

FLOURISH - Week 5

Monday, October 11

From before I was born, my family had roots deep in the mountains of North Carolina. Long before I was born, family members found a wonderful little community just outside Asheville to be a home away from home. They really selected the community because of the nature of the people. They were welcoming and friendly, and they quickly invited us into their lives. It is on this mountain that both of my parents are buried in a little mountain cemetery. In this little village, there is an iconic Baptist church, white and standing on a little hill right in the village. A little stream runs in front of the church, and they dam it up in the summer months so they can have baptisms, although I don't think the water there could ever be warm. As a child, the most memorable feature inside the church was the printed statement of faith. It hung on a wall just above the pulpit. I remember it having three paragraphs, one about the Trinity and each of the members of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The second was about the cross and salvation in Christ. But, strangely enough, the third paragraph was about the dangers and evils of alcohol. I wish I were making this up, but I'm not. It is true that alcoholism had been rampant and destructive in this part of our country at one time, and it remains a problem to this day. But it made no sense to add a statement decrying alcohol to your statement of faith. What did this have to do with the gospel? How could this be so important that it would be included?

Here's our text for today:

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

In this section Paul lists the dangers to a simple trusting in Christ. These were threats to remaining rooted in Christ and living a life based on the gospel. The first obstacle he mentions is related to food. The Jews prided themselves in the foods they ate and didn't eat. They ate kosher. No pork. No mixing of milk and meat. No eating of the meat of many other creatures as well, such as shellfish, for example. They measured their status with God based on these outward signs. Think of the diet craze today of eating organic foods, or being a vegetarian or vegan. There is nothing wrong with eating healthy foods and avoiding foods that do not support good health. But, for them, it was more than this. It was a source of spiritual pride. They were somehow cleaner and better people for the food they ate. You literally eat your way into a good relationship with God, or so they believed. The same was true of the great festivals of the Jewish people and those of other faiths. Each year, the Jewish people came to Jerusalem for three major feasts. If you lived within the region, this was expected of you. Though it might cause you to lose your harvest or place yourself in danger, you pretty much had to show up. To stay home put your faith and your commitment to the Lord in danger. We can also take pride in going to church, in celebrating the Lord's Supper, in how much we pray or read scripture. We can pretty much give religious significance to anything and use that thing to try to gain favor with God. Religion, and the way we practice it, can lead to greater pride rather than greater humility. I'm more spiritual because I read my Bible every day or because I pray. Bible reading and prayer are good, but how you use those things in your life make all the difference. The drinking of alcohol is not a bad or good thing if done in moderation. It is how we use that in our lives that often is the greatest problem. Do you use those things to gain favor with God and feel you are more spiritual, perhaps, more spiritual than others? Have we made those things part of our religion, like the statement of faith in the Baptist church that put alcohol alongside the gospel? By the way, I love Baptists, and Paul loved the Jewish people, but he knew that our religion can actually keep us from God. Here's the thing. We can see the need to confess the sin in our lives, but we rarely see the need to confess our religion as keeping us from a real dependence on God and enjoying the grace of Jesus. We can use our religious practice to earn a place with God, to feel like God somehow owes us. To feel like we have an in with God. But when we do these things, our practices do exactly the opposite because they keep us from grace. They keep us from God himself. This was the major criticism that Jesus had of the Jewish religious leaders at the time.

Jesus said:

“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. -Matthew 23:2-4

Jesus preached a whole sermon on this because they multiplied rules and laws that, in the end, kept the people from God. They looked spiritual and with God, but they were far from God, more concerned about what they ate and drank than walking with God. You see, I’m not making a case for what food you eat. This is a case for how we look at all of these things, all of the practices of our faith. They don’t earn us a thing with God. We are given our place with God through the cross of Jesus, the love of Jesus. The fullness of God is found in him, and you have been given fullness in Christ. So, as we start this week, let’s root out those things and beliefs in our lives that have keep us from grace, God’s love for us in Jesus.

Let’s pray:

Lord God, our faithful Shepherd, we easily fall into a religion or our own merit, trusting in what we do to make us right with you. We easily build lives on pride and accomplishment. We find simply trusting you difficult. We have to admit we can’t find our way home. We have to admit that only you can save us and give us life. Enable us by your Spirit to embrace the grace that is ours by faith in Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

Tuesday, October 12

Not long ago, Sandy and I rose at 4:30am to make an early flight from New Orleans to Miami. We arrived at the airport with plenty of time, got through TSA and found our way to our gate. Soon we were boarded and ready to push back. At that time, the pilot indicated that they had equipment problems and would not be able to use that aircraft. We disembarked the plane and found huge lines of passengers trying to get on other flights. It was a nightmare, not only because of the crush of people, but because the other flights that day were also heavily booked, and I learned that our airline would not rebook us on other airlines. You see, through the years, what is called the rules of carriage for the airlines have gone through multiple changes. It used to be that if your flight was canceled, the airline would book on other airlines to get you to your destination. They don’t do that any longer. Indeed, the rules keep changing each year, sometimes multiple times a year. Now, the rules of carriage for Southwest Airlines are 47 pages long. JetBlue’s take 57 pages to print out. Wow! Who can figure out of the rules? I remember when it was fun to fly, and the airlines would do almost anything to help you.

Now, here is our text for today that we pick up from yesterday.

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

That mention of the Sabbath day, and how you keep it, was at the heart of Judaism. By the time Paul wrote these words, the rules about the sabbath had ballooned like the contract of carriage of the airlines. Rule was added to rule and additional rule. On the sabbath, you could not look in a mirror because then you might adjust your hair and that would be work. You could only walk so far, so you needed to count your steps. In total, there were 39 melachot, or forms of work that were forbidden, and specifications for each of them. Things like: planting, plowing, reaping, gathering, cooking, baking, kneading, grinding, sewing clothing or tearing, writing, erasing. Ok. I’m not going through the full listing, but you get the idea. And the list and the detail in those rules were not the worst of it. There were punishments for breaking the sabbath. The sabbath day was protected by your community that punished infractions and kept watch over your actions. People seemed to always be watching Jesus to catch him breaking one of the sabbath laws. So, you can imagine, how you kept the sabbath became an issue of pride and place among the people and in your community. It was one of the most important measures of how good a person you were, and

whether you were in right standing with God. Yes, how you were doing with God was tethered to how you did in keeping this long list of rules.

Now, here is the amazing thing about the sabbath. God gave this day as a gift to humankind. It was meant to be a day of rest. But, by forcing such a list of rules on the people, it became anything but a day of rest. It became a day of do and don't do. A day when you had to guard your reputation in the community like no other day. In short, it became a burden, not a joy. It used to be fun to fly. The gift of God was turned into pages and pages of rules. Then the gospel showed up, revealing that our place with God is blood-bought. Jesus, the Son of God, is our sabbath rest, opening the way for us to end our ceaseless labor of trying to please God or be good people as a means of salvation. He pronounced the work done and began a new and greater sabbath. But here's the thing. At the church in Colossae, there were some people that went to the new Gentile believers and placed upon them the rules of the Sabbath, the burden that even they themselves could not carry. Here, Paul says that because of Jesus, no one can judge you based on the sabbath and how you celebrate it. Nobody is watching to see how well you are performing. The days of hustling for your place with God are gone, nailed to the cross of Jesus. The written code, all 57 pages of it, has been fulfilled by Jesus. He didn't leave one jot or tittle, not even one of the smallest rules in the law of God unfulfilled. He did it all so that you could have real freedom in him. Jesus made it fun to fly again! Yes, worship has never been the same since. We can freely come to God's throne of grace. It's amazing really.

Sorta makes you wonder what might happen if one of these airlines discovered what it is like to serve people again. They tossed out the long rule book and discovered they saved more than enough money when they let go of the office full of lawyers that spend their time writing rules, and then they just began to enjoy serving people. We'd all want to fly! Yes, this is what happened in Jesus. This is the grace you live in. So, don't let anyone add pages to the rule book. Don't let anyone tell you that our place with God comes through anything but grace. It's God's love. That's all.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we understand why so many people run from religion. Our hearts are taken captive by rules, and we go through the motions. But we know you don't want the motions from us. You want fellowship with us. Thank you for opening the way through Jesus. Help us to rejoice and to enjoy you, to glorify you forever. Amen.

Wednesday, October 13

I understand you can find a book on just about anything, but this one caught me by surprise. *Princess Diana Speaks from Heaven: A Divine Revelation*, written by Matthew Payne, a self-described Baptist minister. As the book tells, for the last few years, Payne has been receiving spiritual visions, really, visits with Lady Diana Spencer from heaven. It seems, according to Payne, that Jesus has commissioned him to interview her and bring her answers to the people at the anniversary of the twentieth year after her tragic death. He explains that he found her happy and content in heaven, and she is making a real difference there. I wish I was making this up. Now, folks, Amazon catalogs thousands of books like this. Books on angels and spiritual forces. Books on demonic entities and how to control the powers at work around you. As much as we have tried to strip out all spiritual and religious language from our world, it is always bubbling to the surface. People are incurably spiritual. But they are also drawn by the newest shiny object, the new teaching about angels or crystals or life forces or spiritual incantations. Tarot cards are under lock and key at bookstores because they are one of the most common items stolen, and Ouija boards are as popular as ever.

Here is our text for today:

Colossians 2:17-18

These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸ Do not let anyone who delights in false humility 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.

In this section of the text, Paul is warning the new believers in Colossae about the things that can distract them from Christ. Like our world today, there were many cults at work in the Greco-Roman world. As today, people chased the latest gimmick in the form of spiritual power. People were hungry for some modicum of control over their lives, some connection to the gods or the spiritual powers at work in the world. You didn't have to convince people that there was a spiritual power beneath the surface of our physical world. They knew this, and they seemed to always be looking for a door into this world. There were plenty of people that promised to get you on the inside. Now, notice that Paul calls these things a shadow. They are not the real thing. Have you ever noticed how a shadow can be distorted by the angle of the light? It may be long and stretch far toward the horizon, having little relationship to the object the light is striking. Also, shadows are always shifting and changing as the angle of the light itself shifts. Paul uses this metaphor. It appears elsewhere in scripture.

Here's James 1:16-18:

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Yes, it was true that those powers were always shifting. Asking for this today and that tomorrow. Always expecting sacrifices to get you into the presence of the real spiritual power. Say these words, make this sacrifice, give this offering. That will get you in. Paul says that all these ideas really come from an unspiritual mind. How can he say that? Life in the spirit is one of real humility before God. A humility that doesn't traffic in offers to get you close to God or to open up the secrets of God. Yes, that is the root meaning of the word "religion." It comes from the prefix "re" meaning to do it again. And, the word "ligion," where we get our words like ligament. It means, by your effort, to bind yourself once again to God. To get yourself home so to speak. But here's the truth. We can't find our way home. We cannot restore ourselves. We cannot bring about our own forgiveness and return ourselves to the Lord. Only God can do that with us. That is the unique feature of the true and living God, the one that does not change like shifting shadows. He pursues us. He is the hound of heaven that has picked up the scent of the people he loves, and he is pursuing us. We are not in Christ because we went in search of him, but we are in Christ because he sought us out and saved us. He brought us home. Jesus tells a number of parables about this. He tells of the shepherd that left the 99 sheep to go in search of the lost one. He tells about the lost coin. You see, we are not where we are because we found our way in. It is because God came down. He entered in by taking human flesh. He came looking for us, seeking us. And Paul is concerned that, in running after the latest spiritual fad, they will miss out on the fullness of Christ. So, are we looking for the next thing? Are we being drawn away from the grace of God in Jesus?

Here is Paul's conclusion to what has happened:

They 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. -Colossians 2:19

Let's pray:

Holy and loving God, we are amazed that you would care for us, that you would seek us out to bring us home. We are not worthy of your interest or your love for us. It amazed us that while we were powerless, Christ came for us and has loved us. Enable us today to rest in your steadfast love. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, October 14

Before long, the tail can wag the dog. That happened in a church where a musician named Matt Redman served in worship ministry. It is not that worship failed to flourish. It was just the opposite. The prestige, the power, the prominence only grew. They began to put out worship songs. They drew a lot of attention. But something happened along the way. A dynamic was missing. Worship

ceased to be about God and more about the amazing worship music and the amazing worship services. It is possible to have worship that turns in upon itself, that misses out on what worship is to be about, God himself and honoring him. So, the pastor of the church did a shocking thing. He shut down the worship team. When people came to church they were shocked to find it all gone. No amazing team, no wowing worship service. Only silence and the word of God. It wasn't a gimmick, but a heartfelt response to losing their way.

Here's our text for today.

Colossians 2:20-21

Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"?

Now, what happened in the church is what long had happened to the Jewish people. God gave them his law to help them order their lives and to create a society of freedom and responsibility. But along the way they became so focused on the law, they began to miss God himself. They lost the purpose for it all. The law was never meant to be a means of salvation. It was never meant to bring about redemption. It was meant to reveal an even deeper need for God himself. But, you could say, the law was wagging the dog.

In our text, Paul mentions the elemental spiritual forces at work in our world. We have learned that these forces are about earning, about getting what you deserve, about performing and gaining position and status through your efforts. In a sense, the law that God meant for good was taken hostage by the elemental spiritual force at work in the world. It was catalogued and became the measure of every person, every family, and every community. People began living in relationship to the law rather than in relationship to God. Life became about how you kept the finer details of it all. Yes, the law is good, but it can be used to crush people, to overwhelm them and to keep them from God. Clearly, this isn't what God had in mind. Now, today, there remains this tendency to become moralistic when we come to faith in Christ. We may begin with joy when we come to faith in Jesus. But we can then become enamored with the law. The elemental spiritual force at work in the world is like gravity, drawing us away from God. Pride can take over and cause us to feel better than others, like we are pretty good people ourselves. Instead, what should happen is that faith in Christ humbles us even more and reveals our need and the depth of our sin. It should give no place to pride but rather a deeper awareness of the fact that we can only be saved by grace.

Now, I want to tell you what happened in the church where musician Matt Redman was sharing his gifts. It seemed like an immense risk to stop powerful worship, and it was. But that is what they did. After weeks of silence and prayer, of songs without instruments sung from the heart, something happened. There was a reconnection with God in Christ. There was a sweet awareness of the goodness of God without all the trappings that had eclipsed the true worship of God. Yes, good things can come to block the most excellent things. By the time they felt sufficiently ready to reintroduce the musicians and sound system, the church had found a new perspective on worship: that it's all about Jesus, and that it demands a response from the heart.

Here are the words of the song Matt Redman wrote to share what happened to them:

*When the music fades, all is stripped away, and I simply come
Longing just to bring something that's of worth that will bless your heart
I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about You, Jesus*

We feel the need to confess our sins, but we also need to learn to confess our religion. What I mean is that we need to confess that we have used religious practice to replace our need for God, and these practices have actually kept us from God himself. They are not bad in themselves, but it is how we use them that can get us into trouble. They can keep us from a flourishing life in Christ. Those rules "do not eat" and "do not touch" only go so far, and they do nothing to bring us closer to God. They may actually pull us away. What we have has been fully given in Christ, in whom are all the treasures of our salvation.

Let's pray:

Faithful God, we can turn almost anything into an idol. We easily take good things and make them ultimate things and that keeps us from enjoying you. Your faithful love breaks through to us again and again, reminding us to trust in you. Give us joy today in knowing we are yours by grace. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Friday, October 15

Ok. You do not want to go looking through our refrigerator. No, it's not dirt or mold or even wasted food. Yes, this happens on occasion. But that is not what I am talking about. It's the expiration dates. To open up our refrigerator is like taking a walk down memory lane. We have salad dressings that expired years ago. Sauces. Toppings. You name it. If it goes in a jar or bottle, it is likely well past its sell by date. Have you noticed the different ways we express this? The label says "sell by", or "best if used by or before", or "freeze by" or there may an indication of how long the product will remain fresh after it is opened. "Please consume within three days after opening..." Now, here's a little explanation. The "best if used by" label is a suggestion for when the food will be at its peak taste and quality. This is not a safety date. That helps me a lot because some of our salad dressings reached that date a few years ago. I wish I were making this up. Even the "sell by" date does not tell you when the product will go bad. This tells the company that stocks it when it needs to be replaced. Even the "use by" date is not a safety notice except when the date is on baby formula.

Now, here is our text for today:

Colossians 2:22

²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.

Paul uses product labeling to talk about religious practices and also the use of the law. He says the law has to do with things that perish as they are used. What does he mean by that? He is saying what Jesus said about food. Jesus said that we are not defiled by what we put into our mouths but what comes out of our hearts. Food is soon digested, and it is gone. It is the heart that remains and that deserves tending far more than our diet. But do we watch our hearts like we watch our waistlines? Not at all. You see, the gospel is constantly going for the heart, the core of our being. Jesus taught that our lives flow from our hearts. There is a second way these things perish. They are passing away. The kingdom to come is not about eating or drinking. There is nothing lasting there. This is also true of the law of God.

Paul explains this in his letter to the Christians in Galatia that were being distracted back to the law once again:

Galatians 3:23-25

Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So, the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

Literally, Paul says that the law was always a side issue. Yes, it helped to guard us until Christ came, but now Jesus has come and fulfilled the law. The law has reached its "best by" date. Before Jesus appeared on the scene, it was our tutor or custodian, helping to keep us secure and safe until the way of grace came on the scene. To live under the yoke of the law is to hold onto something that is outdated, really expired. That doesn't mean that the law cannot reveal to us the holiness of God and how people can live ordered lives. But, it can't bring us to God. It can't save us. It can't give us true freedom. Actually, if we serve it, it will keep us in bondage. The law is good, but it is not God, nor can it bring us to God. Not only that, but we have added to the law a swarm of additional human rules piling onto what God provided his people in the beginning. Paul is saying here that those rules are more than expired. They are rotten, and you would do best just to throw them out.

Every now and then, Sandy sorts through the things in our refrigerator, looking for things well past their expiration date. There is always a surprise or two. We think: I can't believe how expired that is. I can't believe how long that has been in our refrigerator. Why haven't we thrown it out before now? This is how we need to look into our lives, to see if we are treating as gospel some law or rule that has been passed along to us, some rule we've given ourselves to obey. We need to find those things and pitch them out, knowing that they will keep us from trusting Jesus, Jesus alone.

Let's pray:

Loving Father, how could we substitute anything for you, especially rules that can't save us? You alone are our joy and strength, our ever-present help at all times. Your love is better than life. We thank you for your goodness and for providing all that we need in Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

Saturday, October 16

A few years ago, one of our pastors, James Drake, had a gym in the Gables called Iron Tribe. James invited me to be part of the movement. And, that really was what it was. I hadn't been a part of a gym in years, and what made Iron Tribe different was that you worked out together with others. There was immense benefit from not working out alone. When you were struggling to finish a workout, others were there cheering you on, encouraging you to give the last bit of energy you had to complete it. I remember first getting started and having an interview with one of the trainers. Their job was to teach you the way it would all work, and then to talk with you about your goals. For example, you may want to lose weight or be able to lift a certain amount of weight. I remember the surprise when I recorded my goal. It was not to get injured. I had already injured a shoulder, and I had some other physical limitations as well. It seemed pretty strange to have such a goal. But, I knew working out would help me get healthier. Little did I know how helpful the tribe would be. But there was always a limitation. It was my diet. I could work out on a great schedule each week, but if my diet remained the same, well then, I'd continue to struggle getting healthier.

Here's our text for today:

Colossians 2:23

²³Such 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.

Paul is talking about the ways the Christians in Colossae were being distracted from the gospel. What were they doing? First, they were returning to the law as the measure of the lives. They wandered away from grace. It seemed like wisdom to channel their efforts toward doing the law, but they were getting things the wrong way around. We think that greater obedience opens the way to a stronger faith. But Paul says it is faith that leads to better ways of living.

Here's Paul, describing the way it works elsewhere:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹²It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age... -Titus 2:11-12

Yes, it is grace that teaches us our new way of life. It is God's love poured into our lives that brings about the real change we need.

Or, put very simply elsewhere Paul calls it:

Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith... -Romans 1:5

Yes, obedience, our new life comes from faith from beginning to end. Here's the danger. We think that regulations can change the heart, and they just can't do that. There are two reasons. First, it cannot provide the ability to do what it commands. It does not empower us to do what it requires. So, Paul tells us here that it lacks any value in restraining our sin. It provides a standard for sure. But it cannot help us with get there. Why not? The law and all its regulations cannot change our hearts any more than all the exercising I do at the gym can change my diet. The second thing that it does is that it encourages me to trust in my own effort rather than trusting in God. It doesn't lead me to repentance and to crying out for God's grace. It leads me to try harder and to promise I will do better next time. You can see why Paul is warning the church. He says that it has the appearance of wisdom. It seems to be the right thing to do and to be the way to God, but quite the opposite is true. If I look there rather than to Christ, at the very least it will be a distraction, keeping me from developing a greater dependence on God's grace. At the worst, it will stir up pride in my behavior or on the other side a resignation because I can't possibly keep the law.

Let me tell you what happened at Iron Tribe. Thankfully, I didn't get hurt, and I enjoyed the supportive environment for working out. But my trainer had it right. My diet had to change for me to really get healthy. That is true for each of us. I'm not talking about food. I am talking about learning to feed every day on Christ and to rest in what Jesus has done for us. How do we do that? I think we need to preach the gospel to ourselves every day. We need to remind ourselves that we are loved by God, and that Christ has all we need for life and godliness. This is the way to flourishing.

Let's pray:

Loving Lord, you pursue us faithfully with your lovingkindness. You are the merchant in search of jewels. When you find the pearl of great price, you sell everything you have to get it. You have done this for us, giving up your only Son, that you might pour your love into our lives. Help us to walk in this today. In the name of Jesus. Amen.