

## **Philosophies of men**

Colossians 2:8-10

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Well, we've been going through a series through the book of Colossians on Tuesday nights, but I've thought to carry that on into Sunday mornings. So if you haven't been following along, I'll just recap from particularly Colossians 2:1-4 and 5 down to verse number 7, so you can know where we're up to at least.

In verses 1 through to 4, Paul expresses that he has a great conflict of soul for the people there at Colossae. He was concerned for them, and the concern that he had was a genuine concern. He was concerned that their discouragement, that if they allowed themselves to be discouraged and allowed themselves to be disunified as a body, as a church, that they would be more susceptible to being led astray by false teaching and persuasive words. As what he mentions there in verse number 2, he desires that their hearts would be knit together in love and that they would attain, that they may be encouraged and they may attain to the riches of the full assurance of understanding. And he says in verse 4, he says, "Now this I say, the reason why I say this, lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words."

So he recognizes that there's a direct connection between the encouragement and unity of God's people and them growing in the knowledge of Christ in that condition, in that state, and them being kept away from deception. But he goes on further in verses 5 to 7 to then show this commendation of them. He wasn't necessarily rebuking them; he says, "When I look at you, I commend you. You have a good order and steadfastness in your faith." Verse number 5. But he says, even though you have a good order and steadfastness in your faith, I still want to command you to walk in Him.

And that was the first commandment in verse number 6 that we were introduced to in this epistle, and that commandment was simply this: that the believers were to continue to order their life in a way that would be pleasing to Christ. And that's what we left off last week. We looked at the fact that we are commanded to walk in Him, and we looked at what walking in Him looks like. But we took encouragement from this very fact that we are not alone in our walk with Him. That even though we walk in Him and we are

commanded to walk in Him, the very One that commands us to walk in Him is the very One that has rooted us, as verse 6 and 7 say, rooted us in Him, and He is the very One that builds us up in Him and establishes us in our faith.

Meaning, as we walk with Him and as we walk in a way that pleases Him, we are not alone. God Himself works to see that we are established and are built up because He is the very One that has rooted us and grounded us in Christ. And that's where we left off last week, where we took encouragement from that.

But then we looked down in verse number 8 this morning, and we're introduced now to another warning, and it's another command, but here is a very stern warning that Paul is giving to the church. He says, "Beware." Now there's a connection directly between verses 6 to 7 and verse number 8. These are not isolated. And what is Paul simply trying to show is this: that as the believer walks in Him and as God works to build him up and establish him, that walk with God, that walk where God is working on us and building us up, doesn't mean that we should not live a life of laziness or a life of, should I say, indifference to what is happening around us. We need to be watchful in our walk. This is exactly what he's doing now.

He's introducing us, as we walk in Him, as we are rooted and built up and established in Him and grow in our faith, we have to understand this very thing: that we are now warned. We are warned to beware. And what Paul simply does is teaches us that on our journey towards Christlikeness, he reminds us of the fact that there are dangers and there are pitfalls.

And if any of you have read the story of Pilgrim's Progress, you know exactly a lot about that. He was a man, Christian, that left the city of destruction because he had a burden on his back that he wanted to get rid of. And as he's on his journey towards the celestial city, he meets a man by the name of Mr. Worldly Wiseman. Mr. Worldly Wiseman is one who says to Christian that there is an easier way to get rid of that burden. You see, there's a city over there, or a village over there, called the Village of Morality, and there's a man by the name of Legality, and he will help you get rid of that burden in an easier way than you're doing right now.

And he says to Christian, "Oh, you've got a book in your hand," and he says, "Never mind the book. That book makes it very difficult for you to get rid of that burden. Mr. Legality and the Village of Morality will help you get rid of that in no time. He says, "Oh, that book will just make things more difficult for you. Oh, and by the way, that man, Mr. Evangelist, that told you about this part of the celestial city, never mind him. Never mind him." And our life is very much the same.

Paul is essentially showing us a very similar thing: that as we are journeying towards the celestial city, we are met with Mr. Worldly Wise Men that have a better option, as it were, for us or a different path to take. And this is why this warning is here in the epistle, to help us realize that even though we have heard the word of Evangelist and even though you and I are following what is in our hands, the very book of the words of life, we must never forget that there are philosophies, there are teachings, there are systems of thought that prevail in the world around us that will keep us from the celestial city.

So Paul begins here with a solemn warning. Look with me in verse number 8; he says, "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit." Here it's in the continuous tense; he's saying, "Continue to be on guard. Continue to be looking out and to be watchful." And he wants us to acknowledge that we must continue to be on the lookout. What are we to be on the lookout for? Well, he says, "Because lest anyone cheats you or spoils you or makes you a captive." That's the idea.

The imagery here is of an enemy nation that goes into another nation and invades that nation and takes the captives out from their homeland, out of their comfort, out of their safety, into a land, a foreign land, just like the Jews and the Babylonians invading Jerusalem and taking them to Babylon. And the imagery here is that we must beware and be careful lest we are taken captive. Now, when a man or an army invades a city, they take people captive by force, physical force. But what Paul is saying here is that the believer has to be careful that he's not taken captive, not by someone physically coming in and wresting him out of the church per se; he's warning us that we may be taken captive through philosophy, through philosophy. Through philosophy is where the warning is. It contains the same amount of force, but it's a spiritual force, not a physical one.

Verse number four, he says, "Look at verse number four; he goes, 'Now this I say, lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.'" There are words that have persuasion; they have force; they have the characteristic of power, and they can take hold of the heart and of the mind and draw people away from Christ. And that's what we are to be aware of: the philosophy.

Now the question we have to ask ourselves immediately is, what is philosophy? What is philosophy? And philosophy simply means a love for wisdom or a friend of wisdom. Now, immediately we must not think that wisdom is our enemy because the Bible is full of examples of how we should be seeking after wisdom and making wisdom our friend. So it's obvious that Paul is not trying to say to us that we should not care about wisdom altogether

and that wisdom is somewhat dangerous or detrimental to our spiritual health. No, not at all.

What he's simply referring to here is systems of thought, whether they be secular or religious, that lead us away from Christ. And we will go on to look at the characteristic of this philosophy. But it's important to recognize that not all philosophy is wrong in every aspect. There are much things through common grace that men have studied in creation and in the world that is true. And we would affirm that all truth is God's truth. And therefore, as long as something accords with God and His Word and with His truth, therefore we can receive that as truth.

And God has revealed Himself not only in His Word, His special revelation, but in creation. He says, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day they utter speech," so the earth declares the testimony of God to us. And so we must not simply write off anything that is studied or wise or that comes from an academic sphere. That's not the warning that Paul is teaching us here. But what philosophy seeks to do is this: it seeks to observe, to reason, and to apply logic to the fundamental questions of life. That's what it seeks to do. Where did we come from? Where are we going? What is the purpose in life? It asks very important questions: What is reality? What is morality? Where does our moral compass come from? All these kinds of questions. How does human behavior work? Why do humans behave the way they behave? And philosophers seek to answer those questions. But they answer those questions using observation, reason, and logic.

Now, the problem with philosophy is not observation, it's not reason, and it's not logic. The problem with philosophy is its authority. Philosophy exalts reason, logic, and its observation to the highest authority. It exalts man's reason above God's revelation. And so, in theology, as we study God's Word, we apply observation, we apply reason, we apply logic, but we apply it to the revelation of God. We recognize that what God says is final, what God says is authoritative, whether my reason can grapple with it or not.

And so, in theology, we come to the place in our lives where we recognize that God is God, and we are not. And we have faith in the revelation of God. This is the fundamental difference between philosophy and theology. Theology does answer many of those questions, but it answers them with the authority of Scripture. And so, we need to be careful lest we come to a point in our lives where we discourage any kind of reason, any kind of logic, any kind of observation. That is dangerous.

Paul is not encouraging, from this passage of Scripture, an anti-intellectual view on Christianity and saying, "Oh, we don't need to study; all books are

dangerous, and forget about the books." This is not what he's saying here; this is not what he intends to mean. In fact, in verse number two, he encourages them to grow in their knowledge and their understanding of the knowledge of the mystery of Christ and of God. And we must recognize that we must ask questions and seek the Scriptures and seek God for answers in His Word.

When my cousins came to Christ over a year ago now, they had lots of questions. And they, one by one, asked, "Josh, what about this? What about this? What about that?" And our Bible studies were like, "Whoa, this is a lot of questions." And I found myself opening up in one of the Bible studies, and I said, "Everyone, turn with me to Deuteronomy 29:29." And they were like, "Oh, what is this?" And I said, "This will help you in your Christian life." And it says, "The secret things belong unto the Lord, but those which are revealed to us belong unto us and to our children forever." And I said to my cousins, "This very thing: God has not set out to answer and give us the answer to every question of life. He has given us all things that pertain unto life and godliness through the knowledge of Him. He has given us His Word as our guide. There are some questions that God will not answer and does not need to answer. The secret things belong to Him. But those things that are revealed belong unto us, that we observe them and we do them all the days of our life."

You see, the Christian recognizes, because he believes in God, that there is a God whose ways are above ours, whose thoughts are above ours, who knows all things. And we don't think that we can know all things, lest we think that we are God. This is the problem with man. This is the problem with philosophy. It's the pursuit of knowledge, and that is the end goal. My friend, the reason for knowledge, as we'll look at later, is to know God and to understand Him.

And so, what is philosophy? What is the problem with philosophy? Well, it's those very things. But look at the problems of philosophy that Paul outlines here; that's important for us to understand. Look at verse number 8. He says, "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." He mentions that this philosophy is also termed as "empty deceit," meaning it is a deception that has no value and no substance. It's like clouds, as it were, without water. It sounds high and mighty and seeks to promise certain answers, but really, at the end of the day, it leaves the soul empty. It's an empty deceit.

He says, "Beware, this is an empty deceit." But then he also goes on to say, not only is it an empty deceit, it is the tradition of men. It accords, this philosophy accords, and is in harmony not with divine origin, not with

God's Word, not with God's revelation, but it has its origin and its transmission through men's tradition, through men's thoughts, through men's minds. These aren't the teachings of God, as it were. These aren't the thoughts of God. These are the traditions of men, passed on to other men and passed on to other men, and then communicated to you, O Colossians.

So he recognizes that these are not of divine origin. This is an empty deceit that comes from men, not from God. And then he says it's according to the basic principles of the world. Some people, like if you're reading the ESV this morning, that would be translated as "the elemental spirits of the world." Some people think that this word "elemental" or "the basic principles of the world" refers to spiritual forces, demonic forces, and that these teachings have their accord with demonic teaching, not with the teaching of the Word of God. And that is a possible understanding of this passage of Scripture.

However, another understanding that is held by many commentators is that they believe that the basic principles of the world are the foundational and fundamental thinking of humanity when it comes to God and religion. In reality, what it's referring to, I'll quote Hendrickson for you on this one, he says this: "The expression indicates rudimentary teaching regarding rules, regulations, ordinances by means of which people, Jews or Gentiles, in their own way, tried by their own efforts to achieve salvation."

And what he's simply saying is this: it's the natural way that man thinks about having a relationship with God. It's the basic principles of worldly thinking in relationship to God. And that's what many commentators say, and I believe that that is what it's referring to here. And that is picked up in verse number 20. He says in verse 20, "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world," which I believe to be this legalism and externalism, he says, "Why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations?" He says there in verse 21, "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle."

And so he goes on to explain that these teachings, these basic principles of worldly thinking, accord with a legalistic kind of system whereby it's "do not taste, do not touch, do not handle," whether it be found in the legalism of Jews or whether it be found in the paganism of the Gentiles. They're simply people that are under bondage, as Galatians picks up the word as well and speaks to. And it's a system of thought that leads to bondage, whereby man, by his own efforts, thinks that he can achieve salvation before God.

But whatever your view on this word, the basic principles of the world, the last phrase in verse number eight is what is important. That whatever

this philosophy is based upon, one thing is certain: that it is not according to Christ. And he brings this out as the fundamental issue. The fundamental issue with this philosophy, with this teaching, with these systems of thought, is that it does not accord with Christ and His gospel. It undermines Him. It undermines Christ and His gospel. And that's a very important warning point right here.

The Bible teaches us in Hebrews 1:2 that God has spoken unto us in these last days by His Son. Christ Jesus is the final revelation of God. He is God's final word to humanity. He is God's message of salvation. That's why, as our brother read this morning, it is the preaching of the cross that matters, not the wisdom of this world. Not whether the Jews think it's a stumbling block or not because they can't reason with its realities. The fact is this: that it's the preaching of the cross and Christ crucified that is the revelation of God that men must believe in order to be saved.

And so the warning that Paul gives here can be summarized by another passage of scripture which is found in 2 Corinthians 10:5. Let's turn there together. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, it reads like this: "Casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ." And Paul says there are arguments, there are people's imaginations, there are people's thoughts, there are people's philosophies, there are systems that surround us. And he says what the believer needs to do is to cast them down, not to let them be exalted, but to bring them into captivity. Not us being brought into captivity to them, but to bring those thoughts into captivity to the obedience of Christ. Essentially holding up Christ as the standard, holding up Christ as the authority, holding up Christ as the only one by which all and His gospel by which all philosophy should be judged.

And how does Paul then encourage these believers, go back to Colossians with me, then how does he encourage them to safeguard against such danger? You say, well, we're in this world, there are pitfalls, there are dangers, there's warning for us, but what does Paul encourage the believers to do to safeguard them from such things? Yes, warning is one thing, but we need more than warning. Warning is not just sufficient. We need teaching. We need instruction that we might apply ourselves to the warning properly. What does he say in verse number nine?

He says in verse number nine, he gives the answer to be safeguarded against such danger. He says, "For in Him, that is in Christ, dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power." And what Paul is simply saying here is two things. Firstly, he's saying to safeguard ourselves against deceit and philosophy and vain theories that flood the system of the society in which we live and

have been for hundreds of years is this: Firstly, we must have a right view of Christ, and we must have a right view of ourselves in our relationship to Him.

He says in the first part there of verse nine, he essentially says that in Christ, God has decided to manifest Himself in all fullness. What he simply is arguing here is this: that Christ, in Christ, is housed permanently the fullness of the Godhead in bodily expression. You see, Jesus did not become God. He is God. He was God preexistently because in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. And when He became a man, He did not become God then. When He became a man, either because the Bible says that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. He was God incarnate. He was preexistent God, and Colossians 2:9 says that in Him now dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, even after His death and His burial and His resurrection and His ascension. He is still very God of God. And he's essentially saying here that Jesus Christ is the everlasting image of the invisible God. God is fully revealed in Him. And so, what is the importance of this? Why is it important for us to have a right view of Christ?

Because the implication is clear that any religious or philosophical understanding that undermines the person of Christ is detrimental to our spiritual health. And Paul is saying if you want to be on guard against that, not only are you to be aware, but you need to establish yourself in who Christ is. You see, God has chosen to reveal Himself in Christ, and therefore there are no by-paths to knowing God except through Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He's simply saying that there is no other way to come to the knowledge of this mystery, and as the mystical cults may do, they seem to have this special knowledge whereby, "Oh, if you come down this road and if you find and have this experience, then you'll really know God."

Oh, the pagans, yes, you can have God, but you must realize that there's a plurality of gods. You see, as we have the whole system of the plethora of the gods, then we can really know Him. And the Jews and others and other religious fears, yes, you can know God by faith, but really what you need to do is recognize that faith alone is not enough to know God. To have a right relationship with God, you must live. I mean, isn't it logical, isn't it reasonable to expect that God would do everything in our salvation and we do nothing, and one day we're going to just get to heaven because of that? Surely it depends on us, and there's reason, and there's logic, and there's observation, and say everyone knows this. It's innate to us. We know if you want to achieve something, you have to work for it.

But all of that doesn't accord with Christ and undermines Him as God's revelation revealed to us as the only way of salvation. And so that's one



way to safeguard ourselves is to have a right view of Christ, but secondly is to have a right view of ourselves. Look what he says in verse number 10. He says, not only in Him does all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, but he says, "And you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power." And he already simply says it's not just that Jesus Christ is all in all, but what's also important to understand that if you are in Him, then you're complete. You are filled to full. You have been filled to full and remain full, complete.

And you know what's a beautiful thing? He says you are complete in Him. He points to our position. The fullness that we have is because of our position in Christ. He doesn't say you will be complete in Him if you perform. He recognizes that God has done something in Christ to save us, to bring us in a union with Christ, that we now in Him are complete and will be complete forever.

Now the question that we have to ask ourselves this morning: have we fallen prey to the words of Mr. Worldly Wiseman? Now the philosophies that abounded in the days of Christ and before Christ are still present with us now. There are systems of thought that plague our society, things that we hear in the universities, on the radio, in conversations with friends. Our lives are flooded with different thoughts and different things that we have to put to the test. Have we succumbed, even maybe ourselves, have succumbed to this idea of modern psychology? Where we've simply come to the point that we can fix man's morality by simply shaping his environment. That we can fix man's morality by educating him more, by training them more. If we just teach men that drugs have dangers and that sexual immorality leads to diseases of sorts, then surely we can curb men's desires for these very things that plague our society. This is modern psychology. Where did it come from? Observation, reason, logic. But it did not come from God's word. Where is Christ in the picture? How can a man be fixed apart from redemption? How can a man be fixed apart from salvation and apart from regeneration?

The Bible tells us a very different situation of man. Not that it's just his environment that has affected him, but it says that the heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked. Who can know it? Essentially, Jesus says it's not what goes into the body that defiles a man, but what comes out of it. Why? Because the heart of man, from out of the heart, proceeds fornications, murders, adulteries. These are the things which defile a man, not to eat with unwashed hands.

We have to understand that the Bible teaches us a whole other aspect to man's morality and man's humanity. So when we want to fix ourselves, we go to all sorts of theories and ideas, but we don't go to the word of God.

My friends, hear the word of the Lord today. Ezekiel 36 says, "I will put a new spirit within you. I will take out the old stony heart. I will put in you a heart of flesh." He says, "I'll put My Spirit within you, and I will cause you to walk in My ways." This is regeneration. This is transformation. This is revelation from God, truth for man's soul. This is what man needs.

But how often do we ignore this in our evangelism? How much do we ignore this in our counseling of friends, in our counseling of others, or even in our own lives? We think if we can just arrange things better, then things will go well for us. These things may help, but they will not transform. They will not transform.

What about modern philosophy? We live in a society of relativism, where everyone's truth, whatever you want truth to be, it is. Just make it up for yourself and go on with it. If it's true to you, it's true. We live in a society where men and women, and what people are being taught, is that we don't receive our purpose of life from authority. We design our own purpose for life. So what is the meaning of life? Well, it's whatever you want it to be. You just think about it. You design it for yourself, and it's true for you.

And it's no surprise today that in the first class of university lectures, they go around to the students and ask them, "What is your pronoun?" You see, truth has fallen in the streets. If you want to be a woman, you can just say you're a woman. In fact, I read on the UTS website this week, and it essentially said this: that we should not be people that assume just because that person is wearing a dress and has long hair, that that is a woman. We should not assume such things. It's not polite to assume such things. What we should simply do is ask that person, "What is your pronoun?"

You see, what's happened in our society is that we have let truth fall in the streets. Whether it be the truth of science or whether it be the truth of God or whatever it may be, we have lost truth because of philosophy. These philosophies have crept in, and men have been deceived. And so the question then, how does this affect us? Well, we may not be asking ourselves, "What is our pronoun?" That may be happening out there. But what happens to us is that we lose a sharp edge on truth. All of a sudden, we don't want to tell people what is truth because it may make them feel uncomfortable. And we shy away from holding truth, believing truth, proclaiming truth because of how people may respond to us.

And I can't go on, but you know about religious philosophy as well: legalism, mysticism, as I mentioned before, ways in which we can find God apart from Christ and apart from the scripture, all are very dangerous. And you may ask yourself then, how do I know this morning whether or not I have been taken captive by such philosophy? Well, Paul simply wants us

to ask this question to answer this question. The answer to this question will determine whether or not you and I have been taken captive by some philosophical teaching: Are you satisfied with Christ? Are you satisfied with who you are in Him? Or are you looking for more?

You see, the Christian in the scripture is not defined as a person that is on a journey to find the purpose of life. That's what the man of the world is. He is pursuing life to find out what is the meaning, what is the purpose, what is the purpose for my life. The Christian is not that way. The Christian has arrived at the understanding of the purpose and meaning of life. He has arrived at Christ. He, like the hymn writer, says, "Hallelujah, I have found Him whom my soul so long has craved. Jesus satisfies my longings; through His blood, I now am saved." He is not on a pursuit to find God. He has found God in Christ, and he is satisfied. He has tasted of the water of life, and the only thing he thirsts for is more of that. He is not looking for other wells and other waters and other systems of philosophy and theories to help satisfy his longings. He has found Christ, and his soul has tasted and has been satisfied in Him.

You see, the preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes looked at the world around him and pursued knowledge, pursued wisdom, pursued pleasure. He applied, as it were, many theories and many systems of thought to life, and you know what he concluded? Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Chasing these things is like chasing the wind, he says. But at the end of the book, he acknowledges that the only thing that matters in life, that has eternal value, is not the pursuit of wisdom and the pursuit of intellectualism or the pursuit of philosophy; it's the pursuit of God and submitting ourselves to the revelation of Him. Fear God, keep His commandments; this is the whole duty of man.

Christian, understand this day in closing that nothing can be added to you if you are in Christ. You are complete, not will be, not shall be, are complete in Him. Men wonder after other things because they don't know what they have. Christians do not know what they have. We need a right view of Christ and a right view of ourselves in Him. We are complete in Him by our position, not by our performance. Therefore, the encouragement to you this morning, if you don't know Christ, is to come to Him and find completeness in Him. Repent and believe on Him, recognize that unless you submit to His will and submit to His word and submit to His gospel and the revelation of Jesus Christ, you will be dissatisfied not only now but for all eternity in the fires of hell. But if you come before Him now in repentance and faith and cast your soul upon Him who satisfies, you will know eternal life. Be done with philosophy and empty deceit and come to Him who is life eternal.

But Christian, realize what you have in Him. Look nowhere else for your satisfaction. To look for satisfaction in something else is a great evil. It was the evil of the house of Judah. In Jeremiah, in closing, chapter 2 verse 13, it says this: "For My people have committed two great evils, two evils. They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living water, and have hewn themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water." The great evil is that they forsook Christ, they forsook God, they forsook the covenant of God, and they went after to dig out their own inventions and have their own things of satisfaction. Went after idols, went after philosophy, went after vain deceit, empty things which held no water.

And so, Christian, simple encouragement to you this morning is: keep drinking from the well that shall never, ever, ever run dry because you are complete in Him. Let us pray.