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Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

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Overcoming Spiritual Intimidation, Part 3

Colossians 2:8-23

Two great drives in the Universe

- 1) God's desire to be glorified in His creation
- 2) Man's desire for happiness... for pleasure

This human drive for happiness is created by God, but it was meant to be directed to HIM as the satisfier

God made our souls and our bodies alike with PLEASURE RECEPTORS... the ability for sense pleasure, to feel happiness, joy, elation, satisfaction

The body has the ability to sense physical things: by sight, sound, taste, feel, and smell, we can receive what the physical world is giving us

The human tongue has about 10,000 taste buds; designed to receive an almost infinite variety of flavors which God has put in this world... one of them is HONEY

Honey

This golden liquid is one of the most astonishing creations of the natural world

Hardworking honeybees may travel as much as 55,000 miles and visit two million flowers to gather enough nectar to produce one pound of honey

The main attraction of honey is obvious: it is incredibly sweet to the taste!

God designed the taste buds on the tongue to receive the sensations of sweetness, and it brings delight to eat the golden sticky fluid

As a matter of fact, God actually commands that we eat honey...

Proverbs 24:13 Eat honey, my son, for it is good; honey from the comb is sweet to your taste.

But later, he qualifies it with a simple stipulation:

Proverbs 25:16 If you find honey, eat just enough-- too much of it, and you will vomit.

Honey clearly symbolizes PLEASURE... and Proverbs urges us to enjoy the good things of this life

But it also urges self-control

BALANCE in the area of pleasure is a rare thing... but it is the focus of a wise Christ-centered lifestyle

Physical pleasure: TWO DITCHES ON EITHER SIDE OF THE ROAD: gluttony on one side, stern asceticism on the other

Physical pleasure, like the sweetness of honey, is a good gift from God; and it is BAD THEOLOGY that teaches it to be a WICKED THING to enjoy honey

But physical pleasure was meant to point to a higher pleasure... God the Creator Himself

In the same way the SOUL has pleasure receptors as well, put there by God, to receive spiritual stimulation, pleasure from the spiritual world

It was made for HIM, to enjoy GOD, to savor Him and experience HIM

But just like there are dangers in physical pleasure, there are dangers in spiritual pleasure as well

FALSE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES (Bad mysticism) on the one hand (“worship of angels”) or spiritual DEADNESS on the other side... having NO SPIRITUAL PLEASURE

In this passage, we’re going to look at the last two threats Paul mentioned: Already addressed Philosophy and Legalism... today we’ll look at Mysticism and Asceticism

I. Complete in Christ

A. Review: The Supremacy of Christ

Colossians 1:15-17 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

B. Christ is Complete, We Are Complete in Him

Colossians 2:9-10 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and you have been given fullness in Christ

C. Gospel Truths Flow from This: How Full Are We in Christ?

1. We are FULLY CIRCUMCISED (Spiritually); We are FULLY ALIVE; We are FULLY FORGIVEN; We are FULLY FREE from the Law; We are FULLY TRIUMPHANT over Satan

II. Satan's Intimidating Voice: "You Are Incomplete!"

1. Satan's goal is to make us feel inadequate in Christ
2. Then we will need to ADD something to Christ
 - a. Add philosophy... human wisdom and insights
 - b. Add legalism... human religious works
 - c. Add mysticism... human religious experiences
 - d. Add asceticism... human religious self-denial
3. Add them all... and you LOSE Christ, lose assurance, lose joy, lose power

III. The Intimidation of Philosophy

Colossians 2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

IV. The Intimidation of Legalism

Colossians 2:16-17 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. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

C.J. Mahaney: "Legalism is seeking to achieve forgiveness from God and acceptance by God through obedience to God." [*The Cross-Centered Life*, p. 25]

V. The Intimidation of Mysticism

Colossians 2:18-19 Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. ¹⁹ He has 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.

A. The Threat to the Colossian Church

1. "Higher knowledge"... mystery religions; for the enlightened special believer; keys of knowledge help you ascend higher and higher in spirituality

2. Emanations (angels) would help you make the journey... like New Age meditation, with angelic spirit guides expanding your mind and lifting you into a new spiritual realm
3. "Worship of angels"... really they are worshipping these emanations, these spirit beings, of whom Christ was one, so they taught
4. "Great detail about what he has seen": clearly they were experiencing some kind of visions, ecstatic spiritual experiences
5. They "go into" great detail in that they spread reports about their private spiritual experiences... they intimidate others who do not have these experiences and assign them a second-class status
6. "Sensuous mind": they are not in these things being led truly by the Spirit of God; their experiences are totally rooted in the flesh, in sensations rather than in doctrinal truth
7. This is what these folks were doing... some call it "mysticism"

B. Definition of Mysticism

1. Discernment: like philosophy, there are both good and bad forms of mysticism
 - a. Mysticism is a word... and like all words we have to define what we mean
 - b. Direct experience of higher spiritual world

Webster's Dictionary: "The experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality" or "Direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, of ultimate reality attainable through immediate intuition, insight, illumination in a way different from ordinary sense perception or rational process."

- c. Sounds bad, doesn't it? Scary, dangerous, New Age, transcendental meditation, out of body experiences, sitting in the lotus position and chanting "OM" and receiving your "enlightenment" by an angelic being of light
- d. NOT SO FAST

2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

- e. 1734, Great Awakening, Holy Spirit pouring out His influences and presence on many resulting in extraordinary spiritual experiences

Edwards, in his own conversion narrative, spoke of a powerful experience of the living God through the Holy Spirit:

On January 12, 1723 I made a solemn dedication of myself to God.... The sweetest joys and delights I have experienced, have not been those that have arisen from a hope of my own good estate, but in a direct view of the glorious things of the gospel.... I have many times had a sense of the glory of the third person in the Trinity, in his office of Sanctifier, in his holy operations, **communicating divine light and life to the soul**,... as an infinite fountain of divine glory... like the sun in its glory, sweetly and pleasantly diffusing light and life (*Narrative of his Conversion*, ca. 1740).

Edwards said this divine and supernatural light IS...

a true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the word of God, and a conviction of the truth and reality of them thence arising

f. This is actually essential to saving faith in Christ

g. BUT it goes beyond it to an ongoing sense of the greatness of Christ, and a vivid experience of Him

So a working definition of mysticism must divide into two types... Good mysticism and bad mysticism

Good mysticism is an experience given by the Holy Spirit consistent with the Scriptures in which the glory of God in Christ and the truths of His word are made more vivid in the soul; a livelier sense of the excellency of these things is given; our hearts are fanned into a flame, our emotions are stimulated, and we can be drawn ever higher into a greater experience with Christ... that's the GOOD kind

The BAD mysticism is any spiritual experience NOT given by the Holy Spirit, NOT consistent with the Scriptures, NOT focused on Christ

C. Bad Mysticism's Long History

1. Bad mysticism's long history

- a. Worship of angels continued in the Lycos Valley (where Colossae and Laodicea were) for centuries after this
- b. Other forms of mysticism have always been part of pagan religions
 - i) Islam: Muhammad said he had visions of Gabriel who gave him the Koran; whirling dervishes
 - ii) Hinduism: astral projections and out of body experiences... flights through the cosmos
 - iii) Mormonism: Joseph Smith's vision of the angel Moroni
- c. Even Christianity has had issues with this

- i) Some of the modern charismatic movement puts more emphasis on visions and spiritual experiences than it does on the word
- ii) Long history of mystics whose spiritual experiences seemed to trump sound exegesis of Scripture...
- iii) 3rd century Gnostics, who sought higher knowledge of Christ apart from Scripture
- iv) Manicheanism: MANI was a leading Gnostic teacher who said he received spiritual illumination in his early manhood, claimed he was the physical manifestation of the Paraclete (the Holy Spirit), the last in a long line of religion founding prophets: Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus; taught a dualistic system of good and evil, light and darkness
- v) Dionysius the Areopagite, 5th or 6th century, a Syrian monk, who taught also a dualistic system called Mystical Theology in which the soul can rise through a cloud of unknowing and find perfect union with God who transcends all being and knowledge and become gods ourselves
- vi) Western Mysticism also flourished, influenced by Augustine's *Confessions* but lacking his solid grounding in Scripture
- vii) Meister Eckhart, 14th century German speculative mystic, synthesized Greek, Neo-Platonic, Arabic, and Scholastic elements; he claimed that all creatures are pure nothingness... his writings are of great interest today to Buddhists
- viii) Madame Guyon, 17th century mystic who advocated Quietism, remaining totally passive and letting God fill you with himself... making no effort even to fight sin

2. Good mysticism has a long history too

- a. Bernard of Clairvaux: (1090-1153) - **“Jesus the very thought of thee, with sweetness fills the breast; but sweeter far thy face to see, and in thy presence rest.”**

- b. Blaise Pascal:

[17th century French philosopher and mathematician; when he died, they found sewed inside his shirt a piece of paper on which was written the following]

This day of Grace 1654; From about half past ten at night to about half past midnight, Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, Not of the Philosophers and the wise. Security, security. Feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. Thy God shall be my God. Forgetfulness of the world and of all save God. He can be found only in ways taught in the Gospel. Greatness of the human soul. O righteous Father, the

world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. I have separated myself from Him. My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?... That I be not separated from Thee eternally. This is life eternal: That they might know Thee, the only true God, and Him whom Thou hast sent, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ. I have separated myself from Him; I have fled, renounced, crucified Him. May I never be separated from Him. He maintains Himself in me only in ways taught in the Gospel. Renunciation total and sweet.

c. Jonathan Edwards

"[I found] from time to time, an inward sweetness, that used, as it were, to carry me away in my contemplations; in what I know not how to express otherwise, than by a calm, sweet abstraction of soul from all the concerns of the world; and a kind of vision, or fixed ideas and imaginations, of being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, far from all mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in God. The sense I had of divine things, would often of a sudden as it were, kindle up a sweet burning in my heart; an ardor of my soul, that I know not how to express."

d. D.L. Moody

D.L. Moody: [He had been a Christian, a minister in charge of a mission; he was seeing people converted, but he wanted more] "I began to cry as never before, for a greater blessing from God. The hunger increased; I really felt that I did not want to live any longer. I kept on crying all the time that God would fill me with His Spirit. Well, one day in the city of New York—oh! What a day! I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it. It is almost too sacred an experience to name. Paul had an experience of which he never spoke for fourteen years. I can only say, God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand."

D. Mysticism's Great Danger

1. Worship of angels is directly contrary to Scripture
2. Seeking of spiritual experiences apart from God's revelation in Scripture opens us up to demonic influences
3. Not every supernatural experience is from God... Satan is a supernatural being who masquerades as an angel of light
4. Even GOOD supernatural experiences can make people arrogant, as if they are a superior order of Christian
5. The Apostle Paul had extraordinary visions

2 Corinthians 12:2-4 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know-- God knows. ³ And I know that this man-- whether in the body or apart from the

body I do not know, but God knows--⁴ was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

6. BUT THEN:

2 Corinthians 12:7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

7. The Colossian heretics used their unspiritual “idle notions” to intimidate “lesser Christians;” they were steeped in arrogance though they tried to cover it with false humility

8. Sam Storms lists other dangers of GOOD mysticism:

- a. Minimizing Scripture in the life of the Christian, or interpreting it allegorically
- b. Putting experience over Scripture as authoritative in the life of the church
- c. Overemphasizing God’s immanence and forgetting God’s transcendence
- d. Forgetting Christ’s OBJECTIVE work for us on the cross as the foundation of our relationship with God... He is not pleased with us because we have this or that experience, but because Jesus shed His blood for us
- e. Forgetting the infinite difference between Creator and us as Created beings... some mystics tended to so emphasize union with God that they forgot this:

Isaiah 40:12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?

Isaiah 40:22 He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers.

- f. Spiritual elitism:
- g. Disengagement from the local church

E. BUT the Danger of Deadness

1. For all of those dangers, there is an equal and opposite danger of spiritual dryness or even deadness

Matthew 15:8 "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

2. We go through the motions... church attendance, prayer before meals, daily quiet times... but there's little sense of intimacy with God
3. This exposes us to a GREAT DANGER... seeking pleasure and fulfillment from created things, from earthly things, rather than from Christ
4. Learning to seek God as a man dying of thirst in the desert seeks the living God is GOOD in the Christian life, not bad!!

Psalm 63:1-5 O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ² I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. ³ Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. ⁴ I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. ⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

F. Balance Found in Christ

1. We have been given fullness in Christ
2. In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge
3. We don't need any angels to tell us more spiritual things... Christ is the creator and king of the angels, and none of them are the Son of God
4. The quest for mystical enlightenment apart from Scripture begins in falsehood (as though Christ is insufficient) and frequently ends in heresy (in which the mystic arrogantly disdains church leaders who have not experienced what they have experienced)
5. We should seek the face of God in prayer, and God may reveal Himself to us in powerful ways... BUT
6. Whatever insights Christ reveals to us about His Father or Himself should HUMBLE US, not make us arrogant

Matthew 11:25-27 At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. ²⁷ "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

VI. The Intimidation of Asceticism

Colossians 2:20-23 Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²² These are all destined to perish with

use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³ 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.

A. Definition of Asceticism

1. Asceticism is the harsh treatment of the body for spiritual purposes, specifically in the denial of good gifts of God (like food, clothing, shelter) in the assumption that such self-denial will make us more pleasing to God
2. “False humility” = “Asceticism”: part and parcel of their visionary experiences was a denial of food and other forms of asceticism; the word here is “lowliness” or “humility” and is everywhere else used positively in the Christian life... but the context here is negative, so NIV gives us “false humility”... perhaps the showiness of fasting
 - a. Word usually used positively

Colossians 3:12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

- b. Here it must be negative...

Matthew 6:16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

3. Intrinsic to the Colossian heresy was the idea that the body was evil and that material things themselves were evil... therefore, to avoid feeding the body anything (food, clothing, sleep, comfort of any kind) was somehow well pleasing to God
4. See the statements

Vs. 21 "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"

Vs. 23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body

- a. These display the Colossian hatred for physical life
- b. The desire for spiritual ascendancy through physical pain and suffering

B. Asceticism's Long Sordid History

1. Almost every false religion in the world has had its ascetics...
2. Hinduism is full of “holy men” who fast for weeks on end, who sit motionless and deny all pleasures to the physical body... Buddhism seeks enlightenment the same way
3. Even Christianity has had its share
 - a. Certainly Moses fasted forty days, as did Jesus Christ
 - b. Elijah lived in the desert and ate tiny amounts of food brought him by ravens
 - c. John the Baptist dressed in camel’s hair, and ate locusts and wild honey
 - d. In this same pattern, Christian monks began the life of the spiritual athlete
 - i) After the Roman persecutions ended, these monks sought another way to subdue the flesh... the way of the ascetic, the desert-dwelling hermit, fasting for weeks, wearing a hair shirt to afflict the flesh, suffering heat in the day and cold at night
 - ii) ALL OF IT SELF-IMPOSED
 - iii) Athanasius wrote of Anthony, the founder of Western monasticism, who never changed his shirt or washed his feet
 - iv) Simeon Stylites who lived in the 5th century outdid any who came before him: he spent the last sixty years of his life sitting on a fifty foot pillar, exposing his body to the elements, refusing any human fellowship, withdrawing from the world
 - v) Even Martin Luther, before his conversion, fell into this trap... sleeping on the stone floor with no blanket or covering all night through the German winter in his cloister cell in the Augustinian monastery... he almost ruined his health
 - e. Even worse, the forbidding of marriage by clergy made marriage itself seem dirty and sinful

Roman Catholic hierarchy of holiness held that CELIBACY (abstaining from marriage and all marital relations) was HIGHER than marriage; thus priests and nuns were forbidden to marry

C. Asceticism’s Great Danger

1. Founded in a false understanding of the material world as intrinsically evil, it fails to receive the good gifts God intends to give us

2. Furthermore, it misunderstands salvation and the finished work of Christ on the cross... it actually insults grace and Christ's blood thinking that our discipline and physical pain is of greater value than Christ's blood in achieving forgiveness
3. It produces PRIDE... Paul mentions "humility" twice which NIV has as "false humility"

Colossians 2:23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body

4. It also calls the good gifts of God bad

1 Timothy 4:1-5 The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ² Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. ³ They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. ⁴ For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

1 Timothy 6:17 God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

- a. Food is a good gift of God, and it is to be received with thanksgiving
- b. Marriage is a good gift of God, and it is to be received with thanksgiving
- c. Sensual pleasure (whether beautiful sights of spectacular fall foliage, or beautiful sounds of music, or the soft sensations of silk, or the wonderful fragrance of freshly baked bread, or the sweet taste of honey) is a creation of God and all of those things are to be received with thanksgiving
- d. PLEASURE ITSELF is a gift of God, and it is to be received with thanksgiving

Psalm 16:11 You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand

5. Along with all of that, ASCETICISM DOESN'T WORK...
 - a. "Self-imposed worship" is man-made worship
 - b. As old as Cain's offering of vegetables instead of animal sacrifice
 - c. It is NOT pleasing to God
 - d. AND it does NOT produce true godliness

Vs. 23 they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

6. Ascetics STILL lust, still covet, still get angry, still yearn for fleshly things... and their religion has made them PROUD because it's all of human origin

D. Let's Be Honest: Asceticism Isn't a Major Threat, But Gluttony Is

1. I don't know many ascetics at all... most of us struggle with materialism and gluttony and pleasure-seeking
2. We live in an age and a culture in America that specializes in identifying things that people enjoy and distilling them to the point where we can glut ourselves on them morning, noon, and night
3. Music: before recorded music, you had to go to a concert or dance or somewhere that live musicians were playing to hear music; then Edison invented the phonograph, recording sound waves on wax cylinders... the first sounds ever recorded were the lyrics of a song "Mary had a little lamb"; soon flat discs replaced the cylinders, and the record craze hit; radio stations came in after Marconi, and you could hear music day and night, but you couldn't choose it; also radios were huge—you had to sit in the living room to listen; then the transistor radio came in and you could carry the little radio everywhere; but still, you couldn't choose the music; then the Walkman came in and you could carry around tapes; now we have iPods, and websites like Napster and you can listen to your favorite songs 600 times in a row wherever you want
4. Sports: out of control!! ESPN, ESPN2, ESPNU, ESPN Classic, etc. Watch ballgames for the rest of your life
5. Food: Americans struggle with gluttony... many Americans don't know when to push away from the table
6. All of this points to the need for self-control in lawful pleasures

Proverbs 25:16 If you find honey, eat just enough-- too much of it, and you will vomit.

1 Corinthians 6:12 "Everything is permissible for me"-- but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"-- but I will not be mastered by anything.

7. The Holy Spirit works self-control in us as a Fruit of the Spirit

E. Asceticism vs. Gluttony: Balance Found in Christ

Martin Luther: Constant struggle of sinful human to find balance, likened us to a drunken peasant trying to ride home on a donkey; leaning too much left, he falls off into the mud; then, leaning too much right, he falls off again

1. Asceticism:

- a. Christ's sufferings on our behalf removes forever any need for asceticism
- b. Our sufferings do not pay for sin, they do not slay the flesh, they do not please God in any way
- c. Humble repentance and faith in Christ is SUFFICIENT FOREVER for the salvation of the soul
- d. The good gifts of God are meant to be enjoyed with thankfulness, 1 Timothy 4 teaches us

2. Gluttony:

- a. On the other hand, the hunger for pleasure is meant to be satisfied ultimately in Christ
- b. Christ teaches us self-control... and to focus on Him

VII. Application

A. COME TO CHRIST!!!

- 1. True pleasure is found only in Christ
- 2. Pursuing happiness through bodily lusts... sexual pleasure, food, other sensual delights leads to emptiness and judgment
- 3. THE CROSS OF CHRIST and HIS EMPTY TOMB... the pathway to happiness

B. Praise God for your Fullness in Christ!!

Colossians 2:9-10 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and you have been given fullness in Christ

- Fully Circumcised Spiritually
- Fully Alive
- Fully Forgiven
- Fully Free from the Law
- Fully Triumphant over Satan

C. Meant for Pleasure... but it is the Pleasure of God Alone that ultimately satisfies

D. Be on guard against all four dangers

1. Philosophy
 2. Legalism
 3. Mysticism
 4. Asceticism
- E. Pray for the Church... for protection against each one