



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Colossians 2:16-23

"A Defense of Christian Liberty"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We have come in our exposition of the Epistle to the Colossians to chapter 2, verse 16 through verse 23. And that is our Scripture reading for this morning. I'd like to preface it by making two general comments. One, of course, is relative to the context of this particular section because it bears on some of the things that I will be trying to say. The apostle has set out in verse 9 and verse 10 of chapter 2 the fact that we have been "filled full in the Lord Jesus Christ in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." And then developing again the thought of union with Christ he has pointed out that we have been united with him in his baptism of death, burial, and resurrection, and as a result of that we have the forgiveness of sins. We are delivered from the law, "the handwriting and ordinances that was against us and contrary to us," and the satanic forces have been defeated in our Lord's death.

Now those things are important for what follows, because the apostle will make a great point over the fact that we have died with him, participating with him as our representative man in his death, burial, and resurrection. So that's one thing that I wanted to be sure that we bear in mind as we go through these verses.

The other thing is a little bit different and it is this, we are coming to a section in the Epistle to the Colossians that may be the most difficult section in all of Paul's writing

to understand. It is, I think, rather interesting. It's somewhat amazing that after all of these years we should have so much difference of opinion over the interpretation of several of the statements of Paul in this one section. In fact, it has sometimes been said and is still being said that the 18th verse of Colossians chapter 2 is a verse that is debatable on almost every clause and phrase contained within it. The result is that it is impossible to be absolutely certain of the things that Paul means when he writes these verses.

And then put together with one or two other things makes it necessary for me to say to you that I'm going to expound this text in a certain way, but I want you to understand that I'm not doing it in extremely dogmatic fashion. In fact, the most recent scholarly interpretation of the Greek text of Colossians has a treatment of this passage that will differ from what we would call the general run of interpretation of this passage on a half a dozen points at least. That makes it very difficult for an expositor who wants to read the literature that is being written concerning passages such as this and at the same time expound the Scriptures for you who are not necessarily involving yourselves in the things that scholars may be saying concerning the text.

In a moment I'm going to read verse 18, and when I come to verse 18 I want to read three other translations of that verse just to give you an understanding of the fact that when we come to certain texts in the New Testament, we are faced with still after nineteen hundred years of questions concerning the precise way in which they should be rendered.

Now if you were to ask why is this so? The best answer that I could give you would be simply this, something that we've alluded to once or twice before in our study of Colossians. We do not really know the situation in Colossae to which Paul addressed himself. We do not know specifically the doctrines that the heretical teachers were teaching. We have some indications of certain aspects of their teaching. Paul alludes to them. In fact, in this section he alludes to them more than in any other section in the

epistle. But so far as knowing precisely the things that Paul was contending with, we really do not know clearly the false teaching that the Colossians were exposed to.

So we are forced to speculate a bit based on what Paul has written. I hope you'll understand as I expound today of that fact, and I believe it will help you also to appreciate that even apostles don't always understand apostles and Peter when he reflected upon Paul's writings he said there were things in Paul that were hard to be understood even for an apostle.

So for me to stand up and say to you I understand it all, well, in the light of Peter's comment that would be quite a claim and probably would draw the same disapproval from Paul that he pronounces concerning the false teachers who had been leading the Colossians astray.

So with that as an introduction, let's read these verses beginning with verse 16 of Colossians 2, and we'll read through verse 23. "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ."

Now we can be almost certain but not entirely that when Paul says the body belongs to Christ, he is using body in the sense in which we use the term when we say he began his speech or his sermon, but in the body of his sermon he said such and such. That is, the term body here has the sense of substance or what he was really trying to say; the substance.

So we'll translate it,

"Which are a shadow of things to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. 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."

Now probably the little word "not" before "things which he hath not seen" is not genuine. I presume that if you have a more modern version than the one I'm reading, that "not" is not there. But now I'm going to read this particular text in three other versions, and you'll notice the differences in the renderings. This is the way the New American Standard Bible renders verse 18,

"Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen," (notice the "not" is missing,) "inflated without cause by his fleshly mind."

The New International Version renders this verse this way,

"Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions."

Very clear statements. The question is, is it true to the original text? A most recent rendering of this text is this, "Let no one condemn you delighting in humility and the angelic worship of God." You can see the difference here in the worship of angels. Is that our worship of angels or is it the angels worship of God? That is, participating in their worship of God.

So he has this, "and the angelic worship of God which he has seen upon entering." Entering what, one might say? Well if we were referring to the ancient mystery kinds of religion in which individuals were initiated into an understanding of things that they were religiously concerned with in the entering is the entering into an understanding of by the entering into a particular experience which had to do with either seeing a play played on the screen or on the stage, and he entered into it because he has the necessary

information to understand having been given by that by the mystery religion teachers, or perhaps, because he has been given that he is able to enter in afterwards to an understanding of what was meant. All of these things may be bound up in what Paul was saying. We just don't know. The text concludes by this translator, "He is puffed up with idle notions from his unspiritual mind."

So evidentially, the false teachers there were teaching things that had to do with the mystery religions, but the precise sense of their teaching of that we are ignorant. Verse 19, however, is very clear.

"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 show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honor," (Perhaps, that should be rendered "not of any value"), "to the satisfying of the flesh."

Now that text too can be understood in another way. We will, however, leave it with this. May the Lord bless this reading and partial exposition of his word. Let's bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee and praise Thee for the word of God, and we recognize that it has come to us through the hands of men inspired by the Holy Spirit. And we recognize too, Lord that we stand at a place many centuries from the time at which the word of God originated, and therefore, there are things that Thou hast in Thy own purpose and will kept from us to this point. We desire Lord to be diligent students

of the Scripture, and pray that as we ponder the word of God and seek to interpret it with all of the help of the Holy Spirit and of the principles of interpretation that we have come to understand.

We pray, Lord, that we may enter into a closer and more accurate understanding of what is found in the word of God and may as a result more faithfully represent that which we should represent, a faithful service of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We give Thee thanks for him who loved us and gave himself for us, and we thank Thee for this beautiful day about us and for the fact that on the Lord's Day we have this privilege of remembering him and rejoicing in him and rejoicing in the position into which he's brought us by the atoning blood that was shed on Calvary's cross.

We ask Thy blessing upon the whole church of Jesus Christ today and upon Believers Chapel, its elders and deacons, and upon its members and friends, and the visitors who are here with us today. May this be a time of spiritual development and growth and of a true spiritual experience of the things of the word of God as they concern the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray for those whose names are listed in our Calendar of Concern and who have problems and trials and questions and desires and aspirations. Lord, we pray that Thou would minister to them, each on, and do that which will glorify Thy name and be in accordance with Thy perfect will.

We thank Thee for the whole body of Christ. We pray Thy blessing upon every faithful minister of the word of God who has an opportunity today to teach the Scriptures. And for our meeting, we thank Thee and praise Thee for this time together, singing of the hymns of praise, of thanksgiving, and of worship. For the reading of the Scripture and for the ministry of the word, may Thy presence be with us in this meeting, Lord. For Jesus' sake and in his name. Amen.

[Message] The subject for today in the exposition of the word of God is "A Defense of Christian Liberty." One of the perennial problems for the Christian church is the problem of legalism. I'm speaking primarily of the taboos. That is, those things that over which we differ, but which are things that the Holy Scriptures do not speak specifically with or concerning the church which differs over these things the results of the difference frequently leads to very, very unpleasant things.

We have some old taboos that were very prominent in the Christian church when I first became a Christian. For example, evangelicals all over this country but particularly in other places than the south it was regarded as very unspiritual for the ladies to wear lipstick. It was very unspiritual for Christians to attend a movie. I found out that it was also totally unacceptable to wear two-toned shoes on Sunday morning. I preached some years ago in San Francisco in a Baptist church in that city, and I had just bought some brown two-toned shoes over which I was rather proud. I thought they were very nice. They were done by one of the finest of the shoemakers in the United States, and I got up on the platform of this Baptist church and preached that morning, and it was just about two days later that I heard about it about a hundred miles away, because the word had quickly gotten out. And I was never invited back to that church and it was said that I was not invited back because I preached that morning in two-toned shoes.

So I learned a lesson and that was do not preach in San Francisco with two-toned shoes. In fact, I think it has effected me ever since because I've never preached in two-toned shoes again since that time. [Laughter] It was also and probably is still regarded in some churches as a very serious deviation for the ladies to appear in pants, and shorts are certainly unacceptable in most of evangelical churches. In fact, this very week I was asked by someone in the city, did the women who attend meetings in Believers Chapel wear pants? And then when the person asked that question of me they went on to say, our pastor is very much against that and does not permit that.

So the taboos are still with us in one way or another. And in many ways this kind of legalism wrenches the joy of the Lord from us and leaves nothing but sour, somber, gloomy profession; miserable parodies of the real thing. When we use the term, legalism, it is possible for us to be misunderstood. We're not talking about the fact that when we come to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ we are saved by grace. Of course, if we believe we are saved through good works, then that kind of legalism is very contrary to the word of God and reprehensible. If we should be talking about the fact that it is legalism for us to say that the Scriptures teach such and such and that we should follow those things that to my mind is not legalism. The word of God sets forth the mind of the Lord God, and the mind of the Lord God is expressed in the word of God giving us teaching of our Lord through the apostles and those are things that express the mind of the Lord, and therefore, it's not legalism to say that we as believers are expected to observe the imperatives and the exaltations of the word of God.

Now if you think that by that we are to observe the imperatives and exaltations of the word of God in our own strength and by our own power, then of course, that would raise the question of legalism. But in the New Testament when we are told that by the apostles that we should do certain things, and when we are exhorted to do certain things, it is understood in the New Testament teaching that we do those things and in fact, can do those things only by reliance upon the Holy Spirit.

So it's not legalism for us to have pointed out to us the imperatives of Holy Scripture and the exhortations of Holy Scripture. Sometimes you will have people who will say the Holy Spirit has not yet said to me or brought home to my heart that I should do a certain thing. And yet, that thing is written in the word of God. And I can only say that if it's written in the word of God, then we don't need the Holy Spirit to bring some particular inner conviction to us that that is for us, for it is in the word of God. God has expressed in the Scriptures, and therefore, we are responsible for the observation of that particular imperative or that particular exhortation.

So I want to make it plain that we are not talking about the kind of legalism that people speak about in which they say that the Scriptures say such and such, but it's legalism for us to ask of individual's observation of those things set out in Scripture. What I'm particularly talking about are the taboos which are invented. I don't really mean that in a bad sense. Invented or said to be the teaching of the New Testament when they are not specifically set forth in Holy Scripture. They are our interpretations of the principles that are set out in the word of God. Just such as the ones that I mentioned, the wearing of lipstick, the going to movies, and the kinds of clothes that we wear. Not all moral imperatives then in the New Testament are practices to be avoided or in certain circumstances, you must remember that the Apostle Paul was no enemy of self-discipline. He speaks about that very plainly in passages like 1 Corinthians 10. He says that we should act as an athlete who trains himself for his activity, and we should follow the same general kind of training so far as being the kind of Christian the Lord God would have us to be. Furthermore, Paul in other places says that he does respect the scruples that the weak have, but notice that it is the weak who have the scruples not the strong. And the apostle more than once says, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient."

So he respected the scruples of the weaker brethren, and he went out of his way to avoid offending a weaker brethren. So if we are going to follow the New Testament, we must make a place for self-discipline. We must make a place for obedience of the imperatives and exhortations of the word of God, and we must also have a place within our doctrine of Christian life for respect for the scruples of the weaker brethren. What Paul, evidentially, is speaking about here then in the light of all of that is not the personal and involuntary kinds of things that individuals might be involved in, but he's talking about compulsory requirements that were laid upon the believers in Corinth.

So when he talks about, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days," he's not talking

specifically, in my opinion, about Old Testament things although some of those things were mixed up in the teaching of the Gnostic Judaizers. But he's talking about their requirement to observe things that are not specifically set forth in the word of God as the false teachers pretended that they were.

Now we'll come into that in just a moment. We've suggested as we were dealing with this particular section of Paul that the phrase "in Christ" is possibly the most important phrase in the New Testament. And further, that it has to do not so much with a circle in our thought concerning it, but with a sphere. And if we are in Christ having believed in him then we should think of what that means as a sphere that touches all of our life. For example, we could say Christ surrounds believers in his own life. He separates us in himself from false influences. He protects us in himself from all foes. He supplies in himself all of our needs. We are in Christ.

Now the aspect of being in Christ that particularly is stressed here is the second. He separates us in himself from false influences. And so in light of the preceding context then in which Paul has said, "In Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily and we have been filled full in him." United to him and possessed of all of the things that we have in Christ, Paul says in verse 16, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days." The apostle singles out food and holy days, and so we can only assume that the false teachers had mingled in their doctrine aspects for paganism as well as aspects that come from the Old Testament Scriptures. One of the indications of this is when he says, "Let no man therefore judge you in food," well that would be possible from the Old Testament, but drink as far as we can tell reading the Old Testament there were no special requirements set out concerning things that were to be drunk.

So the idea then of judging you in meat or in drink may reflect then pagan additions to concepts derived from the Old Testament. Then the festivals were mentioned, and we don't know the precise identity of the festivals. He talks about "holy

days, new moon, sabbath days." There is a regular kind of systematic presentation, because the festivals were probably annual festivals, and then the new moon, monthly festival, and then the sabbath, a weekly festival. So the apostle includes all of them here. What he is simply saying is this, the risen life that we enjoy in Christ negates these ritual duties that people want to oppose upon you as requirements. So "let no man judge you" in these things. You are in Christ. Further, Paul explains these things are a "shadow of things to come but the body belongs to Christ" or the substance belongs to Christ.

Now when he says, "Which are a shadow of things to come," he's not talking about something in the eschatological future, but he's writing from the Old Testament perspective. That is, the things were a shadow of things to come but the substance belongs to Christ. That is, the one in whose ministry all of these things find their fulfillment, he's here and he has accomplished his work. And so therefore, we're not to be judged by these particular things.

Now if Paul is thinking only of the Old Testament then, of course, he's simply saying the Old Testament in its ritual requirements has been fulfilled because the antitype, the Lord Jesus, has come. It's very easy for us to be influenced by the world and the chances are that Paul is talking about a kind of philosophy in which that has taken place. I don't know whether you realize this or not. I think sometimes I forget things like this. We, of course, have people who like to read their horoscopes, and they like to see under what sign they were born, and there are many people who actually pay a great deal of attention to that. I imagine that most of us who are evangelical Christians, the chances are we might not even know the sign under which we were born, and we certainly would not know the significance of it unless we've heard some comedian refer to it in one way or another. But it's very easy for us to be influenced by the world of the elemental spirits.

For example, Monday why do we speak of; well let me begin with Sunday. Why do we speak of Sunday? Well because Sunday originated as a day for the worship of the sun. Monday, why the term Monday is derived from the term for the moon. Tuesday,

well Tuesday is related to Tiw or Mars. Wednesday is related to Wodin or Mercury. Thursday is related to Thor or Jupiter or Jove. Friday to Freya or Venus. And Saturday to Saturn. You realize that every time we say Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday there is an illusion in our statements to the worship of the false gods.

So it's very easy for us in our society to be strictly speaking related to things that even surprise us. But Paul says the substance belongs to Christ. That is, the priesthood of the Old Testament, the sacrifices of the Old Testament, all of the typical things that happen in the Old Testament, they look forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus and he has come. The substance is here. Why then are you permitting someone to judge you in "meat or in drink or an holy day or the new moon or the sabbath day?"

Now these things were necessary for the Colossians, but they are also necessary for us for if we are going to have a clearer view of Christianity. For example, we all know that according to the New Testament teaching every believer is a priest of the Lord Jesus Christ. We know that, do we not? We know that everyone of us is part of the priesthood of believers, has a part in it. It could be said we're priest, though I don't remember in the New Testament any individual being called a priest but our Lord. Nevertheless, we are part of the royal priesthood, the church. One of the fundamental principles of the reformation which Luther stressed so much the priesthood of every believer.

Now isn't it surprising that though we all would agree that the Old Testament priesthood has been done away with, we still have people in a large section of professing Christianity who speak of themselves and others speak of them too, as the priest. Isn't that interesting? That is, in a special sense priesthood has been transferred into New Testament times. But is priesthood transferable? Can you really truly transfer priesthood from the Old Testament to the period of time of which we are apart? That's impossible. In the first place, the priests also offered sacrifice. That was one of their primary duties.

Well, the sacrifice has been offered. What sacrifice can a priest offer that has any validity before God at all? In that sense, the priesthood is non-transferable.

Now another thing that a priest did was to make intercession. The Lord Jesus, of course, has come and has offered the once and for all sacrifice and he now is at the right hand of the Father and he does the priestly duty of making intercession for the people of God. Is it possible for that priest, the activity to be transferred to us? That's impossible for us. So, just as it's impossible for us to perform the sacrifices, it's impossible for us to do the intercession and yet, why is it in Christianity that we have individuals who are called priests. What we have done is characteristic of the church in a number of ways. We failed to really appreciate the change that took place when Jesus Christ came and accomplished his saving ministry. We have individuals who come into a pulpit and even wear clothes that suggest that they have atonement or the priestly activity of the Old Testament. They had to wear certain kinds of clothes and so we have individuals who wear certain kinds of clothes today in order to, I suppose, to let us know that they are members of the cloth. Isn't that striking?

So we have ways by which we have transferred things from the old economy and brought them into the new economy, and therefore, have clouded the teaching of the New Testament. I can understand why Paul should say let no man judge you in respect to these things. They are shadows of that which is to come. The substance belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ. If you would ask me why we do that? Well there are lots of reasons why we do that. One might think of a lot of them. I don't know that I can really answer that question. It may be because some individuals like a little special attention being paid to them. It may be that some have the kind of motive, well we're zealous for the things of the Lord, and by doing this it's an opportunity for us to manifest our zeal for the things of the Lord.

At other times it seems to me that one must also think that some of these transferences are simply because of dissatisfaction with what God accomplished when

Christ came, and the fact that the beautiful liturgy of the Old Testament was done away with. There are lots of people who like liturgy. They like to have something played before them, and they think they can have a better appreciation of spiritual things. In my opinion, they confuse feeling with the truth of the word of God. But there are people who like that. I have people frequently who say to me I do like liturgy. They like to be apart of it. And I can only as far as I feel it seems to me that they're just a little bit unhappy with the fact in church met as a group of people without any ordained ministry around the table of the Lord and worship the Lord in a very simple way in which those with gifts were able to freely minister their gift and the priests were able to minister their priesthood.

But those things are things over which we don't want to fight this morning. Perhaps, we can fight over them some other time. [Laughter] At any rate we come to our very difficult section in verses 18 and 19, and the apostle having spoken then of emancipation from a false kind of legalism speaks here of emancipation from Gnostic practices? I say that with a little question mark behind it in my notes. I'm not exactly sure of the things that the apostle is speaking about when he said in verse 18,

"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," (for the negative is surely not genuine), "vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind."

This passage it has been said is the most contested passage in the New Testament. And I've read you the translations. You can see how contested it is. Advocates of the Colossian philosophy mentioned in verse 8 or heresy delighted in ascetic practices, evidentially, as a kind of prelude to receiving heavenly visions. In other words, the things that they received were the result of their ascetic practices in which they were engaged. In fact, that same kind of thing takes place in Christian life today. If we were obedient in

a certain way we will receive certain benefits from the Lord God. Evidentially, involved in this was claims of superiority, validated by experiences through some kind of mystical, ascetical piety. The parade of piety continues today, and we have it throughout the Christian church.

There's a very interesting story about President Millard. Incidentally, someone has said concerning humility, "Humility is the virtue that when you know that you got it you lost it." Well, President Millard of Harvard University when Emerson Hall was being built didn't know that the philosophy department had intended to put up a certain quotation on the front of the building. They had intended to put up, "Man is the measure of things." Well the President found out about it shortly after the spring semester was finished, and when the members of the philosophy department had vanished to their particular places in the summer, he determined that he would put up something else.

So when the members of the department came in the fall, instead of "Man is the measure of things," they discovered that the sign that the words that were put on the front of the building were, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" [Laughter]

Well in a lot of our piety today we have a lot of attention paid to man. And in, let's just for a moment think about some of the ways in which man is a part of our religious life. Think of philosophy. It's a kind of a rebirth of Gnosticism and it's ultimately pantheistic. We have a denial of the deity of Christ. The exaltation of knowledge above faith in the word of God, we still have that with us. If you go a few blocks from here you will run into a place where the ancient doctrines of philosophy are certainly very popular. There are people today who claim to have visions, they have breakthroughs. There is religious séance. There is mind magic. There is Shamanism with its mind-body healing. You will hear our athletes saying if you believe something you can make it some to pass by believing it and visualizing it. There is self-talk, there is psychological salvation. All of these things are the descendents of what evidentially the Colossians were faced with.

Just recently I read this. This is the word of person who is involved in some of this kind of belief. It happens to be a woman, but she, I believe, happens to be a wife of an apostle. That is, a person in this particular movement is claiming to be an apostle. This is his wife, and she's written a book. It's called, *God's Will is Prosperity*. You can see its prosperity theology. This is the kind of thing that we have. "I began to see," she says. She wants to buy a house. So this is the way to do it. For those of you who don't have a house, this is the way you get your house. "I began to see that I already had authority over that house and authority over the money I needed to purchase it. I said in the name of Jesus I take authority over the money I need. I called out the specific amount. I command you to come to me in Jesus' name. Ministering spirits you go and cause it to come." Speaking of angels she said, "When you become the voice of God in the earth by putting his words in your mouth, you put your angels to work. They are highly trained and capable helpers. They know how to get the job done."

So Christians, this is what you hear on your TV, isn't it? You hear that you can command in the name of the Lord God things to come to pass and they will come to pass. And you add to that the fact that the angels are ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those are the heirs of salvation, doesn't it make sense that you can command your angels and they'll get you what you want?

Now the result of that is a terrible, terrible denial of the great truths of the word of God. And the apostle was not thinking of about this particular life of an apostle, but the same kinds of thing, evidentially, were transpiring there. He says, "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."

Now regardless of what Paul was speaking about, notice the devastating criticisms that he lays against the false teaching. He says first of all, it's the kind of thing that puffs one up with empty notions. Do you notice the difference between Paul's handling of things like this and the Colossians in our modern society? The apostle was caught up into

heaven. He heard things he said that was not lawful for him to offer. Think of what he might have made of the things that he saw when he was in heaven, but he was unable to say anything about that. We talk so much about experiences. I wish I had when I first began Christianity living, I wish I had written down the various kinds of visions that people have personally told me that they have had. It would make an interesting catalog. The apostle says they are puffed up with empty notions.

And the second criticism is even more devastating than the first. He says they are not holding the head. In other words, they've lost contact with the one who is the source of life and joy. They do not have contact with the head. It's almost as if they are subject to spiritual paralysis. In fact, that's really what Paul is talking about. Paralysis in the physical sphere is the loss of the power of voluntary movement. Muscular motion is caused by the stimulation of certain nerve cells in the brain and in the spinal cord, and when the parts of the nervous system are not working properly, muscular movement is not normal. In a similar way, if we do not hold fast the head as Paul says, we can expect spiritual paralysis. That, I think, is one of the most devastating of the apostle's criticisms. If a person is truly to be the kind of Christian that the Lord God would have him to be, then he must maintain contact with the head. The head of the body, the church, the Lord Jesus Christ; and that is done through the word of God.

Do you remember when the disciples were on the Emmaus Road and the Lord Jesus drew up alongside of them, and then Luke tells us, "He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself?" And afterwards, what kind of response did they say that they had as the Lord Jesus expounded the Scriptures? Did they talk about the way he answered their strange questions? Did he talk about the things that might have been spectacular? No. It was simply, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us along the way." My Christian friend, I firmly believe that if we are to be a faithful worker of the Lord Jesus Christ, preeminent in our lives must be holding fast the head as he is seen and understood and with whom we have communion in the word of

God under the teaching of the Holy Spirit. The Colossians were in danger of not holding the head by being lead astray by the false teaching.

Justin Martyr said many, many years ago some words I think that we have to ask ourselves constantly. "Many spirits are abroad in the world and the credentials they display are splendid gifts of mind, eloquence, and logic. Christian, look carefully and ask for the print of the nails." If lying back of the things that we hear and read about there is not the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who suffered the atoning death on Calvary's cross, we are not hearing things that are truly edifying Christian things.

And finally, the apostle concludes with emancipation from ascetic ordinances. He says, "Wherefore if you have died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world," in verse 20,

"Why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, which all are to perish with the using; after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not to have any value to the satisfying of the flesh."

Paul has essentially two criticisms of the ascetic ordinances. First, they're faithless. All the do's and don'ts that are not found in the word of God, but are the expression of individual taboos, there're anachronistic to start with. We have died with Christ. We have been raised together with him. We live in a new sphere of life. Jewish practices superseding Gnostic ones that were never enforced and the taboos fall under the judgment of the fact of our Lord's death, burial, and resurrection. But then he says they're futile. Notice the things that he says in verse 22 and 23 of them. He says things are not connected with piety. Notice, "Which all are to perish with the using; after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in

will worship." Things are not connected with piety. It's easier to travel on your knees from Dallas to Jerusalem than it is to surrender one's heart to the Lord God.

When I was in theological seminary Dr. H.A. Ironside told us a story about himself, and it had to do with pride. Dr. Ironside was a very gifted Bible expositor. He had a marvelous voice. He had a very keen sense of humor. He had the ability to look at a chapter in the Bible and pick out its two or three major points and expound it, and people liked that kind of preaching. He was a very popular preacher. He said that in his earlier days he had problems with pride, and he had gone to various Bible teachers and asked for help. And one Bible teacher gave him some help he thought was worth looking into. This Bible teacher said to him, "Ironside, you know the thing you ought to do is to get yourself a sandwich board."

Now you won't remember that. You have to be as old as I am, but people use to parade up and down the streets of the major cities of the United States with a board on the front and a board on the back and they were connected together and you put your head through it and you advertised things that way. He said, "Get yourself a sandwich board and instead of having sandwiches advertised on the front and back, put Bible verses and walk up and down the streets of Chicago." He was the pastor of the Moody Church. "And shout out those verses. And Ironside, if you'll do that for a whole day, you'll gain divine victory over your pride." [Laughter]

So Dr. Ironside told us that's what he did. He put himself within one of those contraptions and he puts Bible verses and he walked up and down the streets of Chicago shouting out these Bible verses. And no doubt people thought he was crazy. When he went home he took off the sandwich board and his first thought he said was there isn't another man in the city of Chicago so dedicated to the Lord that he would do something like this. [Laughter]

Things are not connected with piety. Furthermore, Paul says in verse 22, "Which all are to perish with the using; after the commandments and doctrines of men?" In other

words, things and the observation of the kinds of things that the Colossians were being asked to do represent a liable divine providence. After all, God in his creation has determined that these things are good and they are to be used. Listen to what Paul says in 1 Timothy chapter 4 and verse 4, "For every creation of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving." So "Touch not; taste not; handle not," the apostle says are really liabilities upon the providence of God.

And finally, he says they are valueless in checking indulgence. When in politics we declare something out of order or illegal, what often happens is that it goes underground. If we were to ban communism from discussion, we wouldn't ban communism, it would just go underground. And so likewise in spiritual things, things banned and ideas that are banned often go underground. And so the idea of "touch not; taste not; handle not," is not of any value at all to the satisfying of the flesh. Furthermore, it's possible to take this last text as teaching that they actually serve to gratify the flesh. But at any rate, the apostle makes his point that if it is true that we have died with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, we're not subject to earthly ordinances after the commandments and judgments of men. We have a relationship to a risen Lord and that relationship to the risen Lord is the secret and the source of a fruitful Christian life. We hold fast the head.

May the Lord help us to realize that true spirituality is not found in super experiences. It's not found in the observation of legalistic taboos. It's found in the personal relationship with the head of the body, the Lord Jesus Christ in whom we have been filled full. Why should we not engage ourselves in the experience of communion and fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us?

If you are here this morning and you've never believed in him, we remind you of the atoning work that he has accomplished. We remind you also that the Scriptures say that we are sinners that we are under, apart from his saving work, guilt and condemnation, and ultimately, separation from the Lord God. We also remind you that

through the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ there is forgiveness of sins. And as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus we call upon you to respond to the gospel, believe in our Lord Jesus Christ that you may be saved. May God in his grace reveal to you your true condition, and may he also reveal to you your need, and may you come to him willing to receive as life eternal. Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the ministry of the word of God. Many things Lord that we do not understand, that we find very difficult, but we thank Thee for the teaching of the apostle that having died with Christ, we're not subject to the commandments and ordinances of men. Enable us to hold fast the head. Enable us through holding fast the head and through submission to the Holy Spirit, to be in harmony with the life that is set forth in the New Testament as that which pleases Thee. May we be subject to and may we by Thy grace fulfill the imperatives and the exhortations that are given us by the apostles. Help us to remember always that they represent the mind of our heavenly Father for us. Now go with us as we part. For Jesus sake. Amen.