

PREFACE

One of Linda's favorite movies is the 1963 John Wayne picture, *Donovan's Reef*. In one scene, Michael Donovan (Wayne) and his love interest, Amelia Dedham, are out in the hills of the South Seas island cutting down a tree for Christmas. Amelia is the adult daughter of Donovan's old navy pal and the island's doctor. Unbeknownst to her, the three young children with them in the selecting of a Christmas tree are her father's younger children from his marriage to the last island princess, Manulani—who died in childbirth. At one point the oldest of the three children, Lelani, pauses to thank “the goddess of the canyon for our tree” in her native tongue. “Goddess?” Amelia asks. “Do you believe in gods and goddesses?”

The young girl answers politely but imperiously, “I believe in the one God, as we all do. But I respect the beliefs and customs of my people.” And she walks away, having serenely put the older woman in her place.

It all sounds very good, and the scene is played to show the maturity and wisdom—and equanimity—of the young girl, who is now the island princess, after her mother. But in the light of our passage for today, it is, in fact, not remotely wise at all.

The world would have us believe that the height of wisdom is to be fair and open to *all* beliefs. But of course *real* wisdom reveals that when we believe in everything, we in fact believe in nothing.

Our passage addresses the futility, the idiocy of either clinging to the old, or sampling new and strange regulations and beliefs after we have “died with Christ.”

Read Colossians 2:20-23.**vv20-22**

If you think about it, adherence to regulations and mechanical obedience to dogma are far easier than establishing and sustaining a Spirit-based relationship with Christ.

Years ago, when we were performing my one-act play, *Who Do You Say That I Am?*, with a couple from a Des Moines church, the husband, playing the role of Hananiah, the Money-changer, presented a challenge because he didn't quite grasp the concept of stage acting. Instead of investing himself in the character, he insisted, “Just tell me what you want, and I'll do it.” Well, that's not acting—but it is a far-sight *easier* than acting. Instead of coming to grips with your character, understanding him, developing his personality traits, interpreting the author's text and intentions, establishing a rapport with the audience and other characters on stage—that is, *possessing* your character—just have the director give you your marching orders, and you perform them by rote. That's not acting.

Which is easier:

- Go to confession and list for the priest all the bad things you choose to tell him about, do your penance (“Say five Hail Marys and four Our Fathers...”) and leave the confessional free and clear; or
- Live by the Spirit?

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world,

Believers are not dead with Christ, because He is alive. But in Him we are dead to "the elementary principles of the world." Here again is the mysterious and controversial phrase we encountered in v8 that has various interpretations. In our study of v8 we settled on Douglas Moo's interpretation, and so here.

The phrase refers primarily to the basic "components" of the universe and, secondarily, to the spiritual forces often thought to be associated with those physical components.

That is, the stars and planets, and the pagan spirits man has associated with them.

When a person is literally dead, he has been disconnected from life. If we are spiritually dead to the fundamental spirits of the worldly culture, we have been disconnected from them. If we are so irrevocably disconnected, then,

why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!"...in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?

Sidebar: The translations, "as if you were **living** in the world" are the more literal renderings of the Greek, but the NIV captures the contextual idea for us with, "as though you still **belonged** to it," or, as if you were still a part of it.

Specific to the Colossian situation, *Why are you listening to those false teachers with their rules and regulations, when you no longer have any reason to? You are no longer a part of their world: You are now in Christ!* But I think it is fair to broaden this application.

Read Romans 6:1-11.

- Why do we still pay homage to our old sin nature, when, in Christ, we are dead to that nature? [Note: that sin nature is not dead, but we are dead to it.]
- Why do we give it such respect, when it no longer holds such power over us?

Unlike the Colossians, we may not labor under false teachers trying to coax us away from the grace we have in Jesus Christ, but we can still labor under the enticing wiles of Satan, his minions, and the world's society that serves him.

(which all refer to things destined to perish with use)

Here is a strong argument. All these restrictions and requirements—most of which have to do with food—miss the point that in Christ ours is now a *spiritual* life. What truly matters is the condition of the *heart*, not the stomach.

When some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus and challenged Him with, "Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread," Jesus bottom-lined his reply with this to His disciples:

Read Matthew 15:17-20.

Paul wrote in Romans 14:17,
...the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

...in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?

This is what opened the scene in Matthew 15.

Read Matthew 15:1-3.

Here is the first sign you are listening to the wrong people. When their rules and regulations, their teaching cannot be squared with God's word, do not walk, but *run* in the opposite direction.

v23

Read v23.

Go back to that scene with Lelani claiming to believe in the true God while thanking the "goddess of the canyon" for their Christmas tree. And, watching the movie, we are meant to think this makes her mature and wise. But that is the perfect illustration of "the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion." Lelani was crafting *her own* form of worship, her own form of piety that fit *her* preconceived ideas of truth—and that is never wise.

These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in...

The "matters" ("things" in KJVs, "regulations" in NIV) probably refers back to v21's list of "Do not's." From a worldly, flesh-centered aspect they would have the appearance of higher wisdom. But of course it is just a thin, almost vaporous veneer of religion—not the real thing.

self-made religion

This is a fascinating term—a Greek word used nowhere else, and probably coined by Paul. Translated,

NKJV: self-imposed religion

NIV: self-imposed worship

ESV: self-made religion

KJV: will worship [my favorite]

ethelothrēskia = from <G2309> (thelo) and <G2356> (threskeia); voluntary (arbitrary and unwarranted) piety, i.e. **sanctimony** :- will worship.

Even though the word itself is used nowhere else, there are a number of instances of such behavior in the Bible that help us understand this. One is the unfortunate tale of Aaron's two sons.

Read Leviticus 10:1-3.

Nadab and Abihu got toasted because they performed, as the KJV would have it, "will worship." They said, *We know how to worship the Lord's way, but we want to do it this way.* They were presumptuous, and considered *their* will superior to that of the Lord's. And it cost them their lives.

A word of caution: Let us not be too smug about what happened to Nadab and Abihu. While it is true we live under grace, and not the strictures of the Law, we can still be guilty of “will worship”—worshiping the Lord the way *we* like, rather than in a way that glorifies Him alone. As Jesus told the woman at the well, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24) When our “worship” is casual, flippant, insincere, performed mechanically by rote; when it includes elements not in line with God’s word, it is will-worship: worship performed according to *our* will rather than the will of God, and thus disobedient—and worthless.

Then Paul includes two more practices that are worthless—ones he has mentioned before.

...self-abasement and severe treatment of the body

Here again Paul refers to the ascetic practices that were, apparently, part of the syncretistic philosophies being propounded in Colossae.

Because he follows it with “severe treatment of the body,” we can read (in the NASB) “self-abasement,” as the other translations, as a form of false humility. The first is a milder form of the second. Self-abasement could be termed verbal severity—putting oneself down before others in a self-serving display of mock humility. The second refers either to (as in v21) dietary and behavioral restrictions, or to self-flagellation—“severity of the body” taken to the extreme—or both.

We might paraphrase these three as

- fake piety
- fake humility
- fake holiness

All of which point not to God, but, nauseatingly, to self.

The Message paraphrase: Such things sound impressive if said in a deep enough voice. They even give the illusion of being pious and humble and ascetic. But they're just another way of showing off, making yourselves look important. (v23)

but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

None of these things do anything more than intensify our preoccupation with self.

Alexander Maclaren: There is only one thing that will put the collar on the neck of the animal within us, and that is the power of the indwelling Christ.

They are worthless to make us more righteous, more holy, more obedient to God.

R. Kent Hughes: The answer to legalism is the continual realization of the grace of Christ. The answer to mysticism is an understanding of how profoundly we are related to Christ. The answer to asceticism is the reckoning that we have died, been buried, and are resurrected with Christ. The answer is where it all began: at the foot of the cross.