

“Freedom from the World”

Lesson Text: Colossians 2:16-23

Background Scripture: Colossians 2:6-23

Devotional Reading: Leviticus 25:8-17

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.

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To understand that we must not allow the world to affect our relationship with Christ.
- **Biblical Principle:** To know that true freedom can only come through Jesus Christ.
- **Daily Application:** To strive to live a life pleasing to God.

INTRODUCTION

Simple vs. Complex

I once owned a Buick LeSabre with power windows. Because of bad design or poor construction, every window of that vehicle required repair at some point. Either the windows wouldn’t lower, or they wouldn’t raise. After completing the first repair, I longed for previous models’ oldstyle, hand-crank windows. Those windows certainly didn’t break as often—or so I remembered. These power windows should have made life simpler; instead, they had done the opposite. I experienced more “difficulty and annoyance” because of those windows.

In today’s Scripture, false teachers in Colossae had been troubling Colossian believers by requiring additional practices for the people such as angel worship (2:18) and even false humility (2:23). These excessive requirements would have caused the Colossian believers to substitute man’s ideas for God’s truth. These false teachers weren’t merely “annoying” the apostle Paul and the Colossian believers; their false teachings had eternal ramifications!

LESSON CONTEXT

The apostle Paul wrote the epistle of Colossians in the first half of the A.D. 60s. The recipients of the epistle were a community of believers in Colossae (see Colossians 1:1–2), a city in modern-day Turkey.

Paul likely penned the letter while under arrest (see 4:3) in Rome (see Acts 28:16, 30). Paul intended the letter to encourage the Colossians (2:2–3) and address false teachings that had infiltrated the church (see 2:4–5).

This false teaching in Colossae was a syncretistic belief system (an attempted fusion of different systems of thought or belief) and was comprised of various elements from different religious and philosophical traditions that were not rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The false teaching likely included dietary restrictions, and the observance of holy days (2:16). However, other aspects of the false teaching, such as angel worship (2:18) and misdirected fasting (2:23), mirrored pagan philosophies and cults. Paul proclaimed this belief system “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition” (2:8). This belief system concerned Paul because it added requirements for believers beyond God’s work through Christ Jesus.

Colossians 1:15–22 and 2:6–15 feature Paul’s corrective to the Colossians regarding Christ’s preeminence. Christ has made believers complete (Colossians 2:9–10) and raised them to a new life (2:12–14). Further, He has triumphantly “disarmed the powers and authorities” (2:15). These other philosophies, beliefs, and practices had taken the Colossians spiritually captive. If they continued to follow the false teachings, they would essentially deny the power of Christ’s work.

Troubling Judgement: Colossians 2:16-19

Paul is encouraging the Colossians not to be enslaved by legalism, ritualism, rites, and ceremonies (“by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day”). A “shadow” is not the real thing. There is a difference between the shadow and the real physical matter of which a person consists. Shadows (symbols and types above) may stimulate thought, may awaken emotions, may convey divine truths, it may even strengthen faith; but beyond this they are meaningless and dangerous, and may replace the Living Christ. Why look at the shadow when we can look to Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith? These ceremonies are shadows, superseded, and should be abandoned. Since Christ has come, we no longer need the symbols (Hebrews 8:13; 10:1).

1. What did Paul say to the Colossians about being enslaved? (Colossians 2:16-17)

What Do You Think?

How do you evaluate the spiritual benefits of religious celebrations or observances?

Digging Deeper

How do you ensure that these events lead you closer to Christ and do not become an end to themselves?

The “things that were to come” (v. 17b of today’s lesson) is one way that Paul describes salvation in and through Christ Jesus (compare Galatians 4:4–5). Christ is the culmination of all requirements for salvation (see Romans 10:4). “Christ’s physical body through death” brings redemption to all people who believe in Him (Colossians 1:22). Salvation comes through faith in Christ’s merciful and generous giving of Himself (see Ephesians 2:8; Titus 3:5; etc.). Legalism on the other hand is the robber here, stealing your liberty in Christ and making you live by religious regulations instead of by God’s grace.

Paul commanded the Colossians to live with *humility* (see Colossians 3:12). However, the pagan teachers in Colossae had developed a false sense of humility. It is possible that Paul was referring to voluntary practices of self-denial, such as fasting. Jesus had warned His followers regarding people who make a public spectacle of their fasting (see Matthew 6:16). These displays revealed an insincere or misdirected sense of humility. Rather than showing humility, these false teachers had become hypocritical and prideful through their actions, expressed in “worship of angels,” and alleged visions (Colossians 2:18c). The false teachers in Colossae led people astray by claiming their experiences as evidence of their supposedly heightened spirituality.

2. What was Paul’s message to the Colossian church concerning false philosophy? (Colossians 2:18)

The comparison of the church as the “body” frequently occurs in Paul’s writings (examples: Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 4:14–16). He had also previously declared Christ as the “Head” of the church (Colossians 1:15–18; see Ephesians 1:22). If a body is cut off from the head, the body will die (in this case, spiritual decapitation). The Colossian church was on the verge of perishing if it did not maintain a connection with Christ (compare John 15:1–7). Christ supplies (1) unity, ex. being knitted “together by its ligaments and sinews;” and (2) growth, ex. “as God causes.” Spiritual death was certain if they were not rooted in Christ.

Each member of the church has a particular role and work, just as *ligaments and sinews* have in a human body. The church will increase in strength as its members abide in Christ (example: Acts 2:42–47).

3. How did Paul compare the Head to the body? (Colossians 2:19)

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to remove distractions and circumstances that detach you from a life with Christ?

Digging Deeper

How do your efforts contribute to your congregation’s connection to Christ?

Worldly Rules: Colossians 2:20–23

“The elemental spiritual forces of this world” refers to the forces—visible and invisible—that hold power in the world. These could include demonic forces, pagan philosophies, or rules of vanity regarding the consumption of food and drink. These forces are the “principalities and powers” (Colossians 2:15) that lead people to follow “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition” (2:8).

Although the Colossian believers lived in the world, they were not to partake in its behavior (verse 20b of today’s lesson). This manner of living described their old life. However, they were dead to that way of life. Instead, they had been raised into a new life with Christ through His death and resurrection (see Colossians 2:11–13). As a result of their new life, they would reorient their hearts toward heavenly things (see 3:1–3) and live as “the elect of God” (3:12–17).

Paul summarized the *rules* and commands of the false teachers. To “not handle! not taste! not touch!” (verse 21 of today’s lesson) are outward rules and regulations, of which the Christian stands liberated, but which were still a test of holiness in certain religious groups. To begin with, these rules did not come from God; they were the inventions of men (verse 22b of today’s lesson). God “provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17). God gave us these foods to be used, and they “perish with use” (verse 22a of today’s lesson). Jesus explained that food went into the stomach, not the heart (Mark 7:18). The man who refuses certain foods because they will defile him does not understand what either Jesus or Paul taught: “I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself” (Rom. 14:14).

4. What did the apostle Paul mean by “the elemental spiritual forces of this world” (Colossians 2:20–22)?

The false teachers in Colossae had “indeed” gave “an appearance of wisdom,” but in fact were hypocritical in *worship*, and mocked *humility*. These things didn’t have *any value* and could not prevent sinful desires.

5. What was the result of the false teachers trying to control the flesh through misdirected worship and self-denying practices? (Colossians 2:23)

What Do You Think?

In what ways can you glorify God with your body (see 1 Corinthians 6:20)?

Digging Deeper

Who will you recruit as an accountability partner in this regard (perhaps eating healthier, or getting more exercise)?

CONCLUSION

Seek the Head!

Some false teachers in Colossae had made the Christian life more complicated than what was required by God. They had added obligations beyond God's to the Colossian believers. We do not know why these teachers presented the Colossians with these things. The false teachers had forgotten or altogether disregarded the importance of a connection to Christ, the Head of the church. Instead of seeking life in Christ, they vainly sought wisdom through human regulations.

It can be tempting to believe that we don't add anything extra to our faith. Yet, the reality is that we often do. Sometimes, we set explicit or implicit rules on ourselves and, by extension, on other believers. Our observance of these rules or guidelines does not mean that our hearts are automatically more or less holy. But issues arise if we raise these rules to the same level as God's Word. We or other believers may be spiritually harmed.

We should carefully examine our behavior regarding such regulations. Ensure that you first maintain a relationship with Christ, the Head of the church. What, after all, can be added to the gospel of salvation through Christ? What more do we need? Only when we accept that Christ's work has accomplished what we needed for reconciliation can we be filled with His wisdom. Ask for the Spirit's guidance to discern whether you are following the world's wisdom or God's wisdom. At the Spirit's leading, we will be free to engage in practices that lead to the glory of God and the edification of other believers. Seek the Head! And heed the Spirit.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we want wisdom that only You can give. Soften our hearts so we can be attentive to the work of Your Spirit. Guide us to follow Your will. May we, as the body, always remain attached to Christ. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Spiritual life comes from Christ Jesus, the Head.