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Col 2:16–23

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Jerry Tu

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# DANGERS OF FALSE TEACHING

*SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH*

Years ago when my daughter was still playing with dolls, I was inspired to make her a doll stand. I fell into that “do-it-yourself” mentality – DIY. “How hard can it be?” I asked myself. Realize this about me: I have zero mechanical skills. My wife can make and create just about anything, whereas my only ability to fix stuff around the house is to write a check. Anyway, I gathered up scrap pieces of wood, cardboard, and (of course) duct tape. After working earnestly at it all Saturday, I proudly got ... a jumbled mess. DIY just does not work for me, no matter how hard I try or how capable I think I am. It’s probably different for you who are good with mechanical things, but for me this mentality often distracts me from doing the right thing and becomes a waste of my time.

Do-it-yourself pervades many aspects of our lives, from homemade gifts to remodeling your own kitchen to designing your own Websites, and that’s good for the most part. However, when it comes to salvation and maturity in our faith, DIY is unwise and even detrimental to our walk. When we start adding our own efforts to our faith, mixing in the world’s offerings and unbiblical teaching, we get a jumbled mess not unlike my attempt at a doll stand.

We have been studying Paul’s letter to the Colossians in past weeks and have seen that in the midst of the Colossians, there were false teachers who were promoting DIY salvation. They taught the believers that they must earn salvation and entrance into heaven by special knowledge, performing rituals, and relying on their own efforts to make themselves mature. This was a dangerous path for those believers back then and for all of us today. What Paul warned against 2000 years ago is very relevant for us, as we are surrounded by rituals and ideas that sound legitimate but are detrimental to our walk of faith. The questions before us today are, “What traditions have been handed down to us and what things do we value in our culture that we’ve brought into our faith? “Do these help or hinder our walk?” We will consider these questions by examining Col 2:16-23.

## Structure of Passage

Before we dive into the verses, let me first present the grammatical structure of this passage to give us an overview of the important concepts.

Let no one →judge you →(based on)rituals/traditions →(because) these are only shadows

Let no one →disqualify you →(based on) human efforts →(because) these depart from Christ

The passage consists of two warnings, each containing three parts. In the first parts, Paul gives two commands: “let no one judge you” and “let no one disqualify you,” referring to the false teachers. Then in the second parts, Paul gives the criteria upon which the false teachers may judge or disqualify you. They judge based on adherence to traditions; they insist on human effort. Finally, Paul explains why these teachings are misguided: because the traditions are only shadows, and the human efforts depart from Christ and are unbiblical. With this overview in mind, let’s explore each warning

individually: what they meant to the Colossians and how they apply to us today.

## Warning 1: Traditions and Rituals

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Col 2:16-17)

I love Paul’s use of word pictures to illustrate his points. The first word picture Paul uses is that of a court room in which the false teachers are judges pronouncing the Colossians guilty because they did not abide by strict laws. These are the laws given in the Torah: Leviticus 11 prescribes clean and unclean foods; Leviticus 23 and Numbers 28 describe the yearly festivals, monthly new moon celebrations, and keeping the weekly Sabbath. All of these traditions have at their core a desire to remain holy, to remember God’s goodness, to rest and trust Him every year, month, and week. All of these were appropriate in their time, but when they are done legalistically without “heart,” then they are empty rituals. Paul explains in Romans 14:5-6, 10:

**One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God...You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? (Rom. 14:5-6, 10.)**

It is clear that if you live your life to the Lord, you need not feel judged by other people based on compliance with traditions or rituals. You are no longer bound by these laws. Paul uses a second word picture to describe laws: they are a shadow, not reality. Jesus on the cross is the reality; He is illumined by the Father for the world to see. Lying low behind Him and pointing toward Him is the unsubstantial shadow of the past. This word picture of shadow is also used in Hebrews 10:1, “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.”

The old rituals applied only until the new order came. We now have reality in Christ, so we ought not be distracted by shadows that no longer have a hold on us.

What kind of traditions do we adopt or live by that hinder us from Christ? Speaking from a Chinese perspective, I can share that I have many traditions that permeate different aspects of my life. Several weeks ago we celebrated the Lunar New Year, a week of festivities and rituals that have become ingrained in our culture. We give red envelopes to kids to bestow good fortune. We eat fish to symbolize abundance each year and noodles to give us long life. We are not to sweep our house, in fear of sweeping out good luck. I don’t want to diminish the cultural heritage I have inherited; I am

proud of my culture. However, as much as we appreciate tradition, we must not let superstition run our lives. We belong to the one and only God who loves and guides us. We are not under the influence of the “kitchen god” or “household god.” Our future does not depend on whether we eat fish or noodles; our livelihood is not influenced by sweeping the floor. We can value our heritage, but we must not let these ideas creep into our understanding of God and our identity as His children.

Lest you think these traditions are uniquely Chinese or Asian, let us consider more Western traditions. In a couple of weeks we will celebrate the most important event of the Christian calendar: Easter. This week is full of tradition as well: fasting, abstaining from meat, Easter bunnies, chocolate, and egg hunts. Again, these traditions, in and of themselves, are not bad. We just need to make sure they don't distract us from the truth, which is that Christ died for us, was buried, and was resurrected on the third day. The truth that He conquered death must not be overshadowed by Easter bunnies, egg hunts, or other human additions. We may even consider the tradition of Lent in this category, if the Lenten ritual of fasting and self-denial is done legalistically, to earn favor with God or to brag about how “spiritual” we are, or as an excuse to lose weight; under these circumstances Lenten ritual can distract us from the meaning of Easter. These traditions are only a shadow that is inconsequential compared to reality, Christ on the Cross.

This first warning addresses our question, “What traditions have been handed down to us that distract us from our walk?” Now let's examine the second question by looking at Paul's second warning starting in Col 2:18-23.

### Warning 2: Human Efforts

**Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (Col. 2:18-23)**

The second warning of the passage says, “Do not let anyone... disqualify you.” The word picture that Paul uses here is that of a race, an athletic event with a prize at the end. Specifically, Paul warns to let no one disqualify us from the prize. Paul uses this word picture also in 1 Cor 9:24 and 25:

**...Run in such a way as to get the prize...a crown that will last forever...so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.**

What is this prize for which Paul does not want to be disqualified? He tells us in Col 1:26-28 exactly what is this everlasting crown. This prize is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Christ in your life, your life in Christ! To have Christ's glory revealed in you means becoming mature in your faith, becoming transformed into His likeness by the

Holy Spirit. Isn't this a prize worth running for, a life worth living? With that prize in view, we must be diligent to follow the truth. If we are led down the wrong path, take shortcuts, then we will miss the mark and be disqualified.

How do the false teachers mislead the runners in this race? The false teachers want to impose their own additions to the gospel, claiming that you need all these extra special “things” in order to qualify for the prize: false humility, worship of angels, special visions and knowledge. Let's briefly examine each of these misleading paths.

### False Humility

This word is translated in the NASV as “self-abasement” and in the ESV as “asceticism.” We get an idea of what these terms mean from examples further in the text. Paul refers to restricting what you touch or handle or eat (Col 2:21) and also to the harsh treatment of the body (Col 2:23). These are examples of asceticism. The Colossians must deny themselves of pleasures so that they can be purged of sensual indulgence or fleshly desires. Their world became full of taboos, things that one must not do in an attempt to be “pure” or “mature.” They lived in fear, in self-denial or self-abasement. The problem is, this approach does not work! It's like scratching an allergy rash – it offers temporary relief but doesn't address the underlying allergy, and just makes things worse.

What modern taboos or self-denial do we face as believers? I've heard that Christians must not drink or smoke, dance, see movies, buy expensive cars, etc. Of course, restraining from some of these is perfectly reasonable and good discipline. However, the idea that giving up these things – self-denial – in and of itself is pleasing to God is wrong. God isn't pleased when you are harsh to yourself! This is the danger of modern asceticism: it becomes a form of legalism that says “everything is wrong unless you can prove by the Bible that it is right.” That reduces life to a very narrow set of activities we are allowed to do. Certainly, some things are always wrong and dangerous: adultery, lying, stealing, idolatry, and others. But there is so much else that is left open to us. As long as we obey God in areas He says are clearly wrong and harmful, then we have the rest of life to enjoy in His company and guidance. Let us not impose baseless “dont's” in our lives in an attempt to reach maturity; this is a DIY attitude, thinking we can achieve it on our own efforts.

### False Worship

A second human effort that disqualifies believers is the “worship of angels.” This was probably the practice of the local culture to call upon angels for protection against evil spirits. For example, archeologists have unearthed a stone amulet that read, “Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, protect the one who wears this against evil spirits...” They ascribed magical qualities to angels and to stone jewelry. This is not too different to trusting in a jade bracelet or a magical good luck charm or even a cross we wear to “supernaturally” protect us.

I see a parallel of this false worship in my Asian culture, and that is ancestor worship. We venerate the generations that passed, setting up shrines in our homes to our ancestors; we burn paper money, offer food and incense and consider them our guardian angels. It's one thing to have filial piety and honor our parents, or remember our grandparents fondly, but it's an entirely different thing to worship and to be influenced by the ancestors. This is a dangerous and heretical thing! We worship the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

and no one else. Our allegiance cannot be divided. If we put any credence into ancestor worship, then what is to prevent us from worshipping nature, or the “god” within each one of us? What will prevent us from worshipping money, career, and our spouse? When we legitimize false worship, we have lost connection with the Head of our faith; we start down a slippery slope that would lead us away from God.

### False Knowledge and False Leaders

Paul goes on to describe another human addition to the Gospel. He warns against the idea that there is special vision or knowledge claimed by the false leaders. He says these leaders go “into great detail about what they have seen (special visions); they are puffed up with idle notions (special knowledge).” This was an early form of Gnosticism that claimed the Gospel was not adequate, that additional superior knowledge was required to be a true believer. Paul attacks these leaders as empty of substance, puffed up without reason like a giant marshmallow (marshmallow is my word picture, not Paul’s!). The warning here is to beware of blindly following a human leader and his or her ideas, however wise, charismatic, or religious that person may appear. We must use discernment and not be captured by a charismatic personality. I know of a church that is led by a rigid, legalistic senior pastor. This pastor is so controlling that all study material for bible studies must be approved by him in advance, or you are not allowed to present it. If you teach something in your cell group or home fellowship that differs from his strict interpretations, you are banned from further teaching. This puts a human as the head of the church, not Christ, and this is not right. It too is a slippery slope that may lead us away from maturity in Christ.

### Conclusion

We considered two questions this morning, and Paul’s exhortations in Col 2 clearly answer these questions. Paul warns believers to beware of two categories of false teaching: empty rituals that should not apply to those in Christ, and human efforts that are not part of the gospel of salvation. At the end of today’s passage Paul refers to these as “rules of the world” which are “based on merely human commands and teachings.” Human teachings may appear wise or religious on the surface, but they are ineffective and distract us from our walk with the Lord.

The human teaching with which I am especially concerned is the “do-it-yourself” mentality that I referred to at the beginning of my message. In our culture, our job and careers are all performance-based, results-focused, and works-oriented, so there’s a temptation to incorporate this mentality into our faith as well, making it a DIY religion. What might this look like?

I know some churches in the area in which almost every member is deeply involved in multiple ministries of church life. They teach Sunday school, join committees to plan events and community projects. They’re at church all day Sunday, plus Friday and Wednesday evenings. All of these are, in principle, good; they have the appearance of wisdom, the appearance that everyone is connected to each other. However, sometimes things may not be as they seem. There is this saying, “Love the Lord, Serve God.” Under this mantra, each person is expected to serve and serve and serve. Self-esteem becomes based on how much they “do” for God, and they become measured by how much they contribute. At

some point, there is no longer joy in serving, only obligation and legalism. Members get tired and burned out, and they leave the church disappointed and disillusioned. What happened? I believe that they have subtly turned from a grace-based faith to a works-based religion, that they have become a DIY church. Christianity is NOT spelled “D-I-Y” but rather “D-O-N-E.” Christ has done it all. There is nothing you can do that will make God love you any more than He already does.

I believe PBCC has remained steadfastly a grace-based church; we desire the Spirit to transform us from the inside out, not from the outside in. We’re not judged by how many bible studies we attend or if we go on mission trips. It is our hope and prayer that we as a church will not be led astray by principles of this world or vain human effort.

The distraction of false teaching is all around us. There is the temptation to add to Christ things like traditions and rituals, taboos and legalism, false teaching and DIY. What is the antidote to these ideas? Fullness in Christ. Focus on the completeness we have in Christ; He is sufficient for all and we’re complete in Him. Over the next weeks we’ll turn our attention to the practical aspects of being complete and alive in Christ; it will be a thrilling journey of practically living out our faith, as John leads us in Colossians 3 and 4. On that journey, let our focus be in Christ alone, as it says in the song, “In Christ alone my hope is found, He is my light, my strength, my song.”

*May God fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.*

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