



Paul's Letter to the Colossians Study  
**Bible Study Session 10**  
Colossians 2:20-23 : Topic 5.3  
"Detached Living"

Study By  
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### Greek NT

20 Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε  
σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν  
στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου,  
τί ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ  
δογματίζεσθε· 21 Μὴ  
ἄψη μηδὲ γεύση μηδὲ  
θίγης, 22 ἃ ἐστὶν πάντα  
εἰς φθορὰν τῆ ἀποχρήσει,  
κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα  
καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν  
ἀνθρώπων, 23 ἅτινά  
ἐστὶν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα  
σοφίας ἐν ἐθελοθρησκίᾳ  
καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ  
ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος, οὐκ ἐν  
τιμῇ τινὶ πρὸς πλησμονὴν  
τῆς σαρκός.

### Gute Nachricht Bibel

20 Wenn ihr mit Chris-  
tus gestorben seid, seid  
ihr den kosmischen  
Mächten weggestorben.  
Warum tut ihr dann so,  
als ob ihr noch unter  
ihrer Herrschaft lebtet?  
Ihr lasst euch vorschrei-  
ben: 21 »Dies sollst du  
nicht anfassen, das sollst  
du nicht kosten, jenes  
sollst du nicht berühren!«  
22 Alle diese Dinge sind  
doch zum Gebrauch und  
Verzehr bestimmt! War-  
um lasst ihr euch dann  
von Menschen darüber  
Vorschriften machen?  
23 Es sieht nur so aus,  
als ob diese selbst  
gewählte Verehrung,  
die Demutsübungen  
und die Kasteiung des  
Körpers Zeichen beson-  
derer Weisheit seien.  
In Wirklichkeit bringt  
das alles uns Gott nicht  
näher, sondern dient nur  
der Befriedigung men-  
schlicher Selbstsucht  
und Eitelkeit.

### NRSV

20 If with Christ you  
died to the elemental spir-  
its of the universe, why  
do you live as if you still  
belonged to the world?  
Why do you submit to  
regulations, 21 "Do not  
handle, Do not taste, Do  
not touch"? 22 All these  
regulations refer to things  
that perish with use; they  
are simply human com-  
mands and teachings.  
23 These have indeed  
an appearance of wis-  
dom in promoting self-  
imposed piety, humility,  
and severe treatment of  
the body, but they are of  
no value in checking self-  
indulgence.

### NLT

20 You have died with  
Christ, and he has set  
you free from the evil  
powers of this world. So  
why do you keep on fol-  
lowing rules of the world,  
such as, 21 "Don't  
handle, don't eat, don't  
touch." 22 Such rules  
are mere human teach-  
ing about things that are  
gone as soon as we use  
them. 23 These rules  
may seem wise because  
they require strong devo-  
tion, humility, and severe  
bodily discipline. But they  
have no effect when it  
comes to conquering a  
person's evil thoughts  
and desires.

## The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>

### 1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

In Col. 2:20-23, we come to a conclusion regarding the false teaching floating around the house church groups in Colossae. The specific discussion begin in 2:6 and concludes in 2:23. Several signals indicate the inner connectedness of these three pericopes, vv. 6-15, 16-19, 20-23, and will be explored in the Literary Setting section below. This third and final segment appeals to the Colossians to fully reject the teachings of these individuals with a new assessment of the worthlessness of what they were advocating. At the end we will seek to pull together the profile of false teaching that Paul has described in vv. 6-23 so as to have a better understanding of what was taking place at Colossae.

<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

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## Historical Context:

Both the history of the copying of this text (External History) and the historical references inside the text (Internal History) need to be explored.

**External History.** During the early period of copying the New Testament from the second through the eighth centuries, only one place of variation of wording emerges that the editors of *The Greek New Testament* (4th rev. ed., published by the United Bible Societies) considered to be of sufficient importance to impact the translation of this passage into other languages.



In verse twenty three, the phrase ταπεινοφροσύνη καὶ, **humility and**, sometimes is written without the connector καὶ.<sup>2</sup> The impact of this is to limit the list of false qualities to two (ἑθελοθρησκία καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνη) rather than three (ἑθελοθρησκία καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνη καὶ ἀφειδία σώματος). The third quality, ἀφειδία σώματος, becomes a modifier of the two remaining qualities. The translation impact is the difference between the adopted text, “in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body,” and the alternative text reading, “in promoting self-imposed piety and humility by severe treatment of the body.” Clearly not a lot of difference in meaning is present, but some does exist.<sup>3</sup> Most of it centers on the specific role that ἀφειδία σώματος was assumed to play in the piety system of these false teachers. The alternative reading elevates its role to greater importance.

The text apparatus of the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece (27th rev. ed) add one additional variation of text reading to the above one.<sup>4</sup> This additional variation that adds οὖν ties vv. 20-23 on to 16-19 as an implication present in the first text statement. The mss support for it is rather spotty, and the conjunction most likely was an accidental additional from looking at Εἰ οὖν in 3:1 and assuming it was the same here in 2:20, Εἰ....



What becomes clear is that the wording of this passage remained essentially in place over the centuries of being copied. The one important variation related to a differing understanding of the role of ἀφειδία σώματος

<sup>2</sup>“A minority of the Committee preferred the reading without καὶ on the basis of strong and early external evidence, and the likelihood that copyists would insert καὶ on the assumption that ἀφειδία was the third in a series of datives after ἐν, rather than an instrumental dative qualifying the previous prepositional phrase. On the other hand, the majority of the Committee regarded the omission as accidental and preferred the reading with καὶ, which is widely supported by Ɀ A C D<sup>br</sup> H K P Ψ 33 81 614 vg syr<sup>p</sup> cop<sup>sa</sup> arm *al*. As a compromise it was decided to adopt καὶ but to enclose it within square brackets. The reading ταπεινοφροσύνη τοῦ νοός καὶ (G it<sup>b</sup> mon. o syr<sup>h</sup> al) is an expansion derived probably from ver. 18.” [Bruce Manning Metzger and United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.) (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 556-57.]

<sup>3</sup>“There is strong and early external evidence to support the reading without the conjunction καὶ (and). If καὶ is original, then the noun ἀφειδία (severe treatment) will be understood as the third in a series of nouns in the dative case, that is, “in self-chosen piety, in humility, and in severe treatment of the body.” Probably, copyists did understand ἀφειδία to be the third in this series, and therefore, they added the conjunction “and.” If καὶ is not original, then ἀφειδία may be understood as a noun in the dative case expressing *the means by which* the false teachers promote self-imposed piety and humility, that is, “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in [promoting] self-imposed piety and humility by means of severe treatment of the body.” Or ἀφειδία may be in apposition to the first two nouns: “self-chosen worship and humility [that is], severe treatment of the body” (Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 188, n. 2).

“On the other hand, καὶ may have been a part of the original text and was accidentally omitted. The longer reading, with καὶ, also has good manuscript support. The word καὶ is therefore put in brackets to indicate uncertainty about the original text. The reading ταπεινοφροσύνη τοῦ νοός καὶ (in humility of the mind and) is an expansion probably influenced by the words in v. 18.

Most modern English translations follow the longer reading with καὶ and translate ἀφειδία as the third in the series. MacDonald (*Colossians and Ephesians*, p. 116) expresses the view of many scholars in claiming, ‘This verse is one of the most difficult to translate in the NT.’ In fact some scholars think that changes in the text must have been made so early in the manuscript tradition that it is impossible to recover the original text of this verse (see the discussion by Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 124–27.)”

[Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament : An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger’s Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 416-17.]

### <sup>4</sup>Kolossar 2,20

\* οὖν Ɀ(\*)<sup>2</sup> 0278<sup>c</sup>. 6. 326. 365. 614. 629. 630. 1505 *al ar m vg<sup>mss</sup> sy<sup>h</sup>*; Ambr Spec (The inferential conjunction οὖν, **therefore**, is added after Εἰ, making it match the first two words of 3:1.)

### Kolossar 2,23

\* του νοός F G it (bo); Hil Ambst Spec (The words τοῦ νοός are inserted after ταπεινοφροσύνη and before καὶ, so that the reading becomes **in humility of the mind and**)

\* P<sup>46</sup> B 1739 b m vg<sup>mss</sup>; Hil Ambst Spec (καὶ after ταπεινοφροσύνη is omitted)

| txt Ɀ A C D F G H Ψ 075. 0278. 33. 1881 *M lat sy; CI*

[Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 527.]

being advocated by these false teachers in their false system of piety. That it was a part of their system was never in doubt. What was unclear to those copying the text was its exact function in the heretical teaching.

**Internal History.** The time / place markers in 2:20-23 are limited. The time contrast is introduced by the topic sentence in verse 20 between the conversion of the Colossians and their present practices as Christians. The referencing of a variety of religious practices being advocated by the false teachers have a historical foundation, but this will be explored in the Exegesis of the Text section below. Inherently the passage is didactic rather than narrative; thus the historical aspects are somewhat limited.

### Literary Aspects:

Again the literary aspects of the passage are important to the understanding of the meaning, both then and now, of the text. Verses 20-23 stand as a single sentence in the original Greek text. Some aspects of the expansions (vv. 21-23) off the core expression in verse 20 pose some grammatical challenges. The syntax of the sentence is complex and thus more difficult to analyze with clear certainty.

**Literary Form.** At the **broad genre** level, 2:20-23 is a part of the letter body, and thus represents the response of the apostle to a specific situation present in the congregation at the time of the writing of the letter in the late 50s of the first Christian century. Modern applications of the ideas in vv. 20-23 will be in proportion to the closeness of the modern situations to the one being addressed at Colossae in the first century.

At the **specific genre** level, 2:20-23 is paraenesis, although without the direct admonition form of an imperative tense verb. The encouragement comes in the form of a rhetorical question that raises a question which the Colossians should be able to answer easily. The anticipated answer is signaled in the framing of the question. That is, no good reason exists to live under the control of the 'elemental spirits of the world' since we have been separated out from being under their authority and power by our spiritual union with Christ in conversion.

The Greek sentence structure used by Paul in verse 20 is a first class conditional sentence with a rhetorical question as the *apodosis*, i.e., the main clause.<sup>5</sup> The pattern here introduces a basic principle as the foundation for the admonition / encouragement. The 'if' clause assumes a reality in relation to the Colossians, and thus forms the basis of his appeal in the main clause.<sup>6</sup> With the parallel patterns in 2:20 and 3:1, the first assumes that the Colossians 'have died with Christ' and the second assumes that the Colossians 'have been raised with Christ.'

**Literary Setting.** Col. 2:20-23 stands in an important position in the letter body. It brings to a close Paul's direct references to the false teaching present at Colossae, which he began in 2:6. Through a variety of

### Outline of Colossians

#### Praescriptio

Introduction: 1:1-2  
Superscriptio: 1:1  
Adscriptio: 1:2a  
Salutatio: 1:2b

#### Proem

Thankfulness: 1:3-8

#### Body

Intercession: 1:9-12  
Christus Hymnus: 1:13-20  
Reconciliation: 1:21-23

Paul's Ministry 1: 1:24-29  
Paul's Ministry 2: 2:1-5

Christian Living 1: 2:6-15  
Christian Living 2: 2:16-19

Christian Legalism: 2:20-23

Seeking the Heavenly Things: 3:1-4  
Christian Behavior: 3:5-11  
Getting Dressed: 3:12-17

Haustafeln: 3:18-4:1  
Husband/Wife: 3:18-19  
Father/Children: 3:20-21  
Master/Slaves: 3:22-4:1

Admonitions and Requests: 4:2-6

#### Conclusio

Tychicus: 4:7-9  
Greetings: 4:10-17  
Closing: 4:18  
Letter Validation: 4:18a  
Prayer Request: 4:18b  
Benedictio: 4:19c

<sup>5</sup>Paul makes use of the first class protasis only four times in Colossians: 1:23; 2:5, 20; 3:1. But the first two instances are of a different caliber construction than is present in 2:20 and 3:1. Thus these last two instances are closely linked together. The setting up of this type of 'if' clause is common with close to 500 instances in the Greek New Testament.

<sup>6</sup>2:20: *If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?*

Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου, τί ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ δογματίζεσθε

3:1: *So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*

Εἰ οὖν συνηγήθητε τῷ Χριστῷ, τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, οὗ ὁ Χριστός ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ καθημένος

In ancient Greek, the 'conditional sentences' (four types are present), the 'if' clause sentences, are composed of the *protasis* and the *apodosis*. The protasis conveys differing levels of 'iffishness,' all the way from very little uncertainty (the 1st class) to high levels of doubt (4th class). Although very difficult to clearly translate in English, these distinctions are important and often carry major interpretive implications.

These two above 'if' clauses in Colossians are the first class conditional form and express fundamental confidence in the actuality of the stated condition. Consequently this type of sentence is usually translated by 'since' rather than by 'if.'

connecting links, this pericope is closely identified with the ideas in vv. 6-15 and 16-19. Particularly significant is the reference to 'the elemental spirits' (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου / τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου) in 2:8 and 2:20. In both verses, the authority of these spirits is set in contradiction to the authority of Christ, so that the issue is an either / or situation for individuals. The believer's death with Christ has severed ties to these spirits who exercised control until Christ came into the picture. The rules of asceticism 'don't touch, don't taste, don't handle' laid down by these false teachers (v. 21) alludes back to the verse 16 exclusion of certain foods and drinks. The human origin of such rules (v. 21) parallels a similar reference in verse 8. Piety as worthless outward display (v. 23) corresponds to a similar negative assessment in verse 18.

But with the pattern observed thus far in the letter from 1:3 on, this passage also sets up the following pericope of 3:1-4. And this pericope in 3:1-4 introduces the 'epistolary paraenesis' of 3:1-4:6. In 3:1-4, Paul moves toward the more standard paraenetical admonition with the imperative verb form. But the two 'if' clauses in 2:20 ("If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe") and 3:1 (if you have been raised with Christ), link the two pericopes together. The motifs of dying and rising with Christ are common references in the Pauline understanding of conversion, and form complementary aspects of the one experience of conversion.

### Literary Structure:

The block diagram of the Greek text presents a visual expression of the relationships of the ideas inside this single Greek sentence in verses 20-23. The literalistic English translation below illustrates those relationships:

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2.20           Since you have died
                with Christ
                to the elemental spirits of the world,
                as though living in the world,
21   why do you allow yourself to be dogmatized?

22   2.21 Do not touch,
        neither
23   do not taste,
        nor
24   do not handle,

2.22   which are all
        for corruption by use,
        according to the commandments and teachings of men,
2.23   such have a reputation
        indeed
        for having wisdom
        in promoting self-made religion
        and
        asceticism
        and
        severe treatment of the body,
        not with any value
        against the indulgence of the flesh.

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The syntactical structure of this sentence is somewhat complex, although various scholars down through the centuries seem to have made it unnecessarily complex with their seeming limited ability to grasp the grammatical structures used by Paul. Clearly the core expression is the rhetorical question of statement 21. Statements 21-23 stand as expressions of the 'dogmatizing' process by specific rules of asceticism being laid down by the false teachers. These commands stand grammatically as exegetical extensions of the verb δογματίζεσθε<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The punctuation structure assumed by the SBL *Greek New Testament* editors is mistaken in its inserting a Greek question mark (:) after ἀνθρώπων at the end of verse 22. The relative clause introduced by ἅτινά ἐστιν in v. 23 introduces a second modify-

Then two Greek relative clauses in verses 22-23, introduced by ἃ and ἅτινά, add evaluative assessments of the worthlessness of such practices. Some of the wording here is a bit difficult because of unusual meaning usage of some of the Greek words. But the definitional range of Paul's usage can be documented in ancient Greek literature, and thus stands within the limits of sensible expression. Thus no need exists legitimately to 'amend' the Greek text with alternative wording, as a few scholars have attempted, in order to 'clarify' Paul's meaning.

### Exegesis of the Text:

Since vv. 20-23 stand as one sentence in the original text, our examination of it will focus on the identification of the issue in vv. 20-21, and Paul's evaluation of the issue in vv. 22-23 with the two relative clauses. This thought pattern continues here from a similar pattern that Paul used in 2:16-19: identification and evaluation.

### **The Probing of the Colossians, vv. 20-21:**

20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 21 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'?

20 Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου, τί ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ δογματίζεσθε·  
21 Μὴ ἄψη μηδὲ γεύση μηδὲ θίγης,

**Since you have died with Christ to the elemental spirits of the world,** Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου. First the protasis clause, i.e., the first class conditional 'if' clause. This 'if' clause at the beginning of verse 20 makes the assumption that the Colossians 'have died with Christ,' Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ. This goes back to Paul's assertion in 2:12, "when you were buried with him in baptism," συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ. Christian conversion is a 'death experience' and one's baptism affirms and symbolizes this. In coming to Christ the believer dies to self and self interests so that Christ can take control of his / her life as Lord, as Paul lays it out in clear terms in Gal. 2:19-20 (NRSV):

19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

19 ἐγὼ γὰρ διὰ νόμου νόμῳ ἀπέθανον ἵνα θεῷ ζήσω· Χριστῷ συνεσταύρωμαι· 20 ζῶ δὲ οὐκέτι ἐγώ, ζῆ δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός· ὃ δὲ νῦν ζῶ ἐν σαρκί, ἐν πίστει ζῶ τῆ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀγαπήσαντός με καὶ παραδόντος ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ.

But this death is not accomplished by the individual. It is a 'death with Christ' (ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ). That is, the spiritual death of the individual is a participation in the death of Christ on the cross. The believer enters into Christ's death on Calvary in order to experience forgiveness and cleansing of sin, as 1 Peter 2:24 declares (NRSV): "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (ὃς τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν αὐτὸς ἀνήνεγκεν ἐν τῷ σώματι αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὸ ξύλον, ἵνα ταῖς ἀμαρτίαις ἀπογενόμενοι τῆ δικαιοσύνη ζήσωμεν· οὗ τῷ μύλωπι ἰάθητε.).<sup>8</sup> Thus, as he has done already, Paul affirms his confidence in the genuineness of their conversion commitment.

But something unique to this death is asserted here that is not found elsewhere in Paul's statements about spiritual death. Their dying with Christ was a dying to the elemental spirits of the world (ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου).<sup>9</sup> This phrase underscores their spiritual dying as a severing of ties from the control of the element with the same role as ἃ ἐστὶν in v. 22. The difference between the two relative pronouns ἃ and ἅτινά is that ἅτινά has a qualitative tone in it which is difficult to translate into most modern western languages. The diagram above illustrates the correct grammatical connection of both relative clauses to the exegetical commands Μὴ ἄψη μηδὲ γεύση μηδὲ θίγης, which define the verbal action of δογματίζεσθε. The Colossians were allowing themselves to be 'dogmatized' by these rules that in reality possessed the two sets of negative traits defined by the two relative clauses.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 188: "The appeal is the same as in 2:12, to that decisive event of baptism in which they identified themselves with Christ in his death, taking his death as marking the end of their identification with the world to which Christ died (cf. Gal. 6:14), and yielding themselves to the power of that death to old ways and to the power of his life from the dead (see on 2:12-13). The clause here is a direct echo of Rom. 6:8 (εἰ δὲ ἀπεθάνομεν σὺν Χριστῷ), a particularly Pauline adaptation of the more common summary of the Christian gospel, "Christ died for ..." (Rom. 5:6, 8; 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:11; 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:15; 1 Thes. 5:10; 1 Pet. 3:18; see also Rom. 8:34; 14:9; Gal. 2:21; 1 Thes. 4:14)."

<sup>9</sup>For a detailed examination of 'elemental spirits of the world' (τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου) see study 5.1 on Col. 2:6-15 where  
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these spiritual powers in the world. James Dunn (*NIGTC*, 188) describes it this way:

The obvious construction to follow the intransitive verb to indicate what one has “died” to is the dative (as in the otherwise closely parallel context, Rom. 6:2 and 10; also Gal. 2:19). Here, however, ἀπό plus the genitive has been chosen (cf. Rom. 9:3; BDF §211). The intention is clearly to indicate that “from” which death has set free (GNB; NEB/REB try to capture the implication by translating “pass beyond reach of”); the alternative ἐν ᾧ construction of Rom. 7:6 is more awkward. Here the reference is to “the elemental forces of the world” (see on 2:8; though Wink, *Naming* 76–77, surprisingly argues that in 2:20 στοιχεῖα has a quite different sense). The implication is also clear. These are the powers and authorities which were so decisively routed on the cross (2:15). They therefore have no more authority over those “in Christ.”

Thus the spiritual dying of the Colossian believers separated them from the control of these evil forces at work in the world. Christ’s death on the cross nullified their authority forever, as 2:15 asserts:

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

ἀπεκεδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ, θριαμβεύσας αὐτοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ.

Spiritually the Colossians do not have to answer any longer to the demands of these evil powers in the world around them. Liberation from their control has been won on the cross and the Colossians have in their spiritual union with Christ been set free from them by Christ Himself.

What believers in parts of the western world today may have difficulty fully understanding, believers in other parts of the world without a lot of western influence can much more easily grasp. The Weltanschauung, or world view, of many of these modern cultures is much closer to that of the first century Roman world. The active, influential presence of demonic spirits in the world around people was clearly understood and accepted. In much of the ancient world, as well as in many parts of the modern world, a pessimistic fatalism often prevailed in the attitudes and thinking of many individuals. These spiritual powers are so strong and we are so helpless to defend ourselves against them; so why try to fight them? Why not seek as best as one can to appease them? Or, at least to out maneuver them so that they don’t harm you too much?

With its pervasive polytheism belief system, the first century Roman world was superstitious to an extreme degree. Paul’s words to the Colossians were given in that context, not in our modern western context. Most of the believers in the churches, especially those who were non-Jewish, came out of that heritage of extreme superstition about everything in life. It was this background that gave the false teachers some leverage to convince the believers to adopt these rituals as a way to appease such powers. But Paul counters with the powerful declaration that all these powers were completely subdued by Christ on the cross, and thus have absolutely no control or influence over the people of God. Consequently any effort to placate such powers by believers made no sense what so ever! Believers had absolutely no need to make any move toward such powers; Christ was completely protecting His people from any harm that such powers might inflict on people in general. Thus the insistence of these false teachers was not only wrong, it was dangerous!

**Why are you submitting yourselves to regulations?** Now the apodosis, the main clause in the form of a rhetorical question.<sup>10</sup> This spiritual reality of liberation from the evil powers at work in the world makes all the more puzzling any move to come back under their control. To do this would be to “live as if you still belonged to the world” (ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ). Their domain of influence is the world. To come again under their influence one must return to the world. The concept is to adopt the ways of the world in one’s living; these stand in opposition to the ways of God.<sup>11</sup> The Colossians needed to avoid placing themselves in a situation where

the phrase first shows up. It is summarized effectively by Kline Snodgrass (“Elemental Spirits, Elements,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. by Walter A Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, [Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1988], 684-85):

Similarly, Colossians 2:8 would be warning Christians against being led away captive through the philosophical speculations and empty deceit that are perpetrated by human traditions and the elemental spirits. Only two verses later Paul declares that Christ is the head of every principality and power (Col 2:10). Many commentators now believe that Paul intended ‘principalities and powers’ to refer to demons who temporarily ruled various spheres of life in the world. Paul announces that Christ has conquered them and displayed them publicly as captives in his triumphal procession (Col 2:15). Thus Colossians 2:20 might mean that Christians have ‘died’ to those elemental spirits as elsewhere Paul wrote of “dying” to sin (Rom 6:2).

<sup>10</sup>In ancient Greek, rhetorical questions often took on the tone of even more powerful admonitions than the imperative verb forms. Such is the case here.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 189: “The conclusion is equally clear: there is no need to live any longer “in the world.” That can hardly mean that the Colossian Christians should try to live as though physically ab-

they became subject to influences that pulled them away from God and His will for their lives.

The key to returning to the world is not open rebellion or rejection of God. Ironically, that which will put them back into the world is the adoption of rigid religious regulations supposedly intended to bring them closer to God. This is the main focus of Paul's statement to the Colossians. The precise meaning of his term *δογματίζεσθε*<sup>12</sup> is debated somewhat among scholars.<sup>13</sup> Clearly the verb alludes to the noun form in 2:14, *τοῖς δόγμασιν*.<sup>14</sup> The interpretive issue with the verb form in 2:20 concerns whether the Colossians were 'submitting themselves' to these regulations, or whether they were 'allowing themselves to be regulated.'<sup>15</sup> The larger context favors the latter understanding and suggests the presence of this teaching but not extensive adoption of it by the Colossians. These false teachers were attempting to impose strict religious rules on the Colossians as a means supposedly to a 'superior' spirituality.<sup>16</sup>

From Paul's characterization of their efforts, these *δόγματα* were being set forth as rigid rules and regulations that must be followed or else. They were not being taught by the false teachers as recommendations or suggestions!

The question arises, What rules? The appositional element answers this question with a series of demands: "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (*Μὴ ἄψη μηδὲ γεύσῃ μηδὲ θίγῃς*). These rules seem to touch on the reference to food and drink in verse 16: "Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths" (*Μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω ἐν βρώσει ἢ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων*). Clearly the second one, "Do not taste" (*μηδὲ γεύσῃ*), pertains to stracted or cut off from the world (cf. 1 Cor. 5:10); believers are as much still "in the world" in that sense as they are still "in the flesh." It must mean that they are no longer to live under the authority of "the elemental forces" which rule "the world," living lives determined by reference to these forces (cf. Lohmeyer 127; Lindemann, *Kolosserbrieft* 50; Wolter 151), living as though the world itself was ultimately determined by such factors, as though the values and conduct which they stood for were what really counted in daily life.<sup>3</sup> The death of Christ spelled the end of all such systems; his death and resurrection provided the key insight into the reality of the world.<sup>4</sup> Why look anywhere else for the basis of daily living (cf. Phil. 3:18–20)?"

<sup>12</sup>*δογματίζω* (s. *δόγμα*) 1 aor. *ἐδογματίσα* LXX; pf. *δεδογματίκα* 1 Esdr 6:33; pf. pass. ptc. *δεδογματισμένον* 3 Macc 4:11; 1 aor. pass. *ἐδογματίσθη* (=decree, ordain, since II B.C.; s. Nägeli 32; Da 2:13 and elsewhere LXX, Just., Tat.; Ath.: 'state position' or 'viewpoint') **to put under obligation by rules or ordinances, obligate:** pass. *submit to rules and regulations Col 2:20* here permissive pass. (s. Gildersleeve, *Syntax* I 73)=*permit yourselves to be put under etc.* τὰ δεδογματισμένα ὑπὸ τινος things decreed by someone 1 Cl 20:4; 27:5 (cp. 3 Macc 4:11).—M-M. DELG s.v. *δοκάω* etc. TW." [William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 254.]

<sup>13</sup>"*δογματίζω* means to 'represent and affirm an opinion or tenet,' 'establish or publish a decree,' 'proclaim an edict' (Kittel, TDNT 2, 231; cf. LSJ, 441, and Lohse, 123). It is akin to *δόγμα* ('decree,' 'ordinance') used in the plural at chapter 2:14 of the regulations with their penalty clauses associated with the signed acknowledgment of our indebtedness before God. Here the restrictive regulations have particular reference to ordinances of taste and touch (v 21 lists three of them), though we should not suppose that the verb is specifically limited to these. The passive voice of the verb carries the notion of 'allowing oneself to be ...' (some older grammarians took the verb as a middle voice with much the same significance, so Robertson, *Grammar*, 807, 'probably direct middle'; Abbott, 272, cf. Turner, *Syntax*, 57), so that a literal rendering is 'let yourself be regulated' (BDF para. 314; cf. 1 Cor 6:7). The point is that the Colossians were in danger of falling victim to the false teaching and of voluntarily placing themselves under the regulations imposed by these powers (Hooker, *Christ*, 317, considers that the admonition does not mean the Colossian Christians have already submitted to the regulations). This was tantamount to reverting to the slavery previously experienced in their pagan past (cf. Gal 4:3, 8, 9)." [Peter T. O'Brien, vol. 44, *Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 149.]

<sup>14</sup>Col. 2:14 (NRSV): "erasing the record that stood against us *with its legal demands*. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross." *ἐξαλείψας τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν, καὶ αὐτὸ ἤρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ.*

<sup>15</sup>The interpretive issue arises because of the Greek verb spelling being the same for the 'middle voice' or the 'passive voice' of the verb. Normally *δογματίζω* uses the middle voice, "to regulate oneself." But this implies extensive adoption of the false teaching already by the Colossians, something in contradiction to Paul's expressions of confidence in their stance in the apostolic gospel in 2:5, "For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ." Also 1:4, 8. The alternative passive voice understanding is rare with this particular verb and carries the sense of 'allowing oneself to be regulated' by others or by outside forces. The implication is that the Colossians are contemplating these false teachings but have not as yet adopted them.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Markus Barth, Helmut Blanke and Astrid B. Beck, *Colossians: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*. In the Anchor Yale Bible Commentary series. (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 353: "The verb *dogmatizō* occurs many times in the LXX, where it means 'to proclaim an edict' or 'to give an order.'<sup>10</sup> In the NT, this word is used only here. It evokes or echoes 1:14 (*dogmata*, regulations) and is used intransitively to mean 'to make demands of or to impose (regulations) on someone.'"

eating. Some questions arise over whether the first and third commands refer to the same thing or to two different things.<sup>17</sup> The older tendency was to see the first demand related to Jewish purity laws, and the third demand alluding to sexual purity. Thus the false rules related to ritual purity, food purity, and sexual purity. But nowhere in the letter does Paul hint at problems with sexual purity among the Colossian believers. And the terminology used here often relates to general issues of ritual purity both in Jewish and in pagan religious traditions, although the tones here as well as in 2:16 have strong Jewish echoes.<sup>18</sup> Also interesting is the fact that from the Dead Sea Scrolls, we have discovered among the Essenes the coupling of purity concerns and worship of angels, as Paul alludes to in 2:16.<sup>19</sup> What seems to be the basis of the rules being imposed by the false teachers is a strong Jewish influence coming out of contemporary stress on ceremonial purity practiced among the Jewish people of that time.<sup>20</sup> But to the non-Jews in the believing community this emphasis could very well have found a sympathetic hearing because of the varying traditions on asceticism<sup>21</sup> present in many of the Greek and Roman philosophical traditions, as well as some of the religious traditions.

Here Paul intensely rejects the idea that following rigid rules in order to preserve one's religious purity has any legitimacy for the believer. The development of asceticism in later Christian monasticism had to completely ignore these teachings of the apostle. Most Protestant groups today do not practice asceticism.<sup>22</sup> One should

<sup>17</sup>Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 190: "What precisely is in view in the three commands is not clear. ἅπτομαι, "touch, take hold of," must denote a purity concern (Lohmeyer 128); behind it lies fear of defilement by physical contact with something forbidden, fear of impurity being transferred by physical contact (as regularly in Lev. 5:2-3; 7:19, 21; 11:8, 24-28, etc.; also Isa. 52:11, cited in 2 Cor. 6:17; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 123 n. 77, cites Lucian, *De Syria dea* 54, evidencing the same concern). It can also mean "touch food," and so "eat" (BAG<sup>d</sup> s.v. ἅπτω 2a), or "touch (a woman)," denoting sexual intercourse (Gen. 20:6; Prov. 6:29; 1 Cor. 7:1; cf. 1 Tim. 4:3).<sup>6</sup> But here, without an object, the more general sense is presumably intended. Even so, purity concerns are usually at the root of food taboos, so the next regulation is no surprise: γεύομαι, "taste, partake of" food (BAG<sup>d</sup>; as in Matt. 27:34; Luke 14:24; John 2:9; Acts 10:10; 20:11; 23:14; only here in Paul). The third prohibition could again refer to food (see again BAG<sup>d</sup> s.v. ἅπτω 2a), but again probably means "touch" (with the hand, LS<sup>j</sup> s.v. θιγγάνω 1), so that "handle" becomes a way of distinguishing the two nearly synonymous words. Most translations, however, prefer the sequence "handle, taste, touch," following Lightfoot 201; but it is the sense "touch" which is appropriate for ἅπτομαι in this context (as the Leviticus references make clear), not the stronger sense "take hold of."

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Dunn, *Ibid.*, 191: "These regulations could indicate the ritual practices of more than one of the ancient religions and cults. But here again the echo of characteristically Jewish concerns is strong, and particularly purity concerns, though that is missed by almost all commentators.<sup>7</sup> We have already noted the fundamental importance of observing the distinction between clean and unclean food within Jewish tradition (see on 2:16); here we might simply underline the fact that a distinction between 'clean' and 'unclean' is essentially a purity distinction. According to Jewish law one became impure by touching what was impure, particularly a corpse (Num. 19:11-13), but also through physical contact with (touching) a menstruant, or someone with a discharge of blood (Leviticus 15), or a leper (implied by the rules of Lev. 13:45-46). In short, touching human impurity of whatever sort made one impure (Lev. 5:3).<sup>8</sup> Such concerns were widely shared by Jews of the late Second Temple period, as the discovery of many *mikwaot* (immersion pools for ritual purification) in pre-70 Jerusalem and Judea clearly attests (Sanders, *Jewish Law* 214-27). They lie behind such episodes as Mark 5:1-34 and Luke 10:30-32 in the Gospels. Pharisees seem to have been still more concerned with purity, as their very nickname (Pharisees = 'separated ones') indicates, a concern focused most sharply on the meal table."<sup>9</sup>

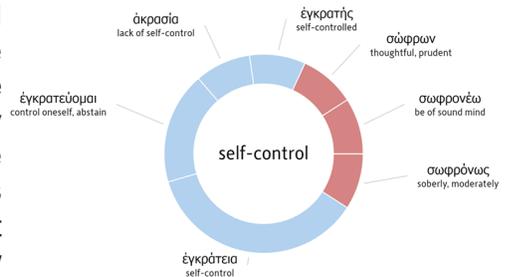
<sup>19</sup>Cf. Dunn, *Ibid.*, 191: "With the Essenes the concern was accentuated to an extreme degree, with strict regulations in place to ensure and safeguard 'the purity of the Many' (1QS 6-7).<sup>10</sup> In view of the discussion of 2:18 above, it is particularly notable here that at Qumran we see precisely the same combination of purity concerns and heavenly worship as is implied for the Colossian 'philosophy.' Since the Dead Sea sect saw itself as a priestly community (hence the accentuated concern for purity), anticipating the eschatological congregation in the presence of the holy angels, and encouraged also a mystical entrance into the heavenly temple (see on 2:18), it is no surprise that purity was as important for entry into the one as for the other. As we see in 11QT 47: 'The city which I will sanctify, causing my name and sanctuary to abide [in it], shall be holy and pure of all impurity with which they can become impure. Whatever is in it shall be pure. Whatever enters it shall be pure.' And the emphasis on holiness in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* is likewise strong: 'there is no unclean thing in their holy places' (4Q400 1.i.14 Newsom)."

<sup>20</sup>Modern Judaism has rejected the essential ideas of asceticism; cf. "Asceticism in Judaism," Wikipedia online.

<sup>21</sup>"1 : practicing strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline; 2 : austere in appearance, manner, or attitude" ["asceticism," Merriam-Webster Online dictionary]. More detailed discussion on this can be found in "Asceticism," Answers.com online.

<sup>22</sup>"Different religious groups within Christianity have differing views on the subject of asceticism; the Catholic Church, as well as the Eastern Orthodox churches, Oriental Orthodox churches, and some Anglican churches, all see value in asceticism, while most of the Protestant denominations view asceticism generally in a negative light (an exception would be the practice of fasting). One Christian context of asceticism is the liturgical season of Lent, the period between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, leading up to Easter. During this season Catholics are counseled to practice prayer, fasting, especially on Fridays and special holy days, and charitable giving. Many other Christians also practice these traditional Lenten disciplines." ["Asceticism: Christianity," Wikipedia

note a clear distinction between self-control or self-discipline, and asceticism. The latter typically involves the extension of self-discipline of the body to unhealthy, extreme levels of denial, which can take place while living in society or more often by withdrawing from society in a communal or a hermit lifestyle. Unquestionably, self-discipline and self-control are affirmed by the New Testament; but asceticism is denied by scripture. As the chart on the right indicates, the concept of self-control is behind over seven different Greek words that show up in the pages of the New Testament.<sup>23</sup> And the emphasis on such is strong inside the New Testament, especially in the writings of the apostle Paul. The grace of God brings self-discipline and self-control into the life of the believer -- this is a fundamental teaching of the Gospel.



online]

<sup>23</sup>For a detailed analysis of the concept of self-control / self-discipline (or the lack of it) see topics 88.83 - 88.92 in the Louw-Nida *Greek Lexicon*:

**K Self-Control, Lack of Self-Control (88.83–88.92)**

**88.83 ἐγκρατεύομαι; ἐγκράτεια, ας f:** to exercise complete control over one’s desires and actions—‘to control oneself, to exercise self-control, self-control.’

**ἐγκρατεύομαι:** πᾶς δὲ ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος πάντα ἐγκρατεύεται ‘everyone who competes in an athletic contest (or ‘in the games’) exercises self-control in all things’ 1 Cor 9:25.

**ἐγκράτεια:** διαλεγόμενου δὲ αὐτοῦ περι δικαιοσύνης καὶ ἐγκρατείας ‘he went on discussing goodness and the exercising of self-control’ Ac 24:25.

An adequate rendering of the expression ‘to exercise self-control’ may require an idiomatic equivalent, for example, ‘to hold oneself in,’ ‘to command oneself,’ ‘to be a chief of oneself,’ ‘to make one’s heart be obedient,’ ‘to command one’s own desires,’ ‘to be the master of what one wants,’ or ‘to say No to one’s body.’ (Compare ἀκρασία ‘lack of self-control,’ 88.91, and ἀκρατής ‘lacking in self-control,’ 88.92.)

**88.84 ἐγκρατής, ἐς:** (derivative of ἐγκρατεύομαι ‘to exercise self-control,’ 88.83) pertaining to exercising self-control—‘self-controlled.’ δεῖ γὰρ τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ... ὄσιον, ἐγκρατῆ ‘the church leader should be ... consecrated and self-controlled’ Tt 1:7–8.

**88.85 χαλιναγωγέω:** (a figurative extension of meaning of χαλιναγωγέω ‘to control with bit or bridle,’ not occurring in the NT) to exercise close control over some function—‘to control, to exercise self-control.’ μὴ χαλιναγωγῶν γλῶσσαν αὐτοῦ ... τούτου μάταιος ἢ θρησκεία ‘the religion ... of one who does not control his tongue ... is worthless’ Jas 1:26. In some languages the expression μὴ χαλιναγωγῶν γλῶσσαν αὐτοῦ in Jas 1:26 may be rendered as ‘one who does not tell his tongue what to say’ or ‘one who cannot tie his tongue down’ or ‘one who cannot stop his talking.’

**88.86 νήφω<sup>b</sup>:** (a figurative extension of meaning of νήφω ‘to be sober,’ in the sense of not being drunk, probably not occurring in the NT) to behave with restraint and moderation, thus not permitting excess—‘to be self-controlled, to be restrained, to be moderate in one’s behavior, to be sober.’ σὺ δὲ νήφε ἐν πάσιν ‘you must keep control of yourself in all circumstances’ 2 Tm 4:5; οἱ μεθυσκόμενοι νυκτὸς μεθύουσιν· ἡμεῖς δὲ ἡμέρας ὄντες νήφωμεν ‘those who are drunk get drunk in the night; we belong to the day and we should be sober’ 1 Th 5:7–8. It is possible that in 1 Th 5:8 νήφω means lack of drunkenness, but most scholars interpret the use of νήφω in the NT as applying to a broader range of soberness or sobriety, namely, restraint and moderation which avoids excess in passion, rashness, or confusion. For another interpretation of νήφω in 1 Th 5:8, as well as in 1 Th 5:6, see 30.25.

**88.87 νηφάλιος, α, ον:** (derivative of νήφω<sup>b</sup> ‘to be restrained,’ 88.86) pertaining to behaving in a sober, restrained manner—‘sober, restrained.’ ἐπίσκοπον ... νηφάλιον, σώφρονα, κόσμιον ‘a church leader ... must be sober, self-controlled, and orderly’ 1 Tm 3:2. In a number of languages νηφάλιος may be idiomatically rendered as ‘one who holds himself in’ or ‘one who always has a halter on himself.’

**88.88 γυμνάζω:** to control oneself by thorough discipline—‘to discipline oneself, to keep oneself disciplined.’ γύμναζε δὲ σεαυτὸν πρὸς εὐσέβειαν ‘keep yourself disciplined for a godly life’ 1 Tm 4:7. In a number of languages the equivalent of ‘to discipline oneself’ is literally ‘to make oneself obey.’ This may sometimes be expressed idiomatically as ‘to command one’s heart.’

**88.89 ὑπωπιάζω<sup>b</sup>:** (a figurative extension of meaning of ὑπωπιάζω ‘to strike the eye,’ not occurring in the NT) to keep one’s body under complete control, with the implication of rough treatment given to the body, possibly as an aspect of discipline (a meaning evidently taken from the language of prize-fighting)—‘to keep under control, to exercise self-control.’ ὑπωπιάζω μου τὸ σῶμα καὶ δουλαγωγῶ ‘I keep my body under control and make it ready for service’ 1 Cor 9:27.

**88.90 ἀφειδία, ας f:** severe self-control, suggesting an ascetic and unsparing attitude—‘severe self-control, harsh control over.’ ἔχοντα σοφίας ἐν ἐθελοθρησκίᾳ καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνη καὶ ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος ‘having wisdom in self-made religion and humility and severe self-control over the body’ Col 2:23.

**88.91 ἀκρασία, ας f:** to fail to exercise self-control—‘lack of self-control, failure to control oneself.’ ἵνα μὴ πειράζη ὑμᾶς ὁ Σατανᾶς διὰ τὴν ἀκρασίαν ὑμῶν ‘so that you may not be tempted by Satan because of your lack of self-control’ 1 Cor 7:5.

**88.92 ἀκρατής, ἐς:** (derivative of ἀκρασία ‘lack of self-control,’ 88.91) pertaining to lacking self-control—‘uncontrolled, lacking in self-control.’ ἐνοστήσονται καιροὶ χαλεποὶ· ἔσονται γὰρ οἱ ἄνθρωποι φίλαυτοι ... διάβολοι, ἀκρατεῖς ‘difficult times will come, for people will be greedy ... slanderers, lacking in self-control’ 2 Tm 3:1–3.

[Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 750-52.]

### **The Assessment of the false teaching, vv. 22-23:**

22 All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

22 ἅ ἐστιν πάντα εἰς φθορὰν τῇ ἀποχρήσει, κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων, 23 ἅτινά ἐστιν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας ἐν ἔθειλοθηρησικία καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνη καὶ ἀφειδία σώματος, οὐκ ἐν τιμῇ τινι πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός.

The reasons for Paul's rejection of the false teaching on developing asceticism at Colossae are set forth in two relative clauses in verses 22-23 with stern condemnation. Paul saves his most severe condemnation of the false teaching until the very end of the unit in vv. 6-23. The twofold condemnation in each relative clause stresses the contrast between human based religious teaching and authentic divine revelation based religious teaching.

**1) The purity regulations of the false teachers dealt only with the perishable (v. 22a):** ἅ ἐστιν πάντα εἰς φθορὰν τῇ ἀποχρήσει. That is, these teachers were focusing spiritual development based on dealing with things that were material and transitory, not on eternal spiritual values that were imperishable.<sup>24</sup> Spiritual maturity is never achieved by basing it on material reality. Its foundation must be spiritual in nature, not material. Here is a stinging rebuke of the so-called φιλοσοφία, *philosophy*, (v. 8) which Paul has already labeled as κενῆς ἀπάτης, *worthless deceit*. Such focus on the material in contrast to the spiritual reflects the lack of spiritual understanding by these teachers. Flesh based actions never accomplish spiritual benefit!

**2) The purity regulations of the false teachers had only a human origin (v. 22b):** κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων. Behind this phrase lies Isaiah 29:13, especially in the terminology of the LXX text:

13 The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and **their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote**; 14 so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.

13 Καὶ εἶπεν κύριος Ἐγγίξει μοι ὁ λαὸς οὗτος τοῖς χεῖλεσιν αὐτῶν τιμῶσίν με, ἡ δὲ καρδία αὐτῶν πόρρω ἀπέχει ἀπ' ἐμοῦ, **μάτην δὲ σέβονταί με διδάσκοντες ἐντάλματα ἀνθρώπων καὶ διδασκαλίας**. 14 διὰ τοῦτο ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ προσθήσω τοῦ μεταθεῖναι τὸν λαὸν τοῦτον καὶ μεταθήσω αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀπολώ τὴν σοφίαν τῶν σοφῶν καὶ τὴν σύνεσιν τῶν συνετῶν κρύψω.<sup>25</sup>

The prophet Isaiah condemned the worship (σέβονταί με) of the southern kingdom as worthless (μάτην) because it originated out of human tradition and not from the revelation of God given to Moses. It focused on the outward and made worship nothing more than putting on a show to entertain the people rather than honor God. Thus the prophet condemned it.

The prophets of the Old Testament, as well as Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament, drew a strong contrast between a religion based on divine revelation and one constructed out of human thinking about religion. Of course humans are used as channels of divine revelation but the bottom line is whether the ideas originate with God or in the heads of individuals. When the latter, the religious thinking is worthless and deceiving because it lacks the understanding of God behind it. Consequently, to adopt it is spiritual suicide

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Peter T. O'Brien, vol. 44, *Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 142: "ἅ ἐστιν πάντα εἰς φθορὰν τῇ ἀποχρήσει. The things covered by the taboos are perishable objects of the material world, destined to pass away when used (the expression ἐστιν εἰς denotes appointment = "is destined for"; cf Acts 8:20; 2 Pet 2:12; so Oepke, *TDN*<sup>t</sup> 2, 428). Paul is probably thinking especially, but not exclusively, of food (cf Harder, *TDN*<sup>t</sup> 9, 102). φθορά refers to the "physical dissolution" (Abbott, 274) of such things in their natural use (ἀπόχρησις, "consuming," "using up," so BA<sup>c</sup>, 102; although the term can have, on occasion, the connotation "abuse," this does not fit the present context where the reference is to physical objects being used in a proper and ordinary manner). If these objects are transient and perishable then the proponents of the "philosophy" lack a true sense of proportion by making them issues central to their teaching. Matters of food and drink are of no consequence as far as godliness is concerned (Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 6:13)—particularly when a test case is made of their abstinence or enjoyment (Martin, *Lord*, 96; for Paul overindulgence that leads to gluttony and drunkenness is another question, 1 Cor 5:9; Eph 5:18, as is food offered to idols, 1 Cor 8). (See R. J. Austgen, *Natural Motivation in the Pauline Epistles*. 2nd ed. [Notre Dame: University Press, 1969] especially chapter v, "Natural Motivation and Dietary Practices," 98–117.) There may be the further point, as Lohse, 124, has suggested, that because of their false legalism the proponents failed to recognize God's good gifts and his purpose of giving them, namely, that all without exception (πάντα) should be consumed through proper use."

<sup>25</sup>*Septuaginta*: SESB Edition, ed. Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), Is 29:13-14.

for the individual. The biblical view of human based religion is that it is idolatry and thus detestable, even if it claims to be focused on the one true God. The use of μάτην σέβονται με by the LXX translators to express the original Hebrew אֱתֵי הַיְהוָה יִרְאָתָם אֵת highlights the utter repulsion of God at this kind of religious devotion. The noun μάτη often refers to the worship of idols with the assessment of the uselessness of such activity.<sup>26</sup>

J.B. Lightfoot offered many years ago a helpful comparison of Jesus and Paul at this point:<sup>27</sup>

The coincidences in St Paul's language here with our Lord's words as related in the Gospels (Matt. 15:1–15:20, Mark 7:1–7:23) are striking and suggest that the Apostle had this discourse in his mind. (1) Both alike argue against these vexatious ordinances from the *perishableness* of meats. (2) Both insist upon the indifference of such things in themselves. In Mark 7:19 the Evangelist emphasizes the importance of our Lord's words on this occasion, as practically abolishing the Mosaic distinction of meats by declaring all alike to be clean (καθαρίζων; see the note on ver. 16). (3) Both alike connect such ordinances with the practices condemned in the prophetic denunciation of Isaiah.

Such rules and regulations have a purely human origin and thus have no connection to God or to divine revelation, even though these teachers claimed to have gotten them through 'revelations from God in visions' (cf. 2:18). They used 'God talk' language to try to convince the Colossians that they possessed special revelation from God. But Paul saw it only a human based understanding that had absolutely no connection to God.

Religious show is always easier to do than true worship of God. Focusing on the outward and the material is enormously simpler than giving attention to the inward spiritual issues of obedience. Religious ritual is a dangerous substitute for genuine religious devotion to God.

### **3) The purity regulations of the false teachers were a phoney counterfeit of real religion (v. 23a):**

ἄτινά ἐστιν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας ἐν ἐθελοθρησκίᾳ καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος. The heart of the statement is that these rules are a λόγον, a somewhat unusual use of the Greek word.<sup>28</sup> But with the connection to μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας the meaning becomes reasonable clear, Dunn (*NIGTC*, ) explains:

With "such things" (the force of ἄτινα), the reference is still to 2:21, "have a reputation of wisdom." The latter phrase (λόγον ἔχειν + genitive) is unusual, but there are sufficient indications of its use in the sense "have a reputation (for something)" (see Lightfoot 203; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 126 n. 96), where the context allows the usually positive term (λόγος) to have a more querulous tone. The reference to "wisdom" confirms what was implicit in the frequency of the earlier references, including the use of the hymn to Wisdom-Christ (1:9, 15–18, 28; 2:3), namely that desire for wisdom and desire to practice wisdom was a prominent element in the Colossian Jewish religious praxis in view (see on 1:9 and 2:3).

These teachers stressed possessing wisdom and insight into religious matters, but what they offered was without substance and legitimacy.<sup>29</sup> It stood opposed to the true wisdom of God that Paul has repeatedly stressed up to this point in his letter. That wisdom comes out of one's developing relationship with Christ. This phoney wisdom is supposedly gained by "promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body" (ἐν ἐθελοθρησκίᾳ καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος).<sup>30</sup> Their outward piety expression was phoney;

<sup>26</sup>The stem μάτα- serves as foundational to a series of words in the New Testament alluding to 'emptiness' and 'worthlessness': ματαιολογία (empty words); ματαιολόγος, ον (talking idly, windbag); ματαιοπονία (fruitless toil); μάταιος, αία, αιον (idle, empty, useless); ματαιότης (emptiness, futility); ματαιόω (I make useless); ματαιόωμα (worthlessness, emptiness); μάτην (in vain, to no end).

<sup>27</sup>Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.*, 8th ed. (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1886), 202.

<sup>28</sup>"The basic meaning of logos is 'collecting, reading.' In transmission, the concept means 'counting, calculating, explicating.' For this usage, the meaning 'enumeration, narration, recitation,' among others, is also pertinent, and derived from that, 'that which is narrated or recited about a person or thing' as well as their 'reputation' (cf. H. M. Kleinknecht, ThWNT IV, 76f.). The polemic of Paul in Col 2:23 demonstrates that he wishes to unmask as unjustified the 'reputation of wisdom' that his 'opponents' have. Thus 'reputation' here is used as a counter concept to 'reality,' and means 'semblance.' E. Schweizer (p. 128, fn. 436) refers to Diodorus Siculus, who wrote a popular world history at the time of Caesar Augustus and who used logos (= 'story') as counter concept to alētheia (truth) (XIII, 4, 1; XIV, 1, 2)." [Markus Barth, Helmut Blanke and Astrid B. Beck, *Colossians: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 358.]

<sup>29</sup>"What is presented as 'philosophy' has the reputation<sup>96</sup> that it is based on 'wisdom' (σοφία) [cf. 1:9, 28; 2:3; 3:16].<sup>97</sup> But this wisdom is only a facade.<sup>98</sup> In reality it is empty and barren.<sup>99</sup> Its proponents try to convince people that the teaching conveys wisdom and knowledge, and they demand a distinct way of life as a consequence of this teaching." [Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.*, Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 126.]

<sup>30</sup>"The first concept ἐθελοθρησκία (self-chosen worship)<sup>100</sup> refers back to θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων (worship of angels) as it was performed in the circle of the 'philosophy.' The prefix ἐθελο- could express the fact that this worship was self-made and produced

their fake humility was false; their harsh treatment of their physical body was useless.<sup>31</sup>

The precise implications of this last term are not clear in defining special actions that constituted the 'harsh treatment of the body.'<sup>32</sup> At minimum, it referred to excessive fasting and other denial of basic human physical needs. Perhaps underneath this is the very negative attitude of Platonic dualism against the material and the physical. This dominating stream of Greek philosophy looked upon the physical body as hopelessly corrupt and thus to be sternly disciplined and kept under strict control. Otherwise, life would suffer ruin and disaster. Some Church Fathers saw in the phrase ἀφειδία σώματος a Pauline rejection of asceticism, which became popular beginning in the second century. But there is no indication in the letter that the Colossians had any tendency to withdraw from society and to form Christian communes. Contextually, the phrase ἀφειδία σώματος most naturally refers to the wrong headed thinking that if I deny my body some of its basic needs and cravings this will bring me nearer to God. The term ἀφειδία by definition denotes actions taken to an extreme that produce injury and harm.<sup>33</sup>

All of this sought to replace true devotion to Christ with a self-serving religion based upon human achievement in strictly keeping spiritually worthless rules and regulations. Tragically much of modern Christianity has fallen prey to the same phoney religious expression.

**4) The purity regulations of the false teachers offered no help in dealing with the sinful flesh (v. 23b):** οὐκ ἐν τιμῇ τινι πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός. Paul's final condemnation of this false teaching is that it provided absolutely no help in dealing with one of the most basic issues of human nature: the sinful fleshly nature. Verse 23b -- "they are of no value in checking self-indulgence" -- echoes the idea in 2:18c: "puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking" (εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκός αὐτοῦ).<sup>34</sup> The pagan

by one's own whims.<sup>101</sup> In this case, we would have polemical recasting of one of the words which the 'philosophers' understood differently.<sup>102</sup> It is more probable, however, that just like the next two words ταπεινοφροσύνη (readiness to serve) and ἀφειδία σώματος (severe treatment of the body), ἐθελοθησκία also describes an expression used by the opponents.<sup>103</sup> They proudly boasted that they had freely chosen the cult in which they participated.<sup>104</sup> They performed this freely-chosen worship in 'readiness to serve' (ταπεινοφροσύνη cf. on 2:18)." [Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.*, Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 126.]

<sup>31</sup>"The proponents of the 'philosophy' describe the way of life they preach with the seldomly used word ἀφειδία. This term describes a severe and austere way of life,<sup>105</sup> and in conjunction with 'body' (σῶμα) refers to the ascetic severity demanded by the 'regulations.'<sup>106</sup> Through fasting and abstinence one endeavors to dispose himself for the reception of divine fullness. Nevertheless, all this taken together effects nothing more than a mere appearance of 'wisdom' (σοφία)." [Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.*, Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 126-27.]

<sup>32</sup>"Ἀφειδία is yet one more biblical hapax, and it was not much used elsewhere. But it comes from the verb ἀφειδέω, 'be unsparing,' and thus can be given the sense of unsparing discipline ('severity'), as well as the better-attested unsparing giving ('generosity, liberality,' LSJ s.v.). The equivalent verbal expression ἀφειδεῖν τοῦ σώματος is not uncommon in the sense of courageous exposure to hardship and danger in war (Lightfoot 204; see also Lohmeyer 129 n. 5). Since the term ἀφειδία would normally occur in a eulogistic context (NDIEC 2.106), we should note that once again the riposte of 2:23 is disguised in terms of compliment; the severity of the self-discipline practiced by the others in Colossae is not as such a matter for criticism.<sup>149</sup>"

[James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 195.]

<sup>33</sup>"Ἀφειδία, ας, ἡ (ἀφειδής 'unsparing'; Ps.-Pla., Def. 412d; Plut., Mor. 762d; Nägeli 52) from the sense 'spare nothing', i.e. lavish on someth., there is a transference to *sparing very little for* someth. as in *severe treatment σώματος of the body* (=asceticism) **Col 2:23** (ἀφειδεῖν τοῦ σώματος also in sense 'harden' [Lucian, Anach. 24]).—DELG s.v. φείδομαι. M-M."

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 155.]

<sup>34</sup>To be clear, the grammar of verse 23 with the relative clause introduced by ἄτινά is understood in different ways because of some complexities, as O'Brien (*WBC*) notes:

ἄτινά ἐστιν ... πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός. The following are the most significant attempts to explain the meaning of this clause. Our preference is for the third suggestion:

(1) Many of the early fathers regarded the latter phrase as a further description of the Colossians' ascetic practices. They equated σὰρξ ("flesh") with σῶμα ("body"), took it in a positive sense and understood the phrase to mean "legitimate bodily satisfaction." On this ancient interpretation the false teachers do not indulge the body, that is, they do not show it the respect given by God. They deprive it rather than satisfy it (cf. Delling's presentation, TDNT 6, 133). However, several difficulties with this interpretation ought to be noted: (a) the links with the phrase "severe treatment of the body" (ἀφειδία σώματος) are awkward (so Moule, 109); (b) πλησμονή can hardly be rendered "reasonable wants" or "legitimate bodily satisfaction" in the light of σὰρξ ("flesh," cf. v 18) which appears to stand in contrast to σῶμα ("body") in the preceding clause and ought to be understood in Paul's usual sense of "lower nature," the old Adam-nature in its rebellion against God (Bruce, 256, and BAG, 673). (c) On this ancient view the apostle's criticism is much too soft. He is not timidly remarking that the regulations fail because

asceticism of that world denigrated the physical body as totally corrupt and worthless, on the basis of Platonic dualism. While not ignoring the utter sinfulness of human flesh, Paul has repeatedly affirmed in 1:3-2:19 that the material world stands as God's creation, and is not beyond reclaiming for positive purposes. The purity regulations of the false teachers came out of pagan presuppositions, but these provided no resource for legitimately coming to grips with the sinful nature of humankind. Externally imposed rules would be helpless to stem the greed and self-centeredness of sinful humanity. As Paul said in verse 17, "These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (ὅ ἐστιν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων, τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ). Only in one's relationship with Christ is the 'sin problem' adequately addressed. And in Christ it is solved!

One wonders at times if what Paul addresses here may not be a major source of the problem with the weakness and spiritual anemia of most of modern Christianity. Some groups attempt to address this the same way the false teachers at Colossae did, with putting on a religious show based upon human accomplishment by adhering to strict rules and regulations. But the end product remains the same today as in ancient Colossae: a phoney 'religiosity' that looks good outwardly but has no real substance.

### **SUMMARY: Profiling the false teaching (and teachers) at Colossae (vv. 6-23):**

These verses lay out the details of the false teaching at Colossae. In order to have a clearer picture we need to pull together the bits and pieces of reference to this found mainly in verses 6-23. In the depiction the apostle will allude to aspects of its content and offer critical assessment of its character.

**It's Content.** Paul labels it a 'philosophy' (φιλοσοφίας) in 2:8. In first century definitions, philosophy was an attempt to make sense out of life by explaining the dynamics of life and the foundations of reality for life and living. The foundation of this particular Colossian philosophy was the 'elemental spirits of the world' (vv. 8, 20): τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. The false teachers had adopted the Platonic understanding of reality dividing it into the visible and invisible. Human existence lay in the visible realm and contact with God who existed in the invisible realm could only be achieved through 'intermediaries.' Consequently the worship of angels (θηρσκειά τῶν ἀγγέλων, v.18) became an important part of their agenda. This included 'self-abasement' (θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ; ἐθελοθηρσκειά) and 'dwelling on visions' (ὃ ἐώρακεν ἐμβατεῦων). The role of the individual in personal achievement took on major significance. Connected to this was the maintenance of a religious calendar where festivals, new moons, and sabbaths were carefully observed (ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων, v. 16). Also central to their agenda was maintaining ritual purity in matters of food and drink (ἐν βρώσει ἢ ἐν πόσει, v. 16). This led to the insistence on rigid abstinence from certain foods and drinks (...δογματίζεσθε· Μὴ ἄψη μηδὲ γεύση μηδὲ θίγης, vv. 20-21). This was touted as superior piety (λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας, v.23) that corrected the deficiencies of the apostolic gospel by an emphasis on piety, humility, and rigid disciplining of the body (λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας ἐν ἐθελοθηρσκειά καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος, v. 23).

Many of the practices have clear and strong Jewish echoes with roots in the Old Testament legal codes. But as many have observed, the details of the practices clearly go beyond what is found in the Holiness Code of the Pentateuch, and thus reflect practices largely Jewish in the Lycus Valley region of the Roman

they do not hold the body in sufficient honor. Rather, this legalistic way of life leads only "to the satisfaction of the flesh."

(2) Lightfoot (204–206, cf. Moule, 108–110), who interpreted the final phrase in conjunction with the preceding words (see above), rendered the Greek of the clause as "yet not really of any value to remedy indulgence of the flesh." Apart from the difficulties already mentioned about this conjunction of phrases, the rendering of πρὸς as "against," in the sense of combating, is unusual and does not read as easily as the following view.

(3) The Colossian proponents' legalistic way of life leads only to the satisfaction of the flesh. πλησμονή ("satisfaction," "gratification," BAG, 673, Delling, TDNT 6, 131–34), which appears only here in the NT, occurred some twenty-eight times in the LXX. It was frequently used in a good sense to denote "satisfaction," especially with food and drink, and other types of enjoyment (of satisfaction by nourishment: Exod 16:3, 8; Lev 25:19; 26:5; Ps 77:25; Hag 1:6; of the gifts of God which satisfy: Deut 33:23); but the term also occurred in a bad sense to denote "excess" or "satiety" which led to sin and apostasy from the Lord (Ezek 39:19; Hos 13:6). Probably behind Paul's use of πλησμονή there is a play on the word "fullness." The false teachers were concerned about "fullness of life." The aim and goal (πρὸς) of all their efforts—the observance of the strict regulations, the reverence and respect paid to the principalities and powers—was satisfaction. But all that was satisfied was "the flesh" (τῆς σαρκός). Their energetic religious endeavors could not hold the flesh in check. Quite the reverse. These man-made regulations actually pandered to the flesh.

[Peter T. O'Brien, vol. 44, *Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 154-55.]

province of Asia. Snippets of reference to Greek philosophy and to identifiable pagan religious practices of that time that are also present strongly suggest the influence of non-Jewish thinking on the emerging system of alternative Christianity at Colossae. If they did not form sources of perspective, at best they created an atmosphere of understanding thus making the acceptance of the Jewish ideas easier and more appealing to non-Jews in the Christian community. Given the demonstrated attitude of the Lycus Valley toward toleration, open-mindedness, and syncretism, one can easily conclude that this teaching was a mixture of ideas from the surrounding cultures, with the Jewish tradition playing the dominant role.

***It's Character.*** The negative assessment of this teaching by Paul is the dominating mark of his depiction.

***In terms of the content*** of the teaching his evaluation is that:

1) It is “empty deceit” (κενή ἀπάτης, v. 8);

2) It is based on human thinking, not authentic divine revelation (“according to human tradition”, v. 8 [κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων]); “a human way of thinking”, v. 18 [τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ]); not based on Christ (“not according to Christ”, v. 8 [οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν]); “not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God”, v. 19 [οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβαζόμενον αὖξει τὴν αὖξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ]); “simply human commands and teachings”, v. 22 [κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων];

3) It actually follows the influence of demons (“the elemental spirits of the universe”, v. 8 [τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου]); “the elemental spirits of the universe”, v. 20 [τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου]). This is Paul’s label for what the false teachers called “angels” (τῶν ἀγγέλων, v. 18). They claimed to be worshipping angels; Paul asserted they were worshipping demons.

4) It has the power to enable the false teacher ‘take one captive’ (τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν, v. 8) with unholy influence over their life.

5) It presents itself as spiritual wisdom, but is phoney (“These have indeed an appearance of wisdom”, v. 23 [ἄτινά ἐστιν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας]).

***In terms of the practice*** of the teaching his evaluation is that:

1) It misplaced its emphasis on achieving spiritual maturity through fleshly means (“All these regulations refer to things that perish with use”, v. 22 [ἅ ἐστιν πάντα εἰς φθορὰν τῆ ἀποχρήσει]). Such efforts were doomed from the outset.

2) It adopted practices that appealed to human instincts (“in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body”, v. 23 [λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας ἐν ἐθελοθηρησικίᾳ καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος]).

3) It followed practices that had no ability to address human sinfulness (“they are of no value in checking self-indulgence”, v. 23 [οὐκ ἐν τιμῇ τιμὴ πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός]).

The apostle’s evaluation of this teaching is stinging and severe. He has absolutely no use for it at all, and strongly urges the Colossians to reject it totally. He saw in it a worthless and dangerous substitute of human based religion for the atoning work of Christ. Self-help religion is almost irresistible even in our day, as well as in the ancient world. Something lies deep in human thinking that they have to save themselves, rather than thrust themselves totally on the mercies and grace of a loving God. Rather than trust the adequacy of the redeeming work of Christ, the urge is to either replace it by self-effort, or, at least, to supplement it by self-effort. Thereby the individual can ‘feel pride in personal accomplishment’ before God. But God rejects utterly such efforts and demands faith commitment based upon submission and humility to Him.

***It's advocates.*** From this profile, the identity of the false teachers by name remains hidden. But the profile does suggest that these teachers didn’t need to have come from outside the Lycus Valley into the believing communities there. Such thinking as described by Paul could have very easily emerged from within the Lycus Valley itself with some in the believing community having inclinations to want to supplement the teaching of the apostle with new ideas from external sources in the synagogue and pagan temples of that region.

## 2. What does the text mean to us today?

The areas of potential application to our day are numerous. They mostly center in adopted a 'man-made' religion over against a divinely revealed religion through the Gospel of the apostles. The inclination toward such is derived from perceived deficiencies in the Gospel message laid out in the pages of the New Testament. At its heart is the difficulty of complete surrender to the grace of God, based on the realization that absolutely everything we need for coming into God's presence is provided to us by Christ through His death and resurrection. Human pride will not allow us to feel so utterly dependent on God or anyone else! We are driven to do things for ourselves with the subsequent pride of personal accomplishment. Virtually all religions in our world today are 'self-help' religions where the individual must do a minimum level of specified religious deeds in order to obtain divine approval. Unfortunately, much of this corrupt thinking has found its way into a lot of Christianity. Usually it masks itself as supposedly complementary to the work of Christ: "Christ saved me and now it's up to me to stay saved!" In Col. 2:6-23 the apostle Paul absolutely condemns such thinking as not only worthless but dangerous because it represents in reality a "turning loose of Christ" as the source of all spiritual nourishment (οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν, v. 19). Clearly such thinking is οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν, *not according to Christ*, in Paul's words (v. 8).

I'm firmly convinced that this sort of pollution of Christianity lies at the heart of the weak and gradually dying Christianity that exists largely in North America and Europe today. The descendants of the Colossian false teachers are numerous and live all across these two continents, and also in other parts of the world as well. They have shipwrecked the religious life of countless thousands upon thousands of individuals. Thankfully in isolated parts of the world the apostolic Gospel is gradually being understood and put into practice, where God's people have grasped how to live a faith-based Christian life that is utterly dependent on God.

And thus the application process comes to you individually. What kind of Christian life are you living? It is based on God's grace in all out faith commitment to Christ? Or, does it represent a 'made-man' religion of self-effort from the flesh? Eternity hangs in the balance with the answer to this question!

- 1) How much of your religious thinking is scriptural and how much is cultural?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2) How strongly do you look to Jesus as the sole basis of your relationship with God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3) Do you crave attention from others as being a very 'religious person'?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 4) How oriented is your religious practiced tilted toward 'ritualism'?