

Paul in the previous section gives a very general warning to the Colossians, warning them to avoid being caught up and ensnared by the things of this world. As he says in verse 8, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition." But now in our reading for this evening, Paul moves into more specific warnings, warning the Colossians exactly what they were supposed to watch out for. And so now his warnings become "let no one pass judgment on you in these specific questions" and "let no one disqualify you, insisting on these specific things." Now, we might think, "But what does that have to do with us? If this is the problem that's going on in Colossae, what does that have to say to us today?" But Christians, all of these things have been written also for us, too. And we can learn something from Paul even as he speaks to what the Colossians are going through. Because here he is teaching us something about what it means to be tempted by legalism. So we need to pay attention then to what Paul is saying so that we too can avoid these things.

Because as we've heard many times throughout this book, Christians, the Colossians are being encountered by a number of false teachers. And these false teachers, Paul is saying, are bringing to them a worldly wisdom, something which doesn't come from God. And more than that, they're claiming a secret wisdom, a hidden knowledge, something that nobody else knows and something that they're going to teach them, probably for a price. We can see the details of this secret knowledge in verse 18 especially, where it says: "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." So those are the things that they were teaching to the Colossians.

Asceticism, of course, is any kind of practice where you deny yourself something for a religious reason, especially very severely deny yourself something. I'm sure you've all heard or maybe even have seen somebody personally who denies themselves something because they think that's the right thing to do. People who go without food for a long period of time. People who abstain from eating certain kinds of foods. People who do some very difficult thing every day because they think that's what they need to do. That's asceticism. That's the kind of practice that Paul is talking about here. But it's not something that you have to do. It's not like you have a food allergy and you can't eat certain kinds of foods. That's not asceticism. This is something you choose to do for the sake of your own beliefs. Now, I imagine the reason why these false teachers were saying this was probably because they taught that the world was an evil thing, something to be avoided, something Christians should have very little to do with. And so by these practices then, by separating from the world, they would escape it and get to something which was better.

And so, related to that then was the worship of angels. This idea that these creatures of God which are above us are themselves like gods. They could be worshiped in the same way that God could be worshiped. And I suspect the reason why that happened was, since we were supposed to leave this world and looked upwards towards God, the angels were in between us and God at the highest level. So everything above us is good and even divine, and everything below is something to be avoided. So the two kind of go hand in hand.

But the main thing that they were insisting on, Christians, was this last one: the visions. Claiming to receive something from God which nobody else knew, something that he had said to no one else in all the world. Now, we see this actually going on today, unfortunately. You hear all kinds

of Christian groups where a pastor or a parishioner will say: "God spoke to me and told me this," or "When I woke up this morning, God told me this new revelation. It's something he's only told to me and to no one else." It's that same mentality, to have this secret, hidden wisdom from God, something which no one else has. But I'll tell it to you, they say, but often for a price.

Now, all of these things caused the Colossians to go astray. But the main problem with this was not these ideas, actually. The main problem was how they acted toward one another. Because these ideas all by themselves are kind of like nothing. But the way that you think about something leads to the way you act. Your thoughts influence the way you live. And this is exactly what these false teachers were insisting on. We hear this in verse 21, where it says: "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?" This secret wisdom of theirs led them to say, "If you want to be a Christian, a good Christian, maybe even a Christian at all, then you're not supposed to handle these things. You're not supposed to touch these things. You cannot taste these kinds of foods. These are the things you must avoid if you want to really understand what we are getting at." And we also hear in verse 16: "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 teachers were saying, then: "If you eat this food, if you drink this drink, if you don't observe this festival, if you don't observe the new moon, if you don't observe the Sabbath the way we want you to observe the Sabbath, you're not a Christian. You're not a Christian like we are. If you really want to get on board with this, if you really want to be a Christian, then you're going to do what we say."

But Christians this happens, unfortunately, quite naturally, to go from this idea of a hidden knowledge, something secret known only by a few, to this kind of legalistic way of thinking. Because think of it this way. If I say that I have this amazing knowledge, this amazing revelation that nobody else knows, and you can see for yourself how good my life is going or how good everything's going for me. If you want to be like me, they say, all you have to do is X, Y, and Z. That's all you have to do. Do these three steps or whatever it may be, and then you can be just like me. Unfortunately, this is a very worldly way of thinking, because you hear this all the time in the world, especially in advertisements and really especially on the Internet. How many times have you gone on to the Internet and saw an ad that said something like one weird trick to lose a whole bunch of weight? Or Big Pharma and Big Tech don't want you to know this. It will disrupt everything. Or even like these two guys have this secret that's going to disrupt a whole industry. It's that kind of advertising. It's that way of thinking. This idea that they know something that you don't, and it'll make your life better as a result. All you have to do is X, Y, and Z.

But unfortunately, this thinking is in the church too. Do you want to be a good Christian? Then you have to do this. If you want to be a Christian at all, then you can't do this. And on and on these things go. And in the process, the one teaching this, the one bringing it becomes like a judge, a kind of umpire even, a referee. That's what Paul is saying here when he says "let no one disqualify you." To be disqualified like you're playing a sport. To be a referee that says that you're not worthy, because you're not living up to their standards. But if we are listening to their standards and to their way of thinking, then we are no longer listening to what God has to say.

But this then is the great danger, Christians, of legalism. Not just how others relate to us, but how we also relate to one another. Because legalism in a nutshell is taking something which God did not command or did not command clearly and making it the most important thing, making it central to what it means to be a Christian. And by that we start to judge everything according to that one thing. We'll look at it and then we'll look at someone and we'll say, "Are they doing this thing?" If we say yes, they're doing this thing, then we'll say, "They're a Christian." Are they not doing it? Well, then they must not be a Christian. And in this way, we distort the whole thing of what it means to follow after God.

Now, of course, we are called to judge. We are called to test the spirits. We have to ask questions. That's what God wants us to do. The problem is not judging. The problem here is that we are judging by the wrong standard. If we are judging by God's standards, by what he actually says in the Scriptures, then that's something we're supposed to do. But it's when we start to judge by human standards, by these things elevated up to the wrong place, that we fall into legalistic thinking. The common example, of course, is always something like alcohol. You know of Christians who will say, "If you're a good Christian, you can't drink alcohol." There's people who say that. Of course, on the other side of the equation, there's also people who have said, "If you don't drink alcohol, you can't be a Christian either." It goes both ways. Or tobacco or whatever you want to say. These things lifted up, even though God has not given us a very clear message about them one way or another. He doesn't want us to abuse them, yes. We can't get drunk. But beyond that, he leaves it free for the individual Christian. So if we lift that up too high, we can fall into a legalistic way of thinking. Are there some Christians who should not drink for the sake of their souls? Absolutely. Sometimes you just can't do it without falling into sin. Does that mean that all Christians should not do it if they would be a Christian? Not at all. What we have to judge by is God's standards. Because legalism, whatever it may be, leads us to say that I'm better than somebody else, even if I don't say it out loud.

But the problem, the real problem with legalistic thinking, Christians, is that it's attractive to us. The reason why it's attractive is because it looks good. It looks right. It looks serious. It looks holy. That person is really taking their Christianity seriously, and that's why they act the way that they do. So if I'm not measuring up to that, well, then I must not be a good Christian. Or vice versa, if I'm trying to impose that on someone else. But the problem here is that it only looks like it. Legalism doesn't actually change anything. It's an outward thing. It's something which we only do with our hands, but which doesn't come from the heart. And our hands are never going to change the way that our heart thinks. We're never going to become better from the outside in. That's not how it works. But that's what legalism tries to do.

And the thing that Paul emphasizes here is that it's actually worthless when it comes to stopping sin anyway. Like he says in verse 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." It's worthless. It doesn't change a thing. Because it's always trying to set up tests for itself, always trying to excuse itself to show why it actually is something good. But because it doesn't come from God, but rather from the world and from within, it doesn't change a thing.

But Christians, God does change the heart. God changes us from within, so that the heart now influences our hands, inside out, the way that we see a real difference. And he does this through his Son, Jesus Christ. Because if we have died with Christ, we will also live with him. And if we are alive in Christ, we're going to see a real growth, as Paul says. A real growth in holiness, a real growth in godliness, because it is a growth which comes from him. It's not fake. It's not illusionary. It's not made up. It is real, because it comes from the Lord. And in this way you can actually stop the desires of the flesh, because we are purified from within. We've become a new creation, different from what we were.

Now, I just want to say one thing here in closing, Christians. All of this does not mean that there are no commands which God gives to us. All of this does not mean that there is nothing which we as Christians are called to do. There are certainly things which God wants us to do, certainly things where if we don't do them, then we cannot call ourselves Christians. But the difference here is that those things come clearly from God. They're not unclear. They're written in the Scriptures. They are things which he has told us through his Son, Jesus Christ. And so in that way, Christians, don't let anybody disqualify you from salvation by means of man-made religion, man-made rules, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch." These things come from the world. Because God has qualified you through his Son, Jesus Christ, and has given you his Holy Spirit so that you are now a new creation in him. Listen to him, and you will never go astray.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, as the true wisdom from heaven. Help us always to listen to his voice and to not listen to the voice of the world, so that we would follow after him in newness of life. In his name we pray. Amen.