

98-05-29b Colossians

We resume our study of Colossians, our, what I would call, reconnaissance of Colossians, filling ourselves in on the background and the situation, circumstances in which Paul writes this letter. We have seen that there is a problem, that Epaphras, who is an experienced pastor, but certainly not possessed of the doctrinal knowledge and experience that the Apostle Paul has, he has been faced with this dilemma, the incursion of a form of twisted truth in the community where he is ministering the Word of God that has him baffled how to deal with it. When he teaches the truth, it only seems to add fuel to the fire.

And if the teaching of God's Word doesn't remedy a situation, what will? So he has come to the Apostle Paul to lay out the details of this problem, and in response, Paul writes the letter we have before us. What was the nature of the Colossian heresy? What was it that had Epaphras so baffled? Well, it had five components, and we are ready now to address these because we know a little bit of the background and the makeup of the population and so forth. We know, first of all, that even though there was a substantial Jewish presence in the Roman province of Asia, which under the Greek Empire had been known as Phrygia, the Romans consolidated Phrygia and several other city-state areas into a general province known as Asia and made Laodicea the capital.

But there had been Jews that had moved there. There were other Jews that were deported there from Babylon in the centuries preceding this time. But they had pretty well absorbed the surrounding culture.

They had integrated and blended in with it. They may have retained a few of their Jewish customs. Obviously, they were still ready to send the temple tax down to Jerusalem.

But in many other ways, they had absorbed their culture. And so the Colossian heresy was not the type of problem that Paul found in Galatia when he wrote the letter to the Galatians. Legalism and getting trapped and going back to the law of Moses and living under that system was the problem.

That's not the problem in Colossae, although there may be some elements there. It's not the root cause because most of the Jews there are very liberal-minded and very much in tune with their local culture. This is a pagan culture.

And the majority of people in the Colossian church and in the surrounding region, when they came to Christ, they came out of a pagan background. And in the pagan society in which they lived, they were free thinkers. There was very little respect for marriage.

There was very little respect for morality in general. It was sort of every man for himself. And everyone sort of played by these loose rules.

It reminds me of traffic in Beirut. Back in 1983 when I was in Beirut, and it was very much a war-torn city. There was active warfare going on.

There was a line down through the middle of the city called the Green Line. You had the Christian Maronite militias and the Lebanese army on one side of the line. And you had all the Moslem factions, the Shia Moslems, the Sunni Moslems, and all the others on the other side of the line.

They called it the Green Line. And every night when everybody got off work, along about 4.30 or 5.00, the shooting would start across the Green Line. Machine gun fire and tracers and rockets and all kinds of commotion would go on until about 10.30 or 11.00 when everybody got sleepy and they'd go to bed.

Then they'd get up in the morning and go to work. It was fairly quiet in the city all through the day. I drove across the Green Line in daylight hours and didn't have any problem, although we were, you know, watching.

But in the evening, along about when we would have rush hour, people would expend whatever ammunition they'd accumulated during the day and that would last for six or seven hours and then everybody would get tired and go to bed. But because of this, the city was in disarray. The street lamps didn't work, the signal lights, the stop-and-go lights and so forth.

There was a big traffic circle in the northern part of Beirut and none of the lights were functioning. So people began to just hurtle pell-mell down the highways. The highways had stripes just like our highways, but nobody paid any attention to them.

So nobody respected lanes and paid any attention to the rules of traffic or not passing on the right. You'd have people skittering off into the shoulder and cutting back in front of you. So the only way to really drive was to lean on the horn.

You would rather have a car without a windshield that did have a horn than the other way around, because the horn was just an essential thing to keep from being run over. But it was just every man for himself. When you got to an intersection, there was no control.

There were no policemen, no light, and so it was driving by intimidation. If you looked like you were going fast and weren't going to stop, other people would screech to a halt and let you through. So you just had to adopt sort of a mean Middle Eastern look on your face and knit your brows and just look like nothing was going to get in your way and otherwise you could sit there forever and never get across an intersection.

So it was just completely disorganized, just I'm going to get where I'm going to go and everybody better get out of my way kind of a thing. Well, that's sort of the way the culture was in the Roman Empire at this time. These are the early seeds of the destruction of the Roman Empire and the only thing that made it last any longer than it did was the growth and spread of Christianity.

But this is the early days of Christianity. These are the first generation or two of Gentile believers and it hasn't caught on and made a difference. So think about the background that these believers are coming out of.

They're coming out of a culture sort of like what ours is turning into where homosexuality was practiced openly and flaunted, where fornication and adultery and incest and bestiality were practiced openly and were not called down and only in the grossest cases were called to account. Worship itself of the pagan gods often involved temple prostitution and all sorts of weird cultic behavior. Well, this was normal for these people and so then here comes the gospel of Jesus Christ and a new and living way and truth in the soul and the things that are pure and noble and honorable and pleasing in God's sight are out of line with what's commonly accepted and what's normal and what people grew up with.

So the first element that is pulling at these fairly new believers, this first generation of Gentile believers is their background. It's been compared by some commentators to a cable. You have the idea that these forces are like a boat sitting near the shore and you've got a cable pulling the boat in and this cable is made up of many small threads, threads of experience and culture and peer pressure and nobody's going to say anything if you engage in these practices that are part of the pagan culture and so it would have been an easy thing to fall back into one's old ways.

Is that something that still exists today or was that unique to the days back in Colossae? What sort of culture do we have today? How easy is it to be sucked into the culture that we have today? I'll give you a good example and once again remember that we are talking about taking things that may not be inherently bad and you'll forgive me, I'm going to have to say this several times so that I won't be misunderstood. I'm going to talk about things and we're going to see the problems in them. These things are not necessarily all inherently evil.

Now some things are. In this first element, the sensuality that characterized the culture, a lot of this was just downright sinful and evil. Disregard for marriage and so forth.

But some of the others that we're going to address are not. But just remember, just because we mention some of these things and this is what Paul is speaking out against doesn't mean that this thing is intrinsically evil. It means that it has been made evil or has become evil because of what it's doing to the lives of believers.

But this first one is in your more obvious category. They could be pulled back into the life that surrounds them. And it's the same sort of thing that surrounds us today.

Now, we know to stay away from the terrible taboo things. We are careful about things like alcohol. We're careful about things like drugs and crime and so forth.

We're more than careful. We abstain altogether from some of these things. Violating our marriage vows, whether we have taken them yet or not.

One of the problems is people think that until you take your marriage vows, well, all is fair. But it is just as important, especially for young people, to remember that there is faithfulness before you meet your future spouse as there is faithfulness afterwards. And while you have the opportunity, when you've still got your time before you and you haven't yet met that person that God has designed to be your soulmate, it is possible to respect the relationship that is yet future and to live recognizing that you belong to someone that you just haven't met yet.

And it's unfortunate that people think, well, once I'm married I'm really going to have to clean up my act. Some people are not able to because you develop habits and ways of thinking and you form grooves and scars in your soul that are not easily healed. They can be healed through the power of the Word of God, but if you have the opportunity to not incur them in the first place, how much better that is.

So that's a part of our culture. You think about high school today. Some of us have children that are going to be growing up and getting into junior high and high school, and the promiscuity, the lack of standards, lack of self-control.

And lack of self-control when children are smaller just manifests itself in disobedience. Someone feels cranky and so they act cranky. Someone feels a little tired so they act tired.

And a lot of parents will excuse their child and say, well, he was tired or it wasn't his fault, this, that, and the other. And we have lost as a culture the importance of teaching children self-control. There is no greater gift that a parent can give their child than self-control.

And sometimes you learn self-control when things are not ideal. And yes, maybe it was a long day. Yes, maybe you did miss your snack.

Yes, maybe you did miss your nap. That is not an excuse for disobedience. And we tacitly train our children that certain things excuse bad behavior when we don't think.

And we have a whole generation of children who are being raised this way that, well, if there's sufficient mitigating circumstances, then what I do is okay. And the problem is, well, what happens when any sort of strong feeling overtakes you, like lust, like desire, like emotional involvement with some girl or some boy in your class and you're with them after hours and so forth and you think, well, but it must, you know, this is the big problem with Debbie Boone's song. Everybody thought that was such a great song.

She's a Christian, you light up my life and so forth. But one line in that song says, it can't be wrong if it feels so right. And there's a whole generation of children who are acting out that principle because they have not been trained.

I'm not saying they don't bear their own responsibility, but it's a sad thing that they've never been trained that it doesn't matter if it feels good or not. It's whether it is good or not that makes it right

or wrong. And there may be factors that would tempt a child to misbehave or to be disobedient, but that is not an excuse.

And one of the important things parents have to do is train their child, yes, maybe you're thirsty, yes, maybe you're tired, yes, maybe it's been a long day, but you have no excuse for disobedience. That teaches a child self-control. And then later on when they come under pressure, they have developed that ability.

They know how to discipline themselves and control themselves and say, well, I've been under pressure before. I can stand up under this. I don't have to give in and follow the crowd.

The whole crowd is caught up in a wave of excitement. We're all at a party and now somebody's broken out the alcohol or someone's broken out the drugs or someone's broken out the bottle and we're all going to play spin the bottle. And they do a whole lot more than just kiss now when they play spin the bottle.

And to be caught up in this and not to want to be thought abnormal or so forth, peer pressure and so forth, when do you start talking to your child as a teenager and say, now when this happens, don't give in? It starts from the cradle. It starts at the earliest stages in training and giving them the opportunity to have a structure in their soul for which they are responsible. So sensuality, falling back into the culture, the cultural norms, the culturally accepted standards, it's culturally acceptable for children to misbehave.

Now they've got a real nice name for it. It's ADD or they're attention deficient. They just can't pay attention anymore.

And as I have told you before, my definition of ADD is not attention deficit disorder. It is adult discipline deficiency. It is a failure for parents to train their child.

The human race has survived for thousands of years before anybody ever invented the term attention deficit. If you're deficient in attention, what you need is motivation to pay attention. And unfortunately, we have removed that in schools.

We've removed it in households. Now you can actually run the risk of being run in under the law for child abuse if you physically discipline your child. And of course, they don't even consider it anymore in public school, which is very unfortunate because it hurts the child.

It hurts them more to not incur physical discipline. And it's a sad thing, but the lack of self-control is accepted. It's a culturally accepted thing.

So falling into the accepted patterns and just going with the flow, this was a big problem in Colossi. And it's one of the things that Paul is going to address in Colossians. Now, why would this come up and be such a problem? Why would this be something Epaphras couldn't cope with? Well, we're going to see when we look at these other four.

I think the sensuality problem, falling back into the culturally acceptable evils, is something Epaphras knew how to handle. And Paul does not really address those too much in Colossians. What he is going to address are the next four that I'm going to give you.

The first one is asceticism. We mentioned this in our earlier session this evening. This was something that the Jews were familiar with from some of the Judaistic strains in Israel, the Essenes and a few others.

Some offshoots that looked at the Nazarite tradition in Jewish thought where you would take a vow and abstain from women and wine and not cut your hair and so forth. This was a holy thing. Samson was a Nazarite.

Many believe that John the Baptist may have taken the Nazarite vow. Again, here's a case where the Nazarite vow can be a good thing. It is a vow of abstinence, but it's abstinence for a purpose.

It's not abstinence as an end in itself. Paul addresses this when you get over to Corinthians and he talks about a man and a woman who are married. He says, don't deny physical relationship to one another except for a time and that for prayer and fasting.

It needs to have a purpose. Don't use it as a weapon. Don't use it as revenge.

Don't use it as leverage. Don't get busy and be neglectful of your spouse. But there is a time for abstinence, but it's abstinence for a purpose.

What people in asceticism did is made abstinence an end in itself. They thought holiness was to be found in abstaining from certain things rather than it being the means to an end. A lot of questions come up today.

Is fasting something that we should do? They fasted in the Bible. Jesus fasted and prayed and so forth. Should we engage in fasting? Here's a brief answer.

We could spend a whole lesson just on that. But stop and think. Why did Jesus fast? Why did people fast in the Old Testament? What do you almost always see when someone is fasting? What else are they doing? They're praying.

And the fasting isn't so much I'm going to show God how serious I am or I'm going to afflict myself and somehow earn God's favor. Basically, it is saying if I stop and partake of a meal here, it's going to distract me. It's going to deflect me from my purpose.

It is an indication of the level of concentration and the level of focus that someone has on what they're doing. If you're deeply engaged in prayer, and I don't think very many of us reach this level of prayer. It's a struggle for us to get 10 or 15 continuous minutes of prayer going.

Your mind starts wandering. You sit down with the best of intentions, and pretty soon you realize you're planning your day for tomorrow or you start to pray for some person, and you think about them, and you remember something that happened a long time ago. You forget all about the fact that you were addressing the Lord 5 or 10 minutes ago.

But there is a time and there is a circumstance where you can be deeply moved about something, a circumstance or a person or an issue. And you're thinking about it and meditating on it from the standpoint of God's plan and God's purpose. And there is a compelling need to go before the Lord and talk to Him about it.

And you don't want to interrupt that concentration to fix yourself a sandwich or to go down and get a meal or whatever. You just skip that meal and you continue to meditate. You continue to concentrate and pray.

And you can do this sometimes when you're in the midst of exercising your spiritual gift. Maybe you're down encouraging someone who has suffered a disaster or is in a time of trial. Maybe you're meeting someone else's needs and you skip a meal.

Well, guess what? That's fasting. Fasting is for a purpose. Fasting is not an end in itself.

You don't say, well, I'm skipping supper. Aren't I holy? Fasting is the means to an end. Everything that we do is in that area as far as even your prayer.

Your prayer is not an end in itself. You don't pray just to be praying. Prayer is the means to an end.

This is one of the problems with social interaction today is that conversation has just become conversation that doesn't have a point anymore. We're fortunate in having Christian fellowship that we do have something to talk about. It doesn't always have to be Scripture and the Bible and so forth.

You sometimes find yourself trapped in conversation where it just seems like it's just talking to fill up the time. Total strangers will strike up a conversation. I was sitting in the airport earlier.

People will strike up a conversation and just chat back and forth about something. It's harmless, and I'm not saying this is a bad thing that we should pass a law against, but really good conversation has a purpose. It is an expression of values.

It's a sharing of experience. It is an expression of fellowship. It is a way of enjoying the presence and the personality and the character of other people, especially other believers.

And it can be about anything, but it has that as its goal. You are enjoying fellowship. It's not just an end in itself.

Well, I'm talking just because it seems awfully dead in here. It seems awfully quiet. Somebody ought to be saying something.

And this is where your weather and your other stuff comes up. Well, hot, ain't it? It should have a point. So, asceticism as an end in itself became an evil.

It's not necessarily a bad thing to abstain from certain things, but when it becomes an end in itself, and we're going to find Paul talking in Colossians about those who say, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. Are these prohibitions the measure by which you measure your righteousness? I don't drink. Alcohol never passes my lips.

And consciously or unconsciously, we sort of base our righteousness. We think, well, God certainly has to be pleased with me because I don't keep any liquor in the house. Gosh, I haven't had a drink in X number of days or weeks or whatever it may be.

And you see, again, all of the rest of these things are going to fall in this category. It may be a very good thing to abstain. For some of us, it's more important than others to abstain.

I think it's important for me to abstain for several reasons. And it goes beyond just personal preference. There are reasons why others need to abstain.

And it can be a good thing, but it's because it's the means to an end. I don't just abstain and say, well, you know, I'm kind of floating about a half inch higher than everybody else on the planet because, hey, I don't drink. If you make it an end in itself, if you say this is the substance of my righteousness, this is the substance of my spirituality, you have taken what might be a good thing and you've turned it into an evil thing.

It's not an end in itself. It is not the means to fullness in your spiritual life. This is not what's going to complete your spirituality, abstaining from this thing.

Now, when we think of asceticism, I generally think of these Gandhi types that are emaciated and sit by the side of the road and have no possessions. But many people consciously or unconsciously say, oh, you know, I would never do that. See what those people are doing over there? They watch movies all the time.

Those movies get bad language. Every once in a while somebody's clothes come off in those movies and that's just wicked, evil, sinful. You're putting money in the pockets of Disney, the evil Disney empire and all of the bad things that they're doing and so forth.

Well, it may be not such a good idea to put money in the pockets of Disney. By the way, if you didn't know it, next week is homosexual week at Disneyland and all of the homosexuals, all of the evil lifestyle types are having a big party at Disneyland next week. And under the encouragement and Mickey Mouse, everybody's going to be there.

Right here in Dallas, people have gotten together, donated over \$7,000 to have a homosexual prom for all of the homosexual high school students who feel awkward at a regular prom because they don't know how to dance with somebody of the opposite persuasion. And they're calling it the promenade and gala event, G-A-Y-L-A. It's a gala event.

And so all of these gala type people are going to be showing up there. And the great thing is, though, is that anybody that wants to pay \$10 can go. And you have to wonder, well, are some of these right-wing extremists going to pay their \$10 and go in? They're trying to go there to not be harassed, but you can pay \$10, I guess, and go down and harass them all you want.

But we tolerate this in our culture. Now it has become almost a badge of how progressive and how enlightened you are that you can look at homosexual characters on TV series or you can know a homosexual at work or whatever, and because you can treat them just like everybody else and have no issues with them, this shows how wonderful you are. Well, you can go to the opposite extreme, and there are people who absolutely get infuriated when they find out that Disney is having the gay week and they're having a gay prom and so forth.

There are people who will make it their sole aim in life. They'll pay their \$10 and go down and try to disrupt it. There are people who are now finding some real stinky acid and pouring it through the windows of the abortion clinics.

When the people come in the next morning, nobody can breathe in there because this awful sulfuric rotten egg stanches all through the building. Is this pleasing to God? Is this God's plan? Here's a question for you. How many picket lines did Jesus and the disciples ever join? How many catcalls did they ever send forth at the slave markets or at the houses of prostitution or down at the temple with the money changers? Jesus only took what could even be loosely construed as a social action of that type twice, and that's when he cleansed the temple.

And why did he do it? Why didn't he go down there every day and cleanse it? He did it once at the beginning of his ministry, and he did it again at the end of his ministry. And what did he say on both occasions? He says, My Father's house is supposed to be a house of prayer. You have made it a den of thieves.

What does that tell us about action? Did Paul tell the Colossians, you know you're in the midst of a pagan culture and what you need to do is not only abstain from this stuff, but you need to go out there and take action. You need to cleanse your society. Go out and burn down the houses of prostitution.

Go down and stone the people that are having the slave auctions and the illicit activities that permeate your culture. Go out there and make a difference. Be a light shining.

What does the Bible tell us about when and where to take this kind of action? When did Jesus take action? When it entered his place of worship. When should we take action against these

forms of evil? When they enter our place of worship. Someone comes into your church.

Someone comes into your immediate periphery, the periphery of your family and your Christian circle and begins to spread evil. That's a time to act. Something begins to have an effect on your children.

They start pushing something in your school to your child and its little sharp rusty point enters your immediate area of influence, your immediate area of control. We all, being an artilleryman, I think of a projectile having a bursting radius. For a 105mm projectile, there's a 30m burst radius.

For a 155mm projectile, there's a 50m bursting radius. And that 50m has a great definition. That is the circle in which 50% or greater casualties can be expected.

There's a certain amount of fragmentation near the blast, near the impact site of a round. And that's a bursting radius. A round is small enough that you can hold it in your two hands, but it has an effect out to a certain distance.

And beyond that distance, it doesn't have an effect. But we all have a bursting radius. We have a circle of influence.

We have a range in which we can make a difference and have a say-so. We have a certain amount of influence, and I'm not discouraging anybody. You should write your congressman, write your senator, keep abreast of national affairs, national politics, and so forth.

But when do you go out and tackle evil? Do you up here in North Dallas or Richardson or Garland, do we drive down to the Routh Street abortion clinic and picket? That's not in my community. That's not in my periphery. That's not in my circle.

Now, if they set up an abortion clinic next door to me, I'd have to rethink how much action I'm going to take. If they come in and start pushing some evil ideas in the school where my daughters attend classes, now this is where I'm going to have to make a decision because now it's affecting, you know, it's right here. Jesus went into the temple when he was in Jerusalem.

You know, he spent most of his ministry up north in Galilee and in Transjordan and went through Samaria a few times and even went up to Sidon. And he only came to Jerusalem sporadically. But when he was in Jerusalem and when it was a part of the plan of God, he went in and cleansed the temple because that was his place of ministry, that was his place of worship, and that had a symbolic... The reason I bring this up is people cite this and say, everybody should take social action because Jesus cleansed the temple.

That's a little bit different category of action. When it's a part of Jesus' ministry, it has symbolic value. It only occurs twice in the three and a half years of his ministry that we have recorded.

We need to take caution before we base a life of social action on Jesus cleansing the temple. But

we often base our righteousness on, I don't do those things. Not only do I not do them, but I go out and attack people who do.

Well, this is asceticism, and this was a strain, this was a perversion of the truth. Sure, there are a lot of evil things. But the question is, where does your reaction to those things fit in your thinking? Do you base your righteousness on your reaction to those things and the action that you take against those things? Do you say, you know, I'm a part of the Operation Rescue.

I've joined Operation Rescue. And not only do I not believe in abortion, I would never let anybody in my family have an abortion or do anything about an abortion, but I'm going to go down there and throw rocks at anybody that does. And I'll lay in front of trucks and pour acid inside and bomb and shoot and do all the things that Operation Rescue and other people of that persuasion have done.

Is that glorifying to God? Is that a part of God's plan? Is that the way God works? Does God work on the outside? Well, if I keep them away from the clinic, somehow that's going to work its way in and they're suddenly going to come to Christ and learn the plan of God and do things that are glorifying to God. It doesn't ever work that way, and people don't stop and think. They justify things that satisfy them and give them a sense of righteousness.

Because they don't do those things. They're against it. They're not a part of it.

And they're going to see to it that you're not a part of it either. And even if those things are wrong and should not be engaged in or partaken of or whatever, to base your righteousness on that is an error and it's an evil. It deflects us from the truth.

It deflects us from the right answer to those problems. How much better not to be a light that shines in social action, but to be a light that shines with the truth. Wouldn't it be great if the impact of God's plan and God's purpose was so great that people didn't want to go to an abortion clinic anymore.

People didn't want to go engage in all sorts of excess. People didn't want to get a high from drugs or pornography or whatever else people abstain from and think they're righteous because they've had a transformation in the soul. To deny the power of the internal solution in favor of feeble human efforts at an external solution takes a good thing and makes it evil.

Our first category of problem in Colossae is the obvious one. The culture from which these Christians have come can easily soak them back in. The second area is the reaction to that.

People who react to that culture and base their righteousness on having abstained from it. We don't go anywhere near the temple. We don't eat any of the meat that comes from those pagan temples.

We don't have any of those little stone idols around our house. We don't talk to anybody who

does. We abstain, we refrain, we do not touch, we do not taste, we do not handle.

Some of them may have had some Jewish influence. We only eat kosher foods. We don't eat these foods that are from the pagan lands and so forth.

We try to stick to what's in the law of Moses. Self-denial may be a good and necessary thing in your life. It's not self-denial per se.

It's self-denial as the basis of your righteousness that is the problem. Paul is going to use a term, and we'll point it out when we encounter it, several times in Colossians, fullness. If you've been reading through the book in anticipation of our study, the next time you read through, watch when Paul uses the word fullness.

He talks about fullness in Christ, completeness in Christ. Because what people were arguing, and this is what Epaphras had such a tough time with, is that, well sure, everything Epaphras is saying is great. We agree with all of that.

All that stuff you learned from Paul, that's wonderful. The word of truth, growing grace and knowledge, be pleasing to God, walk the worthy walk, that's fine. But that's not enough.

If you abstain, if you pull totally away from your pagan culture, don't even touch not the unclean things. Quote Scripture. Bring up some Old Testament things.

This is in the Scriptures. Remember, all they had for a Bible was the Septuagint, the Old Testament. Look what it says in God's word.

Don't eat pork. Don't eat shellfish. Look at that nasty... We're going to abstain from these things.

This is how you'll perfect and complete your Christianity. This is how you will obtain fullness. All of the things you're doing are fine, but it's not complete.

Now, have you ever heard that argument in our culture today? Well, yes, Bible study, wonderful. We're big on Bible study as well. But we also... I mean, that's certainly an important element.

And that's an important part. But, if you really want to be complete, if you really want to accelerate and make progress, here are some other things. This is what Paul is talking about in Colossae.

This is what the Colossian heresy consists in. Sure, everything Epaphras is teaching is fine. It's just not enough.

It's not complete. For the fullness to be complete, here's our idea. And there were several different ideas on how to complete the picture.

Christ is, in and of himself, just through the teaching of the Word and the ministry of the Spirit, is not sufficient. You need these other things. So, in addition to refraining or abstaining from certain

things, in addition to staying away from the sensuality, and those are our first two points.

Sensuality was the first one. Asceticism is the second one. The third thing is, we've got some religious requirements.

And this is where some of the Judaism would kick back in. Ceremonialism. To really complete your Christianity, don't forget about the feasts.

We've got some great feasts to observe. And think about all that you'll learn about God and so forth. Now, is there anything wrong with learning about the Jewish feasts? There's wonderful truth embodied in those feasts, and in the requirements and regulations surrounding them in the Old Testament.

Are the feasts and the food regulations of the Old Testament sinful or evil or in any way bad? They're not, are they? But they are a part of the Colossian heresy. They're a part of what Paul speaks against in Colossians. Why? Because people took a good thing and made it a bad thing.

It's an easy task to identify sin and to identify outright, black, forked-tongued evil. What's hard is to identify when a good thing has become a bad thing. Because we just want to see the good.

And this was the problem. Religious observance, religious regulations, the observance of feast days, the abstaining from certain foods, circumcision, some of the things that come up in Galatians, there was still an element of this up there. And some of the Essene-ism had spread far and wide.

In fact, Josephus says, we tend to think, well, the Essenes only lived down there at Masada or they lived down there at Qumran, and that's the only place they lived. But Josephus says, the Essenes have communities in every major town. He said they spread out and they collect together and create little organizational cells in every town.

And it's no doubt true that they got up into Asia and that there were Essenes up there saying, well, and these may have been believing Essenes, maybe they recognized Christ, but they're saying, well, but you know, the Essene things are still good, you can add this on in. And we find this today in some of the Messianic Jewish congregations. They say, well, Christianity is great, but we're bringing all of this Jewishness.

We're Jewish and there starts to be an element of pride and we were here first and we're going to bring some of our Judaism on into Christianity and so forth. And you have to be careful. All of these things started out as being good, but they can become evil if you base your righteousness on them.

There's another term that has come up in recent years and the source of it is one that I respect, but you have to watch out. Spiritual self-esteem is a term that's come up. Spiritual self-esteem.

Learning the word of God will give you... You have to watch out about spiritual self-esteem. It is not, and if you study that in the context in which the term was originally coined, everything is fine. But the term gets bandied about and let me just say this about that.

It is not self-esteem that counts. It's God's esteem that counts. And when it comes to spiritual things, it's not how well we think.

How well we think of ourselves is a dangerous thing. Every wayward Christian has spiritual self-esteem. And 95% of the time it's based on a false foundation.

It's based on asceticism or it's based on religious observance. I'm at church every time the door is open. In other words, do we have any modern equivalence of this? We tend to think, oh, you know, Colossians, the Jews, and nobody's really hung up on circumcision as a religious observance or abstaining from foods as a religious observance.

What do we have today that's the functional equivalent of these things? We have church attendance. We have ministry involvement. We have organization membership.

We have rally attendance. We have retreat attendance. We have attendance of whatever's going on.

If you're there and you show up, you think, well, you know, I was involved. They had the seminar. They had the special speaker come and I was there all three nights.

And I got the literature and filled out my workbook and did the discussions and prayed at the beginning and gave at the end and did the whole bit. And we unconsciously or consciously say, you know, God's got to be pleased with that. If these things are going to be valuable, if they do have any value, they're going to be the means to an end.

They're not an end in themselves. And so often our thinking and our evaluation of these things falls short. We think, well, hey, I showed up and I went.

Bible class attendance. Here's one that would strike close to home for some of us. Some of us have had this problem where we think, well, you know, I found somebody who's teaching the Word of God and I listen to it all the time.

This too, what we're doing right now, this is not an end in itself. And do not think that because you're hearing the teaching of the Word of God that this is your spiritual life and that your righteousness and your spiritual health is based on the fact that you're hearing the teaching of the Word of God, either here or anywhere else. This also is the means to an end.

If the end is not being achieved, this is a waste of time. It is no different than someone who goes to driver training class. Are you a great driver because you've been to driver training? No.

You're a great driver if you take what you learned in driver training and put it into practice. Are you a sober person because you attend AA meetings? Are you clean and drug free because you attend your support group meetings and so forth? No. If you go to those meetings and if you take the knowledge that they offer to heart and act on it afterwards, when you're not in the meeting, now that has done you some good.

Now the end is being achieved. The reason they had the meeting, the reason they gave you the driver training, this is like people in my area, computers. People say, oh, you know, I want to know computers.

They watch me type and do things. They say, oh, I wish I had that knowledge. Where should I go so I can be like you? Can I go take a class? What would you recommend? And so forth.

Well, going to a class doesn't make you a computer person. It takes two things. It takes wanting to, having a need for it, realizing that the need is there.

And then, yes, you can get training or you can get experience or whatever, but it's what you bring away from that and apply. Those things are a means to an end. You can send, and this is a big fallacy in the computer industry, there's all kinds of certifications from Microsoft and Novell and all these other things.

You can go to training courses, pay your money, it's \$80 per test and \$600 per course, and if you take the 12 courses and pay out all the money, which comes to about like \$1,400 to \$1,600, you too can be a Novell certified network engineer. Well, having that piece of paper up on the wall does not make you a good network engineer. If you are able to absorb and put into practice the information they gave out and that they tested you over and you apply it and through experience you learn how to put it into practice, now you're becoming someone.

Well, it's the same thing in Bible class, it's the same thing with church attendance and so forth, but so many people say, hey, I'm a great, look at all my certificates, look at all my diplomas, I'm a great computer guy, or I'm a great driver, or I know everything there is to know about being clean and sober. No. It's what you do with that that counts.

But we tend to go blind when we look at our spiritual life and we think, well, hey, I've been to Bible class every time they had it, or I was down at church every time the doors were open, I've been involved in this activity and that seminar and this retreat and that conference and so forth. None of those things means a thing unless they are advancing the goal, which is walking with God, faith, hope, and love. And the measure is not what have I done, but where have I gotten to in my thinking and in my priorities? Is my life pleasing and glorifying in God's sight? So, this is difficult, though, because many of these things are good.

Going to church can be a wonderful thing. Many of these ministries and Bible class and all these other things are certainly wonderful and there's nothing wrong in and of themselves. But if people

are taking these things and saying, you must have these for fullness, you must have these for completeness.

Without these things, if you're not doing these things, you're not complete. You've taken a good thing and twisted it and made it evil. And it's much more difficult to identify and deal with a twisted truth because it looks so good.

Satan disguises himself as an angel of light and there's nothing he likes to do more than take good things and get them half-cocked and use what should be good against us. But that's what he does and that's what's happening in Christianity today. We are out of time for this evening, but when we come back next week, we're going to see the other two, which are philosophy and angel worship.

Now, we wouldn't think that the church today would have much of a problem with angel worship and philosophy, but we'll see next week how real and how prevalent these things are even in our culture today. Let's close in a word of prayer. We thank you, Father, for the preservation of your word and for the timeless value of these principles.

We pray that God the Holy Spirit will give us insight to see clearly the applicability of Paul's message and his clarification of where these things fit into our lives and what you are looking for in our souls, what we are called to as believers to live a life that pleases you and glorifies our Savior, Jesus Christ. We ask these things in his name. Amen.