

# The Constant Danger of False Teaching (Colossians 2:16-23)

**Big Idea:** Cling to Jesus and reject false teaching.

Have you ever been part of a conversation that left you feeling like you were missing something?

I have, one a long time ago, and one more recently.

The first was asking someone an important question a long time ago. The response was a story, a fable. I understood every word, but at the end of it didn't have a clue what the answer was. I felt like the longer we talked, the less I knew what we were talking about. I was missing the subtext of the conversation.

The other time was just a short time ago. I heard someone address a difficult topic in front of a big crowd. She did a great job, and I agreed with everything she said. But it seemed like she was addressing a problem, and I wasn't quite sure what that problem was.

Sometimes we hear someone talk, and even though we understand them, we're left with questions about what they're trying to say, and what problems they're trying to address.

I think, in some ways, that's the case in Colossians, the letter we've been studying. Colossians is an amazing book. It was written from jail by the apostle Paul to a small church in a two-bit town, and the message is so good. Here's the overall message of the book: **nothing needs to be added to the work of Christ, because he's all you need.** That's the message we need to hear over and over again.

- We don't need anything more than the gospel. We just need more of the gospel.
- In fact, our greatest need is to renew our vision of Jesus – to see him more clearly for who he really is.
- Our job is not only to comprehend who Jesus is, but to tell other people too.
- Whenever we start to keep distracted by other things, keep your focus on Jesus. Refuse to be distracted by anything else.

That's what we've seen so far in this book.

But today we're going to go even further. We're going to see the problem that Paul is writing to address, and then we're also going to learn the solution that we need in answer to this problem.

## **The Problem: Every Generation Is Tempted to Abandon the Gospel**

Colossians 2:8 describes the problem that Paul wants to address in this book.

*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.*

Boom. Why is Paul writing this letter? Because people in the church were trying to take them captive with false teaching. That's why Paul spends so much time talking about

Jesus in this letter, because Jesus is so much better than whatever false teaching these people were trying to peddle.

If you picture the Christian faith as a song, it's possible to lose track of the melody and to begin singing another song altogether without even realizing it. Paul writes and tells them not to lose the melody, because if you get it wrong, the music will stop.

Side note: A lot of people today think that false teaching is no big deal. But it's a huge deal! Paul says that this false teaching is taking them captive. It's a form of spiritual kidnapping. He even says that it's not only human in origin but also demonic. False teaching is serious stuff! Trevin Wax [writes](#):

*Some contemporary theologians and church leaders embrace ambiguity, telling us it is better to hold our doctrinal beliefs loosely, to accept the fuzziness of gray instead of black-and-white pronouncements regarding truth and falsehood. But this attitude is foreign to the New Testament. There we find a different picture, an emphasis on right beliefs and right actions with massive consequences. Eternity hangs in the balance.*

We can't just ignore false teaching. We can't just agree to disagree. We put ourselves in spiritual danger when we tolerate false teaching. Paul's waving his arms in Colossians. He's warning us, because he knows the Colossians are in danger. Like a warning sign on the edge of a bluff, or a yellow warning sign on a windy road, Paul's warnings are designed to protect us from danger, and we ignore them at our peril.

Finally, in this passage, we get to what the problem in the Colossian church actually was. We live almost 2,000 years and 8,500 kilometers from Colossae, so we face a very different set of false teachings. But see if you can spot the false teachings that the Colossians faced:

*Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. (2:16)*

*Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind... (2:18)*

*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 are used)– according to human precepts and teachings? (2:20-22)*

Here are the three false teachings they faced. The thing that all three have in common is that all of them claimed to offer a plan for spiritual development that didn't have Christ at the center. Here they are:

1. Legalism (2:16) – The idea, inspired by some of the Jewish laws around diet and holy days and mixed with other religious ideas and practices, that you have to eat a certain way and observe certain holy days to be spiritual
2. Mysticism (2:18) – This is probably the hardest verse in Colossians to understand, but it's some mix of self-denial, calling on angels to protect you, having spiritual experiences and visions, and being proud about it
3. Asceticism (2:20-22) – The idea that you must abstain from certain food and drink in order to be spiritual

For some reason, this mix of ideas seemed better to some in Colossae than Jesus did. I suppose some may still struggle with one or two of these problems. Legalism – the idea that we have to obey God's commands on our own strength and even add to

what the Bible requires – is still around in some parts, but it’s not the problem that we face.

And I actually find this helpful. We’re inoculated against certain false teachings that are dangerous to others, and this helps us to see the weirdness of false teaching. “Wow. They fell for that? I don’t get it.” It’s because they lived in a different time and place. They were exposed to different influences than we’re exposed to. They were a product of their culture, and their culture affected what they were tempted to believe.

Just like now. We’re tempted to believe an entirely different set of false teachings. Very few people are pushing false teachings about Jewish holidays and angel worship. The question is: what is our culture telling us that we’re tempted to believe that could take us away from Jesus? If Paul was writing to us to tell us not to be taken captive by false teachings in circulation, which errors would he identify?

In his book [\*The Thrill of Orthodoxy\*](#), Trevin Wax writes:

*In every generation, we risk losing our wonder at the glory of Christian truth and the enduring witness of the church. Amid chaos and confusion, we can easily turn our focus on ourselves and, as a result, forget God. It’s as if we have inherited a vast estate—sprawling grounds surrounding beautiful buildings filled with priceless heirlooms—but we stay cooped up in a broom closet, complacent and bored, with no desire to explore all that we’ve been given in Christ.*

*We’ve been here before. Chaos and confusion are not new. Every generation faces these challenges, for different reasons.*

Our temptations are different today than the ones the Colossians faced. And the next generation will face a different set of temptations. But we’re all faced with this temptation. Even scarier, we’ll probably be blind to the particular temptations we face.

So how should we respond?

## **How to Respond: Cling to Jesus**

What's the answer to these false teachings?

Paul provides one big answer: Jesus. It sounds like a Sunday school answer, but it's not. The same answer that Paul gave to the Colossians is the same solution that will help us today against whatever false teachings we face.

### **Instead of shadows, look to the substance.**

"These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Colossians 2:17).

All the Hebrew laws about diet and holy days had a purpose: they anticipated Jesus. The Jews had special feast days and dietary laws. But as Hebrews 10:1 says, they were just "a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities."

But now we have the substance. Now we have the true form of those realities. We have Jesus.

The answer to legalism is Jesus. Don't settle for the shadow when you have the substance.

## **Instead of mysticism, hold on to Jesus.**

Are you getting the picture here? Paul says the solution to legalism is Jesus. Guess what the solution to mysticism is? Jesus.

*Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and 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. (2:18-19)*

You know what's better than angels and visions? Jesus. You have the Head. You have the final authority in the world – look at Colossians 1.

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. (1:15-18)*

So why would you settle for angels and mystical experiences when you have Jesus? Stay connected to Jesus your Head, Paul says, and the body will grow. Start to get connected to anything else and you will shrivel up and die. Don't let go of Jesus, because he is everything.

## **Instead of asceticism, which looks powerful but isn't, stick with Jesus who looks powerless but is powerful.**

*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 are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:20-23)*

You know the problem with rules about not doing certain things, about adding rules to the Bible? It gives you the appearance of being holy without you actually being holy. Religious regulations look powerful but they're powerless to change you.

You know what helps? Jesus. Jesus is, as verse 19 tells us, the only source of spiritual power and growth.

**In other words, no matter what the false teaching is, the solution is Jesus. So cling to Jesus and reject false teaching.**

What are the lies we're tempted to believe? They're probably very different from the ones the Colossians were tempted to believe. But the solution is the same. There's something about Jesus that is better than any of the lies that try to draw us away from him.

Jesus is better than finding yourself. Jesus is better than redefining sin. Jesus is better than anything that comes along and tries to draw us away from him.



Be willing to stand up against what's wrong no matter how attractive it might seem. No matter what the false teaching is, the solution is Jesus. So cling to Jesus and reject false teaching.

Lord, help us to identify the lies we're tempted to believe. They're probably not about legalism; they're more likely about deciding for ourselves what's right and wrong. They're probably not about angels and visions; they're more likely about a world in which the spiritual hardly exists. And they're probably not about self-denial about self-indulgence.

But no matter what the lies, the solution is the same: Jesus, the One who died for us, the One who is the Head, the One who is the source of all of our growth, the One who is our only hope. So help us to cling to him and reject false teaching. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.