

The Supremacy of Christ: Unintentional Enemies in the Camp

Colossians 2:16-23

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~Unintentional enemies use legalism, mysticism and asceticism to shift the focus from Christ and bully believers~

[Pray]

Have you ever been bullied? Has anyone ever used their size or wealth or intelligence or loud and angry voice to make you feel insignificant? Have you ever been manipulated to do what someone else wanted?

Probably most of us have at some stage or other been the brunt of a bully – if you haven't perhaps you've been on the other side of the equation. For me junior-high was a difficult few years. I've got a picture that will perhaps show you why.

Now I won't point out who I am, but I'll tell you while I was a happy enough kid, I was always the shortest and scrawniest guy in the class and I sported a mullet and huge buck teeth. And that meant I was destined to smell a lot of armpits after gym class and spend a lot of recesses looking out the slots in locker doors.

But this isn't a feel sorry for me sermon, I assure myself that most of the perpetrators of my misery must be unemployed or in prison by now.

But bullying doesn't just happen in junior high. The church throughout the centuries has always struggled with people within its ranks who have ended up controlling the way whole churches think and act. They've dictated where we can go, what we can eat or drink. How we should dress. You name it. And in fact this trend has been going on for two thousand years.

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On that note please open your Bibles to Colossians chapter 2. Page 834 if you are using a pew Bible. And if you are just joining us today we are in the middle of a series through a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, a city in what is modern day Turkey.

And in our section of text today, verses 16 to 23 of chapter 2, Paul shifts his attention to do direct battle against bullies inside the church who were stealing freedom and life from the rest of the body in the name of religion.

Now I need to mention again that what we have in this letter from Paul is one side of a conversation. While the mail system in Rome was state of the art, unlike email or text messaging where you can always look back to see what someone has said earlier, in letters like the book of Colossians we only get half the conversation. Everything Paul received from the Colossians has been lost.

Now that's no problem when Paul is outlining general theology, but when we come to the specific situations or problems in Colossae that he addresses we have to deduce from the clues Paul gives as to exactly what those problems were because he never repeats back what the Colossians had told him.

And of the whole letter, today's text is the most situational – it is all about dealing with three issues that the Colossians were facing. And so there are a couple particular verses in this section that commentaries note are very difficult to interpret.¹ And I'll point them out for you.

But that said most of what Paul says here is clear and still speaks to the church today. And I will do my best to stick to what is clear.

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So I believe Paul's big warning in this passage is that within the church there are **Unintentional enemies using legalism, mysticism and asceticism to shift the focus from Christ and bully believers.** And I want to unpack that for you.

Let's jump right into the first part of this by looking at those **Unintentional enemies** who **shift the focus from Christ and bully believers.**

Now already in this series we've discussed two kinds of opposition. First we looked at the pluralistic pressure the Colossians were facing from outside the faith community.

Colossae was a trade city so there were lots of people with all sorts of different beliefs and philosophies who lived there. And some of them were really good at arguing the merits of combining Jesus with their own ideas. They didn't want to get rid of Jesus; they just wanted to incorporate what He taught with what they already believed, and they wanted the Christians to accept this too – sound familiar?

And Paul responded by arguing for the supremacy of Christ over everything in creation. And that means that combining Jesus with even the best ideas around would only pollute Jesus. Jesus plus anything is less than Jesus by Himself. And so Paul said:

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

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But there weren't just dangers from without. So second, we saw that inside the church the Colossians were struggling with the classic sin of selfishness – there were some who were preferring themselves and their desires over their brothers and sisters. And so Paul told them that the purpose of his letter was to urge them in another direction. He said:

¹ Douglas. Moo "The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon" (Grand Rapids: W.B.Eerdmans Pub co), 2008. pg 217

My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love
(Colossians 2:2a)

So those are the two situational problems Paul has addressed already, but in our text today Paul moves to deal with a darker enemy; some false teachers who claimed to be Christians but were disconnecting the sheep from Jesus.

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Now as I say that it probably sounds like these were evil people with a conspiracy to tear down the church. It might sound like this threat is a bit academic and not really a danger for normal churches today. But look at verse 19 where Paul gives us the clearest picture of these false teachers. He says:

[Read Colossians 2:19]

The picture is that these false teachers had grown up right along side all the other brothers and sisters. They used to be connected to Jesus, to the Head, but recently they had lost that connection.

Now that means these false teachers aren't getting together to plot the destruction of the church. They weren't conspiring to intentionally twist the teachings of Jesus. That would be occult like demon worship, and that isn't what Paul is attacking here – if it were he would have made that very clear. Instead Paul attacks the teachings of people who are members of the church; people who believe they are Christians and are teaching truth... except they're wrong.

Now if that still sounds a bit out there consider a group like the Pharisees. They were the religious leaders of the first century. Think pastors, Bible study leaders and deacons. But Jesus has virtually nothing good to say about them. In fact He calls them whitewashed tombs full of death and decaying bones.² Jesus basically said that these religious leaders looked great on the outside but were really on their way to hell. And worse than that they were bringing others with them. Once Jesus said:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. (Matthew 23:15)

Jesus went to war against people who claimed to know the way to God but actually didn't. And He did this because they are a huge danger to His sheep.

But before we write the Pharisees off as a bunch of terrible people you need to know that they didn't set out intending to end up like this.

You see after Israel came out of Babylonian, about 500 years before Jesus was born, the nation had learned their lessons about idol worship and serving other gods and so they got really strict on following the rules.

² Matthew 23:27

And the Pharisees arose as a conservative group who were passionate about making sure Israel never fell into the same sins that landed them up in Babylon.

And so when Jesus showed up on the scene and did and said things equivalent to claiming He was YHWH they did the only thing that made sense to them – they called Him a heretic and killed Him. But their intentions were good.

As the saying goes, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” And so we need to be on guard in the church against ourselves. History shows us that it is really easy to start in a good place but end up unintentional enemies of Christ even bullying those around us away from the Truth.

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So what had these good people in Colossae unintentional stumbled into that led Paul to make this severe warning? There are three things that we see in the text.

First, these **unintentional enemies used legalism to shift the focus from Christ and bully believers.**

Look with me at verse 16.

[Read Colossians 2:16-17]

If you’ve been with us for the last several weeks you know Paul’s primary point throughout the whole letter has been that everything in Christianity revolves around Jesus being the God of the universe. He is the image of the Invisible God, the firstborn over all Creation, and He holds everything together. And because He is supreme the only thing that matters is Him and our relationship with Him – there is nothing else.

But here these unintentional enemies had tried to add something to Christ. They were saying True salvation comes when you have Christ and follow the rules. And they were then passing judgment, or looking down their noses, at those in the church who weren’t following the rules like they were.

So this group was being very careful to only eat and drink the right things, and they were carefully observing holy days like Jewish festivals and Sabbath. And the word for what they were doing is “legalism.”

Now “legalism” is a word that does not appear in the Bible, but the idea of legalism is one that is talked about a lot. Here is what legalism means:

“Legalism occurs when people lift up biblical or non-biblical rules as the way to earn God’s favor.”³

³ Adapted from John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/flesh-tank-and-peashooter-regulations> (Accessed March 6, 2015)

That means when we try to behave in a “right” way in order to earn God’s favor we are being legalistic. And also, when we judge that we are doing better than some around us at living in a good way, we are being legalistic.

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Now I want to carefully make a strong statement: The majority of people who live moral lives are motivated by legalism, and that means this is a huge danger for the church.

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As I say that do you feel yourself objecting? “Come on, that’s an overstatement. I’m not legalistic?”

Perhaps you are one of the exceptions, but let me ask us a couple questions that I think will shed light on this:

Have you ever seen a man show up in church wearing a hat? Have you ever seen a pastor who owns a really expensive car? Have you ever watched a Christian go into an R-rated movie? Have you ever seen a young lady wear a short skirt while leading worship? Have you ever seen a deacon serve communion wearing a t-shirt, or torn jeans or sandals?

If you are from a little older generation did you know any Christians who played cards? How about some Christian women who wore pants or too much makeup? Did you know any Christian men who wore jewelry other than a wedding band?

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As you hear those questions do you remember your feeling of disgust as you thought to yourself “this is not the way Christians are supposed to act?”

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Now I don’t give this list to step on any toes, but I suspect it sounds familiar to many of you because it sounds super familiar to me. I grew up under most of those expectations, and I have judged myself and those around me by many of those standards and even today find myself drawn to judge people by those, and similar standards. Am I the only one?

But all of that is legalism. When we judge people by those standards we do so believing that being a Christian is about having a relationship with Jesus and following the rules.

But look back at verse 16.

[Read Colossians 2:16]

Now get this, the list I just gave you of all the things we judge people for like movies or hats or clothing or cars is not mentioned in the Bible at all, but the rules that Paul cites in verse 16 are all listed in the Bible – they come from the Old Testament. So for example in Leviticus 10 we read:

Then the LORD said to Aaron, ‘You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the tent of meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. (Leviticus 10:8-9)

That’s a pretty serious rule! And in Exodus God commanded His people to keep special feasts. For example we read:

Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread. For seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv, for in that month you came out of Egypt. (Exodus 34:18)

That’s a direct command for a religious festival. And of course the big one: In the 10 Commandments God said:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. (Exodus 20:8)

Those are the rules that these false teachers were telling the Colossian Christians they had to keep in order to be true followers of Jesus. And Paul says “Do not let anyone judge you by even these standards – not just crummy rules we made up for ourselves but even biblical rules! Because following rules to prove you were God’s people was the old way, it was just a shadow of the things to come, but now that Jesus has entered the picture the whole reality of being a God follower is found in Christ.

Friends following Jesus has nothing to do with following rules. And that’s true so much so that Paul attacked people who were trying to get other Christians to be good and described them as the enemy.

And every church for the last 2000 years including our own has fallen into this trap. So I encourage us brothers and sisters, let’s be careful. We all have ideas about how things should be done: what we should wear, how our service should be ordered, what our church should look like, what kinds of music we should play, what kinds of programs we should run.

And there is nothing wrong with having expectations, and there is nothing wrong with doing good things in an orderly way, but the danger – and it is a very real one – is that we would look down our noses at each other when we see our brothers and sisters not obeying the rules. When we do this we become the unintentional enemies in the camp of Christ.

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Now just briefly I want to talk to the opposite error to legalism, and that is liberal licentiousness. For the last 2000 years as soon as people realized that salvation was by grace not works and therefore had nothing to do with following the rules people immediately thought “oh great, I can do whatever I want. I can just go and sin in any way I feel because salvation has nothing to do with following the rules.”

But Paul spoke to that exact thought in Romans where he said:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? (Romans 6:1-2)

In other words when we meet Jesus and encounter His grace in salvation it changes us. His grace comes down and fills us and then bubbles over into everything we do. We live transformed lives because of what Jesus has done for us. And in fact the evidence that we have received God's grace is that we live out our lives trying to honour Him with everything we've got.

So we live our lives to the glory of God because we have received God's grace, but what we don't do is follow the rules to look like Christians and get God's grace.

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These unexpected enemies were using legalism to bully believers.

The second way these unexpected enemies were bullying the church was by claiming that to be a real Christian you had to have a mystical experience.

Unintentional enemies use mysticism to shift the focus from Christ and bully believers.

Look at verse 18

[Read Colossians 2:18-19a]

So in verse 16 the standard that these false teachers, these unintentional enemies, were using to judge people was whether they adhered to the rules correctly. Here the standard they are using is whether or not a person has mystical experiences with God.

And by "mystical experiences" I mean a special or secret relationship with God that manifests itself with special abilities or visions.

Now before we unpack that I need to tell you that this verse is where commentaries disagree with each other as to exactly what Paul is referring to, particularly where he talks about delighting in false humility and worshipping angels.

Obviously there was something going on in the Colossian church that involved this, but we don't really know what it was. But then in the bottom half of verse 18 it starts to become a little clearer where he says: "such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with ideal notions by their unspiritual mind."

And this is what I want to focus on because this also is something that has been around the church for the last 2000 years.

There have always been some who have said “My special experience with God prove I’m a real Christian and you aren’t.”

So Paul says “these people go into great details about what they have seen.” They brag about their visions or their spiritual gifts setting them up as the standard for what it means to be a Christian. Now what would this look like?

Sadly only about 20 years ago this kind of belief was quite common in Pentecostal circles where people believed that if you didn’t speak in tongues you were a second class Christian. Now I’m happy to tell you few Pentecostals believe this today.

But Paul says ironically when we set up our mystical encounters with God as the standard we have actually “lost connection with the Head.” We are less Christians not more. And that’s because Jesus plus anything else is less than Jesus by Himself.

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Now like legalism and licentiousness there is an error on the other side of this coin as well. And that would be believing that mystical experiences with God are all somehow wrong or false. But God does give people visions. And some Christians do speak in tongues and are gifted with all sorts of amazing gifts. But what is wrong is to use mystical experiences as the standard for what makes a person a Christian. We can’t do that because the standard for Christianity is the grace of Jesus – nothing else.

So Paul says don’t let these kinds of people disqualify you. Watch out for unintentional enemies who try to use their mystical experiences to tell you that you aren’t a real Christian.

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Finally Paul warns that these **Unintentional enemies were using asceticism to shift the focus from Christ and bully believers.**

Look at verse 20.

[Read Colossians 2:20-23]

Now Webster says an ascetic is someone who “practices strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline.”

So for example in the 2nd century there were some monks called the Desert Fathers who believed they were godly because they lived out in the desert by themselves, hardly eating anything, never getting married, always wearing itchy

clothing, never ever taking a bath, never lying down, living on top of a pole for years on end and an endlessly long and crazy list of other self-torturous things.⁴

And Paul tells us that some in the Colossian church had begun to drift in this way teaching things like “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” Live an ascetic life to prove you are a real Christian.

But in verse 23 Paul says such “harsh treatment of the body... lack[s] any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” Being an ascetic won’t make it so you never sin. And so you can’t use asceticism to earn God’s favor. And why would you even want to do that anyway because “you have already died with Christ and therefore you already have God’s approval. So don’t let anyone tell you that because you don’t deny yourself like they do you aren’t a real Christian.

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Now again it is important to say there is nothing wrong with practicing spiritual disciplines. In fact we had a whole series on them last year – things like fasting and prayer and meditation, and living simply. We can use these practices to train ourselves in godliness like Paul told Timothy.⁵ But what we must not do is use the fact that we do these practices as a standard to prove that we are real Christians and look down our noses at those who don’t. And that’s because Jesus plus anything else is less than Jesus by Himself.

So unintentional enemies use legalism, mysticism and asceticism to shift the focus from Christ and bully believers, but we don’t have to give in to them, and we don’t have to become them. Like verse 19 says we can stay connected to the Head. We can put our trust in Jesus for our salvation and not accept the judgment or disqualifying looks people give when they perceive we aren’t playing by their rules.

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Friends, church is a dangerous place. There is truth and salvation here, but there is also a strong tendency to get trapped in error as well. We can unintentionally become the enemy, looking down our noses at those who aren’t like us, or we can suffer from having others look down their noses at us.

But I encourage you if you have Christ you have everything you need. If you have His word you have everything you need. If you have His Spirit within you then you have everything you need. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. And lets watch ourselves lest we too become the unintentional enemy in the camp.

⁴ See Editor Owen Chadwick’s “Western Asceticism” (Philadelphia: Westminster Press) for more examples.

⁵ 1 Timothy 4:7