

## Colossians 2:16-3:5

Much of the first two chapters of Colossians focuses on what has happened in the spiritual realm. It's a lot of past tense language about what Christ has done for the believer ("rescued," "raised up with him," etc.). Paul's basic thrust is, "See how great Jesus is. And how great your salvation is."

With this passage, however, Paul begins to turn the focus on the believer's present. Notice, though, that this only comes after clear outline of who Christ is and what the Gospel means to the Colossians. We turn our eyes to the present in light of what Jesus has already done. We are defined by Jesus and his actions. Ignore spiritual sounding rules and hold to Christ; focus on him and the things above.

**Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day –things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.**

Remember that this "therefore" refers back to verses 14-15, in which Jesus cancels our debt on the cross and triumphs over all authorities. In light of that, Paul writes, don't get tied down in these ticky-tack rules. Some of these may be tied to old Jewish laws (e.g. Sabbath days) while others are more paganistic (new moon festivals may be akin to modern to horoscope, that is, searching the stars for answers). Food and drink are just every day practices.

In any event, the Colossians are already justified. No one should judge them and tell them they need something else to make themselves acceptable to God. These practices are merely the shadow of the real person, Christ. Even good practices that are from the Old Testament derive their value from their association with the substance, Christ. One does not hug a shadow but the person. In the same way, our spiritual vitality and our salvation come from Christ and not the following of rules. Therefore, live in a way that honors Christ, and ignore the judgment of others who think you need something else.

Note, however, that the constant call of Scripture is for the more mature to deny freedom on behalf of the less mature. In other words, if someone is looking down on you (as is the case here), do not let them and clarify your freedom. But if someone is looking *up* to you (as is the case in 1 Corinthians 8), you give up your liberty. The voluntary gift, rather than the requirement, is what displays the heart.

**Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.**

You can hear Paul's heart here, "You've won the prize! You have relationship with God through Christ! Please don't be deceived out of enjoying your prize." And what can deceive you? Individuals who delight in self-abasement (punishing/humiliating oneself) or exalt angels or visions.

At its heart, these dangerous teaching exalts subjective experience. Any teaching that exalts a spiritual "experience" over the person and work of Christ ("the head") defrauds people of the true Gospel. This danger is present today as well, as many churches tell people to look for mystical experiences (visions, new and personal words from God, spiritual "feelings"), and even state that one cannot fully know Christ without these experiences.

Spiritual experiences are legitimate (e.g. Joel 2:28 or Muslims coming to faith in Christ through dreams), but they come to produce change and repentance and never come to the detriment of Scriptural truth. One pastor said, "Don't wait for some spiritual revelation while you neglect Scripture, the spiritual revelation God has already given." So many Christians today (and 2,000 years ago, we see here) are

robbed of spiritual vitality because they are always looking forward to some new experience rather than looking back to what Christ has done and promised.

What a dangerous heresy this experience-based spirituality is, for we come to the throne of God based on Christ's work and not based on any experience we have. The statement that in order to please God we know Christ+\_\_\_\_\_ denies the total sufficiency Christ has and offers. It is building up idols, other high places to worship at in addition to the true temple (to use the Old Testament analogy).

Ultimately, this religion is man-made (see verse 23 below). Our religion becomes subjective rather than objective and focused on ourselves rather than on Christ, the head. Consequently, it is an issue of pride (the root of all sin), and we are ultimately worshipping ourselves. For this reason, Paul refers to the mind becoming "inflated." And instead of puffing ourselves up, we need true growth, which comes from God, spurred by our humble faith in Him. The antidote to pride is becoming consumed with Christ, for we will become humble in light of his glory.

**If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.**

The previous section emphasizes the exaltation of spiritual experiences, whereas this section emphasizes the place of human rules. The elementary principles exalt rules and legalism. Some people say that it takes Christ plus spiritual experiences to please God. Others say Christ but doing the right actions. Paul, however, says that it is only Christ that pleases God and reconciles us to Him. Again, Paul's line of argument is based in the Gospel. "If you have died with Christ, why....?"

Notice the statement "as if you were living in the world." The citizenship of believers is not in this world; we have in fact "died with Christ" to this world. (C.f. Colossians 2:8, where Paul calls the believer to live according to Christ, rather than the world).

Paul also gives a new reason that legalism falls short—it doesn't work. Rules and regulations have the appearance of wisdom, but ultimately, they cannot overcome the flesh. Flesh cannot overcome flesh. You can refuse to indulge your flesh in one area perhaps, but it will only seek (and receive) indulgence in another area. The great example here is Martin Luther, who tried for decades to justify himself before God with his actions but was overwhelmed with shame and guilt because he could never stop sinning completely. The only way that the flesh can be defeated is by acting out your life with Christ, which is common sense now that you have died with him.

It seems wise to tell individuals to follow a set of rules, but we should be reminding them that they need a new heart and a new life. The rules listed in this section in particular remind the reader of the Pharisees (c.f. Mark 7:1-23). Rules and disciplines have their place, but that place is in response to the new life God has given, direction for our new heart, rather than a replacement for it. Paul deals with these themes at more length in Galatians. "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1)

**Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.**

Here is one more astounding statement of the reality of the believer—the believer's life is "hidden with Christ in God." Through his death, Christ offers himself, that is, allows us to be unified to him, welcomes us into to his body. As believers, we've taken part in that death and new life with Christ. Paul is saying this as many different ways as he can—"You have died. You are alive because of and in Christ. Now act

like it!" Here in 3:1 and earlier in 2:20, he uses a logical construction: "If you have \_\_\_\_\_, then \_\_\_\_\_." After we identify ourselves with Christ, our actions change.

Paul also makes a statement here about the eternal security of the believer. Our life is hidden with Christ, and we are secure so long as Jesus, our great high priest and intercessor lives before the throne of God (c.f. Hebrews 7:25). Nothing can steal us from his grip (c.f. John 6:35-40). What incredible assurance there is in that statement!

In light of all this, Paul says, seek the things that are above, reemphasizing the "as if you were living in the world" fallacy of 2:20. The things above are the Kingdom of God—seek to see God's Kingdom come, His rule displayed. In addition, set your mind on those things. Meditate on God, His work, His character, and Christ's coming in glory. As the old hymn says, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace."

## Sample Study Outline

- I. Pray
- II. Context—Who is Paul? Who are the Colossians? What have they been talking about?
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
  - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
  - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
  - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
  - d. Paul says rules are the shadow, but the substance belongs to Christ. The substance of what?
  - e. What is the prize that we can be defrauded of? What would defraud us?
  - f. Have you ever known anyone who inflates themselves because of their spiritual experiences? What does that look like?
  - g. What does it mean to have your life hidden with Christ?
- V. Application Questions
  - a. What are spiritual experiences that we can exult over Christ?
  - b. What are spiritual rules that we exult over Christ? Rules that you submit yourself to as if you were living in the world?
  - c. How can you improve the diligence with which you set your minds on things above?
  - d. Is there an area where you've tried to change yourself through the power of the flesh instead of throwing yourself on Christ?
  - e. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is...
  - a. Rely on Christ
    - i. Not spiritual experiences
    - ii. Not legalism
  - b. You're identified with Christ
    - i. Eternal security
    - ii. Set your mind there
- VIII. Pray