

LIVE IN UNION WITH THE DEATH OF CHRIST
(SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2015)

Scripture Reading: Is. 29:11-24; Col. 2:20-23

INTRODUCTION

Listen to the description of the western world in the early 16th century written by Carlos Eire.

“In 1509, when John Calvin was born, Western Christendom still shared a common religion of immanence. Heaven was never too far from Earth. The sacred was diffused in the profane, the spiritual in the material. Divine power, embodied in the Church and its sacraments, reached down through innumerable points of contact to make itself felt: to forgive and to punish, to protect against the ravages of nature, to heal, to soothe, and to work all sorts of wonders. Priests could absolve adulterers and murderers, or bless fields and cattle. During their lives, saints could prevent lightning from striking, restore sight to the blind, or preach to birds and fish.

“Unencumbered by the limitations of time and space, they could do even more through their images and relics after death. A pious glance at a statue of St. Christopher in the morning ensured protection from illness and death throughout the day. Burial in the habit of St. Francis improved the prospects for the afterlife. Pilgrimage to Santiago, where the body of the apostle James had been deposited by angels, or to Canterbury, where St. Thomas à Becket had had his skull split open by knights of King Henry II, could make a lame man walk, or hasten a soul’s release from purgatory. The map of Europe bristled with holy places; life pulsed with the expectation of the miraculous. In the popular mind and in much of the official teaching of the Church, almost anything was possible. One could even eat the flesh of the risen Christ in a consecrated wafer.”¹

Our own age is not identical, but increasingly we are living in a very superstitious and pagan age. The differences may not be as great as we might imagine.

Our text for today continues with what we observed two weeks ago in verses 16-19.

Colossians 2 is the warning chapter of the book.

¹ Carlos Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 1.

And as I will stress, Paul places emphasis on our union with Jesus Christ, specifically our union with Him in His death.

In the words of Col. 2:20, **Live in union with the death of Christ.**

We will look at Col. 2:20-23 in three parts.

- 1) If you died with Christ, why do you live according to man's rules?, v. 20.
- 2) Man's rules deal with things that perish, vv. 21-22
- 3) Man's rules have no value in curbing our sinful flesh, v. 23.

1. IF YOU DIED WITH CHRIST, WHY DO YOU LIVE ACCORDING TO MAN'S RULES?, v. 20.

Col. 2:20 Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as *though* living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—

What have we already seen about the Colossian believers?

1:4 – They had true faith under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

1:9 – Paul and Timothy continued to pray for their spiritual growth.

1:10 – Great goal: walk worthy of the Lord.

Then in chapter 2 we have a number of warnings given to this faithful body of believers.

2:4 – Lest anyone deceive you with persuasive words.

2:8 – 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. [This verse is connected closely with vv. 20-23]

2:16 – Let no one judge you in food, drink, or regarding festivals, new moons, and sabbaths.

2:18 – Let no one cheat you of your reward. This is similar to the warning of 2:16.

Point of application – faithful churches and Christians are never beyond warning and encouragement.

The more faithful the church the more vigilant it must be.

As we focus on 2:20, we see that Paul doesn't give a command but asks a question.

The key phrase of the verse is the *if statement* – if you died with Christ.

Even though Paul specifically focuses on the death of Christ, he is not seeking to say that only His death matters.

We know that Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 15 if Jesus did not rise from the dead, our preaching and faith would be empty.

The death of Christ as we know from the rest of this chapter includes all that Christ did for us in His life, death, and resurrection.

Calling attention to the death of Christ does highlight the reality of the power of sin being broken and release from bondage.

Romans 6:7 For he who has died has been freed from sin.

The word “if” in verse 20 is not an expression of doubt on Paul’s part. It is a call to think about what something truly means. The “if” we can say is a challenge.

You again see in verse 20 the phrase “basic principles of the world.”

This is a difficult phrase to understand.

The same word translated as basic principles is also used two times in Galatians 4.

Commentators are not certain whether the meaning is the same in Colossians and Galatians.²

As I have stated before, some understand basic principles to mean the OT ceremonial laws or that these basic principles are spiritual beings, regarded as personal and active in the physical and heavenly elements, a form of superstition.

What is clear here from Colossians is that Paul did not want the believers to be tempted and encouraged to go back to their days before they came to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Again, we see the danger in submitting to man-made ideas and laws and living according to the values and goals of this world.

If Paul were writing to us today, what dangers do you think he would highlight?

- 1) Many temptations and distractions
- 2) Spiritual mysticism that is taught and promoted even in some Reformed circles
- 3) Some forms still of legalism

² Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. Waco: Word Books, 1990), 166. R. Alan Cole, *Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 9; IVP/Acordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 160.

- 4) Lethargy and spiritual laziness
- 5) False teaching involving the gospel

If we have died with Christ then we must live in continued union with Him recognizing the break with sin, with our past, and with any form of spiritual mysticism or superstition.

Watch out for the dangers you once engaged in before you were converted and came to faith in Christ. Stay clear of new dangers that would tempt and seek to lead you astray.

Your greatest freedom and joy is in union with Christ in His death!

2. MAN’S RULES DEAL WITH THINGS THAT PERISH, v. 21-22.

Col. 2:21 “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” **22** which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

In verses 21-23, Paul shows how foolish are the rules and ideas of men in contrast to our freedom in Jesus Christ.

In verse 21, Paul may be giving examples of actual rules to which the Colossians were tempted to follow or he might have been making fun of some of the rules that were given.³

“Handle not, nor yet taste, nor even touch.”⁴

Do you find anything like these laws in the OT?

Well, it depends on exactly what you are looking for.

For example, in Numbers 6, we have the laws given to those who took a Nazirite vow. A Nazirite was to be totally separate from wine, vinegar, grape juice, fresh grapes, and raisins. Further, he was to totally avoid any contact with death.

Priests during the time of their actual service also were to not drink any wine.⁵

Here I think we can make an interesting observation. Satan can only twist and pervert the gifts that God has given. And men and women in a similar way make their own rules which in some cases seem to mimic God’s Laws but are far different in reality.

And very often we see that man’s laws end up replacing God’s laws.

³ Murray J. Harris, 129.

⁴ O’Brien, 150.

⁵ Leviticus 10:8-11.

Paul criticizes the laws of verse 21 in two ways.

They deal with things that perish with the using – food and drink.

Rom. 14:17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

1Cor. 6:13 Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, but God will destroy both it and them. Now the body *is* not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

Clearly God’s word speaks to all areas of life. Food and drink are to be used and enjoyed to bring glory to God. Certainly drunkenness and gluttony are condemned repeatedly in Scripture.

But some people focus way too much on physical matters and miss the big picture. Some people are way more concerned about their physical well being than their spiritual well being. They are more concerned about their diets than they are about truly following after Jesus Christ.

Second, Paul says that these laws are merely the commandments and doctrines of men. They are not God-given laws.

Likely in verse 22, Paul has in mind the words of Isaiah 29:13 which our Lord also referenced in dealing with the Pharisees and their man-made laws.

Is. 29:13 Therefore the Lord said: “Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men,

Very easily man-made laws come to replace God’s laws.

3. MAN’S RULES HAVE NO VALUE IN CURBING OUR SINFUL FLESH, v. 23.

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.

Paul continues to show the problems but also the dangers with the false teaching the believers in Colossae needed to decisively reject.

What was the danger of this false teaching?

It has the appearance of wisdom.

All forms of successful false teaching have this in common, that it looks to be true wisdom, but only on the surface.

How did this false teaching have an appearance of wisdom?

Three things are mentioned in verse 23.

1) Self-imposed religion or self-imposed worship. This is a difficult word used just 1x in the NT. This is a boast of the supposed worship of these false teachers, perhaps connected with verse 18.

Here I think we can make a good point of observation. Biblical worship generally speaking is very simple in form, while false worship very often is associated with elaborate rituals and ceremonies.

2) False humility. Again we have the use of the word humility that is modified by the adjective false. Some versions here have asceticism.

Two weeks ago I mentioned Simeon the Stylite. For 37 years he lived on a small platform on top of a pillar near the city of Aleppo in Syria. Earlier in his life he practiced other forms of asceticism. He lived for over a year in a hut, where during the season of Lent he did not eat or drink. He later took to standing continually as long as his limbs would sustain him.⁶

3) Neglect of the body or treating the body very severely. This is similar to the second point.

Peter O'Brien writes:

By means of fasting and abstinence they thought to prepare themselves for divine fullness and the reception of visions. Yet this too was nothing more than the mere appearance of wisdom (λόγον . . . σοφίας).⁷

What is the final problem with this false teaching?

It has no value against the indulgence of the flesh. Man-made rules are of no true spiritual benefit.

Verse 23 is a good lesson that so many people who appear to the world to be holy are often very wicked. Don't be impressed with external piety and holiness.

⁶ See Wikipedia article on Simeon.

⁷ Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians–Philemon* (WBC 44; Accordance/Thomas Nelson Electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 153-154.

Human-based rules do not lead to spiritual growth.

Your own ideas, plans, and resolutions are of no value apart from truly seeking after Jesus Christ.

Even good duties like prayer and Bible reading can become man-imposed duties if you are doing them simply to please yourself or other people.

Rom. 13:14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to *fulfill its* lusts.

CONCLUSION:

Consider some of the challenges given already in the book of Colossians related to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and our union with Him.

Col. 1:10 that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

Col. 2:6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,

Col. 2:10 and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

Col. 2:19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase *that is* from God.

Col. 2:20 Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as *though* living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—

If you died with Christ...

- True conversion
- Humility
- Dependence
- Thankfulness
- Sincere striving and laboring

Live in union with the death of Christ.

Prayer

Hymn: 468

Benediction – Eph. 3:20-21

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.