



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Watch Out for Deceptive Philosophies

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PASTOR FRANK ERB / BOX 13188, SACRAMENTO, CA / FRANK.ERB@CAPITOLCOM.ORG

As we study through Paul's Letter to the Colossians, we now come to Colossians 2:8-23, a section that includes a series of warnings about false teachings. There are many unbiblical beliefs that can lead a follower of Christ away from the truth, and we are cautioned about a number of them here. Today, let us consider the first, which the Apostle Paul describes as "philosophy and empty deception."

COLOSSIANS 2:8-10 SEE TO IT THAT NO ONE TAKES YOU CAPTIVE THROUGH PHILOSOPHY AND EMPTY DECEPTION, ACCORDING TO THE TRADITION OF MEN, ACCORDING TO THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES OF THE WORLD, RATHER THAN ACCORDING TO CHRIST. FOR IN HIM ALL THE FULLNESS OF DEITY DWELLS IN BODILY FORM, AND IN HIM YOU HAVE BEEN MADE COMPLETE, AND HE IS THE HEAD OVER ALL RULE AND AUTHORITY;

Let's examine this passage phrase by phrase:

SEE TO IT ...

Literally "Beware" or "Look out."¹ As believers we need to remember that we live in an environment that is hostile to our faith in God. We are always in danger of spiritual attack, as the Apostle Peter warned: "*Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8). We are also often exposed to false teachers, so Peter cautioned: "*be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness*" (2 Peter 3:17). So much is at stake that Paul warns us to "guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you" (2 Timothy 1:14).

... THAT NO ONE TAKES YOU CAPTIVE ...

The word translated "takes you captive" means "to carry off as booty or as a captive." It was used in the sense of "to kidnap."²

If we are not careful, we can be kidnapped by false or misleading teaching. I have personally seen this happen in many people's lives. I remember one young man who had been a worship leader in our church. He was full of enthusiasm for God and had been leading people to Him for years. Then, he got a new job and began working closely with many other intelligent men who had an interest in

science and philosophy. Gradually, unbeknown to me, my friend was losing his faith. By the time I discovered this change, he was an avowed atheist, unwilling to even consider that God might exist. How did it happen? He let down his guard and was kidnapped by false teachings.

... THROUGH PHILOSOPHY AND EMPTY DECEPTION...

In the first century Roman Empire, this word philosophy (from *philo-sophia*, "love of wisdom") was a very broad term. "Everything that had to do with theories about God and the world and the meaning of human life was called 'philosophy' at the time, not only in the pagan schools but also in the Jewish schools of the Greek cities."³ The Greeks had largely invented philosophy as a school of thought, and well-educated first-century Romans continued to enjoy philosophical debate and discussion, which meant that the early preachers, such as Paul, were frequently confronted with skeptical crowds who challenged the gospel message (see Acts 17).

Paul was not critical of those who sought knowledge or wisdom. In fact, he was highly educated himself (Acts 26:24) and the Bible often exhorts us to seek true wisdom (Proverbs 2-3). He was, though, cautioning about those who would seek to discover ultimate wisdom and knowledge apart from the one true God. In verse 4 he warned about those who would "delude" others through "persuasive argument," and here again he warns of their "empty deception" (see also 1 Timothy 6:20).

... ACCORDING TO THE TRADITION OF MEN...

Philosophical and religious systems are usually based on prior systems of thought. If these traditions are from God, they should be respected as such (1 Cor. 11:12, 2 Thes. 2:15, 3:6). However, traditions that come from the mind of man are not to be considered authoritative. Jesus had strong words for those who follow "the tradition of men" but "neglect the commandments of God" (Mark 7:7-13). Tradition can be helpful, but the mere fact that a belief is old does not mean that it is any more likely to be true.

... ACCORDING TO THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES OF THE WORLD,...

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY/FELLOWSHIP MEETINGS

LEGISLATORS: WEDNESDAYS @ 8:00 AM, ASSEMBLY RULES COMMITTEE ROOM
STAFF/LOBBYISTS/OTHERS: THURSDAYS @ 12:00 NOON, CAPITOL ROOM 125

California

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Men may mean well with their ideas, but ultimately their teaching, if not from God's word, is based on "the elementary principles" of the world (*kosmos*). This word "elementary" is used in Col. 2:20 and Galatians 4:3,9 with reference to those who are caught up in legalistic, rules-based religion rather than the good news of Jesus Christ.

... RATHER THAN ACCORDING TO CHRIST. 9FOR IN HIM ALL THE FULLNESS OF DEITY DWELLS IN BODILY FORM, 10AND IN HIM YOU HAVE BEEN MADE COMPLETE, AND HE IS THE HEAD OVER ALL RULE AND AUTHORITY;...

The "fullness" of God, Paul says, is found in Christ. Note the present tense of the word "dwells" in vs. 9. Jesus still lives, is fully God, and is in charge of the universe.

All the "fullness" (*pleroma*, vs. 9, cf. 1:19) of God is in Christ, and in Him you have been made "complete" or "full" (*pleroo*, vs. 10) too. As John Calvin explained, this "does not mean that the perfection of Christ is transfused into us, but that there are in him resources from which we may be filled, that nothing be wanting in us."⁴

APPLICATION:

This world is always looking for substitutes for the message of Jesus Christ and the Bible. Philosophy as a field of study is often humanistic and godless, with a preference for agnosticism or atheism.⁵ While most modern Americans do not consciously study philosophy, we are all constantly surrounded by and influenced by a multitude of unbiblical philosophical viewpoints, including:

- **Humanism** is the philosophy that mankind can achieve all they need apart from God. Self-help books, which are immensely popular today, often propagate this belief. This view may lead one to political activism if they believe that humans are capable of creating a utopia through social transformation.
- **Atheism** is the philosophy that there is no deity of any kind. This view was largely non-existent in the first-century world, which was mainly polytheistic, but is rapidly growing in popularity today. Atheistic evangelists such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and comedian Bill Maher preach this philosophy with what could be called religious fervor. Consider these quotes from Richard Dawkins, whom many say is

the leading spokesperson for atheism today. *"I think my ultimate goal would be to convert people away from particular religions toward a rationalist skepticism." Also, "Faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate."*

- **Undirected Evolution** is the philosophy that all life evolved by chance and random mutation without any guidance or direction from God.
- **Mysticism** is the philosophy that spiritual insight is subjectively attained through secret discoveries or rituals. Note that in recent years Oprah Winfrey, who is hugely popular, has popularized *The Secret*, a book that the author claims "reveals the natural law that is governing all lives." Astrology, zodiac, and fortune-telling would also fit into this category.

These are just a few of the many unbiblical philosophies that are widely accepted in our day. In future studies, we will also consider legalism, moralism, and traditionalism.

False teachings are poor substitutes for the real truth that is found in Jesus Christ. As explained in Colossians 2:8-10, He is the full revelation of God and is completely trustworthy. His word, the Bible, is therefore the only reliable basis for judging all other philosophies. (See also 1 Corinthians 2 for a rich explanation of this.) Through careful Bible study and honest and humble evaluation, we can "examine everything carefully and hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

¹ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures of the New Testament*. (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), 490.

² Rienecker & Rogers, *Linguistic Key of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).

³ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 98.

⁴ Quoted in Curtis Vaughan, *Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1978).

⁵ Of course, there have been many devout and brilliant Christian philosophers throughout the centuries. This is still true today, with men such as JP Moreland, Ravi Zacharias, William Lane Craig, and Dallas Willard receiving widespread recognition.