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Timely Warnings

Colossians 2:16-19

Intro: In today's text, Paul moves from his assurance of Christ's all-sufficiency and His humbling defeat of all the malevolent spiritual powers and authorities through the cross to specific warnings against the hollow and deceptive philosophy being presented to the Colossians by some unnamed false teachers. Paul repeats and reinforces his negative view of this philosophy throughout the passage to the end of the chapter. It's hollow because it is made up of idle notions (17-18); it's deceptive because it only has the appearance of wisdom but in reality, it is incapable of producing what it promises (23). Its regulations and taboos are based on human tradition (22) and on the elemental principles (or spirits) of the world (20). So, as a loving apostle, Paul provides specific warnings to the Colossians of the shortcomings and spiritual dangers associated with this false teaching that could trip them up and steal their joy.

From the flashing red lights at a railroad crossing to the skull and crossbones on a bottle of poison, warnings are a part of our everyday life. Children must be taught to heed warnings and adults need to be reminded to not get too accustomed to them. Those flashing red lights at a railroad crossing are not there to annoy you; they are there to keep you alive and unharmed. Warnings are a matter of life and death. The spiritual life also has its dangers and its warnings. Moses warned the children of Israel to beware of forgetting the Lord once they entered the Promised Land (Dt 6:12) and Jesus often used the word beware when instructing His disciples and followers. Paul's already warned them about the false teachers in v8, now he gives 3 warnings to heed if they are to enjoy their fullness in Christ.

16-17- Paul opens this section with the word so, and that's important! This little word connects the points he is about to make with the points he has already made in the previous passage. Because Jesus is fully God (9), because we are complete in Him (10), because of the believer's union with His death, burial and resurrection (12) and because of His total victory over the principalities and powers (15), let no one judge you in food or in drink... Because Jesus won such a glorious victory on the cross, we are not to allow anyone to judge us in matters relating to religious legalism. A life that's

centered on Jesus and what He's accomplished on the cross has no place for legalism. No self-appointed religious experts of "divine reality" have any right to pass judgment on believers or to decide who qualifies for a share in the inheritance of the saints. Only Christ can be our Judge and He is our Deliverer.

So this warning exposes the danger of the legalism of the false teachers in Colosse. Their doctrines were a strange mixture of Eastern mysticism, Jewish legalism, with a smattering of Greek philosophy and Christian teaching. Apparently, Jewish legalism was particularly emphasized. This, of course, is of no surprise because human nature thrives on religious duties. The flesh is weak when it comes to doing spiritual things but it is very strong when it comes to practicing religious rules and regulations. Somehow, adhering to the religious routine inflates the ego and makes a person content in his self-righteousness.

The real problem with a person who judges a believer because that believer chooses not to live under their religious regulations is that the person judging them is really judging Jesus Christ. They are insisting that Christ did not finish the work of salvation on the cross and that they must now add something to it. They are also saying that Jesus Christ isn't sufficient for all the spiritual needs of Christians. The false teachers in Colosse were offering a deeper spiritual life for all those who would subject themselves to legalistic regulations. Outwardly, their practices seemed to be spiritual, but in actual fact, these practices accomplished nothing spiritual at all, as we will see.

Paul has addressed these issues of dietary matters, observance of days, and the temptation to pass judgment on others in other epistles ([Rom 14-15](#) & [1 Cor 8-10](#)). In these letters he expresses his conviction that Christians are free to do what their conscience prescribes – to eat or not to eat, to observe sacred days or not to observe them. He cautions the overly scrupulous believers from trying to force their convictions on to others and he encourages the strong believers to be especially sensitive to the scruples of the weak. All are to be mindful that the kingdom of God does not consist in eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ([Rom 14:17b](#)).

In contrast, Paul's argument in our text outright condemns those who use eating and drinking and the observance of feast days to pass judgment on

others. He connects such rules to the fleshly mind in v18, the basic principles of the world in v20 and human commands and teachings in v22. The difference between Paul's argument in Romans and here in Colossians is that this issue doesn't have to do with an internal dispute among Christians. Paul's warning is meant to refute outsiders who are using these issues to disparage Christians. These false teachers have apparently appointed themselves to the role of determining who belongs to God's chosen people and who does not. They use the keeping of food laws and sacred days as part of their criteria for deciding this issue.

Notice, Paul nowhere rejects these practices outright as being idolatry; instead, he says they are merely a shadow of what is to come. The shadow/substance comparison was a popular theme used in ancient Greek philosophy. In it, the shadow wasn't seen in a negative light but referred to a concrete imitation of what is truly real: the archetype, or model (preview) of things to come. Paul takes this tool of Greek philosophy and he gives it a prophetic slant by declaring that the things to come are found in Christ.

The OT Law had had certain provisions and requirements that were done away with in Jesus, especially regarding such things as food regulations and Sabbath observances. It isn't that those laws are bad, they're merely a shadow of things to come. Once the substance, Jesus Christ, has come, we don't need the shadow any more. Why go back into shadows when we have the reality in Jesus Christ? This would be like trying to hug a shadow when the One making the shadow is right next to you. So, days and food, as observed under OT Law, are no longer binding on New Covenant people. The shadow has passed, the reality has come. Now, for the believer, all foods are pure (1 Tim 4:4-5) and all days belong to God.

The shadow/substance contrast as used by Paul here applies to the biblical theme of promise and fulfillment. Since Paul would never describe pagan rituals as a shadow or model of what was to come in Christ, this promise/fulfillment theme is more fitting as an evaluation of Judaism. Religious festivals and New Moons relate to sacrifices in the temple. As we learned in our study of Leviticus, the Jewish religion was tied to the calendar. Of course, all this had its proper function under the old dispensation, but it was never meant to be a permanent part of the faith under the new dispensation of Christ. Once we see the fullness of the sacrifice in the cross, we understand what the sacrificial worship of the OT

was groping after. The implication is clear: Christ fulfills all Jewish sacrifices and hopes. The future yearned for by the prophets has broken into the present!

Legalism is bondage! Peter calls it a yoke on the neck in [Acts 15:10](#). We have freedom in Christ and are not to be coerced into submitting ourselves under regulations that Christ has already fulfilled and done away with. Now, the practice of judging and condemning is still alive and well in the body of Christ. There are plenty of denominations that believe if you don't do certain things, like they do, you aren't saved. You can pick your poison: sacraments, baptism, speaking in tongues, etc. The legalism I'm more familiar with has more to do with societal and congregational norms: you're wrong if...women wear pants, men don't have their hair cut, you don't sing from the hymnal; silly things mostly.

There's also a real danger in the pendulum swinging too far in the other direction. I've heard Christians say that any regulation that deters from their normal accepted daily practices is legalism, "Don't put that Pharisaical yoke on me!" But here's the thing, when the Bible teaches us to put away certain practices, whether by direct command or implied spiritual principle, that's not legalism, that's a call to holy living. We cannot ignore or reject biblical directives and think we will come out of it unscathed. Biblical prohibitions and moral parameters exist for our benefit and protection and we do not have the right to merely set them aside because they don't fit into our self-focused worldview.

The major difference between legalism and holy living is that the legalistic person who adheres to all the religious regulations does so in order to be accepted by God, to draw closer to Him. But, of course, that is impossible. The born-again believer, on the other hand, pursues holy living precisely because they have already been accepted by God through the washing of the blood of Christ. The Christian is not just accepted, they have been born again into God's family – they are not just his servant, they are His child. So the legalist is attempting to work for their salvation while the Christian is living a holy life as a direct result of their salvation. They live to please their Lord and Savior!

18-19- This 2nd warning, while it does provide the most important evidence about the false teaching being foisted on the Colossian Christians, most

scholars and commentators agree that it is also arguably the most difficult verse in this letter to interpret. I'm not about to get sidetracked into chasing down all the different opinions and possible alternate meanings each phrase is reported to have so we will just work our way through it and stick with the most obvious meanings.

The first phrase is not as straightforward as it may seem. Paul warns the Colossians against being cheated out of their reward. The KJV says beguiled while most other translations use the word disqualify. This reflects the use of certain forms of the Greek word used here to refer to the negative verdict of an umpire in an athletic contest and implies that these false teachers act as a judge who decides or rules and awards prizes in contests. These self-appointed referees rule against the believers and rob them of their deserved award. 2 questions come to mind: what are these rewards that we can be cheated out of and how can these false teachers cheat the Colossian believers?

1) What are these rewards? Well, the Bible speaks of rewards, prizes and crowns that are reserved for believers. Some are temporal, like [1 Cor 9:18](#) and [Heb 10:35](#); but most are eternal. The Bible speaks of a crown of rejoicing ([1 Thess 2:19](#)), of righteousness ([2 Tim 4:8](#)), of life ([Jam 1:2](#)), of glory ([1 Peter 5:5](#)) and an imperishable crown ([1 Cor 9:25](#)). Rewards for Christian service are referenced in [1 Cor 3:8,12 &14](#) and [2 John 8](#) while Paul will mention the reward of the inheritance in [Col 3:4](#). Paul also refers to all of this as the prize in [1 Cor 9:24](#) and [Phil 3:14](#). In both instances, the prize is not a forgone conclusion. You could say that the final result still remains in doubt.

2) Can these rewards be lost? In [Rev 3:11](#), Jesus exhorts the church in Philadelphia to Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. The clear implication is that it is entirely possible for a believer to lose their reward and that loss would be the direct result of neglecting the truth that they have received. In [Rev 22:12](#), Jesus again states, Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to everyone according to his work. Certainly, God does not owe us anything. It's purely an act of His grace that He has promised rewards to those who serve Him faithfully. We should be so grateful that He has saved us from judgment that we would serve Him whether or not we received a reward. Most of God's faithful servants likely serve Him out of love and devotion never thinks about

rewards. But, the rewards are clearly offered and they're offered for faithful service so it's entirely possible for a believer to miss out.

What did this mean for the Colossians? The same thing it means for us. Paul's using a sports reference here, referring to an athlete that's been declared unworthy of a prize: the umpire or referee disqualifies the contestant because he has not obeyed the rules. Keep in mind, the contestant does not cease to be a citizen of his homeland, but he does forfeit the honor of winning a prize. When our Olympic athletes fail to win a gold medal, we don't kick them out of the country, they just don't win – they miss out on the prize. A Christian who fails to obey God's directions doesn't lose their salvation but they do lose the approval of the Lord and the rewards He has promised to those who are faithful.

So, how can these false teachers cause the believers in Colosse to lose their reward? By pulling them away from the simplicity of the gospel to pursue ridiculous religious mumbo-jumbo. The primary danger Paul is warning them against was the erroneous belief that a person can have an immediate experience with the spiritual world, completely apart from the Word of God or the Holy Spirit. Paul sees the false teacher as setting up humility as their own goal, something to delight in, as if it was an end unto itself. But then, the false teacher goes on to insist that his way is superior to theirs, it achieves goals that they fall short of.

Paul sees this humility as being false, particularly since it results in them becoming puffed up. This is the type of self-denial that ultimately leads to self-aggrandizement. Jesus warned His disciples not to fast publicly or to even let on that they are fasting. He said this because it was the practice of the Pharisees to fast in such a way that everyone knew what they were doing; sort of a passive-aggressive declaration of "Look how humble I am!" We can understand this better from another sports analogy. There's no one more physically self-disciplined than a professional athlete. They put their bodies through constant training and abstinence of certain foods but it's all for one purpose – to win and be hailed as a hero. This is a false humility that leads to pride, self-confidence and negative opinions of others.

They also participated in the worship of angels. This likely is a reference, not to an organized religious observance, but to the magical invocation of angels to ward off evil, to help them make their lives successful or to bring

vengeance on their enemies. This practice, though purely occultic in nature, had its roots deeply ingrained in local folk beliefs and habits. The Colosse, the spiritual atmosphere of magic in the ancient world pervaded the lives of both rich and poor, both educated and uneducated and this commonly held belief may have continued to exert its effects on the Colossians even after their conversion. At least these false teachers were trying to entice them back into it.

The next phrase is probably the most contested in its meaning but suffice it to say that Paul is accusing them of being preoccupied with their own spiritual experiences. They have had mystical, spiritual visions and, not content with simply experiencing these things, they seem to insist on declaring them at every opportunity, rubbing it in to those who haven't had the experience. Paul doesn't need to provide the Colossians with a detailed description of the beliefs and practices of these false teachers; he just deflates their false boasts by subverting them with sarcasm. Their exaggerated visions are all smoke and mirrors, much ado about nothing. Their bragging is all foolishness.

The end result of these useless experiences is what provokes Paul. They puff up the unspiritual mind – the mind of the flesh – with idle and empty notions. For Paul, the mind of the flesh is something set over against God and, as such, it lacks any true enlightenment. This hollow, deceitful philosophy the false teachers were pushing was simply emotionally elating, ego inflating, and worst of all, brother berating. They neither served nor provided any positive purpose. Of course, the antidote for all of these false teachings was more of Jesus, exalting Him above the angels and realizing that because of His finished work, there is nothing for the redeemed believer to take pride in.

The root of all this error is the failure to hold to the Head (19). These false teachers do not hold to Christ or observe His teachings. They hold to something, anything, other than Christ. Holding to anything other than Christ does not end well. True spiritual growth hinges on a close bond with Christ, although it's caused completely and exclusively by God. All those who do not hold to Christ and His teachings have cut themselves off from the only source of vitality and spiritual unity. The church is the body of Christ by virtue of confessing Him to be the Head and dying with Him and being made alive in Him. Thus, Paul reminds his readers again of Christ's supremacy

over all things and their total dependence on Him. They will not find spiritual growth or fullness in earthly restrictions, celestial observances, worship of angels or star-spangled visions. These foolish things can only puff up human beings with the hot air of empty pride and snap the bonds that anchor them to Christ.

Pride and arrogance are not very becoming of a Christian but I have never seen these traits in any section of the church as much as I have seen in in pastors and ministers. The very ones that should be modeling and walking in true spiritual humility, expressing a servant's heart in every area of their lives, seem to fail at it the most. That ought not to be so. It ought not to be so for any believer because Jesus has paid it all and accomplished it all and we are only recipients of His work of salvation by God grace. So, let us live for His pleasure, let us run for His fame and let us spend our lives in doing His will and expanding His kingdom. Let no one cheat us or distract us from the prize. 😊