

Why? The Error of Deceit.

This is summary of yesterday morning's study on the Christian Life. I wanted to answer the question: why do we stop being spiritual and begin operating by the flesh? We all know what that's like. At one point our motivation is right, we're enjoying relating to life through the perspective of who we are in Christ, we are excited to see God working in and through us, and then at some point, realize that's changed. We are viewing ourselves by how well we're performing, by what we've accomplished, maybe that we're doing better than someone else. We have moved from living by grace to living by a form of legalism. It is a slippery slope and happens so subtly. Why does it happen?

In Colossians 3:1-2, Paul writes, "Therefore, if (since) you are risen with Christ, keep on seeking the things above, where Christ is seating at the right of God. Keep setting your mind on things above not the things upon the earth." The verbs "seeking" and "setting" are present imperatives. The Greek present imperative charges one to keep on doing something or if one is not doing it, to begin and then continue. Whatever the context, the end emphasis is "keeping on." This is the issue, we do not keep on setting our minds on things above. We begin to set our minds on things on earth.

What are these "things on earth?" The answer can be broad but Paul lists several in Colossians. First, in 2:4 after reminding us that **all** the treasures of wisdom and experiential knowledge are hidden in our relationship in God and Christ, he warns us of those who would set our minds on earthly things. These lead us astray by a logical argument which starts with a false premise¹ and by persuasive argument or that which seems plausible. The logical argument may begin with the premise, "Don't you think humility is the key to the Christian life?" Few would deny that, and certainly humility is important, but Paul warns of this kind of self-generated humility (2:18, 23). We did not receive Christ Jesus the Lord as plausible but as the one and only way (2:6). So, we are to walk (order our lives) "in Him" which parallels 3:1-2.

Paul further warns us of those who would take us like spoils of war (2:8). They use philosophy (man's mental machinations versus God's), empty (no substance) deceit both of which are measured by human traditions and the basic elements of how this world operates (2:8). One form of the traditions of men is human commandments and teaching which have an appearance of wisdom (2:22-23). These involve self-generated religion, meaning I come up with what I need to do for God to be ok with God. It involves a humility of attitude in which I think that by debasing or humbling myself in some manner I'll actually be better. Finally, it involved the severe treatment of the body even depriving myself of anything which fills or satisfies my flesh as though every desire of my flesh is wrong. Think of those who fast thinking it makes them spiritually better, or those who have worn harsh clothing, practiced celibacy, lived in harsh conditions not from necessity but because they thought it made them better. This is human teaching and philosophy and never promoted by God as leading to a better Christian life.

Some of the basic elements of the world can be summarized by "don't touch, don't taste, don't handle?" (2:20-21). That means the world teaches us to gauge our lives by what we avoid. It sets a standard of off-limits activities, and we're ok when we avoid

¹ The verb is *paralogidzomai* [παραλογίζομαι]. The preposition *para* indicates alongside and at the time of the New Testament, that which was alongside the proper logical train of thought due to a wrong starting place.

them. On the other hand the world can also set up certain activities we are to do such as keeping a special day or celebratory feast (2:16), or engaging in religious activities (2:18). To be sure, when we operate like this, we are not holding fast to the Head (2:19), meaning we are not continuing to set our minds on things above.

Let me share a couple of personal illustrations. Like all of us, I struggle with certain works of the flesh. I know they are not pleasing to God and I would like to avoid them. When I set my mind on who I am in Christ, I don't do things, and I'm actually rather happy to experience freedom. However, I can subtly begin to think, "I'm not doing _____, so I'm pretty good. That makes me a better Christian, pastor, husband . . ." Have you ever found yourself doing that? What has happened is I've moved to a form of legalism where I'm gauging my life by the bad things I am not doing, and in so doing I've begun to operate by my flesh. Notice also that anyone else watching would think I'm doing great and would give me a great big thumbs up. I appear, from a human point of view, righteous.

Or consider this, a little over a year ago, a couple of us from our church began discussing how we could help address a specific need of fellow believers. This all began with seeing them as brothers in Christ, seeing the need and wanting to help. Convinced it was God's will, plans were made. I was gone to a wedding and so many other believers stepped up to help and did a wonderful job. I loved to learn of their progress. However, some time after returning, someone in the community spoke to me about this and praised this group for their kind and hard work. I gave God the credit and inside thought, "Go, God! How wonderful to see You work." But not to long after, maybe minutes—I don't remember—I began to think something to the effect, "I must be a good pastor and doing the right thing, because look at what these people did. Because of my teaching and encouragement, they let God use them." Do you see how easily that changed. It went from recognizing what God did, to attributing some of that to myself, as though I helped God. I stopped setting my mind on things above in Christ and began to set my mind on my "good works." It is an easy turn to make.

Let me just encourage you with Paul's words, "If you are risen with Christ, keep on seeking things above where Christ is sitting at God's right. Keep on setting your mind on things above, not on things on the earth." (Col. 3:1-2). If you catch yourself deviating, don't beat yourself up, just set your mind back to those things above.