

The Book of Colossians

Lesson 8: Free from Legalism and False Religion -- Colossians 2:16–23

Have you ever met someone who could take the most joyful thing in the world and turn it into a burden? The Colossians had a whole movement of such people. These teachers had a gift for making faithful Christians feel that they were never quite measuring up. Eat the wrong food and they would raise an eyebrow. Skip the right festival and they would shake their heads. They specialized in disqualifying people, in standing as self-appointed judges over everyone's diet, calendar, and devotion. And the saints at Colossae, who had been set gloriously free in Christ, were beginning to shrink back under all that scrutiny.

So Paul plants his feet and says something bracing: 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. Then he tells them why these things no longer bind them. They were, he says, a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Think of how a shadow works. A shadow can tell you something is coming, the way your visitor's shadow stretches across the floor before they walk through the door. But once the person arrives, you do not keep staring at the shadow. The festivals and food laws and Sabbaths of the old covenant were the shadow. Christ is the One who cast it, and now He has arrived. Why go back to fixing your eyes on the shadow when the substance is standing in the room?

Paul then exposes the whole machinery of this false religion. It traffics in false humility and the worship of angels, in visions and self-importance, and beneath the spiritual-sounding talk, it has quietly let go of the one thing that matters: holding fast to the Head, to Christ Himself, from whom the whole body draws its life. Cut off from the Head, even the most religious-looking practices are just dead branches. And then Paul names the rules for what they are: Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch, human commands dressed up as divine ones, with an appearance of wisdom but no power at all to change a human heart.

This is one of the most freeing passages in all of Scripture, and one of the most needed. Because the pull toward rule-religion never really dies. It is always tempting to measure our standing with God by a checklist we can see, and to measure everyone else by it too. Paul wants to set us free from both the false guilt that comes when others judge us by their rules, and the false confidence that comes when we keep our own. Read these verses and breathe out. In Christ, the shadow has given way to the substance, and you are free.

Group Discussion: Paul warns against people who pass judgment on others over food, drink, festivals, and days (vv. 16–17). Why are human beings so drawn to measuring spirituality by external rules, both judging others and trying to satisfy them, and how does that impulse still show up in churches today?

Personal Reflection: Paul says these external observances were a shadow, but the substance belongs to Christ. Where in your own walk have you been more focused on the shadow (rules, appearances, religious performance) than on the substance, which is Christ Himself? What would it look like to fix your eyes on Him instead?

Read Colossians 2:16–23

Study Questions

1. Paul says, 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, for these are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (vv. 16–17). What does it mean that these observances were a shadow, and why does the coming of Christ, the substance, free believers from being bound to them?
2. Paul refuses to let others enslave the Colossians with their rules. Where do you tend to let other people's expectations or man-made standards put you under a cloud of guilt? Or, turning it around, where are you tempted to sit in judgment over fellow Christians on matters where God has left us free?
3. Paul warns against teachers who promote false humility and the worship of angels, who are puffed up and not holding fast to the Head (vv. 18–19). What does it mean to hold fast to the Head, and how can practices that look humble and spiritual actually pull us away from Christ rather than toward Him?
4. Paul says health comes from holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body grows. What things in your life tend to loosen your grip on Christ, drawing your attention to experiences, personalities, or practices instead of to Him directly? How do you stay connected to the Head?
5. Paul asks, if with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why do you submit to its regulations as if you still belonged to it (v. 20)? What does it mean that we have died with Christ to the old system of rule-keeping, and how should that death shape the way we relate to such rules now?
6. Paul assumes we can drift back into living under rules we were freed from. What man-made religious rules or traditions have you, at some point, treated as though they carried the authority of God's commands? How do you tell the difference between God's commands and human additions?
7. Paul says the rules Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch have an appearance of wisdom and severity to the body, but are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (vv. 21–23). Why are external rules and harsh self-denial ultimately powerless to make a person holy, and what does this teach us about where real transformation comes from?
8. Many of us have tried to defeat a sin mainly by piling up rules and restrictions, only to find the sin still alive underneath. Where have you tried to fight a sin from the outside in, by regulation, when the real battle was in your heart? What would fighting it from the inside out, in Christ, look like?

9. Among the things Paul lists is the Sabbath, calling it part of the shadow now fulfilled in Christ (vv. 16–17). What does this teach about the place of the Old Law's Sabbaths, festivals, and food laws under the new covenant? And how should Christians understand the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, on which the church gathers (Acts 20:7), which Scripture never treats as a Christian Sabbath bound by Old Covenant rules?
10. Look back across this passage. Paul tears down the whole structure of rule-religion and points us back to Christ, the substance, the Head, the source of real life. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Colossians 2:16–23 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Galatians 4:8–11, turning back to the observance of days and months; Romans 14:1–12, not passing judgment on one another over food and days; Hebrews 10:1, the law as a shadow of the good things to come; Acts 20:7, the disciples gathering on the first day of the week to break bread; Matthew 15:8–9, worship made vain by teaching human precepts as doctrines.