

Philosophy & Legalism

Colossians 2

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**BIG BEND
BIBLE
FELLOWSHIP**

Colossians 2:1-10 – Not Philosophy but Christ

For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

⁴ Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. ⁵ For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. ⁶ As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, ⁷ rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. ⁸ Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; ¹⁰ and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

v1 – What do you think was the great conflict did Paul had for the Colossians?

Paul described his spiritual warfare and heartfelt care for the Colossians as a great conflict.

Why had the Colossians not seen Paul's face?

Apparently, Paul had never visited Colossae himself. Most of the Colossian Christians had never seen his face in the flesh. Even as Paul's authority extended to those he had never met — to those who had never seen his face — so it also extends to us.

v2 – What goal did Paul have for his letter to Colossae?

That their hearts may be encouraged: Paul wanted this because he was concerned about their enthusiasm. He knew that discouraged, downcast Christians are easy prey for the world, the flesh, and the devil.

What does it mean to be encouraged?

The word he uses is *paraklein*. Sometimes that word means to comfort, sometimes to exhort, but always at the back of

it there is the idea of enabling a person to meet some difficult situation with confidence and gallantry.

Why is encouragement so important?

Being knit together in love: Paul wanted the Colossians to be encouraged because he was concerned about their unity. The unity wouldn't come from coercion, but love.

What does encouragement, unity and love result in?

Attaining to all riches of the full assurance of the understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery: Paul wanted this because he was concerned about their understanding. He knew that their unity and steadfastness was not just a matter of love, but also of growing together in God's truth.

How is unity achieved?

Paul knew that their unity came from not only love, but also from the truth, from both being knit together in love and growing in the understanding and knowledge of God's truth.

- The true wisdom Paul wanted them to know in Jesus would bring them together — indeed, knit them together in love — instead of dividing them the way that false wisdom did.

Is “full assurance” about the truth of God possible?

Yes, God wants us to have eternal security. He is the one who saves us; our salvation is not a matter of our performance which would be salvation-by-works.

- Great freedom and confidence comes when we come to this full assurance.

What is the knowledge of the mystery of God?

Paul uses the term regarding the character and person of God — something we could not know unless it was revealed by Him.

What was the mystery of Christ?

That God Himself would personally make it possible for our sins to be forgiven by paying our sin penalty for us. Old Testament saints had faith in God's grace but didn't know that it would be the Messiah who would be the One to make it possible for our sins to be forgiven.

What are the three mysteries described in Colossians 1:24 through 2:3?

- The Church as the Body of Christ, for which Paul suffered and served (1:24-26).
- The Indwelling Christ, the hope of glory in each individual believer (1:27).
- The Revealed Jesus, the treasury of all wisdom and knowledge (2:2-3).

v3 – What is hidden in Christ?

Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge: This is an important idea in Paul's letter to the Colossians. With this, Paul refuted some of the bad teaching troubling the Colossian Christians. They were influenced by teachers who told them to seek the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, but not to seek them in Jesus.

Does the treasures of wisdom and knowledge being hidden mean they are concealed?

No, but rather that they are laid up or stored away as a treasure. The word hidden is Greek word *apokruphos* was aimed at the Gnostics who believed that a great mass of elaborate knowledge was necessary for salvation. That knowledge they set down in their books which they called *apokruphos* because they were barred to the ordinary man.

v4 – How can people be deceived with persuasive words?

Deceivers won't announce their doctrine as false, and it will often be similar enough to the truth to be dangerous.

- The lure of "hidden" and "deep" wisdom and knowledge can be both strong and deceptive.

v5 – How was Paul with the Colossians in spirit?

Paul's sense of being spiritually present with his absent friends could be extraordinarily strong and vivid. Another remarkable example is found in 1 Corinthians 5:3-5, where he speaks of himself as present in spirit at a church meeting in Corinth when he was resident in Ephesus.

What did Paul rejoice in?

Rejoicing to see your good order: Continuing with the thought from the previous verse, Paul did not see a Colossian church that was given over to heresy. They were under serious danger, but they were still in good order and displayed the steadfastness of their faith.

- The words order and steadfastness are both military words. He sees the situation of the Colossians as being like an army under attack and affirms that their lines were unbroken, their discipline intact, and their 'faith in Christ' unshaken.

v6 – What great admonition for Christian living is given here?

As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him: Just as you received Jesus, walk in Him in the same way. The simple things of the Christian life provide continual and reliable spiritual fuel for growth.

What does it mean to 'receive' Christ?

The verb was specifically employed to denote the receiving of something which was delivered by tradition. This should prove a sufficient safeguard against following the 'tradition of men' (Colossians 2:8).

v7 – How is it possible to be both rooted in Christ and walking in Him?

This is a curious combination of metaphors. As Christians, we walk, but we are also rooted, and we are also built up. While the metaphors are mixed, the message is clear: be established and keep growing.

v8 – What is philosophy?

The study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline.

Where do people generally believe knowledge comes from?

- Science – scientism
- Experience – empiricism
- Human reasoning – rationalism

What are the limits to these sources of knowledge?

Since they are limited by mortal human perception, they are limited to this physical universe and thus fall short of helping with the ultimate reality and existence.

- For that, and to even authenticate worldly wisdom, we need the revelation of God.

How can we be cheated through philosophy?

The false teaching among the Colossians was marked by an emphasis on philosophy and empty deceit. Most of all, it was according to the tradition of men. It had the stamp of man on it, not God.

- The phrase "cheat you" is actually, "lead you away as prey." It also had the ideas of robbing and plundering.

Why is philosophy so deceptive?

It seems highly intelligent and wise since it resonates with human reasoning but it is still vain speculation.

How do we know the Colossian heresy included Gnosticism?

- Gnosticism taught that God (as a Perfect Spirit) could not come into direct contact with the material world. Paul pointed out that Jesus is God, and He came in a body of flesh (Colossians 1:19-22).
- Gnosticism taught that since God could not have direct contact with the material world, and thus did not create the world, but worked through lesser spirits or angels. Paul showed that Jesus was the Creator (Col 1:15-16).
- Gnosticism (and some Jewish mystics) taught that God did not deal directly with man and the material world, but worked through mediators. Paul showed that Jesus did the work of reconciliation Himself (Col 1:19-20).
- Gnosticism (and some Jewish mystics) greatly esteemed the supposed mediators considering them angelic beings. Paul was careful to warn the Colossians that angels should not be worshipped (Colossians 2:18).

How else do we know the Colossian heresy included Jewish mysticism?

- Jewish influence on Christianity emphasized dietary laws. Paul said that Christians were not under Jewish dietary laws (Colossians 2:16).
- Jewish influence on Christianity emphasized the observance of particular days as an obligation. Paul said that Christians were not under these obligations (Colossians 2:16).

How was the Colossian heresy a tradition of men?

It could trace its ideas back to traditions of the Jews or Greek philosophers. Such sources have no equal authority equal to the word of God.

What were the basic principles of the world?

The Greek word for *basic principles* is *stoicheia* which came to also refer to basic elements such as earth, water, air, and fire.

- Many ancient mystery religions considered the world as a dangerous place, threatened by spirits or spiritual forces they called elements or elemental forces (such as Paul uses the word in Colossians 2:8 and 2:20). They thought one was protected from them by worshipping them or some greater spiritual power.

How does the Eastern Mystic concept of “karma” apply here?

Common to both Jews and pagans was the basic idea of cause and effect and in a sense, it rules nature and the minds of men. We live under the idea that we get what we deserve; when we are good, we deserve to receive good; when we are bad, we deserve to receive bad.

- Paul warned the Colossians to not subject themselves to this grace-eliminating kind of thinking, and to consider themselves dead to it.

What human philosophies (or world views) are a problem today?

The “Big 3” – Naturalism, Humanism, and Universalism.

v9 – What does it mean that in Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead?

This is a dramatic, airtight declaration of the full Deity of Jesus. Since all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Jesus, He cannot be a halfway God or a junior god.

Why is the term *Godhead* used rather than simply *God*?

The term *Godhead* implies the triunity of God, that Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity having the same nature as the Father but with humanity added.

Why did Paul make it clear that all the fullness of the Godhead was in Jesus bodily?

He is saying that Jesus did not have the nature of the Godhead in some strange, mystical sense as the Gnostics believed because they made a radical separation between the spiritual and the material.

- A false teaching related to this in the early church was called Docetism, which claimed that Jesus had no actual human body; He only seemed to have one.
- Another false teaching was called Cerinthianism, and it said that “Jesus the man” was separate and distinct from “the Spirit of Christ.”

v10 – How does our being *complete in Christ* reinforce His deity?

This can only be true because Jesus is truly God. If He were not God, we couldn’t be complete in Him.

- Anything that says we are not complete in Him also takes away from the deity of Jesus.
- Paul says that being complete in Him is a fact to be enjoyed, not a status to be achieved.

What is the significance of pointing out that Christ is the head of all principality and power?

The terms, principality and power describe ranks of angelic beings, either faithful or fallen (Romans 8:38, Ephesians 1:21, Ephesians 3:10, Ephesians 6:12).

- This declares Jesus’ authority over all spirit beings.
- The Colossian Heresy emphasized these lesser spirit beings, but Jesus is far above them.

Colossians 2:11-23 – Not Legalism but Christ

¹¹ *In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. ¹³ And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, ¹⁴ having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. ¹⁵ Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. 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.*

v11 – How is it the Colossian believers were circumcised?

Most of the Colossian Christians were Gentiles who had never been physically circumcised. Paul assures them that they were indeed circumcised in a spiritual sense, which is even more important than physical circumcision.

Why do you think Paul had to address circumcision?

Apparently, they were being taught that they had to be circumcised to be right with God. Paul makes it clear that they were circumcised, by putting off the sins of the flesh.

What is spiritual circumcision?

This means putting off of the old man. The Greek word for ‘putting off’, a double compound, denotes both stripping off and casting away. The imagery is that of a piece of filthy clothing.

v12 – How was circumcision related to baptism?

By the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism: Paul says these Gentile Christians find their true

circumcision in their baptism. Christians don’t need to be circumcised; they need to be baptized as a public profession of faith in Christ.

- Even the Old Testament acknowledges that there is a circumcision of the body and of the heart (Deut 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25; Ezekiel 44:7, 44:9). Baptism shows that “circumcision of the heart” has taken place.

How does baptism illustrate our identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus?

We were buried with Jesus by being buried under the water. We are also raised with Him by being raised up out of the water.

Does the connection between circumcision and baptism here mean that babies should be baptized?

Some use this passage to make that case, but this presses Paul’s analogy between circumcision and baptism too far and neglects examples of baptism in the Book of Acts.

- Paul doesn’t say that circumcision and baptism are the same thing, but that circumcision is unnecessary for salvation because we are identified in Jesus and we are baptized to show that.

What is the role of baptism in a person’s regeneration?

Through faith in the working of God: Paul understood that the power of regeneration was not received by the act of baptism, but received through faith in the working of God.

v13 – How is it the Colossians were dead?

This is the condition of everyone before we are born again by God through faith in Jesus. Before we have new life, we are spiritually dead.

- A sick person may need a doctor, but a dead person needs a Savior.

What makes people without Christ spiritually dead?

Being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh: Before we have new life in Jesus, we are dead in our trespasses. A trespass is a specific kind of sin: overstepping a boundary. We are dead because we overstep God’s boundaries in our sin and rebellion.

How is it God made us *alive together with Him*?

We can’t make ourselves alive, but God can make us alive together with Jesus. We can never be made alive apart from Jesus.

- The new birth (made alive) and cleansing (forgiven you all) go together as features of the New Covenant, as prophesied by the Old Testament (Ezekiel 36:25-27) and the New Testament (John 3:5).
- Having forgiven us is the ancient Greek word *charizomai* — a verb form of the ancient Greek word *charis* (grace). We are forgiven by grace.

v14 – What is the handwriting of requirements that was against us?

The handwriting of requirements has in mind a list of our crimes or moral debt before God, a debt that no imperfect person can completely pay. But it can be taken out of the way, by payment from a perfect man, Jesus Christ.

- Some take it in a legal sense representing the charges against a prisoner.
- Others take it in a financial sense and see it as a debit or ledger sheet showing we are bankrupt before God.

What does it tell us that the record against us was nailed to the cross?

Jesus not only paid for the writing that was against us; He also took it out of the way. He made certain that the handwriting against us could no longer accuse us.

What does this remind us of that was also nailed to the cross besides Jesus Himself?

The accusations of Jesus' crime were nailed to the cross and hung above His head (Matthew 27:37). Since we are identified with Jesus in His death on the cross, it is as if the handwriting of requirements against us was also nailed to the cross, just like the accusation against Jesus.

v15 – How did Jesus' work on the cross disarm principalities and powers?

These ranks of hostile angelic beings don't have the same weapons to use against Christians that they have against those who are not in Jesus.

- The paradox of the cross is that Jesus triumphed over the spiritual powers animating the earthly powers that condemned Him to the cross.

If both the spiritual powers of darkness and their earthly proxies had known what would happen on the cross, they would have never crucified Jesus...

1 Corinthians 2:8 – *none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory*

They were defeating themselves and they didn't even know it (true useful idiots).

What weapons do demonic spirits now have against the believer?

They are disarmed, except for their ability to deceive and to create fear. Demonic spirits only have power towards us that we grant them by believing their lies.

- The weapons are in our hands, not theirs. We will one-day see how afraid they were of us.

v16 – Why shouldn't the judgment of others affect us?

So let no one judge you: Because Jesus won such a glorious victory on the cross, we are to let no one judge us in matters related to legalism.

v17 – What value was the Law after the cross of Christ?

The Old Testament law had certain provisions that are done away with in Jesus, regarding such things as food and sabbaths. It isn't that those laws were bad, simply that they were a shadow of things to come. Once the substance, Jesus Christ, had come, we don't need to shadow any more.

Does observing the Law make us closer to God?

Christians are free to keep a kosher diet or to observe the sabbath if they please. However, they cannot think that eating kosher or sabbath observance makes them any closer to God, and they cannot judge another brother or sister who does not observe such laws.

v18 – How can we be cheated of our reward in heaven?

Taking delight in false humility and worship of angels: The worship of angels among the Colossians was false humility as well as the false teaching. The antidote for both of these errors is simply more of Jesus, exalting Him above angels.

Why would people worship angels instead of the Creator?

The heretics probably insisted that their worship of angels rather than the supreme God was an expression of humility on their part.

What does it mean to be vainly puffed up by a fleshly mind?

This describes the spiritual arrogance of these false teachers and those who believed what they taught. There are few things more dangerous among Christians than spiritual pride and arrogance.

What was the problem with focusing on those things which he has not seen?

The Gnostic prided himself upon the special visions of secret things which were not open to the eyes of ordinary men and women.

v19 – How did the Gnostics stand out as being in error?

From whom all the body: When these strange, mystical movements arise in the church, they don't appeal to the whole body, but only to a few "elite" Christians. God wants all the body to grow together.

How does the body of Christ grow?

Grows with the increase which is from God: This is God's plan for church growth. We remain faithful and connected to Jesus (our Head), and God gives the increase.

v20 – What is the problem with legalism?

It compromises with the world's basic principles and subjects people to human rules and judgment.

v21-22 – What characterizes legalistic religion?

Do not... do not... do not: It is defined more by what we don't do than by what we do. Christianity is a moral religion; it does have clear moral boundaries. But at its foundation, Christianity is a religion of positive action.

What is the key to living above legalism?

You died with Christ from the basic principles of the world: Our identification with Jesus in both His death and resurrection becomes the foundation for our Christian life, instead of our law-keeping which is salvation-by-works.

How do the legalistic “do-nots” *perish with the using?*

These things come to an end in being used. Food, once eaten, ceases to be food. These are not the things that matter most; these are not the ultimate realities.

How is legalism characterized by *doctrines of men?*

One aspect of legalism is that the doctrines of men are promoted as the laws of God.

v23 – How is legalism of *no value against the indulgence of the flesh?*

All legalistic rules may have an appearance of wisdom, but they don't restrain the flesh; it feeds the flesh in a subtle, powerful way.

- The most rigorous asceticism can coexist with insufferable spiritual pride, one of the subtlest and most intractable of the 'works of the flesh.'
- asceticism – severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons

What is the difference between human religion and biblical Christianity?

Self-imposed religion is man reaching to God, trying to justify himself by keeping a list of rules. Christianity is God reaching down to man in love through Christ.

- Do & not-do versus done

What applications come to mind from our discussion?

- Don't be deceived by human philosophies... weigh everything against the biblical world-view of Christ
- Truth is encouraging... share it in love.
- God wants us to have full assurance (aka eternal security) ... anything less is a deception and salvation-by-works
- Legalism is salvation-by-works... it is spiritually deadly