

Paul's Second and Third Warnings

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[0:00] Last week when we covered verses 8-15 of chapter 2 of Colossians, we looked at the first of three warnings that end chapter 2.

Those warnings come after the reminder that comes in verses 6-7. Once again, we'll quote verses 6-7 from the NASV rather than our usual ESV. Paul said in those verses, Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. So we need the reminder that we have been firmly rooted in Christ and we're now being built up in Him. We quoted these verses again because, as was the case with the first warning, we need to keep verses 6-7 in mind as we look at the subsequent warnings.

We can avoid becoming victims to the things that Paul warns us about by remaining firmly rooted in Christ and allowing God's Word to build us up in Christ. By taking in the truth of the Word, believers get a strong mind, and by living out those truths, they receive full assurance that Christ is who He claimed to be.

And as they walk in Him, they will grow in Him and become established in their faith, and that in turn will lead them to give praise to God. So let's briefly look at the first warning again.

[1:36] That warning came in verse 8. Paul said, To counteract that warning, Paul immediately pointed us back to the truth about Christ.

He did that in verse 9 where he said, The second and third warnings follow the same pattern. After each warning, Paul immediately will point us back to the truth about Christ. His main point is clear, though, and that point is if you move away from Christ, no matter what you're promised, be very clear, you're going to lose if you do that.

So with that truth in mind, let's read verses 16 through 23. Paul said, 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.

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 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, and not holding fast to the head from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with the growth that is from God.

[3:09] 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? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used, according to human precepts and teachings.

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.

In a sense, divine grace will always be a threat to human nature. Grace undermines our efforts to justify ourselves.

Grace runs counter to human pride and the impulse that we all feel to boast in our own accomplishments. Grace, after all, requires that we defer all praise to God, and grace undermines our best efforts at establishing a list of requirements and prohibitions that we can impose on ourselves and others as the conditions on which we gain acceptance with God.

Grace demands only one thing, that all glory and honor and credit be given to Jesus Christ for what he has done, not for what we have done. And human nature instinctively hates that.

[4:23] This passage takes on the false teachers in Paul's day, and also our day, who try to convince people that they must do something to earn salvation or to move to the next level.

Wherever the gospel is preached, you're going to see that legalism rears its ugly head. Once you declare that God has graciously provided everything we need in the person and work of Jesus Christ, fallen human nature will rise up in protest and try to sneak in somewhere a rule or regulation that we in our own strength can fulfill, or maybe an observance or a ritual that we, without God's enabling power, can perform that will enhance our spiritual standing or gain some reward that will put God in our debt.

For the Colossians, the false teachers claimed that they were able to attain a heightened form of spirituality and holiness independently of Jesus Christ. We'll see that when we get to verse 19. At its heart, then, the false teaching advocated a pathway to fullness and favor with God that refused to rest satisfied in all that we have in Jesus Christ alone. As much as you might think this type of religious commitment is the height of spirituality, it's actually the product of fleshly and ungodly thoughts.

It's also the result of refusing to seek strength and guidance from God through the person of Jesus Christ. In tonight's passage, Paul debunks this false teaching with very direct wording.

[5:52] And here's a quote from Robert Utley. He summarized verses 16 through 23 like this. He said verses 16 through 23 are the strongest condemnations of religious legalism in Paul's writings.

When Paul was dealing with weak believers, he was gentle. But when he was addressing self-righteous religious legalists, he was uncompromising. This self-righteousness was what brought such condemnation from Jesus on the scribes and Pharisees.

Paul knew well how performance-oriented religion affects things. His encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus changed everything. We'll look at tonight's passage in three sections beginning with verses 16 and 17.

And in those verses, we see the fading shadows. So the fading shadows are what goes in your first blanks. Here are verses 16 and 17 again.

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

[7:08] We see the warning very clearly in verse 16. Paul tells us that we should not allow others to judge us. And the term judgment means criticize or find fault with.

We're not to allow others to intimidate us or to question our spirituality. In other words, do not sacrifice your freedom in Christ for a set of man-made rules.

The false teachers' prohibitions about food and drink were probably based upon the Old Testament dietary laws. And those laws were given to mark Israel as God's distinct people and to discourage them from intermingling with the surrounding nations.

Because the Colossians and us are under the New Covenant, the dietary laws of the Old Covenant are no longer in force. And Jesus made that clear in Mark 7. So listen to Mark 7 verses 14 through 19.

This is Jesus here and it says, And he called the people to him again and said to them, Hear me, all of you, and understand. There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him.

[8:16] But the things that come out of a person are what defile him. And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, Then are you also without understanding?

Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from the outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach and is expelled? Thus he declared all foods clean.

Paul reminded the Romans about what was truly important when he wrote Romans 14.17. And Romans 14.17 says, For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The best known New Testament passage abolishing the Old Testament dietary restrictions is Peter's vision in Acts 10.9-16. So if you want to turn to Acts 10.9-16, we'll look at those verses briefly.

Starting in verse 9, here is that account. It says, The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Paul went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray.

[9:32] And he became hungry and wanted something to eat. But while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens open and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth.

In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But Peter said, By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.

And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean do not call common. This happened three times and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Back in our Colossians text for tonight, Paul also tells his readers that they need not worry about observing festivals, new moons, or even the Sabbath.

Festival, new moon, and Sabbath are no doubt a reference to the holy days of the Jewish calendar, specifically the annual, monthly, and weekly observances.

[10 : 41] And this very language is often used in the Old Testament to describe the sacred times binding on all that were under the Mosaic Covenant. These occasions were more than legal requirements found in an ancient document.

They helped establish a national and ethnic consciousness that represented all that was distinctly Jewish. Perhaps, therefore, the issue was theological and cultural both, because the Jews believed that God had given their culture as well as their theological beliefs.

Paul strongly forbade the Colossian Christians to come under these requirements, though. Such things may appear spiritual, but spiritual life is a matter of relationship with Christ and our heart's commitment to Him.

So to consider anything like these matters as necessary to the Christian life would actually undermine the work of Jesus. If human effort is effective, then that makes the work of God unnecessary.

And, of course, we know the work of God is the only thing that can bring us into a relationship with Him. So this is not meant to be an unfair criticism of the religion of Israel.

[11 : 53] The Old Testament Scriptures are very clear and they're very instructive for us, too. But Paul values the Jewish religion and the Old Testament Scriptures for what they are. They're the shadow of things to come.

During the time of the Mosaic Covenant, they certainly had their place and they fulfilled a glorious divine purpose. And that purpose was to point to Christ. They were a symbolic representation of a greater and more substantive reality that's now present in its fullness in Jesus Christ and all that we have by faith in Him.

Verse 17 tells us just that. It says that the Old Testament laws were a shadow of things to come. Think about a shadow. A shadow has no reality in itself.

The reality is whatever makes the shadow. Jesus Christ is the reality to which all the shadows pointed. It matters very much that we live in the substantial reality and don't exchange it for the shadows.

What's stated so briefly in Colossians 2.17 is developed into a major theme in the letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews 10.1 says, For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.

[13 : 22] The concern of the writer of these words for his readers was that they recognized the substantial and solid realities they now possess in Christ. And that's the same concern that Paul has for the Colossians.

The important question is not, do you abstain from certain food or drink? The important question is, are you in Christ? It matters nothing whether or not you observe certain days.

The question still is, are you in Christ? We may not follow those restrictions today, but even Christian people today can easily shift into patterns of religious behavior that reflect the religion of Israel in one way or another.

after all, we can make church life be full of such things as holy places, holy times, and holy rituals. Even if they're not exactly like what the Jews did in the Old Testament, they still have the same character of Old Testament Israel's religion, their shadows.

And Paul says, let no one pass judgment on you concerning such things. Once again, the question is, are you in Christ? And that's what really matters. true spirituality doesn't consist merely of keeping external rules.

[14 : 36] It consists of having an inner relationship with Jesus Christ. So now that we've talked about the fading shadows, let's move on to the second section of our lesson.

In verses 18 and 19, we see the false spirituality. The false spirituality is what comes next. verses 18 and 19 tell us about that false spirituality.

So here are those verses again. Paul said, 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, 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 danger of which Paul's readers are being warned here sounds a bit like the warning we heard in verse 16. After all, in verse 16 he said, let no one pass judgment on you. Now in verse 18 he says, let no one disqualify you.

There is a difference though between verse 18 and what he said in verse 16. What Paul seems to have in mind now is not so much someone passing judgment on you because you don't do something or maybe because you do something that they don't like, particularly in religious kinds of practices.

[16:03] This time, his suggestion is that someone is telling you that you don't measure up to the mark. In other words, someone is telling you or someone else that you're inadequate, you're a failure, and at best you're second rate.

The word translated disqualify there is a word that in ancient times often meant something along the lines of to render an adverse decision against someone or to act as an umpire against someone and to declare someone disqualified.

So to use a sports analogy, Paul's point is don't let anyone throw you out of the ballgame for allegedly having violated rules that God has never imposed. And here's a quote from F.F. Bruce. He reminds us that some people love to make a parade out of exceptional piety. They pretend to have found the way to a higher plane of spiritual experience, as though they've been initiated into sacred mysteries which give them an infinite advantage over the uninitiated.

Others are overprone to be taken in by such people. This kind of claim impresses those who always fall for the idea of an inner circle. But, says Paul, don't be misled by such people.

[17:17] Don't let them disqualify you. Remember, the question is, are we in Christ? Not, do we do certain things. But, before we get too full of ourselves when we say not to let anybody disqualify us, remember this.

The reason we are not allowed to be disqualified in this way is not because we are such a wonderful success at living the Christian life. It's because we are in Christ. The important teaching of Colossians 2, 9-15, lies behind the warnings of verses 16 and 18.

The purpose of the warnings is that Paul's readers will appreciate and not forget the truth of what it means to be in Christ. Because in Christ we know that the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and in him we are filled.

We saw that when we looked at verses 9 and 10. So, don't let anyone suggest that we are or make us feel inferior. We're not, but we're not inferior only because we are in Christ.

So, with that thought in mind, let's look at the things that Paul says have wrongly been used to disqualify believers. First, the ESV says they insist on asceticism.

[18:31] The word here is the one typically translated humility in the New Testament. Obviously, though, Paul employs it in a negative capacity here. the New American Standard renders it as self-abasement.

The idea is that people willingly embrace lowliness and even suffering to enhance their appearance of piety. It's then a false humility, the kind in which a person proudly wears a medal for being so meek.

For the ascetic, the body is a thing to be punished, denied, and even abused. The body is regarded as evil, and the only way to defeat it is to starve it of anything that might spark desire.

Ascetics take steps to diminish the intake of food and drink to a minimum, and in brief, asceticism is the belief that if you add up enough physical negatives, you will get a spiritual positive, and that kind of math doesn't work.

Jesus directly addressed this type of false humility and self-abasement. Think about what he said in Mark 6.16. That's when he addressed the practice of making fasting obvious.

[19:41] Jesus said in Mark 6.16, And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.

Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. The false teachers had a far more serious problem, though, than false humility, though. They also engaged in the worship of angels, and that denied the truth that there is one mediator between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus, which of course comes from 1 Timothy 2.5.

So angel worship is the second thing about which Paul warns his readers. The worship of angels was a heresy that plagued the region where Colossae was located for centuries.

A commentator named William Hendrickson notes that in AD 363, a church synod was held in Colossae's sister city of Laodicea. It declared, and here's a quote from that synod, it is not right for Christians to abandon the church of God and go away to invoke angels.

The early church father, Theodoret, commenting on Colossians 2.18, wrote, the disease which St. Paul denounces continued for a long time in Phrygia and Pisidia.

[20 : 59] The archangel Michael was worshipped in Asia Minor as late as AD 739. He was also given credit for miraculous cures. The Bible is clear.

We're to worship God and God alone. Remember that when people encountered angels in the Bible, the angels always told them not to worship them.

Jesus himself told Satan that we're to worship God and God alone during his temptation.

Remember Matthew 4.10. Matthew 4.10 says, Then Jesus said to him, Be gone, Satan, for it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.

And as we said, the Bible is also clear that instead of being worshipped, the angels themselves worship God. So far, we've seen three traits of spiritual snobbery that Paul mentions in verse 18 and 19, and he's got two more to go.

The next one is that the false teachers made their case for super spirituality based upon the visions that they had seen. So they claimed to experience these visions as a result of extensive fasting and bodily self-discipline, or even while they were caught up in rapturous joy because of their angelic worship.

[22 : 21] They perceived themselves to be members of an exclusive club of elitists, and that was on the strength of bizarre and supernatural experiences. Only those who have been there and done that are truly qualified in their minds to stand in God's presence.

And of course, we still see that today. Think of all the televangelists who have claimed to have gone to heaven and experienced something special. People. Like many heretics and cultists down through the ages, they claimed support for their teaching and visions that they supposedly had seen.

And of course, some of the worst excesses in the modern day charismatic movement are derived from visions like that. But you might be thinking, wait a minute, why is Paul denouncing visions when he and others in the Bible had visions?

Well, the answer is twofold. First, we no longer have the need for visions because God's word is complete. Hebrews 1, 1, and 2 say, Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, and through whom he created the world. The thing to remember is that if a teacher can't back up his teaching with the words of scripture, that teaching is false.

[23 : 41] the other thing about his concern with the visions here is that Paul is more concerned with the elitist claims upon experiences that people are using to disqualify so-called lesser saints.

And these are purported supernatural encounters that lead not to godliness, but to arrogance. And his next point makes that clear. Paul's next point is his fourth example of how the falsely humble try to make people feel inferior.

Paul says that the spiritual snobs are puffed up without reason because of a sensuous mind, or more literally, the mind of the flesh.

Have you ever stopped to think that it's possible to be engaged in numerous spiritual activities of a supernatural orientation and yet be controlled and be driven by the flesh?

That's really what Paul is warning against here. And beware of those who are constantly parading themselves and building their ministries and also their bank accounts more than likely on the basis of repeated extraordinary miraculous experiences.

[24 : 51] For all the delighting and humility, the elevated worship, and the claim visionary experiences, if what you encounter in a person is that, Paul describes that person as puffed up.

And this is a word also translated as arrogant in some other places in the Bible. So this is a dangerous sense of superiority and that's what makes such people intimidating to people who feel inferior to them.

The puffed up people are superior in their own eyes at least for the kinds of reasons that Paul has been describing. They never say they're superior because they, in their own minds, delight in their humility.

But superior is how we encounter them when we see them for what they are. And Paul actually says two shattering things about their superiority. First, he says, it's without reason.

This expressive display of humility is not something to be proud of. And second, look at what puffs them up, a sensuous mind or literally the mind of his flesh.

[25 : 56] So there really couldn't be a more devastating put down than that to the one who tries to disqualify you with his spirituality. The person who's trying to disqualify someone else needs to realize that his sense of superiority comes from his fleshly mind, and that's nothing spiritual at all.

The last thing Paul points out about their issue is the fundamental problem itself, and we'll see that when we get to verse 19. And that fundamental problem is that they seek their spiritual strength and sustenance and guidance from something other than Jesus Christ.

Christ. So verse 18 has been a little difficult in the details, but the general picture painted there by Paul is clear enough and it's familiar enough to be taken seriously.

And the general picture is that those who are in Christ should remember all that we learned in verses 9 through 15. We should take care not to be threatened by what might look like spiritual superiority, no matter how that is expressed.

the pattern of warning and teaching that we've observed since verse 8 of chapter 2 is again followed in verses 18 and 19 because the warning of verse 18 is supported by Paul's teaching in verse 19.

[27 : 17] And the teaching is necessary if the seriousness of the warning is to be appreciated. Verse 19 answers the reasonable question, well, what's really wrong with the kind of spirituality that's been pictured for us?

Listen again to verse 19 for that answer. Paul writes in verse 19 that the falsely spiritual, by relying on things other than Christ, are 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.

God has ordained that true growth, authentic godliness, and a life that pleases and praises him, is derived from a conscious dependence upon and drawing of nourishment from the head of the church, and of course the head of the church is Jesus.

So Christ is the head. Let go of him and you've lost everything, no matter how humble or how spiritual you are. Hold fast to Christ on the other hand and you're not under threat.

Displays of humility or asceticism, elevated worship practices, or remarkable spiritual experiences are of no value without Christ. But when Christ is your head, all of these things are unimportant.

[28 : 36] Verse 19 should remind us of what Jesus said at the beginning of John chapter 15. In John 15.1, Jesus said, I am the true vine, and my father is the vine dresser.

Then skipping down to verses 4 and 5 of John 15, Jesus continued, Abide in me, and I in you, as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing.

And of course, he means nothing of any lasting value there. We, like the Colossians, must not be intimidated by those who would make something other than knowing Christ through his word a requirement for spiritual maturity.

We need to remember that Christ is all-sufficient. Remember what Peter said in 2 Peter 1.3. Peter wrote, speaking of Christ, His divine power has granted us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.

[29 : 51] So we've seen the false shadows and the fading shadows and the false spirituality. In verses 20 through 23, we see the fitting summary.

So the fitting summary is the last section. Listen to verses 20 through 23 again. Paul says, 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?

Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used according to human precepts and teaching. 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.

Some commentators see these verses as a fourth warning, but these verses seem more like a recap, because the verses warn us against following regulations like the second warning does. And similar to the third warning, the verses also warn us against self-made religion, asceticism, and false spirituality. And to emphasize his previous points, Paul gives us four more reasons for avoiding legalism and false spirituality.

[31:14] First, he says, material things perish as they're used. So the things included in the false teachers list of taboos are perishable objects of the material world.

They're destined to dissipate even as they're being used. If you've died with Christ out from under the elements of the rules, the rules must be seen in perspective.

They're extremely limited in what they can encompass. They can't even begin to do for you what Christ's death has done for you. And that's why we keep going back to saying that the real key is, are you in Christ?

Second, Paul reminds us that such rules are man-made, not divinely given. Paul says that the rules are according to human precepts and teachings.

That comes from verse 22. So this is the essence of legalism, the demand that others conform to a particular standard when God has remained silent on that standard.

[32:14] Such rules come not by divine revelation, but by human thought instead. Paul sounds like Jesus in Mark 7-7 when Jesus actually quoted Isaiah 29-13.

Mark 7-7 says, In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. The third thing that Paul reminds us of here is that this approach to spiritual living only seems to be wise.

He says, these have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body. One of the keys there is the self-made religion part.

When you look at people so dedicated and disciplined at denying themselves the ordinary amenities of life, it's easy to be deceived by the appearance of their spirituality.

Such people look committed and pious and holy, but we know that appearances can be deceiving.

Paul is reminding his readers that they have died with Christ, and if we've died with Christ, what can additional rules do for us?

[33:27] The last thing he reminds them of there is that religious activities or rules are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. Rules and prohibitions and self-denial that spring from our own religious creativity are ineffective in curbing the desires of the flesh, and the flesh mocks any attempts to inhibit its expression.

Asceticism won't help you check the sinful urges or energize you in the war against temptation. The problem is so much deeper than what we like to acknowledge.

The problem is our fallen, self-indulgence, God-ignoring, pleasure-craving, self-absorbed nature that we all know so well. Paul often simply calls that the flesh.

We might hope to control it with a set of rules, a code and some regulations and strict discipline, but those things won't work. Paul actually wrote the conclusion for us tonight, and that conclusion is pretty simple.

We should avoid thinking that rules or spiritual practices have any lasting value. Even when rules are wise and sensible, don't be deceived into thinking that they can achieve much.

[34:42] Rules don't change people, rules never change hearts, and rules don't curb the flesh.

Look again at verse 23. Concerning the man-made rules and regulations, Paul wrote, 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.

So that brings us to the end of chapter 2, and do you feel a bit like Paul has left us with a cliffhanger here? He doesn't really tell us what is of value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

And this is where we have to remember that the chapter and verse divisions were inserted after Paul wrote his letter. The next time we're together in two weeks, Paul will begin teaching us about the alternative to earthly rules and regulations, about what is valuable in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

But to give you a preview, the answer comes in Colossians 3, verses 1 and 2. Paul says, if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth. And of course, that's another way of asking the question that we've come back to over and over, and that question is, are you in Christ?

[36 : 07] Are you in Christ?