

**HOLDING FAST TO CHRIST**

Colossians 2:16-23

**Intro:** Have you ever wondered how the Apostle Paul would have described the difference in his life from the way he had been raised, as a Jew, and in his adult years, as a Pharisee, as compared with his relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ? Actually, we can answer this question by reading his epistles, and by reading about the change in his life as it is described for us in the book of Acts.

As a Jew he had devoted to a religious system. He wrote about this in his letter to the church at Philippi, chapter 3. His parents had had him circumcised on the eighth day of his life. He boasted that he was of the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe which had stayed with Judah when the northern tribes split off and became a separate nation. He studied and spoke the Hebrew language, a feat that not all young Jews in his day had accomplished. His father had been a Pharisee (Acts 23:6), and he followed his father in becoming a Pharisee, which he called “the strictest sect of our religion” (Acts 26:5 - NKJV). And he religiously sought to obey the Law, and claimed to be “blameless.” By this he meant that he lived a moral life. And to show his devotion to the Jewish religion of his day he did everything he could, zealous beyond any of his equals, in seeking to do away with the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But it was when he was on his way to Damascus with papers in his possession which authorized him to apprehend Christians and bring them bound back to Jerusalem, that he met Jesus Christ. Saul was not seeking the Lord, but the Lord was seeking him. The Lord had already ascended back to His Father in heaven, but nevertheless he spoke to Saul (which was his name then), and his life after that was completely changed. I won't go into the details of that miraculous event. But it was that encounter with the Lord that caused him to write later, “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ” (Phil. 3:7). It was not that he changed one religion for another because it is not right to speak of the Christian faith as a religion. What was it then? It was that by the grace of God Saul of Tarsus was drawn into a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Before he left Damascus he was preaching in the synagogues that Jesus Christ “is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20).

He had learned firsthand that Jesus Christ was alive. Paul spoke of knowing Him. Paul spoke of walking with Him. To Paul the Lord Jesus Christ

was not just a person who had lived in recent history, but He was to Paul his Savior, his Lord, and his Friend. He recognized the Lord's presence in his life at all times. He spoke of fellowship with the Lord. He sought to do the Lord's will. He lived to glorify the Lord, and he taught other Christians to do the same. He loved the Lord with all of his heart, and he zealously covered a major part of the Roman Empire preaching the Gospel that others might be saved. The Lord Jesus Christ became and continued to be the most important Person in Paul's life. And if we did not have any other letter which he wrote, but this Colossian letter, we can see clearly here how precious, how real, and how devoted he was to his Lord and Savior. It was in becoming personally acquainted with the Lord Jesus Christ that the Apostle Paul saw how empty and meaningless everything else is if the Lord had not saved him and drawn him to Himself.

I hope what I have just said helps us all to realize why Paul was so greatly exercised in his heart at the thought that there might be anything that would turn people in the Colossian church away from Christ. To prevent that he had been praying faithfully for them. And his first exhortation to them was that they needed to "walk ... in Him," in Christ. He knew that they needed the Lord. They needed to grow in their knowledge of the Lord, and in their fellowship with Him. He wanted them to remember that no religion, no person, nor any group of persons, could do for them what the Lord Jesus Christ had done, and which He continued to do. It was the Lord Who made Paul realize that it was not religion that he needed, but a Savior. Paul came to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, and that He had come to the earth suffer, die, and be raised again in order to save sinners from their sins.

But let us ask ourselves today, "What does the Lord Jesus Christ mean to us?" We believe He is the Son of God. And we believe that He died on the Cross to save us from our sins. We believe that He was raised from the dead, that He went back to the Father and is seated today at the Father's right hand. But just how real is the Lord Jesus Christ to us? Could anybody or anything turn us away from Him? I think that not only Saul of Tarsus, but many, many people throughout history have been surprised to learn through their salvation that it is not turning from one religion to another, but it is turning from whatever we may have been trusting in before, to turn to a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. And that the Christian faith means fellowship with God and with His Son Jesus Christ.

Now perhaps we can all see more clearly why Jesus Christ meant so much

to Saul of Tarsus, who became by the grace of God, the Apostle Paul.

We have already seen in Colossians 2 that Paul warned the Colossian believers about the danger they faced from human philosophy and from the ways of men and even the basic ways of the world in which we live. See Col. 2:8. And when we talk about the wisdom of the world, we are talking not only about what the world believes, or doesn't believe, but the way the world lives. As believers in Christ we are called to a life of separation from the world. We have to live in this world, but we have to guard ourselves from thinking like the world thinks, and from living according to the world's lifestyle. Sometimes disaster strikes in the classrooms of our nation, and it begins in the lower grades and goes all the way through graduate schools. Paul said that the world in its wisdom has no place for Christ. We are seeing in our country today what happens when we tell God that we don't want Him, we don't want His Son, and we don't want His Book! The epistle of Paul to the Colossians is a very important letter for every child of God to understand. Don't overlook verse 8 of chapter 2, and don't forget it is a warning that we need today perhaps even more than it was need in Colosse when Paul wrote to them.

But we come to verse 16 where the warning continues.

I am suggesting today that verses 16 and 17 go together. Then verses 18 and 19 go together. And finally verses 20 through 23 go together.

You probably know that expositors have given a lot of time to study just what false systems that Paul was referring to. It seems obvious that Paul had the Law in mind, and we know that Judaistic teachers caused a lot of problems in the early church. Then there were various forms of Gnosticism that were prevalent in that day. They sought to combine Christian teaching with Greek and Oriental philosophies, and they caused a lot of trouble for the early Christians. For example, one group taught that Jesus became Christ at His baptism, but that He ceased to be Christ on the Cross when He cried out, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

I am not going to try to identify the groups that Paul may have been referring to any more than the words of the text indicate. What we need to understand are the words themselves and the dangers that they point to.

But before we look briefly at each of these sections, I want to call your

attention to the last verse of chapter 2. It shows that all of these systems are moral in nature, or at least claim to be of moral benefit, and their object is to control the evil and wrongdoing that is in human nature. People generally will recognize that there is evil in the world, but the difference comes when we listen to the suggested remedies. But the last phrase of the last verse of Colossians 2 should read like this, reading from the NKJV:

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 (Col 2:23).

So Paul was saying by way of summarizing all of the systems to which he was referring in this last part of Colossians 2, that none of them are able to keep us from sinning.

Now I don't think that there is any question but that in verses 16 and 17 Paul was speaking about:

### **I. THE LAW OF GOD (Col. 2:16-17).**

This was the Law given to the children of Israel by God through Moses. Sometimes we refer to it as the Mosaic Law.

Now what the Apostle said here about the ability of the Law to keep us from sin indicates that we are not to let anyone judge us for our sins because we are not observing the regulations of the Law regarding eating and drinking, and its holy days, that is, feasts, or that which is to be done on the new moons, and the sabbath days.

These last three are used in the OT as a summary of all that the Law told the Jews to do. An example is in 1 Chron. 23:30-31. The priests were given this order:

30 And to stand every morning to thank and praise the LORD, and likewise at even;

31 And to offer all burnt sacrifices unto the LORD in the sabbaths, in the new moons, and on the set feasts, by number, according to the order commanded unto them, continually before the LORD (1 Chron. 23:30-31).

It is by the Law that we are made to recognize what sin is (Rom. 3:20). But the Law is not able to deliver us from sinning. All of the details of the Law were but shadows, leading to the coming of Christ. Sanctifica-

tion comes through the work of Christ on the Cross, not by the Law. The rituals of the Law pointed ahead to Christ. Only through Christ can we have victory over sin and sinning.

So Christ is the One we need, not the Law.

The second point in our text points to:

## **II. MYSTICISM (Col. 2:18-19).**

I use this of people who claim to have some special revelation. Perhaps they use the Scriptures, as the Gnostics did, but they go beyond the written Word.

In verse 18 Paul brings up the subject of rewards. And there will be rewards for those who truly turn away from sin and seek to do what is pleasing to the Lord. But there will be no reward for those who falsely present themselves as humble, and encourage the worshiping of angels. Instead the Apostle Paul says that they are saying things that they have not really seen. They are puffed up by their pride, and their teaching only leads its followers deeper into sin.

What is their big mistake? They do not stand on the written Word which points those who are in the Body of Christ, to Christ. It is from Him that the Body receives nourishment and unity and growth (which would include strength for victory over sin). And all of this comes from God.

“Not holding the Head,” referring to Christ, is the problem in all of these systems. False teachers use the Bible, and often will give honor to Christ in a limited way, but in this case they go beyond what is written, adding to Scripture, which is condemned in both the Old and the New Testaments.

“Holding” is the translation of the verb κρατέω which speaks of having strength and power. It can be illustrated by Jacob’s refusal to let the Lord go until the Lord blessed him. See Gen. 32:26. Also by Peter and John who refused to obey the Jewish authorities when they were told not to speak anymore about Jesus. See Acts 4:18-20. It is not unusual for even true believers to go beyond what is written and teach what they think might have happened in situations which are not fully revealed in the Word. People who will add to Scripture even in one area should be considered with suspicion in all of their teaching. We must stand firmly

upon the Scriptures, and especially on what they teach about the preeminence of Christ.

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of what the Apostle Paul wrote in these last verses of Colossians 2. When teachers either ignore the Lord Jesus Christ, or teach anything that is not specifically found in the Word of God, there can be no blessing, and there probably will be a great involvement in sin.

And now we come to the last point. It seems from the statement at the end of verse 22, “the commandments and doctrines of men,” that the Apostle was speaking of all of the non-Christian, psychological and philosophical ideas of men, and pointing out that they are just as bad and useless as trying to fight sin with the Law, or with additions to the Word. Let me simply call this last section:

### **III. MAN-MADE REMEDIES (Col. 2:20-23).**

Note that verses 20-22 are a question. (Read.)

Remember that “the rudiments of the world” was mentioned in Col. 2:8. This expression which basically means the basic elements of knowledge, the a, b, c’s of knowledge, would seem to indicate that the world’s way of dealing with evil, is little more than baby talk, although it may come from a Ph.D. We hear illustrations of this all of the time from people in the world who think that they have the answer to this problem which only God can solve. And He has solved it through the death of His Son. God counts their wisdom as foolishness. The wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. “Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1 Cor. 1:20b).

Believers died with Christ to “the rudiments of the world.” This means that we are no longer under the limitations, the foolishness, and the uselessness of the world’s wisdom, and so Paul asks since Christ has brought us into a new sphere of life where we have the wisdom of God, why should we go back to the world’s do’s and don’t’s to seek deliverance from sin.

We might say that the Apostle Paul gave credit where credit was due, which he does in verse 23. What the world prescribes looks good, and sounds good, but it is of no value at all in delivering people from the

power and sinfulness of the flesh. So, if man's wisdom does not work, let us not have anything to do with it. We have in Christ, and His death on the Cross, the real answer to sin. It is the only answer.

**Concl:** We all struggle with our flesh. The world works from the outside trying to bring about changes within. It may limit the activity of the flesh, but the basic problem remains. John Eadie, a Scotch Presbyterian, who lived from 1810 to 1872, had a unique way of expressing himself on many truths of Scripture. He concluded his exposition of Colossians 2 with these words, speaking of the various ways in which the world tries to deal with the flesh. Listen to what he had to say:

The whole process was a cardinal mistake, for it was a system of externals, both in ceremonial and ethics. The body might be reduced, but the evil bias might remain unchecked. A man might whip and fast himself into a skeleton, and yet the spirit within him might have its lusts unconquered, for all it had lost was the ability to gratify them. To place a fetter on a robber's hand will not cure him of covetousness, though it may disqualify him from actual theft. To seal up a swearer's mouth will not pluck profanity out of his heart, though it may for a time prevent him from taking God's name in vain. To lacerate the flesh almost to suicide, merely incapacitates it for indulgence, but does not extirpate sinful desire. Its air of superior sanctity is only pride in disguise (Colossians, p. 206).

The world does not have the answer for the sins of the flesh, but God does! And it is in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose death, as we saw in verses 11 through 15 left nothing undone in giving to His people victory over sin.

And so what should we do? The answer is in the first four verses of chapter 3 which we will consider together, the Lord willing, next Lord's Day. But for now let me read it to you. (Read Col. 3:1-4.)

Let us hold fast to Christ. Nowhere else can we find what we have in Him.