

SHADOW VERSUS SUBSTANCE – A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS 2:16-23 (part 1 of 5)

In Colossians 2:17, the apostle Paul establishes an all-important contrast designed to help every Christian avoid the pitfall of a legalistic lifestyle. Unfortunately, this distinction, couched in the larger context of Colossians 2:16-23, is often overlooked by many of us, resulting in the pursuit of solutions which cannot overcome the problem of sin, from within and without. So, Paul confronts this issue in a manner which is clear and straightforward by writing this in vv16-17 –

“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 – things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”

Paul begins this significant passage in his epistle to the Colossians with the word “therefore;” indicating that what he is about to write is directly connected to what he has just written. Since this is a topical study focused on an isolated text, we need to set the context for that text by briefly considering vv6-15. But v6 also begins with “therefore,” ultimately creating a connection with Colossians 2:3-5, where we read this –

“. . . in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.”

These verses provide us with an understanding of why Paul shares what he does in the remainder of the chapter. The Colossian Christians were successfully living out their life for Christ, confirmed by Paul’s use of expressions such as “discipline” and “stability.” In light of such spiritual progress on their part, Paul’s primary concern is that they not only maintain this level of growth, but develop their relationship with Christ even further. As we briefly consider vv6-15 and delve more deeply into vv16-23, Paul issues several important warnings to them regarding the very real threats to their growth and development, potentially undermining the stability of their relationship with Christ. Notice the warning expressed in v8 –

“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.”

The insidious nature of these threats to the believer’s spiritual progress cannot be underestimated. The world of lost humanity in which the follower of Jesus must function, is filled with people looking for answers in all the wrong places. If the Christian is not careful, he or she can easily fall prey to incorporating those man-made attempts at coping with problem of sin into their relationship with Christ.