

# “Colossians”

## Summer Series 1

### Lesson 4

## “Colossians 2:16-23”

**Objective:** To understand the message that Paul meant to convey to his audience and then to come to understand what that message means for us today as those living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will seek to ascertain what this message means and to determine how we are intended to live our lives as those who are disciples of Christ in our modern context in light of the message it contains. We will place special emphasis on application.

**Materials:** I will begin by examining carefully the Greek text of Colossians, examine other early translations such as the Syriac Peshitta, and any other sources along with the historical setting of the first century Roman world that can help us to understand the original meaning. I will then examine early interpretations and understandings and examine commentaries and modern interpretations to enlighten our understanding for our contextual situation.

#### Procedures

- 1.** We will begin by translating the text from Greek into English. I do not here give you that full translation here, though there are excerpts.
- 2.** We will examine the contextual setting and seek to understand as much as we possibly can about the historical, cultural and social settings in order to understand the message Paul intended and that God still intends for us.
- 3.** From here, we will seek to find out how to best apply the calling that Paul has for the early disciples to our modern contextual framework in order to do our very best to live as disciples of Christ in our modern era.
- 4.** We will seek to understand the attitudes that we are called to have as disciples and to reflect not only the actions that are the calling of a disciple, but also to learn how to form our attitudes to reflect our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

# Text

**2:16 So don't let anyone judge you about eating or drinking or about a festival, a new moon observance, or sabbaths. 17 These religious practices are only a shadow of what was coming—the body that cast the shadow is Christ. 18 Don't let anyone who wants to practice harsh self-denial and worship angels rob you of the prize. They go into detail about what they have seen in visions and have become unjustifiably arrogant by their selfish way of thinking. 19 They don't stay connected to the head. The head nourishes and supports the whole body through the joints and ligaments, so the body grows with a growth that is from God.**

**Col. 2:20 If you died with Christ to the way the world thinks and acts, why do you submit to rules and regulations as though you were living in the world? 21 "Don't handle!" "Don't taste!" "Don't touch!" 22 All these things cease to exist when they are used. Such rules are human commandments and teachings. 23 They look like they are wise with this self-made religion and their self-denial by the harsh treatment of**

**the body, but they are no help against indulging in selfish immoral behavior. CEB.**

## Lesson

This next section begins for us in English with a connective word (“therefore” *οὖν - oun*), linking what is said, here, to what Paul has just written in the previous verses. Paul is drawing out, in this section, the implications of the victory of Jesus over the rulers and authorities. They had tried to disqualify humanity, and especially Gentiles, from membership in the people of God. They had created barriers to membership and now Paul calls upon the Colossians not to allow human beings to do what the rulers and authorities had failed to do in separating them from the victory they had embraced in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Paul uses the Greek word for “to judge” (*κρίνω - krino*) in verse 16 and then calls upon them not to allow anyone to “judge,” or “condemn” them “in food,” or “in eating” (*βρώσις - brosis*), “in drink” or “in drinking” (*πόσις - posis*), in “participating” (*μέρος - meros*) “in a festival” (*ἑορτή - heorte*), or “a new moon festival”

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries series (Downers Grove IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p. 123.

(νεομηνία - *neowmnia*), or “Sabbaths” (σάββατον - *sabbaton*).

Paul’s use of “anyone,” is his way of suppressing the identity of the false teachers here. Paul may be using this type of reference, as he has elsewhere (2:4, 8), to downplay the significance of the false teachers by rhetorically stripping them even of identity and thus of their influence. His usage of “to judge” carries with it a negative connotation that indicates that they are being judged in a negative fashion, and thus “condemning” them in their judgment.<sup>2</sup>

The teachings being pushed by these false teachers would appear to once again point to an “essentially” Jewish teaching. It is likely important in the discussion that food and drink are mentioned first in the list of issues. The Jews fiercely insisted upon the observance of dietary rules as a test of Jewish identity, as a test of those who were a part of God’s people and those who were not. Jews often chose to die rather than eat “unclean” food (1 Maccabees 1:62-63<sup>3</sup>). From this point in Jewish history, onward, adherence to the dietary requirements was counted as a fundamental mark of loyalty to the nation and to covenant

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<sup>2</sup> David W. Pao, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 140, 184-185.


<sup>3</sup> **But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. 63 They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die. 64 Very great wrath came upon Israel.** NRSV

observance. Also among the concerns of the Jews was the issue of blood being drained from the meat before it was eaten. There was not as much concern about drink expressed in Jewish teachings, but there was still concern, as the wine could have been offered to the gods and would thus be contaminated by idolatry. It is notable that the exact same combination of words “food and drink” (βρῶσις καὶ πόσις - *Brosis and posis*) is used at Romans 14:17 and clearly there it is in reference to Jewish practice. There too, as here, the issue of festivals is bound up in Paul’s discussions and the word for “to judge” is also present.<sup>4</sup> The same issue seems to be prevalent in Paul’s address to the Romans: it is a concern here in his address to the Colossians as well.

Those who insist upon a more restricted lifestyle do so as an expression of their belief and their identity as believers. They observe these restrictions because they think God requires them. The problem with this understanding is that it very often leads to the judgment of others who hold a different understanding. It should be noted that at this point, Judaism and Christianity were not seen as separate religious movements. The implication that

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<sup>4</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, in *The New International Greek Commentary series* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), pp. 172-173.



the Colossian philosophy was Jewish in nature is further substantiated by the terms that follow. It is true that all societies and cultures observed “festivals,” but the connection with “new moons” and “Sabbaths” definitely gives a Jewish flavor to the context here.<sup>5</sup> There is likely an implication as well that the conflict was raised because the Christians at Colossae were claiming that they were a part of the expanded people of God (i.e. what had previously been the domain of Judaism, to the exclusion of Gentiles). Before this time, there had been peaceful relations between Jew and Gentile, but tensions had now arisen due to this new claim of status for the Gentiles as being a part of the chosen people of God.

Verse 17 – The grounds of Paul’s attack are now given using language that would have been very familiar to his audience. Plato used the use of the imagery of “shadow” famously in his

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<sup>5</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 174.

imagery of the cave (Republic, 514a-518b<sup>6</sup>), and this was frequently taken up in Hellenistic times by others. The idea being, that the shadows are not the reality, they are simply cast into the world from the real source.<sup>7</sup> Paul uses this imagery in this very classical fashion to convey the idea that the reality has now come into the world and it is indeed to be found in Jesus Christ. He is the reality of which these other things were nothing more than shadows.

Verse 18 – This verse has been described as one of the most contested passages in all of the New Testament. A tremendous amount of research has been done on this passage, but despite this, there is still a considerable amount of disagreement, not only with regard to its background, but also as to how to translate it.<sup>8</sup>

Stuckenbruck says that, This text alone has played a major role in

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<sup>6</sup> **“Next,” said I, “compare our nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience as this. Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, [514b] able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet-shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets.” “All that I see,” he said. “See also, then, men carrying past the wall....”**

Paul Shorey, Trans., *Plato. Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 5 & 6 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, in The Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 44 (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1982), p. 139.

<sup>8</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 141.

scholarly discussion concerning the nature of the “Colossian error,” which is being opposed in this epistle, by Paul.<sup>9</sup> Arnold sees this text to be related to the mystery religions in the area, and he sees religious syncretism as being behind the imagery here.<sup>10</sup> Moo accepts Arnold’s explanation that what Paul is addressing here is the recruitment of angels to ward off evil, which was a practice that certainly existed in the ancient world.<sup>11</sup>

As I pointed out at the outset, this is a highly controversial section and Dunn would say that one would not expect in any of the forms of Judaism known to us from the period to find the actual worship of angels.<sup>12</sup> Further investigation is needed, but it is unlikely that this matter can be settled to everyone’s satisfaction, at this time. As we break this verse down the idea of “self abasement” could clearly be Jewish in nature. The “worship of angels” is certainly disputed with some saying it fits with a non-normative form of Judaism as we can find represented in the

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<sup>9</sup> Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament – 2 Reihe 70 (Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1995), p. 111.

<sup>10</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism – The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1996), pp. 104-157.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), p. 227.

<sup>12</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 179.



“magical” texts while others reject it as not fitting the Judaism of this period at all. “Dwelling on visions” certainly fits with the notion seen in later Jewish texts such as *Sefer Ha-Razim* along with other Jewish *Merkabah* texts of a similar nature. Such texts call upon angels in a variety of ways and express an element of adoration as well. There also seems to be some degree of agreement with Biblical texts such as those in Ezekiel and Revelation. Overall, considering the evidence, it still seems likely that Paul is referring here to some form of Jewish syncretism in this verse, at the very least, and it seems to me that some form of angel adoration is in view. This may have been quite unique or have been held by a Jewish group that we have not found records of, nor are we fully aware of at this time. Speculation is all we have, regarding a text that seems to indicate the adoration of what we would know as angels.

Verse 19 – In this verse, Paul further defines the false teachers as those who do not focus solely on Christ. The false teachers look for the truth in places other than what is given through Christ, with their focus, and emphasis being on visionary experiences, which do not find their roots in Jesus Christ. “Not


holding fast” would seem to indicate that at least at one time these people were, in some sense, followers of Christ. Others however, translate these words differently here and leave open the possibility that those spoken of here were never Christians at all. This issue cannot be settled simply by an examination of this phrase. However, the passage does make it plain that a continued connection with the head is required for the “growth that is from God” to exist. So whether, or not, they were Christians to begin with, or not, they will not experience the growth here described without that connection with Christ.<sup>13</sup>

The dependence of believers upon Christ is illustrated by this physiological metaphor of the body. With this metaphor however, there is an emphasis not only on Christ as head of the body, but also upon the church as the body, which is necessary for a properly functioning totality.<sup>14</sup> So often today, we hear the statement that a person believes they can worship Christ and be a part of the body of Christ without being connected to the church, or some would say without being connected to organized religion. Paul appears to disagree here, and at other places, with this view.

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<sup>13</sup> David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 191-192.



Community is a critical element in the well-being of those who follow Christ. Without the fellowship of other Christians, the body will not function as it is described here. The “whole body” is important as a unified whole and there is much in this verse that should cause us to pause as we look at the state of the church in our world today. Unity is critical to Paul and it is not as much unity with one another that Paul advocates, though that is implied, but unity with Jesus Christ, the “head.”

God provides the growth here. He is the ultimate source of the growth of the body. The growth of the body entails the spiritual growth of the individual members (3:5-8), the growth of unity among those various members (3:9-14), and outreach to those who are not yet a part of the body of Christ (4:5-6), but who will be grafted in by the power of God. The false teachers focus on themselves instead of upon Christ who is the head. Their focus, upon individual visionary experiences, destroys the communal spirit of God’s people. Their obsession with their own superior knowledge makes them exclusivists and destroys their outreach to

those who are outside, while at the same time destroying the internal unity.<sup>15</sup>

Verse 20 - Paul continues his challenge to those who are both false teachers, but also those who are in some sense wavering in their resolve. If you really died with Christ, then you died to the threat offered by these other things, because they are in no way a threat to Christ. As Paul has clearly explained Christ is far superior to them in every way. The “elements,” and their regulations are manifestations of the old kingdom that has been swept aside by Christ. Why would the Colossian Christians wish to conform to the norms and regulations of that old order as if it was really still relevant to them in any meaningful way?<sup>16</sup> They no longer belong to that world, and therefore, are not subject to the whims, or the regulations, of those who do: Christ has conquered. Why then would they wish to submit to the regulations of that which is dying and defeated?

Verse 21 – Paul treats the regulations of this world with contempt as he recites a list of them here. It is most likely the case, that he here recites this list of regulations in a manner that

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<sup>15</sup> David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 192-193.

<sup>16</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 130.

mockingly refers to the presentation of these ideas that the false teachers have put forth. Paul is giving his own mocking paraphrase of their rules.<sup>17</sup> All of these regulations are to do with purity and food. Paul here rejects this Colossian version of a sacramental universe. It is possible that Paul refers here to the practices of more than one group with his list, but it certainly applies to what we know of Jewish practice. The touching of something unclean, such as a corpse, was forbidden and the eating of foods that were considered unclean was forbidden. This ideology is behind the name of the Pharisees as the “separated ones.” The Essenes also went to great lengths to separate themselves from much in the world, but if they are indeed the community at Qumran they even separated themselves from other Jews. It is highly likely that Paul is referring to Jews interacting with the Colossian church with his list here.<sup>18</sup>

Verse 22 – The regulations of the previous world order are not of permanent value. In Paul’s writings the idea of “perish” is often used of things that belong to the old era and not to the newly inaugurated era of Christ and His kingdom. The contrast is

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<sup>17</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 235.

<sup>18</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 190-192.

between the legalistic practices of the old era and the life-giving promises of Jesus Christ (verse 13), and this also seems similar to the contrast between “flesh” and “Spirit” in Galatians 6:8. It seems to relate to what is referred to by Isaiah 29:13<sup>19</sup> where he also speaks of human commandments. This passage represents one of Isaiah’s critiques of their idolatrous practices.<sup>20</sup>

Verse 23 – The rebuke, in the previous verse, with its allusion to Isaiah 29:13, may seem strong enough to end the argument here, but Paul will have been aware of the attractiveness of regulated discipline amongst people. People view such disciplines as mark of their commitment, and because of the rich spiritual experiences that are promised by such practices there is still appeal and therefore temptation. This claim could not be ignored without proper address. The reference here is back to the things spoken of in verse 21. They have the “appearance” (λόγος - *logos*) of wisdom (σοφίας - *sophias*), or they have a “reputation” of wisdom. Clearly wisdom was something that Paul’s audience

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<sup>19</sup> **The Lord said:**

**Because these people draw near with their mouths  
and honor me with their lips,  
while their hearts are far from me,  
and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote;** NRSV

<sup>20</sup> David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 195-196.

found desirable. These things appear to promote humility and piety, but in reality they only appear to do this, they do not actually do it.<sup>21</sup>


Appearances can be deceiving and in this instance the appearance of wisdom in these practices is deceitful. Just as Eve was deceived by the serpent in the Garden, so also the Colossians are in danger of being deceived here by the appearance of these practices. “Severe treatment” or “severe self-control” (ἀφειδία - *apheidia*) have no genuine value in controlling the indulgence of the flesh. Hollenbach would go so far as to say that it does even more than that, which is to say that this severe treatment actually leads to “the fulfillment of the flesh”.<sup>22</sup> If such is the case, then these things of which Paul warns his readers are not only useless in doing what they are designed to do, they actually do the opposite and bring about indulgence of the flesh. They are in fact false and dangerous.

Paul, here, warns his audience of what he perceives to be genuine danger that would lead them in a path away from Christ

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<sup>21</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 194-195.


<sup>22</sup> Bruce Hollenbach, “Col. II. 23: Which Things Lead to the Fulfillment of the Flesh”, *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979), pp. 254-261.



and the freedom offered, by following old ways, that have been proven to be unworkable and useless for the task. It seems incredible, but humans continually have the tendency to return to old ways that have in fact failed; seemingly expecting them to succeed for them, when they have not succeeded previously to do so. Christ offers a new way that challenges the old ways and it offers a new perspective on even the old ways that have been misapplied and misinterpreted because of outside influences and human influences that have the semblance of wisdom but not the reality. Paul intends his warnings to act as a protection for the precious Christians at Colossae as they should also be protective for us today.

Many of the same things that Paul addresses here are to be found in our world today. All important in our walk of discipleship is our focus. Will we be truly focused on Christ and what He has done and what He has called us to do, or will we be diverted and change our focus? Sometimes the difference between the two can seem so small, especially at the beginning, but the reality is galaxies apart. One way calls for us to be continually and perpetually to recognize that our salvation, our





healing is not due to who we are or what we have done, but due to who He is and what He has done. We are His family because He made it so.


In this recognition we are called to be in the world like Him, loving others with a fierce love and being willing to be inconvenienced to the point of death as He was for us. We are called to forgive, to promote peace and to pursue justice, especially for the weak and powerless. To be a disciple is to seek to be like “Jesus” in all things, not as a matter of pride or to earn salvation, but because we have been redeemed. To be like Jesus requires more than the replication of His actions; it also requires us to pursue the replication of His attitude and His compassion for others to the detriment of ourselves. These are easy words to say, but incredibly hard to live out. Only with the continual help of God is such a walk possible. “Following” Jesus stops us from indulging in selfish immoral behavior. Where does the path of Jesus lead? To the cross, where the old self is crucified and a new being arises that is empowered by God with a renewed spirit.

# Synopsis

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Paul calls upon the Christians at Colossae to resist being drawn into the trap of allowing themselves to be judged by others for matters that were ceremonial, and matters of food and drink. The implication is that these things were only a shadow of things that will come and that the real substance belongs to Jesus Christ. The danger is that in changing focus to these things and allowing the judgment of others to change that focus they are endangered, in their walk with Jesus. Paul makes it clear that such things as self-abasement, the worship of angels, and dwelling upon visions are things that lead to arrogance because they reflect a human way of thinking. This is not the way that God intended for things to be.

Paul goes onto challenge the Colossians to hold fast to the head, which is Christ. In this verse, he draws out some very important theology about the relationship of the church to Christ as the head. It is from this head that so much that is important comes as he uses the analogy of the body. He also expresses the importance of the body (the community of believers) as crucial for



the Christian. It is in the context of body that nourishment, maintenance, and growth occur. A part of the body that is separated from the body will quickly die and decay. The ultimate source of growth and nourishment for the Christian comes from God. This is an element that seems to be so often forgotten as churches are more interested in technique, unique approaches, and atmosphere, than they are with promoting clear and powerful connection with God, who provides growth.

Paul warns them of the dangers of false teachers who would teach them to appease, or to regulate the elemental spirits of the universe in a way reminiscent of their former state, but clearly not reflective of their place in the kingdom of God as Christians. The former regulations of tasting, touching, and handling are regulations that perish with use, they are of human origin and though they have the appearance of helping it is only an appearance and not a reality. They may even make things worse and promote indulgence rather than stop, or hinder it.

Paul calls upon the Colossians to remember they are “now,” already, in the kingdom of Christ.

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# Main Points

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- Do not be trapped by things that are nothing more than a shadow of reality.
  - Do not let others disqualify you by resorting to a human way of thinking.
  - Hold fast to Christ.
  - Do not be tricked by what seems to be piety, but really is not.
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# Questions

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1. Why do you think people seek to observe religious practices in order to be holy?
2. Why do you think people seem to love to observe religious festivals?
3. What is it that people hope to gain by the observance of religious festivals and traditions?
4. Why do you think there is danger in such observances?
5. What is the difference between human thinking and the thinking of God?
6. Why do you think visions are dangerous?
7. Is it important to come to church? Why, or why not?
8. How would you define “community?”
9. What do you think Paul means by “the whole body” in verse 19?
10. What does it mean to “die” with Christ?
11. What does dying for Christ mean for us today?
12. How can we tell the difference between human commands and teachings, and those teachings and commands that come from God?
13. What is “self-imposed piety?”
14. How would you define “self-indulgence”?
15. How might treating one's body harshly lead to indulging in

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immoral behavior?

16.How do you receive spiritual nourishment?

17.How would you define spiritual growth?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important to know that all religious practices are not from God. Sometimes people can even show you in Scripture where it says to do such things. We see that when Jesus came His practice often conflicted with the religious leaders of His day. He often challenged the leaders to look at their motives for their practices and not just their actions. What do you think should stand behind our motives for religious practices?

## **Where is God in these words?**

God is in these words revealing the place of Jesus in His plans and in their revelation. Paul here speaks of what God has been doing, and what He is doing, in Jesus Christ. He challenges his readers to recognize that Jesus is our “head.” We are to follow His lead and seek to be transformed more and more into His likeness, with His attitudes, and to seek to perform His actions for the same reasons that He did them. What are some ways that following Jesus has changed your life?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

The challenge here is to continue to grow. As long as we live and have breath in our bodies we are called to be a part of God’s efforts and His plan to grow His body, His community of believers. These believers are to seek to be as much like Jesus as they can possibly be, not only in their actions, but in their thoughts, and attitudes. What are some ways that having the attitudes of Christ changes your actions?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

The word of God is calling us to recognize what God has done for us and to challenge us to align ourselves with His agenda and His plan for creation. This may not always seem to be what is best for us as an individual, but God calls us to be willing to subvert our own preferences, our own will, and desires, to His will and His desires. Jesus said, “...not my will but Yours...” We are called into this same stream of existence. We are not called to submit to the rules and ways of the world, but to commandments and teachings of God. What are some ways that you discern the difference between the ways of men and the ways of God?