

Colossians 2:8-12

Good morning Westwood. We continue our study of Colossians today in chapter two, verses 8-12. In these five verses, we are reminded of our theme in this study, Paul's theme, which is that Christ is to be supreme in all.

This was a common thread in the early church. In the 2nd century, Tertullian, an African Christian apologist, and thinker penned the famous question, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" In many ways, this question furthers what Paul is saying to the Colossian church in chapter 2. Do not be captive to philosophy, Athens, but be captive, confined, to God, which is Jerusalem in this statement.

As we shall see later on, the church has always had to fight against worldly tradition. The answer to fighting against these traditions has always been to look to Christ and His word. This morning I'd like first to look at this idea of not being captive to philosophy and empty deceit, then examine how we are to see to it that we do not succumb to the thinking of the age.

So, let's jump into the text and see what we are not to be captive to. Paul says in verse 8,

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

First, what are the philosophy and empty deceit that Paul is concerned with?

The Greek illustrates just how concerned Paul is; it comes out more like, "Take heed!" or "Be watchful!" or "Look out!" Paul wants to warn the Colossians not to get caught up with philosophy and empty deceit. To not be captive to it, the word captive is essential to fully understanding what Paul implies. The word itself insinuates that this doesn't just mean come under this type think. Instead, Paul is identifying that when you fall into the trap of thinking this way, you shall be enslaved to it. Captive and in need of rescue. This is a stark warning for Christians.

Over the past few weeks, you've heard different speakers refer to Gnosticism; now, Paul was, of course, warning against a form of pre-gnostic teaching, which argued for created gods that were dueling against one another in this cosmic battle of good and evil. It is not just Gnosticism or gnostic ideas that Paul is warning

against. He is talking about empty deceit that has two origins. Before looking at the two origins, I want to parse this idea of empty deceit.

For by warning against deceit in the first century, Paul affirms that there is a standard for truth. That there is a standard on which the church of Jesus Christ must stand. Scholars have several ideas about what the bar most likely was. For Paul, the standard was the biblical understanding of who Christ was and is.

The earliest known creed of the church is, “κύριος Ἰησοῦς”- “Jesus is Lord.” In some sense, Paul is saying here, “Look out for those who would say Jesus is not Lord.” This would have been a common attack on the early church in Colossae. Another standard that Paul would have desired for the Colossian church to hold on to would have been the eternity of our Lord. We see this in Colossians 1:15-20, where Paul proclaims that all things are created through Christ. Meaning, that Christ is not created. Another vital standard that Paul would have wanted the church to remember and not be deceived about was the gospel. That it is through faith in Christ that one has everlasting life.

I hope you can see what I am getting at. Paul’s warning against philosophy and empty deceit is not a warning against philosophy in and of itself. Still, it is a warning against anything that adds to the teachings of the Scriptures.

So, Paul wants the Colossians, and us, to consider seriously that we should not be captive to philosophy and empty deceit. So what are these things Paul is talking about? After all, that is my first question here.

So first, what Paul is warning against is anything that would contradict or add to the teachings of the Scriptures.

Second, and more specifically, Paul warns against philosophy and empty deceit that is of human tradition.

Paul is specifically talking about the traditions of Colossae that saw the Cross of Christ as not enough. This was a specific reference to the worship of the goddess Cybele.

Today we aren’t dealing with those worshipping a goddess, so let’s contextualize this a bit for ourselves this morning. When you first hear the term “philosophy,” you may think of Plato or Socrates. Maybe a David Hume, or 20th century Bertrand Russell, or perhaps even a contemporary thinker like Jordan Petersen. It is not

incorrect to identify these thinkers as those we should not be captive to. Their thinking, while in parts true, often contradicts the Scriptures, but this doesn't mean they can't be correct in some areas. As Saint Augustine once said, "All truth is God's truth."

Despite that fact, we must be weary of the thinking of human tradition. We must be willing to run from the ideologies of the age that contradict Scripture. Let's take this a step further, beyond philosophical thinkers.

For example, political ideology that rejects the teachings of the Scriptures or is in contradiction with the Scriptures is empty deceit. We must not be captive to an ideology that is ungodly. As Christians, we must unhinge an ideology that has political thought influencing biblical godliness. Whereas it should be the other way around, our political and social practice should succumb to the knowledge of the Scriptures. This in large part means that instead of seeing an opposing party we must see human beings who will stand before the throne of God on the day of judgment with Christ or without Christ. Political ideology contradictory to the Scriptures must be rejected as we serve Christ.

This past week I was exposed to another form of human tradition filled with empty deceit. Bronwyn and I were able to visit Disney World. The first night we stayed for the fireworks and this amazing light show on Cinderella's Castle. It was beautiful; it was spectacular. Yet, at the end of the show over these loud speakers as the castle is being lit up and fireworks are going off everywhere, a voice breaks through the music saying, "The magic is in you." Now, this is Disney's key ideology. Such a simple statement, "the magic is in me." Really this is the human tradition throughout the ages coming to life in the 21st century, which is the ideology that "I can." Moreover, "I am enough." In many ways, this is a redemptive statement that one does not have to change to achieve an end goal. This is entirely antithetical to the Gospel. As Christians, we must recognize "I am not enough." And that "I can not." We need someone else. And thanks be to God, Jesus has come, and that he was enough and that through His perfect life we have everlasting life. There is no magic in me or you, but there is power and life in the blood of the Cross of Jesus Christ our Lord and our Savior, so we must not be captive to any empty deceit that ignores the reality of the Gospel.

Third, the other type of philosophy and empty deceit is that of the elemental spirits of the world.

Again, Paul is referencing the worship practices of the pagans.

You're right in thinking first of demonic practices. I could on and list a multitude of things that would fall under this category including false religions that ignore the true and living God. Really this is just a reminder that we don't battle just flesh and blood, but against the power of the air, the one who reigns in cosmic darkness.

As Christians, we must see to it that we don't succumb to syncretism that mixes Christian thought with false religion.

What Paul is doing here by telling us to avoid these things and to not be captive to empty deceit is really just a call for us to be captive to Christ. Paul is not saying that we must know every false ideology out there. He isn't saying to become an expert in other religions or in philosophy as a whole. Rather, he is saying become an expert in knowing Christ.

The U.S. Treasury Department does not have its employees learn what every counterfeit bill looks like. Rather, they teach them to know the real thing. We as Christians must know the real thing.

And that is exactly what Paul is calling us to in verses 9-12 here in Colossians 2. Moreso, he is saying know who Christ is, know His word and know who you are.

Before looking at how to not be captive, let me reiterate what we are not to be captive to, which is any teaching that is in contradiction to the Scriptures or adding to them, that comes from human tradition or the elemental spirits of the age.

So how do we avoid being captive to philosophy and empty deceit? Paul writes in verse 9:

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

This Christological statement is of much importance and is the first answer to our question. We avoid being captive to philosophy and empty deceit by knowing who Christ is.

So, Christ, is God incarnate, for Paul says, "*For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.*" Jesus Christ is the God-Man. He is God. Know fully, that the Son of God is God.

In the Gospel of John, the deity of Christ is reiterated in the *Seven "I AM"* statements. Each of these statements is a directive that Jesus is God in the flesh. Here, Paul is telling us to know this, believe it. If you have this as a building block, you will not be captive to philosophy or empty deceit, because if you know that Jesus is God, then you can have confidence in what Paul says at the end of verse 10. Which is that Jesus "*is the head of all rule and authority.*"

That is it. Know that Christ is the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, and trust what he has said and what he has done, then throw out whatever is in contradiction to who Christ is and what he has said in his Word.

The church for nearly 2,000 years has done this. Let's briefly look at this throughout history and then apply it to even our modern context.

The early church consisted of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. Each one had a controversy that was rooted in philosophy and empty deceit that was either of human tradition or from the elemental spirits and each time these teachings were compared to the Scriptures and who Christ has been revealed to be. Let's look at a few.

In 325 the First Council of Nicaea refuted Arianism, which taught that Jesus was a created being. They did so by looking at whom the Scriptures taught Jesus to be.

In 381 the First Council of Constantinople refuted further ideas of gnosticism and affirmed the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit by looking at the Scriptures.

In 431 the Council of Ephesus refuted Pelagianism, which states that one could be good enough for entrance into heaven by looking at the Scriptures.

In 451 the Council of Chalcedon affirmed the humanity of Jesus Christ. That he really was a man. They did so by looking at the Scriptures.

This does not stop in the first 500 years of the church either.

The Protestant Reformation comes from the tradition that there were teachings in the Roman Catholic Church that differed from the Scriptures. So, in an oversimplification of the Reformation, the Reformers looked at the Scriptures and abandoned the false teachings of Rome.

The modern era is not void of this either, and in many has had to face a new challenge as the secular age attempts to distort the teachings of the Scriptures. Evangelicals like John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul, and J. I. Packer helped pen and signed some of these statements like:

The Chicago Statement of 1978 affirmed the inerrancy and inspiration of the Scriptures as liberal theologians and non-Christians argued against the authority of what God has said.

Or

More recently The Nashville Statement of 2017 which addressed the issues of the LGBTQ community and affirmed a biblical sexual ethic that marriage is to be between one man and one woman and that a man is not a woman, and a woman is not a man. They made this statement in accordance with the Scriptures.

Until the Lord returns we will have to do these things. There will always be people looking to add to the teachings of the Scriptures. It may come in the form of “You have to be blank to be a Christian.” Or “You have to vote blank way to be a Christian.” Or “You have to do blank to be a Christian.” Or “You must believe blank to be a Christian.” All these ideas our additions to the Scriptures and the gospel of Jesus, so we must be weary of statements and beliefs such as these, and we must not be captive to this way of thinking.

Friends, the first way we do that is by knowing Christ.

The second way Paul gives us to not be captive to philosophy or empty deceit is to know who we are in Christ.

In the Christological statement about Jesus being God and the one with all authority in verse, Paul subtly adds that we “*have been filled in him.*” Verses 11 and 12 go on to say,

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

We are to remember who we are. So, who are we?

First, we are those who have been circumcised in Him by Christ. Paul is not talking about physical circumcision here. Rather, he reminds us that it is not physical action that saves us. He reiterates that we did not save ourselves, but Christ has saved us. Let's look at what Paul says about circumcision in Romans 2:25-29.

25 For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. 26 So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. 28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

It is a spiritual circumcision that has happened and in that cutting of the heart that has made us alive to God and made us in Christ. We are now sons and daughters of the living God.

So, who are we? We are a people incapable of saving ourselves, yet those who are righteous because of the spiritual circumcision that has happened in our hearts that has now unified us to Christ. Who are we? We are God's people.

This is further illustrated in verse 12 of Colossians 2.

having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Paul is once again reminding us here that eternal life is a free gift of God received through faith in Jesus Christ. And because of our faith, we are united with him. Paul uses the picture of baptism to further the significance of our union with Christ. Just as Jesus was laid down in the grave, we are laid in baptism. And just as he was raised to life, we are raised from the water. It's this picture for us that we are no longer dead because Christ is not dead. We are alive because Christ Jesus is alive.

So, who are we? We are a people alive to God, because of Jesus Christ. Who are we? We are a people united, in union with one another and our Lord and our Savior Jesus Christ.

Before I close with a brief application may just summarize what we have seen here this morning. As Christians, we are to not be captive to philosophy and empty deceit that is of human tradition and elemental spirits of the age. We avoid these ways of thinking and living by knowing who Jesus Christ is and by knowing who we are as those who are alive in Christ.

Now the simplest of applications for all of this. If you are a Christian here today, you are to avoid being captured by the faulty ways of this world; you must be in the word of God. For it is here that you will meet Christ and get to know Him. It is also here that you will see who you are as a beloved Child of the living God. May your affections for him increase as you open His word leading you to deep worship of our Great God.