

Don't Get Scammed!

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[0:00] This is Colossians chapter 2, verses 16 to 23. Verse 16.

Amen. This is God's holy word.

We turn this evening to Colossians chapter 2 and to the final verses of that chapter. The number of people targeted by scams of one kind or another, telephone, internet, email, in any given year apparently runs into tens of millions of people. That's just in the United Kingdom. The statistics indicate that almost two-thirds of us will have this kind of experience in the coming year. And these fraudulent scams appear to be everywhere. Now, some are pretty obvious and are designed only to dupe the most gullible. I mean, if you receive an email from a Nigerian prince offering to deposit a million pounds in your bank account, if you'll just send them your bank details, I suspect most of us, at least I hope most of us, are going to think twice about that. But others are very sophisticated, difficult to detect. They purport to be from your bank, your building society, even HMRC. They use the right language. They have the right logo. They appear very convincing. And if you're on the phone to somebody, they appear very, very convincing. Warnings abound against being taken in by various scams of one kind or another. And that's really what Paul is doing in this section of the letter. He's writing to warn his readers in Colossae that they're in the danger of succumbing to a huge spiritual scam. And the key verse introducing this theme is 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. These false teachers, as we've seen, were offering a kind of Christianity plus, offering something better, something new, something improved, a free upgrade for the Colossians. All they had to do was download the file, click on the button. Everything's going to be so much better. Here was the way of fullness and freedom. And yet, of course, it was all a lie, an illusion. Their words were words of worldly philosophy and empty deceit. They were a spiritual scam. And here Paul appeals to the Colossians not to be taken in or taken captive, captured by such teachings. No matter how appealing they may appear, because they will lead not to fullness, but to emptiness, not to freedom, but slavery, not to life, not to life, but actually to death. Why? Because these teachings are not according to Christ. They're based on human tradition, not divine authority. They are rooted in a worldly way of thinking rather than in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the essence of what Paul is getting at here in these verses is simply this. Jesus Christ doesn't need an upgrade. In the Christian life, you don't get beyond Jesus Christ. The person and work of Jesus does not need to be added to or supplemented. Don't be captured by any way of thinking that takes you away from Jesus. He is all sufficient. Christ is all you need. In the previous verses that Chris looked at last week, in verses 8 through 15, Paul reminds us there that Christ is our satisfaction. Only in Him is there the fullness of deity. Christ is our power for living. Only He can produce a holy life. Christ is our forgiveness. Only He has canceled the debt that we owe to God. He is all we need. In Calvin's words, drink from this fountain and from no other. Now, however, Paul turns his attention to focus more specifically on the threat posed by this religious philosophy that was doing the rounds in Colossae.

[6:00] And in essence, he makes a three-pronged appeal to the Colossians. He does not want them to exchange the truth of God for a lie. He doesn't want them to be scammed. And so, let's look at these three appeals. The first one we have in verses 16 and 17 is this. Don't exchange gospel substance for religious shadows. Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival, new moon, or Sabbath days. These are a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

It appears that these false teachers were promoting or pushing several different things. They were trying to impose dietary requirements. Paul speaks about being judged in relation to food and drink. Some foods and drink were deemed unclean or unacceptable for believers. And this appeal may

well have found its origin in some of the dietary laws of the Old Testament. Those were designed that the people would be clean to worship in the sanctuary of God. It distinguished them from the unclean Gentiles.

But it wasn't just about diet. It was also about days. Festival, new moon, ESV has an Sabbath. Better there, Sabbath days. In the Jewish calendar, there were annual festivals that were celebrated.

A new moon would have been acknowledged monthly. The reference here to Sabbath, I think, is not a reference to the Lord's Day and the fourth commandment. It's a reference to ceremonial, festival, yearly Sabbaths. And so, this group was trying to force a certain regimen on the Colossians, trying to shape their worship, their way of life in a certain way, seeking to get them to conform to a variety of different Old Testament traditions, under the pretext that these would help them grow spiritually and deepen their faith. And I think there's a hint in the text that the Colossian believers were somewhat intimidated by this group, their zeal in promoting these practices. Perhaps some of them were made to feel unspiritual, second-class Christians. Their confidence had taken a hit. This group claimed biblical warrant for their practices. They pointed to the Bible. [8:52] And we know from passages such as Mark 7 that Jesus declared all foods clean. In that great vision of Acts 10, Peter hears a voice telling him, what God has made clean do not call common. The Old Testament dietary laws were provisional. They were only for a specific period in Jewish history as they looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, in whom all peoples, Jew and Gentile, would be made clean.

Israel's worship in the Old Testament was a shadow of what was to come and be fulfilled in Jesus. And much of it, including the dietary laws, the special days and festivals, and indeed the temple and the whole sacrificial system itself, were signposts pointing to Christ. Shadows, not substance. These are a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Christ is the substance. He is the real thing. If we think we're having communion this evening, if we think for a moment of the Passover in Exodus 12, that night where God's people were shielded from the divine wrath, not by their ethnicity or their traditions or their good works, but by what? By the blood of lambs. And those first Passover lambs were the price that had to be paid for the Exodus. For God's people to be set free, those unblemished lambs had to be slain, their blood had to be shed. Without them, there was only judgment and death.

And yet on the eve of His death, Jesus celebrated the Passover. But He didn't take a lamb from the table.

He took bread and said, this is My body given for you. He took the cup. He said, this cup is the new covenant in My blood. Because Jesus offered Himself as the Passover lamb. As Isaiah prophesied, He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. As John declared by the Jordan River, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Because Jesus is the Lamb, set forth as a propitiation for sin, set forth that God's wrath might pass us over, set forth that we might say with the firstborn of Israel, that lamb died for me.

He died in My place. You see, there are shadows, and then there is the substance, and Christ is the substance. He is the solid reality to which the whole of the Old Testament points. And if you have the substance, then why would you be focusing on the shadows?

[12:00] It's not that Paul is despising or diminishing the importance of the shadows. They are important signs. They have their place. But we need to let them lead us towards the one that they're pointing to.

Many years ago, Alice and I, I remember this, Alice and I bought a washing machine, and we had it for years. I don't think I ever learned how to operate it, to be honest, but that's a personal confession. But however, every time someone came out, because washing machine is always breaking down. But anyway, somebody came out to repair it, and they would say this, they don't make them like this anymore. And invariably, the repairman would encourage us to hold on to this washing machine as long as possible. Why? Well, it was built to last.

Unlike most modern appliances today, which have built in obsolescence, they are no longer, you know, they're no longer made to be repaired or renewed. You know, they run their life, and then you throw them away. Friends, these Old Testament laws and festivals had built in obsolescence.

They weren't designed to last. They were not meant to keep on going. They had a divinely appointed lifespan. They were previews of the one who was to come. They were not the final word. They were never meant to be permanent fixtures. They were provisional. They've now been

superseded. They've been overtaken by the Lord Jesus Himself. You would think me a bit crazy or crazier than usual if I suddenly decided to trade in my Honda Jazz for a horse. You know, you'd be thinking, well, that's a bit strange.

I wouldn't abandon my laptop computer to go back to my old Amstrad word processor or some old typewriter. Things have been superseded. Belong in the past. We sometimes give babies a dummy to keep them quiet.

[14:09] Dummy is used to pacify. I think that's what our American cousins call them, isn't it? Pacifiers. Parents pacify a young child. And with babies and very young children, we see that as altogether appropriate. But if we see a 40-year-old man sitting in church sucking a dummy, we would think something has gone wrong. That would be aberrant behavior. It would be a sign of immaturity or something worse. Because the dummy is not meant to be a permanent fixture. It's only for a short time.

Likewise, the diets and days of the Old Testament were only for a time. They weren't built to last. They were shadows pointing to Jesus. They were signposts, not the destination.

If you're, you know, if you're going to Glasgow and you see a sign, Glasgow M8, you don't stop at the signpost and gather around it. You go where it's pointing you, even if it's to Glasgow. Yeah, I'll just stop there.

And that's what Paul is driving at here. You know, don't get fixated on the signs. Don't let these things obscure the destination. Focus on the substance, which is Christ Himself.

Don't exchange gospel substance for religious shadows. Secondly, don't exchange gospel truth for what we'll call religious speculation. Verses 18 and 19, let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and the worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by a sensuous mind, not holding fast to the head from whom the whole body nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments grows with a growth that is from God.

[16:07] That little phrase, let no one disqualify you, can be translated variously. Let no one condemn you, or maybe let no one pass judgment on you. These false teachers were judging the Colossian believers by their own worldly standards. They were looking down their noses at them, their simple faith in Jesus.

And they were insisting on asceticism, a word that conveys the idea of false humility. They gave the appearance of being humble and devoted, but it was really just a show of religious pride.

They fasted. They fasted. They abased themselves. But it was all designed really to parade a sense of spiritual superiority. It was a bit, you know, look at us. Look how spiritual we are. It was the very opposite of that true humility that comes through Christ. And then there was the worship of angels in that part of the ancient world. Angels were often invoked through magical practices for help and protection from evil powers. And it's likely that their assistance was being sought, and these angelic beings were being so venerated that they become objects of worship and devotion. It was idolatry. They were looking to angels rather than Christ. They were angel-centered rather than Christ-centered. And then Paul mentions visions, going on in detail about visions puffed up without reason by a sensuous mind. Again, in some of the mystery cults of that time, initiation rites involved kind of ecstatic visions. And these visionary experiences were sought after. They were viewed as a kind of badge of spiritual maturity and standing. And I think it's likely that Paul is alluding to something of this kind. Mystical, visionary experiences that puff people up with a sense of their own importance.

What do we make of those who claim to have visions from God? Now, of course, Paul himself had a vision of Christ on the Damascus road.

[18:21] And indeed, he tells the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 that he received further visions and revelations from the Lord. Now, Paul was a leading apostle of the early church.

No one can seriously make that kind of claim today. Or can they? Unfortunately, such claims are sometimes all too frequent. There are many today who make great claims about receiving visions and direct revelations from God. The claims are great. Jesus spoke to me. The Lord told me. God showed me.

And sometimes it's very hard to contradict or to push back against such claims. After all, who are we to question God? But in truth, making such claims is very easy. Anyone can make them.

Prophetic words of knowledge, revelations and visions, promises of blessings for the faithful. Indeed, indeed, in some settings, the Word of God is set aside in favor of these apparently more exciting and immediate revelations. It is easy for some people to claim divine authority and direct

revelation from God, and on that basis seek to direct and control others.

In other words, invariably, it is a path that leads to pastoral carnage, because these speculative visions and dreams lead people away from the Word of God and away from God Himself.

[20:06] Many of such fellowships that have allowed such things have descended into all manner of heresies, because they've exchanged the truth of the gospel for religious speculation. It is never a wise course to follow.

So, what was this group of false teachers missing? Where were they going wrong? The dangerous characteristic, the evidence, was this, verse 19, They were not holding fast to the head from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

What's he saying? They were not holding on to Jesus, because Christ alone is the head of the church. He is the one who directs the body. He is the one who sustains the body.

He is the one who nourishes the body. He is the one who binds His people together in unity. He is the one, the only one, who leads His church to growth and maturity.

And so, union and communion with Christ are absolutely vital. In his little commentary on Colossians, the English preacher, Steve Brady, tells of an experience learning to water ski in the English Channel.

[21:31] He was all kitted out in his wetsuit and life jacket, and he was assured that this was all going to be very easy. There was a rope with a little handle attached to a powerful speedboat.

All he had to do was to hold the handle between his bent knees, let the rope take the strain, and as the boat surged away, he would be water skiing. Simple.

Well, not quite. He says, after swallowing a huge quantity of water from the English Channel, being left adrift from the boat for the umpteenth time, he again found himself bobbing about in the water. His friend pulled up alongside in the boat and asked Steve, do you know what faith is? And though he was an experienced minister, Steve wisely decided not to rise to debate, and instead said, Peter, tell me.

And Peter replied, Faith is holding on. Don't let go of the rope. And friends, we need to be doing that. We need to be holding on to Jesus.

[22:42] We mustn't let go of the Lord. We need to be abiding in Jesus. Thomas Chalmers wrote, Oh, let me abide in Christ, and in Him have nourishment and strength.

You want to grow as a Christian? You need to be united to and abiding in the Lord Jesus Christ. You need to be holding on to Him by faith. Don't exchange gospel substance for religious shadows. Don't exchange gospel truth for human speculation. Keep holding on to Jesus. Third thing, don't exchange, verses 28 through 23, don't exchange gospel freedom for religious rules.

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they're used, according to human precepts and teachings.

These indeed have an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion, that asceticism and severity to the body, but they're of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

[23:59] So, this third prong of Paul's appeal is for the Colossians not to be seduced, we'll call it, by a religion of rules, because these false teachers laid great emphasis on certain rules and regulations, and they encouraged the Colossians to submit themselves to their teachings, as if this was the way of real, true spiritual progress.

And Paul reminds them that since they've already died to the spiritual pattern of this world, why on earth would they live as if they still belong there? They've been set free in Jesus Christ.

They were now part of God's new creation. Why would they return to this old way of life? Why would they submit themselves to worldly rules and regulations?

What on earth were they thinking? The regulations that the false teachers were seeking to impose were promoted, as I've said, as a way of kind of true holiness.

Paul says here that these things are of no value. They're purely external. They're not a matter of the heart. They're of human, not divine origin. They're fixed, their attention on a world that is passing away.

[25:12] Not on Christ who reigns and rules over all things. Paul asks the Colossians, why do you submit to such things? Now, that's a good question.

Why is a religion of man-made rules sometimes so attractive? Well, I think we must remember that rules can be very comforting.

They have a very strong appeal for many. Submitting ourselves to certain extra-biblical religious rules can make us feel very good about ourselves. If you just need to recall some of the often bizarre rules imposed upon people during COVID-19.

Extraordinary, really, when you think about it. And how absolutely obsessive some people became about them. And in the same way, rules-based religion can be very satisfying.

It gives all the appearance of spiritual wisdom. Adhering to rules can make you feel very good and very righteous. And unfortunately, churches can be infected with this kind of approach.

[26 : 30] Sometimes churches can morph into something quite authoritarian. Church life can be very regimented. There can be a kind of unwritten behavioral code. The atmosphere can be very controlling.

People become accustomed to being told what they can and cannot do in all sorts of secondary and peripheral matters. And in a strange way, people can really feel very safe and secure in such a context.

It can all sound so very spiritual. And it can be very difficult to leave and break free. And over the years, I've seen just how such a culture of unwritten rules often can damage people and cause harm to the cause of Christ.

People are psychologically stripped of their freedom. It generates into a situation of spiritual abuse from which it's very hard to break free. You know, sometimes in a domestic abuse case where perhaps a wife is oppressed by a domineering husband.

And we wonder, why doesn't she just leave for her own well-being and safety? Friends, it's never that easy. It can be very hard to free yourself from an abusive relationship.

[27 : 50] And this group in Colossae, with all their rules and regulations, were very intimidating, appeared very spiritually impressive, high level of commitment, rigorous, disciplined, sincere, full of do's and don'ts.

But look at what Paul says about such practice. These have indeed, verse 23, an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism, severity to the body.

But they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. What was he saying? He said, they feed the self. But they're useless in combating the flesh, the sinful nature.

They don't help people overcome sin. Why? Because the root of sin remains untouched. These religious practices, rules, serve to feed the sinful nature and actually encourage feelings of pride and superiority.

Friends, such rules will not make you like Jesus. They will not transform you. Friends, they will deform you. They will not make you holy or godly because such rules have no power to change the human heart.

[29 : 11] Real godliness is created only when the roots of sin have been destroyed and uprooted. It can be created only when the roots of our fear and pride and insecurity have been dealt with by the power of Christ's gospel.

Godliness is only produced when people have been set free by the Holy Spirit to live for Jesus Christ. God pouring out His love into our hearts by His Spirit.

Jesus Christ coming to live within us. Godly living is about loving, adoring, worshiping, enjoying the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ. And these religious rules obscured the glory of Christ. They diminished Him. They did not exalt Him.

Their rules meant that a person was puffed up, but the body of Christ was not built up. And so, Paul says, don't exchange gospel substance for religious shadows.

[30 : 19] Don't exchange gospel truth for human speculation. Don't exchange gospel freedom for religious rules. You see, the essence of the world's way of thinking is to get us to look to someone or something else to complete us and make us whole other than Jesus Christ.

It's when we think we can complete our own lives by our own efforts, our good works, our religious acts. It's when we look to establish our own righteousness and credit before God, or it's when we look to other things, money and power and status or whatever to fill up our empty lives.

And these avenues may be popular, but they're dead ends. They will take us nowhere but despair. They will always leave us empty. Don't be afraid to really give your life to Jesus.

And yes, that can feel very scary, but He alone can slake our thirst and make us whole. I'm reminded of a scene in one of C.S. Lewis' Narnia books, The Silver Chair. Jill is searching for water in the wood when she encounters Aslan the lion. If you're thirsty, you may drink. For a second, she stared here and there, wondering who had spoken.

[31 : 48] Then the voice said it again, If you're thirsty, come and drink. It was deeper, wilder, stronger, a sort of heavy, golden voice. It did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in rather a different way.

Are you not thirsty, said the lion? I'm dying of thirst, said Jill. Then drink, said the lion. May I? Could I?

Would you mind going away while I do, said Jill? The lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. The delicious, rippling noise of the stream was driving her, nearly frantic.

Will you promise not to do anything to me if I do come, said Jill. I make no promise, said the lion. I dare not come and drink, said Jill.

Then you will die of thirst, said the lion. Oh dear, said Jill, coming another step nearer. I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.

[32 : 57] There is no other stream, said the lion. Friends, there is no other stream. If you are not a Christian this evening, then come and grab hold of Jesus by faith.

Put your life in His hands, you will not regret it. And if you are a Christian, then keep holding on to Jesus. Don't let go of Him. Don't be lured away from Him. He alone is the way and the truth and the life.

Don't be scammed by this world's religion. All manner of religious cul-de-sacs and spiritual dead ends exist today.

Man-made religion will take us nowhere. Look to the life-giving Savior. Drink from no other stream. Turn your eyes on Jesus because everything we need is found in Him. Let's pray together. Lord, help us to lean and trust and depend not on ourselves but on the Lord Jesus Christ.

[34 : 20] Help us to look to Him in faith. Help us to hold on to Him by faith knowing that He holds on to us and He has promised never to let us go.

Lord, we confess tonight that there is no other stream, no other fountain, no other Savior. And we pray these things in His name. Amen. Amen.