
Colossians 2:16-23, *Our Lives in Christ!*

Into Thy Word Ministries Bible Study www.intothyword.org

General Idea: Our lives in Christ are not about dos and don'ts; they are about being in Christ. Therefore, we have no need for fear, condemnation, or to follow some ritual or tradition. There is no need to pass judgment upon others in matters that are trivial while we ignore much greater things to come. Nor are we to regulate others in what they should do while we refuse to know and practice the grace of our Lord. Our earthly plights are mere shadows to the things that will come and that are so much more important, for our completeness is in Christ alone! Our traditions and even well meaning worship are only shadows of the Real Thing, our Lord Jesus Christ! We are connected to and are in Christ! Likewise, we must not allow others to defraud us of the Gospel with false ideas, mysticisms, and empty philosophies and teachings that lead to nowhere. We think these things are exciting but they are, in fact, dangerous and unfulfilling. The greatest philosophies cannot match real true Truth; emptiness cannot fill our need for real spiritual nurture and nourishment that come from our Lord. We can have assurance, confidence, strength, and nourishment in Christ, His presence, His work, and His precepts. No one can or should be able to sway us to believe otherwise! As Christ conquered sin on our behalf, we are to conquer our desires and thinking so they are in Christ and Him alone! He is the Head of the universe, the Church, and of our lives, so let us live our lives His way!

Contexts and Background:

Like any church or Christian group that tends to take on its surrounding societal characteristics and customs, so the church's values and wants can mimic its cultural environment as it did for these Colossians. Whereas, the Jews and Christians who were *pious* (sought The One True God and not the gods), those who were separatists (did not participate in the pagan festivals), or countercultures (avoided sin, premarital sex, promiscuous activities, and/or drunkenness) were ridiculed and started to experience persecution. Paul is reinforcing to them the necessity of knowing who Christ is and what He has done so they can hold onto Truth. He wants to make it clear to them that He is sufficient for salvation and daily life—no added ingredients are needed. In fact, adding anything neuters His Message and Work in our life. The only thing we “put in” to build faith and fruitfulness is our knowledge and growth in Him.

Commentary—Word and Phrase Meanings:

- *Do not let anyone judge you/pass judgment* refers to legalism and being bonded to a set of human rules and regulations. This church observed both the traditional Jewish and some pagan festivals to placate the power brokers in the church and community as well as seeking to influence angels. Scripture is clear that the day on which we choose to have our worship services is irrelevant because every day is a day to honor God and worship Him (Matt. 12:1-12; Acts 10:9-15; Rom. 12:1; 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8; Gal. 5:1; Col. 2:16-23; 1 Tim. 4:1-5; Heb. 4:8-11; 9:9-10).
- *Festival, New Moon* was a monthly celebration to commemorate and dedicate the beginning of each month to some pagan god. Here, this refers to an aspect of paganism, the practice of “asceticism.” This is the seeking to achieve spiritual power by secrets and manipulation or self abasement, then partying with it. It also refers to fasting and other stern spiritual disciplines that seek to manipulate one's will over God's! This may seem to indicate a “how dare they do that,” but the question is *do we do this in some other ways* (Lev. 23; Num. 10:10; 28:11-14; Psalm 81:3)?
- *Sabbath*. This was a weekly celebration of rest and worship, lasting Friday evening through Saturday evening. Traditionally on the seventh day, the Sabbath was instituted at creation. This was done at the temple meeting (tent of the Ark) before the Temple of Solomon was built, and then centuries later in the temple of Solomon. It is a symbol of God's sovereignty and Lordship (Ex. 20:8). It is also a reminder of the redemption to come for the people under the Law, the redemption that we now have in the work of Christ (Duet. 5:12). However, the early Christians were keeping the same festivals and religious observances for purposes of manipulation, seeking faith and assurance in them as well as

placating spiritual beings. Some were adding in extras such as fasting on the Sabbath to prove one's spiritual superiority. Paul tells them that they are now free from such bondage (Matt. 12: 1-8; Acts 20:7; Rom. 14:5-6)!

- *Shadow of the things.* This is a philosophical term from Plato meaning “the real unseen world” versus the world shadows and ideas in which we live. A philosophy to distinguish the real world from the false and what is real is only a shadow of the real we can't see. Here, it refers to the O.T. being a type and shadow that testified to Christ. But, we are not tied to the Law nor do we have an obligation to follow it, because Christ has liberated us (Heb. 8:5).
- *Substance/body of Christ.* Usually refers to the Church as the Body of Christ, but here it refers to a comparison of Christ as The Substance in contrast to a mere shadow of these false teachings. Pagan converts were bringing in their ideas of spirituality, causing confusion about who Christ is and how we are to approach Him. Here Christ is pictured as absolutely real. There is no copy or “avatar!” Christ alone is sufficient!
- *False humility/asceticism.* Humility here means “self abasement.” This is not the good kind (1 Pet. 5) but rather taking spirituality to a dangerous extreme as to work one's self up with ecstatic prayers and over-emotionalism through drugs, deprivation, physical torture, and stimulation to get revelatory visions, spiritual experiences, or power. Thus, these false teachers were getting their ideas from cults and imagination rather than from God's Word, and then teaching them to others. A similar practice has been done by some Jewish and Hindu mystics, Monks in the Middle Ages, and in some Native American cultures. This comes across as one being pious and pure or spiritual, but in fact, one becomes deceived, leading to a dysfunctional spiritual and personal life. These practices do not free us; they only lead us to ignore God, distract us off His path and will, and thus lead us into more bondage. This is false humility and spirituality even when practiced sincerely! We are unable to walk close to God by a force of our will or some spiritual manipulation or self deprivation; rather, it comes from a surrender of our will to His Will (Prov. 6:16-17; Jer. 23:32; Ecc. 5:7; John 3:30; 2 John 8)!
- *Worship of angels.* These spiritual beings, God's messengers, were being worshiped. The practice involved petition, invocation, or praying to angels. This does not mean worshiping with angels as seen in Revelation 4. Rather, the Colossians were mixing in pagan practices and Orthodox Judaism as well as mysticism—a hodgepodge mass mess. They thought they were honoring angels by pleasing them so they would give them a blessing because they thought angels controlled the crops and stars and determined one's destiny (as the Greek and Roman gods) and/or intermediated between the people and God. This, in fact, placed the people in bondage when they could have had liberty and real blessings. Paul explains how foolish and worthless this viewpoint was; we cannot make any power, knowledge, insight, or mediation happen between us and God. No mysticism or tradition can benefit us who are in Christ; they can only distort and distract us (Matt. 4:10; Acts 27:23; Gal. 1:8; Rev. 1:1; 19:10; 22:8-9)
- *Disqualify/beguile you.* Meaning to be your referee and decide what is good and bad for you; also to steal or condemn or distract you from His prize for you. Only Christ is our Umpire and Lord (1 Cor. 9:24; Phil. 3:14).
- *What he has seen/sensuous mind.* Meaning mystics seeking esoteric, religious experience through sleep deprivation and substances or over-emotional indulgences producing hallucinations and spiritual insights and claiming there are from God or angels (Jer. 23:32; Ecc. 5:7; Acts 27:23; Rom. 8:6; Gal. 1:8).
- *Head.* This meant the source of life, as in our ability to know and grow in Christ can only come from Christ. Jesus is the head, the main theme of Colossians 1, as Christ is the Supreme mediator—pure, Holy, and only! He is the Head; we are the body to take His lead and follow to be His hands and feet in the world. The question is, *is He leading us and our churches, or are we seeking to lead Him?* Our life

in Christ is because of Christ and we must seek to honor Christ (John 15:1-5; Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 1:19; 2:9; 2 Pet. 1:3; 2:1-22)!

- *Died with Christ.* This means our union in and with Christ—being “saved” because of His sacrificial death for us (Rom. 6:1-11; Col. 2:8, 11-12).
- *Basic principles/elemental spirits.* This is a Greek philosophical image like *mystery*, referring to the elements of the universe, or “elemental matter.” Here, it is referring to the bad doctrines of trying to please or worship angelic beings that disregard the foundations of truth and the simple message of the Gospel. God’s true Truth is far deeper, more intense, and more insightful than any religious or humanistic thinking or great reason (Gal. 4:3-9; Col. 2:6-10, 18-21; Heb. 5:12; 2 Pet. 3:10).
- *You submit to its rules/subject yourself.* Why bow to pagan practices, *decrees*, and *rules*, as the Pharisees added to God’s precepts (Matt. 23) when we have union with Christ? We have freedom from law; there is no profit or value in these dangerous distractions (Rom. 3:19; 6:14; -15; Gal. 3:23-25). Beating down one’s self physically or psychologically to remove lusts and desires of the flesh does not work and only brings more harm. Do we seek the doctrines of man that lead nowhere but to despair or the doctrines of God that lead to liberty and salvation? We must seek Christ as Lord over all—including our desires, and then we will see maturity and success in dealing with passions (Jer. 29:13; 1 Tim. 1:8).
- *Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!* Adding in our regulations and legalism to Christ’s finished work is a heinous sight and slaps our Lord in the face saying He is not good enough (Gen. 2:17-18; 3:3)!
- *Self imposed/self made religion/will worship.* God desires the fruition of our will to truly, sincerely, and lovingly offer up our worship of Him, but when we do it out of obligation or routine, it becomes meaningless and even repugnant (Matt. 15:9)! Our Worship of Christ must be sacred, heartfelt, and genuine, with never an afterthought, routine, whim, or a series of meaningless rhetoric or ritual. Nor is true worship about seeking our needs, desires, or inserting our presumptions or expectations or procedures or regulations; rather, real worship is respect and reverence for our Lord God, the way He wills and instituted it. True worship is a matter of our hearts, not our will. The will is to be surrendered, and the heart is to be opened and given to Christ. Never forget: He is the Sovereign Lord (Isa. 29:13; Matt. 6:16-18; 15:9; Mark 7:7-8)!
- *Lack any value/of no value* refers to the “ascetic discipline,” the self-discipline or self-denial out of our will and obligation. To get something back is not only of no value, it is also very harmful personally and spiritually. This why God hates it. Also, beating down on our bodies does not help us get over the desire of bad passions and sin. We can never grow spiritually by seeking what we want or manipulating God through false humility, false self sacrifice, or indigence and rituals. Even if they are seemingly good, and we are disciplined, if the underlying purpose is to get our own way, we are in the way of His Way.

Devotional Thoughts and Applications:

This passage is about the problem and lure of *legalism*. We think the gospel of grace is too simple, and perhaps in logic and reason it is. However, thinking we have to add to it is insanity. Legalism substitutes what is great with what is fleeting. It robs what our God has freely given; it replaces our spiritual nourishment and liberty in Christ with junk that is empty and fleeting. It is defrauding as it puts a price tag on the purchase of our soul that Jesus has already paid for. Legalism wants to steal from us and then continue to extort us like a mobster seeking protection money. We are never to live by religious traditions and obligations when we have liberty in Christ. We are not to seek new or exciting teachings when they do not line up to His already stated precepts. Rather, we are to live in His grace and add nothing of ours into it.

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see Inductive Bible Study):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. What do you think of organizations that have a lot of rules and regulations: comforted that you are a part of something bigger than you, feeling a purpose that you know is better, or do you feel overwhelmed and constrained?
2. Why are our lives in Christ not about a set of dos and don'ts? What is the real, impacting message from this passage about being in Christ?
3. Why do you have, or should you have no need to fear condemnation, or need to follow some ritual or tradition to be a growing Christian?
4. How have you or have you seen others pass judgment upon others in matters that are unimportant? Have you, or have you noticed that these people tended to ignore the much greater things of Christ?
5. Why do some Christians have a need to regulate others in what they should do? When and how can this be a good thing—like accountability and discipline? How can this be a tool in refusing to know and practice the grace of our Lord?
6. The spiritual disciplines are crucial means to know and grow in Christ and produce more maturity and fruit. How can these practices be the means to manipulate one's will over God's? What can you do to make sure your practice of the faith is sincere and God-honoring rather than manipulating?
7. What does it mean to you that your completeness is in Christ alone? How are you connected to and in Christ? Do you feel and know it? If not, why not?
8. Why can't we grow spiritually by seeking what we want or manipulating God? How and why do some Christians do this? What are some of the false humilities, false self-sacrifices, or rituals you have seen and tried? How did they work out?
9. How does legalism keep evangelism and new people out and away from the Church? What can you and your church do to stop and prevent this while still following God's precepts for holiness?
10. What must happen to help you conquer your unhealthy, felt needs, thinking, and desires?
11. What do you need to do to have more assurance, confidence, strength, and nourishment in Christ? How can you better know, think, and feel His presence, work, and precepts?
12. How do the mysticisms and philosophies of the world and various religious sects or false teachers become exciting and contagious? How can they be empty, dangerous, and unfulfilling? What can you and your church do to help people discern what is false and misleading and what is True and fulfilling?