

Colossians - Chapter 2
“Living by Rules, But Coming Up Short”
Colossians 2:20-23

Verse 20-22

1. As Paul concludes this chapter he deals with the issue of asceticism.
 - An ascetic is a person who practices strict self-denial as a measure of personal and, especially, spiritual discipline (Webster’s).
2. There were obviously false teachers that were propagating the idea that people are more spiritual if they can deny themselves certain foods and live by certain rules and regulations. Verse 21 says, *“Touch not; taste not; handle not.”* The ascetic has a rule for everything.
3. This is so common today. Both religious and non-religious people think that they will achieve a deeper spirituality by practicing denial of certain things, and practicing rigid self-discipline (denying themselves certain foods on certain days, denying themselves a marriage relationship, denying certain types of clothing or modern conveniences, etc.).
4. There is something in the human heart that desperately wants to prove, “I am a cut above others. I have **earned** God’s acceptance. I have **achieved** a higher religious standard. I have **attained** a deeper spiritual life.”
5. It is the fundamental idea of Satan’s world system - a religion that begins with self.
 - Example: Satan, in Isaiah 14:12-14 – *“I will.”*
 - Example: Cain, in Genesis 4 – A religion of self-effort – *“The way of Cain.”*
 - One of the largest sections of any secular bookstore will be the “self-help” section.
6. This is what Paul is dealing with here in Colossians: people who think they can sanctify the soul through discipline of the body, and people who think they are spiritual because they obey certain rules that pertain to the body. 1 Timothy 4:1-4
7. Of course, none of this impresses God one bit. God is not impressed by our keeping of religious rules and disciplines.
8. Christ came to this earth, fulfilled **all** righteousness, gave Himself on the cross for our sins, and then rose from the dead, forever defeating it. God now offers Christ’s life and righteousness as a **free gift** to us. You can’t earn it or achieve it.
 - You receive Christ’s life and righteousness by faith. Paul was a man full of religious disciplines, but he traded all of that for the knowledge of Christ. Philippians 3:4-9
 - Paul exclaimed in Philippians 3:9, *“And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”*
9. Paul is saying in Colossians 2:20 that if you are dead with Christ, and crucified with Him, *“...he that is dead is freed from sin.”* (Romans 6:7) Religious rules and disciplines aren’t going to help a dead man. He isn’t subject to those. He needs supernatural life!

- Paul is asking them, “Why would you subject yourselves to man-made rules, doctrines, commandments, and ordinances? You are dead with Christ and are not subject to those!”
10. The idea of gaining spiritual strength or spiritual favor through fleshly actions is the “*rudiments of the world.*”
 - “*Rudiments*” means that it is the fundamental idea or principle of Satan’s world system. This world says, “It is all about **you** and your ability to discipline yourself.”
 11. Paul teaches that we are dead to this world system and its ideas. We are dead with Christ, risen with Him, and have been translated into a new kingdom (Galatians 6:14). We have spiritual life pulsating in our inner man. “*And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God.*” Galatians 2:20
 - Satan’s world system says, “It’s all about you and your ability to keep these man-made rules and spiritual disciplines, and through these disciplines you must attain to a deeper spiritual life.”
 - Paul says, “It is all about Christ and the life I now have in Him. I am complete in Him! I am a new creature in Him. Everything I need is found in Him. As I yield to Him, He lives His victorious life through me.” Colossians 1:11, 27, 29; 2:6-7, 10; Galatians 6:15
 12. What I put in my mouth, or what I hang on this fleshly body, or what disciplines I put my body through, are **not** going to strengthen me in my inner soul and spirit.
 - It may help you to lose weight, or control your blood pressure, or give you more energy. Your physical discipline may carry with it some health benefits, but it can’t bring true spiritual victory. Outward discipline doesn’t bring inward sanctification. Only Christ can do this.
 13. It is Christ and His Spirit that strengthens me spiritually. He is all I need. I don’t look to rules and disciplines, I look to Christ. As I grow in Him, the work He does internally naturally works its way out externally. Paul will show us this in chapter 3.

Verse 23

1. The real danger and deception of the ascetic mindset is found in this verse.
2. As ascetics give up certain foods, practice rigid rules and disciplines, and attempt to practice religious self-denial, they get puffed up.
3. As they deny their bodies any physical enjoyments, they appear to be wise and humble. They believe they have **earned** a standing in God’s presence to worship Him (“*will worship*”).
4. But, Paul says that the reality is, it is all an outward show. Any attempt to worship God apart from the merits of Christ is “*will worship,*” and is refused by God.

- It is not our self-denial that gives to us an audience before God; it is the atoning blood of Christ that gives us entrance into God's presence. It is not our works, but Christ's work that opens the door into God's presence. Ephesians 2:18, 3:11-12; Hebrews 10:19
5. Not only this, but our self-denial cannot overcome the sinful cravings of the flesh. Paul says that their self-denial was "...*not in any honor to the satisfying of the flesh.*"
 6. When we try to overcome a fleshly sin through fleshly effort, it only leads to another sin.
 - Example: The ascetic overcomes his desire for alcohol through fleshly discipline, but this may give way to gluttony and indulgence in junk foods.
 - Example: Next, the ascetic overcomes through fleshly discipline the issue of over-eating, but this leads to pride in his outward appearance.
 - Example: Now, because of the pride in his outward appearance, he wants new, attractive clothes. This leads to a spending addiction. (And on, and on we go...)
 7. You cannot overcome the flesh through fleshly discipline and rules. It will not work. The flesh will just find another outlet to sin.
 8. You can only overcome the flesh through the power of Jesus Christ. We rely on Him, trust Him, and find our sufficiency in Him, and Him alone. We are complete in Him!