

THE THINGS THAT CAN RUIN YOUR FAITH

by Ray C. Stedman

I should like to read to you the introduction to Colossians in the Student Bible, a new and exciting version whose notes are written by our good friends, Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford:

You see them in strange outfits on street corners, chanting phrases with too many vowels and punctuating the chants with a noisy tambourine. Or in airports, thrusting books or flowers into your face. Or in California, all over California. You think of them as crazy cults populated by misfits. Then one day you hear about a friend of yours. She seemed normal until suddenly, without warning, she snapped. Her parents searched desperately, even hiring private detectives to help get her back. They found her surrounded by allies, with a new name, a new hairstyle and, so it seemed, a new brain. She stared at them with clear eyes and told them they were missing out on the most wonderful experience of life. She had joined a cult. Cults come in all varieties, often with exotic names like Hare Krishna or Urantia, or the Church of Scientology. They demand much from their members: a lifetime of discipline and absolute loyalty, and they also promise much in return: the pathway to a secret, hidden knowledge, available only to those who follow them.

Here in this ancient city of Colossae, almost two thousand years ago, the same attack was being made upon Christian faith as we find in our country today. In this passage, beginning in verse 16 of chapter 2, we will discover the dangerous traps that await us on every side as we journey toward the goal of a personal relationship and ultimate union with God. We learn there are no new heresies. It is beyond the mind of man to invent new error. We find the same error, the same things that can derail the spiritual life, repeated cyclically through the centuries. These early Christians faced a hodge-podge of spiritual error, a mish-mash of philosophy and misleading ideas, some from Jewish backgrounds, some from Gentile, some arising from pagan superstitions and some from the teachings of the Far East. We, too, face this same kind of mixture of wrong ideas in our world today.

Here, then, are the things that can hurt believers. The first one the apostle takes up is what we shall call Empty Ritualism.

"Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Food restrictions, special diets, observance of special ceremonies and days obviously arose out of Jewish practices. God gave them many of these ceremonies in the Old Testament as shadows, pictures. The problem was that people were performing these rituals mechanically, simply going through the motions. That, Paul says, can destroy the true vitality of faith. These particular religious ceremonies were rituals concerning the year, the month and the week. The "New Moon" was a monthly observance, and the "Sabbath Day," of course, came every week.

We find a parallel to these observances today whenever people place a special value on religious performance. It has not been very long since the Catholic church relented on its restriction against eating meat on Fridays. That was an example of a diet restriction, designed to impart a religious value to life. Many Protestants give up pleasurable activities during Lent, the forty-day period preceding Easter, because they think that will improve their relationship with God. Others seek to do that by wearing special clothing or a uniform. Many Jews keep a kosher kitchen although many of them do not even know why. When my wife asked a Jewish woman in our neighborhood why she kept a kosher kitchen she replied, "I don't know. It is just part of our religion." It was something she felt she had to do, although she could see no value in it.

In the early part of this century hardly any Christians who were evangelicals would travel on a Sunday because they were taught that Sunday was a carry-over of the Jewish Sabbath and that it was wrong to work or travel on that day. Those of you who saw the movie "Chariots of Fire" know how strongly that view was held. This is the kind of thing that Paul is talking about here. Others today chant a mantra without any thought of what they are saying, or sit for long periods contemplating their navel. I have never been able to understand how that improves one in any way at all! Still others turn a prayer wheel or finger religious beads, etc. Any kind of religious performance that is done without meaning or personal significance falls into the category Paul is describing.

But somebody is bound to say, "Wait a minute. Aren't some of these observances given to us by God to remind us of truth? Isn't there some value to mental or physical health to be gained by doing them?" The apostle answers that objection in verse 17. These rituals, he declares, are a mere "shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." Once the reality has been realized, shadows are of no value whatsoever. Shadows are pictures, given in advance, designed to prepare us for something. But if you have found Christ, you do not need the shadows any more. Paul even includes the Sabbath day as an example.

I carry with me pictures of my wife, my children and my grandchildren. I take them along in order to be ready for people who try to show their pictures to me! I value these photographs and look at them occasionally when I am away from home. But what would you think if I propped up these pictures all over my house and talked to them and tried to relate to them? You would think I had lost my mind---and I probably would have. But, more than that, I would certainly soon lose touch with the very people whose pictures I treasure. They would feel ignored and would probably ultimately leave me and all relationship would cease.

That is what Paul says is wrong with shadows. If you still place primary value on a shadow after the reality has come you destroy your participation in the value of that reality. Now the reality, here, is Jesus! He is the center of all life and the source of excitement in a Christian's experience. He is the One who accompanies us through life, to comfort in times of need and strengthen when we are being tempted. He is a place of refuge to run to when we are troubled or uncertain about life. To lose him is to lose all source of excitement and vitality in life. That is the danger in observing shadows. That is why this paragraph begins with the word "therefore." The previous section pointed out all that Christ is to us now. Thus Paul is saying, "Having him, therefore, do not let anyone spoil you by involving you in a mechanical performance that will cancel out the reality."

Joining a cult is not the only way to let ritualism ruin your life. You can do it right here at church on a Sunday morning. If you merely mouth the words of the hymns when you sing, you are doing this very thing. You are destroying something, entering into a religious mechanical performance that not only says nothing to God but destroys something in you. If you let your mind wander when someone is praying, if you do not follow along and silently say, "Amen," or let that prayer reflect what you are thinking, you will turn off much of truth and miss much. You are indulging in a form of hypocrisy; of looking like you are doing something valuable and helpful when actually you are not doing anything like that at all.

Turning your mind off during a message and failing to hear what is being said falls into the same category. When I look out from this platform you all appear to be listening. You look at me and your faces reflect interest in what I am saying. But I know from sad experience that that is not always true. Some of you are at home, worrying about how the roast is doing. Some of you are playing golf, or working out a business deal, or struggling with a problem with your children, or wondering about what someone else is wearing. It would be interesting to know at the end of a service where everybody has been! We all find our attention straying at times, but do not let yourself get into a habit of that because it is destructive; it is empty ritualism!

I would like to ask two questions before we pass on to the next point. First, do you really think God is fooled by that kind of performance? What a low view of God, to think that if we run through some religious fol-de-rol he is going to be pleased with us! There must be a dozen passages in the Old Testament where God tells us what he thinks of that kind of thing. I do not have time to read them to you, but let me share one verse out of Isaiah which illustrates what God says:

"When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Bring no more futile sacrifices.

Incense is an abomination to me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths and the calling of assemblies
I cannot endure any longer."

What an honest revelation that is of what we are doing to God when we act with thoughtless involvement with public worship.

My second question is: do you have any idea of what you lose by this kind of a performance? The thing that first becomes apparent is that the service itself grows dull and boring. You find yourself wanting to leave but you feel you have to stay because your mate or your family expects it, or you gain a reputation for piety by doing so. When a group of people do that, church does become terribly dull. A church service ought to be a tremendously exciting time. Here is where we ought to find ourselves stimulated afresh, awakened again to new vigor in our relationship with Christ. But all that begins to dissipate when we become mechanical worshippers. And, more than that, Christ becomes distant and far off from us. We no longer walk with him day by day or moment by moment. When you do not do that---since to lose God is to lose yourself---all of life becomes dull and empty. Tenseness, worry, guilt and loneliness begin to harry your footsteps. Eventually you succumb to the need for something to stimulate you. You fall in with the world's futile search for an anesthetic to deaden the pain of an empty life. is that happening to you?

Well, that is too convicting! Let's move on and look at the second thing that can ruin your life. Mysticism is what I shall call it. Here is what Paul says of it:

"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."

The key characteristics here are "false humility and worship of angels." Those are two invariable elements of false teaching in this context. In Colossae there was an ancient teaching (later called "gnosticism," meaning knowledge) which held that there is a hierarchy of angels between all human beings and God which must be placated and acknowledged, and that one's knowledge, which began in virtual ignorance, increased with such contact until at last one entered into the fullness of understanding of the Oneness of all things.

That ancient heresy appears widely today under the name of the New Age Movement. At the heart of it is this claim to seek the true Oneness of things. We are told that we are all part of the universe of created matter, and that we are united in Oneness with God. The claim is that this is the way to escape from being centered in oneself, and so move into the fullness of knowledge of the universe. That is why Paul refers to it here as a "false humility." It claims to move you beyond self, but in actual practice, if you examine teachings like this, you discover that they focus on self; that the real goal is to develop all your self powers. That is why it is called the human potential movement---the idea that everything is already there inside of you, and all you need to do is bring it out and develop your possibilities and full potential. I saw a motto on a wall that said, "The Light you seek is in your own lantern." That is the idea. You already have it all---now discover it. Numerous groups today offer to help in this: Esalen, Eckankar, est, Transpersonal Psychology, Transactional Analysis, etc. By the way, most of these are California groups, I must sadly admit. All of them are designed to help discover the great potential that is supposedly wrapped up in you. Whitney Houston sings, "To love yourself is the greatest love there is." That is the heart of the human potential quest.

Along with this comes the idea of the "worship of angels," as Paul describes it. That opens up the whole world of occult manifestations. Those of you who saw Shirley MacLaine's minidrama on television got a full dose of a world of strange spirit beings, of astrology, ouija boards, tarot cards and assorted holy men, psychics, swamis, yogis and gurus. All of these purport to offer help in increasing our understanding of who we are and what we can do, so as to fulfill the possibilities of our humanity.

What is the danger of that? The apostle puts it very plainly: it "disqualifies you for the prize." He has been referring to this "prize" all through this letter. It will eliminate you from the race, removing you from the possibility of experiencing "Christ in you, the hope of glory." That is the great mystery which God himself has

provided us, by which we have immediate and continual access to the fullness of deity in Christ, and by him, strength, help and comfort along our way. Such error will effectively remove all opportunity for the continued experience of love, joy and peace. If you observe Shirley MacLaine and other advocates of the New Age Movement you will discover there is very little evidence that they derive real satisfaction from their experiences. Fascination, yes; satisfaction, no! They are forever seeking. They are never at rest. They are on a quest for a will-o'-the-wisp, that seems to be further away from them the longer they pursue it. Such pursuit effectively removes one from experiencing the prize that God has in mind for his own: daily fellowship with a loving, living Lord!

I find the phrase "such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen," is a strange translation. The Revised Standard and the New American Standard Versions both agree that this should be translated, "taking his stand on visions." The New Age Movement makes a great deal of visions, of psychic experiences with spirit beings, of taking trips outside the body and seeing things that others cannot see, and thus being gradually introduced into strange teachings and ideas. We all remember the claim made by Oral Roberts that he had seen a nine hundred foot vision of Jesus who told him to build a hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Now Roberts is under attack by the media because of his statement that unless people send him four and a half million dollars by March First, God is going to take his life! This ridiculous claim has turned many people away from Christian truth. But who are these strange creatures that are seen in these visions? According to the Bible they are fallen angels, otherwise known as demons, often masquerading as people who once lived on the earth. Thus, they give some degree of credence to the teaching of reincarnation, which is widespread in our day.

With this seeing of visions the apostle links an incredible conceit that claims divine honors for oneself. Notice how he puts it: "his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions." Erich Fromm, whose writings were an early expression of this type of teaching, said, "God is a symbol of man's own powers which he tries to realize in his life." Some of the current New Age writers come right out and say: "We are gods of our own universe and we are in complete control of all that happens to us. We are God himself." Perhaps the best answer to such a claim was expressed by G. K. Chesterton earlier in this century when he said to someone who made a similar claim:

So you are the Creator and Redeemer of the world? Well, what a small world it must be!
What a little heaven you must inhabit, with angels no bigger than butterflies! How sad it must be to be God, and an inadequate God! Is there really no life fuller and no love more marvelous than yours? And is it really in your small and painful pity that all flesh must put its faith? How much happier you would be, how much more of you there would be, if the hammer of a higher God could smash your small cosmos, scattering the stars like spangles, and leave you in the open, free like other men to look up as well as down!

If you claim to be God yourself you do not have anyone above you to look up to; you can only look down on everybody else. That is the danger and the folly of this kind of thing. A modern proverb answers it well. "There are two things one should never forget: 1. There is only one God. 2. You ain't Him!"

In verse 19 Paul tells us what is wrong with this teaching:

"...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."

Someone who becomes involved in this kind of teaching cuts himself off from the Head. When the head is cut off a human body, all life ceases. According to the apostle, the same thing happens when anyone has lost contact with his Head! He also loses connection with the whole body, which is the church. He is no longer fed by teachers and by shepherds (the "ligaments and sinews"), and, therefore, he stops growing completely. Through the years I have observed that people who fall into obsessive or compulsive habits (most of which begin in the teenage years), cease all emotional growth. Compulsive habits such as alcoholism, drug use, homosexuality or sexual promiscuity, etc., repeated continually bring an end to emotional maturity. Those who become so involved cease to mature and to become responsible people until they cease their compulsive behavior. Then, no matter how old they may be chronologically, they must begin growing emotionally at the

level at which they began their habit. That is the terrible danger of this kind of thing. Mysticism, a compulsive following of spirit guides, atavars, or whatever else they may be called, always arrests growth, the apostle declares. If you want to grow up and mature as a man or woman then follow the process which God himself has outlined in his Word. "Follow me," says Jesus. That is the way to true maturity.

There is still a third danger to faith, which we shall call Asceticism. The apostle brings it before us in closing this section.

"If you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence."

Paul is here describing an over-developed zeal, a dedication that goes far beyond true Christian discipline and seeks to please God by extreme forms of self-denial. Dedication and discipline are a proper part of the Christian life. You must often make yourself do what God wants you to do, simply because you love him. That is the proper motive for it. Paul has already commended the Colossians because they led disciplined, well-ordered lives. But you can make a god of discipline. You can take perverse delight in making yourself do difficult things that win the approval of others, and (you imagine), of God as well. As a monk, Martin Luther fell into this before he became a believer. He would lie naked in his cell all night long in the bitter cold and he beat his body and tortured himself, trying to find peace of heart.

But the apostle says this is all wrong. Lesser forms of it take what he clearly describes here as negative approaches: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" I grew up in Christian evangelical churches that taught there were certain things that Christians must always avoid, and if you observed these taboos you not only were acceptable to the religious community but you were actually pleasing God. I was taught that Christians never drink, never dance, never smoke, never go to movies, never play cards, and never read novels. These prohibitions were usually thundered at us! I do not deny that refraining from some of these things is a perfectly proper discipline of the spirit, but any idea that giving up of things of itself is pleasing to God, is wrong. Christianity is a positive faith. If you want to know what pleases God, read the last twelve verses of Romans 12. You will not find anything negative there. Rather, we are asked to "bless those who persecute you," to love the unlovely and minister to the strangers in our midst. Do things that other people cannot do; that is how true faith is demonstrated.

But what is wrong with fasting until one is close to death, wearing hair shirts, refusing to marry, eating only vegetables, praying by the clock, etc.? Three things, says the apostle. First, it shows you do not understand your death with Christ. "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world [or, as we saw earlier, "to the elemental spirits of the universe"], why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules?" To do so is to return to childish behavior---thinking that God will be pleased by your negative approach to life.

In the church this becomes what we call "legalism," which is to pursue holiness by self-effort, instead of accepting the holiness that God freely gives, by faith, and then living it out in terms of experience. A legalist looks at life and says, "Everything is wrong unless you can prove by the Bible that it is right. Therefore, we must have nothing to do with anything that the Bible does not say is right." That reduces life to a very narrow range of activity. But the biblical Christian looks at life and says, "Everything is right! God has given us a world to enjoy and live in. Everything is right, unless the Bible specifically says it is wrong." Some things are wrong; they are harmful and dangerous. Adultery is always wrong. So is fornication. Sexual promiscuity is wrong. Lying and stealing are wrong. These things are never right. But there is so much that is left open to us. If we are willing to obey God in the areas that he designates as harmful and dangerous, then we have the rest of life to enter into in company with a Savior who loves us, and who guides and guards us in our walk with him.

Secondly, Paul says that whatever benefit these things may gain it is only temporary, it all ends at death: "These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings." That is

why Jesus took the Pharisees to task: "You observe these minute rituals, but inwardly you are tombs, filled with dead men's bones." Outwardly you look good, but inwardly you are like a grave full of rotting bones. Your scrupulous refusal to live normal lives gives you certain status and privilege, but it will all prove worthless in the end.

Thirdly, the apostle declares these things are of no value in restraining the indulgence of the flesh. People may outwardly appear dedicated and disciplined, but inwardly sin rages unchecked. Inside they are angry, resentful, filled with vituperation and a spirit of vengeance. Many Christians have this problem. They are trying to regulate the externals instead of walking in the fullness and freshness of life with Jesus Christ, finding the inward purity and cleansing that he alone provides.

All of these errors have one thing in common---they lose Christ! If you fall into any, you lose the vitality and vigor of your Christian walk. Life becomes dull and often desperate. Many Christians discover this has happened to them. What they need to do is to return to Jesus. When these things take over even here in this place, return to Him. We must take care that every day we are in touch with our loving Lord and walking in fellowship with Him. He is the One who can develop the self-life, and yet keep us from being captured by the great god, Self. He will restore and comfort us when we fail and falter, and in submission to him we will find the freedom we seek.

If you would like some additional insight on the New Age Movement, which is so prevalent in our area today, I would recommend *Unmasking the New Age*, by Douglas Groothuis, a very thorough, well documented book, examining the teachings of the New Age in all its forms. Another book that is helpful (although a bit more alarmist), is David Hunt's *The Seduction of Christianity*.

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