

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Submission to the Wrong Authority

Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh. (Colossians 2:20–23)

In many ways, we choose the authority that rules us. Thus, what someone regards as his/her ultimate authority reveals much about that person. By choice of a career, we choose whether we will work in a rigid, tightly managed position or in an entrepreneurial setting where we effectively work alone, answering only to the marketplace. By choice of our marriage partner, we decide how much autonomy we wish, or how much dependence. Some spouses, male or female, demand almost military compliance with their wishes. Another spouse will foster a truly cooperative partnership. As the cliché goes, in our choices, we "name our poison," but often we refuse to own the very choices we make.

In other settings, we simply fail to claim the privileges available to us. Paul effectively describes this situation in our study lesson. The Colossians were dead to the ruling elements of this world because of the new birth, the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in them. However, they were presently acting as if they had little relationship to Him, and the "rudiments" of this world, the fundamental building blocks of this world's moral--or immoral--system, governed their existence. Their behavior displays a profound lack of consistency. Despite being dead to the ruling, despotic elements of this sinful world by the work of Christ in them and for them, they acted as if that very world set all the rules of their conduct. Pause and consider. Are we any different? Do we not often torture ourselves by imposing rules on our conduct and thinking that actually have no authority over us? We choose them. God does not impose them.

In his fascinating book, *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life*, Dr. Armand M. Nicholi Jr. discusses the impact of external rules versus internal. Dr. Nicholi taught at Harvard Medical School for over thirty years; this book grew out of his experiences teaching that course. Dr. Nicholi indicated that students who structured their lives around external rules,

particularly external rules of religion, suffered more than they benefitted by that faith. Students who built their faith and life on a set of internal convictions demonstrated significant mental and spiritual health. Their faith served them well. Think about his findings. Professing Christians who build their faith on rules and regulations imposed by others or by their adopted religious beliefs, for which they lack strong internal convictions, often live as if they exist in a prison. In fact, that is exactly what they do. They embrace all those external rules as the bars to their prison cell, and they live miserable, constricted lives inside their self-imposed prison. Quite the opposite result appears in the lives of Christians who invest regular study of the Scriptures and find the teachings of Scripture to corroborate their internal moral/spiritual compass. Fellowship and friendship with God comes as naturally to these blessed and happy people as breathing fresh air. They honor the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit in their lives and thus discover a compelling peace and affirmation of their faith. The New Testament describes this liberty to which God has called us in amazing terms. Sadly, far too many Christians talk the talk of that liberty, but they fail to discover its peaceful affirmation in their conscience. I once heard about a pastor whose friend alarmed him by telling him that this man's church displayed a frightening lack of love and joy. For the next four Sunday mornings, the alarmed pastor preached on love and joy. Sadly, a preacher who knows little or nothing of this internal harmony cannot teach a congregation what he himself does not know. A pastor cannot raise his congregation above his personal spiritual height. If he lives in the shackles of external rules, of legalism on the throne, he cannot impart true liberty to his hearers. Eventually his congregation shall find itself living in the same prison that holds their pastor. The church in my example did not need a series of sermons on love and joy. They needed a pastor to show them by his personal example

what love and joy in Christ looks like. An empty teaching façade without the live example fails. People in such a setting know the Bible teaches about something called joy and peace, so they know they should have it, and they work hard at pretending to have it, at convincing themselves that they actually possess it, but they go to bed at night often pondering what they intuitively sense that they do not possess. They live in the neighborhood of the Colossian Church, but they regularly try to imagine living in Paul's community of faith.

What kind of imprisoning ordinances does Paul warn the Colossians to avoid? What specific chains hold them in shackles? Notice his description of their problem. *Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using....* Simply stated, the Colossians had dwarfed their faith into a set of negative laws, a long list of prohibitions. They measured their faith by what they could not do, not by the liberty to which God called them. For these sad people, liberty was actually a frightening thing. New Testament Christian liberty always frightens legalists.

The basis of the Colossians' error, a set of artificial rules external to the individual, could not be clearer. The Colossians came to believe that they were required to avoid anything that perishes with use, anything material and tangible, at all cost. Paul wisely applies Gnostic logic to the issue to expose their inconsistent error. If all things material are inconsequential and unimportant to the supreme deity, why were the Gnostic teachers in the Colossian Church putting so much of their energy and emphasis on those things? A more logical attitude for a Gnostic teacher and his disciples would be to live with minds constantly focused on the immaterial, on things that were of greatest importance to Gnostic thought. In fact, they were doing the mirror opposite. If carefully observed, most errors reveal their own weaknesses and inconsistencies.

A primary test to apply to all ideas will often reveal the reality or the absurdity of the ideas. **Subject the idea to the reality test.** Will it work in the real world where we live? Much of eastern mysticism that focuses on the individual describes each person as living within his/her own "reality." When this person's ideas conflict with another person's ideas, a common response is, "Well, your idea is simply not part of my reality." In fact, this response doesn't expose multiple realities. It is a naïve way of consciously choosing to ignore what a person doesn't wish to consider. Let's apply the "my reality" test to real life. Suppose a freight train roaring down the tracks at sixty miles per hour is not part of "your reality." If it isn't part of your reality, why don't you simply walk right out

onto the tracks as you see the train approaching? If it really isn't part of your reality, you shouldn't be harmed by it, should you? The logical fallacies of such a view are many. However, the primary error is that we as individuals do not control what is real and what is not real around us. We live in a real world, whether we accept the fact or not, and that train will surely bring you back to this real world when it collides with your real body.

Paul politely, but rather directly, applies a reality check to the Colossians. If they must wholly avoid all things tangible, anything they can taste, touch, or anything that wears out, they must immediately start with avoiding all forms of food and water, for these items are tangible, and they taste. Stop eating any kind of food. Stop drinking water or any other liquid. See how long you survive in your "reality." The consequences will not be as immediate as an encounter with a speeding train, but they will be as devastating to the fantasy of this imaginary belief.

...after the commandments and doctrines of men.... Paul takes the Colossians to the proverbial "bottom line" of their present error. These Gnostic ideas did not originate with God, but with contrived ideas and beliefs of men.

Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh. The most foolish of errors must create the illusion of wisdom to make them acceptable and believable by others. Paul indicates that the Gnostic teachers in the Colossian Church tried to dress their errant ideas in pseudo-Christian ideas to make them palatable to believers. For example:

1. *...will worship....* Doesn't Jesus teach that a true disciple must deny self and be willing to lose his/her life for Jesus' sake? Well, let's take this legitimate use of the will and magnify it. Let's make the will an object of worship. Shouldn't that match up with Jesus' teachings nicely? Actually, no, it conflicts with His teachings. He repeatedly taught that God alone is the only worthy object of worship. Any belief that substitutes anything for God, including our will, is wrong.
2. *...humility....* Humility is a garment of life that, if worn naturally, beautifies our whole demeanor, but, if pretentiously thrown onto our lives, it wears like a gaudy, out-of-style cheap shirt. The Gnostic teachers wore and taught pretentious, artificial humility. While pretending to be humble, they rejected every tenet of New Testament Christianity and arrogantly

claimed to be the sole possessors of the "real truth" of the faith.

3. ...*neglecting of the body*.... False teaching often builds its power to convince others to accept it on the sacrifices of its adherents. However, in most cases the sacrifices are as contrived as the humility, carefully selected for impact on the observer rather than on a principle of Bible truth.
4. ... *not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh*.... If Jesus taught self-denial, a Gnostic teacher must in some way embrace this idea or lose all credibility.

I close this study with a dual quote from Tom Constable and Warren Wiersbe.

The emphases of these false teachers are still with us today. The first is "higher" knowledge (Gnosticism). The second is the observance of laws to win God's love (legalism). The third is the belief that beings other than Christ must mediate between people and God (mysticism). The fourth is the practice of abstaining from things to earn merit with God (asceticism).

"When we make Jesus Christ and the Christian revelation only *part* of a total religious system or philosophy, we cease to give Him the preeminence. When we strive for 'spiritual perfection' or 'spiritual fullness' by means of formulas, disciplines, or rituals, we go backward instead of forward. Christian believers must beware of mixing their Christian faith with such alluring things as yoga, transcendental meditation, Oriental mysticism, and the like. ***We must also beware of 'deeper life' teachers who offer a system for victory and fullness that bypasses devotion to Jesus Christ. In all things, He must have the preeminence!***¹³⁴¹ (Emphasis added)

We constantly realize that God's inspired revelation in Scripture remains as relevant to life and as up-to-date as when the ink was still wet on the pages as Paul wrote this Colossian letter. God help us to learn its lessons well.

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^{134 134} 134. Wiersbe, 2:104.

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, Col 2:20 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).