

Paul Warns and Instructs Against False Teaching

Colossians 2:4-7

Colossians 2:4-7 - *“Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. ⁵ For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. ⁶ As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, ⁷ rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.”*

Background Notes

In verse 4 Paul was definitely driving home this point: don't be taken in by persuasive words! Be on your guard against these false teachers. Verse 5 indicates that the false teaching was out there, but it hadn't actually penetrated the church. Paul said he rejoiced to see the great order in the church, and the steadfastness of their faith in Christ.

Let's review the false teaching situation that confronted the church at Colossae. In our studies of chapter 1 we discussed that the false teaching was a mixture of Judaism and what later became known as Gnosticism. We've already seen that this false teaching denied the deity of Christ, but let's look further in a little more detail at this false teaching to see how deceptive it was, and how one could be ensnared.

The Gnostics were dualistic. They believed that “spirit is good” but “matter is evil.” They believed that God, or the supreme being (who was good), was separated from “matter” (which was evil) by a series of emanations coming out from the supreme being, kind of like the ripples in a pond. This separation protected the purity of the supreme being, because the supreme being was good, pure, and holy, while matter was evil. So the series of emanations protected the supreme being from the evil of the material world.

In their false teaching, Christ was a very “high emanation” of the supreme being. Thus in that false teaching, Christ was less than fully God.

Furthermore, they taught that this “Christ emanation” came upon the human man Jesus at His baptism, then left before His death. Why? Because, in their thinking, you certainly couldn't have an incarnation. God couldn't possibly become man! God is good, holy, and pure. How could He be associated in any way with human flesh, that is part of the material world? So in this false teaching, the “Christ spirit” came upon the “human man Jesus” at His baptism and then left before His death.

Because matter is evil and spirit is good, how do humans deal with the evil tendencies of the human body? Some of the Gnostics said that you have to be very disciplined to overcome the evil tendencies, and so you have the ascetic trend of Gnostic thinking. Asceticism did indeed come into the early Church by the 2nd century. Other Gnostics said that since the body is evil and spirit is what really counts, you could do whatever you want with your body. You can indulge in anything you want – no problem!

Both of those aspects of this pre-Gnostic teaching are refuted in the book of Colossians.

In this gnostic teaching, the way to attain salvation was to work yourself up the series of emanations, like a ladder. (This teaching later became a Christian heresy.) It incorporated not only Christ as the highest emanation, but a whole host of angels and spirit beings. In order to work your way up the spiritual ladder, you had to become one of the Gnostics. You had to become one of the “elite,” and avail yourself of their secret knowledge.

I think that you can see that if a 1st century believer was not squared away on doctrine, he or she could easily be taken in by this teaching. After all, the material world is affected by evil, and the spirit world does seem to be good, so maybe there is something to this spiritual ladder and becoming more spiritual through secret knowledge, and so forth.

Doctrinal Points

1. False teaching can be very persuasive.

Verse 4: *“Now this I say, lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.”* That’s what Paul was telling the Colossians - and that’s what Paul is telling us. We might say that we would *never* be taken in by this Jewish Gnostic false teaching. Maybe not. But what about other false teachings that abound around us now?

What about the persuasive teaching that there really isn’t a hell? After all, how could a good God allow people to suffer in punishment forever? Some Christian people are being sucked into this idea. They’re beginning to redefine hell - not in biblical terms, as a place of eternal punishment, but as annihilation. That’s not what the Bible teaches. Don’t be deluded. Don’t be taken in by persuasive arguments.

What about the false teaching that “all roads lead up the same mountain” to God? Here in America, one of the roads is Christ, but what about the Hindus and the Muslims? If they’re really sincere, isn’t that another road up the same mountain? Wouldn’t a good God allow people to take any one of many roads up the same mountain? Maybe you think that. If you think that there are any ways to God other than the One Way - through Jesus Christ - you’re being deceived. You’re being taken in by persuasive arguments. Jesus said, *“I am the Truth, I am the Life; no one comes to God by through Me.”*

2. There is protection against false teaching.

In verses 5-7, two means of protection against false teaching are given: encouragement (v5), and establishment in the faith (v6-7).

Let's look at **encouragement**. Verse 5: *"For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ."* Paul was encouraging them, because it was a means of protection against the false teaching. He was rejoicing that they were standing firm. Encouraging one another in the faith is a great means of protection against false teaching.

In verses 6-7, **establishment** is another means of protection against false teaching. Verses 6-7: *"As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving."* There's no substitute for becoming well established in the faith, as protection against false teaching!

By the way, in verse 6 the emphasis is on the principle of "Lordship," rather than on the principle of faith. The idea here is not that "as you receive Jesus Christ by faith, now walk by faith." It's more like "as you received Jesus Christ as Lord (salvation), now make Him Lord in every area of your life."

In verse 7, the idea is becoming a mature Christian. "Rooted" is an agricultural term; it implies stability and nourishment. "Built up" is an architectural term; it implies foundation and structure. If you're not rooted firmly and growing stronger in the faith, you're vulnerable to false teaching.

At a retreat some time ago, I talked with a guy who was a Christian, but he was not well established in the faith. We were talking about the concept of the resurrection of the body – the truth that, when Christ returns, believers will actually have changed bodies. This was completely new to him; he had never heard anything like this. He thought that we were going to be "spiritual jellyfish" floating around out there in space. He was wide open for false teaching! One of the cults could have come along and ensnared him with persuasive arguments, because he wasn't well established. Becoming well established in the faith is the sure means of protection against false teaching.

Notice what's added in verse 7: *"As you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving."* Why is that added? Why is being thankful an important protection against false teaching? It's because when we're discouraged, we're particularly vulnerable to false teaching. And believers can get discouraged, so we need to emphasize always being thankful. Thankfulness certainly goes a long way in protecting us against false teaching.

Practical Applications

1. Let's write letters of encouragement to students away at college.

That's what Paul was doing! He was writing to these believers to warn them, to encourage them, and to help them get established in the faith, so that they would be protected against false teaching.

We, too, need to do that with fellow believers. I'm thinking particularly right now of students. Maybe students that are part of your church congregation are away at college - maybe on a secular campus. Write them a letter! They need to be encouraged, because a lot of deception and persuasive argument is coming at them from all kinds of worldviews that are present in the classrooms.

Write them a letter and encourage them to become more established in the faith, because encouragement protects against false teaching. When I was in college, a number of Christians wrote to me to encourage me to hang tough. Believe it or not, it does help. So let's write letters of encouragement to students who are away at college!

2. Let's practice the Lordship of Christ.

Once again, verse 6: *"As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him."* The apostle wasn't talking about salvation here. He was talking primarily about making Jesus Lord of every area of our lives. Certainly when we become Christians, we confess Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:9). But now we should want to make Him Lord over every area of our lives. Let's practice the Lordship of Christ.

Is the Lord Jesus Christ the Lord of your career? Is He the Lord of your marriage? Is He the Lord of your home? Is He the Lord of your money? Is He the Lord of your social life?

Let's make Jesus Christ the Lord over every area of our lives. Let's practice the lordship of Christ!