

Study in Colossians

Session 5

In the last session covering Colossians 2:8-15 we saw Paul lay down the absolute completeness and sufficiency of Christ. Now based upon those truths, he launches into an attack on the errors of legalism, angel worship and asceticism and how they undermine the believer's freedom in Christ. This section, Colossians 2:16-23, shows the practical outworking of the truths presented earlier in Colossians - mainly the sufficiency of Christ alone for to meet all our needs.

I. The error of legalism [Read Colossians 2:16-17]

A. The false teachers at Colossae laid down rigid restrictions regarding eating and drinking and observing the religious calendar.

1. The "therefore" at the beginning of v.16 shows that this thought (and those that follow in this section) are tied to what just came before this in chapter 2. Since Christ is sufficient for our salvation and since He makes us complete, these following statements are also true.

2. "act as judge"

a. This verb is present active which means it is on-going and it is imperative meaning it is a command by Paul to the Colossian believers.

b. It is a word used in legal settings which can mean to sue, to put on trial, to pass judgment, to condemn or to decide a matter.

c. With the tense, it is a command to not habitually act as your judge in the following matters of ritualistic religion. There were the Gnostics (as well as Pharisees, not in Colossae but elsewhere who were guilty of this behavior as well) who the Christians were allowing to act as judges over their observance of various religious practices and rituals. The Christians are to NOT accept their judgment on such matters. No one is to judge their standing before God based on the following matters (or any matters apart from Christ).

3. The areas Paul mentions are food, drink or traditional religious festivals or other observances such as a New Moon or Sabbath day. In other words, the Mosaic Law and the other religious rituals advocated by the Gnostics was not necessary for the Colossian Christians' life in Christ. Since He was sufficient, what one ate, what one drank or what event one participated in did not affect his standing before God.

a. Notice that one of these is the Sabbath. In the Old Testament under the Law there were strict guidelines on how the Sabbath was to be observed weekly. However, in Christ, the Law was fulfilled and the strict observance of the Sabbath is no longer a legal requirement.

b. In fact, in the New Testament, observing the Sabbath is the only one of the Ten Commandments which was not repeated as something God expected His people to follow and in fact, Jesus went out of His way to "work" and thus "break" the Sabbath at just about every turn.

4. It is important to discuss our freedom in Christ at this juncture because Paul discusses it in a very different light than in other places in his writings.

a. Elsewhere in his writings Paul insists that under some circumstances Christian freedom should be voluntarily limited by one's respect for another believer's tender conscience and love for this other believer who has the weaker conscience. (Romans 14, I Corinthians 8-10). This caution is necessary for those inclined to assert their liberty regardless of the damage their actions might bring on another person. It's not loving or seeking the maturation of the other

in their faith.

b. However, in this passage, it is precisely Christian liberty which must be asserted in the face of superficial and unmerited attempts to undermine their freedom in Christ. The very act of not expressing and living out their liberties in Christ would lead them to be living in heresy. There are thus times when the Christian must express or live out his freedom in Christ to remain true to Christ.

Q: What are some of the times in our day and age when we MUST live out our freedom in Christ to remain true to the Lord?

c. It is a spiritually mature believer who knows the difference between the time he should refrain from exercising a Christian liberty and a time when he needs to exercise it. The main thrust of Paul's statement is that no one should be permitted to make matters of eating, drinking and keeping religious regulations as a test for one's piety or fellowship.

d. I like the way one commentator put it, *"Christianity is too free and exuberant to be trained down to 'times and seasons'... It's feasts are daily, for every day is holy; its moon never wanes, and its serene tranquility is an unbroken Sabbath."*

B. Paul then goes on to expound on the problem of elevating legalistic practices above Christ. (v. 17) He uses two words to make the distinction between fake and real - shadow and substance.

1. "Shadow" - the dark shape of something blocking the sunlight. A shadow has no reality and even shifts in time. It is dependent upon the position of the earth to the sun to determine its length and thus how closely it matches the object casting the shadow.

2. "Substance" - this word actually is the word for "body". It is what is real, not just an image or projection of what is real. In this verse, Paul leaves no room for doubt as to what is real - it is Christ and those things that belong to Him.

3. All the elements of the Law were merely shadows of the good things to come in Christ. [Hebrews 8:1-6]. In fact, now to keep the legalistic requirements around and attempt to observe them only complicate and obscure the spiritual reality that belong to Christ and all He is and has done for us.

4. H.C.G. Moule wrote, *"an appeal for Christian liberty, as earnest .. as Paul's appeal to the Galatians 'not to be entangled again in the yoke of bondage' But let us note well that the 'liberty' he means is the very opposite of license and has nothing in the world akin to the miserable individualism whose highest ambition is to do just what it likes. The whole aim of Paul is for the fullest, deepest, and most watchful holiness. He wants his Colossian converts above all things to be holy; that is, to live a life yielded all through to their Redeemer, who is also their Master."*

Q: What are some examples of the "shadows" of religion obscuring the reality of the Christian faith today?

Q: Why do you think it is easier for people to adhere to the shadows of religion rather than to Christ?

II. The error of angel worship [Read Colossians 2:18-19]

A. This next warning from Paul starts off with a phrase that is hotly debated as to the exact meaning but in reality, everyone is pretty much on the same page. This deals with “Let no one keep defrauding you”. The technical meaning is to act as an umpire against someone. Like an umpire that calls a batter out or calls a wrestler pinned. What Paul is getting at here is the idea of not letting anyone deny your claim to be a Christian based upon your lack of a certain experience.

1. Those that seek to act as umpires against the Colossian believers are those who delight in false humility or NASB - self-abasement and worship of angels.

a. The “false humility” - literally means “finding pleasure in humility”. These are things that lead one to appear humble yet without a truly humble heart. It is a mock humility.

b. The worship of angels is a reference to the entire Gnostic system of spirit-being hierarchy. The false teachers were pressing and insisting the true followers worship the angels and lesser gods rather than the one true God. This is because these lesser spiritual beings were seen as the appropriate intercessors for humans, who were sufficiently humble outwardly. Appealing directly to the throne of grace would have been unthinkable to these Gnostics.

c. “taking his stand” - means to “set foot upon” This is a quote from the Gnostic book of rituals in that is the very phrase the heretical teachers used to describe an initiate or new followers upon coming into their version of the faith - of having received and accepted their “truths”. They claim to see visions and thus it inflates their pride wildly. **[Matthew 23:15]**

Q: Do you see this behavior (false humility, angel worship, reliance upon visions for truth) today? If so, where?

Q: Why do some religions worship angels and “saints” instead of God Himself?

2. The problem is these false teachers lack the vital connection to Jesus Christ, the head of the body. Since Jesus is what supports and matures His body and they have no connection to Him, they are lost and spiritually dead. They have no spiritual energy or life when it comes down to it. Their pride in the above stated matters disqualifies them from coming to a saving knowledge of Christ. Thus there is now way they can contribute to the spiritual growth of the genuine church body. **[John 9:35-41]**

III. The error of asceticism [Read Colossians 2:20-23]

A. Asceticism is the belief that harsh treatment of the body and denial of worldly comforts will lead to righteousness before God. It is completely false. However, this was a major component of the teaching of the Gnostic heresy at Colossae. To get the deeper meaning of v.20, which is the gateway verse to this section, you have to go back to 2:12 when Paul likened our baptism in Christ to our co-death with Him.

1. “died with Christ” - this is the reference to baptism from v.12. Died is in the aorist tense pointing that the time of the believers death was accomplished in the past but that death still have implications for their lives now. Or at least it should. That death provided the means of change or escape from the elementary principles of this world.

2. Christians have died to the elementary principles of the world - same word as in 2:8 - rudiments of how the world works.

3. Thus, since Christians have come through baptism to the other side (out of

death into life) why would they return to the “death” side of baptism and live there? They are now alive in Christ and should live in the land of the living God - not the dead sinner where the elementary principles of the world still apply and are active.

4. Then Paul rebukes the Colossians. “*why....do you submit yourself to decrees...*” (v.20). The word for decrees is “dogma”. Paul wants to know why these believers are dogmatizing themselves after being liberated from sin and the world through their union with Christ. They are free from the rules and rituals of hollow and useless religion, why go back?

5. Then Paul lists a few of these decrees which the Gnostics are pushing for the Christians to live by in order to satisfy their system of faith. The Gnostics made piety hinge on outward observances and rules instead of inward conviction and principle.

a. “do not handle” and “do not touch” - these two mean the same thing in essence.

b. “do not taste” - don’t eat it

c. In other words keeping the dietary restrictions and outward prohibitions of maintaining appropriate distance from some things and people led them to believe that was a means of salvation. The way this is worded may be Paul making fun of the Gnostics and their rigid rules.

d. The deal is that these things all perish with the using. Food quits being food once it is eaten. It has no eternal or moral value. Coming into contact with someone or something has no eternal consequence to the person. v.22 - “perish” means to decay or decompose with the use.

e. In Christ, all food was declared clean. In Christ, all people were declared clean. He alone is the source of salvation and wholeness - not the rules. These rules which are strictly human in nature, have no value in a person relating to the Living God.

B. [v. 23] While the ascetic rules masqueraded as wisdom and on the surface appear to be reasonable yet it is only in appearance that they are anything at all. It is nothing but pretense.

1. “self-made religion” - this is another word that Paul coined. It is similar to the voluntary worship of angels from v.18 but a slightly different form. It is found nowhere else in Greek literature. It literally means “self-willed” - or brought into existence by oneself - completely from the act of human imagination and ingenuity - there is nothing divine to it at all.

2. “no value” - means no honor or prize associated with it. In other words, these things gets one nothing with God. In addition to this, they also don’t do anything in stemming the flesh. Fleshly indulgence is not stifled by this behavior at all thus the Spirit of God is not in these activities. They don’t lead a person to Christ but rather attempt to get them to continue trusting in themselves.

3. So while the ascetic way teaching and life appeared to be wise and righteous to the those in the world, it was completely ineffective and without value and merit in God’s eyes. The Christian life is not a life of prescriptions but rather a living relationship with Jesus Christ. The true controls of the Christian life spring from within the Christian in the confines of his relationship with the Lord and not through any written code. **[II Corinthians 4:5-6]**

Any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?