adherence to law. There was a time that denominational people used "legalist" or "Pharisee" to describe members of the church of Christ because of our insistence upon "book, chapter, and verse" for all we teach and practice. Sadly, it is now most often used by our institutional brethren to describe those of us who still insist that all must be done with scriptural authority.
1. Far from condemning "strict, literal adherence to law," scripture actually demands it (John 8:30-32; 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 5:2-3; 2 John 6).
 2. The Holy Spirit, through the writers of the New Testament, demands "strict, literal adherence to law", or what some call "legalism" (Luke 17:10; Acts 10:33; Galatians 1:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; James 2:18; 1 Peter 4:18).
- E. Man has given a prejudicial meaning to the word "legalism" to ridicule all who insist on doing all God has commanded. In so doing, he feels justified in doing less than is required. No matter what man may say, the word of God remains sure and unchanging (Revelation 22:14; Romans 3:4).

II. ***Mysticism***

- A. Mysticism is the pursuit of a deeper or higher subjective religious experience. It is the belief that spiritual reality is perceived apart from the human intellect. It looks for truth internally, weighting feelings, intuition, and other internal sensations more heavily than objective, observable, external data. Mysticism ultimately derives its authority from a self-actualized, self-authenticated "light" rising from within.
- B. The false teachers claimed a mystical union with God. Paul exhorts the Colossians not to allow those false teachers to keep defrauding them of their prize. Furthermore, the "humility" of the Colossian false teachers was a false humility. They were delighting in it, meaning their supposed humility was nothing but pride.
- C. The false teachers also engaged in the worship of angels, thus denying the truth of 1 Timothy 2:5. The worship of angels was a heresy that was to plague the Phrygian region (where Colossae was located) for centuries. The archangel Michael was worshiped

in Asia Minor as late as 739 A.D. The Bible strictly forbids the worship of angels (Matthew 4:10; Revelation 19:10).

- D. In addition to practicing false humility and worshiping angels, the false teachers were taking their stand on visions they had seen. Some of the worst excesses in the modern-day charismatic movement are derived from such visions. There is no need for extrabiblical revelation through visions (Hebrews 1:1-2).
- E. Far from being the spiritual elite they thought themselves to be, they were inflated without cause by their fleshly minds. Having gone beyond the teaching of Christ, they were not holding fast to the head, that is, Christ. Each Christian forms a vital union with Christ. Thus joined to Him, they all become the joints and ligaments by which the church is supplied with energy and life. The false teacher, without this contact with Christ, has cut himself off from the source of spiritual vitality for God's people and cannot possibly contribute to their growth.
- F. There is a tendency in human nature to move from objectivity to subjectivity -- to shift the focus from doctrine to experience. There are mystical elements in every world religion (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism). Today, this brand of mysticism is most commonly seen as it regards Christians in the charismatic movement, the "better felt than told" experience -- where scripture is a distant second in importance to "visions" and "revelation."

III. ***Asceticism***

- A. An ascetic is one who lives a life of rigorous self-denial. There are many who advance the idea that righteousness is gained through poverty and self-denial. It has not always been remembered that money itself is not the root of evil, but the love of it (1 Timothy 6:10). Many of God's choicest servants in the Old Testament, such as Abraham, Job, and Solomon, were very wealthy.
- B. Through their obedience to Christ, the redeemed are set free from man-made rules designed to promote spirituality. To practice asceticism, Paul writes, is to adopt a worldly system of religion, based on rudiments of the world. This is essentially a form of philosophical dualism. They practiced asceticism in an attempt to free the spirit from the prison of the body.
- C. Asceticism is useless in that it focuses attention on things destined to perish (1 Corinthians 6:13). There is no spiritual value in the "commandments and teachings of men." They were handed down by tradition. They depended on human authority only.

- D. "Will worship" means voluntary worship; that is, worship beyond what God requires. Ascetic religion is godless, for its practitioners essentially worship themselves. God knew best what was most conducive to godliness for His people.
- E. Asceticism might make a person appear spiritual, because of its emphasis on humility and poverty, but it serves only to gratify the flesh. It is a vain attempt to appear more holy than others (Matthew 6:16-18). There is no real honor in denying the body. There is nothing to ennoble and elevate the soul. All they do is gratify pride, self-righteousness, the love of distinction, and other carnal desires of the flesh.

Conclusion. Paul's message to the Colossians is also a warning to us. We are not to be intimidated by false human philosophy, legalism, mysticism, or asceticism. They are but "broken cisterns" (Jeremiah 2:13). We must hold fast to Christ, in whom we have been made complete (Colossians 2:10).