



Forsaking All Others (Colossians 2:16-23)

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It's good to be back, my friends. Thank you for praying for us during my summer sabbatical. I so grateful for some extended time to rest after seven full years of pastoral ministry. We made some sweet memories as a family. I was able to spend unhurried time with the Lord and work through several books for the good of my own soul. And Aliza and I also spent 10 days in western Canada marveling at God's glory in creation. If you want a reminder of how small we are and how great God is, go to the Rockies.

I came back less anxious about the work the Lord has called me to do, more certain that he who began a good work in our church will bring it to completion, and with a renewed conviction to pursue a lifestyle of sustainable sacrifice in my labor as a pastor. In different ways, the Lord repeatedly brought me back to Paul's example 1 Tim 4:10, "For to this end we toil and strive, because we have set our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe." That's the kind of man I want to be – a man who works hard, not because I'm confident in my work, but because I'm confident in the Lord.

We enjoyed visiting several other churches, but sorely missed being with you, especially when the service ended, and we looked around at a room mostly filled with strangers! I was reminded week after week that the church isn't a meeting. It's a family and Aliza and I thank God for making us part of this family.

I also thank God for the way Josh, Chris, Quin, and other men have faithfully taught through the book of Colossians while I was gone. It's a privilege to be used by God to lead, feed, protect, and care for you, but I am not the ultimate builder or architect of this church. Jesus is! I rejoiced to hear how he continued to strengthen your souls through his Word while I was gone.

May we be a congregation that never shifts from "the hope of the gospel," from the good news of Christ crucified, not only in what we say we believe, but at the level of our affections. Col 2:6-7, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."

An attitude of unwavering dependence on Christ alone for all we need today, tomorrow, and the rest of our lives does not happen automatically or simply because you consider yourself a Christian. It's a supernatural gift, awakened by the power of the Spirit. It must be nourished by the spiritual food of God's Word. And it must be carefully guarded from pretenders, from false saviors who clamor to replace Jesus' rightful place on the throne of your heart.

Most false teaching doesn't present in the form of an amazon best-seller with a picture of a guy holding wads of cash or a cult leader who gets arrested by the FBI. It comes in far subtler forms. Just take the last beer commercial you watched. Why are they parading clips of people laughing and having a good time together? Because the company wants you to believe that if you buy their drink, you'll be happy! A little bit more of what is wrong will become right.

Whenever we watch TV, turn on the radio, or browse social media, we are bombarded with spiritual lies about where to look for life and fulfillment. And while the Colossians didn't have to deal with mass media, they were no less tempted to look to all sorts of things besides Jesus for confidence that it was well with their soul! It's why Paul warned them in Col 2:8, "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."

That's the litmus test for every form of false teaching. Is what this person is saying, the spiritual wisdom they're urging me to embrace, does it make much of Jesus or something else? Sadly, much of what we hear from professedly Christian sermons, books, or counseling offices does not hold fast to Christ. It may give lip service to him. But it doesn't make much of him or build us into him.

That doesn't mean we stop listening, reading, or getting counsel. It does mean we must pay careful attention to Paul's warning against false teaching in vv. 16-23. Here's the main point of the entire passage. **Refuse to accept any form of spiritual wisdom that does not hold fast to Christ for true life is only found in him.** So how does false teaching lead us away from Christ? Paul provides a series of examples for the Colossians, equipping us to recognize spiritual lies before we embrace them.

1) FALSE TEACHING DESTROYS THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM (vv. 16-17)

Paul has just finished setting forth the utter sufficiency of Christ's person and work in vv. 9-15. What's it sufficient to do? It's sufficient to deal with the sin that separates us from God and make us right with him! How does God do that? He dies so you don't have to die. He atones for the guilt of your sin so he can justly forgive all your trespasses, "cancelling the record of debt" that stood against you.

For all who turn from sin to trust and follow Jesus, the cross stands as a decisive word of divine judgment. You are white as snow, not because of anything good you have done for God, but because of what God in Christ has done for you. And that decisive word of divine judgment, divine vindication through the gospel, must inform our response to words of human judgment.

"Therefore," Paul declares in v. 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." It seems the false teachers in Colossae were taking parts of the law God gave his people under the Old Covenant, in the Old Testament, and requiring followers of Jesus under the New Covenant to keep the same rules.

"Maybe they're right," they wondered. "Maybe it does matter whether I eat or drink certain foods, whether I observe the annual feasts, offer the appropriate animal sacrifices on the first day of the month, and cease from every form of work on the 7th day of the week."

The word "let" in v. 16 reminds us that we have a choice to make, friends, whenever a professing Christian implies or asserts that we're not doing something God requires. How do you know whether to receive and embrace their words as the truth? Listen carefully. The test is not whether you like what they're saying or whether their words make you feel safe, affirmed, and accepted for who you are! The test is whether their judgment aligns with God's judgment, whether their words reflect the truth of his Word.

We are called to judge one another in the church (1 Cor 5:12). But our judgments must be shaped by what God has done and what God has said about what he has done. So when it comes to food laws and Sabbath days, what has God said and

done? The book of Hebrews tells us they pointed forward to Christ. They anticipated and prepared the way for what God accomplished through Jesus.

They were not the end game or goal. They were dim reflections, “shadows” as Paul says in v. 17, of an infinitely greater substance and glory, the glory of Christ and gospel of our salvation! Jesus fulfilled the law on our behalf (Matt 5:17) so that we are no longer under the Mosaic law in a covenantal sense. We’re under the law of Christ! He declared all foods clean (Mk 7:19). He is our Sabbath rest (Heb 4:3).

So should a Christian refuse to work shifts on Sundays? Scripture doesn’t give us a black and white rule to follow. It gives us principles we must apply like Heb 10:25 (do not neglect to meet together) and examples to follow, like the early church gathering on the first day of the week in Acts 2. Ultimately, however, it’s a matter of Christian freedom.

Guided by God’s Word, the Holy Spirit, and godly counsel, one believer may conclude a particular practice of work on Sunday is wise and another believer may conclude a different practice is wise. Notice I’m not saying Jesus did it all so we can do whatever we want! I am saying we must take care to treat matters of conscience as such instead of weaponizing them to functionally question someone’s salvation or judge their godliness.

If a friend says, “I mean we all know real Christians vote Republican,” you shouldn’t smile and nod. If a fellow parent says, “Clean eating is the best way to honor the Lord with our bodies,” you shouldn’t be ashamed of hotdogs you served last night. You should firmly reject the judgment in their words as a spiritual lie, a false gospel.

There are two rules God has established in matters of Christian freedom, both of which Paul unpacks in Rom 14. The first is the test of faith: *Am I fully convinced that what I’m doing is pleasing to the Lord?* The second is the test of love: *Is what I’m doing building up the Christians around me?* The false teachers in Colossae turned areas of Christian freedom into requirements for salvation and issues judgements accordingly. They failed to carefully work through how the person and work of Christ impacts our application of the Old Testament law.

False teaching may quote verses from the Bible, but it wrenches them out of their canonical context. The emphasis isn’t on the big story of Scripture – who Jesus is

and what he's done for us. It's on whether we are making the supposedly "right" choice in disputable matters. The net result is spiritual hierarchy that undermines the sufficiency of Christ's saving work and destroys the foundation of Christian freedom.

2) FALSE TEACHING ABANDONS THE SOURCE OF TRUE SPIRITUAL GROWTH (vv. 18-19)

If the problem in vv. 16-17 is misapplying Scripture in ways that minimize the gospel, the problem in vv. 18-19 is adding to Scripture in ways that completely replace the gospel. It's an example of manmade religion at its finest. V. 18, "Let no one disqualify you," Paul says, "insisting on asceticism..." What's asceticism? Attempting to earn God's favor through suffering by denying yourself material provisions or blessings.

Are there times it's wise to fast from lawful pleasures like food or drink or television or sex because you realize you have become enslaved to them such that they're no longer helpful? Absolutely. But does constant hard-core dieting render anyone more acceptable in God's sight? No. 1 Tim 4:4, "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving." We fall into the same trap if we think the earlier you get up in the morning, the more godly you are. Or the more hours you work, the more faithful you are.

"Worship of angels," something Scripture outright forbids as idolatry, is a classic example of syncretism, mixing pagan practices into Christianity. How about "going on in detail about visions"? Doesn't God speak to different people in the Bible through dreams? Absolutely. So what's the problem here?

The false teachers are giving undue weight to subjective religious experiences or impressions, such that they became a functional alternative to the authority of Scripture. We can easily do the same thing when we get more excited about what we sensed God saying on our last spiritual mountaintop than the promises he has already made to us in his Word.

What's wrong with the entire list? They're all expressions of human pride or the "mind of the flesh." In our pride, we want to be our own spiritual authority (hence

the visions). We want to fix our own problems (hence the asceticism). And where does it ultimately lead? V. 19 – a failure to hold fast to the Head.

Who's the Head? Col 2:8 – it's Christ! What our physical head is to our physical body, Christ is to the church. He's the one who nourishes our church and knits us together, such that together we grow (v. 19) "with a growth that is from God."

Friend, if you want to experience the joy of a growing relationship with God, a new restraint technique for your anger, lust, or greed is not the answer. You don't need to integrate a little eastern mysticism or run from church to church or conference to conference, looking for an ecstatic spiritual experience of some kind. You need to hold fast to Christ. He's the only source of true spiritual life.

Holding fast to Christ means depending wholly and completely on Jesus to make you right with God, secure the favor of God, and transform you into the image of God, not just at one point in your life, but every day of your life. Trusting Jesus is more than our first step of faith. It's the realm in which the entire Christian life goes down!

Holding fast means looking to Christ alone spiritual nourishment, strength, provision, and help, by embracing the ordinary means of grace he has ordained to draw us close to him - things like meditation on the Word, prayer, sharing the Lord's Supper, or conversation with other Christians. It's the only way you'll really grow in spiritual maturity. I'll give you an example.

If you keep losing your temper with your kids or your friends, what do you need? Would an anger-management class help you practice a little more self-control? Perhaps. But you're just caging the monster. What do you really need? Where will true growth come from? From coming to know Jesus as the Sovereign Lord who reigns over every circumstance in your life and is working them all together for your good and his glory, from learning to trust him, and rest in his care for you. Real change doesn't start at the level of your behavior. It always starts in the heart, in the way we're relating to God.

And when we hold fast to Christ personally through ordinary means of grace, what happens? It's not just you who grow. It's the entire church family in which God has placed you! The life we derive from him spreads throughout the body through the

gift of community as the example of your life and the words of encouragement you share with others helps them grow too.

By the way, the reverse is also true. If you're not holding fast to Christ, you are at best hindering the growth of our entire body and at worst actively harming our family. Gangrene in your foot will eventually destroy the rest of your physical body. The spiritual body of the church is no different. The choices you make tonight will have spiritual repercussions in our community, whether for good or ill. May they be for our collective upbuilding, friend. Hold fast to Christ that our entire body may grow through you and with you.

False teachers in Colossae were promising forms of spiritual health and growth that had nothing to do with Christ. That was the biggest problem. They were abandoning the true source of spiritual growth. We need to test whatever we read in a Christian book, experience in a Christian counseling office, or hear on a Christian podcast in the same way. So often we assume whatever someone is saying is good and right simply because the speaker claims to be a Christian and says things that make us feel better – less anxious, less worried, more confident, more peaceful.

Be careful, friend. Immediate relief from difficult emotions is not the test of biblical truth. What's the test? Is what this person is writing, saying, or recommending urging and equipping you to hold fast to Christ? Is it helping you to look to him, love him, trust him, obey him, and stand in awe of him in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3)? The test of truth is not, "Does it makes me feel better?" The test of truth is whether it's centered on the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

By the way, that's also a helpful question to ask as you're wrestling with matters of Christian freedom. Don't ask, "Am I allowed to do this?" Ask yourself, "Will this decision or action help me hold fast to Christ or lead me away from him?" We ask the same question as pastors whenever we're evaluating a ministry idea. Will this song, this event, this opportunity, help us hold fast to Christ and compel those outside our body to join us in the same?" Sound teaching, biblical wisdom, helps the people of God grow by holding fast to the Head. False teaching abandons the source of true spiritual growth.

3) FALSE TEACHING DENIES THE REALITY OF OUR DEATH TO SIN (vv. 20-23)

Here we confront one of the most insidious lies from the enemy of our souls. He would convince you, Christian, that you have yet to obtain something you already have in Christ. The pitch goes something like this. Do you feel the darkness within you? Do you sense the anger, the rebellion, the insatiable thirst for physical pleasure? Do you feel the gap between who you know you're supposed to be and who you really are?

Well then, here's what you must do. You must learn to discipline your body. You must learn to say no. You must keep the rules. You must train yourself to do the right thing. If you're losing the battle with pornography, throw away your smart phone. If you're spending your way into piles of debt, cut up your credit cards. If you're bingeing to deal with stress, stop buying ice cream. If you have a habit of laziness, schedule your entire day in 30-minute increments.

It's the spiritual disciplinarian. The biblical moralist who reduces the Christian life to a set of wrong behaviors to put off and right behaviors to put on. Frankly, it's exactly what many young people think Christianity is all about – a list of rules God wants you to keep so you can be the good person you're supposed to be. V. 21, “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch.” Don't watch that, drink that, smoke that, listen to that, and above all, don't have sex before marriage.

That's not the heart of Christianity at all, friends. Look at v. 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.” A list of rules may curtail our sinful behaviors, but the rebellion in our hearts will simply out itself in some other way. Why? Because our spiritual problem goes deeper than our actions.

Sin isn't just something we do. It's who we are. We enter this world with a sinful nature, hearts that are dead set against the authority of God. It's why parents never have to teach children to do what's wrong! And if you pride yourself on being a good person, know this. The fact that you think you can earn your way into God's good graces only confirms the true depth of your spiritual darkness. You are blind to the splendor of his holiness. You are blind to the depth of your own wickedness. You tell yourself you can be good enough. God says you cannot!

You need more than a behavior modification, friend. You need a heart transplant. You need God who created you, who knows you, and whose hand are all your days, to remove your spiritually dead heart that is cold to him and give you a new spiritual nature that looks to Jesus to cleanse you from the inside out!

And for those of us who do, what does God say is true? He says we have died. Faith in him unites you to him such that his death becomes your death – the death of who you once were, your old self, your old nature. The man or woman who once was enslaved to all manner of passions and pleasures, living in the kingdom of this world, subject to the spiritual forces of evil, no longer exists. In Christ, you are a new creation!

You're no longer trapped in the endless cycle of a self-improvement and condemnation. He has delivered you from bondage to sin through his death and resurrection. And he is now at work in your life by the power of the Spirit, empowering you to become experientially what you already are positionally, a citizen of the kingdom of God who obeys Jesus not to deliver yourself from sin but because Jesus has already delivered you.

That's the entire point of v. 20. "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of this world," if the old you enslaved to sin and death no longer exists, if, as far as they are concerned, you are dead, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations?" Why are you wandering back to your old master and the spiritual pride that acts as if following the right moral code, abstaining from perishable things like food and drink, will make you right with God?

Remember your union with Christ! Remember who you are in him. You are dead to the power of sin and death. You are alive to God through Christ Jesus our Lord. That's the good news of the gospel! It's not well with your soul because you do this or don't do that. It's well with your soul because of Jesus. Don't hold fast to your own morality. Hold fast to Him! Other saviors are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. Only Jesus can make you exactly who God created you to be.

CONCLUSION

In the wedding service from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, the bride answers the following question: *“Will you have this man to be your wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of marriage? Will you obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep yourself only unto him, so long as you both shall live?”*

Friend, if you are a Christian, you are part of the bride of Christ, the body of the church. He is your husband. He’s the one to whom you have been pledged from eternity past. And like a bride after her wedding day, faithfulness to him requires forsaking all others.

Human precepts and teaching – whether the Jordan Peterson’s 12 rules, new age spirituality, the latest dieting fad, practicing mindfulness, or cognitive behavioral therapy – may contain aspects of biblical wisdom but they are ultimately a mirage in the quest for what is truly wise. They are not Christ. They are not the enduring wisdom of God. Do not set your hope in them. Do not hold fast to them. Hold fast to Christ, for none who wait upon him will ever be ashamed.