

Horsley Evangelical Church ([www.horsleyec.org.uk](http://www.horsleyec.org.uk))

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Colossians 2:20-23 Christ our life.

These verses today bring to an end this warning section of the letter where Paul warns the Christians of Colosse about the dangers of the new teaching. Paul appeals to the Christians to remember who they are in Christ and to live as children of light not children of darkness. The apostle first of all asks the believers an important question – and that question is found in verses 20, 21. Then he reminds them of three important truths in verses 22, 23 – truths concerning false and worldly religion.

And that's how we are going to look at the passage today. Through the Scripture, God's asks us all *important questions* so that we may consider our position before him and the way we are living at the moment. Then the word of God reminds us of important truths about wrong paths we may be tempted to take.

Let's look first at **one important question** in verses 20,21. **Read verses 20,21.** The one important question Paul asks here is, "Why as Christians are you submitting to the rules of the world?" Paul is talking very directly to the Colossians at this point. "Why are *you* behaving in this way?" Now the encouraging thing to notice first of all is that Paul is confident he is speaking to Christians. The fact that at least some of them have been taken in by the strange teaching does not mean they are *unbelievers*. Paul is convinced from speaking with Epaphras that these people have been truly converted. We have seen Paul's confidence in chapter 1.

See how Paul describes them here in verse 20. They are those who have *died with Christ to the basic principles of this world*. And that is true of every Christian. It reminds us first of all that every Christian has been *united to Christ*. We are all *one with him* and *joined to him*. We share his life and all the benefits of his death on the cross and glorious resurrection from the dead. The Christian can never be separated from Christ. Our lives are bound up with him forever.

And then Paul says that we have *died with Christ to the basic principles of this world*. Now death is a very significant 'event' in any person's existence. In what way is it significant? Death is significant because it sets us free from the things of this world. The person who dies is set free from the concerns of this world, from the powers of this world and the pressures of this world. The world no longer has any 'hold' on the person who is dead. The deceased has nothing more to do with this world, with its laws or its expectations - they are dead. They are now in the hands of God – and no one else has any power or influence over them anymore.

And this was true for the Lord Jesus when he died. When Christ died upon the cross for our sins, our Lord was set free from the various human and supernatural powers that sought (unsuccessfully) to control him and oppress him throughout his life. But after he died upon the cross, our Lord's struggles were over.

But by using this phrase to describe a Christian – *you died with Christ*, the apostle Paul is reminding the Christians at Colosse not only of Christ's death for them, but also, because we are eternally joined with Christ, Paul is reminding the Colossians that they too have been set free from the world's influences and laws and powers. In Christ we are 'dead' to these things. Our relationship with this world has changed fundamentally.

Paul puts this another way near the beginning of the letter. [Read 1:13, 14](#). The Christian no longer belongs to *the dominion of darkness* (1:13). In other words we no longer belong to this world and its ways and powers. The Christian has been set free by God; he or she has been delivered from the kingdom of darkness and has been brought into the kingdom of God's Son, in whom we have redemption (or freedom) and the forgiveness of sins.

And so Paul is now asking the Christians at Colosse a question. "Since you have been set free from the powers and ways of this world, since you have been taken out of the dominion of darkness - *why are some of you behaving as if you still belonged to it?* Why do you submit to its rules anymore." What are these rules? Paul summarises them - "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" What is Paul taking about here?

He is talking about the world's way of approaching God. He is talking about the world's way of trying to satisfy God and be made right with God. In other words, Paul is summarizing the way of all *religion* in the world. And in so doing, Paul is telling the Colossians that the new teaching coming into their church is not from God but from the world. Indeed its sources are the spiritual powers and authorities that lead men away from God and keep them in darkness.

What is the 'world's way' of approaching God? What are *the basic principles of this world* when it comes to approaching God? What do our fallen hearts naturally tell us to do? *We are told that we must make ourselves right with God*. And how do we do that? Well, we must follow rules. We must do good certain things to try to please God, and we must do other things which atone for our sins. Man knows deep down that he has sinned against a holy God. And so he tries to humble himself before God and even punish himself so that God will not need to punish him.

And so we have these rules which Paul mentions here - "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" These are really the world's ways, worldly religion's ways of atoning for sin and punishing self - so that God will not need to punish us. And so these rules may well involve denying myself food, or sleep, denying myself marriage, denying myself a comfortable bed, human company or warmth. These rules may insist that you wear shirts which make you itch. These rules may insist on some long and dangerous pilgrimage to some holy place and that generally you live in poverty.

And it's all part of worldly religion's attempt to draw near to God, to make myself right with God and gain his favour. And of course this is what Paul sees in the new teaching that was coming into the Colossian church. He sees there all the tell-tale signs of worldly religion which relies on what I do to make me right with God. So many rules to obey with a strong element of self-denial.

But Paul is asking an important question here. "Why are *you* doing following *these* things? Have you forgotten who you are? Have you forgotten to whom you already belong - Jesus Christ? Have you forgotten that you are already righteous before God and fully acceptable by God through his Son? Have you forgotten that through Christ's death on the cross all your sins have been forgiven and that there is nothing more to atone for? Have you forgotten that you no longer belong to the dominion of darkness with all its laws and regulations to make you right with God?? Have you forgotten that you are no longer subject to these evil powers and authorities that blind men to ignorance and futility. In Christ you died to this world and its rules and its powers. For now you belong to another - the Lord Jesus Christ. You are children of light."

I wonder how would you answer that one important question this morning? To what extent do you live in the world and obey its rules and laws when it comes to approaching God? Have you slipped back into what is sometimes called *legalism*? Have you forgotten something. You already belong to Christ and are united to him forever. You are already righteous before God and fully accepted in Christ. His smile is

upon you. You have been saved by grace. Why do you live therefore as if you still had to earn your salvation? Why do you live as if you were still in the dominion of darkness?

But let's move on from the **one important question** to **three important truths** in verses 22, 23. These three important truths are about all worldly religion – and how useless it is to anyone. [Read verses 22,23](#). The first of these three truths from verse 22 is that *worldly religion will not save you*. [Read verse 22 again](#). Worldly religion will not save anyone because it is not from God. It will not make anyone righteous before God. It will not draw anyone closer to God. It is not effective. And that's because these things are based on human commands and human teaching. They do not come from God. They are not part of his revelation. They will therefore perish. They will not last. They do not work, and they cannot save.

Think back to our passage last time and to what Paul says about the main expositor of the strange teaching at Colosse. How does Paul describe him – this man who teaches strict rules about food and drink and special days which must be followed. How does Paul describe him? Paul says he has lost connection with the Head (19). The things he teaches do not come from Christ the Head of the church. They come from the man's own mind. But his mind is unspiritual, and his notions are idle (18).

This teaching therefore is not from God and it cannot save. Instead it will perish. These are human rules and human teaching – not divine. Indeed their influence comes from the various evil spiritual powers in the world. There is only one way of salvation given by God to men by which we may be saved. And that way is through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ laid down his life for all who will believe in him. He gave himself on the cross for our salvation. Salvation is not by works but by grace. Human religion, in whatever name or guise it comes, cannot save. These things are all doomed to *perish*. Doomed to be judged and consumed and forgotten. Therefore you must cleave to Christ alone. You must look to him alone and to no other way. Christ is God's Son. He is God's gift to a lost world. Only he can save you from the wrath to come. Only his blood can cleanse you. And we receive that salvation by faith and not by works. It is the gift of God.

Then the second important truth about worldly religion is that *such things are deceptive*. They can and do take people in – of course they do. Why else would anyone follow them. [Read verse 23a](#). Paul does not say to the Colossians – I just don't know how you could possibly be taken in by all this. No, on the contrary, Paul tells the believers here that he understands up to a point if they have been taken in by this new teaching. For it has an *appearance* of wisdom. It is not obviously foolish and ridiculous. And it has a form of worship. The people who propagate it *seem* to be worshipping the Lord. They do not openly dishonour the Lord. And they have a certain humility to them, even though it's false. And what they do certainly costs them in terms of pain and discomfort!

So Paul does not *mock* the Colossian Christians for being taken in by this worldly form of religion. He understands its deception. He can quite believe that this man's telling of his heavenly visions must have been quite convincing. And he knows that the main exponents of the teaching are sincere up to a point. It is all therefore believable. Furthermore, the human heart is quite able to be deceived. And the devil, who is the father of lies, is very skilful in deceiving people as he masquerades as an angel of light.

So such things are deceptive and believable. And we are to note the non-judgmental and even gracious attitude of Paul here. It does no good mocking people or making them feel stupid at the way they have been taken in by something. We must be understanding and gently point these things out to one another – as in fact Paul does generally in this letter.

But at the end of the day, truth comes from God and the fact is that we face an enemy who is out to trick us and destroy us. And so as we must pray one another, for discernment. And we should thank God

for brothers and sisters who love us in the Lord and watch over us spiritually and perhaps gently point such things out to us from time to time.

But then the third truth about worldly religion here is that it cannot sanctify - it cannot help us to grow spiritually. [Read verse 23 again](#). This same truth also comes out in 2:19. Spiritual growth comes only from God. Spiritual growth only comes by being united to and in fellowship with Jesus Christ. Mere rules and regulations cannot change human behaviour. As the Lord Jesus taught in Mark 7, the problem is with the human heart. It is what comes out of the heart that makes a man unclean and not anything else. As Jeremiah tells us, the heart is desperately wicked and beyond cure.

Mere rules and laws do not change the human heart. And in the end the evil that resides in the human heart will come out. All the vileness of the human heart will be seen in some way. There is only one person who can change human behaviour and make us holy people - and that is God. There is only one person who can create within us a pure heart. And that is God. We cannot change ourselves. But the good news is that God can, and the Lord does change us as we remain in fellowship with his Son. God has the power, and he has the will and a wonderful plan to change us for ever. And so it is to Christ we must look every day if we are to change. Yes, there is place for self-discipline, of course there is. But ultimately it is not by human might or determination that I will change, but only by the Spirit of the living God. More rules will not change anything. It is the power of God alone that changes me, and it is his grace in Christ that will heal my sick heart.

And so once more these verses from Paul's letter to the Colossians take us back to our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is our life. We belong to him. We are one with him. God our dear loving heavenly Father has delivered us out of the dominion of darkness and has brought us into the kingdom of his Son he loves, in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins. What a wonderful thing God has done for us. Therefore we are not to be taken up with the things of this world but with the things of Christ and the glory to come.

As one of our hymns puts it, "Now all my heart's desire, is to abide, in Him, my Saviour dear, in Him to hide. My shield and buckler he, covering and protecting me: From Satan's darts I'll be, safe at His side."