

## Seeking Things Above

Scripture Text: Colossians 2:16-3:4

### Introduction

Today, we are continuing our look at Paul's letter to the Colossians. Though he had not planted that church or met the people there, Paul worked hard so they would hear the good news of Jesus Christ and the church would be built up in knowledge of Christ. Paul wanted to protect the church from being deceived. The last time we were looking at this letter, we read how Paul encouraged the Colossians by reminding them of their faith and what Christ has done for them. Paul also warned the Colossians about a dangerous teaching that was threatening the church. He reminded them of the Christians' new identity in Christ, reminding them who Jesus is and what Jesus had done for them. Paul also wrote that the Colossians and all followers of Christ are alive in Him. Jesus has made us alive, He has canceled our debt of sin that we could not pay, and He has reconciled us to God through His work on the cross and His glorious resurrection.

Today's passage continues Paul's warnings to the Colossians about some specific issues that were causing trouble in the church. There are things that can cause us to stumble in our Christian walk, things that can hinder our spiritual growth – Lack of prayer, lack of learning God's Word, and lack of fellowship with other believers. One thing Christians do very well sometimes, including myself, that hinders our growth in Christ, is thinking we can rely on ourselves to be right with God. We think we have it within ourselves to be all that God expects of us. The Christian faith is really very simple if you think about it – turn from sin and self, and turn to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Repent and place your complete trust in Jesus and His saving work on the cross and you will be saved. Now, along with that are some expectations, and as obedient children of God, we ought to do them. But the Christian faith is not about a list of dos and don'ts that determine our eligibility to enter the kingdom of heaven. If that were true, then Jesus Christ died for nothing and our faith is useless. *Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Period!*

### Bethlehem Baptist Amendment and Legalism

In 1982, Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN considered an amendment to their church constitution. The church had for many years required **total abstinence of alcohol** as a **condition** for their church membership. The amendment that was being considered at that time was to replace a requirement for total abstinence from alcohol with a broader commitment that read as follows: "*We engage...to seek God's help in abstaining from all drugs, food, drink, and practices which bring unwarranted harm to the body or jeopardize our own or another's faith.*" The pastor of that church believed the new amendment helped to draw attention to other activities besides drinking that cause problems to the Church. Sometimes we have a tendency to focus too much on one thing and neglect the ninety-nine other things that can just as well draw us away from God. Also, the amendment did not explicitly require abstinence of anything as a condition for membership to the church;

rather, it required the church to reflect on whether consuming anything harmed the church and the believer's witness and for the members to respond accordingly.

The issue Bethlehem Baptist Church was facing was a similar issue the Colossians were facing in our passage this morning and indeed an issue many churches throughout the world are facing now. It is the issue of legalism. Now, that word gets used a lot, particularly around Christians, but you will not find it in our passage, or in the whole Bible for that matter. Legalism can be defined in several ways. One way to define it is the belief that salvation can be earned by obeying God's Law. It refers to any teaching that states salvation comes strictly from following a list of commands. There were several groups of people in the New Testament who are thought to be legalistic: the Pharisees and the Sadducees are two. Also, one can be legalistic by requiring people to conduct themselves in ways that Scripture does not explicitly teach and make it a requirement to adhere to those ways as a means by which a person is able to become a member of a local church.

Another way a person can be legalistic is if he or she treats what the Bible says we ought to do as regulations we can keep by our own power in order to earn favor with God. In other words, trying to be moral in our own strength, without relying on Jesus Christ. I want to be very careful here, because the Bible certainly tells us many things that we ought to do and ought not to do. I certainly believe that many of these things are within our ability to do. For instance, most people know and have the power to not kill another person. Most people know and have the power to not steal from another. But, our holiness in regards to how moral we are should be founded in our faith in Christ and the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit and not in our own ability. If we could be moral enough without the work of Christ in our lives, then we do not need Christ. But, because everyone "falls short of the glory of God," we all need a Savior. We all need to be saved from sin and declared right with God.

Legalism is a danger to the church because it can cause us to have a false sense of righteousness. Paul addressed the issue of legalism in this passage by continuing his warning of false teaching that could harm the Colossian church. This is a natural result of what he has already told the Colossians, that Christ has made you alive and He has canceled your debt, therefore Paul wrote, "Let no one pass judgment on you." Christ is sufficient for you; therefore, if you have placed your trust in Him, let no one tell you otherwise. There are two basic points Paul made in this section of the letter:

- Do Not Focus on Human Traditions
- Focus on Christ and Things Above

### **Do Not Focus on Human Traditions**

Human traditions are not all bad. We enjoy them with family, friends, even in our church life. I did not use to appreciate tradition much at all. I wanted what was new and cool, what I thought was exciting. The old stuff just did not appeal to me. But in the past few years I have grown to appreciate traditions. I enjoy traditional hymns. I look forward to traditional ceremonies and events in the church. I have even grown to love traditional church

architecture, such as stained glass windows, steeples, and old country churches. I don't think all human traditions are bad. But when they draw us away from our true love, when they replace what is heavenly and true, when they hinder the genuine worship of the living God, then they need to be put aside. Apparently the false teachers in Colossae were trying to enforce Jewish regulations on the church that were unnecessary to the Christian faith. There are two main things these false teachers were advocating that Paul highlighted:

- Old Testament Requirements
- Asceticism and Worship of angels

On the first one, Old Testament Requirements, the false teachers were advocating a number of Jewish observances, claiming that they were essential – they had to be observed, for spiritual growth. These false teachers were telling the church that they had to follow the Jewish holy days, such as religious festivals, New Moon celebrations, and Sabbaths in order to be spiritual. We should be able to relate to this. We celebrate "special" times, too: Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. The church is currently observing the season of Lent where believers spend forty days prior to Easter preparing themselves for celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is modeled after Jesus' forty days in the wilderness where Satan tempted Him and where He prepared Himself for public ministry. Traditional events in the church are good things as we are told to remember certain things.

The other Jewish observances these false teachers were advocating were what people ate or drank. Jesus addressed the issue of eating, saying it was not what a person eats that defiles him, but what comes out of his heart. Just doing "spiritual things," however, doesn't make one spiritual. Paul told the church to not let anyone pass judgment on you. Do not let someone tell you that your spiritual condition, your salvation, or your membership to the church depends on whether you follow some tradition. Such things may appear spiritual, but spiritual life is about a relationship with Christ and our commitment to Him. To make something else necessary to the Christian life undermines the work of Jesus. Paul said the Old Testament traditions were a shadow of the real thing – they pointed to what has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. God instituted the dietary laws and holy days as a means to foreshadow our coming reconciliation in Jesus. This is what the writer of Hebrews said:

**Hebrews 10:1** For since the Law has but a *shadow* of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities...

A shadow is less significant than the object that causes it. A shadow is temporary, lasting until the true substance arrives. Hence, Christians are no longer under the old covenant. Christians are no longer obligated to observe Old Testament dietary laws or festivals, holidays, and special days – what these things foreshadowed has been fulfilled in Christ.

The second way these false teachers had tried to "pass judgment" on the Colossians and "disqualify" them was in regards to the practice of asceticism and the worship of angels. For asceticism, which literally means humility, Paul probably had in mind things that he mentioned in verse twenty-one, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch." This asceticism

may have gone beyond these commands to include forms of self-mutilation. Such practices may appear spiritual, but it actually promotes nothing more than confidence in one's self rather than in Jesus Christ. It is not clear what Paul had in mind when he mentioned the "worship of angels." Was he talking about literally worshipping angels or worshipping God with the angels? Whatever Paul meant here, these false teachers were basically saying the church members must do this, or they would be disqualified like an athlete who has violated the rules and is barred from a competition. These rules were not from God but from humans. Therefore, Paul wrote that the Colossians did not need to them to "qualify" in the race – to be accepted by God. The one rule we all must follow is to follow Jesus Christ.

The fundamental problem that was going on at Colossae was that some had not maintained contact with Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ and Jesus is the Head of that Body. As the Head of the Body, Jesus not only provides leadership but is also a source of provision for every member of the Body so that the whole Church grows and matures. The false teaching was seeking to enhance religious life without the source of that life, namely Jesus Christ. Paul declared that these practices may appear wise but have "no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh," something he will address later in the letter. These false teachers could not pass judgment or disqualify members of the Church. Only Christ is the Head, the Authority, of the Church. Since this teaching was un-Christian, it was dangerous for the Church to submit to it. We have to be careful that we have sound teaching, that we are faithful to the Word of God and what Christ has taught us.

### **Focus on Christ and Things Above**

So if the human traditions and false teachers could not make people more spiritual, what was the answer? What were they to do? The false teachers were telling the church to focus on earthly things, on human traditions. Paul appealed to the Colossians to live in a manner pleasing to the Lord. His response was again twofold:

- Set your heart (your desires) on heavenly things
- Set your mind (your thinking) on heavenly things

The first thing is, "Set your heart on things above." This refers to our desires. If you have been raised with Jesus Christ, therefore seek things that are above. The second command was similar to the first: "Set your minds on things above." This implies more than a way of thinking; it includes values and loves as well. It could mean, "Delight in things above." Desiring or setting your minds on things that are above contrasts with the things that are on earth and refers to pursuing a deeper knowledge of Christ Himself and all that belongs to living with and for Him. This would include seeking first His kingdom and living a life worthy of His name. It is a difference between seeking imperishable things versus perishable things – things that are eternal value versus things that are temporary. Paul provided several reasons Christians should seek things above.

- We have died to sin, yet we are alive in Christ
- We have been raised, therefore, we should seek things where Christ is

- When Christ appears, we will appear with Him

Earlier, Paul wrote, “You have been filled in Him.” God’s “fullness” is in Jesus, and those who place their trust in Him are “filled in Christ.” Therefore, the Church has everything it needs in Christ. We have died, yet we are alive in Him. Christ has been raised, therefore, seek heavenly things (where He is). We will be raised like Him, and appear with Him. The true path to spiritual maturity is holding fast to Jesus Christ, not following misguided human rules.

There is a real danger for the church. When we focus too much on man made things that we claim are in the name of Christ, rather than being secure in Jesus Christ, we may miss our purpose or fail in what God has called us to do. There is no other source of strength for anyone in the Church than Jesus Christ. This means that whatever growth we have, it is because of our connection to Christ. Also, without Christ, any growth the Church may have would be misdirected. We want to be growing toward the right things and in the right way. The goal is to grow with God’s growth. Any spiritual growth without Christ is false spirituality.

## **Conclusion**

This passage should not be thought of saying “all things” are acceptable to do. Such as saying we can eat, drink, and do anything. Certainly, Scripture declares certain things “off limits” to the child of God. The next passage in Colossians speaks to some of this. What Paul has in mind in our passage today is man made rules that tell us to do certain things in order to be closer to God or even declared right before God. Setting up human rules to make one righteous will only lead to failure. When it comes to being spiritual, one must accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and give complete control to the Holy Spirit to make you in the image of Jesus Christ. While certain things may be wise to do, for the sake of another member of the church, or for our own personal faith, they are not requirements for being declared righteous with God. Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture declares that true life is found only in Jesus Christ. It is found in Christ alone. We are made alive in Him. Jesus has not only given us eternal life, but He has given us spiritual life here. Satan does not want you to have. He desires to distract the church, to see the church not fulfill her mission. He desires to see you live an unfulfilled life, to get you off track and off the mission of the Church. The challenge for us is to rest in the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ. We must trust Him and trust His Word. We must be focused on following Jesus and fulfilling the mission and purpose of this church – to make more followers of Jesus. May it be so! Amen!