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# Christ – Supreme & Sufficient *under attack*

**Colossians 2:8-23**

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**Introduction** All people of all color and every culture hold fast to one of two religions. These two religions cross all boundaries of geography and ethnicity and traditions and denominations. In fact, Church history demonstrates that these two religions can be found in the broad category of Christendom and the narrow category of Evangelicalism. These two religions can be summarized as 1) human achievement or 2) divine accomplishment.

Divine accomplishment is the true gospel. Human achievement is the notion that says, “By my own efforts or with a little help from above I will attain and maintain a clear conscience and a right relationship with God and in the end I will have gone on to better place”.

Wrapped in biblical language and dipped into modern evangelicalism this view sees the redemptive work of Christ as necessary **but** insufficient to fully save. There must be some added exertion on the part of the sinner to attain and maintain fullness and freedom. Rather than seeing good works as something which springs from our new nature (a gift of God), this perspective sees that something needs to be added to Christ; techniques to tame the flesh, baptisms that promise fullness, superstitions that guide daily living, legalism that keeps us from sin. The common denominator in this all is the false belief that Christ's redemptive work on the cross is insufficient to save forever those who draw near to God through Christ (cf. Heb.7:25).

Today we will hear a message. And this message is a warning calling us to watch out for two things.

1. Beware of the so called Christian teacher who desires to assist you by adding to Jesus Christ.
  - a. In sum: Watch out for lethal teachings!
2. Beware of you and your tendency to believe and behave as if you can earn God's approval and forgiveness through personal performance.
  - a. In sum: Watch out for legalistic tendencies!

We want to do battle this morning against the teachings out there and the tendencies in here because the Apostle Paul in Colossians 2:8-23 does just that. Open your Bibles to Col.2:8-23.

## Christ – Supremacy and Sufficiency under attack

2:8-23

Embarking on our third week of studying the letter to the Colossians, we have seen that Jesus Christ is supreme and sufficient. And because He is the ultimate/best we can rely upon His person in heaven and His work on the cross to be sufficient for our salvation, sanctification and satisfaction. The new teachings of the day in our century are nothing new. They were around when Paul wrote this letter exhorting the Christians to stay clear of the people and their teaching who would say that Christ is good but not good enough. One needs to add to Christ in order to really experience fullness and freedom.

And so, Paul has been reminding them of essential truths concerning Christ in order to keep Christ central in their lives and to keep false teaching away from their lives. Today, we will pick up where we left off and listen to Paul warn God's people.

### Three Warnings

v.8-19

The arrangement of Paul's thought can be outlined in the following way. In vv.8-19 he gives them three warnings. Then, in v.20-23 he provides an application. Let's think together this morning over these things by first looking at the warnings.

#### In a warning over being captured

v.8-15

The first warning is a warning over being captured. Listen with your eyes as you follow with me the reading of v.8-15.

*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. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily and you have been filled in him who is the head of all rule and authority.*

*In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*

In this most remarkable paragraph Paul is directly sounding the alarm over the false teachers of their day. He gives them the clear warning in v.8 and then follows the warning with three fundamental reasons for heeding the warning.

#### The Warning

v.8

Verse 8 begins with a word that carries urgency. ESV translates it "See to it". Other versions might be picking up the strength and urgency of the word better by

translating it “beware” (KJV), “be on your guard” (NEB), “Look out” (ESV translating the same word in Phil.3:2).

This strong warning of v.8 has to do with the false teachings influence over the church. The clear and critical warning is *Beware; do not let anyone take you captive*. This rare word “captive” appears nowhere else in the N.T. Paul uses it figuratively to speak of “carrying someone away from the truth into the slavery of error”[O’Brien]. The Colossians were to hear plainly, “Do not let anyone carry you away or kidnap you in order to take you from the clear teaching of gospel and place your thinking into the belief that Christ is necessary but He is not enough. This is warning #1.

The method of the “kidnappers” is spelled out in verse 8. “by philosophy and empty deceit”. This description is not to condemn all philosophy as though it were heresy. Rather, this philosophy is further spelled out as “empty deceit”. The new teachers in and around the church at Colossae were circulating a hollow dishonesty that was designed to seduce the people in the church away from the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. Thus they could effectively move the church toward a man-centered teaching.

This false teaching is next described as “according to human tradition, according to elemental spirits of the world and not according to Christ”. Here, we get a glimpse of the nature of their “philosophy” by which they desired to carry off some of the people in the church. These man-made traditions used by Satan and his demonic brigade were taught by the teachers as though they were the new and improved version of the gospel. They were far from the gospel because they were not “according to Christ”.

### **The Reasons**

**v.9-15**

With that as the warning, Paul moves into three reasons for the church to heed this warning. A wealth of truth can be collected from these verses. I urge you to meditate much on vv.9-15.

For our purposes today, I simply will walk you through the clear teaching of the three reasons so that the point will be made: In Christ believers have all they ever will need.

### **Reason #1**

**v.9-10**

We see this first in v.9-10

*For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him who is the head of all rule and authority.*

We notice in these vv. a recurrence of the word “full”. Regarding Christ, “He is the fullness of deity”. Regarding the believers, “they have been filled in him”. This is Paul’s way of saying it again that since Christ is supreme then Christ is sufficient. He is all we will ever need. Since He is the fullness of God and since we are in that fullness we are made complete. We have been (notice the tense of the verb) filled.

Do not be captivated by new teachings and led astray into error because in Christ there is **fullness already**.

## **Reason #2**

**v.11-12**

The second reason for obedience is found in v.11-12.

*In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ having been buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead.*

Paul shifts from emphasizing fullness to now emphasizing incorporation. V.11-12 are dense with the *union with Christ* teaching. This common and consistent doctrine of Paul's (cf. Rom.6:3-6; 7:1-6; 8:17; 2Cor.1:3-9; 4:7-14; 5:14-17; Gal.2:19,20; 6:14-15; Eph.2:5,6; and others) is here to focus attention on the centrality of Christ whom the readers are to follow unswervingly. It gives the reader the primary elements of Paul's gospel: "Christ died for our sins...he was buried...he was raised" (cf. 1Cor.15:3,4). And these elements of the gospel are personally enjoyed by true believers. This point is seen in the repetition of the phrase "with Christ". The theme of union with Christ is made plain in these verses to remind the Colossians what has already happened to them and for them.

In Christ they were circumcised "with a circumcision made without hands". This phrase is strange to our ears but needs to be remarkable to our hearts. The term "circumcision" means to cut off or cut around. It is used much in the O.T. (LXX) as a technical term to denote physical circumcision as an outward sign of the covenant between the LORD and his people. This idea pointed to a spiritual or heart circumcision (cf. Deut.10:16; Eze.44:7) that referred to a complete obedience from the heart to the LORD. And this was seen in the promise of the everlasting covenant (Deut.30:6; see also Jer.31:31ff; 32:39ff).

In the New Covenant, how is this obedience from the heart to happen? This text says "made without hands". In all of its N.T. occurrences "made with hands" is "used to set forth the contrast between what is constructed by man and the work of God alone" [O'Brien; p.115] (see Mk.14:58; Acts 7:48; 17:24; Eph.2:11; Heb.9:11,24). This is another way of describing the only two religions in the world; made with hands and made without hands.

This phrase "body of flesh" is not referring to our physical body. The Bible makes clear that the body is not evil. Rather this "flesh" to which Paul refers is talking about the propensity to pursue evil. This propensity in each of us has been dealt with by "the circumcision of Christ". This phrase is unpacked for us in v.12 telling us that through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ those in Christ have all they need to defeat the propensity to pursue evil; the evil that still dwells in every believer. The point of this theology here is to say "Watch out for those who say they have a better way of dealing with your inclinations to do bad".

You do not have to go to Barns and Nobel and take in the blending of beliefs and practices in order to live better (this is known as syncretism). The theme of incorporation in Christ seen in these vv. is making the point that the gospel is sufficient to address the evil tendencies of your heart. To live well you do not need the various teachings of pop psychology and philosophy and self-help and second-blessings in order to live free from the grip of sin. It is both the dying with and rising with Christ that gives you hope for change.

### **Reason #3**

**v.13-15**

And should we miss the accent in this paragraph, Paul concludes this paragraph by giving the readers one more reason for obeying the first warning. This is found in v.13-15.

*And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him.*

Notice the subject of all this activity...God has done it all. It is God who made us alive when we were dead in our sins. It is God who has forgiven us all our trespasses. It is God who took the law stating rightly that we are to be condemned and He canceled the debt. It is God who crucified His Son on our behalf. It is God who disarmed the demons and demonstrated through the cross that they are terrorists who are utterly and openly defeated. All this God has done!

The point is that the true gospel brings both full forgiveness of (13) and full freedom over (15) sin and Satan. What could new teaching possibly provide in light of this blazing reality of the gospel?

Fullness already (v.9-10)

Forgiveness already (v.11-14)

Freedom already (v.15).....You have everything you ever will need in Christ. Do not let anyone captivate you and drag you off into deviant and destructive and damning doctrines; novel though they might be.

### **In a warning over being judged**

**v.16-17**

For Paul, sounding the warning sirens for all Christians to hear and heed is part of his biblical ministry to mature everyone. (cf. 1:28) He continues warning the Church in v.16-17 by saying in effect: *Do not let anyone pressure you into empty traditions by judging you.* In this small paragraph, Paul gives us insight into the attitudes and strategies of the false teachers. They looked upon themselves as superior. They looked upon the church as inferior. They passed their opinions over them to pressure them into conforming to their traditions and man-made religion.

Listen as we pick up Paul's teaching in v.16-17.

*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.*

We see the new teachers' strategy by noticing the particulars of their judgment found in v.16.

### **The particulars**

**v.16**

The list found in v.16 can be organized into two categories; 1) Things not allowed 2) Things required.

The things not allowed (food and drink) were likely not associated with the O.T. dietary laws. The false teachers of the day do not seem to be advancing Judaism that we see in other letters of Paul (i.e. Galatians). Nor was this a reference to things we see in Corinth as they relate to the weaker brother; i.e. certain foods and drink.

What we have here, as it appears, is a form of asceticism that involves the renunciation of food and drink. We see this tendency in v.18, 23. It's a teaching that exalted in a solemn-like self-discipline that saw God's basic gifts of food and drink as something to generally be avoided. And in renouncing good gifts, this would make them look quite spiritual. And so, they were passing judgment over this congregation because they were enjoying God's good gifts.

The second category (notice the phrase "with regard to") lists things required for full and free living. These things cited often occurred in O.T. to describe special annual, monthly and weekly events dedicated to God (eg. Hos.2:13; Eze. 45:45:17). It seems reasonable to see these false teachers as ones who took the O.T. regulations and mixed them with superstitious pagan rituals.

Regardless of the specificity of the festivals, it seems clear that they were involved in syncretism; a form of belief that says blending beliefs to create a new teaching will make an old teaching better. (i.e. biblical theology with new age or psychology or self-help techniques or managerial skills). What we see in v.16 is the mixing of beliefs and practices that had become law. To enjoy fullness and freedom the Colossians, according to the false teachers, were to abstain from certain foods and maintain certain festivals. In doing this, so the teaching goes, the Colossians would experience a great life.

### **The essence**

**v.17**

If v.16 is about the particulars v.17 tells us of its essence. Notice in v.17 how Paul talks about the false teachers' view. He says that "these are a shadow of the things to come". All that the new teachers promoted Paul calls "shadows of these to come". This is an amazing insight into any other teaching but the Bible's view. He says that going back to O.T. rituals and believing that temporal things are the main things puts one back into the shadow lands.

What they need is what the letter to the Colossians is all about. The substance belongs to Christ. Christ is all in all. Christ is everything we will ever need. To cling to disciplines and activities and rigors as though this will make us better is

going into the shadows. Everything in the O.T. points in some way or another to the matchless person and work of Jesus Christ. They were to remember this so that they would heed the warning; namely, *Do not let anyone pressure you into empty traditions and superstitions by judging you.*

### **In a warning over being disqualified**

**v.18-19**

We come to the last warning of this section in v.18-19. It reads:

*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.*

With the gospel coming to them 6-8 years ago, they have enjoyed the biblical truth that in Christ we are already qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in light (cf. 1:12). Full assurance of salvation can be enjoyed in Christ. These saints enjoyed the security of knowing that because of Christ's sinless life and sin-bearing death, all of God's people will take pleasure in a matchless eternity. And now come the new teachers who say "Christ plus man-made traditions and asceticism and angel-like worship and rules and regulations; all of this equals paradise for those who obey us. And if you do not adhere to our teaching you will be disqualified from your inheritance".

Paul will not stand for such aberrant doctrine. In this last warning we can hear the clarion call : *Do not let anyone exercise authority over you who attempts to take you from the true gospel.*

### **The portrait of such a one**

In this section, we can finally see a picture of one of these false teachers. Notice first his problem.

#### **His problem**

"Insisting on asceticism and worship of angels". This leader will not take no for an answer. He is imposing regulations and a type of worship that the Bible does not insist upon. His problem is what he teaches. No where in the Bible will we find that self-abasement is necessarily a virtue. Sever treatment of the body is no sign of spirituality. This is different from biblical self-denial. We know this because Paul is not enthusiastic over this man's teaching. Furthermore, his problem seen in his teaching centers on a type of worship. I take this phrase "worship of angels" not to mean veneration of the angels but a angel-like worship. We see this form of teaching in Corinth in 1Cor.13. His problem is his teaching.

#### **His deeper problem**

But that is not his deeper problem. Paul describes him further as "going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind". Here we come across the leader's heart. (it does seem like Paul has in mind one particular teacher/leader = describing him as "his sensuous mind"). He is described as one who is "puffed up". Arrogance is the

essence of his problem. The cause of his puffed up view of himself is found in the phrase “sensuous mind”. The cause of this conceit was a mind that is dominated by the flesh; a mind set on the things of the flesh (cf. Rom.8:7). Out of this arrogance he chooses to have his authority in visions. This man was irrational and couldn’t be reasoned with.

### **His deepest problem**

But that is not his deepest problem as we notice in v.19. Not keeping a close hold of Christ this false teacher rejected Christ’s supremacy and sufficiency. He started presumably with the teaching of Christ but did not persist in the wonder and glory of the risen Christ. Rather, letting loose of the nourishing grace found in worshipping Christ he set out to arrogantly pursue a life of teaching unorthodox doctrines. It appears that, in light of Paul’s talk about church growth, this man had new teachings about how to grow a church. His way might produce numbers, but it had nothing of Jesus Christ in it.

### **And One Application**

### **v.20-23**

So far we’ve been under warnings. These warnings are urgent and serious. There’re three of them. 1) Do not let anyone take you captive and lead you into error. 2) Do not let anyone pass judgment on you in order to pressure you to follow rules and regulations. 3) Do not let anyone attempt to disqualify you because you are not abiding by his way of teaching.

In other words...Beware of lethal teachings!

But that is not all that Paul tells them to beware of. True, most of his teaching centered on the problems out there. The false teaching of the day must be recognized and stayed clear of. But notice how he ends this section found in vv.20-23. Listen carefully as I read these vv.

*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.*

### **Why do you submit to a religion of worldly regulations?**

Paul ends with an application. And his application lands squarely on the congregation. There were some (perhaps many) who were starting to not heed these warnings and were submitting themselves to the new type of teaching. This teaching was a man-made religion that was influenced by Satan. Some in the congregation were trying to improve upon the gospel by listening to this man’s heresy. The issue underneath all the asceticism and harsh treatment of the body and the legalism of don’t do this and don’t do that was clear. The issue is one of submission (cf. v.20).

Who are these people going to obey? To whom were they going to surrender and follow willingly; Christ or the new teacher and his teachings?

The essence of this concern was not the teaching of the day (per se). It was the tendency of their hearts to leave the gospel and move into legalism. To say, in effect, “your plan did not work. I must add to the work of Christ in order to experience salvation, sanctification and satisfaction”.

There is indeed an appearance of wisdom and success with legalism but in the end it has no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (v.23).

Paul’s challenge to the Colossians becomes God’s challenge to us. Why do we submit to a religion of worldly regulations?

Martin Luther in his preface to his commentary of Galatians said, “It is necessary to teach continually this doctrine of the righteousness of faith, lest Satan bring the church one again into the doctrine of works and people’s traditions. Because of enormous pressures that face us from every side – from Satan, our sinful nature, and numerous other temptations – this doctrine can never be taught and impressed on us enough. On the one hand, if this doctrine be lost, then everything is lost – truth, life and salvation. On the other hand, where this doctrine is loved, then all good things flourish – genuine love for God, the glory of God, and the knowledge of all things necessary for Christian living” (taken from a paraphrase and abridgment of Luther’s preface to his commentary on Galatians).

To see whether or not you are watching out for either the lethal teachings of the day or the legalistic tendencies of the heart listen to the sounds of different thoughts. Of the following statements which ones best reflect how you think? In other words, what are you living by?

LIVING BY...

**Conclusion**

effort and under law	faith and under grace...
I live as though my actions will make God or other people approve of me.	I believe that my sins are forgiven because of what Christ did for me on the Cross, enabling me through the Spirit to love and forgive others.
I am shocked when I sin...I have trouble seeing when I am wrong...I have no trouble seeing when others are wrong.	I am not surprised by my sin but grieve over it and trust Christ for forgiveness of it and freedom from it.
The meaning of my life is based on the “success” of my efforts.	The meaning of my life is viewed through the lens of the gospel.
I labor under resolutions and set a standard of morality that I’m able to meet.	I understand the power of the sinful nature, the damage it can do, and the powerlessness of the law to control it. I’m utterly dependent upon Christ and His grace.

Under what system are you living? In whom do you trust? This message warns us of the man-made religion of the day. This message warns us of the legalism of our hearts. Flee from man-made efforts. Flee from your legalistic tendencies. Flee to Christ and his sufficiency.

For His glory in your forgiveness, fullness and freedom – Amen