

Errors and Answers

Colossians 2:16-23

Later this summer Cindy and I and at least some of our kids and grandkids will spend a week at the beach. We are looking forward to it. We are still unsure if we are driving or flying. We can't decide if we want to pay for \$6 gas or deal with the chaos of air travel. Typically, we would drive. And so if we drive we are going to see a lot of signs and some of the signs we will see will be warning signs. We will see signs that tell us not to pass, or to slow down because of a curve in the road ahead, or a construction zone. We will see signs that tell us to stop. We will see warning signs that say, "Bridge ices before road," which doesn't matter this time of year, but it is still a warning sign. Once we are at the beach, we might see more warning signs. Depending on the weather, we might see warnings about dangerous surf or riptides. We might see signs that tell us that there is no lifeguard on duty, or to surf at your own risk.

Some of you will go to the mountains or national parks this summer. If you do, you will see warning signs too, right? You might see warning signs about dangerous wildlife ("bears on the trail" or "staying back from wildlife"). You might see signs about keeping back from dangerous cliffs, or warning signs about fire risk danger.

Slow down. Stay out. Stay back. Stop. Avoid this area. Caution. If you put them all together it can sure sound like someone is trying to restrict our lives, doesn't it? But the opposite is actually the case. These warnings are all meant to protect life. They are all meant to keep us and others safe.

In our passage today, Paul is going to give some warnings – warnings about false teachers; specifically warnings about the errors of their teaching. Paul does so, not to make life restrictive, but to make sure that we continue to walk in all the joy and freedom that is experienced only through the life found in Jesus. Paul is going to warn about three errors of the false teachers and in each case answer it with Christ.

Today, we are looking at Colossians 2:16-23 where Paul continues to address his concerns about false teachers. This section started back in 2:8 where Paul urged the Colossians to not let anyone take them captive by philosophy and empty deceit. There was real danger. There was danger that they become captive to the false teaching. And so Paul warns about three errors of the false teachers because he wants the Colossians to continue to experience true spiritual life in Christ. He wants them to press on to maturity in Christ.

And so let's look at the errors and answers that Paul gives. Here's the first one.

I. The Answer to Legalism is the Reality Found in Christ (vv. 16-17)

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

This is a conclusion based on what he said in the preceding passage in which he described how in Christ the Colossians have been made complete (2:10). They have been buried and raised with Christ (2:12). They have been made alive in Him (2:13). Paul has argued for the complete sufficiency of Christ. He has argued that they have everything in Christ! And so, because this is true, *let no one pass judgment on you* in matters related to Old Testament dietary rules and special religious days.

With the coming of Christ, the Old Testament laws around food and drink, as well as the requirements to observe certain religious days were no valid. These rules were intended for the Jewish people living in the Land during the Old Testament era. But these rules no longer apply to believers in the New Testament age.

The false teachers were judging the Colossians' standing with God based on these things. And if the Colossians began to care about the opinion of the false teachers, then they are at risk of walking in legalism. They are at risk of going back to a life of trying to earn God's approval through obedience to external laws.

Paul's answer to this is that the reality is found in Christ. Verse 17:

¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

When these Jewish regulations about food and drink, and observance of special religious days were given, they pointed to something. They pointed to Christ and the New Testament age. Since Christ has now come, believers experience the reality to which the shadow hinted and that is Christ. The *substance belongs to Christ*. He is the true fulfillment of that to which the shadow pointed. So why would one want to get wrapped up in the shadow when the reality has come?

Now, you may not have anyone trying to compel you to follow Old Testament laws, but there ARE legalists around. There are those who will judge you if you do not do life like they think you should. If you don't read your Bible as often, or as long as they do, or if you don't read the "right" Bible translation, or if you don't pray in a certain way, they will judge you. If you do not discipline your children, or educate your children like they do, they will judge you. They will have a list of things that you must do or must not do, and if you don't follow their list, then you are not a good Christian.

Now, God cares about how we live. The Bible gives us commands to be followed. That's where Paul is going to go next in chapter 3. But what legalists do is go beyond and add to biblical instructions. They make their own personal applications a timeless truth that everyone else must obey to be a good Christian. That's legalism.

Sometimes these may be people who for one reason or another we care about their opinions. It might be a parent, or a sibling, or a believer who was instrumental in our coming to faith in

Jesus. And so we feel real pressure by their opinions. But Paul says that we must not let anyone judge us based on legalistic practices. Don't give in to legalism because the reality is found in Christ. True spiritual life is found in him and in him alone.

The second error that Paul addresses is misguided spiritual experiences, and he says that . . .

II. The Answer to Misguided Spiritual Experiences is True Connection to Christ (vv. 18-19)

¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

To *disqualify* has the sense of “to condemn” or “to pass judgment on.” It is similar, but stronger, than the command to not let someone judge you that we saw in verse 16. Again, the Colossians must not let the false teachers call into question their standing with God because they don't follow their misguided spiritual practices and experiences.

These false teachers, Paul says, [*insist*] on *asceticism and worship of angels*. It's possible that the ascetic practices regarding food was in preparation to worship of angels. They were worshipping angels! They were worshipping the created not the Creator. And then out of their worship of angels, they also go on and on about *visions* that they claim to have seen. When someone truly encounters God, it leads to humility. But Paul says that the false teachers are arrogant. They are *puffed up*. Their minds are *sensuous* or “fleshly,” in other words, they have minds that are oriented to the things of the world.

Paul commands the Colossians to not let the false teaches condemn them for not following their misguided spiritual experience. They are misguided, Paul says, because they don't hold fast to Christ. Verse 19:

¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

The fact that Paul says that they are not *holding fast to the Head*, seems to indicate that the false teachers at one time were part of the believing community. If they had indeed been part of the church in Colossae, that would only add to why the Colossians might feel tempted to follow them in some way. In *not holding fast to the Head*, the false teachers were disconnected from the true source of spiritual growth.

Paul often uses this metaphor of the human body to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the Church. As the *Head*, Jesus is the authority over the Church, and He is the source of everything the Church needs for life. When the Church, the body, is rightly connected to the *Head* it *grows with a growth that is from God*. True spiritual growth. The body is *nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments*, which points to how when the various members

of the body of Christ function as God designs, the body grows with a growth that finds its source in God.

The false teachers and their pressure to follow them in their misguided spiritual experiences threaten this growth if the Colossians listen to them. Their practices draw attention away from Christ, who is the source of true growth. Their practices lead to arrogance not humility, which is disruptive to the unity of the body which is necessary for growth.

We live in a day when there are those who advocate for spiritual experiences that are misguided. Sometimes this comes from Christians, sometimes from non-Christians. And so for example, speaking in tongues is a spiritual gift that God gives to some, but not to every believer. But there are those who believe that unless you speak in tongues you are a second-rate Christian. You are lacking. And they would compel you to speak in tongues. This was a big deal 30 years ago. I don't think it is as much anymore. It is misguided. Another example would be those who would look down on you if you don't have the same emotional experience during worship as they do. And so there are ways that good, biblical experiences become misguided in how they are applied. There is a whole other category of misguided experiences that are promoted by people who want to be spiritual, but not Christian. Worshipping nature. Finding ultimate reality within oneself. Occult practices, and many other such things.

Paul's point is that any spiritual experience that is not connected to Christ is misguided. And so, stay connected to Jesus. Stay close to Him. For only in our connection to Jesus do we experience true spiritual growth. Only as we stay connected to Jesus and do that together do we grow with a growth that is from God.

The answer to the error of legalism is the reality found in Christ. The answer to the error of misguided spiritual experiences is true connection to Christ. And finally, . . .

III. The Answer to Asceticism is Our Position in Christ (vv. 20-23)

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”

Paul writes this in a way to be understood that what he is saying is true. In other words, they had died with Christ to *the elemental spirits of the world*. And so Paul's question for them is that since this is true, why live as if they are still alive to these spiritual forces.

It seems that the false teachers were putting forth a set of ascetic rules (things that involve harsh treatment of the body) to appease the spiritual forces of the world – rules like, “*Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch.*” The way these are written suggest that Paul is using commands and terms that illustrate the kinds of ascetic practices that the false teachers were seeking to impose.

Paul's question to the Colossians is that since they had died with Christ and had experienced the reality of everything that His death accomplished for them, why do they submit to these man-made regulations?

²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?

As we go on to the second half of verse 22, that's what Paul calls these rules. He says that they are *according to human precepts and teachings*. They are not from God. They are man-made rules.

Now, you'll notice that the first half of the verse in the ESV (and NASB) is a parenthesis. What Paul says in the parenthesis refers to the rules about food. His point is that none of these regulations concerning food are not important because the food and drink *perish as they are used*.

In verse 23 Paul makes this final statement about these *human precepts and teachings*:

²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Flesh refers to the bent within fallen humans toward self and the world. It is the sinful nature. It is a problem that needs to be dealt with. But asceticism is not the way. Such practices merely have *an appearance of wisdom*, but *they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh*. They do not get to the essence of what really matters – heart and mind change that leads to true holiness.

What works is our union with Christ. The Colossians are in Christ. They have died with him. Back in 2:12 Paul says that they have been buried with him in baptism, and they were raised up with Him through the powerful working of God. In 2:13, he says that they are alive together with Christ. They are united to Christ. And it is that position of being united to Christ that is effective against the flesh. It is through our union with Christ that we can put off sins of the flesh and put on godly character.

Every one of us is in a battle with the flesh. This will continue until the day we die or Jesus returns. We are not to be passive in this battle. That is going to be very clear in what Paul says next in chapter 3. He will give a list of sins that are manifested by the flesh that must be put off, things like sexual immorality, impurity, anger, malice, slander, and many other such things (3:5ff). And he will give us a list of godly traits we are to seek to put on (3:12ff). And so, the flesh must be dealt with, but we do not do it on our own through man-made rules. We do not do it through ascetic practices. We do it through our union with Christ.

Now, let me clarify one thing. There are spiritual practices given to us that are part of how we seek to grow and put off the flesh. Things like fasting, serving, confession, worship, Bible

reading, and prayer, as well as many other spiritual practices are tools that God uses to change us. This has been the experience of Christians down through the ages. But here's the difference between these things as man-made rules verses tools that God uses. They are useless to change us if we trust in the practice alone. But if we practice such things in order to open our lives up to the activity of God and His working in us, then they are wonderful tools that God uses. But what changes us is not the spiritual practice, it the life that we have in Christ. It is our union with Christ.

Errors and answers. Paul address three errors of the false teachers. The answer to the error of legalism is the reality, the substance, is found in Christ. The answer to the error of misguided spiritual experiences is staying in a true connection to Christ. The answer to the error of asceticism is knowing that it is through our position in Christ that our lives are truly changed. Regardless of the error, the answer is Christ.

If you have been around for very long, you have heard us say that our mission is to make disciples of Jesus, who love God, one another, and our neighbors. A disciple is a student; a disciple is a learner. We want to be explicitly clear that we are seeking to make disciples of Jesus, not disciples of Faith Evangelical Free Church, or of Steve, or of Brian, or Sam, or of any other person. Our heart is to get people connected to and following Jesus because Jesus is the answer. He is the source of life. He is the one who changes us.

And so our heart for each of you is that you would follow Jesus and understand that He is the reality. He is the substance of all that matters. He is the Head. He is our authority and the source of life. Hold fast to Him. Stay close to Him. Stay connected to Him. Refuse anything that is not centered on Christ. And let's do this together because this is how God designed the body to grow. And understand that as a believer in Jesus, you are united with Him. In your position in Christ, you have died, been buried and raised to new life in Him, and it because of that union with Christ that your life can change.

Jesus is the answer. Jesus is always that answer!