

Love Beyond Knowledge

Colossians 2:16-19 by Mark Hammer

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See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. 9 For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, 10 and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; 11 and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; 12 having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. 13 When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, 14 having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. 15 When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

16 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— 17 things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 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, 19 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.

(Paul - Colossians 2:8-19)

WHO MADE YOU JUDGE?

Growing up as an 80's kid, I was fascinated with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. In fact, I loved them so much I wanted to eventually live in the New York City sewers just like them, as I thought that would be really cool. As I got older and started liking girls in the second grade, I quickly realized that most of the girls I had a crush on didn't want to live in the sewers, and the ones who did...well, they scared me. I've recently changed my mind in the last few months about wanting to live in the NY Sewers; in all honesty, I don't even want to live *above* the sewers in New York, right now. Those ninja turtles were really my gateway drug into the Karate scene, and the older I got, the more I fell in love with all things karate.

Around middle school, I started my martial arts journey that would eventually take me into my early high school years. I was decent at it—I even have a grand champion trophy which was almost as tall as I was back then, which I guess wasn't that tall looking back, but I loved Karate and enjoyed competing. However, competitions made me nervous, because we had judges watching us, critiquing us, and scoring us. It was great when they were favorable, but it's never good when you're showing off your nunchuck moves, and the nunchucks fly out of your hand and the judges have to duck, or when you don't control your punch and give a kid a bloody nose, only to be told by the judge to turn and kneel, as they check on the bloody competitor, and shortly after clarify that, "You're disqualified."

Judges, umpires, and referees are important to maintain the quality of any game, making sure the rules are kept and play stays within the boundaries; however, games become dicey when *from* the crowd the voice of a mama bear or an irate father become the enforcing voices of the contest, as they yell, "Foul," and as they verbally assault ten year olds, who might not even want to play the game and who are now given even more justification for not wanting to do so. Those self-appointed referees, umpires, and judges are those who make the game more difficult for the actual players.

It's one thing when spectators become self-appointed judges over a sports game, but it's a whole other thing when people become self-appointed judges over the salvation and spirituality of others. "You call yourself a Christian!?" "Try harder!" "You think God will forgive you for that?" This type of critical spirit was poisoning the church of Colosse, because of the spiritual mysticism—secret spiritual knowledge—some had given themselves over to, making themselves believe they had every right to discount the salvation of others.

LET NO ONE DEFRAUD YOU

Paul writes in Colossians 2:18, "*Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize...*" The word "Defrauding" (katabrabeuō) here, means "to deprive of salvation" or to be the self-appointed "umpire against someone" as in a contest. It's allowing someone the authority to declare you unworthy or condemned. There were some within the churches who had become self-appointed judges of the salvation of others, which was disrupting the fellowship of believers and the influence of the church in the community. This caused an oppressive environment for many, and so Paul is telling the faithful believers to not let

this defrauding happen to them, because of Christ's finished work, which he had already explained (Col. 2:9-15).

How were the faithful being defrauded by others? Earlier in Colossians 2:8 we read: "*See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.*" In light of this verse, defrauding comes through two primary ways—philosophy and empty deception—by two primary agents: First, philosophy which stems from the traditions of men. There's a lot of "isms" out there! Nihilism, existentialism, idealism, humanism, materialism, and from these isms—systems and philosophies, we get things such as Evolutionary Theory, Critical Race Theory, or Marxist ideologies. These worldviews answer life's greatest questions—Who is God? Who is man? What's the purpose of life? What is morality, and how do we determine morality? What is after life? A worldview is important, because **what shapes a man's mind, in turn shapes their actions.** What one truly believes determines their steps and how they approach the world and whatever the world throws at them.

The core components of these beliefs find themselves in entertainment. The music we listen to, the movies we watch, the books we read, the billboards we see, they're all propagating a message, and that message can lead one astray who doesn't have a Biblical worldview. Those ideas, if not filtered and confronted by Biblical truth, will take a person captive—making them a slave to something other than Christ, and it's one thing to be a slave of the creator of the world who gives life and brings order, and it's a whole other thing to be enslaved by a creation that is corruptible and will in turn corrupt, creating chaos. Again, for this reason, Christians, it's important to be in your Bibles, meditating and memorizing it, in order to know the truth and be governed by it.

The second way people are being defrauded is by the empty deception which stems from the elementary principles of the world, and which influence the deceptive philosophies of the traditions of men. What are the "Elementary principles"? Depends on the context. Some believe it means the basic principles of the mosaic law, but I would disagree with that interpretation in *this* letter here, because of Paul's focus on the deception of spiritual forces that are in play. Furthermore, these are principles of the kosmos, the unseen and seen, so there is a spiritual element to it; but to shed light on what elementary principles are here, let's turn to another letter from the Apostle Paul, in which he seems to use the term in the same way. The letter Galatians was written to gentile believers, who we know from our Old Testament history that the gentiles were under the dominion and

enslavement of other gods opposed to Yahweh, the one true God of Israel. Galatians 4:8 says, “*However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to THOSE which by nature are no gods.* It seems Paul is drawing from Deuteronomy 32:17, 21 which describes the Israelites chasing after the gods of the nations: “*[The Israelites] sacrificed to demons who were not God, to gods whom they have not known.... They have made Me [Yahweh] jealous with what is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their idols.*” In the wilderness, some of the people of God were worshiping demons and territorial spirits, as they would worship the one true God, Yahweh. Continuing in Galatians 4:9, *But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?* This enslavement language connects the small “g” gods—mentioned in verse 8 of Galatians 4 to the “weak and worthless elemental things” in Galatians 4:9. These “elemental things” are therefore spiritual in nature with a hunger and thirst for the carnal things of humanity. The adjectives, “weak” and “worthless” only clarify this position, as the gods of the Old Testament were often described by those same terms. Time and time again, “weak,” “worthless,” or “vain” were descriptions of the gods opposed to Yahweh (1 Chron. 16:26; Jer. 14:22; 18:15 ESV), although our English translations would often times redefine those words to “false,” giving the impression that those spiritual beings weren’t real or they were a faithful figment of a pagan imagination, but that’s not a helpful translation, when Paul is referring to very real malevolent spiritual beings (elohim) who seem to be deceptively engaged in defrauding the people of God through carnal means (cf. 1 Cor. 10:18-20).

These are the same spiritual beings already referred to in Colossians 1:16, and 2:10, 15 as the “dominions, rulers and authorities.” We’re not *only* defrauded by human philosophy, but we can also be defrauded by the very empty deception of principalities which author these false and carnal systems into the world, and we can be deceived by anyone who subjects themselves, knowingly or unknowingly, to these principalities, revealing their carnal beliefs through the systems of the world. For this reason, Paul tells us in Ephesians 6 to “*Put on the full armor of God.*” It’s another way of telling us to clothe ourselves with Christ (Gal. 3:27; cf. Rom. 13:14). **Don’t put on the flesh, the carnality— the passions, lusts, indulgences, because to do so aligns one with the philosophies of men which are governed by vain and worthless spiritual forces.** When a person, believer or non-believer, habitually gives themselves over to carnality—to the Disney philosophy of “Follow your heart,” they are providing ground for Satan to get a foothold (Eph. 4:26-27); they’re giving permission to spiritual forces opposed to God to influence them. Therefore, **don’t put on flesh, rather, put on Christ! Live according to Christ!**

KNOWING ISN'T EVERYTHING

With this understanding, Paul continues in Colossians 2:18, building upon the command to not let anyone deprive you or challenge you of your salvation “...*by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind....*” Those delighting in self-abasement (Gk. *tapeinophrosynē*) and the worship of angels were acting as if they had the right to become judges of a person’s salvation. There were some who believed that they had reached the pinnacle of spiritualism, unlocking secret knowledge, which gave them the right to devalue the prize of salvation of one they deemed inferior. These people were spiritual bullies, captivated by deceitful and worthless spirits, who had an inaccurate view of themselves which blindly led them to making false accusations against true believers.

For this reason, be on guard against the desire to be more spiritual; **we’re not called to be more spiritual, but more like Christ**. Spirituality, *outside* of Christ, is just another form of gnosticism, a feel good religion with no life-giving substance. Those who get caught up in it are present day Pharisees who believe they have the right to judge others because of secret knowledge they have or because of their level of spirituality. In our western churches, we don’t particularly suffer from spiritual mysticism, but an elementary form of gnosticism. There is this false perception within Christianity that the more one *knows* about the Bible and the workings of the church, that the more *mature* in the faith they are; I have personally known a lot of people during my eighteen years of ministry who know the Bible inside and out, better than I do; their heads are inflated with Biblical knowledge, and yet their hearts are so callous towards God and others. Most of the time they just complain about what’s happening in the church and outside of the church; they don’t have a heart to serve others, they just enter into a ministry of criticism. The love is hard to see, but the carnality of their life isn’t. They use their Biblical knowledge as a means to puff themselves up, making others feel inferior, and becoming arrogant, self-righteous, and at times destructive. They have Biblical knowledge, but they don’t have Biblical understanding. It is for this reason that Paul prays for this church saying, “...*We have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*” WHY? “...*10 so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects...*” What does it mean, “*to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord?*” It means “...*bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God*” (Col. 1:9-10). Proverbs reveals that knowledge and understanding is wisdom (Pro. 2:6), and Christ is the personification of wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24), and therefore our pursuit of knowledge and understanding is a pursuit of Christlikeness, which bears fruit.

KNOWING ≠ UNDERSTANDING

Now, there is a difference between knowledge and understanding. Knowing and understanding are related concepts, but they're not the same. For example, most all who regularly attend North Summit Church *know* me. We might not have had face to face interactions, but because I'm one of the public figures here, you've already put me in a box made up of data and facts that you've collected through observational senses (He's short, he's loud, he's a pastor, he's a husband, a father, he's a teacher, and he likes beating little kids at games, so he probably suffers from short man syndrome). You *know* me, but if I ask... "Do you understand me?" I've now asked a completely different question. Do you understand why I do the things I do? Can you take those data points and fit them into the right context to begin to grasp who I am as a person? Charles Kettering, inventor of the electric starter in cars, once said, "*There is a great difference between knowing and understanding: you can know a lot about something and not really understand it.*" Similarly, Albert Einstein once said, "*Any fool can know, the point is to understand.*" Knowing is great, but it's better when we can comprehend the knowledge we take in, apply it faithfully by Christ, and watch the fruit grow.

Maybe what has hindered the church for so long is this false sense of maturity that's solely based on one's knowledge of scripture and knowledge concerning the workings of the Church. It breaks my heart at times to see Christians, who have attended church their whole life, and they know the songs and the scriptures, and yet they live their lives in such a fashion which reveals they do not understand any of it. I've seen this poisonous arrogance in both the younger followers of Christ and the older. They're faithful church attenders, they'll pridefully put you in your place with scripture, they puff themselves up as if they have all the answers, they're quick to point out your flaws, and yet none of it is done in a spirit of gentleness, motivated by love, or genuine care for whom they impart their "wisdom" to. These folks put on their religion on Sundays, but paganism in the community seems more prevalent on Saturdays. They know a lot of Biblical stuff, but there is some sort of cognitive dissonance, because it's not applied and their lives are not bearing fruit, evidenced in faithful good works that reveal an understanding of the knowledge they take in. These folks have discouraged new Christians out of their faith. They've harshly criticized and pointed out flaws that they themselves are burdened by in the darkness. This can't be! **May we never be Christians who have absorbed knowledge, and yet continue to be absorbed by the lust of our flesh.**

LOVE BEYOND KNOWLEDGE

Now hear my heart correctly, we all should have a knowledge of the word of God, but we shouldn't study it for knowledge sake to use as a means to elevate ourselves over another, but we should dig in with joy, praying that the Lord would use His sweet word to change us into His likeness. Christian Author and Seminary Professor, Michael Bird, when discussing this topic of knowledge in his book, *7 Things I Wish Christians knew about the Bible*, writes:

This emphasis on KNOWING does not mean trying to replace faith with facts; rather, it means something like seeking a deeper knowledge of God THROUGH a faith INFORMED BY LEARNING—not purely rational knowing, but growth into a closer relationship with God. It is a knowledge that abounds in love, thanksgiving, and praise. (pg. 154)

For the call of Christ wasn't simply for us to *know* Him (John 17:3; Philippians 3:10; cf 1 John 5:20), but to also *follow* Him (Mt. 4:19; Mk. 8:24; Lk. 5:27). Following Christ is done in relationship, and therefore to know Christ on this side of the cross, is to be found in relationship with other faithful believers, who make up the church, the fullness of His body! 1 John 4:7 says, "*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and KNOWS God.*" **Truly knowing God is not about an intellectual ascent, but it's a relational understanding, showing evidence of that knowledge by the fruitful flavor of love!** "*Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies*" (1 Cor. 8:1). If that's the case, we *must* be on guard against any doctrine of man or anything that births a knowledge of pride and arrogance, which will destroy the fellowship of believers and the effectiveness of that assembly within the community.

Anytime someone attempts to become a condemning judge of others, because of their knowledge and pride, they're messing with God's divine order within His church. The church doesn't need more messiahs. She doesn't need more great high priests! She's got one—Christ, The Son of God! In 1 Peter 5:5-7, the Apostle Peter writes,

"...all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. 6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, 7 casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:5-7)

GOD'S DIVINE ORDER

It's evident from the next verse, Colossians 2:19, that this pride and arrogance happened, because these people were caught up in man made doctrines and the worship of angels, and neglected God's established order in the church. This happened because pride-filled people stepped outside of God's divine order which holds all things together in Christ. God created this world to work in a certain way. He also created his church to operate in a specific fashion. There is headship and there is order, and these people who were going astray were either not submitting to that order or they were ignoring it altogether.

Colossians 2:19 says that these "prideful, fleshly-minded folk" opposed to the true God were "...not holding fast to the head, from which the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God." Colossians 1:18 already established that Christ is the *head* of the body—the church. Later in this letter, Paul will drive home the importance of making sure our households and even how we live within our community is done in agreement with God's divine order (Colossians 3:18-4:6), because it's all connected. If the way we conduct our marriages, our parenting, our employees, our relationships in the community is done outside of God's divine order—His way of doing things—to some degree or another it will negatively impact the larger body of believers—the Church. It impacts the witness, the testimony, and the relevance of Christ to our county. **If things aren't in order outside these walls, it impacts what happens inside these walls.** It all works together.

These self-appointed judges were gloating about their spiritual ascent, but Paul is making it clear that only those who come under the headship of Jesus Christ find growth and nourishment. To come under the headship of Christ is to live according to the Spirit of Christ (Gal. 5:16-24), which is made evident by faithful obedience motivated by God's love. And yet in these worthless judge's carnal ways of living, tied to the philosophies of men governed by worthless spirits, didn't subject themselves to the headship of Jesus Christ and therefore they were starving themselves with cheap imitations and carnal vanity that was in agreement with opposition to Christ. For that reason, the faithful believers didn't need to worry about these people's accusations, because their arrogant spirituality *wasn't* rooted in love but selfish ambition. **When you're not under the head of Christ, from which all true spiritual growth is supplied, you won't find growth but only a slow death.** Without Christ as head, there is no life. For this reason, Paul says in Ephesians 5:23 that "Christ is the head of the church," the savior of the body. Colossians 2:10ff "...and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over

all rule and authority.” Why? “...14 [Because he canceled] *out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.... 16 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—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ*” (Colossians 2:14, 16-17). **Don’t focus on the shadows, but focus on the very substance from which that shadow itself is created—focus on Christ!** Be found in Him and under his headship!

All of us must be on guard against anyone, anything, or any system that makes its way into the church, disqualifying the prize of salvation in others. Don’t let anyone defraud you or discourage you of your salvation in Christ according to human criteria. Don’t let anyone devalue your salvation, based on their own puffed up knowledge of scripture. Don’t let anyone talk you into carnal living that aligns with opposing principalities that rob you of life found only under the headship of Christ. Don’t let anyone add to salvation apart from Jesus and the finished works we faithfully are called to step in. As Paul pleads:

[May your] hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I say this so that NO ONE will delude you with persuasive arguments 6 Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, 7 having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. (Colossians 2:2-4, 6-7)