

- IV -

Do Not Take Your Eyes Off Jesus

(Colossians 2:8-23)

Jimmy Adcox

EVERY generation faces subtle temptations to look in the wrong direction for assurance and certainty of salvation. These temptations can lead us away from the Christ who is able to give us fullness of life and ultimate glory.

How can you know that God is pleased with you? Christians, old and new, sometimes search for some sign or guarantee in their lives to assure them that they are in God's will and that they will ultimately be with the Lord in eternity. Sometimes in our efforts to "go the extra mile" and be sure, we try things that have a subtle appearance of righteousness, carefulness, and godliness but which are really a delusion. Often these efforts at personal reassurance become substitutes for what does assure and give strength.

In encouraging the Colossians to keep their roots deep in Christ and to be built up in Him, Paul encouraged them to not get sidetracked by taking their eyes off Jesus and giving attention to poor substitutes for the all-sufficient Christ.

THE SUBTILITY OF SUBSTITUTES

Substitutes can easily become the downfall of religious people. Religious people naturally enjoy religious thinking and activity. They want assurance about their relationship with God and are willing to do anything necessary to "make certain about His calling and choosing" them (2 Peter 1:10).

Substitutes tend to be outward. Remember the examples Jesus used concerning the ancient Jews and the law (Matthew 23) and the traditions of the Jewish fathers?

Substitutes can also be subtle. People want to "take the safe course." They appear religious and wise (2:23). We label ideas and actions by saying, "It's conservative" or "It's liberal."

Substitutes can be judgmental. The safe course becomes the standard course. We say, "You can't measure up unless you measure correctly by the standard."

Finally, substitutes can be superficial. The inner relationship with God may be poor, but the outward conformity may be correct. One may be judged true and righteous, yet be far-removed from God.

The Colossian substitutes included *philosophy and human tradition* (2:8). "Philosophy" originally meant love of wisdom. It then came to mean a reasoned view of life. Paul called the philosophy he had in mind "vain conceit" or "empty deception." A tradition is something "handed down." Traditions are inherently neither good nor bad. They may be good when they facilitate doing God's will. They may be bad when they get in the way of doing the will of God. Theological speculation and accepted traditions about vain questions can inadvertently become standards that take your eyes off Jesus.

Second, a Colossian substitute was *legal demands* (2:14, 16, 17). God does expect certain attitudes and actions from us when we follow Him. His laws reflect His nature, person, and way for us (3; 4). There is little evidence that the Colossians were in danger of going back under the law per se as were the Galatians. Instead, they seemed to keep various legal demands as insurance and rules for added righteousness.

They would have agreed with Paul's statement in 1:15-20, but somehow missed the connection with their problems. They were facing a system of thought that was a strange mixture of Jewish thinking and oriental mysticism:

Therefore *let no one act as your judge* in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—*things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ* (2:16, 17; italics mine).

Third was *experiential religion* (2:18). Many want assurance through feelings, visions, and extraordinary experiences. These lead to a love for feelings rather than Christ and a puffed-up spirit reflecting a sensuous mind.

A fourth substitute was *asceticism and self-abasement* (2:20-23). God does require self-denial (Luke 9:23). However, extreme and unnecessary cruelty while testing your will may be of no value to the spirit.

THE DANGER OF SUBSTITUTES

Substitutes distract from the only source of power (2:9, 10) and a true relationship with God (2:11-15). Substitutes can lead you away and disqualify you (2:18). They can cut you off from the nourishing and unifying Christ (2:19) and become a source of weakness and division. Substitutes can lead you back into bondage (2:20). Accepted for assurance, they soon enslave and imprison. Substitutes are of no value in checking the flesh (2:23). They do not change the heart.

THE REJECTION OF SUBSTITUTES

We should always choose the real over the substitute. What is real? Christ is real. His life, nature, and strength are all-sufficient. A relationship with Him is all important. What is important is this: We have been made alive with Him, we have been forgiven, and we have had the debt cancelled with its accompanying legal demands (2:11-14). What is important is being a part of a Christ who disarms principalities and powers, shaming them and triumphing over them (2:15).

CONCLUSION

Do not take your eyes off Jesus! Let your roots run deep in Him. Be built up in Him, be growing stronger in faith, and be fruitful in His cause.

For the Preacher

"No man should stand before an audience who has not first stood before God. Many hours of communion should precede one hour in the pulpit. The prayer chamber should be more familiar than the public platform."

A. W. Tozer
Renewed Day By Day

"The Devil comes along with something the natural man wants, and he paints the town red to let them know he is coming. The church comes along with something the natural man doesn't want, and thousands of preachers seem to think a mere announcement of the project from the pulpit is quite enough."

W. E. Biederwolf

"Fant and Pinson, in *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching*, came to the startling conclusion that 'Great preaching is relevant preaching.' By 'relevant,' they mean preaching that meets the needs of the people in their times, preaching that shows the preacher cares and wants to help."

James D. Berkley
Preaching to Convince

". . . until we have wrestled with God till the break of day, like Jacob: that is, until we have struggled to the utmost limits of our strength, and have known the despair of defeat. . . [until] we have really understood the actual plite of our contemporaries, when we have heard their cry of anguish, [until] we have shared their suffering, both physical and spiritual, and their despair and desolation . . . then we shall be able to proclaim the word of God—but not till then!"

Jacques Ellul

"Once, when I felt I had done an especially poor job in the pulpit on a Sunday morning, forgetting the best things I had to say and saying the poorest things, I was pretty discouraged. An old preacher, a polished orator in his day, patted me on the back. 'Don't let it bother you, son,' he said consolingly, 'Forget it. The congregation will, and you might as well make it unanimous.'"

Norman Vincent Peale
Have a Great Day, p. 79