

Avoiding Modern Pitfalls # 8

Colossians 2: 16-23

Since the fall in the Garden, sin has completely corrupted the human experience. Beginning with the second generation of humanity, even worship has been polluted due to sin. Cain rebelled against God and sought to offer a sacrifice that was pleasing to him rather than God. Nimrod and those who followed him sought their own form of worship. The Bible is filled with accounts of idolatry and pagan worship among the Egyptians, Philistines, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, etc...Even today this plague continues. Humans are spiritual beings, with a bent toward worship, but their sin nature brings corruption into worship, denying the deity of God and refusing to worship in a manner that honors Him.

Paul has spent the opening portion of his letter to the Colossians dealing with the preeminence and sufficiency of Christ. He sought to lay a solid foundation on which to build, encouraging them in the Lord. He now turns his attention to the dangers of false doctrine and worship tainted by the influence of sin.

These dangers were real in Colossae and they remain in our day as well. Time and generations have passed, but the false doctrines and practices they bring remain with us. I want to examine the [dangers](#) Paul addresses as we are challenged concerning: [Avoiding Modern Pitfalls](#).

I. The Dangers of Ritualism (16-17) – The first danger addressed concerned ritualism, the traditions of men held in higher regard than the mandates of God. Consider:

A. The Standards of Men (16) – [Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days](#): Ritualism had found its way into Colossae. Apparently they were being challenged and judged for their lack of participation in certain rituals and ceremonies. They were expected to eat particular foods and observe specific days. Paul knew these were not biblical mandates, but rather the preferences of men. Christians enjoyed liberty in Christ and had no reason to allow such rituals hinder their joy or service to Christ.

- The rituals and observances of men are still being practiced today. Some would have us believe we are not in a right relationship with Christ unless we participate in such rituals. I am not concerned with pleasing men, but Christ. There are activities that we participate in, but they have no effect on our Christian lives. I am committed to honoring the Lord's day, Sunday, but I am not obligated to observe the Sabbath. Our relationship is not dictated by diets or days!

B. The Shadows of Christ (17) – Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

Some in Colossae were placing more emphasis on particular meals and days than they were on Christ. Much of this came from the Old Testament Law. Paul declares the people observed the shadows more than the One who created the shadow. There were many types and pictures of Christ in the Old Testament, but they were just a shadow of things to come. Christ had come! God's plan of redemption had been fulfilled. It was ridiculous to place more emphasis on the rituals that pointed to Christ than the risen Savior Himself.

- They were not born of shadows, but of Christ. These pictures and types did not provide redemption; Christ did! We are commanded to observe the Lord's Supper and participate in baptism after salvation, but these should never be held in higher regard than the Lord. They merely bear witness to His sacrifice for us, our redemption, and the hope of resurrection.

II. The Dangers of Mysticism (18-19) – The next danger Paul speaks of is that of mysticism or a distortion of spirituality. This danger is recognized through various factors. There is:

A. Counterfeit Humility (18a) – Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility. Paul warns of the danger of being robbed of their reward through voluntary humility. Many in this group claimed to have reached a level of spiritual superiority through continued humility. They failed to realize the arrogance of such claims. They supposed others could obtain the same level of spirituality if only they could obtain their humility. We continue to see this in our day as well.

- Many want to appear humble, but in reality they are arrogant and proud. They, like those of Paul's day, think they have it all figured out and others haven't arrived yet. If others would only live as they live, worship as they worship, and serve as they serve, then our world would be a better place. There is nothing wrong with humility and seeking to become more like Christ, but we must not allow our quest for humility to turn into pride and arrogance. I think it was C.S. Lewis who said, "*Genuine humility isn't thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.*"

B. Compromised Deity (18b) – Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen. As we considered, the mystics claimed superior spiritual knowledge. They claimed an advanced knowledge of angels and the spiritual realm. Clearly they had no further knowledge than any student of the Bible, but their passions led to worship of angels and spiritual beings. It may not have been presented as such, but their fascination and emphasis on the spiritual realm elevated angels to a level reserved for God.

- This practice continues in our day as well. Humans have a great fascination with angels and the spiritual realm. There is a false notion that children become angels when they die. “Well heaven has another angel now.” I know things like that are often said during a time of grief, but it is unbiblical. Angels are created beings just like humans and are God’s creation. They are not one in the same and never will be. Christ didn’t die for angels, He died for lost humanity. Born again believers are not transformed into angelic beings at death.

- Many of the modern cults claim to have insight into the angelic realm. However, it is dangerous to place such emphasis on them. God never intended for angels to be worshiped. In fact, we have biblical accounts where angels have rejected being worshiped, [Rev.19:10; 22:8-9](#). Satan was an angel of light before his fall. He desired to be worshiped as God and was cast out of heaven. Any doctrine or denomination that elevates created beings to a level reserved for God, angels or otherwise, are cults and should be avoided and exposed.

C. Controversial Identity (18c-19) – The last danger associated with mysticism is their controversial and distorted identity. Paul knew their emphasis was being placed on wrong things. He mentions two aspects of this controversial identity.

1. The Promotion of Gifts (18c) – [vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind](#). Under the cover of supposed humility, these are puffed up in their own minds. They are proud of their “spiritual accomplishments” and feel as if they have obtained spiritual gifts reserved for the elite. These gifts and the ability to use them are elevated above the worship and service of Christ. We see this continue in many denominations and cults today. Many place more emphasis on spiritual gifts than the Giver of their gifts. We must keep in mind the Spirit always exalts Christ, not Himself.

- Any gift or ability that is exalted above Christ is sin. Many today claim a fresh baptism of the Spirit is essential for maturity, and when this occurs special gifts are received, such as speaking in tongues and the giving of visions. Caution is in order when spiritual gifts are overemphasized. The gifts and abilities claimed by many false teachers are no longer given of the Spirit. A close study of the biblical context clearly reveals that tongues spoken of in the Bible were not an unknown language, but a foreign language that up until that point, the believer was unable to speak!

2. The Suppression of Growth (19) – [And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God](#). Typically these do not encourage or emphasize the Lord or His church as they should. They seek recognition for their particular gifts and abilities while neglecting service unto the Lord and service among the church. There is little or no concern for the spiritual growth of others. Often they are

intimidated by those whom they perceive may have achieved a particular level of spiritual growth. When one matures in Christ, they are less likely to be persuaded by false teaching. Often these teachers feed their followers a scarce diet of biblical truth, while focusing on their desired gifts.

- All believers ought to desire spiritual growth among the entire body. All gifts are given of God and are essential to the work of ministry. Churches will never prosper seeking to exalt the gifts of a select few while seeking to suppress the spiritual growth of the entire body. Healthy churches are filled with mature Christians, not just a misguided leader seeking to exalt himself.

III. The Dangers of Legalism (20-23) – The last danger Paul warns of is legalism. This doctrine was prevalent in his day and it remains in ours as well. It is closely associated with ritualism. This is definitely a dangerous doctrine. Pastor Mike Stone commented, “*If we forbid what God allows, our kids will allow what God forbids. Legalism and license are opposing sides of the same extra-biblical coin.*” Notice:

A. The Tendency (20) – [Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances.](#) The believer enjoys liberty in Christ, and yet many of them continued in legal bondage. They had subjected themselves to the ordinances of man. Many were bound by a long list of “do’s and don’ts.” They were more concerned in pleasing the desires of men than in pleasing the Lord.

- Do we not see the same tendencies today? It is sad, but many times legalistic organizations and schools of thought attract many followers. I suppose some do not like to think for themselves or study the Word and live according to it. They are content to have someone dictate their every move. I am not advocating we abandon biblical principles, but much being taught and emphasized today is an addition to the grace of God and salvation in Christ. He accomplished what I never could and it isn’t up to me to meet some standard in order to retain my salvation. I enjoy liberty in Christ!

B. The Tragedy (21-22) – Here Paul discusses the tragedy of legalism. Consider:

1. The Standard (21) – [Touch not; taste not; handle not.](#) He speaks of specific requirements given of men that were expected to be followed. Their traditions and ordinances had become the standard for many. It was widely assumed that these traditions must be followed if one was to be accepted of God.

- Again I am not advocating we abandon the biblical standard, but rather we abide solely by it. We don't have time to discuss all the extra-biblical standards that are taught and followed today. Some have set so many restrictions and expectations concerning a right relationship with Christ, it would be impossible to fellowship with God or be accepted of Him if He expected all they claim. If God said do it, then do it. If God said don't do it, then refrain from it. If God is silent then I am not going to be dogmatic and impose my opinion on others.

2. The Source (22) – Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Paul reveals that much of what men emphasize is temporal; it will perish. These commandments are the doctrines of men. At the end of the day we have to evaluate whether we have decided to please men and his desires or follow the guidance of the Lord. God's ways are always right, so I am committed to going with Him. If I seek to please Him, then I only have one to worry about. I will never please all men, so there is no point in trying.

C. The Testimony (23) – Finally Paul reveals the true nature of the legalist will come to light through their testimony. Notice:

1. The Display (23a) – Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body. Regardless of the attempts to hide or distort truth, eventually genuine motives will be revealed. These seek to display a measure of wisdom in worship, genuine humility, but in the end they neglect the body. We might say, "The proof is in the pudding." Listen to what people say, but more importantly watch how they walk. What is possessed on the inside will eventually be displayed on the outside. If their actions and philosophies do not line up with the Word of God, avoid them.

2. The Desire (23b) – not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh. These all desire one thing: to satisfy the flesh, and there is no honor in that. Paul knew all of the false doctrines were built upon that desire. God has given us instruction in His Word, but living according to God's ordinances does not appeal to the flesh. False doctrines and false religions are built upon the desire to satisfy the flesh. They are created to exalt man and his abilities rather than Christ and His finished work. Religion demands that we do something. Salvation in Christ requires that we receive the free gift.

Conclusion: If you haven't dealt with one or more of these dangers, eventually you will. Our only source of strength and wisdom is Christ. He alone can save and He alone can guide our walk, worship, and witness. We need a right relationship with Christ if we are to please God.