

# Wrong Ways to Master the Flesh

Steve Lewis - [www.SpiritAndTruth.org](http://www.SpiritAndTruth.org)

(Colossians 2:16-23)

Paul has been quite complementary to the Colossians, commending the steadfastness of their faith in Christ and their love for all the saints. He has also shared amazing truths about the greatness of Christ – not only about what Christ has done for us, but truths about Christ’s very nature and character. Jesus Christ indwells every believer, providing the desire and power to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him and to bear fruit in every good work.

Paul begins this section with, “**Therefore...**” Paul had shared two pictures of how we are identified with Christ so we can live in Him. First in Col 2:11 Paul mentioned “**circumcision made without hands**, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.” He is referring to gaining mastery over our fleshly nature. We know that the rite of circumcision has no spiritual effect in itself, but it is symbolic of how Christ made it possible for us to put off the sins of the flesh which we are prone to by nature.

In Col 2:12 Paul said we have been “**buried with Him in baptism**, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God.” Then, “when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him” (Col 2:13). Like the rite of circumcision, the rite of baptism has no spiritual effect in itself, but it is symbolic of our death to sin and our resurrection to new life in Christ.

In the last verse in this section Paul outlined the topics in verses 16 through 22.

1. self-made religion (Col 2:16-17)
2. self-abasement (Col 2:18-19)
3. severe treatment of the body (Col 2:20-22)

His conclusion is that these things are “**of no value against fleshly indulgence.**” Paul’s summary statement shows the structure of this section, with the topic being *wrong* ways to master the sin nature.

**Col 2:16-17 - Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – <sup>17</sup> things which are a [mere] shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.**

This set of items involves man-made dietary rules and the observance of specific festival days (**Legalism**). The verb is a present active imperative in the third person, so Paul is forbidding someone from continually passing judgment on believers in such matters. The Greek verb *krinō* is a general word for judging and it carries the idea of distinguishing and deciding.

These things have often been identified as the Jewish dietary laws and feast days which God mandated in the Mosaic Law. If they are meant to indicate Jewish traditions, then they are

probably referring to the additional rules and regulations which the elders created as a “fence around the Law.” They consist of restrictions which go beyond what is revealed in God’s Word, and they can legitimately be described as “**self-made religion**.” Except for the mention of the Sabbath, these terms could also refer to some of the known rituals and celebrations in the pagan mystery religions. His point is that believers are not to be held to a legalistic set of rules in order to measure their spirituality or to maintain their relationship with Christ.

All the things mentioned in verse 16 are mere shadows of the reality which believers already have in Christ. Our life in Christ is not maintained or measured by behavioral checklists. It is a living, vital connection through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Therefore, obeying dietary restrictions and observing ritual festivals have no benefit for keeping or enhancing the spirituality believers already have in Christ.

**Col 2:18-19 - Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on [visions] he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,<sup>19</sup> and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.**

This set of items includes the worship of angels and ecstatic visions (*Mysticism*). The Greek verb *katabrabeuō* means “to decide against or to declare someone unworthy of his prize.” This word is parallel to *judging* in verse 16, but it is an even more forceful expression. Paul is forbidding the action of someone who is continually declaring believers ineligible for their rightful prize. “**Delighting in self-abasement**” is a difficult expression but probably means “having the appearance of great modesty.” This was apparently one of the main characteristics of those who were promoting this set of behaviors.

The Greek word **worship** (*thrēskeia*) applies to any external religious ritual or ceremonial observance. Many groups in Paul’s day revered “elemental spirits.” Several different Greek mystery religions included doctrines and rituals having to do with appeasing the spirit world.

The second item involves someone “**taking his stand on [visions] he has seen.**” The phrase “taking his stand” is a translation of the single Greek word *embateuō* which can mean “to enter into or come into possession of something.” One Bible scholar listed ancient inscriptions where the word is used of a participant in the mystery cults who “set foot in” (*embateuō*) and performed the initiation rites. Paul seems to be quoting the very words used by these initiates. Visions and mystical experiences leave no way to validate what is being described. Far from being humble, such a person is actually “**inflated without cause by his fleshly mind.**” Paul then explains why this set of practices is so dangerous to the Church.

To “**not hold fast to the head**” implies that the person was part of the body, the Church. There may have been a church member in Colossae who was advocating ecstatic visions as a way to enhance one’s spirituality. As we will see later, ecstatic experiences were a common practice in the region of Phrygia. But false humility, the worship of angels, and ecstatic visions have no value for enhancing the connection believers have with Christ. In fact, these things indicate the

person has lost touch with Christ, the head. The appearance of humility or self-abasement is actually a cover for pride and arrogance.

**Col 2:20-22 - If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, <sup>21</sup> "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" <sup>22</sup> (which all [refer] [to] things destined to perish with use)--in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?**

This third set of items involves “**severe treatment of the body**” (*Asceticism*). Paul begins with a “First Class Conditional Clause” which means we assume for the sake of the argument that the condition is true. “**If** you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world” might be translated, “**Since** you have died with Christ.” This recalls the picture of baptism in which a believer identifies with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Col 2:12-13). Everything else in verse 20 depends on the believer’s death to the flesh and new life in Christ. Those who have placed their faith in Christ have been freed from the obligation to obey man-made decrees to abstain from specific things that could be handled, tasted, and touched.

There were many groups in the culture of Paul’s day who taught that a person’s spirituality or continued relationship with God depended on faithfully keeping outward rituals and avoiding specific consumables which “**perish with use.**” The things they were told to abstain from have no permanent existence or significance in themselves. As well as pertaining to things that are perishable, Paul says these decrees or prohibitions are **in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men**. In other words, they lack divine authority. These rules and regulations are not from God’s Word.

**Col 2:23 - These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, [but are] of no value against fleshly indulgence.**

Paul’s summary statement provides the structure for the entire passage. As was mentioned earlier, he identifies three issues: Legalism, Mysticism, and Asceticism. Here in verse 23 he acknowledges that some of these matters have the **appearance of wisdom**. They may look promising from a human perspective, or they may appeal to our fleshly nature. People find it easier to submit to rigid external rules and regulations than to submit to the inner prompting and working of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Paul’s conclusion is that these things are “**of no value against fleshly indulgence.**” All of the things in Col 2:16-23 cover the *wrong* ways to master the flesh. Paul will begin the next chapter by discussing the best way to deal with our sin nature by means of a godly mindset.