

THE FUNDAMENTAL CHOICE IN LIFE

COLOSSIANS 2:20-3:4

All of us must choose which kingdom we want to belong to.

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Weak Christians Are Easily Confused By Satan

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The Fundamental Choice in Life

Colossians 2:20-3:4

Up to this point in his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul has been arguing for the superiority of Christ at every level of existence. He is the author, creator, and sustainer of the universe and every created thing in it. Jesus is also superior to any religion, philosophy, or any spiritual force, real or imagined.

That is going to be important because now Paul is going to remind the Colossians and us that there is only one fundamental choice in life that we must make. Either we will continue to be subject to the Kingdom of Satan or the Kingdom of God. There is no third option. No one can be neutral or true to self. If we follow self, then we are in actuality under the rule and control of Satan. If we give our lives to Jesus Christ, then we are under the rule and control of God the Holy Spirit. There is no other choice. All religions, philosophies, and schools of thought that are not Christian, as defined by the Bible, are under the rule and control of Satan. You can hear the concern in Paul's voice as he warns the Colossians not to be fooled or deceived.

The fact is this. We make a fundamental choice as to which Kingdom we give our allegiance. And these kingdoms have masters that rule them. Satan rules the Kingdom of Darkness. Jesus rules the Kingdom of God. We have masters. That is what the word lord means in Greek. If we are believers, then Jesus is our Lord. We get off track when we forget that and start serving the wrong master. Let me demonstrate to you how sad it is to forget.

Three elderly sisters lived together. They were 84, 85, and 86-years-old. The eldest went upstairs to take a bath. She drew the water and then dipped her foot in it. All of a sudden she yelled to the other sisters, "Was I getting in or out of the bath?"

The middle sister started up the stairs paused and yelled out, "Was I going up the stairs or down?"

The youngest sister was sitting at the kitchen enjoying a cup of tea and was entertained by the conversation of her two older sisters. She shook her head and said, "I sure hope I never get that forgetful, knock on wood," and then rapped her knuckles three times on the wooden table. She then yelled out to the other two sisters, "I'll come up and help both of you ... as soon as I see who's at the door!"

Forgetfulness like this comes with old age and we all experience it. It can be comical. But forgetting which kingdom we belong to and who is our Lord can be deadly.

The main idea of this morning's text is this. **ALL OF US MUST CHOOSE WHICH KINGDOM WE WANT TO BELONG TO.** Paul will lay out the argument that the Kingdom of God is eternal. The Kingdom of Satan is temporary. The Kingdom of God is more powerful and actually more liberating. He will then go on through the next portion of the letter describing the kinds of thoughts and behaviors that characterize people who belong to each kingdom. But for now he will just lay out the argument for making the right choice and sticking by it.

I. THE KINGDOM OF SATAN (VS 20-23)

Weak Christians Are Easily Confused By Satan

In verses 20-23 he reminds the church in Colosse that they no longer belong to the Kingdom of Satan. However, he warns them that **WEAK CHRISTIANS ARE EASILY CONFUSED BY SATAN.** In other words, it's astounding how easily Christians are fooled and how easily we are drawn back to the world.

A. NO DUAL CITIZENSHIP (20a)

In this age of tolerance and I'm okay you're okay philosophy, we get confused as to the fundamental choice everyone has to make. Paul states clearly that there is no dual citizenship allowed in the first half of verse 20. I don't think Paul could make it any clearer. If we are Christians, then we have died to the world. We are either dead to God or dead to Satan. Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters. I think we all kind of understand that. But I think where most Christians get confused is identifying what these basic principles of the world are.

The word for basic principles came up before but I just went over it quickly. The word in Greek is *stoikeion*. There is a broad range of meaning to this word. It could refer to the simple ABCs of life. In other words, what we call common sense, conventional wisdom, and simple scientific principles. It can refer to angelic and demonic powers at work in the world. And it can mean the demonic penetration of human institutions, governments, power structures, ego, and cultural norms. Let me explain this a little further. We know that God built order into the creation. In fact the bible says to God ordained governments to maintain social order. Human institutions like marriage, the educational system, and cultural norms all help to maintain order.

However, because of the fall and the demonic infestation of human life, all these institutions have been perverted by Satan. We can even see the demonic influence of church structures and educational institutions. They are always vulnerable to abuses of power, egocentric thinking, and perverted thinking.

Paul says that if we are believers that we should be dead to all of that stuff. In other words, we shouldn't be influenced by worldly thinking. Again, that sounds easy to understand and all of us would easily amen those thoughts.

B. CONFUSED SUBMISSION (20b-21)

However, it gets a little more complicated than that. We become confused when we take things that seem compatible with Christianity and ultimately make them equal to or greater than Christian truth. Let me give you some examples. In Italian culture, it is a virtue to be hospitable and generous. If someone is not hospitable and generous, he or she is shunned by family, friends, and neighbors. So culture kind of "forces" people into being hospitable and generous. That is certainly a virtue in Christianity as well.

The bible commands us to be hospitable and generous. Now here is where it gets confusing. People then often make the mistake of thinking that just because people are hospitable and generous, that they are mature Christians. For example, if I'm living in an Italian community and I am helping people, being generous with my time and money, and bringing food to people and having people into my house to eat, the real motivation may be my culture. But people in the church may be identifying me as a very good Christian. The problem becomes that culture ends up trumping Christianity. I may hold some very bad theology, but because I'm generous and hospitable, people may identify me as a good Christian. But the truth is I may not be Christian at all.

The same kind of confusion comes when looking at other religions. Take for example Buddhists. Buddhist monks seem to very dedicated people who reject the riches of this world. They are humble, pray a lot, and meditate a lot. They try not to harm any living creature and they try to help humanity.

Well certainly those traits seem compatible with Christianity. The monks seem to be mystical holy people who live lifestyles that seem to be the type of lifestyle that Christ calls us to. But make no mistake. No matter how good, noble, holy, or righteous people of all sorts of religions, philosophies, and schools of thought look; they do not belong to the Kingdom of God.

The reason people are so easily confused is that most of us have not committed ourselves to pursuing holy lives. And when we see people who appear to be holy or religious, we are easily impressed and fooled. Make no mistake, there are people who are good Italians, good

Americans, good Asians, etc. who are not Christians at all. There are dedicated religious people who pray, give money and are dedicated to the point of sacrificing their lives for their religion who are not Christians.

I have to say that it has been my experience that most western Christians are easily fooled because we don't study our bibles, we don't take the truths of Scripture seriously, and we don't believe in the God of the Bible. And when we encounter people who seem to take religion seriously, we are impressed by their "spirituality" even though it is false and serves the devil. Paul was worried about the Colossians and pastors all over the world worry about their congregations.

What happens next is even more frightening. In the second half of verse 20 through verse 21, we see people being so confused that they end up following these people with confused submission. I have actually heard women quote these verses as an argument against drinking. They would wag their fingers and say, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" And they sounded holy and knowledgeable. I don't ever recall anyone challenging them. Paul is actually arguing against these women. He says that we shouldn't be confused by people who act and talk holy but fail to take time to examine what they are really saying and doing. Did you ever see people publicly display their worship? I have seen people get out of their pews and kneel in the aisles. I have seen people weep and lay down prostrate on the floor. I remember taking some people on a retreat. During the preaching, elders and leaders would start weeping and crying and moaning. Other pastors would say, "Isn't this great?" My response would always be, "Let's see how they act two weeks after the retreat." I am always suspicious of people who use religious language and do religious stuff. I'm more interested in the genuineness of their faith.

There are people in the Christian church that say a lot of stuff that sounds right but really has no power to change anyone. Anyone can say, "Our church needs to evangelize more. Our church needs to pray more. Our church needs to visit the sick more, etc." All those things are good and need to be done. Who would be against prayer or evangelism, or visiting the sick? But religious people insist that it be their way.

For example, I have had people come up to me and say, "Our church should be helping the poor."

I would ask, "Are you helping the poor?" They would righteously and indignantly answer, "Of course I help the poor." And then I would say, "Well then since you are a member of our church, our church is helping the poor."

Listen, these types of people only have the power to destroy, tear apart, and tear down the church. Religious people look good on the outside, but Jesus always says to look at the fruit in their lives, not their outward demonstration of religious works.

If you're a Christian, quit being fooled by counterfeit spirituality. Study your Bibles! Know the truth! Live the truth! If we ourselves live authentic Christianity, we will not be fooled by counterfeit Christianity.

C. DEATHLY SUBMISSION (22)

Paul is worried because this kind of misguided submission leads to deathly submission as described by Paul in verse 22. People who chase after worldly counterfeits of spirituality will end up just as dead as these religious expressions. Look, in the end, culture will pass away, politics will pass away, governments, religions, philosophies, and all human institutions will all pass away. And yet, people try to Christianize all their thoughts and behaviors. They all make it sound so noble, and right, and good. But we must continually ask ourselves what we are spending our time, energy, and lives on.

D. DEATHLY CONFUSED (23)

Because in verse 23 Paul reminds his congregations how deathly confused the world is. Again, since the world is so pathetically devoid of spirituality, all sorts of false spiritualities look good. Look, religious people are good at looking good and fooling people. We who are Christians and seriously pursuing holiness must make sure we don't fall into the traps laid out here. First of all, we have to be careful that we don't fall into self-imposed worship. It's easy to take a passage from Scripture here and there and to build a theology of what worship is. We try to set a mood or encourage a specific response. Jesus said that since God is spirit, we must worship Him in Spirit and in truth. We do not have the option of making up our own religion. Secondly we must be careful not to display false humility. People always like to talk about being humble. And oftentimes they are proud of it. My friend used to tell me, "If you want to know if you have a servant's heart, see how you respond when people treat you like a servant." People like to pretend they're humble but I have not met much authentic humility.

And the third is asceticism. Again we can see where people take normal Christian practices, blow them out of proportion, and assign different values to them. Fasting is part of the Christian life. But because I fast and you don't, that doesn't make me any better than you and it certainly doesn't mean I am more holy than you. There are all sorts of Christian disciplines: prayer, fasting, abstinence, giving, serving silence, etc. But doing these things will never make us holy. They are tools to be used, not measures of holiness.

Religious people who feign worship, humility, and sacrifice, are actually serving their own egos. They become more and more enslaved to their pride and it is sad to see people who are so deathly confused.

I understand why these people look so good to baby Christians but what confuses me is to see so many people who claim to have been Christians for many, many years, and who think they are mature, to continue to be fooled by counterfeit Christianity. The truth is this. We have an enemy who preys on the weak. **WEAK CHRISTIANS ARE EASILY CONFUSED BY SATAN.**

Jesus said this:

"¹⁰The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give life in all its fullness" (John 10:10 / NLT).

Even though Satan can counterfeit Christianity, and even though he can make things look good and noble, make no mistake, his goal is to steal, to kill, and to destroy. No matter how good people look, if they belong to the Kingdom of Satan, they will become part of his plan to steal, to kill, and to destroy. And in the end Satan will see to it that all in his kingdom are destroyed with him.

II. THE KINGDOM OF GOD (VS 1-4)

Authentic Christians Are Totally Sold Out To God.

But we don't need to be enslaved to Satan and his plan for us. Jesus offers us the chance to become part of the Kingdom of God in verses 1-4 of chapter 3 and to be called children. But the mark of true believers is this. **AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANS ARE TOTALLY SOLD OUT TO GOD.** It seems to me that if we are pursuing holiness by reading and studying our bibles while trying to live out the commands of Scripture in the context of a community of believers who will hold us accountable, we will not be easily confused or duped by fake expressions of Christianity.

A. FOCUS YOUR AMBITION (1)

We do that by first of all focusing our ambition in verse 1. In sports there is a saying that the best defense is a good offense. In other words, if you are aggressively pursuing points then you don't have to worry so much about defending against the other team scoring points. If we are busy pursuing truth and holiness, there is a much better chance we won't be sucked into Satan's traps.

Paul starts out with a statement of fact. If in deed we are believers and if indeed we have died to the things of this world, then we are now alive and we are seated together with Jesus. Since we are now alive spiritually, since Jesus lives in us and we in Him, He now occupies earth through us and we occupy heaven through Him. And further, since our eternal homes are heaven, we should crave spiritual and eternal things. The phrase "set your hearts" is more passionate. It means to seek, to crave, to desire. Since our destiny is to be made perfectly holy and since our eternal homes are heaven, our goal, our desire, our ambition is to seek the things that will prepare us for that day. Jesus said it like this:

"¹⁹Don't store up treasures here on earth, where they can be eaten by moths and get rusty, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰Store your treasures in heaven, where they will never become moth-eaten or rusty and where they will be safe from thieves. ²¹Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be" (Matthew 6:19-21 / NLT).

Our ambition should be that we want to be good citizens of heaven. We have no more private lives. Since we now share life with Christ, we ought to be working at conforming our thoughts, our words, and our behavior so that it is compatible with Christ's. It should be our ambition to become more like Jesus every day.

B. FOCUS YOUR MIND (2)

In verse 2 we are commanded to focus our mind on the things of God. Again, the phrase "set your minds" is a good translation but again it misses the passion. We are to long for, feel for, and develop interests that are compatible with what our eternal life in heaven will be all about. It is really a treat to encounter someone who is actually trying to allow God to build in them love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. I know we chase after all sorts of things but we are to develop the same interests as our Lord Jesus. In talking about the basic things in life, Jesus even puts them in second place. He said,

"³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33 / NIV).

C. FOCUS YOUR ATTITUDE (3-4)

In order to be an authentic Christian who can easily smell out false spirituality, we must focus our ambitions and our minds on heavenly things. In addition we must focus our attitudes on heaven as well as described in verses 3-4. We have gone over this before several times but it is good we encounter it here again in our study through Colossians because it will set the tone for the next section. If we are dead to the things of this world, then it will be impossible for us to be fooled by Satan. For example, it would be stupid for a prostitute to go to a funeral home and proposition a corpse lying in a casket. The corpse has no sexual drive and it would be total absurdity to try to get him to be aroused. Likewise, you don't see car salesmen trying to put sell the corpse a new car, or an investment broker trying to sell him the latest and hottest stocks. The corpse has no use for them. If we have died with Christ to the things of this world, then power, money, lust, and sin should not appeal to us in the least. People can't really understand people who are not driven by these worldly motives. Christians should be a mystery to non Christians because our motives can't be seen. We are living for Christ and living for eternity. Unbelievers are living for themselves and for the immediate gratification of the here and now.

Our lives will not make sense until either we are safely home with Jesus in heaven through our earthly, physical death, or when Jesus returns and catches us up in the air to meet Him. It will all make perfect sense when we meet Him face to face. Our attitudes should be that of humble submission. We should be dead to the things of this world and actively seeking the things of God's heavenly kingdom. A great test is to constantly ask ourselves, "Is what I'm thinking, saying, and doing, consistent with how my life will be in heaven?" If the answer is, "Yes, that's

how I'll be thinking, talking, and acting in heaven," then we should continue with what we are doing. If the answer is no, then we should immediately stop what we are thinking, saying, or doing and make sure to correct it so that it is consistent with life in heaven is all about.

AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANS ARE TOTALLY SOLD OUT TO GOD. And the benefit of that is that we will not be easily fooled by Satan, the world, the lust of the world, the lust of the eyes, or the pride of life. So really life comes down to this. **ALL OF US MUST CHOOSE WHICH KINGDOM WE WANT TO BELONG TO.** And remember there are only two choices. We either belong to Christ or we belong to Satan.

III. EPILOGUE

I'm always amazed to see how dedicated people are to false religions, cults, political movements, and yet how pathetic Christians are. Listen to what Billy Graham published in one of his journals. It was a letter from a young Communist to his fiancée, breaking off their engagement. The letter read:

"We Communists have a high casualty rate. We are the ones who get shot and hung and ridiculed and fired from our jobs and in every other way made as uncomfortable as possible. A certain percentage of us get killed or imprisoned. We live in virtual poverty. We turn back to the party every penny we make above what is absolutely necessary to keep us alive. We Communists do not have the time or the money for many movies or concerts or T-bone steaks or decent homes or new cars. We have been described as fanatics. We are fanatics. Our lives are dominated by one great overshadowing factor: the struggle for world Communism. We Communists have a philosophy of life which no amount of money can buy. We have a cause to fight for, a definite purpose in life. We subordinate our petty personal selves into a great movement of humanity; and if our personal lives seem hard and our egos appear to suffer through subordination to the party, then we are adequately compensated by the thought that each of us in his small way is contributing to something new and true and better for mankind. There is one thing which I am dead earnest about, and this is the Communist cause. It is my life, my business, my religion, my hobby, my sweetheart, my wife and my mistress, my bread and meat. I work at it in the daytime and dream of it at night. Its hold on me grows, not lessens, as time goes on; therefore, I cannot carry on a friendship, a love affair, or even a conversation without relating it this force which both drives and guides my life. I evaluate people, looks, ideas, and actions according to how they affect the Communist cause, and by their attitudes toward it. I've already been in jail because of my ideals, and if necessary, I'm ready to go before a firing squad."

What's amazing to me is not so much that people can be so dedicated to such bankrupt causes as Communism or willing to blow themselves up for false religions, or even set themselves on fire for a cause. What's amazing to me is that people who claim to be Christian have not even begun to dedicate their lives to the One Who died for them with this kind of passion and dedication.

John Wesley put the advancement of the Kingdom of God like this:

"If I had three hundred men who feared nothing but God, and hated nothing but sin, and were determined to know nothing among men but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, I would set the world on fire."

We have seen people dedicated to political causes and false religions set the world on fire. It's a shame that we Christians are so pathetic that the world has not yet been set on fire for Christ.