

Beware Of Religion

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[0 : 0 0] Well, folks, turn back with me, if you will, to Colossians and chapter 2 this evening as! we round off our communion weekend together, which has been a blessing. It's estimated that there are! in excess of 10,000 religions in the world, that there are 10,000 different religious systems or frameworks, and that 85% of the world's population identify with at least one of these religious systems. The largest religions, of course, are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, and Sikhism. Now, if you were to pick up your dictionary this evening and find what is the definition of religion, it would say that religion is an institutionalized system of faith, worship, and practices. Essentially, what that is saying is religion is man's attempt to reach God, whereas the Bible portrays to us a God who has reached out to mankind. And there is a distinct difference between these two viewpoints. Religion is man's pursuit of God. I want to make up a system whereby I can make myself acceptable before God. Christianity says you'll never make yourself acceptable before God, but God will make a provision for you in order that you may become acceptable in

His sight through making Himself available to us, by revealing Himself to us in Scripture and by His Spirit and through the work of Jesus in purchasing redemption, salvation on our behalf. Religion is an interesting thing, isn't it? Religion is more than just a word. It is a concept that permeates much of even modern life.

It's interesting that people will often refer to themselves as religious, or maybe you've been labeled that by others. Oh, you're religious, aren't you? It's interesting that often people are happier to be associated with a system rather than a person. Rather than saying, well, I love Jesus.

I've been saved by Jesus. I have a living and active relationship with Jesus. Sometimes people find it easier to say, well, I am religious and I follow the church. Well, this evening we're looking at religion as portrayed here in Colossians, in Paul's letter to the Colossians. And really, there's a number of categories here that we're looking at this evening. Rules without reasons. We're looking at systems without substance. We're looking at beliefs without the Bible. You remember, of course, that Jesus' greatest enemies during His earthly tenure were religious people. It was the religious elite who wanted to get rid of Jesus. It was the religious people who Jesus reserved His harshest words for.

A.W. Tozer reminds us that it was religion that put Jesus on the cross. Now, when 2,000 years ago Christianity was spreading around the Roman Empire, churches were being planted here, there, and everywhere. And one of those churches was the church in Colossae. Colossae was in the Lycus Valley. It was on the Lycus River. It was situated on a main trade route connecting east and west. And so, Colossae had people pouring into it from all different parts of the world, bringing with them all different kinds of goods and services, but also philosophies, religions, and ideologies.

[4 : 02] And as a result of that, there was being collected a kind of amalgamation that we've already alluded to this weekend of what scholars now have named the Colossian heresy. It was really a mixture of these different religious systems that were pouring into Colossae, a bit of Greek philosophy, a wee bit of Roman polytheism, some Jewish legalism, as well as the various different cults and different gods and goddesses that were associated with a different religious system. And there were some people that were taking all of these parts of these religious systems and combining them, and it was forming this heresy that was threatening the purity of the church and the belief that the new believers had.

It was a difficult and, to be frank, a dangerous place for Christian belief in the God of the Bible, perhaps not much different to the world in which we live today. Many people like to make their own religious system, don't they, by approaching religion like they would the lunch buffet this afternoon.

Oh, I'll have a wee bit of this, and I'll have a wee bit of that. I'll take a portion of this, and I'm a portion of that ideology. I'd like a large helping of Eastern philosophy, a small order of Christianity. Hold the guilt. I'm on a guilt-free diet this week. I'll take a wee side of karma, throw in some New Age spices just to spice things up, and that will be my religion.

So that's kind of what's happening here in Colossae. That's the context out of which Paul's letter arises. Paul has been approached by Epaphras, dear fellow servant, who's made a journey, an arduous and long journey to Paul to alert him to the difficulties that are facing the fledgling church in Colossae. And really, it's this syncretistic amalgamation of all these philosophies, religious systems, ideologies that are coming together to threaten or to make things difficult for the church. Now, Paul, in writing this letter, he's incarcerated. He's under house arrest.

He's in jail, and he's thinking, what can I do to help the Colossian brothers and sisters? Well, he writes a letter, and he gives us in this portion that we're looking at this evening, three warnings, three warnings against religious practices which take religion to the extreme.

[6 : 25] The practice of legalism, the practice of mysticism, and the practice of asceticism. Now, there's a lot of isms there, and we will work through them. So, don't feel too threatened or worried about that just now. Hopefully, we'll be able to explain them in a way that is helpful for us. Verses 16 down to 23 of Colossians chapter 2 are really the verses that we're going to fill our thoughts with this evening. So, let's begin with the first of them. Paul says, watch out for legalism. Now, it's pretty evident for us in the opening verses of this passage that Paul is thinking about external practices. He mentions food, he mentions drink, he mentions festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths. All of these things are external activities, external celebrations.

What is the definition of legalism? Legalism essentially is the religion of human achievement. That's what it is. It's the religion that says, I can, I will, I will fulfill this, I will do that, I will earn my way to God. Ultimately, legalism is a works-based salvation. Now, if you think about it, there are really only two religions in the world. I've just said there's 10,000, but let's say we can really lump all of these into one of two categories. Number one, there is the category of human achievement, and legalism slots in there beautifully. Number two, there is divine accomplishment. And that's really the only two categories that we have for all these religions, either human achievement or divine accomplishment. Every religious system, every religious system other than Christianity is in column one. It's human achievement. What can I do? What can I perform? What right can I fulfill?

What ceremony can I uphold? What thing can I create? What thing can I add to? The Christian faith, however, says you can't. You won't. You will never. It says it is purely by God's grace.

And it's a free gift, costly to Him, free to us. We can't work for it. We must receive it. We can't add to it because if we do, we merely subtract from it. All we must do is receive it.

So, religious systems are either by our works, human accomplishment, or by His finished work, that's divine accomplishment. Now, what Paul is alluding to here as he writes to the Colossians, and as he seeks to impress upon them the all-sufficiency of Jesus, he's saying, look, what I'm addressing here is the Jesus plus mentality. It's Jesus plus ceremony. It's Jesus plus circumcision. Jesus plus baptism. Jesus plus personal piety. Jesus plus religious activity.

[9 : 41] Jesus plus mystical spirituality. Whatever it may be, the list goes on and on. But the point he's making is that Jesus plus anything equals nothing. Jesus plus nothing equals everything. That's how God sees it.

Jesus plus nothing equals everything. Now, Paul has already mentioned, as we saw earlier today, two different rituals. He mentioned circumcision and he mentioned baptism. Now, he goes on to mention another couple of things, diets and days. Diets, let no one judge you in what you eat or drink, and days regarding festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths. Dietary regulations and specific days of worship. Let's start with the diets first. Evidently, for Colossae, part of the system infiltrating the church, the church was telling people that they had to go backward. They had to regress to the laws of the Old Testament that governed dietary restrictions and requirements, presumably taking people back to Leviticus 11. All things that they couldn't eat. No bacon. That would have knocked us at the mants right out of the park this morning. No ham, no shellfish, no scallops, no crab, no lobster.

Hopeless for many people living on the shores of the minch. No bats, no badgers, no camels, no lizards, no rats. I don't know about you, but there are certain foods that I don't need a commandment not to eat. But there are commandments for these things. But there's nothing in the New Testament, there's nothing in the New Covenant that tells the Christian believer what they should or shouldn't eat.

There are no dietary regulations. Now, there might be things that we would do well to avoid from a health perspective, but there's no spiritual reason for that. In fact, Jesus said, it's nothing that enters a man from the outside that defiles him, but what comes from the heart of what comes from inside a person. That was earth-shattering for the Jewish listener who believed in the kosher law. The Messiah comes along and he says, listen, it doesn't matter what you eat. It doesn't matter what you eat, he says.

Listen and understand, Matthew 15, what goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them. Then the disciples came to him and asked, do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this? Surprise, surprise. Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach, then out of the body, says Jesus? Logical thinking. This is the rationale.

[12 : 27] But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart. Remember that seat of emotions, that central part that we were talking about? For out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person, but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them. What goes into the mouth goes out the other end, he says. It's just how the human system works. That doesn't defile a person. The food that you eat doesn't defile a person. Paul in Romans 14 says, for the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. So diet can't make you holy, thank goodness.

It's not about what you eat or about what you don't eat. Paul's saying, watch out for legalism when it comes to diets about what you can and can't eat. Watch out for legalism when it comes to days.

He mentions festivals. He mentions new moons. He mentions Sabbaths, monthly celebrations. Here's a point for discussion when you go home. Is there anywhere in the New Testament that tells the Christian believer to observe the Sabbath? We're not going to go down that route this evening, but we are in the new covenant with God. The new covenant means new things. Is it good for us to rest? Yes. Is it necessary for us to rest? Yes. Is it good for us to set a day apart? Yes, absolutely.

Absolutely. Is it absolutely necessary? Is it promoted that way in Scripture? Well, why don't you go and search the Scriptures and find out? If we were really going to observe Sabbath as it was in the Old Testament, well, it would be yesterday. It wouldn't be today, would it?

And this can't be my Sabbath because I'm working. So when's Sabbath for me? So there are many questions around about that. There must be liberty in the gospel. When people come to faith, we come to faith in Jesus, and Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. He didn't come to abolish the law, He said.

[14 : 51] He came to fulfill the law. He is the one in whom we find true rest. Come to me, all you who are heavy and heavy laden and burdened, and I will give you rest. Rest for your souls. True rest. True rest for our souls. And so he's saying you've got to beware of these people that are fastidious and restrictive and narrow about specific things that are actually not promoted elsewhere.

Let no one disqualify you. Let no one pass judgment on you in relation to food and drink or festivals or new moons or Sabbaths. Later in, or earlier in Romans 14, what did Paul write? One person considers one day more sacred than another. Another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. We shouldn't actively seek to make a brother stumble either. But these things are a shadow of the things that were to come, he says in verse 17. These things are a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. A shadow has no substance. These things that he mentions were a shadow. But in Jesus, we find fulfillment. We find substance. We find meaning.

We find something to hold on to. Would you ever hug the shadow of your wife? Why would you hug the shadow when she's standing beside you? Would you ever pet the shadow of your dog? Well, no, you would pet the dog.

You wouldn't pet the shadow. Would you ever eat the shadow of a cheeseburger? Some of you are thinking, well, you should probably try it. It'd be healthier if we did, but no, we're going to eat the cheeseburger. Why settle for a shadow? A shadow of things to come. It's in Christ that we find fulfillment. Legalism, Paul says, is living in shadow land. It's meaningless, largely, because it does nothing. When you come to a personal relationship with the risen Savior Jesus, you step out of the shadows and into the glorious sunlight. Legalism is dangerous, says Paul. Don't let anybody judge you. Why is it dangerous?

Because anybody can do it. The unsaved can check all of the legalistic boxes. I did this. I did that. Anyone can conform to a regimen of external standards and not really have any meaningful relationship with Jesus or know the truth of salvation in their hearts. Remember the rich young man that came to Jesus? What must I do to inherit eternal life, he says. And there it is, a works-based righteousness. What must I do? What is the thing that I must do? What achievement, Jesus, do I need to attain in order to inherit eternal life? What thing must I do? And so, Jesus begins right where that young man is at. He begins in Judaism, doesn't he? And he says, well, you know the commandments. He says, what do the commandments say? He says, listen, I've kept the commandments from my youth right up until today. Tick, tick, tick, tick. I've checked all of the boxes, Jesus. I've kept the regulations. And then Jesus nails his heart to the wall, if you will. He says, well, there's one thing that you lack. Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and then come and follow me. And what's he do here? He exposes the idol of that young man's heart, which is his wealth. That is his God. That is the thing that he's relying on. And he goes away sad. It's a tragic story, but it's a picture of legalism, isn't it? Jesus knew that that young man was worshiping his material possessions, that that was his God, that that was his idol.

[19:07] Now, Paul, as he writes to the Colossians, he writes from experience, doesn't he? Because he was a legalist himself by his own confession. He was an ardent legalist. In Philippians chapter 3, he talks about how he himself was a Pharisee in the extreme. If someone else thinks they have reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more, says Paul, circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law, a Pharisee. As for zeal, persecuting the church. As for righteousness based on the law, faultless. Tick, tick, tick, tick. I've checked all of the boxes. I have kept the regimen of external standards. That is the religion of human achievement. But then he continues, doesn't he, in verse 7 of Philippians 3, but whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from God on the basis of faith. Legalism is dangerous, says Paul. Legalism can ruin a life.

Legalism can ruin a church. It can kill a church. Swindle said, let legalism have enough rope and there will be a lynching of all new ideas, fresh thinking, and innovative programs. That's not the way we do it. That's not the way we've done it.

Why did you move a chair or change a service time or start a new program? Watch out for legalism. The second thing that Paul tells us to look out for is mysticism, and that's from verse 18.

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions puffed up and without reason by his sensuous mind. Now, if you're sharp, you'll have noticed that point three is asceticism. So, how come it's mentioned here and you're talking about mysticism? Well, if you go to another translation, you'll find verse 18 reads, do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you.

[22 : 05] Mysticism. Mysticism is the pursuit of deeper spiritual experiences. Now, we say, well, hang on a minute. Surely, we all want to have deeper spiritual experiences. Surely, like we're going to sing at the end of the service, oh, for a closer walk with God, a calm and heavenly frame, a light to shine upon the road that leads us to the Lamb, that we might become closer. All in favor of a deeper walk with God? Yeah, we all. Well, I hope we do. We haven't put our hands up. We do. We all want that. But there are some who go so far, they go off the deep end in that regard. And what happens then is they start to make things up. That's what Paul is saying. And that's where it gets dangerous. That's where the murky water lies. They become puffed up with idle notions in their unspiritual minds. They're making this stuff up, he says. It's not God's rules. It's not God's regulations. It's not God's principles or precepts. They're just making it up. Mysticism says that there is a spiritual reality, a spiritual experience that is above human intellect and the natural senses, which in one sense is true, but it may also not be true. Which is why we have to understand what we believe and live according to what we believe that we might be discerning to beware of what's not true, as he's already said to us earlier in the passage. No, understand what you believe in order that you can discern that which is good and that which is not. Here's the problem with mysticism. Unlike legalism, which looks for truth in external things, mysticism is all about internal things. It's all about sensation. It's not revelation.

It's all about feelings and intuition and mood, perceptions which are all subjective, which are all personal, which change from moment to moment. So, for example, a mystic would consider feelings during worship far more important and valid than actually actively studying the truth of God's Word objectively from the Bible. It's not what you know to be true. It's how you feel. And that's dangerous, not just in the church, but in society as well. It's the thought that dominates the culture that we live in today.

It's not about what is true. It's about how you feel. That is king, this sort of mystic ideology. You know, it taints everything. It's not about biology. It's not about reality. It's about how you feel and where your identity is and what you feel about that identity. And everybody just has to pretend that that's okay because it's how you feel. You feel like a cat. You bark like a dog. That's got to be okay. Nobody's allowed to say, that's weird. That's not normal. That's not natural. Nobody's allowed to say, well, you may feel one thing, but it doesn't mean that you are. So, we have to deny truth in order to embrace this kind of mystical identity kind of thing. One writer said, first, we overlook evil. Then, we permit evil. Then, we legalize evil. Then, we promote evil. Then, we celebrate evil. Then, we persecute those who still call it evil. Now, Paul's concern here with mysticism is at first that they're just going to overlook this mysticism. They're just going to kind of say, well, I don't need to worry too much about that. They'll overlook it. They'll permit it.

They'll begin to dabble a wee bit in it, and then they'll end up celebrating it. They'll end up taking it on board. They'll assimilate into it, and that's going to be a problem. And he gets more specific, doesn't he? He says, do not let anyone who delights in false humility in the worship of angels deny you. We know that. It's a false humility. You can't do that thing. The Colossian heretics believed in kind of sub-gods and sub-goddesses, that there was God, but he was only approachable through these emanations that went out, and Jesus was just kind of like one of these emanations.

But these Gnostics people, with their transcendent ways and their mystical knowledge, they would take you through the ladder of attainment across these different emanations, and one day you would be able to reach God. That's what Paul calls false humility. It's false humility. They're saying, well, I'm just a mere human. I have no right to go directly to God. I'm not good enough to go directly to God, but they are, and they can lead me to God through all of these different steps. It sounds very Roman, doesn't it? That we must get to God through an intermediary, that we must go through a third party, that we must venerate Mary or something like that.

[27 : 26] Paul says they have lost connection with a head, for whom the whole body, supported and held together by ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. Literally, if you add anything, you're decapitating your spiritual life. Spiritual growth comes through union with Christ.

Christ. It comes through direct access to God. John 16, in that day, you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly, I tell you, Jesus says, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

Why do we pray in Jesus' name? Because He told us to. He told us that we can speak to God the Father through Jesus' name. We don't need a third party. We don't need an intermediary. We have access, access to the throne room of heaven. We can go directly to the heavenly Father, Abba, Father, in Jesus' name. And worshiping angels is strictly forbidden in Scripture.

You shall worship the Lord your God alone, and in Him only shall you serve. Remember the Apostle John, when he tried to worship the angel in Revelation? He's getting all these visions, getting all these dreams, these things. And Revelation 19, 10, at this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, don't do that. I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God, the angel says. So, watch out for legalism. Watch out for mysticism. Briefly and finally, watch out for asceticism. From verse 20, if with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you are still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to the things. These things 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. Asceticism essentially is the neglect of the body.

It is a rigorous self-denial in order to be righteous. So, legalism, it's all about what you do. Mysticism, it's all about how you feel. Asceticism is all about what you don't do, what you don't permit yourself to have, what you restrain yourself from doing.

[30 : 07] It's sad, but it's true that throughout different periods in Christian history, believers have promoted the thought that we are to reject anything that is good, anything that is enjoyable, anything that is beautiful, anything that is comfortable in order to pursue God. So, in other words, they're saying, listen, if you enjoy anything on the earth, then you're not following God. Nonsense. We look at God's Word, and we see the beauty that is there. We see that God created everything and saw that it was good.

Yeah, He tells us not to pervert the goodness of the things that He has created, which we're naturally good at doing. But of course, we're to enjoy these things. What is man's chief end?

I'm sure you know your catechism. Man's chief end is to glorify God, yeah, and enjoy Him forever. Asceticism says, no, in order to love God, it's got to hurt. There's got to be this severe self-denial.

There's got to be really difficult things. In the Middle Ages, there was this notion that if you wore uncomfortable clothing like a hair shirt next to the skin, which was really uncomfortable or slept on a hard bed or whipped yourself until your back was bloody, that was somehow a good thing. Bizarre.

There's stories of monks in monasteries who dealt with lustful thoughts by throwing themselves into thorny bushes. I mean, monks are just human like the rest of us. I suppose when they came to dinner at night, they could always tell who had been struggling with lustful thoughts because they'd be bleeding in the seat next to them. So, what's behind this asceticism? Well, it's the basic belief that the material world, including my physical body, is evil and it must be restrained. Now, we would agree with that in part. In part, we would agree that discipline is important as Christian believers. We would agree that fasting or denying ourselves certain things for certain periods of time are helpful, helpful in focusing the mind, helpful in directing our thoughts. We would agree in saying that the body is a temple, that we should do things that are good for us and not bad for us. Paul himself said, I discipline my body and I bring it under control. But asceticism is different. Asceticism is seeking to sanctify the soul by disciplining the body. In other words, to get or to gain God's favor by disciplining myself harshly. Again, a misunderstanding, a misappropriation, a misapplication of the gospel and its truth. And the odd thing about asceticism is that they refer to this denial or this harsh discipline as a means of grace, right? A means of grace. I'm going to get God's favor. I'm going to discipline my body harshly. It's a means of grace. The flogging, the hurt, the pain is a means of grace.

[33 : 23] And to my logical mind, I say, what does grace mean? Grace means unmerited favor. God's riches at Christ's expense is the acronym. How do you merit unmerited favor? How by beating yourself black and blue do you merit unmerited favor? How can that possibly be a means of grace? It's not. Grace is undeserved by us, but they call it a means of grace. Here's what Paul wants us to know. All of these rules, they're all made up. They're all made up. They didn't come from God. They came from people who made them up. They are based merely on human commands. What does he say? Do not taste, do not touch. According to human precepts and teachings, they have the appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

They're based on human tradition, human thought. They are flawed. Paul is saying, listen, if you're in Christ, he is enough. He is enough. He is enough. True Christian faith is not about being miserable and flogging ourselves. It's not about beating ourselves or throwing ourselves into thorny bushes.

It's not about looking morose and downcast as some kind of twisted means of being closer to God. That's not it. Be joyful always, says Paul. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Legalism, mysticism, asceticism, what do they feed? Pride. Pride.

False humility. Gratifying our own flesh about through the means of what we do and how we do it and the things that we amass. What did Jesus say? Jesus said, be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

What was their reward? People going, oh, look how spiritual they are. That's the reward. That's it. Here's the great thing about coming to Jesus, the one who is sufficient. When we come to Jesus, He gives us a new heart, He gives us a new hope, and He implants within us a new desire, and they work their way from the inside to the outside. Peter calls it being partakers of the divine nature. God gives us new appetites. So then Paul says, don't let anyone render a verdict on your spirituality based on external things, on what you eat, on what you drink, on what events you go to, on what day your Sabbath is, or what sacrament that you engage in, or what ceremony. It's not about ceremonies. It's not about sacraments. It's not about rituals. It's not about anything external.

[36 : 45] It's not about a mystical feeling. These are all shadows. They're empty and vacuous. But Jesus, Jesus, as presented in the gospel, He's the substance. He's the pleroma. He's the fullness of God in bodily form. Religion is mankind's quest for God. The gospel is God seeking the lost.

All religion originates on the earth, but the gospel originates in heaven. Religion is the story of what sinful man tries to do for a holy God. The gospel is the story of what a holy God has done for sinful mankind. Religion has good views, but the gospel is good news. There are many religions. There is only one gospel. Religion is man-made. The gospel is a gift from God, and it's free, and it's free.

I wonder, are you resting in it this evening? Beware of legalism. Beware of mysticism. Beware of asceticism. And pin all your hope, and rest in the finished work of Jesus. Let's pray in His name.