

Gospel Prime – The Preeminence of Christ in Colossians

Gospel Liberty: Shadows and Substance (Colossians 2:16-23)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on November 10, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ Today's passage brings to mind Plato's famous allegory of the cave. When Paul uses the imagery of shadow and substance in v17, he very well could've have been drawing from Plato's work, which preceded him by a few centuries. **If you remember back to your college philosophy class, you'll recall that in Plato's allegory, he describes prisoners who are trapped in a cave from birth.** The inside of the cave is all the reality they've ever known.
 - He describes them as being chained in such a way that they can only face the back wall of the cave, and behind them is a fire burning. And between the prisoners and the fire, someone is holding up objects that cast a shadow on the back wall. So they see the shadow of a rock or tree or dog or fellow person. And from these shadows, the prisoners develop all types of stories and theories and philosophies of life. They form realities based on the shadows they see on the wall. Not realizing that they're only illusions of real objects – of the substance – the real rock, the real tree, the real dog, the real person.

- ❖ Now in Plato's allegory, there's one prisoner who is freed, and he exits the cave to see the reality for the first time. **He sees the substance – and not merely the shadow – of a rock or tree.** And he goes back to the cave and tries to convince his fellow prisoners that they've constructed a reality based on shadows. But he has an extremely difficult time convincing anyone.
 - Now in Paul's situation, it's a bit different. When he writes to the Colossians, he's not writing to a bunch of people still imprisoned – still chained and immobilized with their faces glued to a back wall. No, he's writing to Christians who have been liberated. Freed from the chains of sin and condemnation. They've seen the substance who is Christ.
 - And yet they're under the influence of false teaching and being tempted to walk back into the cave to subject themselves to mere shadows. Paul can't believe their willingness to entertain shadows when they've already experienced the substance.

- ❖ But this is where we are in the book of Colossians. Paul began in chapter one arguing for the supremacy of Christ over all things. Because here in chapter two he's building off that in order to argue for the sufficiency of Christ over all salvation. The presenting problem in this book is that a false teacher has been influencing the Colossian church – **teaching that having a relationship with Jesus is crucial but not enough.** If you want to experience the fullness of God in salvation, you need to depend on Jesus and maintain some system of spirituality that was being advocated.

- ❖ **As we've seen in the last few weeks, Paul has been making a sustained argument that Christ is a sufficient Savior** – that faith in Christ is truly all you need to grow in godliness and experience the fullness of salvation. In today's passage, the emphasis on Christ being a sufficient Savior is still there, but we're given a closer look at the falsehoods being taught. Commentators still aren't sure how to classify the false teaching with any known ancient cult, but there are a few clear indicators, in our text, that demonstrates what was being taught.
 - **I'd like to look at three aspects of the false teaching and to consider their appeal.** The Colossians were drawn into falsehood by three things. First, they were drawn by a devotion to law-keeping. Second, they were drawn by a pursuit of mystical experiences. Third, they were drawn by a commitment to severe self-discipline.

Drawn by a Devotion to Law-Keeping

- ❖ Let's consider how we can be drawn into falsehood by a devotion to law-keeping. **This is the appeal of legalism.** And we see it emphasized in v16. *"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath."*
- ❖ The singular relative pronoun in v16 and the singular masculine pronoun in v18 suggests that there was at least one primary false teacher influencing the Colossians. **And apparently he was passing judgment on believers – judging them to be unacceptable before God unless they abided by OT laws regarding ceremonial cleanliness.**
 - There were particular laws in the Torah that regulated whether a person was considered clean or unclean, particularly in regards to temple worship. They typically had to do with dietary restrictions and the observances of annual holidays and a weekly Sabbath day rest. If you maintain these practices – you kept these laws – you would remain clean. But failure to observe these laws would leave you unclean and unworthy to approach God in worship until you subjected yourself to ritual cleansing and sacrifice.
- ❖ Now that was standard practice for the people of God under the Old Covenant. But for God's people – under a New Covenant inaugurated by Christ and his sacrifice on the cross – we're liberated from these laws regulating ceremonial cleanliness. There are no kosher laws for Christians. There are no Sabbath regulations binding on us by law.
 - And yet, here you have a mostly Gentile church so ready to let someone pass judgment and subject them to these OT laws, even though it wasn't part of their upbringing or culture. Why were they so willing? **What's so appealing about legalism?**
- ❖ Just think about it. **Legalism makes things so much simpler.** Just tell me what to do. How to conduct myself. How to behave. It's so much simpler and straightforward when your acceptability (worthiness) is based on external conformity to rules.
 - Because examining your heart is hard work. **Discerning your heart motives is not easy.** If we can avoid that altogether – if we can just focus on actions, on behavior, on questions of food and drink, new moons and a Sabbath – it makes Christianity simpler. It's easier to avoid ingesting unclean foods than to avoid internalizing unclean thoughts. It's easier to avoid doing work for a whole day than to find true rest in God.
 - This is why legalism is a perennial problem for Christians. **Our fleshly instinct is to avoid dealing with heart issues and to gravitate towards law-keeping** – placing our hope and confidence on how well we keep the rules. It's easier to measure. It's easier to compare.
- ❖ But look at v17, *"These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."* **Paul's point is that these ceremonial laws are mere shadows that point to Christ.** When they were first given, the laws showed how to be acceptable to worship God in his temple. Assuming the temple to be a physical place.

- ❖ **But by the time you get to the NT, the idea of the temple as a place recedes into the background and is replaced with the temple as a person.** Christ is presented as the new temple where the fullness of God's dwells. If you want to worship God – if you want to be in his presence – you go to Jesus. You enter – not a building – but a relationship with Christ and you're suddenly clean. You're acceptable to worship God.
 - And now that the substance can be seen clearly in full light – the shadows are receding. So why would you still bother with ceremonial laws? **Why would you bother with shadows when you're standing in front of the substance?**

- ❖ Picture this scenario with me. **Imagine a husband long separated from his long-lost love.** For all these years, the only thing he has to remember her by is a worn-out photo. A photo he keeps neatly folded, in his pocket, close to his chest. It's a photo he looks at longingly every night.
 - Now let's imagine if this man is finally reunited with his beloved wife. **Wouldn't you consider it strange if he finally has her by his side – but for some reason he keeps stealing glances at his worn-out photo?** Wouldn't it be strange if he spends more time staring at his beloved photo instead of staring into the actual eyes of his beloved wife?

- ❖ **But that's exactly what the people of God do when we mistreat the OT law – when we treat the law as the substance of the matter.** These ceremonial laws should be beloved and revered, but, like the worn-out photo, they've served their purpose. **Now that we have the substance – now that we have Christ – we can put those laws aside.**

- ❖ But, of course, it's easier said than done. Because law-keeping is so instinctive to us. **Legalism is our bent.** Maybe you've never considered yourself a legalist. Maybe you're so new to Christianity that you're not even sure which laws in the Bible should tempt you towards legalism. But, in the end, we all have legalistic tendencies. We're all legalists in the flesh.
 - And here's how you can tell: **Consider that nagging feeling you often feel – like you're living under a microscope.** Like your always being observed and evaluated. You feel like you're constantly under trial. You're being cross-examined. Everything you do or say is providing evidence – either for the prosecution or the defense. And some days you feel like you're winning the trial. Other days you feel like you're losing. It never seems to end.

- ❖ But Paul has the answer. **The open secret is to remember that, in Christ, the trial is over.** Judgment has been passed – on Christ, on the cross. We saw Paul say that last week in the verses immediately prior to our passage. He said Jesus cancelled “*the record of debt that stood against us*” – our sin debt – by nailing it to the cross (2:14). **Jesus lived the righteous life we should've lived. And he died the death for sin that we should've died.** And now the verdict of God is in. You've been declared righteous and forgiven if you've hidden yourself in the Righteous One.
 - **Jerry Bridges speaks of there being two courts – the court of heaven and the court of the conscience.** For Christians, our trial in the court of heaven is over. When we trust in Christ for salvation, the court of heaven is satisfied. There is no condemnation in Christ. There will never be a guilty charge laid against a Christian in the court of heaven.

- ❖ But in the court of the conscience, Christians are often waylaid by feelings of guilt. We feel like we're not good enough, and there's no way God would accept us in the state we're in. This is where Christians have to live by faith and not by sight.
 - **One of the disciplines of the Christian life is preaching the gospel to yourself every day to realign what's playing out in the court of your conscience with what has already been declared in the court of heaven.** You do that by first agreeing with your conscience about your guilt and unworthiness, but then reminding yourself that Christ has borne your guilt on the cross and made you worthy by his gift of righteousness.
- ❖ Friends, the draw of legalism is strong, but the truth of the gospel is stronger. **Christians have to stop living like we're still in court.** It's just like how prisoners freed from Plato's cave need to stop crawling back into the cave – dealing with mere shadows instead of enjoying the true substance, which belongs to Christ.

Drawn by a Pursuit of Mystical Experiences

- ❖ That's the first appeal in the false teaching going around in Colossians. Legalism. **The second is the appeal of mysticism.** The Colossians we're drawn into falsehood by a pursuit of mystical experiences. We see this in v18, *“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind.”*
- ❖ Now v18 is a notoriously difficult verse to both translate and interpret. I read a lot of pages this week on this one verse. I don't want to bore you with all the different arguments. So let me give you what I think is the best explanation that best incorporates the larger context of the letter. It comes from a recent commentary by G.K. Beale.
 - He points to that phrase *“going on in detail about visions”* and goes into detail about how that is a claim of access to peer into heavenly sanctuary where God and his angels reside. The CSB translation captures that idea when it describes the false teacher as, *“claiming access to a visionary realm.”*
- ❖ So not only was this false teacher passing judgment on the Colossians for failure to keep OT ceremonial laws. He was disqualifying them (condemning them) for not pursuing the same kind of spirituality that has got him so puffed up with spiritual arrogance.
 - **Most likely he was insisting on certain ascetic practices – like extreme fasting of food and drink – in order to induce a trance-like state, conducive for experiencing ecstatic visions.** This teacher was probably claiming to have visions of a heavenly sanctuary like in Isaiah 6. That would explain the mention of angels, and there's definitely a degree of idolatry in his attitude towards those angels.
 - **But the main issue here is that this false teacher was claiming to have had a deeper, fuller experience of God through a mystical encounter.** And you would be considered disqualified – spiritually inadequate – if you can't claim the same. The pathway for spiritual growth, according to this false teaching, would necessarily include these mystical experiences.

- ❖ Now let's consider the appeal of that kind of teaching. **Why would an insistence on mystical experiences as an essential component of spiritual growth be attractive?** What's the appeal?
 - You've probably felt it yourself. For those of you who have been in the church long enough, it's so easy to get so familiar with Christ and the gospel – that we feel like moving on to something deeper. **We tend to treat the gospel like it's the ABCs of the faith** – the elementary truths that you need in the beginning – but then you're supposed to move on to deeper truths and experiences.
 - **So anytime a popular preacher or book claims to have a deeper insight or to offer a deeper experience of the faith – it appeals to our fancy for novelty.** For something new, something different. We want to experience God in ways that go beyond what we've already encountered in Scripture. We want personal visions and dreams. We want private revelations of God speaking just to us.

- ❖ **Now the concern here is *not* whether experiences like these are legitimate today.** Obviously, God has given visions of his heavenly sanctuary to people in the past like the prophet Isaiah. But whether he still does today is an entirely different question for a different sermon. Let's just focus on Paul's concern here in the text.
 - **His concern is when these deeper pathways are disconnected from Christ.** They won't lead to deeper growth if they don't lead to Christ. Look at v19. The false teacher is puffed up, *“and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.”*
 - **His point is that spiritual growth only comes from God and his grace in the gospel of Christ, the Head of the Church.** So any spiritual experience being championed that, in the end, minimizes Christ – or presents a Christ that conflicts with how he's revealed in Scripture – that experience is going to draw you further – not closer – to God.

- ❖ I realize we may not be tempted by the same forms of ancient mysticism like the Colossians, but I think we do share the same longing for novelty in our faith. **I think the big question is whether or not we truly believe that trusting in the Christ of the gospel is sufficient for growth in godliness.** Do you believe that trusting in Jesus is all you need to experience the fullness of your salvation?
 - If you go your entire Christian life never experiencing a mystical vision, never having a prophetic dream, never receiving a private revelation – if all you experience is reading your Bible, worshipping with your church, and trusting in the Jesus of the gospel preached to you week in and week out – would that be enough? Would that be sufficient? Or would you feel lesser? Would you feel spiritual inadequate?

- ❖ Friends, that's when Paul would say – don't let anyone disqualify you. **If you are in Christ – if you're holding fast to him by faith – then you're qualified.** You have all you need to grow up into spiritual fullness and maturity.

Drawn by a Commitment to Severe Self-Discipline

- ❖ So we've seen the appeal of legalism and the appeal of mysticism. **The third is the appeal of asceticism.** The Colossians were drawn into falsehood by a commitment to severe self-discipline. We see this in vv20-22, "²⁰*If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—*²¹*“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”* ²²*(referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?*"
- ❖ The false teacher was trying to subject the Colossians to certain regulations regarding what you shouldn't eat or drink and what you shouldn't do or participate in. **He was imposing on Christians a set of strict disciplines and severe methods all aimed at curbing the desires of the flesh.** It was an approach of extreme avoidance and deprivation. If you can just avoid sinful influences and deprive yourself of sinful opportunities, then you won't sin.
- ❖ Consider the appeal of this kind of commitment to severe self-discipline. **For many people who sincerely want to stop sinning, the advice to repent and believe – to trust in Jesus more – feels too simplistic and too abstract.** We feel a need to do something.
 - So when we're introduced to a highly disciplined method of dealing with sin and temptation, it's appealing because it seems to work. We've all felt the urge to sin, and we all know how strong temptation can be. **So any method of curbing our sinful desires through avoidance and deprivation seems to make a lot of sense.**
 - Don't watch those kinds of movies or shows. Don't listen to that kind of music. Don't associate with those kind of people. Avoidance and deprivation. You'd think those would be the most sensible and effective solutions.
- ❖ But Paul would disagree. **He would say that these severe methods of discipline – may appear at first to work – but they ultimately fail to deal with sin at its root.** Look at v23, "*These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*"
 - His point is that this approach to dealing with sinful desires are self-made attempts that will ultimately fail. They won't do the job. These severe methods of self-discipline appear wise at first. But they turn out to express a superficial wisdom that fails to deal with sin at its root. "*They are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*"
- ❖ **It's because our battle against sin is ultimately a matter of the heart.** In the Gospel of Mark, in chapter 7, Jesus was confronting the Pharisees who were holding to the traditions of man (Mk 7:5, 8) in their attempts to remain clean and pure of sin. It boiled down to avoidance and deprivation, particularly when it came to ceremonial washings before you ate.
 - Jesus said you're so worried about what you put in your body. **But what defiles you is not what goes in – it's what's already there.** It's the sin in your heart that defiles. "²¹*For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,* ²²*coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.* ²³*All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.*" (Mk 7:21-23)

- ❖ **All of our human efforts to deprive ourselves of opportunities to sin are merely half measures. The battle must start in the heart.** If you really think about it, avoidance and deprivation are poor solutions. Imagine if your stove malfunctions and causes a fire in your kitchen. Closing all the doors leading to your kitchen and stuffing wet towels under the cracks – won't do. Just avoiding your kitchen from now on is no solution. Your house is going to burn down. Avoidance and deprivation will only prolong the inevitable.
- ❖ Friends, you have to realize that sin burns wildly in the human heart. **So if your method of dealing with sin amounts to avoidance and deprivation – to self-imposed regulations and severe self-discipline – you'll find yourself outgunned in the fight.** Sin is burning hot in your heart, and you won't stand a chance unless you fight fire with fire.
 - Think about it this way. If you've been keeping up with the news, then you know that forest fires are a big concern right now in California. **It reminds me of how some fires are stopped by a technique called back burning.** Back burning is where firefighters intentionally start small fires along a firebreak on the path of the main fire. Once you burn away all the fuel – anything burnable – then when the main fire gets there it has nowhere to go because there's nothing to burn.
- ❖ **Christian, do you realize that in Christ you've already been burned?** You've been back burned. That's the point Paul was making in v20. He says, "*If with Christ you have died to the elemental spirits of the world,*" – if you've been burned at the cross with Christ, then why are you still trying to fight sin with asceticism? Why aren't you fighting fire with fire?
 - Just avoiding sin and depriving yourself of opportunities to sin – is not going to be enough. **If you want to stop the indulgence of the flesh – if you want to resist the burning desires of sin – then, in your heart, you have to die with Christ.** You have to identify with Christ in his death on the cross. That's what it means to be a Christian. **It means, by faith, you receive Jesus's death as your death. You've embraced the substance.**
- ❖ Friends, if you're struggling with sin and you want to stop the indulgence of your flesh, don't bother with shadows – go straight to the substance, which belongs to Christ. **Go to the gospel – to the good news that Christ was burned in your place.** Trust in that gospel, and you'll get a heart – a heart burned with Christ, refined by Christ, made new in Christ. The battle is in the heart. And the victory is in Christ.