

Colossians 2:20-23

Asceticism

1

Introduction

Today, with social media, TV, and the internet, there is an onslaught of false teaching. The sufficiency of Jesus Christ is either openly or implicitly denied. The churches in the Lycus Valley also faced the danger of spiritual intimidation. False teachers were telling them that Jesus Christ was not sufficient, that they needed something more. These heretics attempted to draw Christians away from confidence in Christ alone.

In 2:8–23, Paul mounts a frontal attack on the Colossian heresy. He has already dealt with philosophy (2:8–10) and presented Christ's sufficiency (2:11–15). He continues his refutation of the Colossian heresy by dealing with legalism (2:16–17), mysticism (2:18–19), and asceticism (2:20–23).

2

Colossians 2:20-23

Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as *though* living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—²¹ “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,”²² which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?²³ These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, *false* humility, and neglect of the body, *but are* of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

3

Mysticism

Colossians 2:20-21

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An ascetic is one who lives a life of rigorous self-denial. In addition to practicing legalism and mysticism, the Colossian errorists were attempting to gain righteousness through self-denial.

The church has been intimidated for centuries by those who advocated poverty as a means to spirituality. It has not always remembered that money itself is not the root of evil, but the love of it (cf. 1 Tim. 6:10). Many of God’s servants in the Old Testament, such as Abraham, Job, and Solomon, were extremely wealthy.

4

Mysticism

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If you have died with Christ to the basic principles of the world, why, Paul asks, **as *though* living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations,** such as, **“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle!”** Through their union with Christ, the redeemed are set free from man-made rules designed to promote spirituality. To practice asceticism, Paul writes, is to adopt a worldly system of religion, based on **basic or elementary principles.**

5

Mysticism

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We have already taught that the false teachers taught a form of philosophical dualism. They practiced asceticism in an attempt to free the spirit from the prison of the body. The view that the body was evil eventually found its way into the church. According to the church, Father Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism, never changed his vest or washed his feet (*Life of Anthony*, para. 47).

He was outdone, however, by Simeon Stylites (c. 390–459), who spent the last thirty-six years of his life atop a fifty-foot pillar. Simeon mistakenly thought the path to spirituality lay in exposing his body to the elements and withdrawing from the world. Their feats have been emulated by monks throughout church history. Even Martin Luther, before discovering the truth of justification by faith, nearly wrecked his health through asceticism.

6

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There are times when a believer is to give up things of this world. We are to deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow Christ (Luke 9:23).

Things that cause us to fall into sin should be put away. Others find their trust and security in the things of this world and hoard up resources. We need to tame and temper these drives and behavior.

These practices have to do with overcoming sin, where asceticism has to do with the attempt to gain spirituality or righteousness. Our righteousness is not based in our works, but in the finished work of Christ.

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Mysticism

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God may call some to a life of self-denial. Many missionaries, for example, have by necessity led ascetic lives. Many missionaries have given up the comforts of home, to live in areas with little or none of the things we rely on (electricity, running water, etc). They sacrifice these comforts in service of Christ and to reach the lost. They did not do so in an attempt to gain spirituality.

8

Mysticism

Colossians 2:22

which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

Asceticism is useless in that it focuses attention on things destined to **perish with the using**. “Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food;” writes Paul to the Corinthians, “but God will do away with both of them” (1 Cor. 6:13). There is no spiritual value in keeping **the commandments and teachings of men**.

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Mysticism

Colossians 2:23

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, *false humility*, and neglect of the body, *but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh*.

The reason for asceticism’s impotency is seen in 2:23. Although it has **the appearance of wisdom in imposed religion and false humility (self-abasement) and neglect (severe treatment) of the body**, it is **of no value against the indulgence of the flesh**. Asceticism might make a person appear spiritual, because of its emphasis on humility and poverty, but it serves only to gratify the flesh. It is a vain attempt to appear more holy than others.

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Jesus warned His disciples against asceticism: “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who *is in the secret place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” (Matt. 6:16–18).

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Commenting on the futility of asceticism, the great nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Alexander McLaren wrote, “Any asceticism is a great deal more to men’s taste than abandoning self. They will rather stick hooks in their backs and do the ‘swinging poojah’ than give up their sins and yield up their wills. There is only one thing that will put the collar on the neck of the animal within us and that is the power of the indwelling Christ. Ascetic religion is godless, for its practitioners essentially worship themselves. As such, we are not to be intimidated by it.”

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There have also been those who have created their own standard of righteousness in denying the body. Yet these standards are either so low that they justify their sin, or so high that they cannot be obtained.

Many have practiced asceticism as a form of self-punishment. You should ask yourself, “how much of the punishment for your sin did Jesus take?” The answer is all! All attempts at self-punishment is a direct denial of the effectiveness of the cross.

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Today, many attempt to barter with God. They have gotten themselves into trouble or desire God’s help to obtain some goal or possession. This form of modern asceticism attempts to make a deal with God to get His help. In return, they give up some material possession or practice as a form of sacrifice.

Let’s make this clear. You are in no position to barter with God. All you have is out of His storehouses, and in reality, already belong to Him. What God desires is a “broken spirit and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17).

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So What ..

Paul's message to the Colossians is also a warning to us. We are not to be intimidated by false human philosophy, legalism, mysticism, or asceticism. Those are but "broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:13). We must hold fast to Christ, in whom we "have been made complete" (Col. 2:10).