



## **DON'T BE LED ASTRAY!**

(Colossians 2:8-10,16-23; Mark 7:14-23) Becky Douglass

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### **Introduction**

A couple of years ago, Scott and I had the opportunity to spend some time in Switzerland. I was already there for some meetings of the Global Children's Forum which was meeting in a Chalet in the Alps which was owned by a Swiss friend. This friend decided Scott and I needed some time away together and so she paid for Scott to fly out and join me and let us stay in her chalet for free for two weeks.

It was a wonderful opportunity, and we rented a car to travel around the place a bit. Of course, we didn't know the area at all and so we relied on Google maps to tell us how to get places. Most of the time this worked really well but occasionally we ran into problems. We were not staying in a big tourist area and so the mobile phone coverage could be unreliable. We'd be driving along being told where to go by Google when the coverage would cut out and we would be left with no idea where to go. We had to just keep driving and hope that the coverage would come back when we needed to make a turning. Most of the time that worked out OK!

Another problem was that Google has a tendency to find the shortest route between two points, no matter the size or condition of the road. A couple of times we ended up on a track out in the middle of nowhere – heading in the right direction, but on a road that no knowledgeable person would have taken. I can remember one time Google took us down a back road only one lane wide with a sheer drop on one side and a cliff on the other – not uncommon in Switzerland! We drove around a corner only to meet cars coming the other way. We all stopped, waiting for someone to make room to pass. I am sure that there is a local rule on who backs up for whom in these situations, but we didn't know it! In the end, when the other cars didn't move, we figured it was our move and we backed up until we came to a place where there was room for the other cars to pass us – a bit stressful!

On the whole, Google maps was a good thing and got us where we wanted to go. But it didn't do to rely on it unquestioningly as it could lead us astray. We learned to ask people when we had the opportunity as local knowledge trumped Google knowledge every time. Since then, Google has added in the capacity for people to give feedback on the routes it chooses, and it has "learned" how to pick better ways to direct people. But it can still lead you astray!

As we move into the second half of Paul's letter to Colossians, he has challenged to Colossians that *"as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him"*. (2:6) He wants them to keep growing in their relationship with Christ and have that relationship change every aspect of their lives. Just as they received Christ by faith, in total dependence on Him, they are to walk with Him by faith and in total dependence on Him for every step. However, he is concerned that they not be led astray from this walk with Christ by people who are promoting other ideas, practices and experiences. Some of these things are not wrong in and of themselves, but when they take the focus off Christ and out relationship with Him, they can become detrimental to us.

Paul groups these things into three types of distractions which all begin with a warning which is highlighted in the text – "Do not let anyone capture you ... Do not let anyone condemn you ... do not let anyone condemn you ..." – followed by a final paragraph giving another reason why we shouldn't be led astray by these things. In each paragraph, Paul summarises the issue, gives a reason why it is not good, and what is to be found in Christ instead.

### **Empty thinking vs the fulness of Christ**

*Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ. For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority. (2:8-10)*

Firstly, Paul addresses our thinking. He cautions them against *"empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense"*. Paul isn't afraid to say what he thinks! In Paul's time, people had great respect for thinkers – people who came up with theories of how to live and how to understand the world around them. Western society has been largely shaped by the thinking of the Greek and Roman philosophers and scientists – people like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. They sought to make sense of the physical world and how we should live together in a productive society. There were also many religious systems of thought, including variations of Judaism, that were mixed together and changed as people moved around the Roman Empire.

All of these were influencing the church as it sought to understand what it meant to follow Christ. Of particular concern to Paul was those who wanted to accept Christ, but add to Christ things from these other systems of thought. They thought that Christ was a good starting point, but one needed to add to Christ other ideas which would lead you into deeper truths which will unlock a greater access to God – ideas which Paul feels will *"capture"* them and pull them away from Christ. What is really interesting is that Paul says that these ideas are not only human ideas, but also come from *"the spiritual powers of this world"*. He believes these ideas are not only misguided but designed by Satan himself to pull us away from Christ.

Paul counters these ideas by pointing us back to Christ and specifically to Christ's relationship to God. Christ isn't just part of God's plan. He doesn't just represent part of who God is. *"In Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body."* If you want to know God, there is nothing more to know than what is found in Christ. He is God in a human body. Paul contrasts the empty philosophies with the fulness of Christ. And it is in our union with Him, that we find our own fullness. Christ is also the ruler over the spiritual powers who would seek to capture us and pull us away. We have no need to fear or give into their strategies because he knows all they are doing and can guide us away from their clouded thinking and into the Truth.

So how does this relate to our world today? I think we face two sources of thinking which can pull us away from our focus on Christ. Firstly, the world around us has a totally different view of reality to us. We live in this world and are saturated by its thinking every minute of every day. What is important? What is right and wrong? What makes life good? How should we treat others? These ideas are so common that it is possible for us to accept this thinking without even realising that we are doing it. It is only as we expose ourselves to God's truth in His Word that He is able to show us what is the truth and how we need to change. If we are following Him, we will have different priorities and we will see life differently than those who are not His.

Secondly, even in the church, there is a tendency to focus on human wisdom rather than on Christ. Theology is a great thing. It is our attempt to understand God's truth - to take the Bible and help us to understand it by coming up with systems of thought and belief to explain it. This is a good thing. However, there is also a very human tendency to put our faith in these systems of thought, this theology. These systems become the centre of our faith rather than Christ himself. And this is where theology can become a negative thing because all theological systems are the result of human thinking and as such none is infallible – all have weaknesses and fall short of the glory of God and his salvation.

For example, I will defend to my dying day that God is the Creator of this world and everything in it. This world is not the random result of time and chance. We are an intentional creation of God made according to His purpose. However, we are in danger if we make our interpretation about how that happened to be a central focus. Good people with strong relationships with Christ have differing views about this. I have seen Satan use this issue to split churches and destroy people's relationship with Christ.

I can think of other theological issues which have caused unhelpful divisions such as Arminianism vs Calvinism, interpretations of prophecy and systems of church government. I think it is good thing to study these things. God has written about them in His Word because He wants us to know about them. But He hasn't told us everything, and we need to hold our human ideas loosely and with humility. And most of all, we must stay focused of what the Bible is very clear about – such as Paul's declaration in 1 Corinthians:

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ...” (1 Corinthians 15:3,4)*

### **Temporary rituals vs the reality of Christ**

After this warning against human theories and systems, Paul goes on to remind the Colossians of all the thing they have in their union with Christ. We'll come back to these towards the end when Paul brings them up again. Then he goes on to the second thing which can lead us astray.

*So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality. (2:16,17)*

Paul moves from our thinking and addresses our actions. Here he affirms that while certain practices may be helpful in walking with Christ, they are not to be elevated above a relationship with Him. The things which Paul mentions here can all be related to Jewish religious practice, but they were also a part of many religious systems of the day. Guidelines on what to eat and what rituals to perform were – and still are – central to the generally accepted way of getting closer to God and being accepted by Him. But in Christ, all that

changes because we are accepted not because of what we do, but because of what God has done for us.

For the Jews, God established certain rituals like Sabbaths and holy festivals and eating practices to remind them that they were His people and that He needed to have priority in their lives. These things were meant to point to God and His salvation, not replace Him and a relationship with Him. This is what Paul means when he calls them a “shadow of the reality yet to come”. The writer of Hebrews also talks about this when he says: “*The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves.*” (Hebrews 10:1) They were put in place to prepare the Jews to welcome Christ when He came. But we see in the Gospels that very few accepted Christ, “*the reality*”, when He came. In fact, we see in the Pharisees that it was possible to keep all the rules and not know God at all - not even be good people!

As we look at this warning today, I think it is important to see that Paul is not saying that what we do doesn't matter. For instance, I would say that setting aside a regular time to be with God and others who follow Him – say on a Sunday morning – can be an important “ritual” which helps you to walk with Him. But simply attending church on a Sunday morning will not make us holy any more than living in a shed makes you a cow! The ritual can help strengthen the relationship, but the relationship is what changes us.

Paul is not making an attack on general guidelines that promote godly living, but he is refuting any traditions that become more important than Christ. To take another example, devotional exercises like fasting can be good practices to help us focus on Christ, but they can become hinderances if we look to them to change us or enable us to get something from God. Only Christ can change us. And, more often than not, rather than getting what we want, we need God to change what it is that we want to bring it into alignment with His will!

It is especially important not to judge others based on what they do or don't do. This can become legalism where we focus more on how people do or don't conform to our own ideas of spirituality rather than focusing on our own relationship with Christ and allow Him to reveal to others what they should do. God uses many things to point us to Christ and his righteousness, but none can create righteousness in and of themselves.

### **Prideful experiences vs the headship of Christ**

*Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud, and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it. (2:18,19)*

In Paul's day, it was thought that self-denial and self-punishment led to better spiritual experiences. They thought that the physical body was basically evil and needed to be subdued in order to have a true experience with God. The people Paul is talking about here thought that denying basic physical needs like food would help them ascend into heavenly worship. There is some debate as to what Paul meant by “*worship of angels*”. It could be worship directed towards angels – thinking that this was a way to get them to influence God to bless them – or worship with angels – seeing this as an advanced way to worship that was better than mere human worship. Either way, these people thought that mere human worship of God and a relationship with Christ was inferior to what they wanted and so they

were looking for a way to get a special spiritual experience. This then led them into pride as they thought they were better than other people.

Today we might not see an exact parallel to this. However, there is a tendency for people to be seeking a special experience of God or higher level of spirituality and to become proud of what they think they have achieved. Anything that makes us proud in our relationship with God is off track – again it takes the focus off Christ and puts it onto ourselves and what we do. It distances us from Christ, but also from each other as we compare ourselves and judge others. When Paul had an special spiritual experience, he didn't want to talk about it and he thanked God for giving him weaknesses to keep him humble. (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

I think this is why Paul counters this danger by pointing to Christ and our connectedness to Him as the head of His body, the church. While these things elevate ourselves and separate us from each other, true spirituality comes from submission to Christ and connectedness to our brothers and sisters in Christ. A truly spiritual person does not point to themselves in pride, but always wants people to see Christ and seeks to elevate others in the body. And it is in the Body of Christ that we will be nourished and grow.

### **The true source of our new life: Union with Christ**

So, we can see that Paul has looked at three possible distractions to our walk in Christ – three things which can lead us astray – empty philosophies, temporary rituals and prideful experiences. He has shown the dangers in all of these and shown how Christ alone is able to change us and bring about true spiritual growth. Now he brings one final argument – we don't need them, and they don't work anyway!

*You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!"? Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires. (2:20-23)*

Paul takes them back to the discussion that we looked at last week where he told them that in their union with Him, Christ has cut away their sinful nature through His death and resurrection and taken away their sins so that Satan has no power over them. They don't need anything else. All the theories and rules and experiences are secondary to what Christ has already done for them. Nothing more is needed.

But more than that, without Christ, all these things are useless because they focus on the externals and not the internal relationship with God. In the passage we read from Mark's Gospel, Jesus talks about this. He makes the point that what you eat or drink can't make one bit of difference to your heart condition – and it is your heart condition which determines your actions. However, it is precisely your heart which is the focus of Christ's work in your life.

Yes, it is important to think about the Bible and seek to understand it better. Yes, some spiritual practices such as attending church or fasting can put you in a place where you can meet God and be changed by Him. Yes, God does sometimes give us glimpses of heaven which can be encouraging. However, all of these mean nothing without Christ. And none of these things can change our hearts. Only Christ can do that. The glory of God's salvation is that God chose to love us and send His Son into the world for us – even though we are sinners, even though we were God's enemies, even though we did not want Him. And

through Him, God has taken care of our hearts and freed us from slavery to sin and Satan and brought us into glorious fellowship with Him. Amen?!