

### I. Introduction

- A. American Christianity has done a very good job of getting people involved in church and a very poor job of getting people involved in a deeper walk with Jesus Christ. That's why the church today is weaker than ever before.
- B. I want to zero in on a particular phrase in Colossians, verse 20:
  - 1. NKJV: the basic principles of the world
  - 2. NASB: the elementary principles of the world
  - 3. NRSV: the elemental spirits of the universe
  - 4. NLT: the evil powers of this world
- C. What is this passage talking about? What are the basic principles, the elemental spirits of the universe?
- D. Let me review a basic history of the spiritual universe. I covered this a little bit a couple of weekends ago, but it's important to go over it again.

### II. The History of the Cosmos

- A. Before God made people, God made angels. The highest angel was named Lucifer. He was the prince of the angels. The Bible describes him as beautiful and powerful.
- B. Yet, Lucifer made a free will choice to rebel against God's authority.
  - 1. "I ordained and anointed you as the mighty angelic guardian. You had access to the holy mountain of God and walked among the stones of fire. You were blameless in all you did from the day you were created until the day evil was found in you. Your great wealth filled you with violence and you sinned. So I banished you from the mountain of God. I expelled you, O mighty guardian, from your place among the stones of fire. Your heart was filled with pride because of all your beauty. You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth and exposed you to the curious gaze of kings." Ezekiel 28:14-17.
- C. God kicked Lucifer and his angels out of heaven. Lucifer, the shining light, became Satan, the adversary and his angels became fallen angels or demons. Jesus said, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Luke 10:18
- D. But that wasn't Satan's end. Ever since that fall, in the prehistoric, dateless past, Satan has had one objective: to prove his worthiness before the universe as a god worthy of worship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. His goal is to be like God, not unlike God. His problem is that he can't pull it off.
- E. So the Bible says
  - 1. *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."* Ephesians 6:12,13
- F. I think this is important for us today and it is ultimately the main thrust of the book of Colossians. We are caught in the crossfire of the War of the Worlds and it is, at its root, a spiritual war.
- G. The Bible teaches a very spiritual view of our world. The Greek word *cosmos* is translated "world." It means more than planet earth. It means how a thing is arranged, ordered and decorated. It gives us the word cosmetics. In the Bible, the world means the values and systems of society that all have one terrible quality in common: A DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE FROM GOD.
- H. R. Kent Hughes, who pastored the College Church in Wheaton, wrote:
  - 1. Satan is terribly powerful. To be sure, he does not possess anything near the power of God but, in God's inscrutable arrangement, he temporarily dominates and drives the world which, on the whole, is separated from God's grace. Though the Devil can only be in one place at a time, with his myriad of malignant spirits he imitates God's omnipresence and omnipotence for he desires to be God more than anything. The consensus of Scripture is that this world is the cosmos diabolicus.  
[R. Kent Hughes, Ephesians, the Mystery of the Body of Christ, 1990, Good News Publishers.]

### III. Worldliness

- A. When I grew up in church, I was taught that worldliness meant dancing, drinking and women wearing makeup and pants. I remember one time a young woman in our church wore a pantsuit to church. Some of the old timers criticized her. They hit her with a Bible verse that said it was a sin for a woman to dress like a man.
- B. I had two thoughts:
  - 1. First, I didn't know any man who would ever wear her pantsuit.
  - 2. Second, back in Bible days, the men wore dresses. So go figure.
- C. Worldliness meant going to movies, listening to rock and roll music and Amy Grant, and going to a secular college. That was worldliness.
- D. But scripture paints an entirely different picture of worldliness.
- E. Worldliness is you buying into the philosophies of our culture in places where they declare independence from God.
  - 1. We need God for healthy marriages.
  - 2. We need God for a healthy economy.
  - 3. We need God for healthy sexuality.
  - 4. We need God for healthy entertainment.
- F. Wherever and whenever we say that we do not need God, we have bought into the devil's ancient delusion.

Move over, God, I can do as well as you. That is worldliness.

- G. Worldliness is you, every time you think you can set God's ways aside and chart your own course, because you know better.
- H. What does this mean for us? It means that there are many voices competing for allegiance. Behind those voices, lie spirit beings called principalities and powers. You do not have to be afraid of them, because when Jesus died on the Cross and rose again, He ruined them. So you should quit listening to them. They don't have to call the shots in your life.
- I. The problem is that these spirit beings ARE calling the shots in our culture and our society. Art, media, entertainment, music, education, government, humanism, religion, every form of human philosophy is distorted away from reality and toward the devil's lies.
- J. A big example: A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned that the top song downloaded on iTunes is about a young girl experimenting with lesbianism. Does anybody watch *So You Think You Can Dance*? C'mon, confession is good for the soul.
- K. This week, that song was a featured performance and you and thousands of young kids were dancing, cheering and applauding a young woman's flirtation with lesbianism.
- L. But it's usually not that blatant. Most of the time, the devil's lies are very subtle. He's crafty. The bible speaks of the "wiles of the devil" Ephesians. 6:11. You won't see him coming and, if you do, you'll like what you see.
- M. That is where art, entertainment, music and media merge with satan's world system—the cosmos diabolicus.
- N. All over our country, in universities, on the radio, on the internet, there are subtle ways in which Christianity is undermined.
- O. Let's bring it home.

#### IV. Back to Colossians

- A. St. Paul wrote to a culture that understood the spiritual nature of the universe. When he wrote about "the basic principles of the world" he meant "the basic philosophies of the world-system as they have been corrupted by the devil and his angels."
- B. Understand this really clearly: Paul does not allow his disciples to worry about the outcome of the war of the worlds for one second. There is no doubt about the outcome. Christ has triumphed over sin and death and the devil. You do not add to that triumph; you enjoy it by faith. The devil is a toothless lion and the only power he has in your life is whatever power you give him.
- C. That's why the Bible is so important. Because, when it comes your own life, the battle is always about truth vs. deception. Truth—the Bible. Deception—the cosmos diabolicus and its lies.
- D. There are two equal and opposite religious philosophies that the devil will trick you into if he can:
  1. Self-denial (asceticism)
  2. Self-indulgence (Lasciviousness)
- E. Both of these are equally from your flesh, equally worldly. Let's look at them.

#### V. Self-denial (asceticism)

- A. *"Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations: "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle" which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things, indeed, have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."* Colossians 2:20-23
- B. Look at the list: Don't do this, don't do that. Self-denial. False humility. Self-imposed religion. Neglect of the Body.
- C. Let me pause here and say there is a proper place to deny yourself and that is to discipline yourself to be a strong Christian. But, that's not the point here. The point here is denying yourself to gain the approval of God.
- D. Martin Luther was a monk during the 15th century. He would lay in his stonewalled bedroom in freezing weather, without blankets and without clothing, shivering and nearly freezing to death because he wanted to please God.
- E. God wasn't impressed.
- F. In the 13th century, a monk named Dominic Loricatus became famous for torturing himself for Jesus. He used a whip to strike his own back as hard as he could as he read the Bible. He made his back an open wound. He started a movement called the Flagellants. The Flagellants paraded up and down the streets in Italy, Austria and France whipping themselves for God's sake.
- G. The movement died out. I'll bet they had problems with recruitment.
- H. God doesn't want our self-punishment or our asceticism.
  - I. The one and only point that impresses God is Jesus Christ. He is the head of the church and we take our marching orders from Him. He issues them through His Word.
  - J. This is legalism: Humans, by human effort, trying to gain the approval of God.
- K. When I grew up, I was taught that if the Bible doesn't explicitly permit an activity, then that activity is a sin. So dancing was out. Going to movies was out. So was playing cards.
  - L. But, if you really want to be consistent, you'd have to be Amish because driving cars should be out, too. Using electricity should be out. After all, the Bible doesn't explicitly permit those things.
- M. But, that rule is all wrong. It is based on self-denial. When you are using self-denial as a way to please God, it's

just a return to the the basic philosophies of the world system as they have been corrupted by the devil and his angels.

- N. Ray Stedman pointed out that just the opposite rule was true:
1. "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.'" (Sermon loc cit)
  2. "*Now the Holy Spirit tells us clearly that in the last times some will turn away from what we believe; they will follow lying spirits and teachings that come from demons. These teachers are hypocrites and liars. They pretend to be religious, but their consciences are dead. They will say it is wrong to be married and wrong to eat certain foods. But God created those foods to be eaten with thanksgiving by people who know and believe the truth. Since everything God created is good, we should not reject any of it. We may receive it gladly, with thankful hearts.*" 1 Timothy 4:1-4
- O. Sometimes Christians swing the pendulum to the opposite extreme. Not self denial, but...

#### VI. Self-indulgence

- A. Self-indulgence says, "Now that I'm a Christian, I can do whatever I want."
- B. Really, the reasoning is more subtle than that. It goes like this:
1. There are many different interpretations of the Bible.
  2. Every time someone gives an interpretation, somebody else gives an opposite interpretation.
  3. It's too hard to tell who's right and who's wrong.
  4. So I'm going to just give up and not worry about right and wrong.
- C. That thinking has led to one of the most self-indulgent generations of Christianity in American history. Here's how you can tell if you've swallowed their kool-aid:
1. It's the church's job to meet people's needs and make them feel good.
  2. It's not the church's job to uphold biblical doctrines; they're not worth fighting over.
  3. It's not the church's job to uphold biblical values when those values make people feel bad; we should put people's feelings over the church's beliefs.
  4. As long as it doesn't hurt anybody, it's okay. As long as it's okay, I shouldn't judge anybody. People who judge others are mean and phony and that's why the church is so messed up.
  5. Christianity should always be easy and cost-free; Jesus isn't my Lord and Owner and Ruler and Boss, He's my good friend and my complaint manager with God.
  6. He won't mind it if I ignore Him for months at a time. He's always there for me, even if I forget Him.
  7. Even if I do sin, God will forgive me. Right? It's all about grace and grace is leniency, right?
  8. As long as He has to forgive me, He should forgive everybody so, therefore, all religions are good and all roads lead to God, even if the people are a little confused.
  9. It's not my place to say who's right and who's wrong.
  10. This is giving me a headache, so I'm going to hang out with my friends, watch TV, have some beers and head home with my girlfriend/boyfriend. Maybe we'll get married someday, but it's just a piece of paper, right?
- D. Colossians 2:23: These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, *false* humility, and neglect of the body, *but are* of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.
- E. If the devil were to write his own Ten Commandments, the first five would command self-denial and the second five would command self-indulgence. He wouldn't care which five you obeyed.
- F. The funny thing is, half of our church is shaking its collective head at the other half and think I'm talking about them. I'm talking about YOU.

#### VII. Back to the beginning of our paragraph:

- A. Colossians 2:20: Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as *though* living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations?
- B. There is the main point: You died with Christ from the voices of demons, you died to the voice of self-denial, you died to the voice of self-indulgence. In the next paragraph he will say not only did you die with Christ, you've also been raised with Christ.
- C. What is he talking about?
- D. He is talking about the amazing truth of what a Christian really is; what you really are.
- E. You are a new person who has been united with Jesus. You are so much one with Christ that you share His possessions, His treasures, His status, His nature, His identity and His life.
- F. Christ is your life. What does that mean? It means you have to keep returning to Christ, keep learning more and more about Christ, keep living moment by moment with Jesus. Respond to His voice and His word, more than to the devil's voice and the devil's world.

#### VIII. Question

- A. For all those times you were uncertain as to what the Bible really meant, let me ask you a question:
1. If you were really certain, would it make a difference?
- B. If you knew clearly what Jesus wanted you to do, would you do it? If you knew what He wanted you to think or to say, would you think it or say it?
- C. Because, if you really think about it, self-denial and self-indulgence are just opposite sides of the same coin; wounded spirits groping for something real. Wounded hearts and confused minds looking for truth, but not

finding it, because they're not looking through Jesus.

- D. What does Jesus think about that song on So You Think You Can Dance? What does He feel for all those young people cheering about it? He loves them. He died for them. He wants the best for them. Jesus grieves when people self-destruct that way.
- E. He grieves when you self-destruct, too. That's why the best life you can ever have is one in which you refer to Him. Or, as this passage says, Hold Fast to the Head. Hold fast to Christ. Keep coming back to Jesus. Jesus, the Savior. Jesus, the Lord. Jesus, the Prince of Peace. The King of Kings.

#### IX. Conclusion

- A. Every day, we're caught in the war of the worlds. You will either grow up, grow mature, be equipped and trained to become a LOYAL WARRIOR.
- B. Or you will become a CASUALTY in the great conflict of the ages. You will take in the doctrines of demons and believe the devil's lie. You'll give in to self-denial and all its ascetic worldliness and, when you're sick of that, you'll switch to self-indulgence and all its lascivious worldliness.
- C. You'll be devoured by the devil, says Peter in 1 Peter 5:8.
- D. Well, the devil may be a roaring lion but guess who else in Scripture is compared to a lion? Jesus! Jesus is the lion of the Tribe of Judah, says John (Revelation 5:5), and whose roar do you think is louder?
- E. Our culture is racing to the bottom as fast as we can and, yet, Jesus isn't flustered. He isn't scared. He isn't worried. He isn't in a slump and He isn't having a bad year.
- F. He's the same, yesterday, today and forever.
- G. The plea of this book is that you will anchor your emotions to Christ, derive your identity from Christ, draw in your truth from Christ and live your life for Christ.
- H. How? Keep plugging away at the Bible, at prayer, at worship, at community with God's people and at a life of service to Him. That will make you whole. That will bring you to the life of your dreams.
- I. Look, who here is loyal to their friends?
- J. Jesus is your friend, isn't He? Do you have another friend who died for you? Who shed blood for your sins? Who went nose to nose with the devil for you? Who went through hell and back for you? Do you have another friend so good to you, so loyal to you, so steady for you?  
  
Let me ask again, who here is loyal to their friends?