

# BEWARE!

by Ray C. Stedman

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Our text today deals with the terrible danger of being spiritually deceived. We live in an age that is well supplied with impersonators, pitch men and con artists. I once heard of a farmer whose horses kept slobbering over everything. He saw an advertisement in a farm magazine offering a cure for this for a fee of \$20. He scraped together the money and wrote asking for the secret. In return he received a very thin envelope containing a single sheet of paper, on which were written the words, "Teach your horses to spit."

We laugh at that kind of simple-minded deceit, but what is happening to many people today is not funny at all. I had lunch last week with a prominent Christian businessman who told me that his son, who had been raised as a Christian and had gone to church all his life, is now involved in a cult here in the Bay Area, headed by a guru who claims to open minds to divine powers. A highly intelligent and well educated man, he has fallen for that and has dedicated his life to propagating the error of that cultic group. This is not an uncommon experience. Some of you, perhaps, have loved ones who are involved in cults. In view of the present danger there may be no passage in the Bible that is more relevant to our own time than this second chapter of Colossians.

Let us begin our study with the eighth verse:

"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."

There is much packed into that short verse. The apostle obviously sees these Colossian Christians, whom he has commended and encouraged up to this point in the letter, as facing a great danger of being taken captive by false teaching. Actually the word is "kidnapped." They are in danger of being kidnapped by error. To bring this up to date, we would say they were in danger of being taken hostage! That is something we hear much about in our day. In several parts of the world today, ordinary American tourists may suddenly find themselves taken hostage and denied their rightful liberties as Americans. Paul sees a like danger facing Christians who are taken captive by wrong philosophy, wrong teaching, false doctrine. Such can deprive believers of their Christian liberty and hold them hostage for years, if not for the rest of their lives.

The weapon that is used to do this is philosophy. That sounds rather harmless. After all, philosophy means simply "the love of wisdom." What could be wrong with loving wisdom? We are all much indebted to philosophers of the past, to Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and others, for their keen insights into the nature of reality and life. The love of wisdom is a good thing in many cases. There are good and bad philosophies, but what the apostle has in mind here, of course, is the danger the Colossians are facing of being seduced by bad philosophy.

What was wrong with the philosophy that endangered them? First, says the apostle, it was "hollow." It was empty teaching. When they got to the heart of the teaching he is referring to they would discover that it had no real content, no actual basis in reality. That is true in every age. Many of the philosophies we hear of today when compared with the reality of human existence are far off the mark. They are without content. They are sheer illusion.

But, and here is their second characteristic, they can "deceive" many. They are deceitful and misleading. They may sound good, they may be followed widely, but they are mental detours, leading many astray. When you examine them closely you discover they are empty and exploitative. Communism---and capitalism, too---are philosophies, and both have elements of non-reality about them. John Kenneth Galbraith describes the difference between them thus: "Under capitalism, man exploits man; under communism, it is exactly the reverse!" Both are somewhat wrong. Neither reflects truth in its ultimate form.

The apostle goes on to point out the three things that are always characteristic of wrong philosophy. They were true of the specific philosophy that was endangering the Colossians (we will look at that in much more detail in our next study), but they are equally true of erroneous doctrine in any age or generation. Here, then, are the three things to watch for.

First, according to Paul, these empty, deceptive philosophies "depend on human tradition." They arise out of the thinking of men, find a foothold in society, and then are passed along from generation to generation so as to appear popular and widely supported. Hardly anyone dares question them because everybody believes them. One obvious example today is the theory of evolution. Evolution is now being widely challenged on a scientific level. Many evolutionists are beginning to question Darwin's view. But when I was in college the theory of evolution was almost universally accepted. Nobody with any scientific standing ever raised questions about it. But evolution is only a philosophy, not a fact. Today it is being challenged by the counter-philosophy of creation, which is not a religious view at all, but a scientifically supported view that offers another explanation of the universe and all material things in it. The theory of evolution rests upon human tradition and derives its longevity from widespread popular support. That is why it is difficult to answer.

Our staff received recently a remarkable newspaper account of a debate between David Roper, one of our former pastors, and another religious teacher, actually a liberal pastor, Bill Edelen, of Boise, Idaho. Each of these men writes a religious column, from widely separated viewpoints, on alternate Saturdays for the Boise Statesman, a daily newspaper published in Boise. The editors were so interested in their divergent opinions that they brought the two men face to face to interview them. It was a most remarkable encounter. In his opening statement Mr. Edelen took the position that Jesus was nothing but a good man. Here is part of what he said to the interviewer:

The book that I'm reading right now is *Jesus in History and Jesus in Mythology*. And this is a compilation of an international symposium. Scholars from all over the world all met and presented papers. In those papers, there's a definite separation between a historical person named Jesus and the Christ mythology that built up around that person that is a continuation, a mythological diffusion.

What I'm saying right now is not just Bill Edelen giving his opinion, because when I taught at the University of Puget Sound, every one of my colleagues in the Department of Religion would not only fully agree with what I'm saying right now, but this is what they taught. And I also think that it's safe to say that what I'm saying would be accepted in any major university or departments of religion in this country. They do look upon Christianity as being saturated with Zoroastrian (early Persian) mythology. And Christianity as being saturated with Egyptian mythology and with Babylonian mythology.

Do you recognize his tactic? He is attempting to make it appear that the finest minds and the best scholarship are convinced, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Christianity is a myth, and that it is only a tiny minority of blind fundamentalists who believe otherwise.

The interviewer went on to ask Edelen about David Roper's central point: that Christmas is a celebration of Christ, or God incarnate, being born (whether on December 25th or another date). They asked, "Do you believe that Christ is God incarnate when he was born?" Here is Mr. Edelen's answer:

No, I don't believe that literally, at all...Albert Schweitzer, here's one of our great scholars of all time, and Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus* is still considered as a classic in the field...Schweitzer said that Jesus claimed none of the things that the church or theologians have claimed for him over the centuries...Schweitzer said to live in the spirit of love is to live in the spirit of Jesus, which is to be a Christian. And Schweitzer said being a Christian doesn't have to do with believing anything. Some people say you have to believe these doctrines or these creeds before you can be a Christian. Well, the doctrines and creeds are all man-made.

That is "The Gospel according to Schweitzer." Do you see how it confirms what the apostle says? In every

generation theological error takes this form. An attempt is always made to make it appear that biblical Christianity is a minority faith, held by only a few ill-educated, almost mentally deficient people, who have no basis in scholarship for what they believe. I do not have time to share with you David's answer to that charge, but I assure you it was very adequate. By the end of the debate the reporter was obviously on his side. But what a confirmation of what the apostle says. "Hollow and deceptive philosophy" rests on human traditions. That is what is wrong. It sets aside the revelation of God, disclosing himself to his people, and undermines that revelation by claiming superiority for the guesses and conclusions of the inadequate mind of man.

The second thing that Paul charges is wrong with "hollow and deceptive philosophy" is that it depends on "the basic principles of this world." There is a debate among the scholars as to whether that is a proper translation. The word for "principles" here or, as it is sometimes translated, "elements," literally means "things in a row," a series of things. The word became associated with the alphabet because letters in an alphabet are always lined up in a row. One learns a language by first learning the ABC's. Thus, some scholars feel that this word represents something rudimentary, simple and elementary---basic principles, that is the idea.

Other scholars, however, point out that this word is also used with reference to an army of soldiers lined up in a row, in ranks, as in a hierarchy. These scholars feel that this is a reference to the fallen angels; that it is a parallel passage to Paul's statement in Ephesians 6, "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers and wicked spirits in high places," whom he also calls "the rulers of this world's darkness." In Galatians he calls them "weak and beggarly elements" and clearly states the Galatians are serving "those which by nature are not gods."

Which view is right? Are these rudimentary, fundamental or elementary principles of life? Or are they the teaching of "the world rulers of this present darkness?" My view is that both viewpoints are true. Oftentimes, when a scriptural phrase has a double meaning, both meanings are intended. Perhaps that is true here. These philosophies that Paul describes (or any erroneous philosophy in the realm of religion or the spirit), fits the description of what Paul calls in 2 Timothy "doctrines of demons." They are elementary, rudimentary truths, perpetuated by demonic powers among human beings, which have the effect of returning people to childish actions and childish views of life.

Have you ever noticed how easily grownups can begin to act like children? Such actions offend us and we say, disparagingly, "Oh, don't be so childish." Until, of course, we behave the same way. Then we justify our behavior on some other basis. See what happens, for instance, when you set a plate of cake in the midst of a group of children? They all grab for the biggest piece. But take a special stock option and make it available to a group of businessmen, and they too will grab for the biggest piece. They act like children. Observe how the ladies behave at a special sale, where real bargains are being offered. They are like children.

Children love to show off. They are forever strutting about, seeking to get your attention and telling you of their past accomplishments. They want you to be aware of them. But have you heard grownups talk that way? Of course you have. It is rudimentary, elementary, childish conduct. Children love to dominate others, to order them around and tell them what to do. Grownups love to do that too. Children easily squabble and fight among themselves. But watch a crowd of people arguing over some difference of opinion: the arms race, higher wages, or whatever; note how easily it degenerates into a squalid squabble!

All of this is a representation of what the apostle is describing: it is childish behavior. Nations and governments often act this way. International affairs are conducted on this basis. When we are removed from it we can see how childish and foolish it is. The apostle reveals that this behavior is inspired by "world rulers of this present darkness...wicked spirits in high places." There is no other explanation for the evil of humanity that is in accordance with reality. Yet that explanation is often regarded as ridiculous and laughable. Christians, and others who hold it, are often intimidated and do not want to admit that they believe in such things as "wicked spirits in high places." But everywhere in the Bible, from the lips of Jesus himself and from the pens of the apostles, this is the clear teaching of the Bible. The reason why some of the great schools and universities, which started out Christian, soon lost their Christian emphasis, is because people began to give heed to the traditions of men, based upon basic, rudimentary principles of life, that are constantly fed into the stream of human thinking from demonic beings who control the minds of men. That is the biblical position.

But there is yet a third problem with false doctrine. It is, in Paul's words, "not according to Christ." Evil teaching always focuses on demoting Jesus, refusing to recognize the full revelation of his Being as it is set out in the Scriptures. Every cult attacks the Person or the work of Jesus---or both. They claim that he was nothing but a very good man, a model man, perhaps, although he lacked the insights into life and reality that are ours through modern knowledge. Thus, they put him down and demote him. Or, going to the opposite extreme, they regard Jesus as a supernatural being, one among several Divine Masters who come periodically into human affairs to teach us wonderful truths that we would never know otherwise, and which, if followed, will release within us great divine powers. (This is the teaching of the New Age movement that we are being exposed to today.) But these cults never view Jesus as God himself, willing to die in our place.

Any form of religious error, then, will have these three manifestations: they are supported by human tradition; they establish themselves as the only respectable doctrine to believe; and yet they come from the minds of satanic beings who cleverly, but invisibly, reduce people to childish behavior and childish attitudes, all to the end of setting aside the glory and true character of Jesus Christ.

Now Paul begins his response to this, and his answer is not along the lines we would ordinarily think. When confronted with evil teaching, most of us attack it and try to point out what is wrong with it. But the apostle does not do that. When I was a young preacher, just graduated from Dallas Seminary, I decided to take on all the cults in Palo Alto. We were meeting at the Community Center then, and we put an advertisement in the local paper announcing a series of three evening meetings to deal successively with Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Science. We actually invited the adherents of these cults to come to the meetings and debate with us. I will never forget the tension, the dynamism of those meetings. People could hardly wait until the preliminaries were over and we started the message. I had done my homework and studied these cults. I quoted them and answered their claims with quotes from the Bible, and tried to show their error. Then we opened it up for discussion and we argued back and forth. Things got very tense. As I look back on it, however, I have to say that I do not think anybody's mind was changed. In fact, I probably helped the other side because I made them look like underdogs. Everyone felt sorry for them, and people ended up supporting the error more than believing what I had said.

That is not the best way to answer erroneous doctrine: Look at what Paul does. He reviews for the Colossian Christians what they already have in Jesus. He calls them back to the truth and sets it vividly before them in five wonderful statements, the first of which is found in verses 9 and 10:

"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have this fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority."

Everywhere in Scripture you will find this approach: We are to be "...looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith." We must focus again upon who he is, then the mind and heart are both protected against the assault of an evil teaching. Here the apostle reminds the Colossians that they already have everything they need if they have Jesus. They have God for "in Christ dwells all the fullness of Deity in bodily form." All of God is present when Jesus is there. This does not mean that Jesus is both the Father and the Son. Scripture never teaches that. But "the fullness of God," the whole Godhead, comes into your life when you receive Jesus. What more do you need? That is Paul's question. What more can these false teachers add to that? What new experience, what other additional divine person can you receive than what you have already received when you have Jesus? It may be that we need to discover more of what it means to have Christ in our heart; that is a lifelong process. We shall always be growing in appreciation of what it means to have him, but the point is (and it is a very important one): you do not need anything more than you already have. You merely need to understand more of what you have received. That is where Paul begins his response.

Having made the statement that they have, in Christ, already received all that God is, and nothing can be added, Paul now traces how this happened to them. In these next four statements he tells how believers share in the fullness of God in Christ. First, he declares, they were circumcised with him:

"In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of your sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ."

That is an astonishing statement. Many scholars equate circumcision with baptism, holding that Christian baptism has taken the place of the Old Testament rite of circumcision. But if you look carefully at this verse it is clear that this is not true. If we are Christians, says Paul, we have been both circumcised and baptized. Thus, they are not the same thing.

I will never forget an incident that occurred a number of years ago here at the church. A young man came to my office carrying a thick Bible under his arm, which he had been reading. Looking at me very earnestly, he said to me, "Would you circumcise me?" After I had picked myself up from the floor, I explained to him why, one, he did not need physical circumcision, and, two, what circumcision meant. I pointed out that it was an eloquent symbol when it was properly understood.

Because circumcision is a minor surgical operation on the male sex organ it has been a subject that many people have avoided. That is too bad, since God ordained both the operation and the organ upon which it would be performed. Thus, it makes sense to understand what he is saying to us by means of circumcision. For centuries, males have equated their manhood with their sex organs. Certain ribald remarks you may hear from time to time confirm that. It is not strange, really, that it should be so because it reflects an inherent, even instinctive understanding, that in some sense the male sex organ stands for the man himself. God has determined it so. At birth the male organ is covered with a loose cap of flesh. That covering symbolizes the hidden male ego, suppressed and disguised. It suggests that what a man really is in his innermost being is covered over; but it is there. What that is is expressed by the Spanish word "macho." Macho stands for proud confidence in one's own ability; it means self-centered egoism. That is what we have become in the fall. (The man, of course, stands for the whole race, male and female alike.) The male foreskin is a picture God has employed to teach us that egoism, the sinful pride within us, is hidden to us. We do not see anything wrong with it. But when a male is circumcised, it is a symbolic way of saying that what is hidden is now revealed. The wrongness of it is exposed so we can see it for what it really is. Fallen humanity is revealed for what it really is.

Thus when our Lord was crucified, the sin that he assumed on our behalf was removed---that is the point. It is what Scripture calls the "circumcision of the heart." Observe how Paul explains that here: "In him you were circumcised in the putting off of your sinful nature." The foreskin of the flesh is a symbol of the fallen nature, the flesh, within us. When we become a Christian it is revealed for what it truly is, worthless in God's sight! It does not advance us or help us in any way in his sight. To be proud and independent and sinfully selfish will never help us or find value in God's sight. That is why Scripture says plainly, "They that are in the flesh cannot please God." Jesus himself said, "Without me, you can do nothing." The natural life, the old Adamic nature, is of no value any more.

Then Paul moves to the next step, which is baptism. In baptism, he declares, you were:

"...buried with him and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead, and when you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive in Christ."

That is what baptism means. Circumcision symbolizes the death of Jesus and our death with him, our dying to sin, as Romans 5 and 6 argues. But baptism stands for our new life with him. When someone is immersed in the waters of baptism he is not left there, he is brought out again to a new life. That is what baptism reflects: the work of the Spirit in imparting new life from Christ, a new humanity, the human spirit made alive. It is the difference between a true Christian and a merely professing Christian. The true Christian has been made alive in Christ. He has a whole new basis for living.

The third step in this process of sharing in Christ is given next.

"He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to his cross."

Here Paul declares the forgiveness of sins for which the law, the "written code with its regulations," condemned us. That condemnation is now removed by the death of Christ on our behalf. He paid for all our

sins, the sins we committed in the past, the sins we are going to commit to day, and the sins we shall commit in the future. Sin is no longer an issue in our relationship with God. It affects our fellowship but not our relationship. He has fully dealt with it. We need to acknowledge our sin in order to enter into the benefit of that forgiveness, but forgiveness is already there in the heart of God. What a wonderful truth! I do not think I rejoice in anything more than the fact that my sins, my mistakes, my failures, my unloving words, my unkind attitudes and my selfish actions have been forgiven. Every day God gives me a new slate, a new unspoiled day, to live through by his grace. Our sins have been forgiven. Paul sees them as "nailed to the cross," so they no longer can condemn us. The law is not done away with, but the condemnation of it is. We are made free and told "Go, and sin no more." The last step is, we are freed from the power of these evil beings: Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

These are the world rulers of darkness, the clever, malevolent, malignant beings who keep inserting into human thinking wrong ideas, dangerous thoughts, attitudes and teachings that set us at naught with one another, and make us go for one another's throat, keeping enmity and strife stirring in the human family. What has happened to them? Paul declares that when Jesus died he seized these powers by the throat, chained them, and dragged them in triumph behind him, like a Roman general marching through the streets of Rome, his chained captives walking behind in total subjugation. That is why John can say "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." There is no need, therefore, to give way to evil teaching or evil temptations, for we have a Power and a Person within who is superior to anything Satan can throw against us---the world, the flesh or the devil! That is the teaching of this passage. Paul is encouraging the Colossians to see that there is absolutely no need to believe the doctrines, the teachings or the rituals that he will next enunciate to them.

Neither do we need to believe them! If we understand who we are in Christ, and what we have in him, there is no need to be weak, faltering, or failing. We may rise up and be the men and women that God intended us to be. Let us pray the words of the great hymn:

Out of unrest and arrogant pride, Jesus we come.  
Into Thy blessed will to abide, Jesus we come to thee. Out of ourselves to dwell in Thy love,  
Out of despair to raptures above,  
Upward we rise on wings like a dove,  
Jesus we come to Thee.

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