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Speaker: Pastor Jeff Poush  
Bible passage or verse: Col. 2:16-23  
Title of sermon: **Beware of Spiritual Swindlers**  
Series: Against the Tide - #7

**Colossians 2:16-23 NIV:**

**16** 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. **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. **19** 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. **20** 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: **21** "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? **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. **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.

Have you ever had a fool's gold moment? Have you ever had one of those moments where you thought you'd just stumbled upon a gold mine, only to find out later that it was really just a pile of something else? Or worse, have you ever been just taken advantage of? Maybe you thought those were sweet Oakley sunglasses that you bought in Mexico, but you found out later they were actually "Jokelies" or "Folklies" -- "Fake oklies?" Well, I had a fool's gold moment. I've actually had a couple, but I only feel comfortable telling you about one. I was at a garage sale, and I noticed a comic book sitting there all by itself, but it had a fancy plastic cover on it. It was five bucks, and I'd never seen this particular comic book before. It wasn't something like Spider-Man or X-Man, it was an obscure title, but I noticed the packaging that it was in, and I also noticed something on the front cover that caught my eye. It said, "First Edition." Now, I don't know much about comics, but I do know that first edition books can be worth something. So, I discreetly pulled out my phone and googled it, and found that that comic book was selling on eBay for \$700. My adrenalin starting pumping. My hands got clammy. And I started feeling a little bit conflicted, almost as if I were obligated to go tell this poor gentleman that he had no idea what he was actually selling. All I could think of was the fact that I was about to make \$695! So, I casually walked up to the guy with the cash box, set the five-dollar comic book down, and said, "Five bucks for a first edition? That's not too bad!" That was the way I kind of absolved myself of the guilt for the fact that I was just pulling one over on this guy!

I took my comic book, kind of hustled to my car, and started dreaming of the new golf clubs that I was going to buy with my mountain of cash. I was so excited about these newfound riches that I wanted to share the good news. I wanted to also get a little bit of advice from a friend of mine who knew a little bit about collectibles. So, I sent him a photo of my rare comic book and waited for him to congratulate me. He didn't. He encouraged me to flip the comic book over and to look in the lower right-hand corner, because there was a word there that really mattered. The word was, "Reprint." It might as well have said, "Sucker!" "Worthless!" "Of no value!" My heart sunk and my golf clubs just kind of drifted away. You see, this comic book was a copy of the real thing. It was made to look exactly like the original. Oh, it was close -- the same artwork, it was the same size and shape as the real thing, but it had no value. Because it was a fake. I got lured in. I took the bait. I was enticed by the fancy plastic holder and the highlighted words of "First Edition." And I got swindled. It left me with an empty feeling, because I thought I was holding something of great value. But it was fake. The only thing that made me feel better was the sound of the paper shredder grinding up the evidence of my naivete.

Now, the Colossians -- they were dealing with a similar situation that called for Paul to write them the letter we've been studying. There were some religious men that were pawing off false religion as if it were the real deal. And the Colossians were getting taken advantage of. They were spiritually

hungry. They were pursuing truth. But Paul wasn't there anymore to answer their questions, so they began listening to other men that were speaking with great authority. They were using spiritual language. And the Colossians' curiosity left them vulnerable to half-truths and misinformation that they were being fed by these false teachers. Paul wanted to protect his friends from being deceived. He wanted to shed light on the truth so that the lies would be revealed, and he wanted to redirect their attention onto the substance of their faith, Jesus Christ. So, how do you know when you're dealing with a spiritual swindler? What should we be looking for so that we don't have our own fool's gold moment when we realize that we've bought into a fraudulent form of Christianity? Or worse, how do we know if we've inadvertently bought in to a counterfeit form of false religion? You see, I got distracted by the big, bold words on the front of the comic book, but I didn't know what to look for. I should've been looking for the tiny words on the back that said "Reprint."

So today, as we look at our text in Colossians chapter 2, verses 16 to 23, I'm going to introduce you to three different people. I'm going to name them. Oh, they're not in the text, but I'm going to give them names so we can see them, and we can see what a spiritual swindler looks like. So that we can orient ourselves to that fine print and not get taken advantage of. These swindlers, these spiritual counterfeiters -- they were loud, they were charismatic, they were persuasive. But they were also dangerous, because they were teaching a false gospel. They were influencers in the town of Colossae, but we still see them in the church today, and we need to keep our eyes open so that we don't get scammed.

In verse 16 of chapter 2, Paul says, "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. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." Paul's warning his friends about a group of judgmental people who were making others feel like second-rate Christians because they weren't following the rules. These people were acting like judges, the ultimate arbiters of right and wrong. These guys decided what kind of food and drinks were appropriate. These guys determined which religious activities and ceremonies were to be performed and on which days they were to be held. We call these people "legalists." You see, legalism pedals rule-following over relationship. Legalism is a sham because it teaches that righteousness comes through right behavior rather than believing in the right person. It's a classic bait-and-switch technique. The legalist uses language that sounds good. They talk about discernment and making proper choices. They talk about the importance of having a good testimony and avoiding immorality. These are all important things, but if you're not careful you begin to worship the rules rather than the rule-giver. Why does this happen? Because the only way a legalist knows if they're behaving properly is to have a clearly defined list of rules and regulations that define which behaviors are righteous and which behaviors are unrighteous. Defining the rules and setting proper boundaries becomes an obsession, and eventually your perspective becomes totally obscured by your pursuit.

Our first friend is named "Larry." Legalist Larry is blinded by what he needs to do rather than who he ought to become. False religions will always tell you what you need to do in order to be accepted by God. Which prayers should I say? Which religious activities should I engage in? What do I need to stop doing in order for God to love me? Legalists like systems. Larry just wants to be told what to do. He needs to know where his boundaries are so that he doesn't cross them and fall out of favor with God. So, Larry has a position on the proper music to listen to. Larry has a position on drinking, on which movies are appropriate and inappropriate. He has a position on tattoos. He has a position on the proper education model for your children. Legalist Larry has a very tight, clearly-defined box for every behavior, and he also wrongly believes that if he follows all the rules, God will love him more. That he will find favor with God and experience His blessing. You see, for Larry, he must perform in order to be accepted. What Larry doesn't understand is that Jesus is more concerned about relationship than religiosity. As followers of Christ, we should be concerned about our behavior. It does matter how we live our lives. We should strive to have moral behavior, because we want to

have a good testimony. We should have standards that keep us from sinning, but our obedience should be motivated by our desire to express our love for Christ, not to coerce Him to love us because of our behavior. Such an important distinction. Living as a legalist robs you of true joy because you are constantly seeking approval of God and others. Legalists like Larry alienate themselves because they condemn and judge. They accuse others that don't meet their religious standards. And if we're honest, we all probably have a little legalist in us -- but this is where we have to be careful. We need to be aware of the legalist trap of requiring others to live up to the rules that we have adopted.

There are a very, very few number of issues that I would die for, that I would go to battle for to the point of death. One's the deity of Jesus. Another's the bodily resurrection of Christ. One is the inspiration and the authority of scripture. Another's that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It's a pretty short list of things that I would die for, but what I just listed are fundamental, doctrinal truths that are the bedrock of Christian faith -- not subjective matters of personal behavior that can be debated and discussed as matters of opinion, and this is where the legalist thrives. Subjective matters of personal behavior. Friends, when dealing with debatable matters, we must listen. We must learn and we must extend grace in order to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Legalism is divisive by definition. So, we must be aware of its trappings for the sake of maintaining unity in the body of Christ. To judge another person's salvation based on their performance is a trap set by the legalists, and it binds us to rule-following rather than releasing us to experience the liberating joy of a relationship with Jesus.

Paul goes on to address another misleading form of false religion in verse 18. He says, "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. 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 us to grow." Here, Paul introduces us to Mystical Mary. I actually met Mary in college. I changed her name to protect her identity, but Mary was a year older than I was, we were both involved in the same campus ministry, and in-between her junior and senior year that summer, she had a spiritual experience. She had an encounter that fundamentally changed her relationship with God. She had received what she called the "second blessing of the Holy Spirit." She received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and she began experiencing this prayer language that she even couldn't understand, and it was dynamic and powerful. It would often bring her to tears as she prayed. She shared this experience with me, and I was thrilled for her -- until the other shoe dropped. And she told me that as she had watched me interact with Jesus for three years that she had reached the conclusion that I had an inferior relationship with God. I had a second-rate relationship with God. And what I needed to do was to pray for this second blessing that she had experienced so that I could have the kind of dynamic, full relationship with God that she experienced. She made me feel like a second-rate Christian. I believe this is what Paul meant by the phrase, "Don't let anyone disqualify you." A literal translation could be, "Don't let someone tell you that you are inadequate." See, I believe my friend Mary had a legitimate spiritual experience. There's no denying her experience. But she made me feel inferior because I didn't have the same spiritual experience that she had.

You see, mysticism redirects attention onto fleeting experiences over foundational truths. The specific issue that Paul was addressing was angel worship, which isn't nearly as prominent today as it was back in the first century. In the early church, Mystical Marys were going around talking about dreams and visions that they were having after they had spent time worshiping angels. Now, this is problematic for two reasons. First, it made ordinary Christians like you and me feel like inadequate second-rate failures because they weren't having these dynamic spiritual experiences. And second, and more importantly, they were committing idolatry. They weren't worshiping God -- they were unapologetically worshiping angels, and then they were bragging about it. These mystics actually

justified their angel worship by claiming that they were too humble to approach a holy God. They were fallen, sinful people, and because they were so aware of their creatureliness they could not go directly to God, they had to go through the next best thing, which was an angel. They spiritualized their idolatry; they spiritualized their arrogance with false humility. This is not humility at all. Mystical Mary is filled with false humility, because her feelings are disconnected from reality. The scripture says that folks who seek spiritual experience over substance of Christ "are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews...."

Friends, we don't need to conjure up spiritual experiences in order to connect with God. We don't need to conjure up dreams and visions in order to fill that gap that we believe exists between us and God. We don't need to conjure these things up in order to connect with God because we are already connected. Just like your neck is connected to your head by ligaments and muscles, so too is the believer connected to the head of the church, Jesus Christ. Mary and her mystic friends were using spiritual language that made them sound humble, but their actions were the height of arrogance. Jesus wasn't their object of worship. I don't believe the angels were even really the object of their worship. I believe they were the object of their own worship, because they needed to be the center of attention. These mystics weren't helping the Colossians get closer to Jesus. Rather, they were placing obstacles in the way of the Colossians. They had figured out a magic formula for deeper spirituality, and then they prescribed that formula for everyone else to follow. Supernatural dreams and visions were now the litmus test for true spirituality, and anyone that didn't experience that was second-rate and inferior. Does God still use dreams and visions to communicate to us today? You bet He does! Does God want us to have a dynamic, thriving, experiential relationship with Him instead of some sterile, cold, mechanical relationship? Or course He does! But here's what we need to look out for, so that we don't get swindled by the mystic. We need to beware of the mystic trap of elevating subjective sensations over substantial certainty.

Paul compares false religions with shadows, and that is such an important word picture for us to consider, because shadows have no substance. In fact, a shadow is actually the absence of something. Shadows are the absence of light. You see, the real object is casting the shadow. The tree has substance. Its shadow, however, is ethereal. It's fleeting, and it's intangible. The mystical journey can take you to higher levels of consciousness. It can give you spiritual sensations and feelings of deep connection with the spirit world. But like a shadow, it is an empty pursuit. Mysticism is a shadow because it elevates spiritual experience over relational engagement, and it could become a trap. It moves your focus from the substance of Christ onto the shadow of fleeting, temporal experience. You see, a spiritual experience is never about me -- it's about Christ at work in me. The feeling I get isn't the goal. Rather, the feeling is the evidence that the Spirit is alive and in the process of changing me, of transforming me, to look, sound, and act more like Him. Spiritual experience starts with the pursuit of the one true God, but when we lose connection with the Head we lose all perspective. We cannot find our way, and we cannot discern between what is real and what is a shadow. The experience isn't the problem. It's the drift away from the substance of Christ.

Finally, Paul addresses the third branch of false spirituality, as he introduces us to a world view called "aestheticism." Verse 20 -- he describes the aestheticist life. He says, "Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belong to the world, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?' These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. 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." What is aestheticism? It's the belief that true spirituality can only be found by removing one's self from all forms of pleasure. They believe that if you deprive yourself of enjoyment, then you have a greater chance of achieving holiness and the approval of God. The favorite word for the

aestheticist is "abstain" because if it's fun, it must be bad -- so stay away. If it's enjoyable, it must be evil, so remove yourself from its presence. Aestheticist would even go so far as to lie on a bed of nails as a sign of their religiosity. A man named Macarius laid down face-down in a swamp for six months to show his devotion to God. Doesn't that just make a ton of sense to you? Why do these guys do this? Why would they lay on nails and put them face in a cesspool for six months? Why would they do that? Because for them, the opposite of pleasure was pain, and if you inflict pain on yourself, then that is a sign of super-spirituality, and it is the pathway to holiness. To endure pain over pleasure was a sign of your commitment to righteousness.

Another hallmark of aestheticism was the removal of one's self from culture and its pagan practices. This is where monks and monasteries came from, this desire to abstain from and get away from the immorality of the corrupt pagan world. Because if sin is to be avoided, then so, too, are sinful people. Do you see a problem here? Aestheticism promotes morality at the expense of missional engagement. How could we be salt and light if we remove ourselves from unsalty, dark places? How can I engage my city if I avoid it? How can I love my unsaved neighbors if I stay away from them on the basis of their unsavedness? Aestheticist Albert avoids evil behavior and evil people but never addresses his own evil desires. Here's the catch -- abstaining from bad things and bad people never addresses the real issue -- your own badness. If I have lust in my heart, throwing away the Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition isn't gonna solve my problem. If I have hatred in my heart, moving away from the person who wounded me isn't going to correct the inner condition of my soul. I'm just taking my hatred with me to a different location. You see, behavior modification never addresses the condition of the heart.

In 423, a hermit named Simeon invented a new way to pursue a life of holiness. He would build these poles and stand on them for long periods of time -- pole after pole after pole. Some of them were 60 feet tall, and he would sit there, and he would stand on one foot and just endure. For 36 years, this man lived on these poles that he had constructed, away from the evils of the world, suffering through exposure to the elements -- rain, scorching heat, with heavy chains around his neck to increase his misery. He would groan and wail all day, and he withered away upon his lofty pedestals until his last days on earth. He wasn't engaged in the mission of Christ. In his attempt to remove himself from evil, he isolated himself from his very calling. Beware the trap of aestheticism that drives you away from the very people Jesus came to rescue.

Think about what Jesus did. He left Heaven and moved toward the lost, and He calls us to do the same. During His earthly ministry, Jesus spent a good deal of time with the Pharisees, because the Pharisees, like the aestheticists, were separatists. They separated themselves from the immoral. And Jesus rebuked them, and said, "No -- these are the people that I've called you to. I have come to seek and save the lost." A changed behavior never deals with the state of the heart. All three of our friends -- Larry, Mary, and Albert -- all missed the point. They were so obsessed with what they had to do in order to gain God's approval that they failed to realize the work had already been done for them. Their performance had nothing to do with their holiness. It is the work performed on the cross that allows us to attain the righteousness of Christ. The legalist, the mysticist, and the aestheticist are passing out counterfeit comic books. They're selling a fake reprint of the original with absolutely no lasting value. You see, false religion is an apparition. Jesus Christ is the right decision. Manmade systems will let you down. Legalism will make you narrow-minded and critical. Mysticism will puff you up with foolish pride. Aestheticism will leave you malnourished and weak because you never really feed your soul with the indwelling transformational work of the Spirit. These are counterfeit, fraudulent systems that look real, but they all leave you lacking because you're chasing shadows rather than substance.

Chase after Jesus and you will be fulfilled. Jesus is the real deal, and once you've found Him, nothing else will ever compare. Your pursuit of holiness will be satisfied by the substance of Christ, not the shadow of pointless performance.

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