

Life in Christ Brings Freedom

Lesson for November 19, 2023

Unit III: Christ Frees, Law Enslaves

Adult Topic: Live as You Were Taught

Background Scripture: Colossians 2:6-23

Printed Text: Colossians 2:16-23

Key verse: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith ...” (Colossians 2:6-7a, NIV)

"What must I forsake?" a young man asked.

"Colored clothes for one thing. Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot, if you are sincere about obeying Christ, take warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against him who created us, to attempt to improve on his work."

Quaint, isn't it – this example of extrabiblical scruples? And perhaps amusing. The list has constantly shifted over the 1,800 years since this one was actually recorded.

Jim Peterson, *Living Proof*, NavPress, 1989, p. 106.

This week's example seems funny in 2023, but it was a part of the narrowly constricted beliefs in Christianity 1800 years ago. What constricts us today? In this week's lesson Paul raises the question, “How can we break free of practices that ensnare us?” (*Sunday School Commentary*, Townsend Press, 2023, p. 108)

Key Terms

- 1. Circumcision** (verse 11) – The cutting off of the foreskin of males that is practiced as a religious rite by Jews and Muslims and by others as a social custom or for potential health benefits (such as improved hygiene). The commandment to circumcise was a covenant made with Abraham and is recorded in Genesis 17:10–14, reading:
‘And God spoke to Abraham saying: ... This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and thy seed after you — every male child among you shall be circumcised.’
The biblical explanation for this commandment states quite clearly that the circumcision acts as an outward physical sign of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people.
- 2. Elemental** (verse 20) – The “elements of the world” (NIV) is a reference to the Mosaic Law. These “elements” were the ceremonies and sacrifices performed to gain divine acceptance. It refers to the elementary part of something. The basic beginning. Paul is saying, “When we Jewish Christians were minors in the faith, we were kept like slaves under the rules of the Law.”

3. **False Humility** (verse 18) – Humility here means "self-abasement." This is not the good kind (1 Peter 5) but rather taking spirituality to a dangerous extreme as to work one's self up with ecstatic prayers and over-emotionalism through drugs, deprivation, physical torture, and stimulation to get revelatory visions, spiritual experiences, or power. Thus, these false teachers were getting their ideas from cults and imagination rather than from God's Word, and then teaching them to others. A similar practice has been done by some Jewish and Hindu mystics, Monks in the Middle Ages, and in some Native American cultures. This comes across as one being pious and pure or spiritual, but in fact, one becomes deceived, leading to a dysfunctional spiritual and personal life. These practices do not free us; they only lead us to ignore God, distract us off His path and will, and thus lead us into more bondage. This is false humility and spirituality even when practiced sincerely! We are unable to walk close to God by a force of our will or some spiritual manipulation or self-deprivation; rather, it comes from a surrender of our will to His Will (Proverbs 6:16-17; Ecclesiastes 5:7; John 3:30; 2 John 8)
4. **Shadow of things** (verse 17) – This is a philosophical term from Plato meaning "the real unseen world" versus the world shadows and ideas in which we live. A philosophy to distinguish the real world from the false and what is real is only a shadow of the real we can't see. Here, it refers to the Old Testament being a type and shadow that testified to Christ. But, we are not tied to the Law nor do we have an obligation to follow it, because Christ has liberated us (Hebrews 8:5).
5. **Unspiritual** (verse 18) – Of the flesh; earthly; not concerned with religious values; not spiritual.

Lesson Background

When Paul wrote the epistle to the church at Colosse, Christianity was new and seemed too good and too simple to be true. They were in a very difficult, Greek, pagan culture and were having birthing and growing pains. They were being negatively influenced and thus confused by the spectacle of cults and false religions that surrounded them; they needed the True Savior. A church planter named Epaphras helped these Colossians embrace the new life and Way, so they were evangelized at the time of Paul's ministry to the Ephesians. They received the grace of Christ but found themselves in further turmoil. False teachings, mysticism, empty philosophies, legalism, and traditions had battered its walls, threatening the health and wellbeing of the members and their evangelistic opportunities. They were under siege by false teachers and prideful men seeking sensationalism and mysticism rather than Christ as Lord. Christ's Deity was being challenged and rejected for more so called "clever and newer" ideas (Acts 19).

Christianity was the solution, but it is so simple, most people missed the power of the Gospel message and therefore sought to add to it. And, the new fancy philosophical theories were as catchy and powerful then as today's false teachers and their deceptive ministries that fleece the flock and leave people empty and devastated along with a bad reputation in the wake. Thus, the Colossian church was in chaos.

Chapter 2 explains five errors that endangered the Colossian church: (1) Enticing words, vv. 4-7 (2) Philosophy, vv. 8-13 (3) Legality, vv. 14-17, (4) Mysticism, vv. 18, 19 and (5) Asceticism, vv. 20-23. These are some of the same issues that can impact the church and individual relationships with the Lord. This week's lesson focuses on the last three – legality, mysticism, and asceticism.

Lesson in Depth

I. Freed from Legalism (Colossians 2:16-17)

So do not let anyone judge you/pass judgment: The opening “so” is important. It connects this thought with the previous thought. Because Jesus won such a glorious victory on the cross, we are to let no one judge you in food or in drink or in other matters related to legalism. A life that is centered on Jesus and what He did on the cross has no place for legalism.

Festival, New Moon: was a monthly celebration to commemorate and dedicate the beginning of each month to some pagan god. Here, this refers to an aspect of paganism, the practice of "asceticism." This is the seeking to achieve spiritual power by secrets and manipulation or self abasement, then partying with it. It also refers to fasting and other stern spiritual disciplines that seek to manipulate one's will over God's. This may seem to indicate a "how dare they do that," but the question is *do we do this in some other ways?*

The point is clear: days and foods, as observed under the Mosaic Law, are not binding upon New Covenant people. The shadow has passed, the reality has come. So, for the Christian, all foods are pure (1 Timothy 4:4-5) and all days belong to God.

Christians are therefore free to keep a kosher diet or to observe the sabbath if they please. There is nothing wrong with those things. However, they cannot think that eating kosher or sabbath observance makes them any closer to God, and they cannot judge another brother or sister who does not observe such laws.

II. Freed from Mysticism (Colossians 2:18-19)

In this passage, Paul rebukes the strange mysticism of the Colossian heresy.

Disqualify/beguile you. Meaning to be your referee and decide what is good and bad for you; also to steal or condemn or distract you from His prize for you. Only Christ is our Umpire and Lord (1 Corinthians 9:24; Philippians 3:14).

Taking delight in false humility and worship of angels: These aspects of **false humility** (see key terms for a definition) and the **worship of angels** were parts of the false teaching troubling the Colossian Christians. That is why Paul touches back on these themes throughout the letter of Colossians. The antidote for both of these false teachings is simply more of Jesus, exalting Him above **angels**, and realizing that because of His finished work there is nothing to take pride in.

“That is to say, the heretics probably insisted that their worship of angels rather than the supreme God was an expression of humility on their part.” (Vaughn)

“Their humility found an expression in angel worship. It is therefore that lowliness which causes a man to think himself unworthy to come into fellowship with God, and therefore prompts to worship of the angels.” (Peake)

False humility and the **worship of angels** do not make anyone more spiritual. Instead, holding fast to the Head (Jesus) makes us truly spiritual.

Intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head: This describes the spiritual arrogance of these false teachers and those who believed what they taught. There are few things more dangerous among Christians than spiritual pride and arrogance.

Intruding into those things which he has not seen: “That is a mistranslation. The correct translation should be ‘making a parade of things which he has seen.’ The Gnostic prided himself upon the special visions of secret things which were not open to the eyes of ordinary men and women.” (Barclay)

Vainly puffed up: “*Vainly* characterizes the emptiness of such pretension; *puffed up*, the swelling intellectual pride of those who make it. The humility is thus characterized as affected, and the teachers as charlatans.” (Vincent)

From whom all the body: When these strange, mystical movements arise in the church, they don’t appeal to the *whole body*, but only to a few “elite” Christians. This is not the cause under **the Head**, Jesus – He wants **all the body** to grow together.

Grows with the increase which is from God: This is God’s plan for church growth. We remain faithful and connected to Jesus (our **Head**), and God gives the increase.

III. Freed from Asceticism (Colossians 2:20-23)

Asceticism: Ascetic as a noun is defined as "a person who dedicates his or her life to a pursuit of contemplative ideals and practices extreme self-denial or self-mortification for religious reasons." Asceticism is the practice of the denial of physical or psychological desires to attain a spiritual purpose or goal. Hardly any religion has been without elements of asceticism. as stated by Britannica.com:

The origins of asceticism lie in man’s attempts to achieve various ultimate goals or ideals: development of the “whole” person, human creativity, ideas, the “self,” or skills demanding technical proficiency. Athletic *askēsis* (“training”), involving the ideal of bodily fitness and excellence, was developed to ensure the highest possible degree of physical fitness in an athlete.

“False teachers infiltrated the church in Colossae and attempted to promote salvation by adhering to human effort through Jewish legalism, mysticism, and stringent self-denial” (*Pathways*, Sunday School Publishing Board). This is what Paul argues against in this passage.

Died with Christ: This means our union in and with Christ-being "saved" because of His sacrificial death for us (Romans 6:1-11; Colossians 2:8, 11-12). You died with Christ from the basic principles of the world. Remembering this is the key to living above legalism. Our identification with Jesus in both His death and resurrection (as mentioned before in Colossians 2:12) becomes the foundation for our Christian life, instead of our law-keeping.

Basic principles/elemental spirits: This is a Greek philosophical image like *mystery*, referring to the elements of the universe, or "elemental matter." Here, it is referring to the bad doctrines of trying to please or worship angelic beings that disregard the foundations of truth and the simple message of the Gospel. God's true Truth is far deeper, more intense, and more insightful than any religious or humanistic thinking or great reason (Galatians 4:3-9; Colossians 2:6-10, 18-21)

“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,”: This is a perfect description of legalistic religion, defined more by what we don't do than by what we do. Christianity is a moral religion; it does have clear moral boundaries. But at its foundation, Christianity is a religion of positive action.

Which perish with the using: “They are things which come to an end in the very act of being used. Handling them, eating them, or the like involves their destruction. Food, once eaten, ceases to be food. These are not the things that matter most; these are not the ultimate realities.” (Bruce)

According to the commandments and doctrines of men: One aspect of legalism is that the doctrines of men are promoted as the laws of God.

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom... but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh: We might regard this as the greatest indictment against legalism in the Bible. At the bottom line, legalism's rules have no value in restraining the indulgence of the flesh.

All such legalistic rules may have an **appearance** of wisdom, but they have no real value. Legalism doesn't restrain the flesh; it *feeds* the flesh in a subtle, powerful way. “In fact, the most rigorous asceticism can coexist with insufferable spiritual pride, one of the subtlest and most intractable of the ‘works of the flesh.’” (Bruce)

Self-imposed religion is man reaching to God, trying to justify himself by keeping a list of rules. Christianity is God reaching down to man in love through Christ.

Lesson Summary

Our lives in Christ are not about dos and don'ts; they are about being in Christ. Therefore, we have no need for fear, condemnation, or to follow some ritual or tradition. There is no need to pass judgment upon others in matters that are trivial while we ignore much greater things to come. Nor are we to regulate others in what they should do while we refuse to know and practice the grace of our Lord. Our earthly plights are mere shadows to the things that will come and that are so much more important, for our completeness is in Christ alone. Our traditions and even well-meaning worship are only shadows of the Real Thing, our Lord Jesus Christ. We are connected to and are in Christ! Likewise, we must not allow others to defraud us of the Gospel with false ideas, mysticisms, and empty philosophies and teachings that lead to nowhere. We think these things are exciting, but they are, in fact, dangerous and unfulfilling. The greatest philosophies cannot match real true Truth; emptiness cannot fill our need for real spiritual nurture and nourishment that come from our Lord.

We can have assurance, confidence, strength, and nourishment in Christ, His presence, His work, and His precepts. No one can or should be able to sway us to believe otherwise. As Christ conquered sin on our behalf, we are to conquer our desires and thinking so they are in Christ and Him alone. He is the Head of the universe, the Church, and of our lives, so let us live our lives His way!

Sources

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