

Series: The Letter to the Colossians
Title: “Let No One Disqualify You: Part 1”
Text: Colossians 2:16-17
Date: September 24, 2023

Verse 16

In Colossians 2:16, Paul transitioned to talk more specifically about a problem at Colossae. He had previously alluded to how some within the church were enforcing Jewish rituals upon others (Colossians 2:4, 11). In our current passage, he began to deal with the matter in more detail. To do so, he said, “Therefore 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” (Colossians 2:16). The word “therefore” at the beginning of the verse pointed back to the content of verses 6-15. In those verses, Paul had spoken at length concerning the person and work of Christ. He now transitioned to warn his readers about those who made ceremonial aspects of the Law a requirement for godliness. In using the word “therefore,” the apostle drew a conclusion from what he had said previously. He pointed back to the work of Christ, as described in verses 6-15, to indicate that Christ had freed New Testament believers from obligations related to the Ceremonial Law.

“Let No One Pass Judgment on You”

Take note of the structure of verse 16. At the beginning of the verse, Paul instructed his readers to not let anyone judge them. In the second part of the verse, he outlined the matters concerning which his readers were being judged. The Greek verb rendered “pass judgment” (*krinō*) was one that could have been translated “to take one to task.”¹ Paul employed the verb with a verb tense that called for “the stopping of an action in progress.”² The apostle’s verbiage indicated that some within the church were in the process of allowing others to judge them. In what would follow, Paul would warn his readers about those who were passing unlawful judgment on the faithful at Colossae. Such judging was taking place in regard to three religious errors — Mosaic ceremonies (2:16-17), mystical experiences (2:18-19), and manmade traditions (2:20-23).

While believers are called to be discerning (Matthew 7:1-2), they are forbidden to pass self-righteous legalistic judgment on others (John 7:24; 1 Corinthians 2:15). The Jewish legalists in Colossae were engaging in the toxic, sinful type of judging. Faithful believers needed to stop allowing such judgments to influence their spiritual and religious life. One commentator has noted that the issue went beyond the act of judging. It is likely that some legalists were threatening to exclude people from the community of God’s people.³ Quite possibly Gentiles were being told they couldn’t meet in the synagogue for Lord’s Day worship unless they submitted to Jewish rituals.

Paul wanted his readers to know that they had no need to feel insecure because of the self-righteous judgment of others. Because of Christ, true believers had been forgiven of sin. Paul mentioned such forgiveness back in verse 13. God had already passed judgment on the true believers at Colossae, having forgiven them of their sins through the work of his Son. Therefore, they had no need to submit to the self-righteous, religious judgments of others. His message was similar to the one he gave the Galatians when he said, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

¹ Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 465.

² Rogers, 465.

³ Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 119.

“In Questions of Food And Drink, Or With Regard to A Festival Or A New Moon Or A Sabbath”

After forbidding legalistic judgmental activity in the church, Paul described the things concerning which his readers were being judged. He specifically spoke of two matters — Jewish dietary regulations and Jewish holy days. Discussion concerning these two topics followed Paul’s discussion concerning circumcision in Colossians 2:11-14. It seems the Jewish legalists in the Lycus Valley were imposing circumcision, dietary restrictions, and holy days on Gentile Christians. It was fitting for Paul to deal with circumcision first, since it was the first and foremost of Jewish ceremonies. It was the overall sign of God’s covenant with the Jews. Having dealt with that matter in verses 11-14, Paul moved on to talk about matters related to food, drink, and holy days in verses 15-17.

It is important to note that three problems were in play with the legalism at Colossae. First, some tried to enforce Old Testament ceremonies that were no longer in effect for the people of God. Such individuals failed to understand that such ceremonies were designed to provide a foreshadowing of the coming Christ. Once Christ had come, such ceremonies were no longer needed. Second, those who advocated for such customs did so in a legalistic way. It is worth noting that the ceremonies they enforced under the Mosaic Law weren’t inherently bad. They were actually instituted and ordained by God! The problem with ceremonies at times was that people observed them in a mechanical and legalistic way. They missed the point of the ceremonies. The Lord intended such things to be done with a heart of worship and an anticipatory eye on the coming of Christ. Third, some of the legalistic practices within the early church were based more on Mishnaic Law than Mosaic Law. The Mishnah was a volume of writings created during the Intertestamental Period. It contained extra rules that were added by rabbis and scribes on top of the Torah. When Jesus rebuked people for “teaching as commandments the doctrines of men” he was speaking about the unhealthy prevalence of Mishnaic Law amongst first-century Jews (Mark 7:7). Of the three problems mentioned above, there was likely a melange of all three within the legalistic teaching at Colossae.

“Food”

In regard to the dietary regulations, Paul first spoke of “food.” Old Testament restrictions concerning food are well known. Passages like Leviticus 11:1-47 and 20:25-26 outlined ceremonial requirements in regard to one’s eating regimen. The Lord gave such food laws for the purpose of distinguishing his people from the pagan nations that surrounded them. He wanted to make them stand out as his special people who were ordained as the national vehicle to deliver His Anointed One. In the Mosaic system, one had to abide by such food laws in order to remain ceremonially clean before the Lord. The legalists in Colossae were telling New Testament believers that they still needed to observe such laws in order to maintain spiritual purity. They failed to see the meaning of such food restrictions. Furthermore, they failed to see that such restrictions had passed away with the coming of Christ.

Paul wanted his readers to know that they had been set free from the Ceremonial Law of Moses. Christ had fulfilled such things (Matthew 5:17; Hebrews 10:1). Consequently, they had no need to abide by either Mosaic or Mishnaic Law. Such things were a picture to help Old Testament believers look forward to Christ. Once Christ performed his work on behalf of sin, they became obsolete. Peter’s heavenly vision in Acts 10:9-33 revealed that the New Testament age has a different approach to food.

“Drink”

In regard to food restrictions, Paul secondly spoke of “drink.” The Greek word he used was one that referred to indulgence in wine.⁴ The Old Testament prohibited the consumption of wine only in certain circumstances. One instance is seen in the well-known Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:3). On another occasion, the Lord ordered Samson’s mother to abstain from “wine or strong

⁴ Rogers, 465.

drink” (Judges 13:4). Apart from those circumstances, abstinence from certain forms of drink was not strictly commanded. One only sees warnings about the effects of overconsumption of wine (Proverbs 23:29-30). Apart from this, the only other restriction concerning “drink” in the Old Testament was in reference to drinking out of ceremonially unclean vessels (Numbers 19:15). Perhaps some at Colossae had misinterpreted some of the aforementioned Old Testament regulations. Maybe they were unnecessarily making such things a requirement for holy living within the New Testament.

On top of Jewish customs in relation to “drink,” the ancient world often promoted strict restrictions in reference to wine. It was common for pagan religions to regard abstinence from wine as a gateway for experiencing enlightened spirituality.⁵ Such thinking likely crept into Jewish ways of thinking. Maybe such things were in play at Colossae. Honest believers were being told they needed to abstain from wine and certain foods in order to be close to God. Paul wanted his readers to know that Old Testament dietary restrictions had no place in the New Covenant. He shared a similar message elsewhere in his New Testament writings (Romans 14:17; 1 Timothy 4:4). There is certainly a place for healthy eating in the Christian life. Over-indulgence in food is often rooted in the “lust of the flesh.” However, no professing Christian can erect any type of eating regimen as being a pathway to godliness.

“Festival...New Moon...Sabbath”

After talking about dietary restrictions of the Mosaic Law, Paul moved on to mention holy days associated with the Mosaic Law. In doing so, he made mention of three distinct holy days — “festival...new moon...sabbath.” His words contained a famous threefold designation used amongst Jews to speak in totality of all Jewish holy days. Paul’s main point was to indicate that Christians should not feel compelled to observe ceremonial holidays of the Mosaic Law.

“Festival”

Paul first spoke of “a festival.” Some believe Paul’s reference was to the annual Passover festival.⁶ Perhaps the false teachers at Colossae were mandating observance of that Old Testament feast. They had somehow missed the way Jesus’ observance of the Lord’s Supper had supplanted that ceremonial meal (Matthew 26:26-29). The Passover celebrated God’s covenant with Israel and marked her exodus from Egypt. However, it also provided a foreshadowing of the coming of the true Passover Lamb who would atone for the sins of God’s people (1 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 11:28). With the coming of Christ, God’s people were no longer under compulsion to observe the ceremony. The legalists at Colossae who were forcing the festival on others were misguided. They were inappropriately zealous for a ceremony that was meant to point people to Christ for a certain period of time.

“New Moon”

The “new moon” was a special holy day observed each month by God’s people under the Law of Moses. Its significance rested in its relation to Israel’s arrival at the wilderness of Sinai after the Exodus (Exodus 19:1). Under the Ceremonial Law, certain offerings were required for new moons (Numbers 29:6). An observance associated with a new moon was the occasion for David’s departure from Saul’s royal place (1 Samuel 20:5).

“Sabbath”

The word “Sabbath” was the one commonly used for the weekly observance of rest. Notice that Paul spoke of three holy days within verse 16 — a yearly holy day (“festival”), a monthly holy day (“new moon”), and a weekly holy day (“Sabbath”). His categorical way of speaking perhaps lends support for the view that the apostle didn’t mean to totally dismiss the place of

⁵ Rogers, 465.

⁶ Rogers, 465.

the Sabbath in the life of God's people. Instead, he surveyed the gamut of all holy days — yearly, monthly, and weekly holy days — in order to emphasize that his readers should not have allowed any one to judge them in regard to the observance of such days. Old Testament rituals and feasts were shadows that pointed forward to the substance of Christ. None needed to feel pressure to observe such things.

In regard to the Sabbath, it is important to note that such a holy day was in use for humanity before the giving of the Ceremonial Law to Moses. A weekly day of rest is woven into the fabric of God's created order (Genesis 2:1-3). In creation, the Lord established three basic ordinances for humankind — family, work, and rest (Genesis 1:26-2:3). All three ordinances are central to healthy human life and productivity. To deny or attempt to erase either of the three is detrimental to human constitution and experience. One cannot escape his or her need for a one-in-seven day of rest. The Sabbath is something for all of humanity for all of time. If this is true, it is specially true for the people of God.

Yes, the Sabbath did provide a shadow concerning New Testament realities. It pointed to the rest of the soul that believers would receive through the person and work of Christ (Hebrews 3:7-4:13). However, the work of Christ was never meant to supplant the need for a weekly day of rest. In the New Covenant, God's people should still rest one day out of every seven. The necessity of such is expressed in God's Moral Law (Exodus 20:8-11). While God's Old Testament people observed Sabbath rest at the end of the week (Saturday), God's New Testament people observe rest at the beginning of the week (Sunday). Sunday is the new Sabbath because it is the day upon which Christ was raised, securing our life and our future resurrection (Matthew 28:1; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; Revelation 1:10).

All together, there was no need for New Testament believers to observe Old Testament festivals. The weekly Sabbath was an ordinance associated with the creative order of human society, so believers were still to worship on that day. However, the legalistic burden concerning festivals at Colossae was misguided and unhealthy. Paul addressed the same issue when writing to the Galatians. Dealing with the legalism in that church, he specifically spoke of how Christians were free from Old Testament holy-day observances: "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain" (Galatians 4:9-11). Modern Christians observe certain holy days — Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Good Friday, and Easter. However, it is important to note that there is no Scripturally mandated holy day for New Testament believers other than the Sabbath.

The Jewish legalistic in Colossae were guilty of doing what many Jews had done throughout history. They placed such an emphasis on the Ceremonial Law that they missed the weightier matters of the Law. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees regarding this matter, saying, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!" (Matthew 23:23-24). Samuel once reproved Saul for his inordinate concern for ceremonies: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). David recognized his own propensity to stress the ceremonies of the Law in an unhealthy way: "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:16-17). Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord rebuked his people in this matter, saying, "When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isaiah 1:15-17).

Ceremonial culture and customs were suppressing Christ at Colossae. The church needed to return to the true substance of vital religion. It was an abiding faith and obedience to

Jesus alone that could strengthen and sustain the souls of God's people. The Judaizers were the proverbial blind leaders of God's people.

In all of our talk of these things, it is worth noting that there was perhaps nothing wrong with God's people keeping some ceremonial observances. Such things weren't strictly prohibited by the coming of Christ, so long as they were kept in their proper place. Paul dealt with such controversies in some of his other letters. He often gave latitude for believers to observe certain ceremonial customs, so long as they didn't self-righteously impose such customs on others.

An example of this can be seen in 1 Corinthians 8. After discussing controversy concerning food offered to idols, Paul concluded, "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble" (1 Corinthians 8:13). So, we see that Paul actually submitted himself to food regulations on occasion for the sake of his brothers and sisters in Christ. When Paul wrote to the Romans, Paul addressed the same controversy in the church of Rome. According to Paul, the important matter was for each to follow conscience: "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God" (Romans 14:5-7).

New Testament Jews were free to observe food restrictions and holy day requirements, if they felt compelled to do so. However, they were to be on guard against two traps in such things. First, they could never allow a custom or ceremony to become the grounds of acceptance before God. Christ alone is one's means of acceptance before God. Calvin once said, "To abstain, it is true, from swine's flesh, is in itself harmless, but the binding to do it is pernicious, because it makes void the grace of Christ."⁷ Secondly, Jewish Christians were to refrain from sinfully judging others who did not feel compelled to keep ceremonial observances. This was the essence of Paul's warning in Colossians 2:16.

Verse 17

After forbidding self-righteous judgment concerning legalistic customs, Paul pointed his readers to Christ. He said, "These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Colossians 2:17). The word rendered "shadow" is one that indeed referred to the shadow cast by an object. However, the word was also used in reference to a dim outline. At times, it was used in reference to an outline created by a sketching, later to be filled in with the more elaborate features of the object itself.⁸ Calvin described the word picture in our text by saying, "For as painters do not in the first draft bring out a likeness in vivid colors...but in the first instance draw rude and obscure lines with charcoal, so the representation of Christ under the law was unpolished, and was, as it were, a first sketch...."⁹ Paul's point was that Old Testament rituals were like a sketching that provided the outline for a glamorous painting. They provided a foreshadowing of what was to come in Christ. It made no sense for believers to obsess over the sketching after the painting was completed.

"Shadow of The Things to Come"

Paul implemented the word to convey the purpose of Old Testament dietary regulations and holy days. Such things were like an outline or shadow that gave hints, clues, and previews

⁷ Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 193.

⁸ Rogers, 465.

⁹ Calvin, 193.

occurring with the coming of the Promised One who would provide life (Genesis 3:15, 20-21). However, such things did not give life themselves. They were mere shadows. Christ was the substance. One has said, "...the Old Testament ritual observances were dim outlines of the New Testament redemptive truths."¹⁰

Evidence of the shadow principle is seen elsewhere in the New Testament. Jesus made allusion to it when he said, "Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." (John 8:56). When writing to the church at Corinth, Paul spoke about the shadow nature of Old Testament realities by saying, "... but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away" (1 Corinthians 13:10). The author of Hebrews said, "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near" (Hebrews 10:1). He also spoke of the way those mentioned in the famous "hall of faith" saw shadows of New Testament realities: "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13).

Interestingly, there may have been an allusion to Greek thought in Paul's use of the word translated "shadow."¹¹ Remember, many believe that the Gnostics adhered to a sort of Platonic dualism, distinguishing human flesh as being inferior to spiritual realities. Interestingly, the creator of such philosophy — Plato — had a famous allegory he used in his teaching that made much of shadows. In his well-known allegory of a cave, he taught about education, or the lack thereof, by telling of a fictional group of people who lived their lives chained inside a cave. Within their cavernous prison, they were only able to see the side of a rock wall. The fire they used to warm themselves produced shadows on that wall from the outside world.

The allegory was intended to portray the importance of education. When one is uneducated (chained in a cave), one can only see shadows of reality. When one is educated (released from the cave), one can see the substance. Perhaps Paul had a double meaning with his reference to "a shadow of things to come." Maybe he intended to address both his Jewish and Gentile readers at the same time. The Jewish fixation with Old Testament rituals was misled, and so was the Gnostic fascination with Greek philosophy. Both the Gnostics and legalists at Colossae needed to reorient their perspectives on Christ.

"Substance"

Instead of being obsessed with shadows, believers needed to stake their lives on "the substance" — "Christ." In speaking of "substance," Paul used a word that was often translated "body." The original language of the text literally reads "of the body of Christ" (tó tò sōma Christós).¹² However, the word was also commonly used as an antonym for "shadow," depicting the opposite of a shadow — the substance that casts a shadow. Bible scholars debate concerning which meaning was meant by Paul in our verse. Did he mean to speak of "substance" or "body." Perhaps Paul had a double meaning in mind.¹³ Old Testament regulations were a shadow that pointed to Christ. More specifically, they pointed to Christ's body. Through his incarnation, Christ fulfilled all of the gospel sketches and shadows provided in Old Testament rituals and observances. Dietary laws pointed to the way the work of Christ brought purification from sin that draws people close to God. Holy day observances pointed to the spiritual rest, release, and redemption found in Christ.

Such a double meaning — Christ and Christ's body — would have once again provided a rebuke of both the legalists and the Gnostics at Colossae. The legalists were mistaken

¹⁰ Rogers, 465.

¹¹ Wright, 119.

¹² Wright, 120.

¹³ Wright, 120-121.

because they enforced Mosaic ceremonies that were intended to be shadows that pointed to the substance of Christ. The Gnostics were mistaken because of their flesh/spirit dualism in which they discounted human flesh as being evil. Their Platonic thinking made them deny the incarnation. Paul rebuked both groups with one swipe — the substance of Christ was the source of salvation. Through the incarnation (John 1:14), Christ fulfilled all Old Testament ceremonies (Matthew 5:17) and offered his real body on behalf of sin (Hebrews 10:1-10). Instead of trusting in shadow, whether it be the shadows of Old Testament regulations or the shadows of Platonic philosophy, Paul's readers needed to trust in the substance of vital religion — the body of Christ offered for the sins of God's people!