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“Avoiding Spiritual Pitfalls”

Colossians 2:16–23

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In Colossians 2, Paul addressed three issues that plagued the church in Colosse: judgmentalism, hyper-spiritualism, and legalism. In this study, we will define these problems and check that they do not define us or the church today.

1. **Colossians 2:16–23** – “[16] So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, [17] which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. [18] Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, [19] and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. [20] Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— [21] ‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ [22] which all concern things which perish with the using— according to the commandments and doctrines of men? [23] These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.”

2. Context

a. The church at Colosse

- i. The Colossian church was almost entirely composed of gentile Believers.
- ii. The church at Colosse was not one of the churches Paul planted, and he had never visited.
- iii. Epaphras, the pastor of the church at Colosse, had told Paul of three errors spreading in the congregation.
 1. Epaphras is mentioned twice in Colossians.
 2. Epaphras visited Paul while he was imprisoned in Rome.
 3. Epaphras made Paul aware of three errors in the church at Colosse, seeking spiritual advice.

b. Three spiritual pitfalls

- i. Judgmentalism
- ii. Hyper-spiritualism
- iii. Legalism

3. Judgmentalism

- a. **Colossians 2:16-17** – “[16] *Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, [17] which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.*”
 - i. Paul wanted the Colossians to focus on their relationship with Christ, not others judging them for not keeping Jewish customs.
 - ii. The Jewish Believers were judging the gentile Believers, thinking they were not as spiritual as the Jewish Believers.
 1. The Jewish Believers struggled with the idea that their customs were not required in the new covenant.
- b. There are 613 Mitzvahs, or laws, in the Old Testament.
 - i. The gentile Believers at Colosse were unfamiliar with Jewish laws and did not know how much of that to incorporate into Christianity.
 1. The Jewish laws pointed to Christ and were fulfilled in Christ.
 2. The Jewish customs are fine to practice as a remembrance, but they are no longer required under the new covenant.
 - ii. The laws fall into three categories: dietary, ceremonial, and moral.

4. The dietary law

- a. The reasons God established a dietary law:
 - i. Some argue that God gave the Israelites a dietary law to maintain their health.
 - ii. More likely, God gave His people these laws to demonstrate that the Jewish people belonged to Him, obeyed Him, and were distinct and set apart from the nations of the world.
- b. But Jesus came and showed a new way to be set apart unto God.
 - i. Jesus emphasized that having God in us will set us apart more than any dietary law.
 1. **Mark 7:18-19** – “[18] *Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside*”—like food—*“can make him “unclean”?* [19] *for it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.’ (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean.’)*” (1984 NIV)
 2. **DISCUSS:** What is one time that others noticed you were set apart unto the Lord? How can you better reflect that to others?

5. The ceremonial law

- a. The feasts and festivals pointed to Christ.
 - i. Jesus was crucified during the Passover.
 1. During Passover, lambs were sacrificed on the Temple Mount to make temporary atonement for the sins of the people.

2. Passover also commemorated God freeing Israel from slavery in Egypt.
 3. During the first Passover, God commanded Jews to mark their doors with the blood of a lamb so that the angel of death would pass over them.
 4. Jesus was crucified during Passover, a symbol that He was *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (**John 1:29**).
 5. Our sins are covered by His blood.
- ii. Jesus was buried as the Feast of Unleavened Bread began.
1. The Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover merge for an eight-day celebration.
 2. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a time when Jews would rid their homes of all leaven or yeast, which was a picture of sin.
 3. Jesus bore our sins and was buried with them so that we could be cleansed with Him who removes the leaven from our lives.
- iii. Jesus rose during the Feast of Firstfruits.
1. During the Feast of Firstfruits, Jews brought their first crops to the temple to thank God in faith with an expectation of the rest of the harvest still to come.
 2. Jesus was the first to rise from the dead with a glorified body.
 3. Those who believe in Him are part of the rest of the harvest, and we will rise with Him with imperishable bodies.
 4. **DISCUSS:** How can we invite others to be part of God's harvest?
- iv. The Holy Spirit was given on the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost.
1. In Exodus, this feast commemorated the giving of the law.
 2. The problem was that while God was giving Moses the Ten Commandments on the mountain, the people had been engaging in revelry and immorality in Moses' absence.
 3. Because of this, the law Moses carried judged the Israelites and 3,000 of them were slain.
 4. But in Acts, the Holy Spirit came down on Pentecost and Peter preached to the masses.
 5. In response to the Gospel, around 3,000 were saved.
 6. The letter of the law kills, but the Spirit of grace gives life (**2 Corinthians 3:6**).
 7. **DISCUSS:** What is the role of God's Law in the Old Testament and God's grace in the New Testament? How has the Holy Spirit given you life?
- b. There is one more feast yet to be fulfilled.
- i. The next feast on the Jewish calendar is the Feast of Trumpets.

1. The Feast of Trumpets points us to the next major event in God's timeline: the second coming of Jesus, where all who believe in Christ will rise with Him.
2. **1 Thessalonians 4:16–17** – “[16] *The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. [17] Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.*”
3. **DISCUSS:** How is the Feast of Trumpets related to the Feast of Firstfruits? How does this expectation affect how you live?

6. The moral law

- a. The dietary and ceremonial aspects of the law were fulfilled in Christ and are no longer binding, but the moral aspect of the law is still intact.
- b. Jesus is the moral standard.
 - i. **2 Corinthians 5:21** – “*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*”
 - ii. **Hebrews 4:15b** – “*We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.*” (1984 NIV)

7. Judgmentalism versus judgment

- a. All of us need to make judgments, but none of us need to be judgmental.
 - i. **John 7:24** – “*Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.*”
 1. Jesus is not against judgment, but against judging by the way things appear instead of by looking for all the relevant facts.
 2. **DISCUSS:** When have you formed hasty opinions? What was the error that you fell into, and what safeguards do you have so you can avoid falling into the same error?
- b. A lot of harm has been done to people because of gossipers spreading hearsay.
 - i. It is better to keep your mouth shut than speak of what you do not know.
 1. **DISCUSS:** What does righteous judgment look like, and how does that differ from the hasty generalizations our society encourages?
 2. **DISCUSS:** Rather than having a judgmental spirit, what should characterize us instead?
- c. **Colossians 2:16** – “*Let no one judge you . . .*”

- i. When Paul told us not to let others judge us, he meant we should not let anyone aside from Christ define us.
 - 1. **DISCUSS:** Are you letting others define you? How can you counteract what others say about you with what Christ says about you?

8. Hyper-spiritualism

- a. **Colossians 2:18–19** – “[18] *Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, [19] and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.*”
- b. Hyper-spiritualism is characterized by four things:
 - i. Not holding fast to the Head, who is Christ
 - 1. In Paul’s strong indictment against hyper-spiritualism, he said the people who practiced it were disconnected from Christ.
 - 2. They loved their spiritual experiences more than Christ.
 - 3. **John 15:26b** – Jesus said, “*The Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.*”
 - 4. Everything the Holy Spirit does is to bring glory to Jesus, but hyper-spiritualism is detached from Christ.
 - ii. A fleshly mind
 - 1. Their obsession with mysticism led them to have a fleshly mind, and to pride.
 - 2. The hyper-spiritual people would brag about their visions and pretend to be enlightened by secret knowledge and revelations.
 - 3. They made a show of their spiritual gifts.
 - 4. **DISCUSS:** The fleshly mind treats the spiritual gifts as another way to become puffed up, but how does the Biblical view of the gifts differ (**1 Corinthians 12:12–26**)? What is their true purpose (**Ephesians 4:11–13**)?
 - iii. The worship of angels
 - 1. Their obsession with the mystical and the spiritual realm reached the point where they began worshiping angels.
 - iv. False humility
 - 1. The hyper-spiritual pretended that they regularly experienced the supernatural and then feigned humility.
- c. **Colossians 2:18a** – “*Let no one cheat you of your reward.*”
 - i. The hyper-spiritual people led the Colossian Believers to doubt their salvation, but Paul argued that:
 - 1. The hyper-spiritual were not even saved themselves.

2. They were arrogant and fleshly.
3. They wanted to draw everyone's attention to themselves rather than to Jesus.
4. They should not affect the Believers' relationship with Christ.
- ii. It is not bad to desire to see the miraculous hand of God, but we should not desire it more than God Himself.
- iii. We should believe in the miraculous and the gifts of the Spirit.
 1. The Bible gives us examples of God's "visible" hand (the miraculous) and "invisible" hand (His unseen providential work).
- iv. However, there is a difference between **charismata** and charismania.
 1. **Charismata** is the Spirit working through us as Believers, empowering us with spiritual gifts.
 2. Charismania describes the clownish affectations of the hyper-spiritual.
 3. We can test whether something is a manifestation of the Spirit of God by asking three questions:
 - a. Did Jesus teach it?
 - b. Did the early church practice it?
 - c. Do the epistles support it?
 4. If the answer is yes, we can pray for it and practice it.
 5. Some deny the idea that we should test the spirits because they claim this quenches the Spirit.
 - a. **1 John 4:1** – *"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."*
 - b. If you test the spirits by your own experience, you can validate any manifestation, even that of a demonic spirit.
 - c. You will only know the work of God by testing it against the Word of God.
 - d. **DISCUSS:** Have you ever tested whether something was a manifestation of the Spirit of God? What methods did you use to test it? How can you use the Word of God to test every spirit?

9. Legalism

- a. **Colossians 2:20–23** – *"[20] Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— [21] 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' [22] which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? [23] These things indeed have an*

appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."

- i. The quotes around these regulations (verse 21) show us that these are man's traditions not God's commands.
- b. Legalism
 - i. Biblical legalism is enforcing extrabiblical rules to impress God, but only Jesus' work on the cross did that.
 1. **DISCUSS:** Do you trust that Jesus' sacrifice was enough to make you right with God, or do you sometimes feel the need to earn God's love with your works?
 - ii. But God's favor is not won by our performance.
 1. The Pharisees were a strict Jewish sect that tried to follow and even add to God's Law.
 2. **Matthew 23:4** – Jesus criticized them for this, saying, *"They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers."*
 - iii. Legalists pride themselves on being right rather than on doing right.
 1. **DISCUSS:** Do you worry more about your motives than your performance? How can you cede the role of Judge to God and let Him examine you?
 - iv. Legalists add standards to God's Law to feel more spiritual.
 1. The first example of legalism is in Genesis.
 2. **Genesis 2:16–17** – God said to Adam, *"[16] Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; [17] but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*
 3. But while God emphasized man's freedom, Eve added an extra command, claiming that she and Adam could not touch the forbidden fruit.
 4. **Genesis 3:2–3** – Eve said, *"[2] We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; [3] but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'"*
- c. Legalism toward others
 - i. Often, we measure others by the standard which we measure ourselves.
 - ii. Even a good standard can be legalistic if:
 1. You begin to think God is impressed by your keeping of that standard.

2. You feel condemned or apart from God when you do not keep that standard. Our Heavenly Father is gracious with us.
 3. You think others are less spiritual for not keeping your standard.
- d. The balance
- i. Liberalism is thinking you can do less than God requires, and legalism is thinking you need to do more.
 - ii. There's freedom found in obeying God's Word rather than taking away or adding to His Law.

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New King James (NKJV)