

Since You Died With Christ...

Colossians 2:20-23 *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 -- ²¹ "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," ²² which all concern things which perish with the using -- according to the commandments and doctrines of men? 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.*

Have you ever tried to fix a problem, with something that made sense to you, but it had the opposite effect? If you have tried to put out an oil-based fire with water, you may have learned the hard way that it doesn't work. Using water to put out a fire seems reasonable, but on oil it actually makes matters worse. Sometimes people approach their Christian lives a bit like that. They see various sins in their lives that are going strong, like a fire. But what they throw at it, sometimes ends up making it worse, not better.

Anytime you try to deal with sin in your life, be it lust, envy, gossip, despair, laziness, you have to deal with it God's way. If you try one of the many 'Jesus-plus' methods, you will fail.

In recent sermons on Being Complete in Christ, we have already seen a number of 'Jesus-plus' approaches to the Christian life. Gnosticism says, 'Jesus isn't sufficient, you need other mediators, and special knowledge.' Legalism says, 'Jesus isn't sufficient, you need to do certain works of the law.' Mysticism says, 'Jesus isn't sufficient, you need special experiences and revelation outside of Him.' Now, we come to a third kind of Jesus-plus approach that was occurring in Colosse – something known as *asceticism*. But like the other three, this is not from God, it is man-made. Paul makes it very clear that this is a man-made approach, because he tells us in **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 --*

This system comes from the *world*. It comes from the system of false religion that Christians have died to in Christ. It borrows from Christianity, and twists certain truths, to make a system which is not commanded by God, but is *according to the commandments and doctrines of men*.

In fact, in verse 23, Paul calls it *a self-made religion*.

Whenever men invent a religion, it will have at least two characteristics:

- 1) It will make sense to our human minds. Human religion operates on human idea. We think we have been bad, so we decide the solution is to do more good than bad. We decide that the mind is a problem so we shut off the mind. We decide the body is a problem, so we punish the body. But it seems reasonable to us, it seems logical, sensible, even wise. That's why false religion keep going. People learn the basic idea, and approve of it.
- 2) It has no power to overcome our selfishness. As clever as it might seem, when push comes to shove, false religion has no power over the cravings of our selfish, sinful nature. You can dress a tiger up in a dinner jacket, put the cutlery in front of him, seat him at the head of the table, and say grace before the meal. You might have tamed him enough to do that. But if he is hungry enough, you won't be serving him dinner, you'll be part of it. False religion seems to tame the sinful nature, but it really is just show. If the selfish nature is hungry enough, it will ignore all the trappings of that religion and gorge itself.

That's the case with this false system called asceticism. It seems to make sense, but it has no real power.

What does asceticism look like?

1) Asceticism is concerned mainly with *external matters*.

Paul describes the kind of regulations that are common to this system '*do not touch, do not taste, do not handle.*' Asceticism has to do with food, sleep, sexuality, clothing, washing – 'Don't eat pork, don't eat meat, don't touch a dead body, don't touch a leper, don't have any form of physical relationship with the opposite sex in marriage.'

These are all external things. They are things which are not internal, and therefore they are *temporary*. That's why Paul says, '*they perish with the using.*' You eat food and it is gone, you might marry or not marry, wash your body or not; but your body is also temporary.

When your whole approach to religion is about disciplining the body, watching your diet, controlling sexuality, the Bible says 'you are submitting to a worldly kind of religion, concerned with the external.'

Jesus dealt with this very strongly.

Mark 7:14-23 ¹⁴*When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand: ¹⁵There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. ¹⁶If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!" ¹⁷When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. ¹⁸So He said to them, "Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" ²⁰And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. ²¹For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, ²²thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. ²³All these evil things come from within and defile a man."*

Jesus was not saying that it makes no difference what you put into your body. He was saying that the major spiritual issues are not the actual foods or drinks, or fastings, or other uses of the body. The major spiritual issues are the things already found inside your heart.

Sometimes you find someone very proud of how conservative she is in her dress. So she is focused on the external matter, but what is coming out of her heart? Pride.

Here is a man who has cut his hair – no longer is it how it was in his heavy metal days. But he despises the man coming to church with the pony tail. He has got something 'squared away' externally, but what is going on internally?

Now, is dress or appearance or food irrelevant? No, we are not saying that. The Bible gives space to those issues. But whenever Christians focus on the externals, and leave the internal untouched – this will have no power to overcome the flesh.

This seems to have a *show of wisdom*. These external things can certainly be measured. You can see how much food you have eaten. You can see if you have smoked or not. You can see how long you have slept. You can measure these things in calories, hours, packs, glasses, centimetres.

So it seems when you control these things that you are making progress in the Christian life.

And it is comfortable for a self-made religion because you cannot as easily measure pride, lust, jealousy, hatred, strife, covetousness, evil thoughts. Those are harder to deal with.

So man-made religion focuses on what it can measure. It moderates what goes into the body, and what the body looks like outwardly, and it moderates the places you go.

But merely to moderate these external things is not powerful enough to overcome the flesh. It is using a water pistol against a fighter jet. It cannot overcome the flesh. In a real sense, if this is your whole Christian life, you are scratching the surface. Rather, it may in fact encourage sins of the flesh.

2) Asceticism calls for *self-powered self-denial*

Asceticism is very focused on denying oneself certain things. Notice Paul tells us that the typical laws and commandments are 'don't, don't, don't.'

Elsewhere Paul says in I Timothy 4:3 that the doctrines of demons include '*forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.*'

Ancient ascetics denied themselves almost any kind of bodily comfort. They believed if they neglected and treated their body severely, it would fade into the background, and their soul would be free to commune with God with very little temptation. So they denied themselves all kinds of things. They denied themselves food and embarked on long and protracted fasts. They denied themselves marriage and so lived celibate. They denied themselves bodily comforts – they would wear prickly clothing, they would sleep on hard stone; some of them slept in caves or even in the elements. Some denied themselves social interaction and took vows of silence. Some denied themselves all money, and took vows of poverty.

But because ascetics do not trust in Christ's power, they rely on themselves to deny themselves. The power in asceticism is *willpower*. In fact, one possible translation of the Greek words in verse 23 translated self-imposed religion is 'self-willed observance'. You deny yourself many things, but you do it in your own power, and therefore for your own glory.

Now there is a place for self-denial. Jesus Himself said, **Luke 9:23** *Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."*

Jesus said that self-denial was part of following Him. But what you will notice is that denying yourself and taking up your cross is a means to *following* Him. In other words, if riches gets in the way of following Christ, then you deny yourself riches. If it doesn't, then you don't. If marriage gets in the way of following Christ, you deny yourself marriage. If it doesn't (and it doesn't for most people) then you don't. If eating has become a stumbling-block to serving Jesus, then you will practise self-denial in this area.

Self-denial doesn't do anything by itself – it is supposed to assist you to do something else. Tying your shoelaces doesn't help you walk, it just stops you from tripping over them, or from slipping out of your shoes. Lifting the handbrake doesn't make your car go, it just helps you to go without much hindrance. This is what true self-denial is, denying ourselves sinful or lawful things that prevent us from running the race.

Hebrews 12:1 *Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,*

1 Corinthians 9:27 *'But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.'*

Self-denial is a means to an end. You do it, *so that you can do something else*, namely, follow Christ. And because you are doing it for Christ, the power is not merely willpower, it is Spirit-enabled.

When it becomes an end in itself – it malfunctions. When you are simply denying yourself various things, and doing so in your own strength, you produce a big vacuum in your heart.

Luke 11:24-26 "When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.'²⁵ "And when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order.²⁶ "Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first."

The context here is the matter of demon possession and that is its primary application. But it is true of sin as well, and of human desire. If all you do is remove, take out, subtract, beware that you do not find your soul binging, glutting itself on the thing you have denied it, or on something else.

Many Christians today think that if they just deny themselves various things in their own willpower, they will automatically love God and live a holy life. So they make sure they do not smoke, drink, gamble, listen to worldly music, they don't celebrate Christmas, they don't celebrate Easter, they don't read Harry Potter books (or anything with the word 'magic' in it), they don't watch TV, they don't go to movies, they don't go to most family functions, they don't read books not recommended by their group.

They deprive themselves of sleep because they believe they must rise at 4am every day to be pleasing to Christ. They impose a punishing schedule of study on themselves, they fast long and hard. Their lives are a long list of subtractions - things they have stopped doing. All things which they stopped doing in their own strength.

But in the meantime, all kinds of internal sins have been festering, growing and developing - spiritual pride, strife, contentiousness, cliquishness, envy, impatience, jealousy, hatred.

Paul tells us that this approach to the Christian life has *an appearance of wisdom*. Like false mysticism has real experiences; asceticism seems to make sense, it seems reasonable. Since some of our sins are external, bodily sins – *treat the body severely or neglect the body*.

Since so much of our sin is a result of temptation, they keep subtracting until there are no longer any sources of temptation. It seems humble, but it is a *false humility*.

But in fact, it is of *no value against the indulgence of the flesh*. The *flesh* is not the same thing as the *body*. The flesh refers to our sinful nature. The body is not evil. The flesh is evil. Trying to tame the flesh by neglecting the body is like trying to kill a wicked man by throwing eggs at his house.

Treat the body as rigorously as you wish, it is just the house of your soul. If your soul is undisciplined, sensual and indulgent, none of that will help. It is like trying to catch a Great White Shark with a bamboo stick and a thread. You will not defeat the flesh and overcome sin in your life merely by practising self-denial.

For example, someone trying to overcome smoking the ascetic way will focus merely on the external habit – the habit of smoking. They will not look internally at what is defiling them, only at the external. Then, relying on willpower they will try various schemes, various cutbacks, all the time measuring their own performance, keeping score, and all the time concerned about the external act, not about the heart. Many fail. Some might have some success, but they still fail to deal internally.

Think of a man who seeks to overcome his lustful habits, his pornographic habits. He focuses only on his indulgences. So he removes various temptations around him, and tries by force of will to not look at certain things, to not listen to certain things. But nothing is dealt with internally. Even if he obtains a measure of success, the *inside* of the dish is not clean.

A woman is dealing with over-eating, or under-eating. She might try to deal with it by strictly following a diet, counting calories, following a rigorous exercise program, maybe even purging. But she fails to deal with the heart. And this approach will not be of any value against the indulgence of the flesh.

We could say the same for laziness, gambling, a critical spirit, excessive TV watching, prayerlessness, material envy, covetousness, shopping addictions and financial wastage.

Put simply, asceticism is a false hope.

So wherein lies the power to overcome sin? As Colossians has been repeating it is in an all-sufficient Jesus Christ. Specifically, in being in union - one with - the all-sufficient Christ, positionally; and experiencing it practically, by faith. The main point here is *'if you died with Christ, why do you keep submitting yourselves to this man-made religion?'* In other words – there is the answer. The solution to sin is not asceticism; it is your union with Jesus in His death and resurrection.

Romans 6 makes it very clear, and so does Galatians 2:20.

The <i>historical fact</i>	- "I have been crucified with Christ."
The <i>paradoxical fact</i>	- "I am still alive."
The <i>explanatory fact</i>	- "It is not really I who lives; it is Christ's life dwelling inside me."
The <i>resulting fact</i>	- "I live by faith in the Christ who loved me."

Faith is how I experience the union with Christ on a moment-to-moment basis. The death and resurrection is historical. So in the present I experience Jesus' past death to sin, and His past resurrection, to live unto God by faith. Moment to moment, I believe that sin no longer has a hold on me. I died to it.

You might remember, in 'Pilgrim's Progress', that Christian's faith is tested when he approaches the place Beautiful, and there are two lions in the way. He is told that they are both on chains, and if he keeps to the middle path, they will not be able to harm him. They are there as a test of faith. Pilgrim believes this, walks down the middle, the lions get up and roar, but they cannot reach him.

The historical fact means the tiger of your sinful nature is chained. Living by faith is realising his chain cannot extend to you in Christ. You can go up to him and feed him yourself, but he cannot overwhelm you if you obey God. Don't let all his growling temptations lead you to walk closer to him. If you do not walk closer to him, he cannot get you. It may look like he can, but faith is counting what God said to be true.

Equally, it is realising, I can do the things God is calling me to do. I historically rose with Jesus to live to newness of life. So I will trust Him, and obey Him.

Faith brings the powerful past event of your death to sin, and your resurrection to newness of life, into the present.

The historical event of your union with Christ is like your engine idling - faith in that truth is like putting it into gear and pressing the accelerator. The historical event is like the water pressure that is in your pipes at home; faith is opening the taps. The historical event is like the electricity connected to your home; faith is like switching on an appliance.

All the power to be separated from old habits and say no to sin is true of you. You must now believe that and act upon it. All the power to say yes to righteousness is true of you. You must now believe that and act upon it.

In other words, a Christian's emphasis is not on his own willpower. It is on his union with Christ. That's what he focuses on. I am one with Christ. Christ died to this. Christ lives to God. I died to this. I live to God. Flee temptation and pursue pleasing God.

There is a place for self-discipline and rules. But those things, apart from a union with Christ in His death and resurrection, appropriated by faith, will fail. Self-denial and self-discipline are like buckling your seatbelt and releasing the handbrake. It is good and helpful and preparatory. But the engine is your union with Christ, and faith is pressing the accelerator.

The Christian fighting the smoking habit has to recognise the biggest problem is not merely a physical one, it is a spiritual one. There are issues of self-gratification, self-love against love for Christ, self-trust, utter dependence on this substance, on not on Him, willful disobedience to the command to treat your body as a Temple. You must deal with these spiritual matters of the heart, if you want to defeat the physical habit. You must repent of those idols, walk away from their growls and seek deeper union with Him.

The Christian fighting lust must focus on the internal issue and deal with it through his union with Christ. The god you have made of pleasure, the cheap imitation of intimacy, the profound self-love that gratifies itself, using another. Realise you are joined with Christ, sin has no dominion over you, do not feed it, and then abide ever deeper in a satisfying union of new life with Him.

The Christian fighting over-eating, or under-eating, must deal with the spiritual problem within – the god you have made of your own appearance, the god you have made of the pleasure of eating or drinking. Realise you are dead to these idols and continue to deaden yourself to them. Repent of them, embrace a life pleasing to God by faith; seek satisfaction in a union with Christ.

The power to overcome sin is not found in trying to tame ourselves by ourselves. It is in surrendering to the fact that our only hope is total union with Christ. We must live in that union, love it. Pursue that closeness of fellowship with Him. As we grow, it becomes more and more obvious – Jesus died to this. How can I continue in it? Jesus rose to holiness; I must too. I am in Him, and He is in me. The oneness must increasingly overtake us.

As you think about the battles you have had, and are having, with sin in your life, ask yourself, 'Has the truth of my union with Christ been at the centre of my thoughts?' Has this been your focus? Has your effort been centred upon experiencing a closer union with Christ, acting that union out by faith; or has it been upon your own efforts, your own personal scorecard of how long you have gone without sinning, and so on?

God will not share His glory with human willpower. That is why salvation is by faith, and not by human willpower. In sanctification, God will not share the glory with human willpower. That is why sanctification is by faith, not by human willpower.

Proverbs 25:19 says, '*Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth and a foot out of joint.*'

Confidence in your own willpower is like a bad tooth, and a foot out of joint. It will keep disappointing you and keep harming you. Abandon your trust in yourself. Humble yourself and embrace your union in Christ. Believe it by faith. Act upon it, denying yourself and fleeing temptation, because you are so in love with the Christ who loved you and gave Himself for you.

1 John 5:4 *For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith.*

