

Colossians 2:18–23

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

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, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, 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. 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, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

Fraudulent Deprivation of the Prize

The prize of verse 18 is present, not future. It is the conscious enjoyment of what the Christian already possesses in Christ — the fullness, the completeness, the inheritance underfoot. Achan is the sober illustration: he imagined he would be more complete with a wedge of gold, some shekels of silver, and a Babylonian garment. But those things could never add to one who was already in the inheritance. They only brought him down. The voluntary humility and worship of angels, the intrusion into things unseen — all of this is the same movement: reaching for something outside Christ as though Christ were insufficient. It is a fraudulent deprivation — the prize is taken away from the Christian by what presents itself as spiritual gain.

Intruding Into Things Not Seen — Vainly Puffed Up

Verse 18 identifies the character of this: entering into things he has not seen, vainly puffed up by the mind of his flesh. The appearance is of uncommon spiritual depth — mystical insight, vision, special knowledge beyond what Scripture gives. All the religions of the world have their mystics: those who claim access to a higher spiritual realm, special revelation, experiences beyond the ordinary. What it really is, according to the apostle, is the mind of the flesh in operation. The flesh loves the idea of special insight that others do not have. What is offered as humility — approaching through intermediaries, retreating from the boldness Scripture gives — is actually pride: the pride of the fleshly mind finding its satisfaction in things beyond the written word.

There is such a thing as the obedience of the mind. The mind that is not brought into subjection to Scripture is as much under the flesh as the man who indulges the body. Ephesians 2:3 puts them side by side: the lusts of the flesh and the will of the mind — both equally the fruit of the fallen nature, both equally needing to be dealt with by the cross.

Not Holding Fast the Head — All the Body

Not holding fast the Head is the root of it all. From the Head all the body is nourished and compacted together through joints and bands, increasing with the increase of God. Every departure from Christ as the exclusive source of the soul's supply — whether into Jewish ordinances, philosophical mysticism, or any other supplement to Him — is in essence a failure to hold fast to Him. It is a practical denial that we are complete in Him.

It is the whole body that increases from the Head — all the body, not a single local assembly. There is one body of Christ on earth. Membership is membership of Christ, not membership of a local meeting. The gifts placed in the church — first apostles, then prophets, then teachers — were placed in the church universal,

not distributed among independent local units. Where a doctrine of local independence severs a company from the nourishment the Head is sending through the joints and bands of the body, it is not holding fast the Head in its practical outworking. The remedy is not ecumenical compromise, which always involves giving away something due to the Head — but returning to the Head Himself, from whom all flows.

Dead with Christ from the Elements of the World

Verse 20 states the ground of the whole passage plainly: *if ye be dead with Christ from the elements of the world, why, as though alive in the world, do ye subject yourselves to ordinances?* The elements of the world are not elemental spirits — some mythological spiritual forces to be warded off while the Christian goes on enjoying the world. That reading blunts the thrust entirely. The elements of the world are its basic, characterising principles — what constitutes the world as a system apart from God. Christ died to those principles. We died with Him. To submit to ordinances — touch not, taste not, handle not — is to act as though we were still alive in the world, as though that death had not taken place.

Touch Not, Taste Not, Handle Not — To the Satisfaction of the Flesh

A helpful reading of verses 21-23 places the first half of verse 22 in parentheses, and most of verse 23 in parentheses also. The main thrust then reads: *touch not, taste not, handle not — according to the commandments and doctrines of men — to the satisfaction of the flesh.* That is the thread. Everything else is explanatory. The ordinances are of men, not of God. And their end — whatever the outward appearance of self-denial — is the satisfaction of the flesh.

This is a sharp point. Ascetic rigour — harsh treatment of the body, coarse garments worn under fine ones to produce constant irritation, fasting and

abstinence imposed as conditions of acceptance — all of this has the appearance of wisdom in voluntary worship and humility. Others look on and say, what a holy person. There is a certain honour in it before men. But underneath, it is to the satisfaction of the flesh. The flesh that loves to keep ordinances is the same flesh that refuses to keep them — both are the flesh pursuing its own satisfaction. The law was only for the old nature. It was never given to the new. And regulating the flesh through ordinances yields nothing beyond what the flesh can yield: its own satisfaction, dressed up as holiness.

The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6). That is not a call to pamper it — but neither does it support deliberate bodily mistreatment. What God has given is to be used for His glory, which is a very different thing from either indulgence or asceticism. The Christian has died with Christ — and that death, reckoned real, is the only effective dealing with the flesh and with the world.

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