

The Problems of Boot-leg Religion

Colossians: Christ Above All

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Our passage tonight comes from Colossians 2:16-23. Colossians 2:16-23, and we're looking at the problems with bootleg religion. Let's read the text and get it in front of us.

16 Do not therefore let anyone pass judgment on you in eating and in drinking or in a matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath 17 which are a shadow of the things that were to come; but the solid reality has to do with Christ. 18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on a scraping humility and worship of angels, which things he has seen while entering on his experience, inflated without reason by his flesh oriented mind, 19 and not holding onto the head, out of which the whole body, being supplied and united through the ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that comes from God. 20 If you died with Christ, free from the control of the elemental spirits of the universe, why, as living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations, 21 "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" 22 (which all of such items are destined to perish in the process of being used up) - in line with the commandments and teachings of men? 23 Which things have an appearance of wisdom in pseudo-worship and scraping humility and austerity to the body, not of any value in combating the indulgence of the flesh.

There was a time back in the 1920s when the manufacturer in transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages was verboten; it was the prohibition era and because of that, people began to make their own. Bootleggers engaged in bootlegging and manufactured bootleg. It was making your own and there is a sense in which there is such a thing as bootleg religion, folks make their own. They were manufacturing it, you might say, in Colossae, and as you read through the book of Colossians, as we've said, Paul doesn't give you a kind of a 1, 2, 3, these are the elements of the heresy at Colossae or the false teaching that was trying to infiltrate the church at Colossae, but he does give us certain hints and we wonder how could there be such a hodgepodge of various stuff together? But if the conditions are right, it can easily happen.

Stephen Lungu, his autobiography called, "Out of the Black Shadows," tells of a time when he was a young fellow. He was reared in poverty and in very difficult times. This

was in what is now Zimbabwe, at that time it was Rhodesia. And he, in some way, as a youth, attached himself in some way to a Presbyterian Church there and the pastor decided to give him a little bit of a job. He was to sort through the membership cards and bring some kind of order to them and so on. Well, Stephen Lungu couldn't even read; he apparently knew some letters of the alphabet and so on, so he made a show of going through this work and then the pastor one day summoned Stephen and said, "I want you to take my bicycle and I want you to go to the racetrack. I have bet on a horse and I need a potion of black magic so that my horse will win." So he sent, the Presbyterian pastor sent Stephen to the racecourse where he met an elder of that Presbyterian Church who also doubled as a medicine man in his spare time and who concocted a potion consisting of horse urine, horse dung and a bit of mud with a horse print in it and he gave this package to Stephen and he said, "Now, you take this back but, now, when you leave here, don't look back or you'll break the charm and its power." Now, here's a Presbyterian minister who bets on horses and tries to win it through black magic and so on. What a hodgepodge. How could....? Oh, it's easy. We call it syncretism; everything gets mixed up together and you had something like that going on at Colossae.

Now, much of the so-called false teaching at Colossae seemed to be based in Judaism. Not all of it but some of it. You remember Paul mentioned circumcision up in this chapter at about verses 11 and 12 and so on, so there was an element of baso-Judaism, apparently, in this false mixture of teaching, and we tend to think, "Well, Judaism is basically equivalent to Old Testament faith." No, it's not. Judaism is not a derivation of Old Testament faith, Judaism is a deviation from Old Testament faith and we don't have time to support that tonight but you need to keep that in mind, and Judaism in the New Testament period was also susceptible to taking on all kinds of elements of superstition and elements of paganism even, and that's why you have such a hodgepodge here in Colossae.

Now, you notice the connection there in verse 16, it begins, "Do not therefore." Now, why does Paul say "therefore"? "Do not therefore let anyone judge you or pass judgment on you," and the "therefore" goes back to verses 8 to 15 which we looked at last week. What he's saying, what Paul is saying essentially as he gives them instruction here, not to fall for this bootleg religion, he's saying, "Since Christ is all you need, since Christ is your satisfaction, since he is your transformation, since he is your forgiveness, since he provides you with freedom and liberty from all the dark powers that would enslave and harm you, therefore don't fall for this." So he's saying, "Since Christ is all you need, you need to repudiate all that offers you something other than Christ or all that offers you more than Christ, where bootleg religion," Paul would say, "is riddled with errors."

Which are? Well, first, bootleg religion substitutes the transitory for the substantial, verses 16 and 17. It substitutes the transitory for the substantial. Now, I can't answer all your questions on this because I don't have all my own answer on it, but let's get to at least what seems to be the heart of it. "Don't therefore let anyone pass judgment on you in matters of eating and drinking or in a matter of a festival or new moon or Sabbath." Now, this can't be completely a Jewish situation, probably, because he talks about passing judgment on matters of drinking and the Jews didn't really have so much prohibition

there, but in matters of eating, if there were dietary restrictions maybe that the false teaching at Colossae was trying to press Jewish restrictions on clean and unclean foods and so on and what were technically clean or unclean according to Judaism, and they may have been trying to push that here and so he says, "Don't let anyone pass judgment on you in those matters, or in a matter of a festival or new moon or Sabbath." Now, that could be a festival would be a Jewish feast, etc., like Passover or a new moon would be a celebration of a feast that the first of the month you have that in Numbers 28. You would also find that that was very congenial to paganism, the new moon, the beginning of a month, the astral or planet worship and so on would jive very nicely with that, or Sabbath day. So you go from the yearly, the festivals, to the monthly, to the new moons, to the weekly Sabbath days and so on. So he says, "Don't let anyone pass judgment on you in those matters." Apparently those features at Colossae were trying to impose a kind of a regimen of celebration and commemoration of these matters. If it's a matter of diet, of at least eating, Jesus in Mark 7, Mark says, "He had already pronounced all foods clean in his teaching there." He had eradicated that barrier, and the experience of Peter in Acts 10 substantiates that, so that was no longer, should no longer be in play as a requirement.

You look at these times and so on, and you notice that in verse 17, Paul seems to speak especially of the elements that would be more typical of Israel's worship in the Old Testament period or even in Judaism where he says, "which things are a shadow of the things that were to come, but the solid reality," or the body, literally, "belongs to Christ," or has to do with Christ. It seems in verse 17 that Paul backs away, in a sense; he's not talking about all the Judaistic and the pagan mishmash that may be loaded onto it, but he seems to back away and say, "Now these things in Israel's worship, the festivals and so on, new moons and Sabbaths, those sort of things, those were a shadow of what was to come. They were foreshadowings of what we would have in Christ. They were previews of what we would have in Christ. They were precursors and so on, but the solid substance has to do with Christ."

Now, you can think of these foreshadowings perhaps in terms of some of the festivals. For instance, if you turn to Leviticus 23 and you have the rundown of some of the yearly feasts and you notice Passover is one of them and you think back to Exodus 12, and you know that in Passover, the lamb was slain, the blood was put over the door. It was the lamb's blood that shielded Israel from God's wrath. You can see how that points to the work of Christ in the cross and so on, and his provision of shielding us from God's wrath by his sacrifice. You can think of the feast of Pentecost or of Weeks, how it celebrated the provision among other things of daily bread in the wheat harvest, the first of the harvest, and so on, and how it pointed even further to the ultimate gift that Christ would give in the gift of the Holy Spirit. Or you can think of the day of atonement that we are told of in Leviticus 16 and so on, and you can see there a picture, can't you, of how Christ carries away the sins of his people in that procedure. Can't go into it now but it pointed a way to Christ and ultimately it pointed beyond these two goats and so on, the one that was slain and the one that was kept alive, and the one that carried Israel's sins away into the wilderness, and it gave you a foreshadowing, a precursor of how Christ would deal with the sins of his people. Or you can think of the feast of tabernacles in the fall, and the way that commemorated the Lord's keeping and preservation of his people in all their

wilderness dangers and in all that period in the same way that Christ preserves his people as he says, "I give my sheep eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand." He is the one. He is the Lord who guides and preserves and keeps his people. He fulfills all that the feast of tabernacles depicts and so on. So these are foreshadowings, these are precursors, they are previews, etc. of the solid ultimate reality that they point to, even Christ himself.

Now, that seems to be Paul's point there but if you have the solid reality, if you have the substance, if you have the body of what these things point to, then you don't need to be fixated on those shadows. If you have the solid thing, you don't have to be fixated on the shadows. That doesn't mean you have to despise the shadows. I don't think Paul would say that, I think especially as a Christian. You may go back to Leviticus 16, to that description of the day of atonement in Israel, and having come to Jesus and having seen his work for you, you go back to Leviticus 16 and that passage may open up to you and impress you and move you more about what Jesus Christ has done for you at the cross. There may be some New Testament passages so I don't think Paul would despise the shadows but you look at them in light of the solid reality that has come in Christ. You don't despise the shadows but you don't get fixated on them, you don't hold onto them, rather you let them lead you to the one to whom they pointed. But bootleg religion will always strive to substitute the transitory and will focus on the shadows and it will not focus on the substantial and that's what Paul's concern is here.

Sort of like we have different analogies, I suppose we could use, sort of like in 1903, Henry Ford went to the Michigan Savings Bank to get a loan to build his cars and so on, and the president of the Michigan Savings Bank told Henry Ford's lawyer, "The horse is here to stay. The automobile is a novelty, a fad." Well, probably he's been proven wrong because the automobile is a fad that has stayed and the horses have basically been turned out to pasture in that respect. Or I remember, I can go back to my house and I can dig out of a box in the closet a small portable typewriter. It's a kind of a 1920s Remington, no electric stuff on it or anything like that. Very compact. It was my father's typewriter that he used. It has no correcting apparatus. It just has two spools that has a ribbon on it and so on, and it goes so far and it reverses and after a while, you know, the ribbon runs out and so you have to get a new ribbon. Of course, my dad would take 3-in-1 oil when the ribbon got bad and he would put 3-in-1 oil all across, all through the ribbon and then it extended the life of the ribbon. Of course, you could hardly see the letters because they were all blurry but it extended the life of the ribbon. Well, I have that Remington portable typewriter. I can put it up next to on my standup desk, next to my desktop computer and you see a relation. You say, "Oh, they both have a keyboard. There is some kind of genetic family relationship here," but you wouldn't want to go back to the Remington portable if you're doing word processing. It was kind of a preview, it's a foreshadowing but you don't want to hang up on that when you have this.

In fact, we could say that there is sort of in God's way of revealing himself and bringing us to Christ, had a kind of a built-in, can we call it, obsolescence going on. You run into this sometimes in appliance repair. Bad news in that situation. Sometimes you have a washer or dryer and it has a problem so you call the repair man and he comes in and I've

had a couple of them tell me that, "Well, washers or dryers aren't necessarily made to be repaired anymore, that they are mostly made to be replaced." Sometimes you run into that head on when you realize you've got a problem with one and if you repair it, you find out that it will cost two-thirds of the price of a new one. Built in obsolescence. Well, we don't like it with appliances but there is something in which in the Lord's way of revealing himself, that there were some things that were meant to be shadows but weren't meant to be permanent. They were to project and give us previews of Christ but we're not to become hung up on them as if they are the final word. They were to point us to Christ.

Of course, these sorts of things with mechanical or technological matters lack something but the idea is something is a little bit more perhaps like this, if you have a six year old and you want to teach them to ride a two wheeled bicycle, you might have a little two wheeled bicycle, okay, and he needs to learn to ride it. So you'll get him training wheels which you attach to the back wheel of the bicycle and it will give it a little flop there but it will catch you. As he rides his two wheeler, it will be more like riding a tricycle. It gives him stability and so on until he gets used to doing it and then you take off the training wheels and he's off on his way. The problem is if you have a 15-year-old and he is still riding his bike with the training wheels, there's something wrong with that, and Paul's point here is, you fixate on the shadows that are meant to point to Christ, to preview Christ, but you hang up on them and you never get to Christ or you let them obscure Christ, there's something wrong.

Sort of like these things we call pacifiers or some people call them Binky's or you may have your own little cute name for it. Maybe you have a child and he or she is, let's say, 18 months old, kind of a toddler wobbling around and so on and likes a pacifier, yet hasn't weaned him or herself off and you haven't done it. You think about that, "Yeah, maybe we ought to do that but, you know, we've got bigger fish to fry. There are more important things and there is nothing wrong with an 18 month old having a pacifier. Yes, it drops out of his mouth onto the carpet and it gets gunk on it and you have to take it to the faucet and rinse it off and dip it in formaldehyde and give it back to him and all that sort of thing. It's an inconvenience but there's nothing really wrong with it." But if you're sitting in the back of First Presbyterian sanctuary on a Sunday night and you've got room at the end of your pew and someone comes in a little late and they are 32 years old and they're sucking on a pacifier, that person has problems. There is something wrong with that and Paul says you don't want to go back to these things that are shadows. There is a kind of a planned obsolescence. These were not meant to be permanent, they were meant to point you to Jesus, to lay hold of Jesus, to prize him, and so on.

It sort of would be like driving on the interstate and you realize that you should have stopped 30 miles before and there are three or four people of you in the car and you need the facilities rather urgently and you're dying to see a rest area sign and you've come over the top of a hill and you see a blue sign that says "Rest Area 2 Miles," now what you do? Do you careen off the road and stop, get the family out and go over to the sign and take a picture of you next to the sign? No, you don't, you'd stomp on the accelerator and you get to the rest area. Well, that's what Paul was saying. Don't let bootleg religion fixate you on

the preliminaries and the foreshadowings and the shadows of what pointed to Christ that were meant to be obsolete. Don't let it substitute the transitory for the substantial.

Now, there's a second problem with bootleg religion and that is that it substitutes the speculative for the vital. The speculative for the vital. Let's look at verses 18 and 19. "Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on scraping humility and worship of angels, which things he has seen while entering into his experience, inflated without reason by his mind that is oriented on the flesh and not holding fast the head." Now, let's look at that just a bit. What's going on here? Well, the false teachers were apparently trying to impose a certain belief and practices there on the folks at Colossae, the believers there, and one of them had to do with some kind of humility. Actually, Paul uses the word "humility" in verse 18, "insisting on humility," but he's using it in a scornful sense. He's using it as a kind of a dig, "humility" in quotation marks. Probably some kind of groveling abasement that they were to do. Some scholars think that Paul is referring to some kind of a scheme of fasting that was laid out. I don't know so I just translate it "scraping humility," that kind of thing.

Then not only that, but worship of angels. There's a little bit of, what do we make of this, the worship of angels? It seems like a little bit of paganism and it probably is, but some scholars will say that by worship of angels, Paul means worship that the angels engage in and that the believers at Colossae were to engage with angels in worship in some way, but I don't think that's the point. It was worship of angels, that is, worship that was directed to angels, was what they were advocating. There are all sorts of inscriptions around Asia minor or contemporary Turkey, that have come up in which angels were appealed to in worship or in veneration, asking for their protection and their assistance and their aid, so this was apparently a common thing. That's probably what was part of the mix in this heresy or false teaching at Colossae. They were to engage in worshipping angels, seeking to ask various angels to be their protectors and defenders against malign powers and other angelic powers that would harm them and so on, and that was mixed into the whole thing.

Now, Paul is saying they may try to impose these things on you. What's the authority for that? Well, you notice what he says, "which things he has seen," whoever the false teacher might be, "things he has seen." He has had visions. He has had divine revelation, he claims, about these things. And then a strange word, "while entering," I've paraphrased it, "while entering into his experience." It's a word that's only used once in the New Testament. It has come up in a place at the Oracle of Apollo, it was about 30 miles north of Ephesus, and this word has been found where it seems to refer to the extra level of consulting the Oracle, of being involved in an experience of the mystery rites. So he apparently claims, someone would claim that he had divinely granted visions supporting this kind of teaching that he is advocating and that he got it when he had this special experience, a mystical visionary experience consulting the Oracle, perhaps. Well, there is no way, that's all well and good but there is no way you can check that. It's just like when someone says to you and hopefully they are speaking informally and not technically but when someone says to you, "The Lord told me that," it makes you wonder. I mean, how do you counter that? You say, "Are you sure he told you that? How do you know he

did?" "Well, who are you to question what the Lord has told me?" It's that you can make claims to revelation, you can make claims to having visions etc. and that God spoke to you through visions but how do you substantiate that? It's very difficult but this is what is appealed to and again and again, it causes heartache and trouble.

About in the 1500s in what is now Germany and so on, Thomas Muntzer was at the head of a whole bunch of peasants who he was stirring up and so on. They were standing against the princes and so on and the princes had offered that if the peasants handed over Thomas Muntzer, that they would allow them to live and so on, but they got no answer to that. The peasants had far more people than the princes did but the princes had about 2,000 cavalry and so on. Well, Thomas Muntzer stirred up his hearers and he declared that God had spoken to him and promised victory; that he himself would catch the cannonballs of the enemy in the sleeves of his cloak; and that God would transform heaven and earth rather than allow his people to perish. So that's what he told them and at that time in his speech, a rainbow appeared and this was thought to be very important because a rainbow was the insignia on Muntzer's own flag and banner, and so, well obviously that was a sign. Obviously, they didn't turn Muntzer over and so the princes attacked and the peasants panicked and fled and they were cut down and slaughtered by the hundreds, but you see, there was a revelation. God had promised victory. What kind of a revelation was that? It's easy to claim.

Now, you might say, "Well, but we don't have that sort of thing going on now. I mean, this is different. This is the 21st century and so on." But it wasn't so long ago when you had these sorts of things and they are still going on. There is a televangelist, and if I mentioned his name you would recognize him, he is one that claimed in one of his books that Jesus Christ himself appeared to him and gave him a formula for faith. He said it happened while he was in the Spirit, just like the Apostle John was on the Isle of Patmos, and a white cloud enveloped him, he says, and he began to speak in tongues. "Then the Lord Jesus," he says, "himself appeared to me. He stood within three feet of me." And after a little casual conversation, Jesus told him to get a pencil and a piece of paper and he instructed him, "Write down 1, 2, 3, 4," and he gave him a formula of faith so that anyone who followed it could get what they want from him. He claims that. "He stood within three feet of me." How do you know that?

Well, there's another televangelist that once said, "God showed me a vision that almost took my breath away. I was sucked into the Spirit, caught away, and I found myself standing in the very presence of Almighty God and it just echoed into my being and he said these words to me. Exactly these words: many of my ministers pray for my people but I want you to pray the prayer of agreement with them. Right in the presence of Almighty God." Now, how do you know? But it's easy to claim, isn't it? "Which he has seen entering into his experience." It's easy to claim authority for this stuff.

Now, what's the deficiency in this? You notice that Paul says that when they substitute the speculative, claiming revelation, for the vital, well, what's the vital? What are they missing? Verse 19, "and not," that is, these false teachers, "not holding onto the head out of whom the whole body, being supplied and knit together through the ligaments and the

sinews, grows with a growth that comes from God." Do you see their problem? They're not holding onto the head. Who is the head? The head is Jesus who is head of the church, his body. Here the word "head" is used in the sense of sovereign. Surely he is in control over it and it is also used in the sense of sustainer because the head in this image sustains the body and they are not holding onto him. You know, faith is not just a profession but it's a life union, a vital union with Christ, and they must go on holding onto him and they're not doing it. That's a problem.

Steve Brady is a minister, a Bible expositor, in England and he's a principal of a Bible school there and he tells of a time when some of his friends had him out in the English Channel and they were going to teach him to water ski and so on, and one of his friends had a big powerful speedboat and so they trussed him all up in a rubber suit and so on and paraphernalia, and I don't know, life jacket and so on, and explained everything. It would really be a piece of cake. All he had to do was he had this rope with a handle on it between his knees and he just had to hold onto it. Well, apparently he didn't for several times and he said he drank more water from the English Channel than he thought someone could and still live and there he was bobbing around after one of these episodes in the water and his friend circles around in his speedboat and he says to him, "Steve, do you know what faith is?" Well, Steve thought, "Well, I'm a minister. I could tell you a few things about faith," but he decided to eat humble pie and he said, "Well, Peter, tell me," and Peter, his friend said, "Faith is holding on. Do not let go of the rope."

Now, that's what Paul is saying here. What matters is not having these pretended visions that you lay claim to as if that supports your credentials, their problem is they are not holding onto Jesus as the only life giver and so if you face bootleg religion that tries to substitute the speculative, the false claims for the vital, the living relation to Jesus, what do you do to counter that? You do what they don't do, you keep holding onto the head. As Jesus said in John 15:4, "remain in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except that it remains in the vine, no more can you unless you remain in me." Keep on holding onto the head, your life-giving Savior.

Now then, bootleg religion also has a problem in that it substitutes what we could call the impressive for the effective, verses 20 to 23. The impressive for the effective. Now, there is a kind of an anomaly in verses 20 to 22. Paul says, he begins, "if you died with Christ" now it's not in doubt, the "if" there is what we would call "if as is the case," or you could almost translate it "since." "Since you died with Christ," when Christ died and you are united to him, you die with him. "If you're dead and you're freed from the control of these elemental spirits of the universe," from this dominance of these evil powers, demonic powers that they were tending to kowtow to in Colossae. "If you have died with Christ, you are free of the control of the elemental spirits of the universe, why as living in the world do you submit yourselves to regulations? Why do you put yourself under the regimen that they map out for you?" What is that regimen? We get a taste of it in verse 21 when Paul repeats the various commands that the false teachers make. "Don't handle. Don't taste. Don't even touch." No, no, no, and so on, probably having to do with food regulations of some kind.

Now, he says, "These are all destined to perish as they are used up." That's basically a way of saying this has to do with food, you know, and there is really nothing of consequence that's going to come from that because that food, someone is just going to perish, it's going to go down into the digestive system and that's going to go down into the sewer system and that's going to go eventually into the great human compost pile. It's not going to have any effect one way or another. Well, why do you submit to that?" And he says it's according to the commandments and teachings of men, it has mere human authority so it has no lasting value, you know, it's just going to go to waste basically, and then it has no proper authority either. They are just making these claims. So Paul says in his perplexed question: why? Why do you submit to that stuff? Why do you let them micromanage your Christian life, he's saying? It's frustration that he has.

Sometimes that can be hard to explain. You wonder why but psychologically it's not quite so hard to understand perhaps. Maybe you've had contact with someone sometime whose had experience under a very strict regimented almost cult-like group. I happen to know a family like that in one of our experiences in the pastorate. There was a family who got out of, was almost a cult-like atmosphere. It was Christian and yet it was very authoritarian, very confining, very demanding, etc., very regimented, and they got out of it, and you could tell there were some psychological scars there that went along with it. They were in our congregation for a while and I had the sense sometimes when I talked to the head of the family, I had the sense that he wanted me to give him directions about something. Here's what you ought to do rather than, you know, you're free to work this out under Christ. No, no, I think he wanted directions. Interesting that when they moved away then from our congregation, another location, they didn't go back into a situation that was as confining as cult-like as the one before but they did go into a situation that did have a certain kind of authority structure and expectations etc., almost as if that's all they felt safe with perhaps. It's almost perhaps like a wife who's verbally and physically abused and you say, "Why? Why doesn't she get out of there for her own safety etc.?" And you may not be able to understand it but there is a certain psychological element there that's very difficult to free yourself from that danger when it is a clear danger. Paul is saying here, "Why? Why do you let yourself be dictated to like this?"

Now notice what Paul says in verse 23, he says, "all of this has," and it's a difficult verse to translate, "the appearance of wisdom in pseudo-worship and scraping humility and austerity to the body." Oh, it seems to be impressive. Now you might say, "We don't really have these sorts of situations today, do we? I mean, this is more like first century Colossae and all of that." Well, a fellow by the name of Ron Enroth wrote a book a few years ago called, "Churches that Abuse," and it hasn't been all that long. Here are some of the situations that were in some of those churches. One that was kind of a non-orthodox and deviant group but nevertheless a pastor there instructed the members to report each other's faults to the pastor. Hm, that might be fun. A dress code was put in place for both men and women as well as a dietary code restricting pork, shellfish and alcohol, all based on the pastor's interpretation of Old Testament laws. Oreo cookies were outlawed because they contained lard. Interracial dating was not allowed and certain Christian books and book stores were to be avoided because they promoted false creeds. There you go. Or another group, fellowship, in which the folks would buy no insurance, they would

not wear contact lenses or glasses. Shame on some of you. And they would remove the seatbelts from their cars, their vehicles, because they were trying to walk by faith. Not only that, but wives were expected to be submissive, obedient homemakers who practiced no birth control. Members were told to pray only once concerning a matter, to avoid vain repetition. Married individuals were not to have sexual foreplay or sex for pleasure so as to avoid "inciting lust." And members were not to swear any oaths in a court of law and they are prohibited from consulting attorneys, perhaps in order to sue the socks off a church.

But in any case, you see the regimen that is structured there and Paul says when you have something like that, it has the appearance, it has the appearance of wisdom. I mean, people may think you're nuts but they'll say, "But look at those folks. They are so sincere and committed. Look at what they put themselves through." It really looks impressive but bootleg religion does that, it substitutes the impressive for the effective. Now, Paul doesn't go into the effective a whole lot here that he does say, "all of this," he does say in the last of verse 23, "all of this is of no value toward combating the indulgence of the flesh." That is, it doesn't do anything to overcome the power of sin from a self-centered nature. It just doesn't do anything. It doesn't touch it. It's all very impressive, you can put yourself through all kinds of discipline and if you're a person that's able to discipline yourself, you can put on a pretty good show and so on, but it doesn't get down to the root of things. It won't make you more like your Savior. It won't touch it so you may have folks in this situation and Paul is saying, "You know, it doesn't matter whether you eat or abstain from eating Oreo cookies, that's not going to affect whether you withstand temptation. And it doesn't matter whether you abstain from eating collards that are cooked in bacon fat and served, that's not going to make any difference in helping you walk through this dark trial you're going through right now in faithfulness. And you may eat or not eat stewed okra. You may eat it or you may abstain from the wretched stuff, but it's not going to make you more like Jesus. It's not going to touch that. It won't be effective where it needs to be. There is no power in that." And bootleg religion always tries to substitute the impressive for the effective.

Well, you may think this text and its concerns are far away from you but there are new deviants that are always coming up to the surface and so perhaps going through this passage will provide you at least with a grid for recognizing new religious dead-end streets. So watch for those who substitute the transitory for the substantial, the speculative for the vital, the impressive for the effective. And what do you need to do to avoid getting sucked into bootleg religion yourself? Do exactly what they don't do, verse 19, keep holding onto the head, to your life-giving Savior who sustains you.

Let us pray.

Our Lord, your servant Jeremiah was right, people, even your people, are always wandering around digging cisterns that leak and don't hold water. We are so in love, O Lord, with religious cul-de-sacs that come along. Grant, O Lord, that we ourselves would be satisfied with Jesus, the fountain of living waters, and be content to drink of him. Amen.