

Paul's Letter to the

COLOSSIANS

LESSON 5 COLOSSIANS 2:16-23

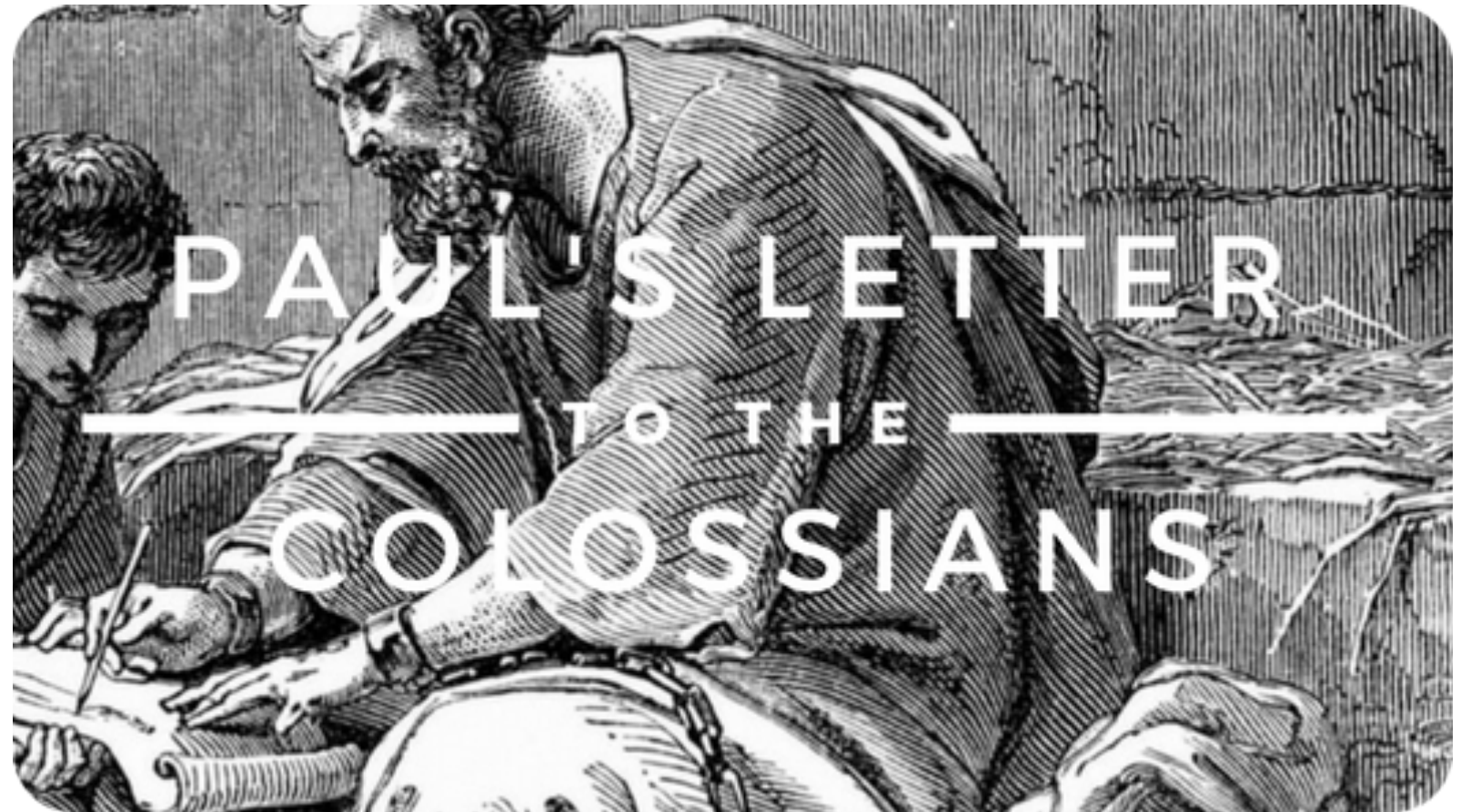
OVERVIEW | COLOSSIANS 2:16-23

Last week we saw that the main point of 2:6-15 is that believers should live (“walk”) only on the basis of faith in Christ and not by anything else. Here the Christian life is described as walking in Christ – rooted in Christ, built up in him, and established in the faith (2:6-7). Walking in Christ means that we look to him in all things. Every decision we make, every thought, every choice should be rooted in the love of Jesus Christ.

When we make Christ first in our lives, we make his story our story. And we aren’t called to do this alone! Notice how often Paul uses the words “with Christ” or “with him”:

- **2:12:** “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith”
- **2:13:** “You, who were dead God made alive together with him”
- **2:20:** “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?”
- **3:1:** “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is”
- **3:3:** “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”
- **3:4:** “When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

This new reality of our relationship with God in Christ has changed everything. We aren’t the same people we used to be.



We’ve taken off the old and put on the new. We’ve come to a new understanding of who we are in Christ. When we did that, we were freed from the old way. Paul says the mystery has been revealed to us. It’s not about the old system. It’s about a new reality. Our new relationship with Jesus.

But there’s always potential dangers on our journey with Christ. One of those is that we would get stuck in the old system. That we would feel like somehow we have to do external things to create this internal reality. But Paul reminds us that the gospel works in the opposite way.

The main thrust of our text this week is that followers of Jesus have no need to submit to external laws of bodily discipline to experience

God’s presence. The reason for this is because only faith in Christ brings us into God’s holy presence.

The gospel, therefore, isn’t about the exterior changing the interior. The gospel is about the interior being made new – and that newness working its way out into the external dimensions of our lives.

We want it to inform our values and transform the way we think and love. We want it to be seen in our actions, attitudes, thoughts, and relationships. We want it to be visible in the way we invest our time, money, and gifts. But we don’t do all of those things *so that* we can have peace with God. Rather, we do all of those things *because* we have peace with God.

COLOSSIANS 2:16-23 (NLT)

11 When you came to Christ, you were “circumcised,” but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature. **12** For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.

13 You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. **14** He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. **15** In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.

16 So don’t let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. **17** For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality. **18** 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, **19** and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.

20 You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, **21** “Don’t handle! Don’t taste! Don’t touch!”? **22** Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. **23** These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person’s evil desires.

COLOSSIANS 2:16-19

This week's text is the practical application of the realities that Paul explained in Colossians 2:9-15. In that passage, Paul explains that Christ is all sufficient. All the fullness of God lives in Christ, and Christ has brought his followers into that fullness (2:9-10). Christ is over all the powers and authorities (2:10, 15), and Paul wants the Colossians *to live* in a way that demonstrates that they *believe* those powers have been disarmed (by Jesus), instead of falling into the old traps set by human thinking and the spiritual powers of this world. Therefore, if we believe these things about Jesus, what does that mean for how we live our lives? Today's text begins to provide some answers, as Paul establishes some practical application of living life in its fullness under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

ALREADY FREE FROM THE LAW'S DEMANDS (2:16-19)

Having laid a foundation of saying that the Colossians already have Christ in their midst (2:9-10), that they have already been circumcised in baptism (2:11-12), and that the law has no more to say to them (2:13-15), Paul now applies this to specifics. There may have been some teachers in town who were saying that to be a member of the people of God, they should be careful about what they eat and drink and they should observe the religious festivals and ceremonies, and especially the Sabbath.

To this Paul says, "Don't let them judge you or say you aren't complete." Specifically, he says: "These rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality" (2:17). In other words, Jesus is the "the reality yet to come" – the new reality has arrived in Christ. And if that is so, Paul says we do not need these "shadows" anymore. The Christian gospel says that in Jesus the kingdom of God has arrived. That's why Jesus caused so much controversy with what he did on the Sabbath. It wasn't that the Jews were legalists and Jesus didn't believe in the Torah. What Jesus was doing – especially with his healings on the Sabbath – was saying that the Kingdom of God *has now arrived*. To use an analogy: We wouldn't put up a sign saying "This Way To Nashville" in the middle of Broadway ... because we're already there! In the same way, Paul is telling the Colossians not to let anyone condemn them for what they eat or drink, or for not observing certain celebrations, because all of those things are forward looking signposts ("shadows") that pointed to the new age. And that new age has already arrived in the person of Jesus.

It may not look like the new age has arrived, because as all the early Christians knew, we have to live with a *now* and *not yet* understanding of the times. We must remind ourselves that when Paul is talking about Christ "stripping the rulers and authorities of their power," Paul himself is in prison. So it doesn't look as though the rulers and authorities have been disarmed, but Paul says that's the reality into which we're living and by which we orientate ourselves.

Therefore, in 2:18, Paul warns against letting anyone suggest that there are new types of spirituality that they should be engaging. Perhaps these people would come and say that there are certain practices or prayers which the Jews know, and if these new Christians are going to be a real member of Abraham's family, then this is how they should do it. Paul uses some rather interesting language here when he talks about not letting anyone "condemn you by trying to force you into a kind of fake humility, or into the worshiping of angels" (2:18). Of course, the Colossian Christians will be humble and penitent, but he's warning them against false and disingenuous displays of their spirituality. And as for the worshipping of angels, scholars aren't sure whether there were Jewish groups who actually worshiped angels, but this statement could also refer to people thinking that they were sharing in the angelic worship that was going on in heaven, as pictured in Isaiah 6. Some would have an ecstatic vision and see themselves as part of the angelic chorus singing praises to God.

Paul says these people go into "great detail about what they have seen." They talk about these visions they've had about God, and they get puffed up by merely human thinking ("Their sinful minds have made them proud" 2:18). This is the same phrase that Paul uses in Romans 8 when he contrasts the mind of the flesh and the mind of the spirit. Paul says the "mind of the flesh" is what's making these people proud and puffed up.

COLOSSIANS 2:20-23

ALREADY DIED TO THE WORLD WITH CHRIST (2:20-23)

Moving into 2:20-23, Paul dares to imagine that it's really true that (1) Jesus has died, (2) Jesus has been raised, (3) we are in Christ, and therefore, (4) we have died and have been raised with Christ. And now Paul says, "Let's work out what that's really going to mean." This is why the Christian church from the beginning has told the story of Jesus' death and resurrection and has made it the focal point of prayer and worship. Because the more we understand the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion and the meaning of his resurrection, the more we understand who we are as people who live within Christ and thus share in his death and resurrection.

To this end, Paul says, "If you died with Christ, coming out from the rule of the 'worldly elements,' what's the point of laying down laws as though your life was still merely worldly?" (2:21). In other words, he's saying that *since we have died with Christ, there are certain things that should be true of us.*

In Colossians 3, Paul also says that *since we have been raised with Christ, there are things that should be true of us, including things that we should be leaving behind.* To be sure, dying with Christ and being raised with Christ overlap, because in Colossians 3 Paul is still talking about what it means to have died, even though we are risen. The two ideas work closely together.

But here at the end of Colossians 2 we have a final message to those who want to say that the Christians in Colossae would do much better by joining a synagogue or a cult that has good rules and regulations for living an ordered, wise, and virtuous life. This way of life was very attractive in the ancient world, particularly to those who had seen the bad things that happened in the pagan world. The Jewish way of life was appealing, if only because it had a clear code of morality and a structured system of worship to the one God of Israel, rather than to a multitude of pagan gods and goddesses.

It seems that there was no shortage of people who were offering to tell these young Christians what to eat, what to touch, and what things they can and cannot do in order to become a holy person. But Paul says this is not the way it works. Jesus' death puts an end to all of those things that belong to the world. When someone says "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!" (2:21), Paul says it's as though they're just making rules based on the world: "Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them" (2:22). In other words, when you eat or drink something, it's gone. Who cares?

Paul here is tracking with what Jesus himself says in Mark 7 and Matthew 15, when, shockingly at the time, Jesus says that what goes into you doesn't defile you, it's what comes out of you that defiles you (7:15). And Jesus goes on to explain that whatever food you eat goes in one end and out the other – it's not a big deal. "With that," Mark says in a parenthetical comment, "Jesus declared all foods clean" (7:19). "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come" (Mark 7:20-21).

Those statements were revolutionary! In the Jewish world people had died because they had refused to eat pork, and now this Jesus person is telling us that it's now OK after all? Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 would say that's exactly what Jesus is saying: "Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.'" (10:25-26). Therefore these regulations belong with the old creation, and we are now people of the new creation. We reaffirm the goodness of creation and we celebrate that goodness by being able to touch, taste, and handle anything that may come our way. As with Jesus in Mark 7, Paul here is saying they are just observing these human traditions rather than actually following God. Paul reminds the Colossians that these commands are simply "human teachings" (2:22), and that they are not living out of the present world with its dogmas, but in the new creation.

COLOSSIANS 2:20-23

Paul admits in 2:23 that those ways do have a semblance of wisdom: “These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline.” And since these rules promote a do-it-yourself religion, it might make a Gentile feel virtuous and spiritual if they can keep these rules for a week, month, or year. But, Paul says, they provide “no help in conquering a person’s evil desires” (2:23). We can keep those external commands all we want, but the real sins deep down inside, which come out in various forms of physical self-indulgence, will continue. The heart has not actually been dealt with.

A good way for us to summarize Paul’s teaching is this: “Don’t let anyone tell you that you need an external addition to make the internal relationship with God everything God wants it to be.” That doesn’t mean God doesn’t want things to change in our lives, or that God isn’t interested in our actions, attitudes, thoughts, relationships, and the way we invest our time, money, and gifts. All of those things should reflect the new reality that we have in Christ. By faith, internally everything has changed, we are completely forgiven, and we are alive from the dead in Christ. And there’s no external thing that can change the truth of those realities. Christ did enough! So our standing with God is solidified by the work of Christ. Once we can live in the reality of “done,” we won’t get trapped in the nature of “do.”

Paul respects the fact that many Gentiles would see something to aspire to in the Jewish way of life – something that looked holy and wise in a way that was different from the world that they had known. But Paul wants to show them a new way to true holiness, which God’s word and truth is all about. And he says we don’t get there by obeying external regulations like that.

The encouragement for us, therefore, is to think about the new creation, what God has done on the inside of us simply as an act of faith. Yes, we want that to walk itself out in our lives. We want that to affect our behavior. We want it to inform our values and change the way we think and love. But we don’t do all of those things *so that* we can have peace with God. We do all of those things *because* we have peace with God. We do it by having died with Christ, coming alive in him, and leaving that old world behind. And that’s the transition that takes us into Colossians 3 next week.

DISCUSSION

1. The spirituality that Paul begins to warn against in 2:16 is based on performance – one’s ability to “keep the rules” or perhaps even “check the boxes.” Why does this kind of spirituality lead us to judge others? When we’re stuck in a spirituality of performing and “box-checking,” what are some things that we tend to judge others for?
2. Through honest self-reflection, can you describe a time when you looked down on others because they weren’t “keeping the rules” or “checking the boxes” as well as you were? What was the source of that spirit of judgment? (Alternatively, can you describe a time in which you were on the receiving end of that kind of judgment and how it felt?). How have you grown since that time? What have you learned (or are still learning)?
3. When Paul mentions observing certain religious days or the regulations, “don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch” certain things (2:16, 21), he’s focusing attention on the appeal to pagans of Judaism’s high moral code and heavy demands, a kind of religious fundamentalism. Why does religious fundamentalism have such appeal to people today? What does Paul mean by it having “an appearance of wisdom” (2:23) but not actually being wise? By contrast, what should characterize an authentic relationship with God?
4. Talk about what it means to have ‘died with Christ’ and come out from under the rule of the ‘worldly elements’ (Col 2:20). In what practical ways can Christians live as part of the new creation today? Consider, in particular, all the things that are happening in our world right now. How can our lives as a community display that there is a whole new way of being human in the world?