

From The Pulpit Of



No. 7
Series: Colossians

Finding True Freedom
Colossians 2:16-23

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Text

[16] Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. [17] These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. [18] Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, [19] and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

[20] If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—[21] “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” [22] (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? [23] These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Introduction

- Arouse Interest:
 - As my family was traveling back from Birmingham recently, we were listening to the audio version of the book *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck. After the Bible, *East of Eden* is my favorite book, and to be honest there is no real close third.¹
 - One of the fundamental themes of the book is whether or not any of us can truly be free. With all the forces at work around us and within us, can we really break free from the cycles of sin and trauma in the past and chart our own path in this world?
- Surface Need:
 - It's a very appropriate question for our day and age. In our world, it often seems like the most important thing everyone wants on all sides of our culture war is the freedom to do what we want and live how we choose.

¹ John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).

- And in light of our world, Christianity is often seen to be too legalistic and restrictive. The principles of the Bible seem to be holding us down rather than setting us free.
 - I understand the concern here. And at times, I myself sometimes feel that the Christian faith is nothing more than a straitjacket for the way I really want to live.
 - At the same time, I kinda think Christianity is often unfairly criticized. While it's true that Christians do have rules and standards for right conduct, there is a profound sense in which the Christian gospel actually sets us free. A way that Christ provides for his people the kind of freedom we've all been looking for.
- Orient to Text:
 - As we've been walking through Colossians, we've seen how Paul has been driving Christians to look to Christ and to avoid false teachings.
 - Last week, Paul made a positive argument for his case. Avoid false teaching because Jesus Christ really is that great. But this week in our passage, we're going to see Paul make the negative version of this argument, avoid false teaching because these false teachings really are just that terrible.
 - And in confronting these various false teachings, Paul again reminds the church of this important truth: ***Faith in Christ sets the Christian free!***
- Organizational Sentence:
 - As we look at our passage today, we're going to see two ways that faith in Christ sets the Christian free. In verses 16-19, we see that faith sets us free from faulty standards. Then in 20-23, we see that faith sets us free from fleeting values.

Faulty Standards (16-19)

- Now as I'm reading through this text trying to break it down and understand Paul's argument, I'm noticing a repetition of this word "Therefore" both here in verse 16 and earlier in verse 6.
- And this is a silly phrase, but it is useful. Anytime you see the word "Therefore" in the Bible, you ought to look a little earlier in the book and see what the word "Therefore" is there for.
- So when I look right above verse 6, I see in Colossians 1:24-2:5 this section where Paul is explaining the purpose of his ministry. Here in this section, Paul is talking about how he is struggling and suffering so that the Christians in Colossae might, as it says in 2:2, "reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding

and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

- And the reason he is striving so intensely is because in verse 4, there are false teachers that are seeking to delude them with plausible arguments. Seeking to steal them away from Christ.
- Therefore, in light of Paul's struggle, Paul exhorts the Christians there in verse 6 to press deeper into their faith in Christ. He tells them in this first "Therefore" of all the riches in Christ Jesus that Christians have received by faith. As Pastor Kevin broke down for us last week, in Christ, we have access to the presence of God. We've been given the power over sin. And we've been given a full pardon through the cross from all of sin's penalties.
- And Paul is emphatic on this point. Jesus is amazing, and you don't want to miss out on what he's done for you by being sucked in to empty human traditions.
- Well, if the first "Therefore" is meant to push Christians to appreciate Christ, this second "Therefore" that starts off our section is meant to remind God's people of just how empty these human traditions really are.
- First, Paul warns the church in Colossae that these vain philosophies and human traditions weigh us down with the faulty standards of other people.
- Notice this repetition of this phrase in verse 16 and 18. Let no one pass judgment on you. Verse 18, let no one disqualify you. Evidently, the Colossian church, by allowing these false teaching into their mind were slowly putting themselves under the condemnation of worldly judges.
- But what were they being judged for? Well it looks like they were being judged for not adhering to a certain form of rigid Judaism. In verse 16, it says that some of the Jewish leaders of the time were judging them for not adhering to the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. This is what is referred to here in where Paul writes of festival or new moon or a Sabbath.
 - Now this can get complicated really fast. I'm gonna try to keep this simple. Enoch helped point this out to me. When you see these three things paired together in the Old Testament, they generally refer to the ceremonial aspects of the law. These are the aspects of Jewish laws that revolve around temple sacrifices, dietary restrictions, and religious holidays.
 - In the Old Testament Prophets these are the laws the people of Israel are keeping in neglect of the weightier aspects of the law such as caring for the orphans and widows. You can see an example of this in Hosea 2:11.
 - And in the New Testament, these aspects of the law are said to be fulfilled in Christ and done away with. In the words of Paul here, these were shadows but the true substance of these things are in Jesus Christ himself.

- In other words, ceremonies like the Passover were small pictures in the Old Testament of the greater reality that was to come in the person of Jesus Christ. And with the coming of the greater reality, these Old Testament pictures no longer need to remain in the life of God's people.
 - Now, this is just a side tangent that I don't want to spend too much time on. But if I'm right in this conception of things, you can't necessarily use this verse to rule out any form of the Sabbath for Christians today. While this verse does say that the ceremonial Sabbath feast and festivals do go away, there is a good argument to be made that the moral Sabbath which is rooted in the Ten Commandments and in the creation account in Genesis 1 still applies in some sense to Christians today. I'm not gonna get into this because it's not really the main point of the argument of this passage, but if you want to talk with me about it, I'd love to have that conversation with you.
 - To wrap up this section here, the most important thing you and I need to wrestle with is that in this time, God's people were being judged by standards that God himself didn't set for them.
- Similarly, in verse 18, Paul warns the church,
 - *[18] Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,*
 - This phrase "worship of angels" here is a little tricky. It could mean these people were pressuring Christians to actually worship angels in some sense. But it could also mean that these false teachers were trying through their ascetic practices to transcend their bodies and have a spiritual vision of heaven where they would join the angels there in worshipping God.²
 - The details of the false teaching in Colossae isn't entirely clear. But what is clear is that in both cases God's people were pressured to conform to standards that God himself didn't set.

Application

- Now if you're here today and you are not a Christian, you might be thinking to yourself, this is exactly why I don't want to be a Christian. I don't want to be weighed down by a bunch of weird arbitrary rules.
- And friend, I understand. Between you and me, I don't want that either. And it bothers me that some Christians sometimes portray the Christian life that way.

² James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing ; Paternoster Press, 1996).

- But before we beat up on Christians too much here, can I challenge you today to just be a little self-reflective? Whoever you are, whatever kind of beliefs or community you come from, all of us are always placed under some kind of list of weird legalistic rules to follow.

Illustration

- I read a book recently by Byung-Chul Han called *The Burnout Society*. Han makes this claim that while in one sense people have a whole lot more freedom now than ever before, in another sense we all are placed under a whole lot more pressure than we ever were before.³
- There is this internal expectation that comes with this freedom. That in light of the possibilities, you and I ought to do everything we can to be our very best selves. If you really can work hard and be whoever you want to be, then wouldn't it make the most sense for you to be the best doctor? Or to be the best lawyer? Or to have the biggest business in your town?
- Shouldn't we all aim to be our very best selves? Wouldn't it be a shame if we came to the end of our lives realizing that we never truly lived up to all our potential?
- And the reality is, in this society of freedom; we are all kinda dying under the weight of our own impossible standards. Because no one can ever tell us whether or not we've done enough to live up to our "best self."
- And this is just one of the ways the world is constantly judging and condemning us.
- And although I'm ashamed to admit it, Christians do the same thing within our own church communities today. So many Christians today feel like to be the right kinds of Christians we need to vote the right way, send our kids to the right kinds of schools, or have the right kinds of religious experiences. And if that's what you think, I just gotta be honest here:
 - The Bible doesn't tell Christians who they should vote for. It gives you principles and values to guide you in your decision, but it doesn't tell you who to vote for.
 - The Bible doesn't tell you where you should send your kids to school. It tells parents to train up their children in the Lord, but it doesn't say whether we should educate them at home or in a Christian school or public school.
 - This one's a little weird, but I think it's here in verse 18. The Bible doesn't say what kinds of religious experiences ordinary Christians ought to have. Some of us might be more inclined toward the intellectual side of Christianity and some of us might be more emotional.

³ Byung-Chul Han and Erik Butler, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs, an imprint of Stanford University Press, 2015).

- Now to be clear, we need both kinds of people in the church, but neither one is necessarily better than the other. And just because you are inclined to one of these things doesn't necessarily mean that you are flourishing in the faith.
- What's the sign that we're really doing well and flourishing in the faith? What was it that these false teachers were missing out on in their asceticism and legalism? Well, it's right here in verse 19. They were not holding onto Christ their head in faith.
- Brothers and sisters, faith in Christ ought to set us free from all these games of who's better than whom. It ought to free us from worrying too much about how others judge us with faulty standards, because the one person whose judgment really matters has already accepted all those who trust in him.
- As we see in verse 14, Jesus Christ has canceled the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands through his own death on the cross. And because Christ has provided the perfect pardon for our sin and secured our acceptance before God, you and I don't really need to worry too much about who's doing better than whom.
- This is the beauty of the gospel. The good news of being clothed in the righteousness of Christ means that I can work my whole life as a faithful fry cook in McDonalds loving God and serving people in small ways and still hear on that last day "well done, my good and faithful servant!"
- It means that as a Christian in church, I don't need to compare myself either to the preacher in the pulpit or the parishioner whose been missing a couple Sundays.
 - I can serve my community without seeing the people I serve as somehow beneath me.
 - I can struggle with sin for the rest of my life and still know that even in the murky times, God himself sees and honors my sincere struggle to serve him.
- Friend, there is a freedom in Christ that this world can never offer you. It's the freedom that comes when you know that you are unconditionally loved and accepted by God not on the basis of anything you did but solely based on everything Christ himself has done for you. That's the kind of freedom that comes to those who hold onto Christ in faith.

Fleeting Values (20-23)

- Not only does Christ set us free from faulty standards, but as we'll see in the next portion of our text, faith in Christ also sets us free from the fleeting values of this world.
- Paul writes in Colossians 2:20-23:

- *[20] If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—[21] “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” [22] (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? [23] These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*
- Again as we can see here, Paul is tackling these ceremonial regulations that have to do with eating and drinking. But this time, he gets at this with a different argument.
- Now to get at what Paul means here, we need to talk a little bit here about what Paul means when he talks about the indulgence of the flesh. Why does Paul say here that the discipline of our bodies would have no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh?
- Well that’s because when Paul talks about the flesh, he isn’t normally talking about our actual physical flesh. Normally, when Paul talks about the flesh, he’s talking about this present age we live in where the powers of sin and the flesh are manifest. And this is often contrasted in Paul with the age of the Spirit which is to come when the reign of God will be fully manifest in this world. You can see how Paul contrasts flesh and Spirit in Romans 8.
- Now this is tricky, but look at how Paul situates Christians who have placed their faith in Christ in verse 20. According to Paul, if you are united to Christ by faith, then there’s a very real sense that when Christ died on the cross, you died with him.
- This is a mysterious Pauline teaching known as union with Christ. It’s the idea that in a similar way that two people become one in marriage, Jesus Christ himself becomes one with his church. That we are so intimately tied to Christ that all the penalties of our sin go to him, and all the benefits of his righteousness come to us when we hold onto him in faith. This is why Jesus is described in verse 19 as the head from which we his body derive all our spiritual nourishment.
- But if that’s the case, if Christians truly have died to the things of this world, then according to Paul, we shouldn’t keep living as if this world is our home.
- Look at chapter 3:1:
 - *[1] If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [2] Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*

Illustration

- I remember one summer in college, I got to go on a trip to Europe, and one of the places we visited was the Czech Republic. It’s a beautiful European country. But it’s been marred by a lot of corruption, and the currency of the Czech Republic is

not worth very much. I think currently one Koruna is the equivalent of an American nickel.

- I remember the Koruna very well, because when I was in Prague, I needed to get some cash, and I accidentally converted almost all of my money to Korunas. And due to the nature of the situation, the people of Prague were somewhat reluctant to exchange my money back to US dollars after that.
- I was left with a currency that was going to be useless when I finally came back home. Fortunately, my friends helped me out, and I became the de facto ATM machine for everyone that needed to exchange money while we were in the Czech Republic.

Application

- Now what's the point? In the same way that it would have been foolish for me to invest in the currency of a country I wasn't even planning on living in, Paul argues here that it's actually a little foolish for Christians to invest so much in a world that were not planning on being in for very long.
- And this is really the heart of the problem with the way that these spiritual disciplines were presented. As Paul says in verse 23,
 - *[23] These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*
- In other words, they made you look good right now, but they're not going to do you a whole lot of good for your eternal home.
- And even though you and I don't struggle in the exact same way that these Christians were struggling, we still feel that tension don't we? To invest in the things of this life more than in the things of the next life.
 - Friends, let's just take an honest assessment of ourselves this morning. How many of us spent the majority of the week stressing more about our finances than we did thinking about investing in the eternal rewards of heaven?
 - How many of us are more willing to sacrifice for our children's school evaluation than with the evaluation they will receive from God in eternity?
 - How often are our actions motivated more by what others around us think of us than by what God himself thinks of what we are doing?
 - Brothers and sisters, how much time are we investing in this life versus the next life? And given how much time we will spend here versus there can we say that we've made a wise investment of our time money and resources?

- These are hard things to think about. But at the same time, this kind of perspective we receive by faith also in a weird way sets us free from the fleeting values of this world.
- Sure, as Christians we might not be liked very much in this life. But what does that matter when we'll be spending our eternal life within the everlasting love of God?
- We might not have a whole lot to our names here, but there Paul says that we all will be seated with Christ at the right hand of God!
- And while there may be suffering for us now, it's not so bad when we know that our eternal comfort in Christ is secured for us then.
- And this is the kind of freedom that I don't want any of you to lose. Friends, it is so easy in this life to lose sight of Christ and what he's done for you. Even if you are a Christian today, the world is pretty good at getting to spend all of your time and focus thinking about faulty standards and fleeting values.
- That's why Paul was so adamantly dogmatic about clinging to Jesus Christ in verse 6.
 - *[6] Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, [7] rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*
- And in this sense if you're doing the Christian life right, fasting not to show off but to earnestly seek the face of Christ, serving not to be great but to love those Christ has given you to love, spending time with Jesus and cultivating your relationship with him, friends, if you're doing the Christian life like that, then you suddenly find out that the Christian life isn't restrictive.
- No it's the most freeing life you can live. It frees you from the faulty standards of this world. It frees you from your enslavement to fleeting values. And it frees you to truly love Jesus, not because you need to earn his acceptance, but because you already have it!