The linguistic root of “asceticism” is the word *askēsis* which means practice, training, or exercise and came to be used in reference to spiritual disciplines and self-denials. There have been various forms of asceticism in the major world religions, including “pagan” forms that similarly involve escaping the corrupting world, but as a non-religious salvation or secular “self-improvement.” In ascetic systems, it is typically understood that the things of the world, and even enjoyment of them, are not in themselves simply rejected but are considered a hindrance and obstacle to some perceived higher religious and spiritual objective. The common idea is that self-denials and restraints will give greater freedom and detachment from those obstacles to one’s spiritual and moral health or growth.

- **Christian Asceticism & the Quest for Spiritual Experience**

Since asceticism has played such a large role in Judeo-Christian history, we must ask if it has biblical grounds. It might be argued that there are two definitions of asceticism. To simplify these two, we could say that the one definition is life/world-affirming and sin denying, while the other is life/world-denying and sin-denying. The biblical gospel through both the Old and New Testaments is clearly life-affirming wherever it might be argued that it has some kind of ascetical aspects (e.g., Nazarites), and it is never life-denying. If there is a biblical ascetic, it never flows from the presupposition that the created world or human body is essentially bad or evil and thus demands escape. The biblical view is that self-denial of some earthly good is not because that earthly good is in fact bad, but rather that some higher good is needed (as in intensive fasting and praying for a season). That is, the motivation of such denials is not to escape some evil in order to achieve some higher good. Although, there are evils in this world that are necessary for all believers to avoid and escape for their own spiritual good, but not for self-justification or self-sanctification. The biblical view is always sin-denying and holiness and life affirming in its *totality*, or wholeness. Anything we might call a “spiritual discipline” that involves some form of concentrated self-denial or focus, is to be understood in the *context of the whole life*, and not separate from it, as an escape from it, nor a diversion from it, out of fear of some obstacle to the higher spiritual life. “Praying without ceasing” does not mean that we leave the world and sit forever in church or on a pole, as discussed next.

The other definition, wherever it is found, rests on assumptions of the evil of the world and the body and the consequent necessity of denying and escaping such earthly things for higher (spiritual) purposes (usually related to self-justification in terms of works-righteousness). There were ancient “pole-sitters” (*stylitēs*) who would sit on platforms on tops of high poles (see illustrations above), and those who spent their lives hiding in caves or monasteries, to escape the corruptions of the world. Underlying much of this form of asceticism is a *dualistic* view of the universe. Even if the ascetic impulse is not combined with this view of the intrinsic evil of the world and its pleasures, this world is typically perceived as a hindrance to spiritual pursuits and advancement. Thus, in either case, the means of such denials include *abstinence* and *austerε* disciplines of denial and even self-inflicted deprivations, pains, and various flagellations. Such unbiblical views of human
nature, the image of God, the creation of God, human life in this world, and justification and sanctification, make much of these ascetic traditions untenable and counter-productive for Christians.

Super-spirituality and self-righteousness are dangers we always will face in our prideful state, but it can be that such asceticism, ironically, can swiftly open those doors. This is not to say that humility and self-abasement can not come from self-denials (such as intensive prayer and fasting), but the goal is knowing and glorifying God in Christ in order to live in the world, not self-justification by seeking spiritual perfections (to become “spiritual athletes”) or experiences or escape out of the world from corrupting threats. The goal of the Christian life is Christ-likeness, living fully in the world in service to others.

In Christian asceticism, for example, the idea that God is somehow unquestionably prior to one’s family, or other human responsibilities, or vocation, and service, leads to the view that it is more spiritual to do missions or evangelism or some other obviously Christian activity than to serve one’s family or a vocation in some capacity. This is perhaps based on Jesus’ statement recorded in the Gospel of Matthew:

Mtt 10:37 “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. 38 “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.

Nevertheless, I believe this is a serious misunderstanding of the nature of Christian service and love, since serving one’s family, or fulfilling some rather “ordinary” vocation or task, may be the very “highest” calling we will ever have, and by loving and serving our families, doing our work well, and serving a vocation, we are indeed fulfilling God’s calling and vocation for us. (In this text in Matt 10, Jesus was addressing those who would forsake or reject him for others, or for something else.) That is, it is not less spiritual to peel the potatoes at home than to do a short-term missions trip. There is also the commonly used phrase, “full-time Christian ministry” that indicates we have not moved past the medieval notions of the separation of sacred and secular. That doing “full-time ministry” is somehow a higher calling than everything else, and that it can even justify abandoning other human, familial, and vocational responsibilities has (inadvertently) caused much heart-ache in people’s lives in the history of the church.

In light of these matters, is such a thing as Christian asceticism possible, and is the idea truly oxymoronic? Historically, Christian’s have attempted to develop and practice various forms of asceticism, and they often drew on both pagan and Jewish forms, but today they draw most readily from Greek and Gnostic traditions.

“The prevalence of asceticism cannot be traced to a single source or motivation. Selective use of the canonical Gospels and Paul, the Stoic ideal of apatheia (“passionlessness”), Platonic dualism, the influence of Essene and other Jewish communal practices and the widespread ascetic impulse in serious circles in the Greco-Roman world all contributed. From no later than the mid-second century, the Protevangelium of James propagated reverence for Mary’s perpetual virginity.”

The important question is, can asceticism contribute anything to the sufficiency of Christ?

Our sufficiency is in Christ alone; there is nothing we can add to that sufficiency. Spiritual exercises and religious observations may be helpful in some practical ways (concentration and focus in prayer and worship), but ironically they become a serious hindrance to godliness whenever thought to be the path to a “higher spirituality” or spiritual qualifications before God. Very seriously, asceticism can also threaten a believer’s subjective assurance of the objective assurance they have in Christ’s sufficient grace. Works for righteousness always undermine our confidence in the all-sufficiency of Christ Jesus.

Indeed, there are so many movements and people and ideas that would take away from the full sufficiency of Christ, or that would add to the full sufficiency of Christ. These are probably the two most common temptations we sinners often fall for, being frequently restless and discontent and failing to grasp that Christ is absolutely sufficient in himself for us and our redemption, body and soul. There is nothing we can add to his all-
sufficiency, but there are so many voices that call us to either diminish his sufficiency (unbelief, Liberalism, many world religions, etc.), or to add to his sufficiency by our own efforts (moralism, legalism, works, higher spirituality, super spirituality, etc.). This is what Paul was addressing at the church at Colossae:

Col 2:8-10 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. 9 For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, 10 and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority . . .

In conclusion, all such unbiblical notions that diminish or add to the all-sufficiency of Christ in asceticism are completed contradicted and vanquished by the Incarnation and the Resurrection of Jesus, since in both God affirms the goodness of his creation and his purposes to resurrect the body of those he claims as his own people. This is why Paul condemns all those who say “do not handle, do not touch, do not taste” (Col 2:20-23), in order to curb one’s sinful heart, or to sanctify oneself, since these deprivations in themselves have no advantage, power, or value against sinful indulgence. In response to the various deprivations and denials for the higher spiritual life, Jesus said that it is not what goes into our mouths that is a danger, but what comes out of our hearts . . . (Mtt 15:11).

Jesus lived the perfect life for us, though tested and tempted, in the created world, in the flesh, and thus fulfilled in his life the Edenic ideals that Adam failed to accomplish. His power and Spirit alone can sanctify us in heart. Christ’s incarnation and resurrection are the proof that the new creation will be a glorious renewal of all that he has made and all that he has redeemed. And then we will come to fully understand that to be human in itself is to be fully “spiritual,” and it is in being human that we glorify him.