

Colossians 2:16—23

October 20, 2019

Recently I found an article that described some of the most difficult walking paths in the world. The article talked about walking through snowy mountain passes and insect infested jungles. No thanks. But one jumped out to as one to particularly avoid.

The first is a trail on the Hawaiian Island of Kauai. It is in the Kalalau Valley. Tell me if this sounds hard to you.

"This is an 11 mile trail that sits 4000 feet above the ocean and is the only land access to the No Pali Coast which is absolutely breathtaking.

As waves crash against the cliff edges you'll wind through thick jungles, thundering waterfalls, steep inclines and declines and narrow passageways that with one slip will send you plummeting into the waters far below.

The trail is often slippery with mud and rain and so it is a really dangerous route and certainly one of the toughest walks in the world...Along the trail the conditions are not the only danger, many predators live in this area including black bears, cougars and wolves."

If the hike isn't hard enough it is complicated by predators along the way. No way. I can only think of ONE walk that is harder than this Hawaiian jaunt.

The Christian Walk.

In daily walk as we follow Jesus—putting one foot in front of another—we are faced with deadly perils. On one side we might have a precipitous cliff of one temptation or another that could send us plummeting. We face thundering waterfalls of suffering, narrow passage ways of trials, and there are an array of predators more menacing than black bears, cougars and wolves.

Our path following Jesus is often treacherous. The book of Colossians is like a trail guide with one message. Keep walking, following Jesus. He have all power and authority; he lived and died for us; our lives are hidden in him; he upholds us AND he has canceled our massive debt of sin.

We've seen that following Jesus means that he might just, "interfere with our daily lives and goals."

As we follow him—there are hazards on the road. And this morning, in Colossians 2:16-23 are alerted to a hazard that we might not think about—the hazard of empty spirituality. Or religiosity. From other people. All of us have the potential to erect barriers on other people's paths that distract them from following Jesus. We have to be so careful.

The even harder thing is knowing the difference between those primary issues that we MUST inform our walk and secondary issues that MAY inform our walk from empty traditions that CAN'T.

PROP: Follow Jesus; not religious tradition.

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—²¹ "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in

promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

PRAY

1. The WRONG Focus

We get that straightaway in verse 16,

¹⁶Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

This seems remote, because it is.

The New moon festival was prescribed in Numbers—

“At the beginnings of your months, you shall offer a burnt offering to the LORD: two bulls from the herd, one ram, seven male lambs a year old without blemish; [12] also three tenths of an ephah of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil, for each bull, and two tenths of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil, for the one ram; [13] and a tenth of fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering for every lamb; for a burnt offering with a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the LORD. Numbers 28:11–13

The new moon is a week from today and I can bet that none of you are thinking, “I have to make sure I get two bulls, one ram, seven male lambs and figure out how much an ephah of flour before the new moon 7 days from now.”

There are going to be zero people who put pressure on you—probably—celebrate OT holidays. None of you will have to confess eating unclean food like shrimp or chicken McNuggets.

The church Paul was writing to, had a mix of Jewish and Gentile believers and it appears that there was some amount of pressure to follow OT cleanliness and dietary laws. There was also some pressure to avoid all wine all together.

It appears that there was an undercurrent of pressure to avoid all wine, most meat, and observe Jewish holy days.

There were others who seemed to promote vague spiritual experiences—

Vs. 18,

“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind...”

There seemed to be some internal pressure amongst people to live an ascetic life. Do you know what asceticism is? It is a way of life that prescribes self-denial and pleasure avoidance. An ascetic way of living is often marked more by what you don't eat, what you don't do, where you don't go, and how much you deny natural pleasures.

The danger with ascetism is that it seems like it is a spiritual way of living. We Christians are called to self-denial in many ways, yes. But in the right ways. Self-denial is never an end in itself. There is a wrong way to deny yourself.

Ascetics think—in general—that NOT doing something that you enjoy is pleasing to God. This is nonsense by the way.

Who gave you taste buds? God.

Why do you think he gave them to you? So you can taste good food and say, “WOW! That is so good.” Obviously we can go too far and eat too much, but it is NOT more godly or spiritual to eat bland food or not eat much at all.

It is NOT more godly to not eat.

Who gave you eyes to see? God.

He gave you eyes to see the vast array of color in our world. Just look outside this building when you leave. The trees can all (mostly) be called green, but there are so many shades of green. The explosion of color at sunset is for us to enjoy.

It is NOT more godly to deny yourself these things.

Who gave you a sense of touch? God.

He gave this to you so that you can hold and feel your first granddaughter as you cradle her in your arms. He gave this to you so you can communicate a powerful sense of comfort to someone grieving at the loss of a parent by putting a hand on their shoulder.

It is not more godly to ignore this.

We could go on and on.

You should never feel guilty for enjoying God's good gifts. Never. Can we abuse his gifts? Sure.

We can eat too much.

We can see evil things.

We can misuse any gift.

What can you enjoy?

Chocolate?

A hike?

The Sunset?

A roadtrip?

A good meal?

Wine?
Sports?
The Grand Canyon?

Enjoy it.

Our problem can be that we don't want to just enjoy these things we want to live for

Chocolate?
A hike?
The Sunset?
A roadtrip?
A good meal?
Wine?
Sports?
The Grand Canyon?

That is a problem.

But the answer is a blind austerity.

The problem with asceticism is that it seems godly, but is not. There is no virtue in strictness in and of itself. Ascetism is often deadly to the one who practices it to others in their lives.

At the end of the day Asceticism is just legalism.

Verse 23 tells us of the fruitlessness of asceticism.

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

Severity to the body NEVER stops sin, but it seems like a godly way to live. This is one of those ideas that is difficult to understand without talking about some examples.

We need to be real clear first about what we are NOT talking about. This conversation is NOT about NOT about NOT about let me say it one more time NOT about—winking at sin. Or saying that sin doesn't matter. Or calling bad things good.

Some things are ALWAYS wrong—

Lying
Cheating
Stealing
Adultery
Drunkenness
Gluttony
Slander

We are NOT saying—sin is no big deal. We ARE saying it is not sinful to enjoy gifts from God.

We are NOT talking about those things. For the ascetic the body is always to be denied. That is wrong and unhealthy.

You might think—what in the world does this have to do with us today?

Legalism is something the church always has to be on guard against—always. Legalism masquerades as godliness but it is not. Legalism wears a mask of piety that seems godly but is not.

The issue is not even asceticism, really. Any Christian is free to eat or not eat something—but they are NOT free to mandate others do the same. That is legalism.

So, you are a minimalist—great. You just don't want to have a bunch of stuff and you want to keep your life simple. That is fine. Let's say you are convinced that you can't eat meat. That is fine.

You don't have the right to demand others make that choice for themselves.

We need to be VERY careful of people who pass judgment on others on matters that scripture does not require. That is legalism. Legalism is deadly.

And when you say—you must follow Jesus the same way I follow Jesus—you could be putting a barrier up for others.

Let me give you an example from another time—that none of us are tempted by.

Buttons. Like the kind on your shirt. Or zippers. There was a sect of people who were called 'Hook and Eye Baptists' that thought buttons and zippers were worldly. Buttons and zippers conformed too much to the spirit of the age.

400 years ago Christians would never use the words: Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and so on. The days were named after Norse gods. Sunday was the day of the 'Sun god'; Monday the day of the 'Moon god'; Thursday—Thor's day.

Anyone know what 'devil's grease' is? What Christians of an earlier age called lipstick.

Let's tease this example out a bit. Ladies, If someone came up to you and asked you if you were wearing devil's grease—what do you think you would feel? That they didn't approve of the practice of wearing lipstick. You might feel pressure not to wear lipstick. Then, whether you wear lipstick or not becomes a spiritual issue. It should not be.

None of us—probably—are going to say, “you must follow Jesus the way I do by eschewing buttons and zippers.” None of us are going to be tempted to put those kind of barriers up for others.

Where it gets difficult for all of us is when there is a practice we are passionate about and we say to others, “You should follow Jesus the way I am in this area.”

A past issue here—

Homeschooling. Years and years ago there were some who were convinced that the best way to educate their children was via homeschooling. That is fine. The problem became when people said not only is it the best way for us—but it is best for you too.

Do you see the rub? Does it make you second-class if you don’t homeschool? No.

We have no right to demand others follow Jesus the way you do in the education of your children.

What some other things that could hit a little closer to home?

- Halloween

People are going to have differing perspectives. 25 years ago I was a part of a church that passed out an annual flyer printed on orange paper that was entitled, “Why we don’t celebrate Halloween.” They didn’t pass out a flyer about anything else, the understated opinion was—real Christians don’t celebrate Halloween.

We would be encouraged to turn off our lights and not answer the door. I don’t recommend that today. We simply don’t have the right to say, “Real Christians don’t celebrate Halloween.”

We can’t do that. We don’t have the right.

- Political perspectives

You have them. I have them. Most of us do. We have ideas about what the direction of the nation and who should be elected in the next election cycle.

We are free to hold our perspective but we are not free to say, "Real Christians vote like me."

We don't have that freedom. Hold your perspective—but if your perspective has the effect of saying—this is the right way to think—we are holding our perspective wrongly.

- Creation Care

Maybe you feel called to clean up the environment. That is wonderful, but often what is lost is that people are more important than animals and the landscape. Planting trees is simply not as important as being involved with people. Helping the environment is not as important as helping the grieving.

One of the reasons this is popular is because people in the world say—that is great!

Are you free to practice creation care? YES! Must we all—no. You are going to hear more and more about this. And people are going to make you feel bad if you don't do all you can to shrink your carbon footprint. Oh do we have to be careful here.

The emphasis in the scriptures is not on creation care but on soul care. We should be MUCH more concerned with the pollution of sin in our lives than the pollution in the air.

How do we respond?

Look at the language Paul uses in verse 16—

Vs 16

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

Vs. 18,

“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship

This does not mean that we are to go around making sure that people are not passing judgment on us. And if they are we need to stop them. Rather, if people do pass judgment on us on secondary matters we should not let it bother us.

Obviously, we should not be the kind of people who pass judgment on others for any secondary matter. But if someone does—you simply can't let it bother you.

Easier said than done.

How do we respond?

We've spent a good deal of time thinking about the WRONG focus—now we move onto—the RIGHT focus.

2. The RIGHT focus

Jesus. This comes straight from our section this morning. Look again at verse 17,

¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together

through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

Do you see?

Our response must be to HOLD FAST to Jesus. He is paramount.

'the substance belongs to Christ'

We've talked a lot about what not to focus on here—because that is what our passage talks about. But our passage is not just a list of things to avoid. Rather, we hear the refrain. Don't give into false outward religion—focus on Jesus.

He himself is the substance of our faith and our hope. Nothing and no one else. There are no deeper journeys into biblical faithfulness beyond Jesus.

He is our substance.

NOT what we believe about Halloween.

NOT what we believe about politics.

NOT what we believe about buttons.

NOT what we believe about the environment.

NOT what we believe about the election.

Our substance is Jesus. What would we have without him?

Nothing.

He died so we can live.

He rose so we might be justified.

He rose to raise us to new life.

He ascended so he might have all authority.

He was seated so he could pray for us.

He protects us against our enemies.

He is working in our lives.

He sends his Spirit to encourage us.
He sends his Spirit to convict us.
He will take us into eternal glory.

We must hold fast to Jesus.

If we think we will be preserved by your religious practices you will not find power in them. We hold fast to Jesus.

We follow Jesus not so we can have successful lives. It doesn't work out that way. Following Jesus is no guarantee of—

- A good job
- A good life
- A happy family
- Good health
- Happiness
- A happy marriage
- Fulfilling relationships

Holding fast to Jesus. We follow Jesus for what he can do to make us successful. We follow Jesus because—we must.

There are many blessings that come as we follow Jesus but on this earth—all of them will be taken away. Only he remains. Hold fast to him.

What is distinctive about us is him. As long as we are together as a church we are going to continually focus on him. It might not be popular. It might seem outdated and antiquated.

But we must focus on him.

One of the reasons I am eager to change our church name is because we are going to proclaim to anyone and everyone that we aspire to be fixed on Jesus. Center Church: Fixed on Jesus.

We are not fixed on any of the blessings that may provide, we are fixed on him. It is no chore to hold fast to him. Who loves you like this man?

Who has given you what Jesus has given you?
Who has given everything like Jesus has for you?
Who has promises for you like Jesus?

We must hold fast to him.

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—

United to Jesus

When he died—we died. We died to the idea that any religious practice can make us worthy before God. We point to Jesus our only hope in life and in death.

We are now in him. If we follow Jesus why would allow ourselves to be distracted from him by religious activities?

We must not.

PRAY

"To him be the glory both NOW and to the day of eternity. Amen."