

Keep Your Eyes on the Gospel

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 October 2020

Preacher: Rev. Ben Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Hello, everyone. It is great to be back in Colossians today. It's such an encouraging book. And I want you to think about a great coach. Maybe you've had a trainer or a coach in days past.

Maybe you have one now. And if you watch a great coach in action, their default is positive instruction. It's encouragement. And so they'll say things like, keep your eyes up. Just don't look over there. Don't look down. Keep your eyes up. Work the fundamentals. Don't give up on the fundamentals. And that message is the majority of the book of Colossians. Paul is saying, eyes up.

Keep your eyes up on Christ. Work the fundamentals. Remember the gospel. But a good coach also gives warnings. And so they'll say, do this. Not that. Don't do that. Do this. Do this. Do this. If you do that, you're going to get hurt. You're going to get benched. You're going to be out of the game.

And that's where we are today in chapter two. Chapter two is structured around three warnings. So verse eight, verse 16, and verse 18. Those are the three. Last week, we dealt with the first, which was don't let anyone kidnap you, take you captive with empty philosophy. And these would-be kidnappers are false teachers that are hanging around with the Colossians. And they are adding extras to the gospel. And these extras are being presented as necessary or advanced. And these extras are spiritually destructive. What they're doing is pulling the Colossians' gaze off of Christ, and they're undermining their confidence in the gospel. Paul warns, don't listen to them.

Eyes up. Drill down on what you know. Christ is enough. So today, we're going to tackle the final two warnings in this chapter. And it tells us that our hope for forgiveness and life and transformation doesn't come from a set of rules. It doesn't come from special experiences. It doesn't come from spiritual achievements. Our hope comes from Jesus and his work and our living connection to him.

[2 : 1 5] Well, verse 15 sets the stage for this. It says, he, that is God, disarmed the rulers and authorities.

He put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him, that is, in Jesus. So this verse speaks of Jesus's victory, which is a victory that we share. And so, I mean, just imagine what the story is here.

The story is, all the forces of spiritual evil, along with fallen human structures that are captive to these forces, conspired and united against Christ. And they all gather together, and they throw their worst at Jesus, and they crush Jesus on the cross. They kill him. They grind him into the dust.

And yet, even though they did all of that to Jesus, they lose. All of these forces lose, because in his death, Jesus overcomes sin and death. Instead of being shamed and defeated, like what you would expect to happen, Jesus is actually the victor, and sin and death and Satan are shamed and defeated.

Jesus has won everything we need for us. So this means that there's no power, whether visible or invisible, that's stronger, that's more effective than what God has already accomplished in Jesus.

[3 : 35] There's no philosophy. There's no set of rules. There's no virtue that you could practice or put on. There's no experience that could add to that victory that I've just described. It's a cosmic victory.

There's nothing better. There's nothing needed on top of it. So this is the launch pad here, verse 15. It's saying, if Christ has already won that kind of victory, if this is what he's done, what could anyone hope to add to it? Who would dare to tell you that you need something else other than a victory that's that massive, that's that amazing? That's the freight that we're taking with us as we go into verse 16. That's the momentum behind the therefore. This cosmic victory is what God has done in Christ for you. Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. So you probably recognize these are the Old Testament rules for life with God that Paul's talking about here. The Jews were set apart by diet and religious holidays and special practices. And the false teachers in Colossae are seeking to take some of these things, picking something from here, something from here, bringing some of these elements back into the mix in their Christian life. So as this is a fledgling Gentile church, maybe they're a little bit unsure of their identity. What does it mean to be God's people? And the Colossian false teachers are saying, well, this is how you know it's working. This is how you know that you're pleasing

God when you're doing this and this and this. And Paul says, no way. Don't let anyone say that without these practices, you are deficient or you are substandard in your life with God. And what's really interesting is if we look at the reason that this judgment is wrong. It's in verse 17.

It says, these things, speaking of those practices we were just talking about, these are a shadow of the things to come. But the substance belongs to Christ. Now, have you ever seen a sundial?

I feel like a sundial up on the stage because there's lights shining at me. But a sundial is essentially a wedge on a flat disk and its shadow can tell time as the sun projects over it.

[6 : 07] Now, that's pretty impressive. That's some impressive technology. But what does it compare to the blazing orb of plasma that is the sun? Without the sun, a sundial is useless.

And Paul here says, the Old Testament law is like a shadow. You can look at the shadow. You can watch the shadow. And by looking at it, you can understand something of the passage of the sun across the sky.

But the main thing isn't the shadow. The main thing is the substance. It's the blazing sun that is Christ, who has now come and died and risen. He is the one that illuminates and makes the shadow even make sense.

So, don't let anyone tell you, you that have the sun already, that you need the shadow, that you need to add the shadow. So, I think sometimes we wonder when we see this temptation to kind of Judaistic practice with early Christians or in the Bible, we think, how could anyone confuse a sundial with the sun?

How silly these people must have been to add Jewish practices to the gospel. I would never give up bacon. I would never give up shrimp. I'm not tempted by that at all. But the thing is that religious systems, whether they're Jewish or they're more of the self-help variety or New Age spirituality, whatever these systems might be, they're actually very attractive to people.

[7 : 39] So, I could take a system and I can use it to measure my progress. I can feel good about myself with a system. Every rule that I keep is like another gold star that I can put up on my chart.

And it gives me a sense of achievement and control. It also distracts me from having to look at areas of failure in my life. It helps me feel like my salvation is something that I've really got a hold on, that I'm really, I'm just killing it right now.

And as I thought about this week, I was thinking about when my daughter was studying astronomy recently in school. And she learned about the fact that one day the sun will die. And she talked about it for weeks.

And I remember actually when I was a kid and I learned that. And I was also just terrified by that idea that the sun was going to die someday. And it's really a scary idea, even if it's a few billion years off.

And the reason it's scary is because when that happens, when the sun dies, life on earth is over. It doesn't matter if you have a bunker. It doesn't matter how many canned goods you have.

[8 : 44] When the sun dies, that's the end. And if Christ is our son, if Christ is our salvation, if he is the fullness of all things, our absolute dependence on him can be frightening.

It can be frightening to think about the truth of Colossians, that Christ is everything and there's nothing outside of him. And we wonder, what if he isn't actually enough?

What if he doesn't come through? What if this good news of forgiveness and grace, what if that's not all there is? And it's good to stop and think, what is the backup plan that maybe I've been working with here?

As I feel the fear of putting all of my trust and all my weight on Christ, in what ways have I been tempted to kind of shore that up a little bit or add a system or add a chart to try to lessen that feeling of dependence on Christ?

We add a lot of frenetic activity to our spiritual lives, playing with these systems, which are actually only shadows. And Paul says, no backup plans, no building bunkers.

[9 : 57] They wouldn't help anyway. Don't let anyone judge you by shadows. Keep your eyes up on Christ. Okay, that's verse 16.

Let's look at the warning in verse 18. Let no one disqualify you. So first, let no one judge you. Now 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. So first warning, eyes up on Christ, not down on the shadows.

Second warning, work the fundamentals. Don't get caught up in fads. So the false teachers are replacing the gospel fundamentals with their own fresh new program.

What are the gospel fundamentals? Well, this is what we do together when we worship. This is what we know as the gospel. It's about conviction and repentance and forgiveness by Jesus and his cross.

[10 : 56] It's keeping Christ at the center. It's keeping his words in our hearts, his way in our lives. It's just trusting that he's going to finish what he started, even if we can't see it or do it ourselves.

And this gospel-shaped life, it takes endurance. It's returning again and again and again to Christ and to his promises.

And growth is incremental. It's the slow work of the Holy Spirit in our lives over a lifetime. It is generally not exciting or flashy, but it's like a race, as Paul speaks about in other places.

And the false teachers are coming in and saying, forget that. Look over here at this. Look what we've accomplished. There is a deeper and more spiritual experience. Don't grind away at the gospel.

There's a next level of spiritual life. There's a shortcut. There's a program. It's a 30-day program, 30-day transformation. You can have it all now.

[11 : 59] We have a system. We have rituals. We have daily practices. Now, I'll warn you, it's a little bit advanced. We have achieved control over our bodies in a way that you probably haven't.

And it's opened up new spiritual planes. We've seen angels. We've had visions. All of this can look and sound quite impressive. And Paul cuts through it by just saying, they're puffed up without reason.

In other words, they're proud, but they should be ashamed. The irony is that while they think they're on this new spiritual level, they are actually more enslaved to their bodies than ever.

Their spiritual practices of asceticism actually have all of their attention on sensuous worldly things. It has completely eclipsed Christ in their lives. They're spiritual narcissists.

So they're self-absorbed in their own spirituality and their own practice. They're so wrapped up in these advanced methods that they're practicing, they've lost their hold on Christ. That's how Paul describes it in verse 19.

[13 : 03] Not holding fast to the head. From whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows together with a growth that is from God. If Christ is the head and we are the body, these teachers, in effect, have begun to wrap a tourniquet around themselves.

So they're cutting off the nourishing flow of life that is coming from Christ, the head, and flowing through the body. They're putting a tourniquet around themselves with these practices. And these pursuits, which they imagine will grow them and make them more important, are actually leading to amputation.

They're killing themselves because they're not connected to Christ. Now again, these practices might seem kind of weird. We may think, I would never do something like worship angels or seek visions.

But someone is always selling a shortcut. Someone will always be looking down on the gospel and saying, that's too basic. You've got to get past that.

And so I think Paul's warning lands in two ways here. On one hand, it's easy to buy into the idea that I'm the only one that's struggling. I'm the only one that's doubting.

[14 : 17] I'm the only one that's falling into sin. And from that place, we think, perhaps there is something extra. Perhaps there's just something I'm missing that everyone else has.

And we're looking for the answer. We're looking for the conference, the method, the mindset, the diet, the new book, whatever it is. We're looking for that thing. But what Paul reminds us of here with this great image of the body is that there's no growth or nourishment that comes outside of Christ and his gospel.

And so what we do when we start to get worried about our spiritual progress or look around at other people is that we begin to spin outward. So we're going further and further afield, looking and looking and looking.

But what Paul calls us to do in Colossians is actually to spiral in. So he's saying, go deeper, go deeper, go deeper into Christ. Spiral in to grace, rooted and grounded in him.

Don't let anyone disqualify you. Work the fundamentals. So that's one danger. I think the other danger is that we can also be tempted to pride like these teachers.

[15 : 26] So we look at other Christians and we think, man, they are blowing it. Like, they are down here. I'm up here. And the error of these teachers, don't forget, it's an error that masquerades as advanced spirituality.

And so when we feel like we are just especially spiritual or kind of walking in a place that's a little higher, a little better than other Christians, that's exactly when we should take care.

Pride is often at work in places we don't expect it to be. In our preferences. It can be a part of our quiet time. It can pervade our theological degrees. We don't need to get caught up with angels to actually lose the plot in spiritual pride.

We don't need visions or extreme practices either to think that there are classes of Christians to begin ranking ourselves above other people. When we fall into this way of thinking, these type of practices, this type of pride, the consequence is division within Christ's body.

The consequence is disconnection from Christ. Because in Christ's gospel, there is a flattening effect, or there ought to be, right? When we're standing under his gospel, the deeper we know him and his grace, the more we know our similarity before him as sinners.

[16 : 54] And the more we know our place, the more we know his grace, our similarities standing before the cross, the more grace that we have for other people. In this image of the body, the life of Christ travels equally through ligament and joint.

There's no part that's more alive than another part. There's no part that's growing faster. This great growth that Christ is doing in his body, he's doing it in all of us. It happens all together, or it happens not at all.

There are no super Christians. There's just members of the body. So, don't let anyone disqualify you. Hold fast to Christ. Work the fundamentals.

Remember the gospel. And let's close by looking at verse 23. So, speaking of the philosophies and the rules and the practices of these false teachers, all the things that we've talked about, Paul closes this section by saying this.

These, all of those things that we've talked about, these have indeed an appearance of wisdom. In promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body.

[18 : 00] But they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. So, any system that is outside of faith in Christ and his work, it's only an appearance of wisdom.

In other words, it might look good, but it can't transform you. It can't save you. Practices like these that we've talked about today are actually self-made religion.

They're homemade, homebrew. They're like that bunker with canned goods. Right? It seems like I've made something really impressive, but what I need to live is the power of the sun.

I need Christ. My bunker is not going to cut it. Self-made religion will not cut it. Asceticism and severity to the body or any other system of self-help, super religious practices, they're not going to help us transcend.

What will happen is we will descend into spiritual narcissism. We will become cut off from Christ's body. But really, the final nail in the coffin of verse 23 here is that these things can't stop the indulgence of the flesh.

[19 : 14] In other words, they just don't work. They don't deliver. The 30-day program will not work. For all the pride or feelings of spiritual insight they might generate, they won't actually transform us.

They won't actually save us or grow us in Christ. There is only one thing, one person, who can bring us life. And it's the one that we have died with. It's Jesus.

Jesus. So, eyes up on him. Work the fundamentals. Our hope for forgiveness, life, and transformation doesn't come from a set of rules. It's not from special experiences or spiritual achievements.

Our hope comes from Jesus and his work and our living connection to him. Christ is all you need. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.