

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Dead to the World **Colossians 2:20-23**

Intro: The English language is not necessarily the most beautiful language around but it is very descriptive. English is chock full of euphemisms and idioms that are employed as sort of a language inside of a language, similar to an inside joke but they are not meant to be funny, just descriptive. Now, euphemisms and idioms aren't the same things. A euphemism is a mild word or expression used as a substitute for words considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing (expecting/ pregnant; see Ms Murphy [Cheaper by the dozen]).

An idiom, on the other hand, is a phrase or expression that has figurative meaning that's different from the literal meaning of the words used in the phrase and American English employs thousands of them. If we say, "It's raining cats and dogs" we mean it raining heavily; under the weather = ill or sick; bite the bullet = to do something you really don't want to do; piece of cake = something that's easy or it's a cinch. Other countries have their own idioms that don't make sense to American ears without explanation. China: inflating a cow = make a mountain out of a mole hill; Brazil: peel a pineapple = cope with a tricky or complex situation; Thailand: ride an elephant to catch a grasshopper = putting in lots of effort for very little reward. Every country has their own idioms but you can run into trouble if you try to use your idioms in another country because under the weather = have a hangover in South Africa.

Of course, Paul didn't speak English and was understandably unaware of American idioms since they didn't exist until 2000 years later but, in our text today, he unknowingly and unintentionally strikes a common idiom that serves as the title of today's message. When a person is in such a deep sleep that you could drive a freight train by them and it wouldn't disturb them, we say they are dead to the world. We had a technician who was just such a deep sleeper. He would fall asleep in the van on the way back from New Orleans and when they arrived at the shop and backed up to the door to off load bring backs and load up for the next day, he wouldn't wake up. So, being the kind and considerate workers that they were back then, they would pull the van into the shop close all the doors, turn off the lights and go

home – and he would still be sleeping in the van! Figuratively saying, he was dead to the world.

This is exactly what Paul is about to tell the Colossians in this last section of ch2. In our last study, Paul gave the Colossians 2 important warnings: Don't let anyone judge you in food or drink (16) and don't let anyone cheat you out of your reward (18). Within the explanation of these warnings, Paul condemns both the religious legalism practiced and promoted by the false teachers and the ungodly mysticism they promise will bring the Colossian Christians closer to God. In today's text, Paul doesn't provide a warning but he does ask a rhetorical question that is meant to compel these believers to consider all that they have received in Christ and compare it to the bondage and failings of the sham belief system being offered to them by these false teachers.

20-23- Here, Paul's condemning the idea and practice of asceticism as a means of drawing closer to God. An ascetic person practices a lifestyle of rigorous self-denial and self-mortification in order to become more spiritual. Ascetic practices were popular in the Middle Ages: wearing uncomfortable clothing next to the skin, sleeping on hard beds, whipping oneself, not speaking for days (or years); going without food or sleep, etc. Some extreme examples of this still occur today. In the Philippines, during the week between Palm Sunday and Resurrection Sunday, some individuals would participate in a practice called self-flagellation. They would tie ropes around their arms and legs, bare their backs and walk down the street with a handful of cords tipped with bamboo slivers and whip themselves as they made their way to the local church or cathedral. This is an extreme example but it comes from the same misguided concept that harming oneself or denial of simple comforts makes you more acceptable to God.

If this sounds a lot like the previous section, you're not wrong. There's a definite relationship between legalism and asceticism, for the ascetic often subjects themselves to rules and regulations (21). Certain foods or practices are considered to be unholy and must be avoided. Other practices are considered holy and must not be neglected. The ascetics entire life is wrapped up in an ever growing and never satisfied system of rules. This isn't to imply that there's something wrong with physical discipline and Christians should know the value of it. Paul disciplined his own body and kept it under control (1 Cor 9:27) and told Timothy that bodily exercise profits

a little (1 Tim 4:8) so there's a place in our lives for the proper care of our bodies. Eating a lot of fat, greasy food, turns you into a fat, greasy dude!

But, the problem with the ascetic is that they hope to sanctify the soul through the discipline of the body and this is the heresy that Paul is attacking. Just as special diets and special days have no sanctifying value, neither does fleshly discipline or ungodly self-denial. In this section, Paul provides several arguments to warn all Christians against the dangers of carnal religious asceticism.

20- Paul's first argument is to, once again, present the Christian's spiritual position in Christ. He asks the rhetorical question: if you died with Christ...why...subject yourselves to regulations? This reminds us of a key theological point that Paul has made earlier: believers have died with Christ. Now, I will grant you that Paul hasn't said this particular statement in so many words but his teaching about believers being buried with Christ in baptism (12) implies that we have also died with Him. Some translations replace the word since for if, to reflect the reality of the Colossian believers position in Christ, which is clearly the case. But, from a rhetorical standpoint, it seems better to retain the If.

Paul is not simply stating the fact that we have died with Christ; he is inviting us to consider whether we have, indeed, died with Christ and if we can answer yes, then we must stop and ponder the implications of that truth.

Here, Paul returns to his main point. All that the Colossians and all other believers need is found in Christ. With the biblical principle of corporate solidarity as the basis for his statement, Paul claims that we really did die with Christ, were buried with Him, and were raised with Him. Just as all humans were appointed by God to be with Adam in his sin, so God has appointed all believers to be with Christ in the events that reversed and more than canceled the effects of Adam's sin. We now enjoy the benefits that Christ has won in His death because of our union with Him.

Previously, these Colossians had been part of the world that is governed by basic principles; elemental rudiments that all fallen humanity is subject to, and these elemental rudiments are enforced and empowered by the spiritual rulers of the cosmos; malevolent and rebellious powers that seek to enslave humanity and resist the will and work of God on the earth. By dying with Christ, believers have been moved out from under the control of these

elemental spirits and these formidable powers can no longer exercise any control over them. So, Paul's question to them is simply this: if, in your conversion and baptism, you died to the old life of bondage and have put it behind you, why would you now seek to voluntarily reenter that slavery again? Why would you even consider giving these powers new life by submitting to their irksome and irrelevant taboos? Why are you going around asking for trouble?

Paul uses 2 parallel phrases to describe the same reality – basic principles of the world and living in (or belonging to) the world. This present world is marked by its rebellion against God and subsequent slavery to other powers. It's this dimension of slavery that Paul is warning them against. Clearly, Paul doesn't mean to imply that believers no longer live in the world. We do! His point is that believers no longer count this world as their true home or as the place that dictates who they are or how they are to live. Though we're in the world physically, we're not of the world spiritually. We have been transferred into God's kingdom and as such, we govern our lives by His laws, not the rules of men.

Believers should never fear, or even care, what their horoscope says in the newspaper (still have them?). New Orleans has long been known for the practice of voodoo that occurs in its dark corners. I don't give it a second thought because I'm no longer subject to those dark powers. They have nothing on me! I couldn't care less what the California Psychic network may have to say to me, their visions or readings have no bearing on my life. I heard recently that Zoom meetings are the modern day equivalent of an old-timey séance: "I think someone is trying to join us. Mary, is that you? Can you hear us? Hit your mute button so we can hear you!"

21- Instead of the freedom that that is theirs in Christ, the Colossians are in danger of reverting to slavery, in this case, a slavery to religious (ascetic) rules. Paul provides some examples of the rules that the false teachers were trying to impose on the Colossians. It's unlikely that he's quoting the rules as the false teachers have presented them. Instead, he presents them in a somewhat sarcastic tone with his rapid-fire listing of what these rules suggest. In doing so, Paul gives us his own interpretive paraphrase of what these rules amounted to. To be sure, in providing this list, Paul is both mocking the false teachers and warning his readers not to be deceived and led astray by them.

The list sounds like what a parent says to their young children right before they enter a store or go into someone's house: don't touch anything, don't look at anything, don't ask for anything, etc. To be sure, these directions are given to instill a certain amount of holy fear into those children to help them behave properly in public. That's exactly the effect these rules would have on these Christians. The problem with being over-scrupulous about what they eat, the believers are returning to a mentality of fear. Instead of pursuing a relationship with God, they become concerned purely with the material world, with things that decay and vanish and have no lasting significance.

This list, though sarcastic and mocking, is a perfect description of a legalistic, ascetic religion; a religion defined more by what it doesn't do instead of what it does do. Of course, Christianity is a moral religion; it does have clear moral boundaries. But at its foundation, at its core, Christianity is a religion of positive action. As God's people we live for Him, we grow in our knowledge of Him, we draw closer to Him. As members of Christ's body, we bear one another's burdens; we pray for others, we grieve with each other, we encourage one another, we rejoice with each other. As servants of our Lord, we serve, we minister, we run the race, we fight the good fight, we press on to the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. If we dedicate ourselves to do the things we should be doing faithfully and consistently, we won't have either the time nor the energy to be doing the things we shouldn't be doing.

The sad reality is that this string of do nots implies that to avoid contamination, one needs to avoid practically everything by shutting themselves up in a purity cocoon. But this is contrary to what God desires for His children. Paul's advice to the Corinthians was "Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it'" (1 Cor 10:25-26). When eating and drinking is done for the glory of God, it does no harm (10:31). Paul told the Christians in Rome, "All food is clean" (Rom 14:20). What matters is belonging to the Lord (14:8), honoring and giving thanks to God in what we eat or drink (14:6), acting in love (14:15), serving Christ (14:18) and building up our neighbor (15:2) so that we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (15:6). We have freedom in Christ and the Father intends for us to enjoy that freedom – to His glory!

22-23- in these last 2 verses, Paul justifies his rejection of the false teacher's rules by making 3 points: 1) the rules have to do with matters of this world; 2) the rules are a product of human teaching, not divine; 3) the rules cannot bring about spiritual transformation. The first 2 points are made in v**22**. First, these rules focus on fleeting realities that perish with the use. At some point, the food we eat ceases to be food and it becomes something else, it perishes with the use. Jesus gave a more earthly evaluation of such things in **Mk 7:18-19**. The phrase is eliminated is actually a euphemistic translation because the original text literally reads, "It goes out into the latrine." The translators wanted to be a little more delicate. They could have just said they're going to see Ms Murphy!

It seems Paul's opinion is that the rules of these false teachers also belong in the latrine! Everything that they had to offer only had to do with perishable things, and their rules only bind them even more to this present evil age. What Christ has to offer believers has to do with what is eternal, and He delivers them from the power of darkness to boot. Thus, all believers should ignore the spurious objections of those whose religious preoccupations are all empty whimsies with no eternal effects.

Second, these rules are the product of human reasoning and teaching but are promoted as replacements for the inspired Word of God. The doctrines are what the false teachers believed; the commandments were the regulations they gave in applying their doctrines to practical daily life. Their glaring failure is that they come from the perspective of the fallen, rebellious world. Jesus made a similar point in His rebuke of the Pharisees for their preoccupation with their own rules of ritual uncleanness (**Mk 7:7-8**). Having rules in the head isn't an acceptable substitute for obedience from the heart. Similarly, the false teachers were making far too big a deal of matters that failed to get to the essence of true Christian spirituality; the change of heart and mind that leads to true holiness, as Paul explains in v**23**.

This is, ultimately, the deception of asceticism: it gives the people who practice it a reputation of spirituality but the product doesn't live up to the promotion. Sure, they look good and no doubt sound very impressive, claiming the wisdom of ancient tradition but it's all a sham! This self-imposed worship likely points back to the worship of angels Paul mentions in v**18**, but whether it's that or something else is irrelevant. Self-imposed

worship, no matter what it is, is not the true worship of God. As Jesus declared to the woman at the well, God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth ([Jn 4:24](#)). Self-imposed religion is nothing more than self-made piety, purely a human invention with no ground in God.

If your self-imposed religion is false, it's guaranteed that the humility it produces is also false. And further, in the greatest indictment against the rules of legalism and asceticism in the Bible (this neglect of the body), Paul declares that, at the bottom line, these rules have no value in restraining the indulgence of the flesh. The false teachers were suffering from the law of unintended consequences. Their misguided religious aim to serve God and bridle the flesh only succeeded in serving the flesh and unleashing its power. Self-imposed religion, humility and harsh treatment of the body built up the importance of the flesh rather than putting it off. These things were adopted as disciplines for their own sake and merely led to the puffing up of the mind of the flesh that had devised them. Their professed goal of lifting men out of the lower life only plunged them into it more deeply.

Asceticism is a futile attempt to defeat the flesh and is no match for the cross. By seeking to live a life of ritual purity, devout religious observance and intense spiritual experience, these false teachers sought to draw closer to God. The difficulty with this is that if rules could be kept to perfection, if religion could be practiced with no blemish of hypocrisy or half-heartedness, and spiritual events manufactured to order, there would be no need for salvation or the cross.

But God, in His grace, cuts through all this religious paraphernalia. It's God's free gift of salvation, of adoption into His family, and union with Christ that makes all these things unnecessary. The rules and regulations by which these false teachers aimed to reach God are of human invention, with nothing to offer that God has not already far surpassed by His saving acts in Christ. Ascending to heavenly realms and beholding visions is no match for the heavenly ascent of Jesus Christ, who now sits at God's right hand. Forgiveness, reconciliation to God, new life, and the utter and complete defeat of the elemental spirits and powers of this fallen world can only be found in Christ.

If you are alive with Christ then you are dead to this world! It no longer holds any control or bearing over your life so don't give it any. We shouldn't serve

Christ with a mentality of fear – we serve out of love and appreciation for everything He has accomplished through His sacrifice and has provided to us because of our identifying with Him and His sacrifice. We have freedom and confidence in Christ – let's walk in the freedom and serve the Lord in that confidence and, as we do, we will witness His power working through us to effect the world around us with the love of Christ. 😊