

KEEPING THE TRUTH

Colossians 2:8-23

We are constantly bombarded with ideas about how things should work. It is most evident nowadays in the socioeconomic area where we hear well-meaning people advocating that we provide financial help to everyone who makes a request. We have people who have expanded our rights from “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” to include free health care and taxpayer-funded abortions and gender altering operations. Because we live in such a secular society, we don’t hear a lot of ideas that are related to alternative religions even though they are around and available.

Many times I find myself hearing someone advocating for a particular point of view and I will think something to the effect, “I can see that – that is reasonable.” Even when we hear an opposing point of view, we might also think “I can see that – that is reasonable.” The problem is that you can’t have it both ways. Many times we don’t get all the facts, we don’t think through the probable outcomes and the unintended consequences and we wind up missing the truth or the best approach or route that we should take.

In the case of the truth of the gospel message, we need to be diligent to hold on to that truth and not drift off into some alternate interpretation that sounds good on the surface. We really need to be able to **recognize** truth and to recognize error. We also should be careful to **remember** where we were and what we believed prior to salvation and not drift back into the thought patterns and behaviors that characterized that time in our life. We need to **resist** the tendency to add a lot of “religious” stuff to the simple truth of the gospel message. Finally, we should **refuse** to be involved in the superstitions and folk lore that are part of the culture in which we live.

Recognize - 2:8-12

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. ⁹ For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, ¹⁰ and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; ¹¹ and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; ¹² having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. Colossians 2:8-12 (NASB95)

It is possible for Christians to be sidetracked or “taken captive” by philosophies based on human experience. The Christian life is a supernatural life. A. W. Tozer said “if you can explain a Christian experience on the basis of psychology, you’ve got a good church member, but you haven’t got a born-again Christian.” The problem is not that people have philosophy but they have philosophy based on the wrong thing. Philosophy asks the question “What is reality?” and seeks to understand it. To simply accept the traditions men have built up as the basis for truth and not turn to the Source of all truth is poor philosophy.

The church is under attack by Satan and one of his best tools is our own pride in the fact that we are human beings. For some reason many people think they know more than God does. People want to make up their own rules and develop their own explanations and create their own value system. We develop theories of how the universe began that take more "faith" to accept than the Genesis account. We propose theories and teach them for truth regarding evolution, not just within species, but from one species to another. This again takes more faith to accept than the simple statement that God created each "according to its kind." The various kinds of dogs probably did evolve from other dogs but dogs did not evolve from frogs and man did not evolve from monkeys. Such things are the humanistic traditions of men. We also need to guard against

acceptance of such beliefs as is implied in such terminology as "mother earth." (In the current news we see an effort by some to give "mother earth" the same legal rights as human beings - whatever that means.) We cannot afford to "buy into" the false religious ideas that the constellations of stars influence our lives. Our philosophy of life must be based only on the revelation of Jesus Christ Who is "God revealed to mankind in the flesh" and as revealed by God's indwelling presence (the Holy Spirit) that Jesus is God's only provision for salvation. Jesus really is **all we need**.

We can find teaching today that Jesus was only one of a series of Messiahs that have come on the world scene throughout its history. This error was around in Paul's day and was being promoted by the Gnostics who claimed that they had "special knowledge." They taught that each of these Messiahs is necessary as part of the revelation of God. Paul countered such ideas when he stated that in Jesus Christ we find the full and ultimate revelation of God and we can find our completeness in Him.

Many of the world's religions do not recognize a Supreme Being God but have a variety of local deities to which they relate. Paul argued that of all spiritual beings, we should not attempt to deal with anything less than the ultimate head of all things, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the head of all principalities and power.

Sometimes we tend to think of false teaching as more of a problem in the time of the early church and that most of the error was coming from other religions and weird humanistic philosophies and that we are too sophisticated today to be deceived by false teachings. As a consequence we tend to let down our guard with regard to new ideas that spring up in Christian culture. There is a battle going on now with regard to a new version of the old error of universalism. There are books being published and churches being taught that there is no hell. The idea of there being a hell does not fit their understanding of who God is and they then make a god for themselves that matches their belief system. This is just a more sophisticated version of idolatry – creating their own god but without the graven images that used to be done by more primitive cultures.

It is very difficult for a person who has grown up in a religious system that is based on observances of rites and rituals to not put their trust in these things. In Paul's day, some Jews insisted that the Gentiles had to practice the Jewish rituals and ceremonial rules to be saved. In these few verses, Paul shows that the law and the ordinances were only a foreshadowing of the spiritual reality revealed in Christ. The practice of circumcision was a foreshadowing of the work of the cross in that the fleshly nature is put away. Just as the rituals and ceremonies looked forward to the reality of the work of the cross, baptism (literally, immersion) for new converts looks back on this same reality and is symbolic of a fuller picture that we have put off the fleshly nature (died with Christ), we are buried with Christ and raised to new life. In the same way that some Jews thought there was efficacy in the rituals and ceremonies, there are people today who believe that you have to be baptized to be saved.

Remember - 2:13-15

¹³ When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, ¹⁴ having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. ¹⁵ When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. Colossians 2:13-15 (NASB95)

Paul continued with his explanation of how the cross was effective in accomplishing the work of salvation in the lives of individual Christians. The starting point for every person who is of Adam's race is that they are dead. This death is not of a corporeal (or physical) nature, even though the body is literally dying and does not have the inherent nature to live eternally. The

death that Paul is writing about is a moral death in that each is alienated from God Who is the life Source.

There are two reasons for this alienation and separation from God and these are summed up in the words or concepts of “transgressions” and “uncircumcision of your flesh.” We understand transgressions to be the thoughts we think, the words we speak and the actions we take that are contrary to the will and purposes of God. In other words, these are the sins we commit. The phrase “uncircumcision of your flesh” is a euphemism for the old sin nature that we “inherited” from Adam. This means that we were dead because of SINS and because of SIN. The bottom line is that, even if we had never committed a sinful act, we would still be dead because of our heritage in Adam.

The remedy for this “death” is not something that a person can do for himself. Just as someone who needs CPR cannot give CPR to himself, a person who is dead in transgressions and the “uncircumcision of his flesh” is not capable of infusing life to himself. Since we could not do this in our own strength and by our own resources, God (in His grace and mercy) did it for us. He did two things. The first was that he gave us new life which addresses the “old sin nature” part of the cause of the dead condition that we were in. The only way to gain this new life is to die to the old life and be raised to the new life which is pictured in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Jesus told Nicodemus that “you must be born again.” The second thing that was done was to address the other part of the reason we were dead and that is the issue of “transgressions” or sins. The remedy for that is “forgiveness.”

Forgiveness is pictured as destroying an IOU that we had signed and given to God as a result of committing sins. This IOU is referred to by Paul as the “certificate of debt” which was a listing of the penalties we owed as a result of sins in our lives. What is the penalty for sinning? In Ezra 18:4 and 18:20 we see “the soul that sinneth, it shall die.” Since Christ became “sin for us” and He was nailed to the cross, then Paul concluded that the certificate of debt had been nailed to the cross. Since the cross is an instrument of death, then the IOUs have been eliminated (taken out of the way) in or by the work of the cross.

In the dual acts of eliminating (putting to death) the Adamic nature and replacing it with a new (born again) nature that is characteristics of the Second Adam (Christ) and then canceling out the IOUs that were against (hostile to) us, God took away the ammunition (disarmed) the powers and principalities used to hold us in slavery or under their dominion. In effect, the cross event (death, burial and resurrection) was a public display of the victory God had accomplished in Christ.

Another way to state this is that in the Resurrection, we see the open triumph of Christ over all powers and principalities and every false way. Christ demonstrated His superiority to all other means and philosophies by His death and resurrection. All those who identify with Christ Jesus in His death are dead to the power and penalty of sin but are alive to righteousness. We are, therefore, partakers in the victory that Jesus accomplished.

If we know these things to be true – that is, if we have the doctrine of theology correct, then there are practical implications of applying truth to our everyday life experiences. We live life at the intersection of Physical Street and Spiritual Avenue and the life events that express themselves in our emotions, our intellect and our wills are plaited together in our actions that help define who we are to those who observe us. Paul addressed two general areas that affect our actions. The first is related to religious beliefs and practices and the second is related to superstitions that are prevalent in the culture. We are to resist the pressures of letting our lives be controlled by religious-based rituals that are only representative of the reality or substance. Also we are to refuse to let superstitions dictate what we do or avoid doing.

Resist - 2:16-19

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. Colossians 2:16-19 (NASB95)

Since we are free in the “all sufficiency” of Jesus, we do not have to be entangled in the rules that men have set up to observe certain days, or do certain rites and rituals or to eat only certain kinds of food. We do not venerate the dead saints or put our trust in angels and assign great powers to them. Instead we are to look to Jesus as not only necessary but totally sufficient for all of life. Our salvation does not depend on whether we eat or don’t eat certain foods, observe or not observe certain holidays or even which day of the week we set aside as a day of rest to honors and worship God. Our salvation is centered in Christ Jesus and the fact that we acknowledge Him to be Lord of our lives in word and deed.

Apparently some of the false teachers were relying on some special religious experience or a vision they had or claimed they had and used this as a basis for their authority rather than relying on the authority that comes simply from being called by God to fulfill the ministry to which they are sent to do. The false teachers were really serious about keeping all sorts of rules, being careful to observe certain practices, showing excessive humility (some people are proud of how humble they are), observing all the right rites and rituals and any number of “religious” based practices. Do such things still happen today? What are some things that people do that are sources of spiritual pride for themselves and things that are used to create guilt in others who might not be so “religious?” [Make a list of things you find yourself doing in an effort to demonstrate that you are righteous. It is fairly easy to spot such practices in others but not in ourselves.]

Refuse - 2:20-23

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. Colossians 2:20-23 (NASB95)

In addition to the religious rules that influence our lives, there are more basic “rules” that have grown up in most cultures that we are cautioned to never violate. We might find that we should avoid the number 13 because it is supposed to be unlucky. The next time you go to a hotel in a large city, see if you can find the 13th floor. Have you ever owned a rabbit’s foot? What goes through your mind when a black cat crosses your path? What about the concern that some have over a broken mirror?

These taboos and superstitions are elementary principles of the world and we are not to observe these or be influence by them since we are not part of the “world system.” In some areas of the world, the superstitions and the religious practices are difficult to separate and appear to be intermingled. Some groups may practice cutting themselves or walking on hot coals or lying on a bed of nails as a way to bring their bodies into submission. Paul’s conclusion was that such practices do nothing to curb the appetites of the flesh. The solution to that issue was addressed in the work of the cross by which we have died to all these influences of man-made religions and traditions.

There is a hymn that states it so well, “He’s all I need, Jesus is all I need.”