

Colossians 2:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

(Touch not; taste not; handle not;

Analysis

(Touch not; taste not; handle not; Paul provides examples of regulations characterizing false teaching: *mē hapsē, mēde geusē, mēde thirēs* (μὴ ἄψη, μηδὲ γεύσῃ, μηδὲ θίγῃς, "Don't handle, don't taste, don't touch"). The progression moves from minimal contact (touch) through consumption (taste) to any connection (handle), creating comprehensive prohibition. Such ascetic restrictions promised spiritual purity through material abstinence.

The staccato rhythm and emphatic negations convey the oppressive, joyless character of legalism—a religion of prohibitions rather than positive relationship. This anticipates verse 23: such regulations appear wise but lack power to restrain fleshly indulgence. Legalism promises mastery over flesh through external restriction but produces either proud self-righteousness (if rules are kept) or defeated guilt (when broken).

Historical Context

Both Jewish and Greek religious systems featured ascetic practices: dietary restrictions, sexual abstinence, property renunciation. Such disciplines were considered evidence of spiritual advancement and mastery over bodily passions. Gnostic movements developing in this era particularly emphasized asceticism, viewing matter as inherently evil and requiring suppression. Paul will argue (v. 23) that such approaches are powerless against genuine sin.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What prohibitions do you or your Christian community emphasize that Scripture doesn't actually require?
2. How does your spirituality focus on what you don't do versus who you're becoming in Christ?
3. Can you distinguish between biblical holiness and man-made asceticism designed to demonstrate spiritual superiority?

Interlinear Text

Μὴ	ἄψη	μηδὲ	γεύσῃ	μηδὲ	θίγης
not	(Touch	not	taste	not	handle
G3361	G680	G3366	G1089	G3366	G2345

Additional Cross-References

1 Timothy 4:3 (Parallel theme): Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

Genesis 3:3 (Parallel theme): But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.

Isaiah 52:11 (Parallel theme): Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD.

2 Corinthians 6:17 (Parallel theme): Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,

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