

Paul tells us in Colossians that we are called to be faithful to Jesus and to the gospel. In order to do this, we must understand who Jesus is, who we are in Jesus, and what we are up against. In today's passage Paul gives us warnings about the potential dangers to our spiritual well-being. Recall that Paul wanted the Colossians to stand firm in Jesus and withstand false teachings. He made three points to help us stand firm. First, in Christ is the fullness of the Deity, therefore He is the supreme head over all powers and authorities. Second, we participate in Jesus' death and resurrection, so we also participate in His victory. Third, this victory over the demonic power of sin means that we are free from the accusations and records of sin against us. We must hold to these truths, and they must be reflected in our behavior. But Paul warns us against three mindsets that threaten to pull us away from this truth and from the fullness of Christ.

The first of these warnings is against legalism. This refers to the rules and rituals of the Law and associated Jewish traditions. Paul says in vv. 16-17 that Christians should not condemn each other for not following the regulations of the Mosaic Law because we have freedom from these legalistic regulations, which include dietary restrictions (about unclean foods, fasting), and calendar observances (annual feast days, monthly New Moon celebrations, and weekly Sabbath observance). Paul labels all these rules a shadow of things that were to come (see also Hebrews 8:5 and 10:1). A shadow is insubstantial, partially indicating the form of an object, but it is not the real object. The Old Covenant regulations foreshadow the New Covenant reality. Let us not try to put new wine into old wineskins (Matthew 9:17), for the old regulations of the Law are not required for those who are united with the One who is the fulfillment of the entire Law.

The lure of legalism is the ability to "quantify" spirituality, which leads to pride and judgmentalism. The flesh finds spiritual things difficult, but it can easily turn rules into habits. The flesh desires to have control over spirituality rather than rely on our union with Christ. And the resulting judgmentalism leads to a joyless false spirituality. It requires uniformity and conformity to a superficial form of spirituality. It tends to emphasize the less important superficial rules that are easy to follow, but ignores the deadly sins such as envy, anger, greed,

hatred, and pride. Today, some fundamentalist churches have rules about hairstyles and clothing. These rules lead to a judgmental, joyless, and superficial faith. Paul isn't saying that observing these regulations is wrong, but he doesn't want any believer to be bound by them. We have liberty to observe or not to observe these rules. We cannot elevate personal preferences to become general principles or judge others based on them.

The second warning is against mysticism (v. 18-19). Seeking visionary experiences is empty, carnal, and disconnected from Jesus. The goal of mysticism, which is to have deeper knowledge of God, is not wrong in itself. Paul teaches against deceptive mysticism that isn't rooted in Christ. One form of this mysticism is a false humility that insists on worship and communication with angels as mediators rather than directly with God. The second dangerous aspect of mysticism is going into great detail (being obsessed) with dreams to the point of being deceived and deceiving others. Another danger is being puffed up by mystical experience. Finally, this obsession with mysticism can lead to losing connection with the Head, which is Christ. It becomes a vain sham by which people can claim to be elite believers, while actually straying further from Jesus.

The third warning in vv. 20-23 is against ascetic practices. Spiritual discipline is good, but the asceticism Paul warns against is the idea that a higher spiritual and moral state can be achieved through severity to the body. We died with Christ to the elemental forces of this world. We don't need to punish our bodies in order to be free from them. Our spiritual life is from Christ. Asceticism is a way people try to take control of their own spirituality. But it is self-imposed, and not from God. It leads to false humility and cannot restrain sensual indulgence. Ascetics tried to train the body to overcome the flesh apart from God. But if we have experienced the power of Jesus' resurrection, why would we then rely on ourselves to overcome our flesh?

Today there are still many perhaps more relevant deceptive mindsets that pull us away from the fullness of Christ. The cult of fitness glorifies the bodily health over spirituality. False mindsets about missions glorify moving to another country over the work of the gospel, which can be done anywhere. The alliance between Christians and a particular political party glorifies political affiliation over God's kingdom. To resist these teachings, we must hold firm to Christ.

If we rely on the grace of Jesus, we don't need legalism. If understand our union with Christ, we have no need for mysticism. If we realize that Christ gives us freedom from this world and from the flesh, we have no need for asceticism. The answers are all where it first began—Christ on the cross.