**Colossians – Keeping Christ in Focus Series**

**“Wolves at Colossae”**

**Colossians 2.16-23**

**Introduction**

For the past five weeks we have been looking at Paul’s letter to the Colossians. The church at Colossae was under attack from a group of false teachers who were teaching that Christ was not enough for a person to enjoy the fullness of God and causing believers to get their focus off of Christ.

Last week the Apostle began to address these false teachers head-on calling their teachings mere philosophy, empty deception, tradition of men, and elementary principles of the world. (2.8) In today’s text the Apostle will identify specifics behind these heresies. Today’s text is Colossians chapter two verses sixteen through twenty-three.

***16****Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—****17****things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.****18****Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,****19****and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.* ***20****If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as,****21****“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!”****22****(which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?****23****These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.*

**“Wolves at Colossae”**

Four years before the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians he warned the elders of the nearby congregation in Ephesus that *savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them*. (Acts 20.29-30) Now we see these savage wolves attacking the church at Colossae. Paul had warned the Colossians that these savage wolves had potential to take Christians captive and throw them into the prison of philosophy, the dungeon of deception, the torture cell of tradition, and the penitentiary of elementary principles. (2.8) These false teachers were wolves in sheep’s clothing disguising themselves as religious superiors, pretending to be humble visionaries, and masquerading as teachers of wisdom. But now the Apostle reveals their true identity and the danger behind their teachings.

**Shadows instead of the Substance of Christ**

Paul tells the Colossians, *Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.*(2.16-17)The Apostle reveals that these wolves were disguising themselves as religious superiors who were teachings shadows over substance. Notice that the Apostle says, “*Therefore no one is to act as your judge.”*

The *“Therefore”* is referring to the previous section where Paul made it clear that the Colossians were complete in Christ. (2.8-12) Using the “therefore” Paul is saying, “Since you have been made complete in Christ don’t let anyone act as your judge.” Paul gives this admonition because these false teachers were acting as judges over the Christians at Colossae. They were behaving as religious superiors telling Christians what was acceptable for them to eat and drink and what annual festivals, monthly holy days, and weekly Sabbaths must be observed to demonstrate Christian piety.

Even though the Apostle doesn’t assign a label to these false teachers, this type of superiority sounds a lot like the Judaizers of the first century. As I shared last week the Judaizers taught a combination of God’s grace through Christ together with conformity to the Laws of Moses. Judaziers taught that to be truly right with God a person must believe that Jesus is the Messiah and keep Mosaic Law. This law keeping included circumcision, dietary restrictions, and strict observance of festivals, holy days, and Sabbaths. Remember the Gospel equation Jesus + nothing = The Gospel. The Gospel is not Jesus + circumcision + dietary restrictions + strict observance of festivals and Sabbaths. The Gospel is Jesus + nothing = The Gospel.

The teaching of the Judaziers stemmed from Pharisees, a Jewish religious party who taught that righteousness was obtained through strict law keeping. Jesus condemned the teachings of the Pharisees on several occasions for heaping religious rules on men’s shoulders too heavy for anyone to bear. (Mt.23.4) The early church strongly condemned a sect of the Pharisees who had believed that Jesus is the Messiah but taught that *it is necessary to circumcise* Gentile believers *and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.* (Acts 15) The Apostle Paul condemned the Judaizers in his letter to the Galatians saying that their teachings distorted the gospel of Christ.

Now in Colossians Paul is once again is condemning the teachings of the Judaizers for teaching that the shadows of the Old Testament ordinances have more substance than Christ Himself. Everyone understands that a shadow doesn’t have any substance in itself. A shadow is formed only because an object of substance exists. That’s Paul’s point! The dietary and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were foreshadows of Christ. Christ is the One of substance. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, “*The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.”* (Heb.10.1a)

These false teachers taught that the dietary restrictions of the Old Testament would make a person holy before God instead of teaching that true holiness is only found in Jesus Christ. They ignored that Jesus declared all things clean and what God has cleansed through Christ, no one should consider unholy. (Mk.7.19b; Acts 10.15) As the Apostle teaches in the book of Romans, “*the Kingdom of God does not consist of food or drink but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”* (Rom.14.17) These fakers required the observance of Passover instead of teaching that *Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.* (ICor.5.7) These self-called religious superiors emphasized a particular Sabbath instead of exalting the Lord Jesus as the Lord Sabbath. (Mt.12.8) Basically, these frauds were promoting food, drink, and special days as the road that leads to righteousness instead of promoting Christ as the fulfillment of all things.

Last week I told you this Colossian heresy had a unique twist and here it is.

***18****Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,****19****and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.*

**Worship of Angels instead of the Worship of Christ**

The unique twist of Colossians Heresy was that these false teachers, especially one main guy, were promoting themselves as receiving angelic visions that presumably gave them insights on who the real Christians were and who were not. Paul warns the Colossians not to let anyone defraud them of their claim as Christians.

It seems that these false teachers were teaching that an angel could be an intermediary to God. This heresy led people to worship angels instead of worshipping Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that there is *one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.* (ITim.2.5) We don’t need angels. We don’t need Mary. We don’t need a Priest. All we need is Jesus Christ. As Paul expressed in his letter to the Galatians, *“if an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!* (Gal.1.8)

Paul reveals that these false teachers delighted in coming across humble and self-abasing but in reality they had inflated egos and considered themselves superior to others. They delighted to deceive people by coming across humble and contrite but in reality they were inflated with haughtiness and conceit.

Paul goes on to identify the biggest problem with these false teachers was that they were disconnected from Christ as the Head. Paul says that they were *not holding fast to the head*, which is Christ. (Col.1.18) They were not connected with Christ. They did not have a vital union with Christ. Christ was not their head – Christ was not their superior – they were their own superiors.

This is very serious because through our vital connection with Christ the Head *the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth, which is from God.* And isn’t it ironic that those who were promoting themselves as the ones who can discern who were the real Christian were the ones who were disconnect from Christ.

Paul continues saying, ***20****If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as,****21****“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!”****22****(which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?****23****These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.*

**Prohibitions instead of the Power of Christ**

These false teachers, these wolves in sheep’s clothing, were masquerading as teachers of wisdom telling people, *“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!”*These prohibitions might have the appearance of wisdom but in reality they are elementary principles of the world. Basically, Paul is saying that these teachings were the lowest level of religious thought and practice. The idea that a person can only enjoy the fullness of God by religious rule keeping is immature, primitive, and worldly. Paul asks, “*If you have died with Christ . . . do you submit yourself to decrees, commandments, and teachings of men?”* No! A thousand times, No! *It was for freedom that Christ set us free; not to turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, to be enslaved all over again.* (Gal.5.1; 4.9) If we have died with Christ we enjoy freedom from the yoke of rituals and ordinances.

The biggest problem that this *self-made religion,* this *self-abasement, and* this*severe treatment of the body* posed were that these things *are of no value against fleshly indulgence.* These false teachers were teaching the “outside-in principle.” The “outside-in principle” teaches that if a person keeps the outside stuff out of your life by not handling it, not tasting it, and not touching it then you will keep yourself holy and clean before God. You know, “Don’t drink, smoke, and crew or hang around people who do.”

The problem is that Jesus taught the exact opposite. Jesus taught the “inside-out principle.” Jesus taught *that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him.* (Mk.7.18)Jesus is condemning the “outside-in principle.” He is saying that whatever enters a person from the outside does not defile a person. But that which proceeds out of a man, this is what defiles a man. This is the “inside-out principle.” Jesus taught *that out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and slanders.* These are the things that defile a person. (Mt.15.19-20)

Notice that the things coming out of the heart are listed in the plural. *Out of the heart come evil thoughts* because I can have a variety of evil thoughts against a person. *Out of the heart come murders* because I can murder with my anger*,* my tongue, and my attitude. *Out of the heart come adulteries* and *fornications* because looking at another person lustfully is committing adultery. There are a variety of ways to steal, bear false witness and to slander someone.

The point is, *“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”* The answer? The Lord does! (Jer.17.9-10) *Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?* *Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!* (Rom.7.24-25) *Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.* (ICor.15.57) “Grace, grace, God’s grace, Grace that will pardon and cleanse within. Grace, grace, God’s grace, Grace that is greater than all our sin.” Not handling, tasting, or touching cannot pardon and cleanse within. Only God’s grace through Christ can do that! You can create a whole list of prohibitions but those prohibitions have no value against fleshly indulgence.

**Closing Thoughts**

Brothers and Sisters, the problem isn’t eating pig meat. Eating pig was prohibited in the Old Testament law and these false teachers would have no doubt taught against eating pork. But the problem isn’t eating pulled pork, pork chops, ham, or bacon. Eating pig isn’t going to defile me. Praise God, right? The problem is that I can be a pig in my heart. Out of my piggy heart comes *evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and slanders* and this is what defiles me. But to eat a piece of bacon doesn’t defile me.

Not handling, not tasting, and not touching have no value against my fleshly indulgences. The problem is my heart and as a follower of Christ I must allow Him to rule my heart. (Col.3.15a) Christ is the head over all rule and authority therefore He can guard my heart and mind to dwell on what is true, honorable, right, pure, and lovely instead of allowing my piggy tendencies rule my life. (Col.2.10b; Phil.4.7-8) The power of Christ in me can work from the inside-out to bring glory to the Father. The power of Christ in me can put to death my fleshly tendencies so that I may live to the glory of God.

Brothers and Sisters, let’s not allow the wolves of this world to destroy the beauty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let’s focus on the substance of Christ. Let’s worship Christ and Christ alone. Let’s trust in the power of Christ to capture and rule our hearts for the glory of God.

**Call to Prayer**

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts* (Col.3.15a)