

False Righteousness

Maybe you've heard of the word asceticism (pronounced a-set-i-siz-em), which means to renounce or abstain from something, believing that doing so renders oneself more righteous. Asceticism is an age-old belief and practice, held by people in many faiths. But, is it a healthy belief? Does it actually bring about righteousness? People who practice asceticism believe that the object or activity they are denying is either wrong in and of itself, or that it's too worldly and can lead them away from spiritual righteousness. For example, some ascetics might say, *"Eating pork is a sin,"* or, *"I don't use electricity or own a phone, because worldly things are evil."* Sometime the words abstain or asceticism are misapplied. For example, if I said, *"I'm abstaining from cocaine,"* that's not an example of asceticism, since cocaine ought to always be avoided, as it's sinful.

When the Apostle Paul traveled to Corinth to bring the gospel to the Greeks, he found that the Corinthians practiced asceticism. Under Paul's ministry, many came to faith, and Paul established a church in Corinth. Eventually Paul left the city to continue his missionary journeys, but Paul continued to pastor the Corinthian people from a distance by corresponding back and forth with them. Two of these divinely inspired letters are available for us to read in the Bible; 1 & 2 Corinthians. In the example below, Paul addresses the topic of asceticism.

1 Corinthians 7:1-5, ***"Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But this I say by way of concession, not a command."***

Because of the ascetic traditions, Corinthian husbands and wives would forgo sex, assuming that this discipline would bring about personal righteousness. They wrote Paul, seeking affirmation, and they made the following statement, ***"It is good for a man not to touch a woman."*** This was the Corinthian's statement, not Paul's, which he makes clear when he writes back saying, ***"Now concerning the things about which you wrote, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman."*** Paul is going to correct their thinking.

The effect of their ascetic practice didn't accomplish what they'd hoped it would. Paul teaches that to deny your spouse sexual fulfillment is in fact creating an opportunity for Satan to tempt. The result is that some would gratify themselves sexually outside of the marriage covenant, thus having a negative effect on their spiritual lives which was the whole point of the asceticism in the first place. Paul argues that, ***"because of immoralities,"*** and since ***"Satan will tempt you,"*** it's better to be married and gratify one another as often as a spouse seeks it, with concessional acts (with permission), and in doing so you'll be able to focus on prayer and serving one another, which are real sources of spiritual growth.

It's necessary then to ask, is there a legitimate place for asceticism in a Christian's life, or is it simply a foolish way to pretend that something righteous is happening? The Bible teaches that we should make sure, by self-denial, that we are not being enslaved by any good thing. Jesus said, ***"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"*** (Luke 9:23). Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12, ***"All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated [or controlled or enslaved] by anything."*** In other words, the issue is not that food and drink or other legitimate pleasures are sinful, but that we ought not to be enslaved or dominated or controlled by anything — good or evil. A kind of self-denial is a part of Christian living; you can call it asceticism, if you wish. Good things ought to be enjoyed in moderation and in their proper context. Additionally, in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, Paul talks about sports and compares the life of a disciplined athlete to that of a Christian with self-control. He says things like, ***"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win... Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave."*** So, in order to be a winner, one must live with self-denial.

It's important to differentiate between godly self-denial and worldly self-betterment. There are disciplines like secular fasting and fitness regimens to gain health benefits, and these have some value. Where Christians need to be on the alert is when certain practices claim to impact spiritual health. If I avoid good things and tell myself that doing so will make me a better person, maybe even make me more pleasing to God, then my thinking is off. Instead, I ought to have a humble reliance on God's grace to bring about spiritual change, so that even my fasting is a pursuit of more of Him.

Paul addresses asceticism again in his letter to the Colossians. The Colossians were a community of new believers within the people of Colossae; a small Greek merchant city in present-day Turkey. The main purpose of Paul's letter to the Colossians was to address their false teaching and practices; some of which included extreme forms of Judaism (rigidly adhering to the old ceremonial Laws of Moses), as well as asceticism. Some key verses are Colossians 2:8, ***"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."*** Also, Colossians 2:16-20, ***"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. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!'"***

There was false teaching infiltrating the church which Paul was very concerned about; involving some kind of asceticism (verses 16 & 21, ***"regarding food and drink" ... "do not handle, do not taste, do not touch"***), insisting upon observing certain religious holy days (verse 16), special visions (verse 18), worship of angels (verse 18), and varieties of rules that Paul refers to as ***"elemental principles"*** (verse 20). All of these are being pressed upon the church, confusing weaker believers to think that if they don't follow these teachings then they're not a Christian. Engaging in these false beliefs only served to diminish Christ and replace Him with religion, ***"according to the tradition of men...rather than according to Christ"*** (2:8). Paul instructs that in these matters of practice, ***"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception,"*** (2:8) and, ***"no one is to act as your judge"*** (2:16). Meaning, refer to the Scriptures when in doubt, and pay no mind to those that would try to judge you in these matters, or coerce you to comply.

It needs to be understood that some of the practices Paul is addressing here used to be upheld and observed under the old ceremonial Law (like observing festivals and holy days, or abstaining from meat sacrificed to idols). However, the ceremonial Law was abolished at Jesus' death. But, even before His death, the ceremonial Law was only a shadow of the real substance of Christ. Paul argues that the shadow of an object is nothing compared to the object itself. In short, Christ is the fulfillment of whatever these observances pointed to. Therefore, Paul urges believers, since you know Christ, and are a part of the body of Christ, there is no value in adhering to old rituals which Christ has already fulfilled and/or embodied! Continuing to practice these things is not only religion for religions sake, but it can be harmful as it gives people a false sense of righteousness.

There is a true way to grow in righteousness and become more like Jesus. The Bible calls this sanctification, which literally means to consecrate (set apart) and purify the heart and life. To become pure and set apart from the world renders a Christian useful for kingdom purposes. Romans 6:22, ***"But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life."*** Sanctification comes by way of abiding in Jesus and letting His Spirit govern your life. Paul urges the Colossians to not be deceived into thinking that they are maturing in righteousness by replacing Jesus with false religion or elemental rules. In Colossians 2:18 he writes, ***"Let no one keep defrauding you,"*** calling these worldly practices ***"self-abasement,"*** which means to humiliate yourself. Paul continues in verses 20-21, ***"If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!'"*** Eating and drinking can become gluttony with a loss of self-control, and not eating and drinking can become boastful and Christ-diminishing. Asceticism failed in Colossae in two ways; one, it isn't glorifying Christ, and two, it isn't defeating sin.

Here's the bottom line, if you're a Christian that is practicing asceticism, take a good look at what it is you're denying yourself, and ask, *"Does the Bible confirm that avoiding this thing will in fact bring about righteousness?"* For example, I hear regularly from inmates that request a vegetarian diet, claiming untruths like, *"Eating meat is unclean, unrighteous, ungodly,"* or, *"I believe abstaining from meat will boost my spiritual health."* Jesus rejects any claim that certain foods are unfit to eat. In Mark 7:18-19 Jesus speaks to His disciples, ***"And He said to them, 'Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?'" (Thus He declared all foods clean.)"*** Jesus knew the world would embrace this sort of superstitious practice, like avoiding certain meats or drinks, but He encourages His followers to know that the real source of righteousness doesn't come from one's diet. Righteousness is a heart issue, not a stomach issue.