

**Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2022**  
**Colossians 2:16-23**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word:

Holy Spirit come among us as we pray and soften our hearts to the word of God Holy Spirit come among us and help us see the life offered to us in Jesus Holy Spirit come among us with power and deep conviction for we ask it in Jesus name amen

I've got a question for you to think about and at first hearing it might sound a little shocking, maybe even heretical. Here's the question.

If you were to make your own religion what would it look like? If you were to make your own religion what would it look like? And I'm not asking that simply because I'm at home and safe from you all, I do have a reason and it is tied to our passage. What is more, the question gets at something in human nature in general, because we are wired for worship whether we end up worshiping sport or money or sex or power or family, we worship something and as John Calvin the great reformer and theologian said 'Our heart, the human heart, is a factory of idols we end up worshiping something more often than not.' Sadly, it's not God. What are we worshiping? If you make your own religion what would it look like?

I suspect if we were to actually make our own religion it would be very like the world religions today. There would be something in it that would give us a benefit because all religions do. There'd be something in it whereby we do something that something that looks spiritual, religious, that have pre things to do and things to have as part of that religion. There would of course have to be, I suspect as all the religions do, a way of improving yourself, because none of us are perfect, we've always got room to improve, and, because we're not perfect and we do wrong things, there needs to be a way of balancing the scales. All of these would likely feature in whatever we made up as our religion.

But, in our passage today, Paul wants to keep the Colossians faith in Jesus exclusively in Jesus. I might add and to achieve that he speaks of things that they are to reject.

He says in verses 16, 18 and 20 'Therefore, do not let anyone judge you, do not let anyone disqualify you. Why do you submit?' In these three portions he's basically getting at the same idea - reject false worship - and he's going to give us two broad avenues of worship that we are to reject so that we keep our faith exclusively in Jesus.

The first chunk, the first paragraph is really to do with shadow worship. He says in verses 16 to 17 '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.' These are a shadow of things to come, we are to reject shadow worship and Paul outlines at the start there are a whole range of Old Testament practices and he says they're all a shadow. They were all something pointing back to the real thing. They were pointing to something else. They're a shadow,

So, for example, the eating and drinking laws. They were to identify who was part of the people of God, to say who was in and who was out, and that was a shadow pointing to the reality. Or the religious festivals which were annual events often tied into forgiveness, spiritual forgiveness, again pointing to another reality, The monthly new moon celebrations often tied to a theme of spiritual renewal. And then, the weekly sabbath day which symbolized freedom and security and rest in God, again pointing to something else, All of these were a shadow says Paul. They are fleeting. They are temporary, They're not the real thing. So, reject now such worship. He goes on to say this in verse 18 'Do not let anyone who delights in false worship and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen. They are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.'

So, let me unpack a few words and phrases here. False humility probably has connotations of fasting and so it may be fasting to bring on a spiritual experience or fasting to appear very spiritual and mature. Worship of angels can mean a couple of different things, we're not entirely sure. It could mean the actual worship of angels rather than God, or it could have could mean having a spiritual experience where you're caught up amongst the worship the angels are giving to God and you're kind of joining in that experience but really, whatever it means, ultimately Paul says in the next sentence they are 'idle notions', they lead nowhere, they are not worth anything.

He says also, that this kind of worship, this false kind of worship, just puffs people up, it makes them prideful, makes them full of hot air. And so, again, don't let them disqualify you. Reject such claims and such teaching because that form of worship is empty. It's again, a form of shadow worship, so reject it.

Let's go back to that intro question thinking about if you were to make your own religion what would it look like. Well, I suspect if we did try and create our own religion we would naturally seek a kind of positive side, a positive side to our religion. It brings us benefits and asks us to do things which just appear spiritual, appear good on the surface, pure beneficial and Paul's principle in this portion of our passage is that the Colossians are to reject shadow worship so as to keep their worship on Jesus alone, they are to reject shadow worship things that look beneficial and worship Jesus alone. So, what about us? Do we engage in shadow worship? Do the people in our community engage in shadow worship?

You know across the three years I've been here I've seen different forms of shadow worship. I've or heard of things at least I know of one place where people were organizing a fun night by inviting a spiritualist to host an event and indeed there are around and about, maybe more so in West Lothian, but probably here as well, there are spiritualist churches and sadly that's quite a misleading title because a spiritualist or a spiritualist church or meeting is about connecting with spirits of people who have died, either friends or family, and I want to briefly mention this just in case you or someone you know is ever thinking of engaging in such things and I want to point out why doing so is not healthy, is a shadow form of worship. Because the Bible teaches that when someone dies, whether they know God or not, their spirit automatically goes on to

whatever lies ahead, to either be with God or to face judgment. There is no mix up, there's no accidental staying behind or anything like that, it's one or other, and that means that whatever is happening in a spiritualist meeting or event and whatever has been facilitated by a spiritualist, should it be real at all, it can't be a human spirit, it's not going to be anything of God's kingdom, because God doesn't deceive, he doesn't lie and try and trick us, and the only other spiritual force or place that that could come about then is the dominion of darkness, which Paul talked about earlier in Colossians, basically the demonic. So, I caution you against such things. I would caution anyone in our community against such things and in fact actually, when I heard about that event because it was somewhere important to me and I didn't want them to have that event I did go and speak to the management and say I really don't think this should be happening and here's why. We do, as human beings, engage in shadow worship.

There are also people in groups which engage in other kinds of shadow worship. You might know or have been involved in a rite or ceremony which claimed religious connotations and maybe include symbolism, maybe the symbolism of being blindfolded, maybe the symbolism of having something tied around your neck and it might just have been described as a metaphor or that it didn't carry any great meaning or effect but actually, it does, it is a portrayal a symbolism of spiritual dynamics the blindfold inviting spiritual blindness the thing tied around your neck talking about silence. These are not healthy practices and if you've engaged in them or engaged with a spiritualist or a ouija board or whatever, it might be you've potentially opened yourself up to forces beyond Jesus, because nothing in our faith encourages us to engage in such practices and if that unsettles you then please just come and have a talk with me, and we can find freedom and life in Jesus.

So, those are maybe more out-there kind of things and it might seem like a bit of a side issue for many of us but if I don't talk about it, who is going to talk about it. So, this is my one time just because it comes up in Colossians I, right I'm going to mention this.

So, let's think about more everyday things. Let's think about things within the church, for example. So, in the first part of this passage Paul talks about people who are claiming to have spiritual experiences, a real spiritual high and if you're not having that, seeing that, experiencing that, then maybe your faith in Jesus is insufficient or not real, and it makes me wonder - Are we seeking a spiritual high rather than seeking Jesus? Are we, in our faith, simply about making us feel good or about following Jesus? Because, you know, following Jesus is really hard. There are times when sacrifices are made. There are times when feeling close to Jesus just isn't there. You feel distant from Him and that doesn't mean He's not real, doesn't mean that your faith's not genuine. And if we are seeking a spiritual high, a spiritual experience, if our faith is only about making us feel good, then we're worshiping that rather than worshiping Jesus. Or in the church we have other dangers as well, because we can end up worshiping so much else than Jesus. Although we think we're worshiping Jesus. So, for example, we might say I wish there was more band music or I wish there was more organ music or I wish there was more silence or I wish there was more noise and informality. You know, do we worship the style of worship more than we actually worship Jesus? Or we're talking about

buildings as well in the church circles just now and will we keep our building, will other buildings close? And, if our building was to close, would you stop coming to worship? Would you refuse to go elsewhere? Could that suggest you worship the building more than you worship Jesus? There's so many different ways that this can happen, that we end up engaging in shadow worship rather than the worship of Jesus, and Paul's call to us in this first part of the passage is to reject shadow worship because it is fleeting and empty.

So, let's go back to that intro question, if you were to make your own religion what would it look like? and what we've discovered. We've looked at the positive side, the benefits, the things you might do in a positive manner and as part of that religion but, you know, every religion deals with the negative side of humanity somehow. We need something in our religion that deals with our brokenness and tries to balance the scales of that so that there's justice in the world.

And I think that Paul is aware that the false teachers are going to or are or are already trying to push a false worship that seeks to deal with that negative side of our humanity, but in unhealthy ways. So he says for example 'Why do you submit to its rules? Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!' These rules which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use are based on merely human commands and teachings.

Now, let's be clear, Paul's not against morality as we'll see in the next couple of chapters but he is careful to differentiate between as he says rules that are merely human commands and teachings with what is from God and what is actually effective. Because, let's see what he says in the next verse '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.' Now, let's be clear, by sensual indulgence Paul is not just meaning sex or sexual temptation, although that is included, if you look in the letter to the Galatians chapter 5 you'll see Paul listing various ways that the flesh portrays itself; yes, there's the sexual stuff, but there's also envy and greed and bitterness and anger and rage and such like. All of that is part of how our flesh, our sinful nature, shows itself and displays itself and we war against that, and the tendency of humanity is just to create more and more religions that try and deal with that through tick boxes, through a list of rules, rather than trying to get to the heart of the issue, which is our sinful heart, We would rather deal with anything, we would rather have a list of rules as long as your arm, rather than face up to our willful rebellion in our hearts against God, we'd rather do anything else, speak about anything else than face up to that reality, and have God deal with that reality in the depths of our being.

I wonder if in past generations you've seen some of that as well. I'm conscious that I think there was a period of time, maybe it was more in the States but possibly here in the UK as well, where Christians were not expected to do certain things there, they might have not drunk and alcohol, and they might not have went to dances, they might not have went to the cinema. Now, those rules may have come in for good reasons, at least on the surface, but, actually, did it deal with the real issues the issues of our heart?

Did they actually foster anything of the fruit of the spirit of love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness or indeed self-control? Probably not. And so, we have to wonder if such rules were simply hollow, they lacked any value, because they didn't change us from the inside out, they gave the appearance of being holy but didn't actually nurture holiness. It maybe relied much more on our strength of will than on the power of God's Spirit to change us. After all, Paul says in Romans 8 'If, by the spirit, you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.' You have a role to play putting to death the misdeeds of the body but it can only happen by the Spirit, by the Spirit that we put to death over the course of our life, we put to death the misdeeds of our body so that we grow in greater likeness to Jesus, displaying the fruit of the Spirit in increasing measure, that is part of the hope of the Christian journey but it's a process, and it can't be in our own strength and so, Paul is saying that we are to reject futile rule making because it's passing, it's hollow, it's simply trusting in the wrong things.

So, what about us? What about you? Where are you tempted to trust the wrong things rather than trust in Jesus and in the power of His Spirit? For example, maybe you have a sense that you need to appease God, that you're not perfect and you do wrong things. All of us probably have that feeling at times but, are you trying to appease God in your own way, with your own resources, your own achievements, your own sacrifices? Do you ever think along these lines, that surely God accepts you, surely God will welcome you into heaven, into the kingdom of heaven, into His family because of your moral life, because you've given up so much, or done so much, or went to such great lengths? Is that what you base your confidence, your faith upon? Do you think that your religion and your activity in the name of religion will be enough? Because, after all, Paul says this in Galatians 'For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse. As it is written 'cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law.' Clearly, no one who relies on the law is justified before God because the righteous will live by faith.'

If we try and rely on our own merits, try and obey the rules, try and tick the boxes, if we stumble at one fault, that is the whole lot cast down, that is the whole lot stained, because, as the verse says, to live by the law you have to do everything and if you don't you're under a curse. So, the law doesn't actually justify you because you can't be justified, can't be made right with God through what you do, you cannot live a good enough life to earn salvation, it's all futile rule making, and Paul calls us to reject it because it is passing and hollow.

So, Paul has given us two avenues of worship to reject. We're to reject false worship and we've to reject futile rule making. But, you know, along the way as Paul does, he weaves in some positive encouragement, positive reminders, positive truth, because after all, he wants the Colossians to keep their faith exclusively in Jesus, and so he just can't help himself but point to Jesus because, in Jesus, is the life we seek. He says in verse 17 'These are a shadow of the things that were to come.' The reality however, is found in Jesus, the reality is found in Jesus, all that was portrayed through the Old Testament, the forgiveness, the spiritual renewal, the freedom, the security, the welcome into God's family, the rest that you yearn. for all of that is now found in Jesus.

so come to Him. And you know, finding something, when you're looking around the house and you find it, you take hold of it and you keep a hold of it, It's that idea here, as well. Lay hold of Jesus and keep a hold of Jesus because the life you seek is in Him. Paul goes on, he also said they have lost their false teachers, have 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 head from whom the whole body grows. The image of a head and body we know from chapter 1 verse 18 is speaking of Jesus as the head and the church, as the body the members or the individual Christians. And so Paul, is saying that the life you seek is in Jesus but you need to stay connected to Him. Don't be distracted, don't be taken away elsewhere, stay connected to Jesus. And we understand that picture language, don't we, because our head and our body are so intricately tied and connected through our head. It's how we access food and what we drink through, our head is how we take an air that our body needs, our head is where thinking and senses are processed, through our head is where the life comes from the body and when the head becomes disconnected from the body, well, the body's dead. The same is true of the Christian life, any spiritual life. If you want life, it's through Jesus and you need to stay connected to Him.

But Paul has one final little bit that throws us a bit of a curveball maybe. He says in verse 20 'You died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world. Why, as though you still belong to the world do you submit to its rules?' It seems a little bit oxymoronic because, how can life come from death? It seems a bit odd but actually, Paul is simply echoing the teaching of Jesus here because Jesus said in several of the gospels 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life, will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me, and for the gospel, will save it.' The language of 'take up your cross' and of 'losing your life' is the language of dying that your will, dies and submits to the will of Jesus and follows in His way. It is a language to help us understand what in part it means to be a Christian, to follow Jesus, that the things that we maybe want we have to die to. How we understand the world wrongly is to die the priorities that we think are so important. Sometimes need to die so that we find life through Him.

The life we seek is in Jesus and in sharing in His death and taking up our cross and losing our life for His sake. We come into that life we yearn for and that means we need to allow things to die. We need to allow our man-made forms of worship to die. We need to allow our shadow-worship, we need to allow our futile rule-making, to die. Because we are now in Christ. We are now a new creation. We've come out from under those false old ways, that shadow-worship, that futile rule-making. We don't need to submit to it any longer. We don't need to submit to that old way of life anymore, because we have died to it and we now have life through Jesus.

Friends, the spiritual life we seek, the life of meaning, community, freedom, the life of forgiveness, renewal, hope, joy, peace, security, that spiritual life we yearn for is to be found in Jesus. We don't need to make up our own religion. We don't need to answer the question I asked at the start. We don't need to go to a spiritualist. We don't need to belong to an exclusive group. We don't need to seek spiritual highs or tick religious

boxes or appease God with our own efforts. The life we seek is found in Jesus so, reject shadow-worship, reject futile rule-making and simply come to Jesus. Trust in Him. Worship Him. Hold fast to Him. Stay connected to Him because the life you seek is found in Jesus.

May we each find that life today and all the days of our life. May it be so, Amen.

We close our service as we sing together our final hymn 'All I once held dear.'