

Colossians 2 • Three Things to Be Aware Of

Introduction

The dominant problem of Paul's time is once again the dominating spiritual issue of this present age: Gnosticism. This is where someone purports to have a special knowledge or revelation apart from God's Word which they assert has a priority over God's Word. Having establishing the superiority and preeminence of Christ in chapter 1, Paul here goes into three specific examples of Gnosticism which characterized the false teachers of the day just as they most vividly and accurately identify the false teachers in our time.

¹For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, ²that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. ⁵For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

⁶Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, ⁷having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. ⁹For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, ¹⁰and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority;

[Read v.1-10]

Q: What is the nature of the "struggle" Paul refers to?

A: Paul is in a spiritual conflict against Satan's influence attempting to lead Believers astray.

Q: What does Paul desire to happen in Believers?

1. "...hearts may be encouraged..." (v.2)
2. "...knit together in love..." (v.2)
3. "...the full assurance of understanding..." (v.2)
4. "...a true knowledge of...Christ..." (v.2)

Application: These things express the balanced application of biblical truth and biblical love in a Believer's life. Biblical truth is required to give us the true definition of biblical love.

Q: How does v.3 contrast the teachings of Christ with those of false teachers?

A: While false teachers have fascinating philosophies, in Christ we have "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge". Whereas false teachers assert they have "discovered" a previously hidden truth, revelation or doctrine, all wisdom and knowledge is actually (and ironically) hidden in Christ and can only come through Christ.

Application: Knowledge—biblical truth, and wisdom—how to put biblical truth into practice, cannot be found outside of Christ. Anything derived apart from Christ and His Word is Gnostic—obtained apart from Him.

Q: What are the true motives of false teachers as revealed to us in v.4 & 8?

1. They attempt to "delude". (v.4)
2. They attempt to take "captive". (v.8)

Point: False teachers employ deception in order to render listeners captive to something other than Christ, whether it be a tradition, observance, or entire cultic system of belief.

Q: What is the first approach of false teachers Paul is warning about in this first section?

A: "...philosophy...according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world..." (v.8) These are those who attempt to bring principles and teachings of the world **into** the Gospel. They assert that something **outside** of the Word in the realm of man's wisdom is necessary to illuminate Christ's Word and wisdom.

Q: According to v.6-10, what are the four main actions by which Believers overcome false teachers and their philosophies?

1. (v.6) **We walk in Christ.** As we have been saved by the Word, so we walk in faith by the Word; as we have been saved by the Spirit, so we walk by the Spirit. This is how we “*have received Christ*”, this is how we consistently continue in Him.
2. (v.7) **We grow up in Christ.** We are rooted in Him and have built the foundation of our faith in Him through the Word; this is how we consistently grow in Him.
3. (v.8) **We make Christ the test.** Every system, doctrine or teaching is tested by asking, “Does it give Christ the place of preeminence?” Many give Christ a high or eminent place, but only true biblical Christianity affords Him the reigning **preeminent** place.
4. (v.9-10) **We draw on His fullness.** Those who drift back into worldly living or are taken in by man-made systems or doctrines do so because they feel lacking in something they do not believe Christ alone can supply. True Believers realize there is no substitute for Christ and that everything they need is fulfilled in Him.

Application: As expressed in v.5, the Believer who overcomes false teachers and their philosophies are those of “good discipline” and have “the stability of...faith in Christ”—that is, those who are consistently and faithfully putting the Word into practice.

¹¹and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; ¹²having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. ¹³When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, ¹⁴having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. ¹⁵When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

¹⁶Therefore 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—¹⁷things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

[Read v.11-17]

Q: Why is Paul bringing up the issue of circumcision? How is does it pertain to the overall warning against false teachers?

A: It is a literal example of the working of the flesh versus the working of the Spirit. The flesh loves to be religious so long as that religion does not subscribe to the cross to crucify the flesh. Circumcision was an issue then believed to be enough to save. Just as baptism does not save anyone in and of itself but is an outward, public testimony of an inward, spiritual condition, so too is circumcision.

Q: What is the greater teaching of the spiritual circumcision in Christ vs. physical circumcision where the flesh is concerned?

A: Whereas physical circumcision literally removes but a fragment of the flesh from the body, only through spiritual circumcision in Christ can the whole nature of the flesh be completely put off.

Q: How does v.17 describe the core issue at hand?

A: The **reality**—“*the substance belongs to Christ*”—is forsaken for the **symbol**—“*things which are a mere shadow of what is to come*”. The greater spiritual meaning of circumcision and baptism are replaced by their earthly adoption so that the **spiritual** is replaced by the **fleshly**.

Point: The second warning has to do with those who promote religious legalism. They place the wrong priority or an over-realized meaning on things or teachings undoubtedly associated with the Church and Christianity. It is like the ultra-Calvinist who over-realizes God's righteousness to the point that it diminishes and even obscures God's other characteristics, particularly His love.

Q: What is the truth where the false teaching of religious legalism is concerned?

A: According to v.13-15, everything we need has been accomplished by Christ on the cross. Spiritual circumcision in Christ through the working of the cross overrides the physical rituals which were only a shadow of the final work in Christ to come.

Q: What is the meaning of v.15?

A: There is probably a dual meaning to who Christ “*disarmed*” and “*triumphed over*”:

1. One meaning is Christ’s victory over powers and principalities in the spiritual realm;
2. Another meaning is how the shadow of Old Testament practices such as circumcision were all fulfilled in Him, resulting in a victory over those who continue to over-emphasize the Old Covenant over the New, such as Judaizers who insist on the priority of Judaic traditions or Old Testament practices in spite of their having been fulfilled in the New Covenant through Christ.

Q: So how are Believers supposed to handle traditions and things associated with the Christian faith?

A: “...no one is to act as your judge...” (v.16) We are to stick to our personal convictions through the Word and the Spirit on such things, not base our practices or beliefs on another’s opinion.

One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

— Romans 14:5–9

Application: The Believer who overcomes false teachers adheres to the reality of the fulfillment of all things through Christ and the cross rather than being distracted by over-realizing the symbols representing those things.

¹⁸Let 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, ¹⁹and 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.

²⁰If 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, ²¹“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” ²²(which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?

[Read v.18-23]

Q: What is the third type of false teaching Paul is warning against?

A: Paul is warning against man-made disciplines.

Q: In v.18, what are some of the activities associated with man-made disciplines?

1. “...*delighting in self-abasement...*” Special religious observances with regulations which make people “feel” spiritual. It is not something undertaken to the glory of God, but done in the flesh for one’s own praise.
2. “...*the worship of angels...*” Taking something that has a spiritual component and even some kind of spiritual authority in the overall scheme of things and elevating it out of place to the point of substituting for the preeminent position of Christ in all things.
3. “...*visions...inflated without cause by his fleshly mind...*” Just because

²³These 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.

someone has a vision does not automatically mean it has come from the Lord. They must be tested to determine whether they are truly from the Lord, a satanic counterfeit, or springing from the flesh of one's own imagination.

Q: How is the true Believer's relationship with Christ characterized?

A: As a living union—He is the head, we are the members. (v.19)

Q: How is the true Believer's relationship with the world characterized?

A: Through Christ we have "died...to the elementary principles of the world..." (v.20)

Application: True followers of Christ are evidenced as having crucified their old life and, going forward, living a changed life in the character and image of Christ.

Q: What is the problem with man-made mandates where the flesh is concerned?

A: Such systems and regulations appear spiritual, but it is impossible for the flesh to control itself, or to improve itself, much less perfect itself. It replaces the entire principle of walking by the Spirit through faith in His Word.

Application: The Believer who overcomes false teachers where man-made disciplines are concerned holds fast to a crucified life which considers those worldly disciplines to be equally dead and useless when it comes to growth into Christ the Head.

Overall Application

To be sure, there are many ways by which Satan deceives and influences all people, but it is important to note that Paul is specifically warning about three expression of Gnosticism which during his time, throughout the history of the Church, and particularly at this present time are primarily at work **WITHIN** the walls of the Church:

1. Man-made philosophies and worldly principles brought into the Gospel so that man's wisdom takes priority over God's wisdom. This is most predominant today with the Church Growth Movement and the Purpose Driven agenda.
2. Religious legalism to over-realize a spiritual practice or teaching to the point that something powered by the flesh takes priority over the Spirit-filled. This is most predominant today in the Emergent Church Movement and the trend toward adopting practices of Eastern mysticism.
3. Practices rooted in the flesh which "feel" spiritual but supplant the preeminence of Christ. This is most predominant today in the introduction of New Age practices and the ecumenical road back to a union with Roman Catholic practices and traditions, not to mention the self-help and positive thinking philosophies which are so currently prevalent.

As during every age of the Church when these have reared their ugly heads, they are overcome...

1. By those who are consistently faithful in putting God's Word into practice.
2. By those who adhere to the reality of how all spiritual symbols are fulfilled in Christ and have no power or meaning apart from Christ.
3. By those who seek the fulfillment of all things spiritual through the cross.