

***Update on Counseling Conference**

There is a place in Canada called Algonquin Provincial Park that I have spent time at in years past doing some wilderness trips. This place is absolutely incredible! It's a park that contains lakes where you put your canoe in on one side spend several hours paddling to get to the other side. Then you take your canoe out of the water, as well as all of your gear, portage (which means carry all of your stuff) 200 meters or maybe even 2000 meters to another enormous lake and do it all over again. This is a place that offers no modern amenities (no indoor plumbing, no electricity, no shelters, no internet connection, no cell phone signals); it's just you and whatever you bring in with you.

When you are preparing for a trip like that, how you pack is so important! When I go on vacation, I'm an over-packer. But, when I realize that every single day I'm going to be carrying whatever I pack, that changes my focus. There are no extras; there are no 'just-in-case' items that I'm putting in my bag. I'm asking myself, "What is essential?"

And that is the question that I want to ask you today, "What is essential?" Now I'm not going to be asking about your packing list for a wilderness trip (you can bring as much stuff as you want... because YOU'RE carrying it). What is essential to the Christian life? What is essential to your spiritual health and your spiritual growth? What is essential to our church? That is an important question to come to a conclusion on because if we're not careful, we can pack in all these "extra" items and push what is essential off to the side.

So what is essential for your life? What is essential for your spiritual health and spiritual growth? It's Jesus Christ the Son of God. The One in whom we have been made alive; the One in whom we have had our sins forgiven; the One who canceled the record of debt that stood against us by being nailed to the cross. The One who disarmed the demonic realm and put Satan and his demons to shame and triumphed over them as He was placed in the tomb and then rose again three days later! Jesus is the One who is essential. If you're going to grow in spiritual maturity, it will only come by attaching yourself to Jesus Christ and looking to Him to sustain you, to shape you, and to transform you.

Do you want to change? Do you want to grow? Those are legitimate questions that every Christian would say, "YES!" to. But how do you go about doing that? Well, this passage that we're going to look at today addresses some of that question.

We're going to look Colossians 2:16-23, and Paul is confronting some ideas that are creeping into the church. They're trying to answer the question what is essential for life, what is essential for spiritual growth? And opponents of the gospel are instructing the church to include on their packing list a bunch of extras. They're saying you should have Jesus, but don't forget to add this, and to be doing that, and

that true spirituality is found while doing this thing too. So Paul confronts the heresy, so let's look together at what he says.

READ COLOSSIANS 2:16-23

The passage that we have here in front of us this morning is the key passage that identifies the problem that is threatening the Colossian church. If you recall when we first began studying the book of Colossians, I told you that a guy by the name of Epaphras had come to know Jesus Christ as His Savior. He had been changed by the gospel therefore he shared that good news with his friends and family in the community that he lived. But after a period of time false teachers had shown up expressing new ideas and new philosophies, that's what Paul is addressing now. They weren't advising people to reject Jesus completely, but what they were doing, they were telling people that in order to reach a greater level of spirituality, you need to add a few more things into your routine of spiritual disciplines.

I can just hear them in my head going, *"Oh, you don't feel like you're growing? You're walk with God doesn't seem as significant as what you think it should be? Well, it's because you're doing it wrong. My life is amazing right now and I feel closer to God than I ever have been before. Why don't you and I sit down tomorrow and we'll talk about it over lunch. I let you in some things that you need to start doing in order to grow."* It sounds sincere and it sounds good and seems like they've got insights into something that is being missed. So people begin adding actions to their packing list. They begin carrying things that are not essential.

So Paul addresses this fallacy within the church and I want to highlight this portion of scripture by breaking it into two sections. Let's first look at verses 16-19 where Paul encourages the believer to **"Let No One Disqualify You."**

We see there in verses 16 & 18 a list of standards that are now being held over the Christians in the Colossians church. They are being told that if they truly want to be godly, they must obey this set of rules. This is what we would define as legalism. People are adding standards/rules to the Christian life and then enforcing others to follow along. And in the Colossian church they are being told in verse 16, what they can/cannot eat or drink; they're being informed that they must follow the Old Testament practices of observing certain festivals and Sabbath laws.

Paul quickly jumps in at verse 17 and tells them that those things weren't bad. The Law wasn't bad, the festivals weren't bad, the sacrificial system that went along with those festivals weren't bad, the standards that went along with the Sabbath wasn't bad, but all of that was just a shadow of what was to come. And once you see the fullness of the sacrifice on the cross, we understand what the sacrificial worship of the Old Testament was pointing toward. So Paul encourages these young believers that there is no need to not play in the shadow world when you have experienced the real thing. There is no need to voluntarily put a burden back on yourself that Jesus has already conquered.

To make a side note on this: If a Christian decides to abstain from certain foods, and drinks, or sets aside certain days or seasons of life for special observation or meditation... that is a great thing!! But this is something to be settled on an individual basis. You cross the line when you set standards and rules of godliness where the Bible has not.

As you look back at our text you see that we have what is essential. We have Jesus. Paul continues on attacking these empty philosophies in verse 18 by saying, "Let no one disqualify you..."

These false teachers are now calling into question whether a person really knows God or not. They're looking a list of rules/standards and saying that if you don't match up to these qualifications (qualifications by the way that are not found ANYWHERE in the Bible) and saying that if you can't check this off your box, you don't really know God.

I don't know if you have ever participated in a sport where you can be disqualified or not. During my Junior and Senior year I was on my High School's swim team. By far, toughest sport I have ever competed in!! If you're familiar with the sport, each stroke has a set of rules that must be followed. If you don't follow them exactly, there are judges who are watching and will disqualify you from the race. It's very disheartening to give it all you've got in a race, touch the wall on the final lap, only to look up to the board where the times are recorded and see the letters DQ (which doesn't stand for Dairy Queen, you've been disqualified).

And you have these immature believers in the church, and they're not dumb. But their just baby Christians and they need to grow in wisdom and they need to grow in understanding. The last thing that they want is to be told that they have been disqualified; that they're doing things wrong. They want to do things right, they want to honor God with their lives. But they're listening to the advice of the wrong people.

This is why discipleship within the church is so important. It's not just enough that we reach the lost for Jesus Christ. It's that we're training up the younger in faith to reach a fuller understanding of God. Discipleship should not be some abstract, far off idea. If you are a Christian, there ought to be mature believers in front of you (that you can name) that are passing along godly wisdom, but there should also be immature believers behind you (two or three people) that you're seeking to guide towards the ways of Christ. An immature/young believer, on their own and really anyone on their own, is in a dangerous situation.

And the dangerous situation that the Colossians are in, is that they are being advised to follow some ungodly principles in verse 18. They're being told that asceticism is important. Asceticism is the idea that a person can attain a high spiritual and moral state by practicing self-denial, self-discipline, and just about rejecting any pleasure

that this world has to offer. They were also being told to worship angels and people were fabricating some pretty wild visions. People in that time era as well as today regularly called on angels to protect them and help them, to bring success in business, to destroy enemies, or remove a curse. People are holding fast to vision that they may or may not have seen. What is asceticism, worshiping of angels, having visions doing? It's puffing up their mind. They're deluded into thinking that it's bringing them to a higher form of spirituality but in reality it's drawing them away from Christ. They're not growing in a greater dependency on Christ, all of these things are confirming within their mind just how great they are.

Look what I'm able to do, look at what I'm accomplishing... The root of all error is the failure to hold fast to the head.

READ VERSE 19

Holding onto anything other than Christ will cause a person to disintegrate and perish. Now, are there commands that you need to obey to grow in godliness? Yes! Wait until we get into Colossians 3 and 4. You're going to see that there are lot of instructions given as to how you should live your life. But you need to have an understanding of what comes first. Everything is founded on, centered on, revolved around the Son of God, Jesus Christ the Lord. You can't put good rules and regulations as the primary source of growth. Get connected with Christ, stay connected with Christ for it is through Him that each part of the body of Christ functions appropriately and grows toward maturity.

And this moves us into the second half of our passage this morning. As we want to focus on what is Essential for Growth we keep in mind that no one can disqualify us based upon the regulations that they establish, but we also need to understand for our own lives that **"Rules Don't Change the Heart."**

READ COLOSSIANS 1:20-23

Rules Don't Change the Heart. These rules, these regulations that these false teachers are demanding have no hold over the Christian. In verse 20, Paul asks the question, why are you submitting to these regulations? Now, submission is a great word. It's a godly word. We're going to talk about that in a few weeks as Colossians 3 talks about wives submitting to your husband; we could look at Ephesians 5 where we're told to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Submission is a great word, and it's a great and godly thing to do **IF** what is being asked of you follows godly principles. Submission is not blind allegiance.

So Paul asks of them, why are you submitting to these regulations, because these regulations/rules have been abolished in Christ! Through faith in Christ did you die with Christ to these basic spiritual powers of the world? The Christian answers, yes! Those no longer have a hold over me. We're awakened to the reality that rules don't

bring us to a deeper level of spirituality, and they do nothing to change the internal condition of the heart. Rules/regulations don't change the heart.

Look at the rules; "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch." All commands that are given are in the negative... and as you look at that it looks like a parent talking to a young child.

As a parent I have had multiple times (probably millions of times) where I've had to say "No, put that down!" "No, don't put that in your mouth." "No, get away from that." I remember a particular time when our middle child Alaina was a toddler and she was being taught that she can't play with the electrical outlets. I don't know what it is about those things, but all kids are fascinated by them at some point in life. I remember telling her in a firm voice, "No. Don't touch this." Well she came back to a few minutes later and I had to repeat myself, "No. Don't touch this." On the third time she went to go touch it and I repeated myself "No. Don't touch this" and then swatted her on the hand.

That's when I got two different responses from older my daughters who were watching this unfold. Madison started protesting, "Dad, don't do that. She's so little." She couldn't stand to hear the cries of her baby sister who was being disciplined. But then Haylie piped in, "Good job." She was on board with seeing her sister get punished.

But on that day I was giving her a rule. A rule that was for her benefit and for her protection. And it was a good rule and it was a helpful rule. But do you know what that rule didn't do? It didn't change her heart. What we're after in parenting, what we are after in the church, what we're after in life, is the heart. You see, it is possible for you to become an excellent rule follower. You can learn to say all the right things, you can learn to check off all the lists of things that you're supposed to do and to stay clear of things that you're not supposed to do. And can make yourself look really good. That's what it says in verse 23

READ COLOSSIANS 1:23A

People can look at the exterior and go, "Wow! That person is doing something really special." "That person is disciplined." It's possible to follow all of the rules... and yet still have a heart that's far from God. Think about Jesus and the people that He talked to that a really polished exterior? It was the Pharisees. If anyone followed the rules, they did. But Jesus quotes Isaiah and calls them hypocrites,

"Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." Mark 7:6-8

What Jesus was after, and what we are after, is the heart. Legalistic prescriptions of following a list of rules will only focus in on behavior. And you're missing so much when you that is your focus. You're missing out on diagnosing what are your true desires, what are your fears, what are the idols of your heart. And in the end those regulations and rules do nothing to stop your desire to sin. That's what 23 end with,

READ COLOSSIANS 1:23B

Rules do nothing to stop your desires to sin. Now, I'm not saying that you shouldn't put some barriers up to protect yourself from sinning. You should have a filter on your internet; if you're prone to be grumpy when you've got a little bit of sleep or skip a meal, attempt to plan your day to the best of your ability so that those things happen. You can come with all sorts of ways to "protect" yourself from sin. But if you don't address the heart, the indulgences (those desires) of the sinful flesh are going to want to come out. They don't automatically go away by following rules.

In the coming weeks we are going to talk about the actions of the Christian life. We're going to talk about what it looks like to stop doing certain things and start doing other things. There are actions within the Christianity, there are commands that we are to be following. But our obedience those to commands spring from a heart that loves God, that has Jesus Christ as our central focus. That we're not just giving into the rules and trying not to rock the boat. But we have a heart, we have a life, that is connected to the Head, who is Jesus and our love for Him drives us to do everything that we do.