

**“Guarding Our Treasure”**  
Colossians 2:16-23 (NRSV)

A number of people seem to think religion is **all about rules and regulations** and, therefore, they avoid the institutional church like the plague. But that is an incorrect assumption. **The Christian faith is all about being fulfilled and finding joy and freedom** in Christ. This is a treasure we need to guard zealously.

Last summer, Colleen and I began our trip to Eastern Europe with a visit to the ancient city of **Krakow, Poland**. Krakow’s magnificent town square – apparently the largest in Europe -- is bordered on one side by the massive edifice of St. Mary’s Church – where the late Pope John Paul II not so long ago served as archbishop. From the great steeple of the church’s bell-tower, a bugle has been sounded every evening for the last 700 years. But the last notes of the piece that is always played are suddenly broken off, as if some disaster has befallen the bugler. And, indeed, that is exactly what happened. The 700-year commemoration of a bugler’s song, now played by a city fireman every night, is done in memory of a heroic trumpeter who summoned the people to defend their city against hordes of invading Tartars. As he was sounding the last blast on his bugle so long ago, an arrow from one of the Tartars struck and killed him. So the notes are always suddenly broken off at the end. And in repeating the piece every evening, the Krakovians show that they have never forgotten this **heroic warning**.

The text under consideration today in Paul’s letter to the Colossians also carries **an ancient warning**, as the Apostle Paul sounds a clear note that has brought deliverance to many through the years ever since who would hear it. Originally a warning for the Colossian church that was besieged by those who profoundly misunderstood the nature of the Christian faith, thinking it consisted mainly of a list of rules and regulations, it still pertains today as a defense against people who think the fulfillment of certain moral requirements is what the faith is all about. Here is a bulwark against the very subtle attacks that would rob believers of their fulfillment and freedom in Christ.

**1. A warning against legalism (Col. 2:16-17).**

Paul’s first warning is **against legalism**. It happened in Jesus’ day, and times before; it happened in Paul’s day; and it can happen in ours as well.

There will always be those who define religion in terms of **the observance of certain favourite rules or customary regulations**. The Pharisees were good at this kind of thing and some Presbyterians are good at it as well. Therefore, Paul writes,

Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (2:16-17).

The warning included **two areas of concern: diet and days**.

This is not an irrelevant topic. There is, for example, plenty of judgment about **one's diet** today. Just look at any popular home or fitness magazine or newspaper today – **healthy eating** is what it's all about. Woe betide the person who pays no attention to this!

In Paul's time, certain teachers were saying that the only way to God and to spiritual maturity was to observe **the dietary laws of the Hebrew Scriptures** (or our **Old Testament**). As you may know these writings categorized certain foods as being "clean" or "unclean" (see, for example, Lev. 11:2-20). And these categorizations were not without reason. For, although perhaps unknown to the Jews, there were excellent physical reasons for these dietary laws which Dr. S. I. MacMillen has catalogued in his interesting book, None of These Diseases (1963), such as worm parasites being commonly found in swine and imperfectly cooked pork. There were also spiritual reasons, for the distinctions between certain foods was meant to familiarize God's people with the idea of purity and impurity, and thus to stimulate the conscience in everyday life.

But most Christians believe that **when Jesus came, such dietary laws were abolished**. Jesus said to the Pharisees, who were offended by his liberated eating habits: "Are you so dull? Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his/her heart but into his/her stomach, and then out of his/her body. (In saying this Jesus declared all foods 'clean')" (Mk. 7:18-20, NIV). In reinforcement of this teaching, the apostle Peter later received a vision of a sheet let down from heaven with all kinds of animals available for food, which also underscored that all meats were "clean" (10:13-16).

Later, the apostle Paul concluded in his letter to the Corinthians: “Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat [certain foods], and no better if we do” (1 Cor. 8:8). The New Testament Scriptures are unified in telling us that **all food and drink is lawful**.

Of course, certain **dietary principles are a good idea**. Eat too many “Twinkies” and you will no longer be twinkle-toes; too many “Snickers” are no laughing matter either. But generally, unless there is a good health reason for it, rigorous dietary discipline isn’t a particular sign of mature spirituality. In fact, it may be a sign of legalism, faddism or a lack of balance. It can even be unhealthy. In any case, we are not to judge others, or to allow anyone to pass a any judgment on us in regard to food and drink.

The same applies to the observance of **special days**. Of course, the Jews had their special feast days (Leviticus 25) and their “new moon” festivals (Isaiah 1;13) and their Sabbaths (Exod. 20:9-11). **But, when Christ came, he fulfilled them all!** Although certain Christians, like Seventh Day Adventists and Seventh Day Baptists don’t agree with us, we believe that we no longer need to celebrate the Sabbath – that is, worship on Saturdays – because we now celebrate “the Lord’s Day”(Rev. 1:10) – that is, we worship on Sundays, “the first day of the week” (1 Cor. 16:2; Acts 20:7), the day which commemorates the resurrection (Jn. 20), and on which first-century Christians also worshipped.

Paul writes, “**these** [former, special diets and days] **are a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ**” (2:17). The ancient dietary rules may have sensitized God’s people to purity; the ancient great feasts may have taught various aspects of God’s providence, but they are just “a shadow.” The real thing has come in Christ. People can get hung up on a certain diet or on a certain day in the week, or on the calendar, when in fact all diets are good ways in which to celebrate the Lord of life and all days are good days on which to celebrate the Lord of life.

It’s true that **some people need rules and regulations** to discipline themselves, to keep on the straight and narrow, for even as Jesus observed, “the spirit is ... willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41). But the over-zealous observance of these **can often lead to pride and legalism and judgmentalism**. Legalism often spawns judgmentalism. “Nobody is as good at this as me!” It is also often joyless, full of do’s and don’ts. It also demands uniformity when, in fact, the diversity of life demands the opposite.

And it may also produce a surface faith, because its adherents sometimes emphasize things that aren't really important. Their "do's" and "don'ts" often ignore such other deadly sins as slander, gossip, hatred and bitterness. Legalism limits some people to the damnable pit of self-righteousness.

Interestingly, Paul did not say, "Forbid the faithful from keeping special diets and days." Rather he says, "Do not let anyone condemn [or judge] you" in these things (2:16). There is great liberty in what Christians can do: we can keep certain diets and observe certain days, or forgo them. We are not to judge and/or to compel another to comply with our own preferences.

As bad as legalism is, there is another danger equally harmful – the sister error of **mysticism – doing your own thing**.

## 2. A warning against mysticism (Col. 2:18-19).

Before I explore this idea, I must say that **Christian mysticism** per se is not bad, for its goal is a deeper knowledge of God. There have been many wonderful and helpful Christian mystics in the life of the Church. What Paul is talking about here is a **deceptive mysticism** that isn't rooted in Christ. In the context of his letter to the Colossians, it's a mysticism derived from the **pretense and sheer imagination** of the Gnostics. These folks had their own ideas of how to get to God, based on their concept of "self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause ..." (2:17).

In sports terms it bore some similarity to the pretense with which **Coach Johnny Kerr** tried to get his Chicago Bulls to win games. As Kerr told it:

We had lost seven in a row, and I decided to give a psychological pep talk before the game with the Celtics. I told Bob Boozer to go out and pretend he was the best scorer in basketball. I told Jerry Sloan to pretend he was the best defensive guard. I told Guy Rodgers to pretend he could run an offense better than any other guard, and I told Eric Mueller to pretend he was the best rebounding, shot-blocking, scoring center in the game. We lost the game by 17. I was pacing around the locker room afterward trying to figure out what to say when Mueller walked up, put his arm around me and said, "Don't worry about it, coach. Just pretend we won.

(James S. Hewett, ed. Parables, etc., Vol. 6, No. 1 Mar. 1986, p. 1)

The Gnostics were **great, self-absorbed pretenders** and they fooled not only themselves, but threatened to fool the Colossians as well. Paul says that the recipients of his letter were in danger of being deprived of their reward and future glory by the pretense of their so-called highly cultured Gnostic “friends.” This is how he puts it in the NIV:

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow (2:18-19).

The Gnostics power to fool people came from their **disingenuous approach**. They used bogus humility, delighting in **false “self abasement”** when, in fact, **they thought pretty well of themselves and their ideas**. They loved to say things like, “We’re not good enough to go directly to God, so we’ll begin humbly with one of the angels, with whom -- if we are correct in our approach – we’ll be able to elevate our requests through the hierarchy to God himself.”

Next, they claimed to have **special “visions”** – “going into great detail about what they’d seen.” We are told this was a technical phrase used in that day to describe those “who had been admitted to a higher grade in one of the mystery religions” with which the Roman world was then filled (F. F. Bruce and E. K. Simpson, Commentary ... Ephesians and Colossians, 1957, p. 250). Through this, they claimed to be **on the inside**, and who was going to argue with them? The Gnostic was, therefore, actually proud. “His unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions,” says Paul. Advertising humility, they were filled with huge conceit, claiming to know things better than anyone else.

It was all **vanity and sham**, but learning the secrets of the spirit world can be enticing. **Tarot cards**, for example, are inviting to some. Their aesthetic design is meant to exude mystery, and millions have fallen into the interpretations put on them by so-called seers. Likewise various horoscopes derived from **the mystic signs of the Zodiac** have led many astray. An exceptional sign of piety is also attractive to many. Some people are drawn to those who say they are “the humblest” people in town. And the thought of being excluded from the “inner circle” is devastating for many.

**C. S. Lewis**, preaching a sermon at St. Mary the Virgin Church, Oxford on June 8, 1941, said that the desire to be in the inner circle (whatever it may be) is one of the “great permanent mainsprings of human action. Of all passions, the passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things” (The Weight of Glory). Applied to the realm of religion, this is especially true!

Like the dog described in ancient fable who, while carrying his bone, paused at seeing its own reflection in the water, and who then grabbed at the mirrored prize, lost the one he had, there are multitudes who have lost all to **misguided, self-absorbed deception**.

**The root of the problem** is laid bare by Paul. Such a person “has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.” The false teachers had (and still have) **no part in the true Body of Christ**. They do not care for the Church. They do not consider the tried and true teachings of the Church. Conversely, their misappropriation of Christ and of his Body, the Church, provides the answer for those who want to steel themselves against their delusional teaching. **We must hold fast to Jesus Christ, the only King and Head of the Church**.

Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts,  
Thou fount of life, thou light of men,  
From the best bliss that earth imparts  
We turn unfilled to thee again.

We taste thee, O thou living bread,  
And long to feast upon thee still;  
We drink of thee, the fountainhead,  
And thirst our souls from thee to fill.  
(Bernard of Clairvaux)

This is true Christian mysticism.

### 3. **A warning against asceticism** (Col. 2:20-23).

Ultimately, Paul finds that **spiritual discipline is good**. We need to be centred upon Jesus Christ. But he warns the Colossians, and us, against **extreme asceticism**.

Sadly, church history is replete with the stories of **people who've gone off the deep end in trying to be super spiritual**. There are legions of stories that can be told of **excess in the rejection of good and beautiful things** in the pursuit of God: in that way some have rejected marriage, or sex, or parenthood, even self. But such "self-made" religion doesn't do anyone any good. In fact, it can heighten fleshly temptation – feeding the flesh by starving it (F. F. Bruce et al, p. 256) -- and along with it such unreal mortifications produce a joyless and defenseless approach to life.

All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed and appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of now value in checking self-indulgence (2:22-23).

The **answer to such delusion** is in the beginning of Paul's advice: "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?" (2:20a). Our identification with the death of Jesus Christ has freed us from the demonic powers of the world. Because "we have died with Christ," they have no power over us. We need to re-appropriate this truth and live in the full joy of God's creation, enjoying him and his people.

Paul has sounded a warning, calling us to **look at things as they really are**.

Several years ago, **Royal Robbins**, a professional mountain climber, wrote an article for Sports Illustrated that demonstrates the importance of seeing ourselves as we really are and life as it really is. He wrote:

If we are keenly alert and aware of the rock and what we are doing on it, if we are honest with ourselves and our capabilities and weakness, if we avoid committing ourselves beyond what we know is safe, then we will climb safely. For climbing is an exercise in reality. He who sees it clearly is on safe ground, regardless of his experience or skill. But he who sees reality as he would like it to be, may have his illusions rudely stripped from his eyes when the ground comes up fast.

**The reality is this:** live your lives in the knowledge that Christ is with us, Christ is behind us, Christ is before us, Christ is above us, and Christ is below us. We are men and women, young people and children, "in Christ."

No ultimate harm will come to us. We are safe and secure in his hands.

Amen

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