

Don't be Deceived.
Colossians 2 v 8

A good magician tells his audience to step in close and watch and listen carefully for then it is easier to deceive them. Look, he says, the card is there, when really he has it up his sleeve all the time. It is not difficult to be deceived. If something is presented with skill and a degree of logic most people can be led astray quite easily.

And there is a worldly way of thinking and doing religion that promises to save us but doesn't, rather it deceives and ensnares us for the father of lies, the devil. Instead of enjoying the peace of God, the promise of heaven and the freedom that are in Christ, people are subtly led to a religion with no real assurance, just the empty words of other human beings, binding people to certain rituals and practices, drawing attention to angels or special 'saints' instead of Jesus. Instead of celebrating the salvation we are given freely by God's grace in Christ, we are hoodwinked into a system of conforming to certain rules and customs to try and earn God's favour by our own efforts.

The Apostle Paul is speaking about such things in Colossians 2 v 8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human traditions and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ".

Paul was concerned about this Christian fellowship he had heard about, who were doing so well. Their faith and love was well known. They were zealous as members of this new Christian religion. But before the 1st century was over a heresy was developing, a movement called 'Gnosticism' based on the Greek word 'Gnosis' meaning 'knowledge'. It was a mixture of Greek philosophy which thought that God and spiritual things were good while physical matter like the universe and our bodies are evil, and Jewish traditionalism which taught the necessity of rituals like circumcision and observing certain festival days if we really want to please God.

That may sound a bit strange, long ago and far away but if we think about it these are two very common strands of popular religion, the claim to have special secret knowledge coupled with strict regulations. People are controlled by their fear of those who seem to possess the inside ‘knowledge’.

Sometimes people may come to your door claiming – we have special knowledge revealed by God - come to our Bible study, become one of us if you want to be enlightened!

Even those who don’t practice a formal religion are often taken by fascination with angels. Never mind Jesus, He’s too far away, but here is a personal angel just for you to wear around your neck or carry in your pocket to protect you or put on your mantelpiece for good luck and well being in your home.

So much of this is sincere and well-intentioned but simply wrong! Human learning, rituals or charms cannot save us – only Christ can, so we must keep our attention firmly on Him.

Look what Paul says about these false religious beliefs and practices. He says they are ‘hollow’ – empty – there is no effective substance to them – they are not from God and therefore do not save us or bring us closer to Him.

But note they are ‘deceptive’ – in other words they can be clever and attractive, well-packaged and presented like the fruit offered to Eve in the Garden. She knew it was forbidden but the serpent made it seem like such a good idea – it would be good for she and Adam to have this promised knowledge and be like God, but she was being deceived!

Worldly religion and philosophy are based on two things, firstly ‘human tradition’. That is they are centred on us as human beings. We are the centre of attention as we strive to overcome our problems and become better people, worthy of blessing and eternal life and

happiness. Does this sound good? It is the underlying script in the world today but it's not Christianity.

We depend and focus entirely on what God has done for us in His grace and love through the death of Christ on our behalf. It's not what we have done – we have sinned and failed and deserve punishment! It's what *He* has done in dying that we might be forgiven and share something of His divine fullness with us by His Spirit living in us.

The second thing is worldly principle. Religion based on the principles of this world is like a school careers talk. Now boys and girls, work hard, study well and you'll do well in your exams and get a good job. Now people, come to church and get baptised, make friends with all the right people, read the Bible, say your prayers and we'll get there. It is basically self-advancement by self-effort and social ritual. Not the Gospel!

Don't be deceived says Paul, don't let the evil one make you a spiritual prisoner of such false teaching. Beware you don't let go of Christ – keep all your attention on Him!

For Who is He? The Son of God, the 'image of the invisible God' by Whom all things were created, Head of the Church, firstborn from among the dead, in Whom all the fullness of God dwells. He is Lord and all-sufficient Saviour Who has completely satisfied the holy justice of God against our sin. He has opened a new and living way through Himself for us to come to know God and know His kind blessing as our Father. He rules on high and intercedes for us. He is Jesus our Master and Friend, why would we bother to look at any other?

In closing let's remember as Christians who we are in Him, 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven', renewed in holiness and power to live positive, free and God-pleasing lives.

Let's be prepared to respectfully tell the world to keep its deceptive alternatives. We will accept and own Christ and no other and in Him find all we need and more.

Amen