

Paul continues in this part of his letter to the Colossians with a warning. And that's what he says here in verse 8: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ." Because the danger with these philosophies, the danger with these "vain deceits," as he calls them, these false teachings, is that they ultimately will take us captive. They will take us prisoner, so to speak, and lead us away from Jesus, so that we will be led away from life into death. That's why he warns us so sternly against them, to pay attention so that we are not led away. Now, Paul will go on in this letter to give very specific warnings to the Colossians. That's what we're going to hear in the rest of this chapter the next time that we meet. But here he has a very general warning, one to pay attention to, and he gives us the reasons why we should pay attention to it and why we should avoid these false teachings. We must avoid them, he says, at all costs.

Because, Christians, we are surrounded by philosophies and by vain deceits. We are surrounded in this world by all kinds of ideas which are trying to get our attention. But it's not only in the world that we have to deal with these things. It is also in the church, these ideas which try to take us captive, to lead us away from Christ. But the problem with these ideas and the reason why he has to warn us so sternly against them is that they seem so attractive to us. They seem good, even. They sound good. Maybe they even sound Christian, or at least they want to be seen as such.

But the reason why that is, Christians, is because Satan wants to deceive us. He doesn't come to deceive us with something he knows isn't going to work. He comes to try to deceive us with something which sounds good to us. And this is very often why these ideas are linked to things maybe which we agree with, with things that we think are naturally good. Let me give you some examples so you understand what I mean here. Whenever we have something like issues of race in the world today, you'll always hear them connected to justice. We think justice is good. Everybody wants it, right? That's something that we think is a positive thing. And so they'll try to give any number of ideas and always connect them with justice as a way of saying that we should just accept these things. Because if you're against it, well then you want injustice. You want a bad thing to continue. And in that way these ideas can become very attractive to us, or at least a lot more tempting. Or think of something like with abortion. Abortion is always connected with choice, isn't it? They even call it "pro-choice." Because you want to be able to choose something for yourself, right? You want to be able to make your own decisions, so to speak, and not have someone else make them for you. And so to be against these things, the world says, means that you're trying to force your will upon someone else. Something that maybe we don't want to do. Or issues of transgenderism, always connected with issues of freedom. We should be free to choose who we are. We should be free to express ourselves, the argument goes, so why would you deny that to someone else? But you can see how by connecting these ideas with something we might agree with, the idea becomes much harder to argue against. Because if you're against these things, well then you must be against these good things as well.

But Christians, this doesn't just happen in the world. This happens in the church too. That can happen in churches who have accepted worldly ideas, taking worldly arguments and attaching Christ to them and saying that this is what God thinks. Or even with other things too. Someone

might say, for example, that "I don't have to go to church, because I'm free in the Gospel, because I'm saved by grace and not by my works. You're not against grace, are you? Why would you argue in some other way?" But you can see how, then, those two things being connected together tries to get us to accept them, and now we're left with a conundrum. What are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to deal with this situation?

Paul warns us against it. We shouldn't be taken in by these things. And the only way that we will know what is right and what is wrong is by testing it, by asking some questions, by thinking about it and asking these tests as a way of seeing what is of the world and what is of God. You shouldn't be afraid to ask these kind of questions, either, because this is the only way that we will know what is indeed of the Lord.

So what questions should we ask, then? How should we put these things to the test? The first question we should always ask is: is this idea from the Bible? Now, that probably seems obvious to us. We're Christians, right? Shouldn't we always be looking to the Bible? But you'd be surprised how often we forget to ask that question, to ask if whatever is coming to us is something which God is saying or if it's something merely which the world is saying. Because if someone makes an argument to you and never references the Bible at all, never talks about the Lord at all, how can it be from God? It must be from the world. But of course, we have to be careful here, because just because they mention the Bible doesn't mean that it's from God either. Matthew chapter 4, for example, where the devil is tempting Jesus, shows us that the devil can quote Scripture too. He knows the Bible. He knows how to make his arguments. So the further question we have to ask is: how is the Bible being used here? Are they using the Bible to make the argument? Are they saying, "This is what God says, and this is what says in the Bible, and therefore this is what we should think as Christians"? Or are they merely using the Bible to support the idea, as something to tack on at the end to make it sound Christian? You see this all the time, unfortunately. "Jesus would believe this," or "Jesus would agree with this," or even people who will say, "Jesus never said anything about this, so how can he be against it?". You hear that argument used in the world all the time, especially with something like homosexuality. "Jesus never explicitly mentions it," they say, "and therefore he must at least be indifferent to it." But that is using the Bible in the wrong way. It's not dealing with what God actually has to say. So if it is from the Lord then, Christians, it is something which will be rooted in his Word. It will come from it. It will be supported by it. And it will end in it. So that in everything we can see that it is from God.

A second question we might ask of this idea is: if you took Christ out of it, you didn't mention him at all, would it change anything? Think about that. If you took Christ out of the equation altogether, would it change anything about the argument which was being made? If it wouldn't change it all, actually, then no, it is not from God. Because an argument which is from God, an idea which is from him, must depend on him in everything from beginning to end. Take Jesus out of it, and the whole thing would fall to pieces. But if the idea still holds together, and it's still being made without him, then it must be coming from the world. This is why, Christians, we also have to be careful of appearances too. Just because something looks Christian doesn't mean that it is. People can be very excited about things that are not of God. People can try to convince you of any number of things, even people which seem to be Christian. But just because they're zealous for him, just because they say that they are Christian doesn't mean that they are. We have

to ask ourselves, if we took God out of this, would it change anything at all? Is Christ the center? Is Christ the heart of everything that is being said?

A third and perhaps a final test we might ask is: does this idea exalt Christ, or does it exalt me instead? If it exalts Christ, if it lifts him up, it's going to cause us to love him more. It's going to cause us to see how much we need him, how much we depend on him in everything, so that we realize our own unworthiness more and more, and how much we owe to him more and more. It will also make us better Christians, so that we will walk patiently with one another, so that we will show love to one another, just as Christ first loved us. But if it's an idea that exalts myself, it's going to cause divisions. It's going to make me become proud, to start to look down on other people, to say, "I am a better Christian than they are," or "I'm a better person than they are." You see this all the time with the world too, Christians. These ideas where people will say, "I'm better than you because you're on the other side of this argument, and therefore I can treat you like dirt. I don't have to listen to it all. I don't even have to be respectful towards you, because I'm better than you." But if something is of Christ, Christians, it's not going to do that. Because Christ taught us to love even our enemies, to pray for them, even as they are persecuting us, so that in everything we are becoming more and more like him.

Because that's really Paul's point here--isn't it?--when he continues on in the way that he does this. Because he connects this warning with a clear description of who Christ is. Because Christ is our everything. Christ is our all in all. In him is all the fullness of deity, Paul says. And we have our fullness in him. Everything that we are and everything that we have comes from the Lord. We don't need to add anything to it. We don't need to get anything from the world. In him we have our entire salvation. We don't need to supplement it with something from the world. In him we are entirely forgiven. There's nothing left to do. The world doesn't need to add anything to it. In Christ we are entirely alive. We don't need to look to the world to find more life, because we have the fullness of that life in him. So in everything, as Paul shows us, Christ is our beginning, Christ is our end, the very sum and substance of our thinking and our actions and our life.

So Christians, test all of these ideas. Don't just accept them. Don't just say that because they sound good that they must be true. Test them. Ask questions. Is this from God? Does this exalt him? Is this going to lift him up? And when we hold on to what is from God, to the things which pass the test, then we will be built up in Christ, because he is our everything, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the author and the perfecter of our faith.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, as the fullness of all that we are and have. We pray that you would teach us always to listen to his voice and to trust in him, so that we would not be taken captive by the world, but would seek him in all things. In his name we pray. Amen.