

T R I N I T Y
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D A L L A S

The Sermon

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Colossians 2:20-23

"The Fatal Flaws of Asceticism"

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TRANSCRIPT

I've been watching a bit, and your study in the book of Colossians has brought you to chapter 2, verse 20; and my assignment this morning is to finish chapter 2. So our text for this morning is just four verses: Colossians 2:20-23. And before I read it, I want to give some context; in fact, quite a bit of context. I listened to Mark Becker's sermon from last Sunday and Dr Lawson's two messages prior to that, so I have been enjoying your journey through this chapter. And here's where we are. I'm going to start at the beginning and summarize it for you.

Paul is writing the church at Colossae from Rome where Paul is under house arrest, and we know that, because in the last verse of the last verse of this book he tells them, "Remember my chains." He's literally chained at the ankle to a Roman soldier 24/7. Now I actually own a set of Roman shackles from that era. I bought them one time on a trip to the Mediterranean area, and these are heavy iron cuffs with a very unwieldy chain, and they're designed to secure a person's ankle to the guard. And in fact, I wish I could show you my Roman ankle cuffs, but I knew I'd never get them through the TSA checkpoint, especially in my carry-on luggage, and so I didn't even try.

But just know that when Paul says, "Remember my chains," he is talking about at least seven pounds of iron that kept him fettered to a guard at all times. And so it's obvious from the epistle itself that this is a letter Paul wrote at some point during the two years described at the very end of the

book of Acts, when Luke tells us Paul was in room under house arrest. Acts 28:16 says, "Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him." So he's chained to this guard at all times. Probably a shift of three guards every day would come and change ship. But Paul had to be there, and never could leave this house. He has no privacy, no dignity, no ability to enjoy any of the normal comforts of life, except for the fellow saints who were able to come and visit him during those two years of imprisonment. And Luke writes about that in the last two verses of Acts. Luke writes, "Paul stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, unhindered," unhindered in his preaching. He was certainly hindered in where he could go. Those are the closing words of the book of Acts, and Paul's epistle to the Colossians then basically takes up at that point.

And so the last chapter of Colossians is full of greetings Paul is sending back to Colossae from other believers who were there with him in Rome when he wrote this letter. He gives us a list of the people who were there. He names Tychicus, Onesimus, Luke, Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Justus, and Demas. So it's quite a room full of visitors he has. Epaphras and Tychicus and Onesimus are going back to Colossi. Onesimus is that slave who is described in the epistle to Philemon, and he's on his way back with Epaphras, who's bringing him back to Colossi, and they will carry this epistle, and probably the epistle to Philemon, and some other. There's also an epistle Paul names to Laodicea, the church there, which isn't preserved in our canon, so it's not an inspired epistle. But at least these two inspired epistles they are carrying back to Colossae with them.

Colossi was a long way from Rome. It was a thousand-mile journey mostly by sea across a dangerous part of the Mediterranean. The distance from Rome to Colossae, if you draw a straight line as the crow flies, is roughly the same distance as from Dallas to Pittsburgh, just so you get an idea in your head of how far it was. But it could be a treacherous journey, because you had to sail around the Roman and Greek peninsulas, and then land at Ephesus. And after you landed at Ephesus, you had another hundred-mile journey across land to get to Colossae.

Paul himself had never met with the church at Colossae, it was an indirect result of his missionary work in Ephesus. And what seems to, if you piece together what Scripture says, I think what happened was Epaphras had apparently heard the gospel from Paul in Ephesus, and he took the news back to Colossae, and this church was the fruit of Epaphras' testimony. It's an indirect result of Paul's missionary work; so he is, in a sense, their spiritual father. But he indicates in chapter 1, verse 4, that he has only heard of their faith in Christ Jesus and the love which they had for all the saints. He also says in the first verse of our chapter, chapter 2, that they had not seen his face in the flesh. So this is a letter to this church from a renowned apostle whom most of them did not know personally, but they certainly knew about him, and they knew from Epaphras that Paul's words carried the weight of apostolic authority.

And so Epaphras, who most likely was – he was certainly the founder and most likely serving as pastor of the Colossian church – he had apparently traveled to Rome to solicit Paul's help in answering what were some very serious threats to the doctrinal orthodoxy of the church at Colossi. False teachings had crept in among the Colossians, and these were serious errors they were threatening to develop into full-blown heresies. And in fact, you've already heard both Dr. Lawson and Mark Becker say that the errors threatening the Colossian church were an odd mixture of four different strains of error: early Gnosticism and Jewish tradition, with a little Eastern mysticism and Greek philosophy to sweeten the blend. I think Dr Lawson and Mark Becker both named four strands of errors that Paul addresses in this epistle. There's Jewish legalism, Gnostic dualism, superstitious mysticism, and a rigid kind of asceticism. So there are elements of the Judaizing heresy, with the demand for physical circumcision. That's the same heresy that Paul deals with in the Galatian epistle.

It's also the same error that is condemned by the first church council in Acts 15. And there was also in Colossae an echo of the error that Paul condemns in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians, where someone was evidently trying to upgrade the gospel by blending it with the wisdom of this world, which, of course, is foolishness before God. And again, the Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless. That's 1 Corinthians 3:19-20. And then for good measure to make it all seem super spiritual, they had added claims, the false teachers had added these claims that they had

seen heavenly visions, and they burdened down the gospel with a list of rules against all kinds of earthly enjoyments. And in fact, if you want the technical names for these four strains of error, I would label them legalism, Gnosticism, mysticism, and stoicism. Verse 16 condemns the error of legalism, and in that one sentence Paul completely debunks the heresy of the Judaizers, verse 16, "Therefore, no one is to judge you with regard to food or drink, or in respect to a festival or a new moon, or a Sabbath day - things which are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ."

And then the other varieties of error that were - that was the big one, by the way: legalism. That sort of headed the list. The other three varieties of error that were troubling the Colossian assembly are all clearly alluded to in one verse, verse 18, where Paul says that whoever was teaching these things was defrauding the Colossians, threatening to rob them of their heavenly reward by enticing them to follow what were really manmade teachings, "delighting in" - he says - "self-abasement" - that's stoicism - "and" - here's the hard one - "worship of the angels, the worship of the angels," - that, I believe, is a reference to stoic asceticism, and I will explain why I think that's what that means before we're finished this morning. So self-abasement, along with the worship of angels, that's a reference, an allusion at least to stoicism - "going into detail about visions he has seen," - that's mysticism - "being puffed up for nothing by his fleshly mind," - that's Gnosticism.

So Paul condemns legalism, stoicism, mysticism, and Gnosticism - all four strains of these errors. And of course, Paul's inspired denunciation of those errors also applies then to any blend of ideas that borrows anything from those sources. And it seems evident to me that whoever was peddling these ideas to the Colossians wanted a religion that sounded more sophisticated, more familiar to the people in that culture, and more palatable to the secular, wisdom-loving Greeks than the simple gospel. It wasn't sophisticated enough. It didn't meet them at their felt needs, you know, it didn't jive with what they already believed. And so the false teachers who undoubtedly claimed to be Christians - heretics always do - they thought, perhaps, they really perhaps believed that they were improving on the simplicity of the gospel by adding these beliefs that were more in harmony with what people in that culture were drawn to. That way of mingling

Christian truth with other religious notions is called syncretism, and it always results in serious error, because you simply cannot blend the revealed truth of God with the teachings and commandments of men and come up with anything other than an ideological monstrosity. It's always going to be bad.

You know the Pharisees, you know them already; they did this in a subtle way. They added manmade requirements about ceremonial washings and extra rules for Sabbath observance, and a whole lot of external and ritualistic embellishments, that they added to their observance of the clear commandments of the Mosaic covenant. And Jesus condemned them for doing that in the most emphatic way possible. Matthew 15:3-9, He told them, "You transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition." And then he says, "You have invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition." And then He calls them hypocrites: "You hypocrites, in vain do you worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." Their religion, Jesus says, was worthless, because it was this syncretized blend of biblical commandments mixed with human religiosity, and the result was a completely manmade religion, and it was utterly worthless. And in fact, that's what Jesus says: "In vain do you worship Me. Your religion is worthless." And in fact, Jesus treated it as damnable heresy.

And the same thing was beginning to happen among the Colossian believers, that's why Epaphras had sought Paul's assistance. The religion of some of the people in the Colossian church was trending towards a kind of externalism that was very much like what the Pharisees did. They were obsessed with Sabbaths and ceremonies and all the pomp and circumcision that the Pharisees loved so much. And furthermore, because this was a predominantly Gentile region, most of the people in that church were probably Gentiles. The push to contextualize the gospel for that culture had blended also Gnostic ideas and Greek philosophy and Eastern mysticism, along with a heavy dose of this Pharisaical style legalism; and all of that combined then overlaid the gospel in a way that obscured the preeminence and the sufficiency of Christ. So Paul is writing to correct all of those tendencies, and his strategy is to restore Christ to His rightful place in the hearts and minds of the Colossian believers, to make Christ preeminent in their thoughts and in their focus, and also to get their focus out of this

world and off the culture around them and to teach them to focus their minds on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth - and he's about to say that in Colossians 3.

Now the central truth of this chapter, chapter 2, is spelled out pretty clearly in verse 3: "In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." And the point there is, there is no need to try to embellish the gospel with the wisdom of the Greeks or the traditions of the Jews or the legalism of the Pharisees. Christ is perfectly sufficient. He alone embodies everything we need for life and godliness. He is literally everything we need. He is, after all, God incarnate. He says, verse 9, "In Christ all the fullness of Deity dwells bodily." And therefore, verse 3, "In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." And human philosophy can add nothing to that. "In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." So you can't add to it.

Now by the way, don't be thrown off balance by that word "hidden": "In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Paul is not suggesting that Christianity is like the mystery religions, where deep truth, the real truth that you really need to know is a mystery, it's a secret that you have to be initiated into by some enlightened master. This is not what he's saying. On the contrary, he's telling the Colossians that they don't need to look anywhere other than Christ to find the treasures of wisdom and knowledge: "Christ is sufficient to meet every spiritual need you have." That's the point: all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are contained in Christ. They are held in Him, they are bound up in His Person, not in order to keep them perpetually hidden, but in order to put them within reach of anyone and everyone who is united with Christ by faith.

And in fact, in chapter 3, verse 3, he's going to say to the Colossian believers, "You are hidden with Christ as well; for you died, and your life has been hidden with Christ in God." He's about to say that in verse 3 of chapter 3. So he's saying, "There's no need to look elsewhere; you're hidden with Christ in God. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ as well, so you don't need to be looking for deeper truth as if it might be available from the philosophers or the Gnostics or any other

source outside of Christ and His word." And that's what this whole chapter is about.

Again, it's underscoring the sufficiency, the absolute sufficiency of Christ. And there are a couple of key expressions that I know have been explained to you, I just want to review these again. One is the phrase "the elementary principles of this world." That's an expression that appears twice here: once in verse 8, and once in verse 20, "the elementary principles of the word." That expression is defined by the context; and I say that, because if you just read that in some ancient literature, you might think that's talking about earth, air, fire, and water, because those were considered the chief elements of the world by most people in ancient times.

But that's not what Paul's talking about, it doesn't fit the context here. And we know from elsewhere Paul uses this term for something very specific. He uses the same expression twice in Galatians chapter 4. In Galatians 4:3, he says, "While we were children, we were enslaved under the elemental things of the world." And in Greek, it's the same expression we have here, "the elements of the world." And in that context he's talking about the law being our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. He's referring there to the ceremonial law. And in verse 9, he asks the Galatians why they would want to turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, and he uses the same expression there, "the elements," the simplest things. And in the context of Galatians 4, it is very clear that what Paul has in mind are the ceremonial features of the Mosaic covenant. These are like the dietary laws, the laws governing Sabbath observance and ceremonial washing; very things he's confronting here in Colossians 2.

These are the ceremonial laws. They're elemental, or elementary, in the same way that for us the letters of the alphabet are elementary. The that's the first, simplest thing about literacy that you teach to a child. And those letters of the alphabet are the building blocks for learning more complex things, but they're elementary. And once you've mastered the alphabet song, you don't have to sign up for a class where they're going to teach the alphabet in depth. It's a simple truth: you retain that truth, and you move on with it, you build on it.

But the Galatians and their neighbors, the Colossians, were refusing to leave their coloring books and their toys behind. They were trying to cling to the symbolic features of the old covenant, the Sabbaths and the ceremonies of the Old Testament, even though, verse 17, "those things were only a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." And I loved what Mark Becker said about this last week. He correctly equates that with being so obsessed with the packaging that you ignore the product that's inside the package. And I think Mark Becker said nobody does that. Well, I have a kid that did it. One of my sons, when he was a toddler we got a chair for his playroom. He didn't care much for the chair, but he played for weeks with the box that it came in.

And on a spiritual level that's exactly what was happening in Colossi. People were becoming obsessed with the Sabbaths and ceremonies, even though those are features of Moses' law that were always designed to be temporary and symbolic. And even though the Colossians already had the very substance of the things that these elementary features represented, they were shadows. They clung to the symbols and the shadows rather than the substance. So that meant that their focus was off Christ Himself, because He was the substance, He is the substance, and they were obsessed instead with things that merely represented Him.

And so Paul tells them in chapter 2, "Christ is all you need. In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells bodily. In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Verse 10, "In Him you have been filled." Verse 11, "In Him you were already circumcised with a circumcision made without hands." Verse 12, "In Him you were buried and raised again through faith." Verses 13-15, "In Him you were made alive. Your sin debt was canceled. The enemy of your soul was defeated, and he's been publicly humiliated. "Therefore," - he says, verse 16, he's saying - "stop with this legalistic asceticism and guard the freedom with which Christ has set you free." Verse 16, "No one is to judge you in food or drink, or in respect to a festival or a new moon, or a Sabbath day." He's saying, "Those things are not spiritual features that you are obliged as a Christian to observe. You can do that if you want; but whether you do it or you don't do it, no one is to judge you," and that's his answer to the Judaizing legalists.

That's verse 16. In verse 18, as we've seen, he then goes on likewise to dismiss the claims of stoic and mystical and Gnostic asceticism. In fact, look at it. The stoic aesthetic delighted in self-abasement, because – and Paul names that, "self-abasement," and he links it – I mentioned this before – he links it to the worship of the angels. And therefore, I'm inclined to think that he may not be talking here about offering worship to angelic beings.

That wasn't common in Judaism; they didn't worship angels, they considered that an abomination. I'm inclined to think this is not talking about them actually worshipping angelic beings, but rather what he's referring to here is a kind of self-abasing attempt to mimic the style of worship that is practiced by the angels, you know, where they cover their face and their feet, and they constantly recite the majesty and holiness of God in a kind of ritual form. And these guys in Colossi were promoting an artificial brand of seraphic sanctimony, trying to simulate the pure holiness of the angels. But fallen creatures are not capable of that kind of purity, and so mimicking, the look of it becomes a kind of artificial piety.

And in fact, I read one commentator on this text who agrees with that. He thinks Paul's talking about trying to make their worship mimic the style of angelic worship, and he says that's like the Essenes, a sect that was contemporary with Christ. They were the ones that lived in the desert and kept the Dead Sea Scrolls and all of that. They were known for the strictness of their piety, and they spent most of their day just reflecting on spiritual things. They abstained from all earthly pleasures, went out to live in the desert; and their stated goal, what they said they were trying to do was live like the angels here on earth. And that's what I think this refers to, "the worship of angels."

But even if Paul is talking about worship offered to angelic beings, he links it to this sort of self-abasement. So I think it must be the case that whoever was doing this, if they were indeed offering worship to angels, they were probably claiming that they did it because they're too weak or too contemptible to approach God directly; and so they bowed and prayed to

angels instead as mediators. In fact, that's very much what the Roman Catholic Church does with the saints and Mary, same thing. And Paul clearly connects the worship of the angels with the idea of a kind of sanctimonious self-abasement. So either way, this is a condemnation of stoic asceticism.

And then in verse 18, he also takes up the subject of mystical asceticism in his reproof. He talks about the guy who goes into detail about visions he has seen. And of course, the evangelical world today is full of people like that, who talk nonstop about extra biblical visions that they've seen, and they think it seems that that's more important to follow and track than what Scripture actually tells us clearly to do. And then he takes a poke also at the Gnostic ascetic. This is the person who claims to be privy to secret knowledge. But Paul says, "He's just puffed up for nothing by his fleshly mind." Those are his words in the LSB, "puffed up for nothing by his fleshly mind."

That's an accurate description of the spirit of Gnosticism. Gnostics are puffed up by nothing by their fleshly mind. Gnosticism is an arrogant, supercilious brand of religiosity; and the person who thinks he has been specially enlightened with regard to some secret knowledge is puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind. That's what the ESV says, "puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind." In other words, no matter how strict his brand of asceticism might be, might seem to be, it's sensuous, it's sheer carnality, it's not spiritual.

Gnostics tend to be exactly like the Pharisees in that regard. And it's true of every brand of asceticism. "They wear the badges of their piety on their sleeves for a carnal reason. They do all their deeds to be seen by others." That's what Jesus said about them. So Paul's point is all of these four strains of error, they all fail; and although all of them promise that they can catapult their followers to a higher plane of sanctification, they actually halt a person's spiritual growth, because all of them move the focus of the believer away from where it properly belongs.

Namely, our focus should be fixed singularly on Christ, and he keeps saying that. Instead, all of these embellishments direct the person's energies and efforts and attention to something that has nothing to do with the doctrines and commandments of Christ. Verse 19, "Those who embrace these errors are not holding fast to the head," - that's Christ - "from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God." And what he's implying there is you won't grow if you add all of these embellishments to your religion. Spiritual growth simply does not occur when people turn away from Christ to follow other things, or add other things to Christ.

Now, the other things that had captured the attention of the Colossians really boil down to one thing, and that's asceticism. "Asceticism," I've used that word several times. It's a severe austerity or self-abasement; and in fact, if you want a definition, asceticism is a rigorous but artificial piety that where self-deprivation is practiced for religious reasons. And asceticism, every variety of it - legalistic asceticism, stoic asceticism, mystical asceticism, Gnostic asceticism - all of these are unnecessary distractions from the pure, simple gospel of Christ, who deserves first place in everything, but especially in His church and among His people. And moreover, Paul keeps reminding them, "If you have Christ, you don't need anything else, because in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells bodily, and in Him you have been filled," past tense, you have everything you need.

If you have Christ, why would you try to find sanctification or satisfaction in a religion that you have devised for yourself? If Christ's work on our behalf is enough to save us, why would anyone add the burden of extra rules and supplementary works of our own? Why would people do that? That's what Paul is saying. He wants them to see the absolute sufficiency of Christ.

Now that's all introduction; that was a long introduction, and I know it's a review of things you've already heard, most of you. But to paraphrase what Paul says in Philippians 3:1, those are truths I don't mind repeating, because I love them, and it's good for you to hear them again. But now we come to our passage, verse 20, and Paul is going to sum up the point that

he's making in this chapter by challenging them to think it through in the simplest possible terms. And then beginning in chapter 3, he's going to give them the remedy for the spiritual dilemma that they've created for themselves by listening to these false doctrines – and you'll hear that part next week.

But here's our text, verses 20-23: "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, 'Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch!' (which deal with everything destined to perish with use) which are in accordance with the commands and teachings of men, which are matters having to be sure a word of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value against fleshly indulgence." And right there he sums up the problem with every strain of heresy that is assaulting the Corinthian assembly. This was a web of bad influences, and the fruit of it was an utter corruption of the gospel at the very heart of the gospel.

The gospel message is that God alone saves, and Christ alone is the Savior, and He saves by grace alone through faith alone. And I want you to notice that formula, how many times the word "alone" appears in it: "by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone." And the word "alone" in each case speaks of sufficiency. But these corrupting influences all effectively remove that word "alone" from the formula. This is not by Christ alone if, oh, by the way, you have to follow all these lists of rules of do's and don'ts. The various flavors of asceticism that Paul is addressing were all de facto denials of the sufficiency of grace, and the sufficiency of saving faith, and worst of all, the sufficiency of Christ. They denied all of those things. And in fact, Paul notes all three of those errors.

First, he says, "If your religion is defined by what you do and don't do, and you live your whole life" – verse 20 – "as if you were living in the world, as if this is your home, this is where you're bound," – in other words, you're living as though you still belong to the world – "then you don't really believe God's grace is sufficient." Second, "If your spiritual standing is determined by your obedience to a list of demands and restrictions," –

verse 21 - 'Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch,' if that's what defines your standing before God, that's what establishes the ground on which you stand before God, then faith alone is not the sole and sufficient instrument of your justification." And, third, "If you believe you're still bound to the ceremonial statutes of the old covenant," - verse 20 - "the elementary principles of the world, the ceremonial law, those things were merely precursors to Christ, but you think you are duty-bound to observe those signs and symbols, then you don't really believe in the full sufficiency of Christ. And furthermore, if you're still living" - verse 22 - "in accordance with the commands and teachings of men, then you don't believe in the sufficiency of Scripture either." In other words, this type of asceticism denies the principles of sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus, and sola Scriptura. And understand, I'm not suggesting that Paul was defending the Protestant Reformation, but he was laying the foundation for it. In fact, I would say don't call yourself reformed if you're practicing any of these brands of asceticism.

Also in these four verses that we're concerned with, the apostle gives three reasons why this type of ascetic religion is a corruption of the gospel. First, he points out that unlike the gospel which is in every regard Christ-centered, ascetic religion is by definition works-oriented. And, second, the gospel is entirely God's work, the working out of our salvation is entirely subject to God's will, and the fruit of the gospel is eternal. But by contrast, ascetic religion is worldly, and along with the elementary principles of the world, asceticism is, verse 22, destined to perish with use. It can't be an eternal type of spirituality. And, third, the gospel announces to us that Christ's victory is already not just assured, but complete through Christ. God has already accomplished His plan and guaranteed its eternal success, because, verse 15, "having disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them in Christ." And by contrast, he says, "Ascetic religion is absolutely worthless, it doesn't accomplish anything, but gratify the flesh." In other words, all the errors that were being spread in the Colossian church, all of them were works-oriented, worldly, and worthless. That is Paul's entire criticism of those errors, and you can neatly summarize it in those three alliterated points.

And so let's consider these one at a time. If you're taking notes, here's point one: "Asceticism is works-oriented." And these are vital verses. These are

some of the most important verses in the New Testament if you're struggling with the issue of, "What do we do with the Old Testament laws?" In one simple statement here Paul rejects everyone who wants to impose the ceremonial statutes from the Mosaic covenant, and that includes all the dietary laws, the ceremonial aspects of Sabbath observance, and basically all the showy elements of ceremony and sacerdotalism that the Pharisees were so enamored with – all the washings and purifications and all that. Paul's making the point that our own meritorious works don't play any part whatsoever in the gospel of Christ.

Apparently someone in Colossi was promoting the same error that Paul addresses in the book of Galatians, telling the Galatians that they couldn't be saved unless they were circumcised; and they also had to observe all of the ceremonial and dietary statutes of the old covenant. And Paul here it corrects that, refutes it, denies it, and in doing so, he's simply echoing the teaching of Christ, and he makes that point. To impose any laws about ceremonial cleanness or to impose the Old Testament dietary restrictions, that would be clean contrary to the teaching of Christ, because in Mark 7:15, Jesus said, "There is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man."

Have you ever thought about that statement and how it must have impacted the people who first heard it? That would be a saying that would be very hard for anyone who's steeped in the law of Moses to receive, because the law is full of ordinances about ceremonial defilement, and all of them have to do with external contact to think. Numbers 19:11, for example, just one example of hundreds that I could name. Numbers 19:11, "The one who touches the corpse of any person shall be unclean for seven days." And by the way, getting rid of that uncleanness required ceremonial cleansing two times – once on the third day, and then again on the seventh day. You read that in Numbers 19:12, "If he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean." And verse 13, "Anyone who touches a corpse, the body of a man who has died, and does not purify himself, makes the tabernacle of Yahweh unclean; and that person shall be cut off from Israel." So if you don't go through the ceremonial cleansing and you go in the temple, you've now defiled the temple, and that's grounds for excommunication, "because the water for impurity was not splashed on

him," Scripture says, "he shall be unclean. His uncleanness is still on him." So he goes through the rest of his life unclean.

So all that is to say, if you were defiled ceremonially, it was an ordeal, a ceremonial ordeal to get past it. And there were lots of things that could defile you, it wasn't just contact with a dead body; lots of foods that if you ate you would be defiled. And so when Jesus comes along and says, "Nothing outside a man can defile him," the disciples were understandably confused. And Jesus' answer to them is significant. He says Mark 7:18, "Are you lacking in understanding in this way as well? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him," - here He's talking about spiritual defilement - "cannot defile him, because it goes not into his heart," - so clear, he's talking about heart defilement, spiritual defilement - "it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and from there it goes into the sewer."

And then Mark, who's writing this gospel, and who's also, interestingly, with Paul as he writes the epistle to the Colossians, Mark adds this inspired commentary to the comment Jesus made. Mark interjects in there, "Thus He declared all foods clean." When Jesus said, "Nothing that goes in you can defile you," He was formally and officially speaking as God to abrogate all of the dietary laws. They were instantly rendered null and void, because they were symbolic and ceremonial in the first place, as Paul says in our text, verse 22, "Those rules deal with everything destined to perish with use." They dealt with temporary things. They were themselves temporary in nature, and they were never more than temporary precepts that were designed to teach people about the absolute holiness of God, and to set the requirement for righteousness so high that people would realize they can't attain this on their own, and the only hope they had was to look to God as their Savior.

And so that's what Paul means when he says, "The law was a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ." It left people, if they understood it properly, with no option other than to look for a Savior, because they realized, "Obedience to the law can't save me." And since Christ Himself then came and not only paid the penalty for sin and became the offering that explains how sinners

like us can be saved, He abolished the dietary restrictions. He did that formally with His words – and these were the laws that Israel lived by under the old covenant – "abolished by Christ." And since He did that, it is arrogant folly to make new rules about clean and unclean foods, and think that by doing that you're honoring Christ. What those rules do is establish a system of works, works-based righteousness. They are inherently and definitionally self-righteous, because they're not expressions of the righteousness of God, they're commands that tell us, "Look, if you really want to be righteous, here's what you'd have to do."

But you can't do it; and if you think you're doing it, then all you're producing is sinful self-righteousness. These are supposed to appear super spiritual. The ascetics who put the rules like this in place think that. But actually, they're expressions of self-will rather than the will of God. And that's why we should never impose any spiritual rule on other people that isn't expressly taught in Scripture. We're not to go beyond what is written; that's 1 Corinthians 4:6, "Don't go beyond what is written." And if you want a rule to live by, that's a good one: "Don't go beyond what's written." It's biblical. That's not a work to be done, that's a truth to be received by faith. It's the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. What Scripture tells us is sufficient, just as Christ is sufficient.

And Paul uses an interesting word here to speak of these legalistic lists of dos and don'ts in the Legacy Standard Bible. That's what I've been using, by the way, if you wonder what I'm reading to you. Legacy Standard Bible translates the word as "decrees," it's at the end of verse 20: "Why do you submit yourself to decrees?" And the Greek word there is *dogmatizō*, which you recognize as similar to the English word "dogmas." These are dogmas, human decrees, extrabiblical regulations. It's ascetic lists of dos and don'ts. And verse 21 characterizes them as, "Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch." So these are legal works governing your relationship with external things, and the aim, supposedly, if you obey them, is to gain righteousness, and thereby add something of merit to the perfect righteousness of Christ that is imputed to us.

And that even sounds foolish, doesn't it, because when we believe, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, it's put to our account. That's a perfect righteousness, because it's the righteousness of God living as a man under the law; and He obeyed it perfectly, which you and I can't do. And His righteousness is imputed to us in the same way that our sin was imputed to Him, and He paid the price for it. So if I have the perfect righteousness of Christ – and it is, by definition, perfect – how could I ever think that something I might do could embellish that or add to it? That's arrogance. And that's Paul's point that asceticism is inherently just works-based legalism. And there was hardly any flavor of heresy that Paul hated more, because he came out of that pharisaical system. And so what he's saying here is asceticism is, by definition, a works-oriented religion. Now that's number one, if you're taking notes: "Asceticism is works-oriented."

Here's number two: "Asceticism is worldly, it's worldly." And there's an irony here, because asceticism purports to be otherworldly. The ascetic believes that by saying no to earthly enjoyments, he's actually living at an elevated level of spiritual consciousness. But Paul says his whole way of thinking is actually rooted in the elementary principles of the world. In other words, he's worldly. The beliefs and the lifestyle of the ascetic deal only with worldly and temporal issues, verse 22, "everything that's destined to perish with use." All the rules and regulations that have been cobbled together to make these religious systems, verse 22, are in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men. These are human, manmade religions. And in fact, he refers to this brand of spirituality in verse 23 as – in the version I'm reading – self-made religion. And I think that's the way it's translated in most modern versions: self-made religion.

And again, the Greek expression there is interesting. That phrase "self-made religion" is actually a single word in the Greek text. It's *ethelothréskia*, *ethelothréskia* made from two root words. One of them means the will, that's the choice-making, decision-making aspect of your mind, the will; and the other root word means worship. And in the King James version that word is translated as "will worship, will worship"; and I like that translation, it's a fitting translation, because the kind of religious system that Paul is criticizing always elevates the human will: willpower, free will, human autonomy. It's inherently Armenian, if I can say that.

Now, no Christian ever ought to put an ounce of faith in human willpower. Scripture makes it abundantly clear in the first place that our salvation from sin is not a matter of human willpower or human free will, but according to John 1:13, "Those who receive Christ and are born again were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." There is no power in the human will, and even the redeemed will is crippled by the sin and sinful desires that remain in our flesh. Paul describes that very situation in Romans 7:18 when he writes, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." And there's the apostle Paul expressly saying that he cannot by sheer force of his own will make himself do right. He cannot reform himself by willpower, there's a conflict in his will. As a believer, he loves the law of God, he wants to obey it; but he can't obey it consistently, because his flesh is driven by contrary desires, selfish cravings, and ungodly lusts. "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other to keep you from doing the things you want to do."

That's actually Galatians 5:17. It's a single-verse summary of the point he's making in Romans 7, "You can't do what you want to do, you don't have any power in your own will." And yet one thing almost all false religions have in common is that they try to glorify the human will: will worship. Most religions do virtually make the human will an object of worship. The only power they really put their trust in is sheer willpower; and that's why manmade religions are always prone to asceticism and self-discipline and self-improvement and legalistic rules. And that word *ethelothréskia* could be translated self-willed religion. The Legacy Standard Bible, the English Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible all say, "self-made religion." The New International Version says, "self-imposed worship," and the New King James says, "self-imposed religion." And all of those ideas are included in what this is talking about. I like will worship, because it always ultimately entails a deliberate imposition of rules and restrictions that God Himself has not required. And so it's an unwarranted intrusion that works against the simplicity of the gospel and the sufficiency of Christ, because it's saying there's something else you need other than what you read in Scripture.

And so asceticism becomes a manmade religion, man-centered religion, a religion that magnifies the human will rather than God's will; and asceticism does this by imposing, substituting self-imposed, manmade rules that ultimately become substitutes for God's commands. The assumption that underlies this tendency is the false notion that full righteousness ultimately is attained by the exercise of human willpower; and nothing could be further from the truth. Asceticism may have, as Paul says in verse 23, an appearance of wisdom; but to borrow words from James 3:15, "This wisdom does not descend from above, but it's earthly and sensual and demonic." That's what James says about it. So it's worldly wisdom; and as Paul tells us elsewhere, "The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."

So asceticism is fatally flawed because it's works-oriented, and it's worldly. And now, third, "asceticism is worthless." End of verse 23, "These things," - he's talking about these works-oriented, worldly, ascetic dogmas - "these things are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh, because they're external only." They might modify your behavior in the sight of men, but they cannot transform your heart in the sight of God, they can't renew your mind, they can't cleanse your conscience; and at the end of the day, they are, therefore, worthless. It's a worthless religion.

Now remember, all of these strains of error, all of them together, and whether you combine them or keep them separate, ultimately they all establish one or another brand of super spiritual, pietistic legalism. All of them are marked by pride and self-will. Even if by all outward appearances they involve a ostentatious display of lowliness, the brand of religion that Paul is confronting here might give the appearance of profound wisdom and pious self-denial, but all it actually does is gratify the flesh, because it scratches that pharisaical itch. To do your alms before others and to make a spectacle of your religion through austerity does not cultivate true holiness, it cultivates pride, and it's, therefore, worthless.

Now speaking of worthlessness - and I'll try to wrap this up - I'm sure you've heard that old cliché that sometimes is applied to people. You say, "They are so heavenly-minded that they're no earthly good." I hate that

cliché. But there's, no doubt, someone would use that saying and try to apply it to these ascetics, because, you know, they're walking around like they're full of self-denial, and their piety is worn all over their sleeve. People would point at them and say, "They're so heavenly-minded they're no earthly good, they're just of no earthly use."

But here's what I want you to see. That is practically the opposite of what the apostle Paul is saying. He says asceticism is worldly, it's rooted in the elementary principles of the world. And the cure that he's going to prescribe for them in the very next two verses - chapter 3, verses 1 and 2 - is to, "Keep seeking the things above where Christ is," - that's heaven, where He's seated at the right hand of God - "and set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth." He wants them to be more heavenly-minded, not less. And you'll look at that in depth next week with Andrew Curry.

But for now, we turn to the Lord's Table, which is a reminder of the central truth of the gospel message, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. He died to pay the penalty of sin; and His death is sufficient, as He is sufficient; and that means our forgiveness is complete. Those who believe are covered with a garment of perfect righteousness. And again, there is nothing you can do that would add one iota of righteousness or merit to the work that Christ has already done on your behalf. His atoning work is sufficient, He is sufficient; and we are going to confess that and celebrate the good news of the gospel, even as we remember our Lord's death on the cross.

So I want to challenge you now. Prepare your hearts to receive these reminders of the body and the blood of Christ. This is the sacrifice of the new covenant, and it's a holy remembrance of the price that was paid for our redemption. We're bought with a great price, and we remember that price this morning. And if you're visiting with us this morning, if you're a believer in Christ and you're sure of your standing with Him, you're invited to participate. If you're not a believer, even if you are a regular attender in the corporate gatherings here, please don't partake of the elements. And whether you are a believer or not, this is a time to examine yourself. And if

you have unconfessed sin or a heart of unbelief, you need not to participate in this observation of the Lord's Table.

We read in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 that "whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner, eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." So take a time, take a little time here to examine yourself, and pray to the Lord; and if you have sin that needs to be confessed or needs to be prayed for, do that now quietly with yourself.

The apostle Paul , "The Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat. This is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'" And if you peel that little top off there where the bread is, take that out, and let's do it together.

[Prayer] Father, we thank You for the love that sent Your Son to die for our sins to give His body to be broken for us. Give us grace to present our bodies as a true and living sacrifice to You. Forgive us for the half-heartedness and unfaithfulness that makes our devotion to Christ unworthy of the sacrifice He made for us, and conform us to His likeness through the cleansing of our hearts and the renewal of our minds. We pray in Jesus' name. [End]

Now on the other side of that is the section with the wine. Again, take that top off very carefully.

"In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; this do as often as you drink it in remembrance of Me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.: Let's do it together. Now hold that container carefully in your hand and let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, the blood we commemorate with this cup is precious blood, priceless, the blood of Your own Son, offered on our behalf, offered to You as an atonement for our sin, as a ransom for our souls. This is the only ground on which we can come to You for mercy; and yet it is a sufficient atonement, even for the chief of sinners. It speaks of the depth of our sin, it speaks of the utter perfection of Your righteousness, and it speaks of the high cost of forgiveness born completely by Christ on our behalf.

We confess, we don't think of these truths often enough or deeply enough. So may this act of remembrance humble our hearts with deep gratitude, because we know You give grace to the humble; and we desperately need Your grace. So now fill our hearts with awe and gratitude. Fix our minds solemnly on the truths that these elements symbolize. Fix our attention in the days ahead on heaven, where Christ sits at the right hand of God; and draw us ever closer to Him. We pray in His blessed name. Amen.