

Colossians 2:16-23

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[0 : 00] Well, if you want to make progress in the area of physical fitness, what do you need to do? Well, in many ways it's quite simple, isn't it? You have to eat the right kind of food and actually get out and do something, join a gym, do some exercise, all that kind of stuff.

You are pretty much in control of that. If you want to get to a higher level of fitness, that's what you need to do. And there are many ways of measuring your progress, aren't there? You have apps on your iPhone that will, if you've got an iPhone, which I don't, but apps that tell you how many calories you've burned, what your heart rate is, all this kind of stuff.

You can get little gadgets to attach to your wrists that tell you all sorts of data about how fit you're getting or not, as the case may be. So it's pretty easy to know whether you're making progress in the world of physical development.

But what about spiritual progress? How can you have a deeper relationship with God? How can you be sure you're really accepted by God? How can you experience increasing change in your life so old habits die and a character has changed?

How can you know and experience God's joy and peace and forgiveness and love? Well, these are the kind of questions the Colossians were dealing with. And they had all sorts of people around them in their culture who were giving them advice on how they could make spiritual progress and get to a higher level or a deeper understanding.

[1 : 21] There were really three routes that were available to them, or they had around them in their culture. They're around today as well. There were some who'd say the way to do it is through following religious rules.

Get serious and you'll do well. There were others who'd say, no, come with us. Chasing a spiritual experience. That's the way to get a deeper insight or onto a deeper level. And there were others who said, no, what you need is severe self-discipline and asceticism.

That is, avoiding all forms of physical indulgence, typically for a religious reason. So there were three avenues available to them. Rules, experience, or self-discipline, asceticism.

And all these different things are around today. What we want to look at is, what does Paul say about them? How does he address this with the Colossians? Well, look at the context here. If you look at verse 16, he begins with the word, therefore.

And whenever you see the word, therefore, you need to ask what it's there for. And if you look back to chapter 2, verse 6, you'll see where he starts this section. He says, therefore. You say, well, what is that, therefore, therefore? And so far in this book, he's been telling them, showing them how great Christ Jesus is.

[2 : 33] That Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, chapter 1, verse 15. He's the one in whom all people are brought back to God. He is the one in whom God's wisdom dwells.

He is the one who is God's mystery. He is the one in whom God unfolds all his purposes. And Paul says in chapter 2, verse 6, As you've received Christ as Lord, as you've received his teaching about him, continue in him.

Now, what did he mean by that? Well, all he talks about in verses 16 down to 15 are things that we have in Christ. That is, if we've trusted in Christ, we are in him, united to him.

Now, what in the world does that mean? Let me just use two little illustrations, one of which I used last week. What happens when you trust an aeroplane to get you to your destination? Well, you get on board, you get in to the aeroplane.

Then everything that happens to the plane happens to you. The plane takes off, you take off. The plane flies, you fly. The plane lands, you land. Because you are in the plane, everything that is true of the plane becomes true of you.

[3 : 39] And that's a little bit of a picture of what it means to be in Christ. As we trust in him, Paul says everything that's happened to Christ happens to you. Christ died. You died to your old way of life.

Christ was raised. You are raised with him to a new life, a new future. You are changed in that process. You are in Christ if you've trusted in him. All that is true of him is true of you.

Well, let me give another quick picture. Imagine a child who's orphaned, has nothing, but then is adopted into a wealthy family. Suddenly, all the resources, all the status, all the security of that family is now belonging to that child.

They are in that family. And so it is in Christ. All Christ's status. All Christ's wealth. All Christ's resources. Are ours if we've trusted in him.

So that's what Paul's been saying. If you're in Christ, everything that's true of him is true of you. All his resources are now yours because you are united to him by faith. So, therefore, how do you deal with these people who come along and say, no, the way to a higher spiritual life, the way to a deeper insight, is through rules or through spiritual experience or through submitting to self-discipline.

[4 : 58] Well, look at what Paul says about each of those things. Look, first of all, at verse 16. And here he's talking about religious rules. Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regards to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

So they were all Jewish religious rules. Evidently, there were people around in Colossae who were saying to these Gentile, these non-Jewish Christians, well, it's great you've accepted Christ.

Jesus, that's good, but you need more than that. You need to be a proper Jew to be really sure if you're standing with God. You need to start keeping the Sabbath. You need to start eating the kosher food.

No more bacon sandwiches for you, Colossians. If you want a deeper spiritual experience, if you want to know you're on the inside track, you're in God's good books, keep these rules. Now, that would sound plausible, wouldn't it?

I even have friends who are part of a church who recently put on Facebook how they celebrated Passover because they're really into keeping Jewish festivals. I don't quite know why they did that, but I guess it sounded attractive to them.

[6 : 07] But Paul says there's a problem with this. Look at verse 17. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

All these Old Testament practices were just shadows, just outlines, waiting to be filled by the reality. Paul says the reality has come, the substance has come. All this was just pointing forward to Christ. You have the reality in him. To make some metaphors for a moment, let me use this illustration. A few months ago, I went to an office in Brentford where they were showing off a model of a new housing scheme they're building there.

And it looked great. It looked fantastic. It took a while to work out where it was, because obviously they try and make these things look absolutely amazing. But it's just a model. When they finish doing all the building by the A4, who's going to want to know that model?

Who's going to want to see that model? No one. You can't live in an architect's model. You go and see the real thing, the real buildings. Paul said these Old Testament rules, these festivals, these dietary requirements, they were just shadows.

[7 : 14] They were just architect's models. You don't deal with that now. You've got the real thing in Christ. Now, for most of us, the temptation is not to go and start eating a Jewish diet, is it?

I would miss my bacon sandwiches. And yet, there are often religious rules we feel we need to follow to get us closer to God, to make sure we're okay with God.

So let me ask you this question. How do you think your standing is with God today? How do you think God feels about you today? There are all sorts of ways you can answer that question, aren't there?

I think very often if I ask people that, they say, well, not so good today. I didn't have a quiet time this morning. I didn't read my Bible this morning. Or maybe you're thinking, actually, I'm doing pretty well with God.

I made it to evening lunchtime talks. That's something. Or maybe you think, well, I haven't prayed. I didn't pray on a bus this morning. That was terrible. So when we do that, what we're saying is, my performance, whether I've kept certain rules and traditions, is what makes me right with God.

[8 : 23] It's what affects my status with God. And when we say that, when we think like that, what we're doing is thinking we can improve on Christ's work. We can improve on all we have in Christ.

Imagine for a moment you went to the Louvre in Paris. And after that queuing up for hours, you're standing in front of the Mona Lisa. Leonardo da Vinci's great masterpiece. And imagine then you thought, you know what, she doesn't have a very good smile.

Let's get my red marker pen out and just make that a bit more smile. Give her some more lips. She looks a bit miserable. If you add to what da Vinci has done, can you improve it? Of course not.

If I don't add to it, you just detract from it. And so it is with Christian life. If we try and add our own efforts to what Christ has done, we detract from it. We don't make it better.

Paul says religious rules are not a way to get deeper with God. They do not work. Following religious rules doesn't work.

[9 : 23] Trusting in Christ alone is the way to go. That was the first couple of verses. Then he goes on to talk about chasing a spiritual experience. Look down to verse 18. Many people today are into experiences, aren't they?

And so they were in Colossae in those days. Verse 18. Let no one disqualify you. Insisting on asceticism and worship of angels. Going on in detail about visions puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind.

It seems of people those days who were really into chasing a religious experience. And so through their diets and through ecstatic experiences, they would try to join in with the worship of angels.

Try and access heaven. Come back with great stories of visions they'd seen. And it can sound so impressive. It can sound so impressive today when people say things like that.

And they talk about a deeper relationship with God or a higher spiritual experience. Now people today don't claim exactly the same things. But let me read you the blurb I found on the back of a Christian book just yesterday.

[10 : 25] Beginning with a dramatic encounter, the book unveils the author's uncommon journey to an understanding of and fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Complete with a study and discussion guide for individual or group use.

See what the book's selling? It's selling this man has had an experience, and if you follow what he says, you can have that experience too. It's not a common one, but you can have it.

Or others will teach a special technique for prayer. So there's contemplative prayer. Opening up your mind. Again, I quote from some literature about it.

A form of contemplative prayer. The centering prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer. Rather, it adds depth of meaning to all prayer. It emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God, and as a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Christ.

See what they're saying? Get this technique. You'll have a deeper relationship. You'll have a deeper insight. It's really exactly the same kind of thing as these guys in Colossae were saying. But do you notice how Paul critiques them?

[11 : 33] What does Paul say about these people? Look at the end of verse 18. He says, first of all, they are puffed up with their sensuous mind. Literally, their mind of the flesh. There's nothing spiritual about it, he says.

There's no growth. It's just like a balloon blowing up. It's all hot air. It's not maturity. Secondly, they've lost their grip on Christ. Verse 19. They are not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

The head is Christ. Paul told us that back in Colossians 1.18. Paul is picturing the church as Christ's body. Christ is the head of the church. But these people, in going into their own little spiritual experiences and their own ideas, they've lost connection with that head.

They're running around like headless chickens, essentially. Yet if you don't have a head, you don't have any nourishment, do you? It's where the nourishment comes from. They're cut off from that source of nourishment.

See what Paul says, as we look at these verses, about what true spiritual maturity looks like. It's not ecstatic experiences. It's not chasing a religious experience.

[12 : 45] It's certainly not individualistic. Look at what's needed in verse 19. First of all, you need to keep connection with the head, with Christ. That happens through faith. Paul told us that back in verse 12.

Through faith in God's power, we are united to Christ. Christ is the source of our life. Verse 13. He's told us we're alive with Christ. If you want life, trust in Christ.

But also it means not only connection to Christ, but connection to Christ's people. You see that in verse 19? They're not holding fast to Christ, for whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows.

See, private experiences isolate us from Christ, and they isolate us from Christ's people. God didn't save us so that we could be mature individuals on our own.

He saved us to be part of his family, part of his people. So Christian maturity is always a corporate thing, not an individualistic thing. It involves other people. We can't be Christians just listening to sermons on the internet, or praying on our own.

[13:52] We grow through being part of God's people, connected to Christ. We all need that connection, to Christ and to one another. And then where does the growth come from? Look at the end of verse 19.

It grows with a growth that is from God. See, Christian growth, spiritual growth, is not our work, but God's gift.

It's not our work, but God's gift. It's not individualistic any more than you can go to the gym and just exercise one muscle. So with Christ's body, it grows as the whole thing works together, fed by Christ.

So it's Paul's response to following religious rules as a way to try and get a deeper spiritual experience. He says that doesn't work. They're just a shadow.

The reality is Christ. This is what he says about chasing a spiritual experience. That won't work. It disconnects you from Christ and from Christ's body, Christ's people. It's only through God's grace we grow.

[14:53] That takes us on to a third area, which was very appealing to the Colossians. Verses 20 to 23. Which is submitting to self-discipline, or submitting to an ascetic regime.

You see what he means if you look at verse, well, look at verse 20, 22 I suppose, 21. Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. That idea that if you keep away from certain things, you can be more spiritual.

Now in those days, in the days when Paul wrote this letter, stoic philosophy was pretty popular. And stoicism believed that the material world, the physical world, things we can see and touch, was bad. And all our desires for those physical things were basically bad. So what you had to do was discipline yourself. Discipline yourself. So you can control yourself. And that way you could be a more fulfilled person and reach your purposes and your goals.

And that idea is prevalent in many religions. It's been prevalent throughout Christian history. Back in the 4th century, there were monks who would take themselves away from monasteries, away from people, and sit on the top of pillars, so they'd be away from society, and not eat much, not drink much.

[16:02] As if somehow that would help them be more spiritual. On a lesser extent, some people give up drink or chocolate for length in the hope that that may somehow help their spiritual life.

But Paul says, do you see where Paul says all these things come from? Look at verse 20. It says, Now what are those elemental spirits?

Well, the elemental spirits of the world are the spiritual forces that are working against God and against God's people, and who love to distract us by giving us things to do to make us feel like we're getting closer to God, getting right with God.

Paul says that's the way all religion basically works. And you shouldn't go back to that. Why? Because you've died with Christ to those ways. In other words, when Christ died, all those of us who trust in Christ, we've died to that old way of life, that old way of being controlled by these elemental spirits, controlled by these old religious ideas.

And Paul says you're no longer part of that. You've died to that. You're alive. You've been given new life, your real life. So don't submit to those rules. Don't you try to picture it like this. If you can remember the day when you left school.

[17:27] If you think back that far, it's quite a long time in my case. After you'd left school, after you had that summer holiday, when the next August or September rolled around, did you put your school uniform back on?

Did you get back to your old classroom for registration by 8.45, whatever the time was? I'm guessing none of us did. Why? Because that was the old way. We're no longer under the school regime.

We no longer have to keep those school rules. We are free from that. Paul says if you're submitting to all this do not taste, do not touch stuff, then you're forgetting that's dead, that's past, that's your old life.

That's like going back to school when you've finished. So go on, Paul says. They're a step backwards into slavery, not a step forward to spiritual fulfillment.

He has two other critiques for it as well. Not only did they step backwards, look at what else Paul says about them in verse 21. Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used.

[18 : 29] In other words, you eat stuff, you drink stuff, it all gets used up. None of this is eternal. None of it lasts. So how do you expect anything good from it? Where does it come from? Verse 22.

It is according to human precepts and teachings. These aren't God's ideas. These aren't God's rules. They're just human ideas. They can't make you right with God. They only deal with...

And thirdly, what's his final critique? Verse 23. See what he says there. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom. It looks impressive, doesn't it? See, monks who could fast for ages or whatever.

They have an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Rules don't change people. Rules don't change people. We all know that every new year, don't we? Make a new year's resolution. How quickly do we break it?

[19 : 30] Because rules do not change people. What we need is a change in the heart. Giving someone a rule to try and help them be a better person is like giving a cough drop to someone who's got pneumonia.

It doesn't get down to the problem. It doesn't solve the problem. But what can change us? What's Paul reminded them about here in verse 20?

If with Christ you died, you'll say in the next verse, chapter 3, verse 1, if with Christ you've been raised, what changes us is not our work, not our rule-keeping, not our religious rules, not our spiritual experiences.

What changes us is Jesus Christ. A deeper spiritual experience doesn't come through submitting to self-discipline. It doesn't come through chasing a religious experience.

It doesn't come through following religious rules. It comes through faith in Christ. In Christ who died and was raised. So people like me and you could know the living God and be his children.

[20 : 34] And we'll see more how that works out next week. Let's pray.