

“Why Do You Still . . .?”

Colossians 2:20-23

²⁰ *If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—*²¹ *“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”*²² *(referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?*²³ *These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (ESV)*

If you have forgotten what I talked about last summer up to this point in the Book of Colossians, you could have kept up to date and fresh in the Book of Colossians if you'd spent the last year watching reruns of “The Simpsons” – at least one of them. Several years ago, Judy was out of town and Abby and I were watching an episode of “The Simpsons” (that’s how I know Judy was out of town: because we were watching “The Simpsons.”) The episode revolved around Homer, Bart, and Lisa. Bart and Lisa had come to the conclusion that Homer was no longer a cool dad. Those of you who are fathers know what a wounding moment that is when your children decide that you’re not cool. The only thing you can do is show them that at least you’re crazy. You might not be cool, but you can still be crazy. Homer decides he’s going to show them how cool he is, so he takes Bart and Lisa to this event called “Hellapalooza.” At this event Homer realizes that he has a special talent that no one else in the world has. Homer can actually catch cannonballs in his gut as they’re fired from a cannon. So over and over again Homer has people fire a cannon into his gut. The whole time a doctor is on the scene, and the doctor gets a little worried about it and says, “Homer, if you keep catching cannonballs in the gut it’s going to kill you.” Instead of Bart pleading with his dad, “Dad, you’ve proven your point. You’re cool. We believe it now,” Bart actually begins to fill out life insurance forms on Homer. He’s going through asking him questions, and then Bart gets to the religion question. He asks, “Hey, Homer. What religion are you?” Homer, without even thinking, says, “Well, you know – the one with lots of rules that never work.” Bart says, “Christianity?” He says, “That’s it!” It’s pretty sad that that’s the view. Abby was six or seven then. She looked at me and asked, “What did he mean by that?” I said the first thing that came to my mind. I said, “Abby, Homer has fallen victim to the Colossian heresy.” She didn’t know what that meant either, but it got me off the hook.

What’s the Colossian heresy? It’s not anything specific. The Colossian heresy is much like the Galatian heresy, the I Corinthian heresy, the II Corinthian heresy, the First EPC heresy. What is it? It’s just this, generally speaking - that people would come into the church and say, “You know, Jesus – it’s good that you trust in Jesus, it really is. Everyone needs to trust in Jesus, but what’s better is if you really behave well. Here’s a bunch of rules and if you follow these rules, then Jesus will really love you. I mean He loves you, we know that, the Bible says that. But if you really want to be on the inside, if you really want to be seen as obedient by God and respected by men, follow these rules and you’ll be golden.” What Paul is doing in Colossians is addressing that issue.

The Book of Colossians is an interesting book because most of the time when Paul visited places or wrote letters, he visited and wrote to major urban centers. If he were alive today, he would visit New York and San Francisco, maybe. Maybe Seattle. But a place like Colossae – he wouldn’t have done it. Colossae in the Ancient Near East would have been the equivalent today of Kent, Washington, to Seattle. Its Seattle would have been Laodicea. We went on this 2,500-mile road trip and people we met asked, “Where are you from?” If we said, “Kent” or “Auburn” or “Renton” they go, “Huh?” So what did we tell them? “We’re from Seattle.” That’s what Colossae was. When people asked them, “Where are you from?” They wouldn’t have said, “Colossae;” they would have said, “We’re from Laodicea. We’re from the big area.”

Either way the question is, “How did they get this letter?” The answer lies with this man named Epaphras. We know he was a friend of Paul’s and visited him quite often, and we also know that he started the church in Colossae. So if you put two and two together it seems that Epaphras asked Paul to write this letter to Colossae. The overarching questions that Paul addresses in this letter are the same ones he addresses all the time. Question number one, “Who is Jesus?” Question number two, “Why do I need him?” Question number three, “Do I need anything else if I have Jesus?” That’s what we’re going to talk about today, “Do I need anything else?” That’s what Paul is asking them.

The overarching question in this text really at the end of the day is: When you think about Christianity, is it a religion or a faith about restraint or is it a faith about liberation? Is it a faith that holds you back or is it a faith that frees you up? We’re going to look at three questions this morning. I’m going to talk about the question of death, the question of sin, and the question of restraint. Let’s talk first about the question of death.

Paul says:

²⁰ *If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—*²¹ *“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”*²² *(referring to things that all perish as they are used) . . . (ESV)*

By the way, just as a side note, the way that heresy always enters the church is by way of goodness, not badness. The way that people bring false teaching into churches is not by way of badness, it's by way of goodness. What I mean by that, if someone comes into a church and immediately starts saying, "You know, here's what is important if you want to be accepted by God. You need to be a fornicator, you need to be a drunk, you need to be a lecher, you need to leave your family, you need to be an adulterer," they wouldn't make it through the doors. But if someone comes through and begins talking about how good you ought to be, saying, "Here's what it means to be a Christian – to be good; to follow certain rules."

Paul said that's over for you if you're a Christian. He asks them a rhetorical question: "Why, if you have died with Christ, do you still submit to these rules?" The key to understanding the whole thing is to understand the nature of death. Remember all the way back in Genesis chapter one and two when God creates Adam and Eve. He puts them into the garden and tells them, "Don't eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil because if you do, on the day that you do you will surely . . . "What? "Die." They eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and on the surface it appears that they haven't died – at least physically. But we know that they have died in that they are now completely and utterly separated and severed from a relationship with God. Death in its very definition has to do with severing a relationship and severing ties. If you think about it in your own life, we lose those who are dear to us. If nothing else, we feel something has been lost. A relationship has been severed. It's no longer there. That's what death does. That's the bad news: because of Adam's sin and because of your sin and my sin we are irrevocably separated from God if we have anything to do with it. If it's up to us, death that sin brought has separated us from God. But Paul says here, the answer to the Christian life, the answer to all your issues, is another death. He says, "If you died with Christ, why do you still submit to the rules of this world?" The death that Adam suffered in being separated from God was completely and utterly reversed in the death that came with Jesus. In Adam's sin we were separated from God. In the death of Jesus and our death with Him we are actually separated from our sin. Separation happens both ways. You're either separated from God or you're separated from your sin, but you're separated from something one way or the other. Paul says, "If you've been separated from your sin, if you've been separated from the need to perform in order to please God, if you've been separated from all of these things, why do you still act like you need to do these things in order to be accepted? Why do you still do it?" That's a great question, isn't it? If Jesus has taken away all of your sins, why are you so insecure? If Jesus has taken away all of your sins, do you realize that when Jesus died, He not only took our sins upon Him and took our punishment, but according to the Gospel, we died with Him. The punishment for our sin was taken away and now there is nothing else that we can do in order to please God – not a thing. No rule following, no anything. Paul's question to the Colossians is, "If that's true, then why do you still submit yourself to human regulations? Why do you still submit yourself to these bogus teachers?" The answer is that they don't really get it. The extent to which you and I don't submit ourselves in hopes that God is going to love us, or submit ourselves to different rules and different teachings and hope that somehow it's going to be a back-up policy shows the extent that we don't get it. The question is, "Has the Gospel really liberated you? Has the Gospel made you free regardless of your circumstances?"

Have you ever seen the movie, "Amistad?" The movie "Amistad" is one of the most powerful movies I think I've ever seen. A group of Africans is kidnapped and is on its way to Cuba when they mutiny. As they mutiny they spare the captain and they him to take them back to Africa (this is mid-18th century). Since they can't speak the language, they don't know what's going on. The captain tells them he will, but instead he takes them to Spain. They are eventually extradited to the United States and there's this huge question, "To whom did these people belong – if anybody? Are they slaves or are they not slaves? They were kidnapped. What does that mean?" It's a wretched movie in that sense, to see what these folks went through. There are two main characters among those who were kidnapped. One's name is Cinque, and one's name is Yamba. Cinque's the spokesman. Cinque tends to be more optimistic and Yamba, on the other hand, would be me. He's cynical, he expects the worst from those who hold them captive. Each day they go from their jail to the courthouse and each day as they do there are abolitionists who stand beside the sidewalk. There's some humor there because the Africans are talking to each other (they show the subtitles) and Cinque asks Yamba, "Do you think they are entertainers out here on the street?" Yamba says, "No, they couldn't be entertainers because they're too miserable." They were Christians, by the way. One day as they are making this trek from the jail to the courthouse, one of the abolitionists puts his Bible out in front of Yamba and Yamba bitterly grabs it from him. For the rest of the movie you see glimpses of Yamba looking through this Bible. Toward the end, they're in jail and Cinque looks over and sees Yamba just enamored and poring over this Bible. Cinque says, "You can quit acting like you know how to read that. No one is looking." Yamba says, "You don't need to read it, there are pictures." He grabs the Bible and says, "Come here." Cinque looks over and he shows him a picture first of Daniel in the lion's den. He said, "This book is about a people enslaved like we are, only they had it a lot worse. Then they were taken and they were enslaved again." It shows Babylon. "But then He came. Look." It's a picture of the Nativity. He says, "When He came, everything changed." He showed him pictures and said, "He grew up, and look, he took care of the poor." He turned the page. "Look, He took care of the children." He goes on and on and on and on and on. He says, "But then, they killed him." Cinque said, "They wouldn't kill an innocent man." Yamba looks at him and says, "Look at us. "But the story's not over." He turned the page. "It says He rose again from the dead. Look." Then he turns to a picture of heaven. He puts his finger down and said, "That's where I'm going when they kill us." The next morning as they are walking to the courthouse, he looks and sees three masts of ships that look exactly like crosses. He just breaks down and

begins to weep. Why? Because Yamba has been liberated. He has chains around his ankles and chains around his arms, but the Gospel has liberated him. His sins are gone. They can do anything to the outside of him and it doesn't matter because the inside of him has been fundamentally changed. The question is, "Have you been changed by the Gospel?" You can't be unless you deal with the question of sin first.

The first question was the question of death. The second thing is the question of sin. What do I mean by that? Let me read it to you. Paul is mocking the teachers:

²¹ *"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"* ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ *These have indeed an appearance of wisdom . . . (ESV)*

What's the nature of sin? Is the nature of sin really what it is that happens on the outside of us or is it what happens on the inside of us? Paul is mocking these guys. All these rules apparently have to do with food items or things like drinking or smoking, and Paul basically says, "The irony of this stuff is all the things you guys are worried about all perish with use." For example, let's say some of you thought smoking cigars was a sin, (I know some of you do.) and I stood up in front of you and lit a big, fat stogie. You said, "Pastor, that's a sin. You have to stop smoking that cigar." I would say, "I'm killing it right now." By the time the cigar is smoked, you've killed it and have accomplished what the person wanted you to accomplish anyway, correct? That's silly, isn't it? What Paul is doing here is actually bringing to mind the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 15. Jesus' disciples had apparently eaten without washing their hands well enough. The Pharisees were uptight about it, and Jesus had some words for that. The Pharisees came to Jesus in Matthew 15.

² *"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."*

Jesus says quite a bit, culminating in verse 7:

⁷ *You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:* ⁸ *"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁹ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."* ¹⁰ *And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."*

I love this line:

¹² *Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?"* ¹³ *He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up."*

Then in verse 17 Jesus says:

¹⁷ *Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."* (ESV)

The question you have to ask yourself, and I've asked you this before is, "Are you more concerned with the fact of being seen as a sinner or the fact that you are a sinner?" Are you more concerned that people around you might look at you and say, "You know, that guy is a sinner" or are you really concerned, primarily concerned with the fact that you are a sinner? When you talk about sin it's easy to try and avoid certain things. "I don't smoke and I don't drink, and I don't do these things. I must be okay." Jesus says, the bottom line is this, "It's not what goes into you that makes you unclean but what comes out of you." The question is, "What comes out of you?" He says, "Murder, adultery, slander, all these things that come out – those are the things that make you unclean." The question is, "How do you deal with those?" Can you deal with them by just suppressing them or can you deal with them by actually having them taken away and changed?

That leads to the last question, the question of restraint. What good is restraint in dealing with our sin? The answer according to Paul is it actually is no good at all. It's good for the purpose of restraining, but after restraining it can't change you. It can't save you. It can't help you. It can't hold you. Why? Because unless you're changed from the inside, nothing matters. How much time do you spend trying to keep yourself from sinning? Are you more worried that you're going to get caught sinning or are you more worried about the fact that you have sinned? Something has to happen inside you.

When we were still living in Seattle, our home was broken into. I talked to my sister who's a cop and asked, "What do we need to do?" She said that 99% of break-ins are avoided if you have a dog. Now we finally have the right dog. I think we're

on dog iteration “5.0.” At that time I remember finding in the paper a Lab that looked perfect, at least on paper. Housebroken, great with kids. I called up the lady and said, “We’ve been broken into. I need a dog, but I especially need one that’s good with little kids. What do you think?” She said, “This is the best dog I think I’ve ever bred. It’s great with kids. The kids can ride him. The kids can do anything with this dog.” I said, “That’s great. I’ll take him.” She said, “One question though. Do you have any cats?” I said, “No. I’m good there.” She said, “Do any of your neighbors have cats?” I said, “Practically all my neighbors have cats.” She said, “Then I will not sell you this dog.” I said, “Why?” She said, “Because this dog kills cats.” I said, “You just told me he’s the perfect dog – with kids – keep a leash on it.” She said, “It is the perfect dog with kids, but this dog cannot help itself from killing any cat that it sees, and I can’t say that strongly enough.” I said, “Why does he do that? Can’t you call the Dog Whisperer or something? What’s going on?” She said, “The reason he does it . . .” (and as a pastor you love hearing these kinds of things just for the story.) “It’s just part of his nature. It’s just what he is. You can keep a leash on him. You can put a fence around him. You can keep him in the house, but at the end of the day he is still a cat killer. The first chance that he has to kill a cat, he will do it.” The interesting thing is that this same thing applies to you and to me. That’s what Paul says. Let me read that last line to you. He’s talking about these rules – the fences that we use. He says

²³ *These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (ESV)*

You can make all the rules for yourself that you want. You can compose all the fences, you can do everything you want, but if your heart has been fundamentally changed at the end of the day, you’re still a cat killer. Why? Because it’s your nature.

I had a mentor one time who said more than once, “Tommy, the people you need to keep an eye on in the church are families where everything looks perfect.” He said, “The more effort people spend to make things look outwardly good and outwardly restrained and outwardly okay, the more chance there is that there are major issues and sin going on in that family. You know what, over and over again I’ve seen that to be true because the question is, “What is it that you’re putting your hope in? Are you putting your hope in your own power to restrain yourself from sin or are you putting your hope in the fact that you’ve died with Christ?” If you’ve died with Christ you’ve risen with Him. Paul isn’t against restrain from sin, but the question is, “Where does it come from?” Is your restraint coming from the outside in or is it coming from the inside out? Do you avoid sin because you’re a new person? Jesus has made you new. Think about that. Keep that in mind this week.