

Colossians 2 pt. 3 v.18-23

Continuing on in Colossians we see that Paul advances his assault against legalism -- a strict adherence to a set of rules, meant to convey a sense of moral goodness or religious superiority; reminding the Colossians that they should remain firmly focused on Jesus Christ, connected to Him as the Head, and not dissuaded by any person or outside influence that would try to convince them otherwise.

V.18 - is a parallel thought to v. 16. In v.16 Paul writes, “***Let no one judge you...***”

Giving the sense that the Colossian church was dealing with some faction of judgmental believers who sought a high-position from where they could look down on Christ’s Body and cast their judgments and condemnations about what people were eating and drinking and what holiday’s people were keeping or not keeping, and so forth.

Now in v.18 Paul writes, “***Let no one cheat you...***”

Before we go any further we must acknowledge the difficulty with what is before us. Douglas Moo suggests that v.18 is “...arguably the most difficult verse in Colossians to interpret.”¹

A brief examination of the translational differences between the popular Bible versions of today is sufficient to demonstrate that point:

NKJV Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

KJV 1900 Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

ESV 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,

NASB95 Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels,

¹Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 224.

taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,

NIV 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.

NLT Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud,

The Message Don't tolerate people who try to run your life, ordering you to bow and scrape, insisting that you join their obsession with angels and that you seek out visions. They're a lot of hot air, that's all they are.

The basic cause for these translational differences is found in the Greek text, which uses a term that indicates someone standing as a false referee or judge among and over the Colossian

believers.^{[2][3][4]} So the various translators have chosen several different, albeit inter-related, ways of communicating that sense.

The basic notion is this: Don't let anyone who is making a big show about how spiritual they are, how humble they are, and going on and on about all of their quasi-spiritual experiences and religious practices cheat you, beguile you, disqualify you, defraud you, condemn you, or run your life. All of their supposed, inside knowledge is an indication of their big fat heads! You already have the treasure! You are already part of the kingdom so turn away from the knock off, cheap substitute, that false teachers and legalists are pushing as a more superior way of discipleship.⁵

John Calvin remarked about this passage, “all those who draw us aside from the simplicity of Christ cheat us out of the prize of our high calling.”⁶

² Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 67.

³“καταβραβεύω: to judge as a referee that someone is not worthy to receive a prize—‘to disqualify, to condemn, to judge as not worthy of a reward, to deprive of a reward.’ μηδεις υμας καταβραβευετω ‘let no one disqualify you’ or ‘let no one judge that you should not receive the prize’ Col 2:18.” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 364.

⁴ “καταβραβεύω...‘decide against’ (as umpire), and so rob of a prize, condemn”William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 515.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 117–118.

⁶ John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 194.

V.19 - Paul describes how such people, who arrogantly presume to take the position of a referee within the Body of Christ, arrived at their current position -- they let go of the Head, Jesus.

They became disconnected from Christ by chasing after all of those things that they are now found to be forcing upon other Christians.

This is a very real danger for all believers -- to become disconnected from the Head, to leave the rich simplicity of Christ, for other things that are ostensibly connected to the gospel but are really, "a shadow of things to come" (v.17) or worse, outright lies. Many saints over the generations have fallen victim to this trap.

On the night of His betrayal Jesus taught the Disciples, an important truth that we need to be reminded of from time to time:

[Jhn 15:5-6 NKJV] 5 "I am the vine, you [are] the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. 6 "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast

out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw [them] into the fire, and they are burned.”

It appears that in Colossae people were moving in the church who thought they were the vine, but really they were just a bunch of dead branches only fit for the woodpile.

Furthermore, we see that Jesus as the Head causes nourishment, unity, connectedness, and growth in accordance with God’s will.

There is an important point of application here for those who would seek to grow in their discipleship and in maturity -- growth comes through remaining connected to Christ and brings about all of those things that we long for in the ideal church.

In a lovely reminder of what we grow into Paul addressed the Ephesians, writing:

[Eph 4:13-15 NKJV] “13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and **of the knowledge of the Son of God**, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature **of the fullness of Christ**; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning

craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, **may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ--**”

So then, we see that, as Christians grow and mature we become more and more focused on Christ, and more and more LIKE Christ.

The mark of the maturing Christian isn't found anywhere else outside of a resemblance to Jesus Christ. And, as we grow we cause growth in one another, we build each other up...because that's the nature and heart of Jesus. It's all so natural when we remain focused on the Lord Jesus.

We shed those immature childish doctrines of men, and come to rest in Jesus.

V.20-22 Paul challenges the Colossians on any sort of submission to, or participation in, any type of syncretistic religion that would put them into bondage by those things that they have once and for all been delivered from through Jesus.

The statement “**IF** you died with Christ...” is not an indication of uncertainty.⁷ The matter has been settled in Col 2:11-14 where

⁷ This may be a good example of a 'First Class Conditional Indicative' -- “This is the use of the indicative in the protasis of conditional sentences. The conditional element is made explicit with the particle εἰ. This is a relatively common usage of the indicative, though much more so with the first class condition (over 300 instances) than with

Paul assesses their condition, noting that they WERE buried with Christ in baptism and raised with Christ through faith in the working of God. AND, that in their current resurrection state, with Christ, there is no longer a list of ordinances, debts, or requirements against them because Jesus Christ has removed it at Calvary.

So then, v.20 communicates the idea: **SINCE** you died with Christ (as the NIV translates)...why are you allowing yourselves to be manipulated by these false judges and referees into participating in vain religious regulations based in worldly wisdom.

While we may take it for granted, the simple idea that the gospel is about Jesus Christ alone and no other stack of outward requirements, is sometimes an earth-shattering revelation for new believers!

Some Christians pay lip-service to this idea even while denying it in everyday life. Some Christians don't even go that far and profess to have found a "better way" to be a Christian, while piling all sorts of extra-biblical requirements onto those dear souls who

the second (less than 50 examples). The first class condition indicates the assumption of truth for the sake of argument, while the second class condition indicates the assumption of an untruth for the sake of argument." Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 450.

in a moment of faith, dared call on the Lord Jesus, hoping that they would find something they had never experienced...true freedom.

Unfortunately our modern era of discipleship shares much in common with the Pharisees of Jesus' day.

[Mat 23:13, 15 NLT] 13 "What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces. You won't go in yourselves, and you don't let others enter either. ... 15 "What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are!

V.21-22 lays out exactly the type of man-made traditions and religious requirements that people think make for a "more superior" Christian and even a "more superior" person.

Don't touch, Don't taste, Don't handle

Naturally this reminds us of the Jewish dietary laws that were important to distinguishing the “otherness” or “separateness” of the Jewish people.

Given that we live in an age where most Christians don't have a Jewish heritage -- which is the opposite of the first Christians in and around Jerusalem -- It is sometimes difficult for us to imagine these customs creeping into our modern churches. But, the NT presents the temptation toward religious rigidity, as a very real and present threat.

This is the basis of legalism, a draw toward the measurably, demonstrably holy. And, while we may amend the playbook from time to time to fit our cultural context, the basic tenets of guilt, control, and power over others remain the same.

One clever illustration demonstrates the absurdity of legalism:

“During the afternoon, I asked Dr. Klausner (professor in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem) if he would sign my autograph album to which he replied, “No, I am sorry; but it is the Sabbath.” I did not know until I made inquiry that night that the Talmud

asserts that writing two words in succession is work, and if a man even signs his name on the Sabbath he has broken the Law.

As those of us gathered in his study discussing one subject after another, Dr. Klausner would climb a little stepladder and bring down some heavy tome from his shelves, open it, point to some relevant passage, then return the book and soon take down another. The Talmud says nothing about bringing down books from shelves as work—to write two words would be labor, but to develop a perspiration by reaching up for volumes and vigorously discussing them is not work!

This is a perfect illustration of what our Lord meant when he talked about his contemporaries “holding the tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:3). —Dr. Wilbur M. Smith”⁸ [one of the founders of Fuller Theological Seminary]

And another, “A pastor discovered one Sunday morning that the roads were blocked and the only way he could reach church was to skate on the river, which he did. When he arrived the elders of the church were horrified that their preacher should skate on the Sabbath. After service they had a meeting and he explained that it was either to skate or not to get there. Finally one asked: “Did you

⁸ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 726.

enjoy it?” When the young man said no, they decided it was all right.”⁹

Many of our modern churches have just as many extra-biblical prohibitions that we teach as essential or, at the very least, evidence of salvation. Most of which are generally identifiable externally - ignoring the state of the heart.

Paul writes about the real danger that will come upon the churches in the latter times:

[1Ti 4:1-5 NKJV] 1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, 3 forbidding to marry, [and commanding] to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. 4 For every creature of God [is] good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; 5 for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

⁹ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 726.

Sadly, not a few of us can bring to mind several examples that fit Paul's warning.

But take heart. We are free in Christ! Or, as Paul so plainly states to the Galatians: [Gal 5:1 NKJV] 1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

V.23 - We find here that the issues of legalism (adhering to a contrived code of religious observance by compulsion) continues to assail the saints exactly because they PROJECT AN APPEARANCE OF WISDOM, and so take on a certain weight of theological rightness even though such prohibitions may in fact be matters of conscience or considered as "disputable" matters.

D.A. Carson wrote a tremendous article for *Themelios* outlining the ebb and flow of "disputable matters," noting:

"...Immediately...we recognize that some things that were thought theologically indisputable in the past have become disputable. Paedobaptism was at one time judged in some circles to be so indisputably right that Anabaptists could be drowned with a clear conscience:

if they wanted to be immersed, let us grant them their wish. Until the last three or four decades, going to movies and drinking alcohol was prohibited in the majority of American evangelical circles: the prohibition, in such circles, was indisputable. Nowadays most evangelicals view such prohibitions as archaic at best, displaced by a neat transfer to the theologically disputable column...Moreover, some things can cross the indisputable/disputable divide the other way. For example, in the past many Christians judged smoking to fall among the adiaphora [indifferent/disputable things], but their number has considerably shrunk. Scientifically demonstrable health issues tied to smoking, reinforced by a well-embroidered theology of the body, has ensured that for most Christians smoking is indisputably a no-no.”¹⁰

The line of thinking goes something like this: since it may be wise to abstain from alcohol and nicotine then we should tie that to our theology. But remember, loved one, Jesus PLUS ANYTHING ELSE EQUALS NOTHING. We are saved by Christ alone in the midst of our wretchedness and not because we deserved it. No

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, “Editorial: On Disputable Matters,” *Themelios* 40, no. 3 (2015): 383.

number of behaviors that we abstain from and no amount of things that we do has the power to commend us to God - save the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

People will always endeavor to make a good show in the flesh, so that they may boast in their own works, their own demonstrable self-righteousness. False believers will always feign humility to curry favor and position.

True believers will remain firmly anchored in Christ, boasting in His flesh, adopting His humility -- a humility that demonstrates the grace of God extended to wretched sinners who are made in His image, and re-made in His image upon coming to Jesus.

No matter how long we are able to keep up the ruse of self-imposed asceticism, and false humility, eventually our flesh will fail us and we will meet our undealt with sin and our own weaknesses face to face. In those moments we come face to face with our desperate need for Jesus.

Amazingly, He is there for us in those moments that are often corrupted by filth and wickedness.

AND, remarkably, sometimes those failure moments are the most formative for believers - to finally come to a position of total reliance on Christ aside from our carefully fabricated routines, rules, and religion.

In those moments we agree with Paul that it is better to have “no confidence in the flesh, worship God in the Spirit and rejoice in Christ,” and so truly prove to be God’s people as He makes us into His likeness. (Phil 3:3)

Not a few new believers, having come joyfully and hopefully to the cross of Christ have been crushed by the ensuing weight of “dos and don’ts” pressed upon them by “well meaning” disciple makers. May God forgive us for that. May we present to the world the gospel in its purity, simplicity, and freedom and the promises thereof.

Christ has made you free. Be free.