

Paul Warns Against Mysticism and Asceticism

Colossians 2:18-23

Section 1, verses 18-19: The Dangers of Mysticism

Colossians 2:18-19 – *“Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.”*

Background Notes (for section 1)

The primary reason why the apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church at Colossae was to warn them of the dangers of false teaching. This was a mixture of Judaism, and what later became known as Gnosticism. Paul wasn't worried about the Colossians becoming heretics overnight. His main concern was to prevent elements of the false teaching from mixing with the truth of the gospel. He didn't want the Colossians to settle for a distorted Christian faith, a faith that would not be Christ-centered and Christ-focused. That danger is possible today as well. Let's not settle for a distorted Christian faith!

In Colossians 2 Paul pointed out that there were (and are) four particular areas where it would be possible to stray from a Christ-centered Christianity. There was the area of philosophy (or worldviews), the area of legalism, and now, in verses 18-23, the dangerous areas of mysticism (v18-19) and asceticism (v20-23).

Doctrinal Point (for section 1)

Mysticism is not Christ-centered, but self-centered.

What is mysticism? It is the idea that a direct knowledge of God's spiritual truth and/or ultimate reality can be attained through *subjective experiences*. There was a definite mystical trend in the false Gnostic teaching. The mention of the worship of angels shows that Paul had this in mind. In Gnostic thought, there was the idea of a supreme being, and a series of “emanations” descending from the being like ripples in a pond, until you finally got down to matter. These “emanations” included a whole host of angels and spirit beings. Paul was refuting Gnostic thinking in his comment about the worship of angels.

It's important to point out here that the Bible is not against subjective experience. Romans 5:5 speaks about "the love of God that's shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit." That's certainly subjective; that's the "warm feeling" side of Christianity. But if we desire to experience feelings all the time, we begin to focus almost entirely on visions, spiritual experiences, the dramatic spiritual gifts, and so on. This can easily lead to mysticism, and the idea that you don't need scripture – that all you need is spiritual experiences, and you'll have a direct line to God. The idea that you can attain direct knowledge of God and spiritual truth and ultimate reality through subjective spiritual experiences is **not** biblical.

The danger of mysticism is that it is not Christ-centered, but rather it is **self**-centered. Look at the end of verse 18: "*vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.*" Emphasizing visions and other spiritual experiences leads to pride, whether the visions are seen or not seen. It's sad to meet Christians who tell you (with false humility) that because they have had certain spiritual experiences, they have a direct line to God. With fleshly pride, they imply that if you're not "Spirit-filled" and having spiritual experiences, you're missing out! You're unspiritual, and they have better access to God than you do. Don't believe it!

The beginning of verse 18 says, "*don't let anyone defraud you of your reward.*" The idea there is not salvation - it's the idea of taking away our great privilege. Hebrews 10:19 says that **all** Christians can have boldness to enter the very presence of God through Jesus Christ. So don't be defrauded of your prize by believing anyone who says you have to have certain spiritual experiences in order to enter the presence of God!

Verse 19 says that Christians who become mystical do not hold fast to the Head, "*from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.*" Christians who emphasize mystical experiences become less and less Christ-focused, because they focus on their own spiritual experiences. Mysticism is not Christ-centered – it's self-centered.

Practical Application (for section 1)

Let's be careful about spiritual experiences.

Verse 19 warns that if you go off on a mystical trend, you're "*not holding fast to the Head.*" As an illustration, think of a paraplegic or a quadriplegic. The problem is not in the head or the body; it's in the fact that the head and the body are not connected. There's been a break in the spinal cord.

Jesus Christ is the Head, and we are His Body. There must be a vital connection. He's the source of life and growth (v19). "Holding fast" means to be in close connection with the Head. The primary way we stay in close fellowship with the Head is to stay in His Word. In John 15 the Lord says, "*I am the Vine; you are the branches.*" How do we abide in the Vine? Abide in His Word!

Be careful about spiritual experiences, because the more we become occupied with the spiritual experiences of the body, the less we tend to hold fast to the Head of the Body. Christians who focus on spiritual experiences often begin to taper off in their systematic Bible study. Warm fuzzy feelings become a priority, and sharing “what the Lord showed me” increasingly takes center stage. God does us give spiritual experiences, and there is a subjective side to the Christian faith and life, but be careful about spiritual experiences.

Section 2, verses 20-23: The Dangers of Asceticism

Colossians 2:20-23 – *“Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—²¹ “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,”²² which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?²³ These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.”*

Background Notes (for section 2)

Verse 21, *“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,”* is not a verse that the Lord put in the Bible for Christian mothers to post on the refrigerator so that dad and the kids stay out of there! That would certainly be taking it out of context!

The context of verses 21 - 23 is a warning to the Colossians (and to us today) to watch out for the dangers of asceticism, or the severe treatment of the body, with the idea that this will gain salvation or sanctification. Don't settle for a Christian faith that has been distorted through asceticism!

Doctrinal Point (for section 2)

Asceticism is not taught in the Bible.

Asceticism is the belief that salvation and/or sanctification comes through severe treatment of the body - that persecution of the body will save the soul. This trend existed in the Gnostic false teaching around Colossae.

Paul wasn't worried about the Colossians settling for an ascetic brand of salvation, but he was concerned that they might pick up the false idea that asceticism would lead to sanctification or becoming more spiritual. It sounds so logical, doesn't it - the idea that you keep if your body in check by severe treatment, you will become more spiritual? It's easy to see how people can be taken in by that idea, both then and today.

The biblical answer is: **discipline – yes; asceticism – no!** Verse 20: *“Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations.”* Here's the apostle's

point. If we've died with Christ, that's our position. Then why go back to the basic (elementary) principles of trying to keep the flesh in check by our own will power? Think about it - the flesh (our sinful human nature) trying to hold the body in check by the flesh! It's like the fox guarding the chicken coop. It doesn't work.

The Scripture is teaching us here that we've died with Christ to the works of the flesh, and to everything that has to do with "the flesh trying to please God." Trying to keep manmade regulations about temporary things is the work of the flesh, and it means that we've failed to recognize that we have died with Christ (v21-22).

In 1 Corinthians 9:27 Paul said, *"I discipline my body and make it my slave."* That's biblical. But severe treatment of the body, persecution of the body, and thinking you're chalking up points with God by that means, is not biblical. Setting the alarm clock early to get up and read the Word of God – that's discipline, and it's biblical. Crawling on your knees for a mile a day, thinking you're making points with God by this practice - that's asceticism, and it's not biblical.

Again, bodily *discipline* is biblical, but asceticism is not. Asceticism, thinking that you're becoming more spiritual through severe treatment of the body, is not biblical.

Asceticism is not taught in the Bible.

Practical Application (for section 2)

Don't think that you can become more spiritual through asceticism.

Most Christians today are not facing that danger – in fact, their problem is often just the opposite! But there's always the possibility that some Christians could get into asceticism. Asceticism may *appear* to be spiritual, but it doesn't work. Look at verse 23, *"These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."*

A young man who studied for the priesthood before he became a born again Christian told me that they had to practice "flagellation" - beating your body. But some of the students cheated. They would go to their room, beat the bed and cry out in pain. That's what the Scripture says: asceticism is of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

Asceticism has never worked. In the 4th century, after the Roman persecutions ended, there was an age of asceticism. Christians lived in caves and survived on bread and water - but it didn't work! It didn't make people more spiritual then, and asceticism doesn't make Christians more spiritual today.

In Galatians 5:16 the apostle Paul gave us the only way to check fleshly indulgence: *"I say, then, walk in the Spirit and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh."* Don't think that you can become more spiritual through asceticism.