

Unshakeable: Colossians 2:16-23 “Empty Religion Vs. True Spirituality” 2/19/17

Warning Illustration:

The Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act of 1965 required the following health warning, prescribed by Congress, to be placed on all cigarette packages sold in the United States: CAUTION: CIGARETTE SMOKING MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH.

Cigarette labels in Europe... vs. US

All these labels are meant to be a huge warning sign: This is hazardous to your health! This passage from Colossians 2:16-23 is like a **warning label: This false teaching is hazardous to your spiritual health!**

Throughout this letter we have been over and over again learning what it means to build our lives on the unshakeable foundation of Jesus Christ. Two weeks ago we looked at verses 8-15, here Paul is arguing against the false teachers formula for salvation- Jesus+circumcision, etc. And we concluded that the Salvation is Jesus + Nothing! It is finished when he nailed our whole wrap sheet to the cross!

Paul theologically dismantled the false teaching and he is going to continue on that theme and warn us against practicing the empty religion of the false teachers. Paul warns us about three empty religious practices that are hazardous to our spiritual health.

1) Warning Against Empty Legalism

Colossians 2:16

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.

What is Paul referring to? If we know our Old Testament, it should sound very familiar to the Jewish laws. And it is. The false teachers were telling the church members that the way to higher levels of spirituality were through returning to the dietary laws and observing the Jewish calendar, Passover, Feast of Tabernacles, holy days, eating kosher, no bacon diet...The false teachers were looking in judgment at the “less spiritual” Christians who were not adhering to the Jewish diet and calendar. This is the heart of legalism. **Trying to quantify spirituality through religious practices or a list of extra-biblical do’s and don’ts and imposing your rules upon others.**

And to this empty religion Paul says...

v.17 These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

True spirituality is not found in the shadows of empty religiosity but in the One who fulfilled the law, Christ! See Paul says the law (foods and festivals) pointed to and found their fulfillment in Christ.

Ill- My brother Jon is really strict with healthy food, he doesn't eat any sugar and only good fats... which was a new thing for me I didn't know there were good fats, eats a lot of lean proteins...and kale, uggghhhh... now he doesn't do this because he needs to loose weight or because of an allergy, he's just really into it...and there was a time when he would not even allow himself to cheat at all...not on vacations, not at holidays and one Christmas I went into the kitchen and I caught him standing over the cookies, and he was smelling the cookies. Gotcha!

See the smell of the cookies are nice, but the true pleasure is in eating the cookies! Paul is saying, "Why should anyone want to cling to the shadow when the object casting the shadow, Christ, is already here!! Why follow the eating regulations when we have the bread of life? Why observe the Passover when Christ is our Passover lamb? Why observe the Sabbath restrictions when we have eternal rest in Christ?"

You can't get your arms around a shadow. You can't be comforted by a shadow. It takes the substance to do that, and Christ is the substance, the reality as Paul says.

You maybe say, OK- well we don't practice Jewish so how does this apply to us? There are legalistic churches and people out there that say you are a good Christian if you: don't dance, don't drink, don't smoke, don't play cards, don't wear certain clothes, don't have tattoos, if you go to Wednesday prayer meeting, can pray with all the right Christianese words... "Father God, we just ask for traveling mercies...", Here's the danger- One word- Pharisee...If we are not careful, we can conform to a bunch of rules that keep us looking good on the outside while ignoring the condition of our hearts. We It's like buying good-looking peaches only to find out that when you cut them open they are bad on the inside. I've met with guys who attend services, give money serve regularly, say the right things... but treat their wives horribly at home... how is that living out true Christianity? Jesus longs to have a real heart-to-heart connection with us. One that expresses our love to him in response to his unflinching grace toward us in Christ. Not just living a life of dutifully keeping external rules.

Question- Are you attempting to measure your spirituality based on some external set of rules or on the status of your relationship with Christ?

2) Warning Against Empty Mysticism

Colossians 2:18-19

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.

They have 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.

What is Gnostic Mysticism? Trying to Quantify spirituality based on **experiential encounters** with God or spirit beings. Now there is a Christian mysticism that isn't

necessarily a bad thing. In some ways we are all Christian mystics if we believe we can experience God's presence, voice, guidance in a subjective way.

But the gnostics thought that they couldn't encounter, and experience God... but that they had to work through a series of other spiritual beings, angels, intermediaries who can connect with him, and they were using this as a way of saying they were on a higher level of spirituality. "We've obtained a level of holiness and a spirituality that is unlike anything you have experienced. We have connected ourselves with the angels and other spiritual emanations, and we've climbed the ladder to the presence of the one true deity." And they were claiming that they received special revelations "going on in detail about visions."

So here Paul is warning them of the emptiness, that this is dangerous. He says, "Don't let anybody tell you are disqualified from obtaining the prize of spirituality, because you haven't had our spiritual encounters, reached the level of the worship of angels; you haven't had the right visions." Paul says they are puffed up in their own minds- the literal translation? They are wind-bags.... And the one thing they are not doing is holding fast to the head, and who is the head? Christ. You see, they've said, it's Christ, plus my visions, plus my experiences with the angels...

And this still happens today in some extreme charismatic circles that would say that unless you speak in tongues, unless you have visions and speak with angels and these kinds of divine encounters you really are missing out, you are not on our spiritual level. Don't be intimidated by that. You stick with Jesus!

1 Timothy 2:5

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

Hebrews 4:16

So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

Now I don't mean to offend those who are Catholics, many are well meaning and loving people but here's the truth- we should not be praying to Mary, to the saints or to angels. Not once in Scripture will you EVER see that situation, in fact you will see the opposite- angels and saints of Scripture refusing worship or prayers saying, "we are just messengers!" We have direct access to God through Jesus Christ. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit who intercedes on our behalf when we don't know what to pray (Romans 8).

3) Warning against Empty Asceticism

Colossians 2:20-23

Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"?

These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.

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.

Asceticism- Trying to quantify spirituality based on extreme self-denial.

The source of the asceticism of the gnostics came from the philosophy called dualism, which we've talked about before. Everything material is evil. Since man's body is material, it is evil and corrupt. The only way to be successful in this struggle is to deny the body the satisfaction that it demands. The spiritual nature of man, according to asceticism, can have victory only if the body is beaten into submission through extreme forms of self-denial. Now I am not saying that there should never be any self-denial or discipline. No, in fact the Spirit produces self-discipline according to Gal. 5. But using self-denial as a means of saying, "Look at me, I fasted for 5 days so now I'm more spiritual" is not a product of the Spirit but of the flesh.

During the 4th century asceticism ran-a-muck and hundreds of ascetics sought to escape temptation and punished their bodies by living as hermits. The extremes to which they went in their attempts to deny gratification of physical lusts seem incredible. Bessarion, a monk, would not even give in to his body's desire for restful sleep. For 40 years he would not lie down while sleeping. Macarius, the Younger sat naked in a swamp for 6 months until mosquito bites made him look like a victim of leprosy. St. Maron spend 11 years in a hollowed out tree trunk. Others lived in caves, dry wells, even tombs. To suffer the discomfort of filth, stench, worms, and maggots were considered to be spiritually beneficial and a sign of victory over the body. And to that I say one word- Stupid. Paul says that even with all this extreme self-denial it fails to deal with indwelling sin **v.23 but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.**

There is only one thing that will put the collar on the neck of the animal within us and that is Christ's life, living through us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Accepting his grace toward us and living in His power, not our flesh. Penance won't work, saying a certain number of prayers, giving a certain amount of money or selling your possessions, mentally beating ourselves and wallowing in our shame won't work. Now I don't want to go too far into what it looks like to live victoriously over sin in our life because we will get there in Chapter 3.

Question- are you trying to become more spiritual through self-denial? Or are you cultivating a deeper relationship with Jesus?

Listen, it's all about the relationship...So it's not Jesus+ Legalism, Not Jesus+ Mysticism, Not Jesus+ Asceticism... Jesus+ Nothing. We are sufficient in him.

When we took our trip to the Holy Land, we spent a few days in a hotel in downtown Jerusalem. It was the Sabbath. Now some of the most devout, Orthodox Jewish people will stay in a hotel from Friday night into Saturday night of Sabbath so that they don't have to "work" someone else does the cooking, cleaning, etc... And this is why they have Sabbath elevators... now you say what in the world is that? Well these Sabbath elevators stop at every even and odd floor. Why? Because if you are Jewish and trying to be a good Jew on the Sabbath you can't push the elevator button because that would be defined by their Jewish leaders as "work." I'm not kidding! Well our group leader, Lon also told us that one time on a trip that a Jewish woman approached a lady in the tour group in the hotel and said, can you come to my room with me... and so she went up and she said, what can I do for you? Can you turn on my light switch in my room? She had forgotten to turn it on before Sabbath and she didn't want to endanger her salvation by turning it on. Friends this is BONDAGE! And whether it's a light switch, or attempting to access God through praying to Mary, or trying to live up to the standards of man-made rules, or it's beating yourself up mentally over your sin... IT'S BONDAGE!

Galatians 5:1

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of bondage.

So what I want to do today is call you to freedom! The freedom as an adopted child of God through Christ, that you can flick on light switches, you can mow your grass on Sundays if you want, you can go boldly and directly to God through Jesus Christ, you can accept his grace after you mess up and not wallow in guilt and do a bunch of penance. You are free in Christ! In Christ, God won't love you any less if you do these things and he won't love you any more if you don't. Got it?

Some of us have spent so much time living in bondage to religiosity... that it's hard to accept the teaching of Jesus+ nothing, that Jesus is sufficient and we can't add anything to his grace. But make no mistake about it, in Jesus Christ you are Free!

We have spent many weeks drilling this in...because this is the foundation, this is the root. So you may ask, well if we have all this freedom, if we don't have to perform in order to be saved or accepted by God, what keeps us from doing whatever we want? Ahhh...glad you asked- Paul Chapter three is the hinge. He has built the foundation, not he is going to talk practical for the next two chapters about how Christ's life is lived out in us.