

COLOSSIANS: OVERCOMING SYNCRETISM THRU CHRIST
Part VII: Christ's Sufficiency And Supremacy Over Oriental Asceticism
(Colossians 2:20-23)

I. Introduction

- A. Recent research indicates that the average American adopts beliefs and practices from approximately nine distinct worldviews, what produces a jumble of often contradictory philosophies known as syncretism.
- B. The epistle to the Colossians handled a mixture of Jewish legalism, Greek philosophy and Oriental mysticism (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, p. 1690, "The Colossian Heresy"), so it applies to the syncretism that we face.
- C. Colossians 2:20-23 presents Christ's Sufficiency and Supremacy over Oriental Asceticism for our insight:

II. Christ's Sufficiency And Supremacy Over Oriental Asceticism, Colossians 2:20-23.

- A. Asceticism "is the pseudo-spiritual position that revels in rules of physical self-denial," and it "arises out of guilt." (Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 679) Thus, ascetics seek to achieve righteousness in their lives by means of human self-discipline in order to overcome feelings of guilt over having indulged their physical drives.
- B. The ascetics whom the Colossians faced tried to subject them to "the basic *principles* of this world" (NIV), the Greek term rendering the term "principles" being *stoicheia*, the same word used in Colossians 2:8 KJV of "rudiments" and may here mean either "elementary principles" or "elemental spirits" (RSV), Ibid., 677, 679.
- C. Whether the *stoicheia* in this verse were principles of this world or demonic spirits who fostered ascetic rules (as in the case of 1 Timothy 4:1-3), Paul's point in Colossians 2:20 was that his readers were positionally dead with Christ from both the principles of this world and the demonic spirits who produce ascetic rules. Paul's readers were positionally crucified to the world so they were to be experientially crucified to it, cf. Gal. 6:14.
- D. In addition, the ascetic false teachers' rules of self-denial such as "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (Colossians 2:21 NIV) arose out of guilt, but "Christ has taken away all human guilt by His death (Col. 2:13-14) . . . (Believers) are no longer obligated (by fleshly inclinations) to obey them. Only those alive to sin (Rom. 6:2-7) need obey it as master." (Ibid.)
- E. Paul then exposed the inherent futility of the ascetic rules and regulations themselves, Col. 2:22-23:
 - 1. First, ascetic rules refer "to things that all perish as they are used" (Colossians 2:22a ESV), making them futile even to practice in one's earthly life!
 - 2. Second, ascetic rules are based on "human precepts and teachings," not Scripture, Colossians 2:22b ESV. There is no divine authority behind ascetic rules, making them unnecessary for believers to observe.
 - 3. Third, such rules have an appearance of wisdom in promoting a self-made religion, false humility and a harsh treatment of the body, what may impress onlookers or even one who practices them. However, they lack value in actually restraining any sensual indulgence of the body, Colossians 2:23 ESV. "(D)enying the body its desires merely arouses them, as is well known by many who have tried to lose weight by sticking to rigid diets. Neglecting the body, Paul argued, does not nourish the spirit." (Ibid.)
- F. Romans 8:3-4 KJV gives the true teaching on how righteous living is achieved in the believer's human body (as follows): "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh (sin nature), God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Where trying to force the sinful nature to perform righteous acts with regard to one's earthly body is a futile exercise, God has provided the Holy Spirit Who can and will achieve righteous actions in the believer when he relies on the Holy Spirit in an act of faith and not on his sin nature for behavior control.

Lesson: *The false spirituality of asceticism that seeks to overcome one's guilt of indulging the drives of the body through keeping rigid rules of abstinence is utterly futile. Christ has died to all sin and guilt, so the believer is positionally released from sin, guilt and the control of the sin nature that he might walk in newness of life by relying by faith on the Holy Spirit's power. Further, ascetic rules perish as they are used, making them useless, they are based on human authority and not God's authority, making them unnecessary to keep and such rules cannot restrain any sensual drives and hence themselves cannot curb one's indulging in the body's drives.*

Application: *(1) May we rest in the finished work of Christ on the cross as to our sinful nature, knowing that we have been forgiven all trespasses in Him. (2) May we realize the utter futility of keeping ascetic rules and instead rely on the indwelling Holy Spirit for the power to function righteously with regard to the body's drives. (3) May we follow Scripture as to what we should or should not do with the body's drives, and that by the Spirit's power.*