

**Series:** The Letter to the Colossians  
**Title:** “Let No One Disqualify You: Part 2”  
**Text:** Colossians 2:18-19  
**Date:** October 1, 2023

### Verse 18

Paul continued his discussion concerning the false religion in Colossae by saying, “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” (Colossians 2:18). In the previous two verses, Paul warned about inferior Christian teachings that were rooted in Judaism. In verses 18 and 19, he warned about inferior Christian teachings rooted in paganism. A lesson is found for us in Paul’s warnings. The sources of counterfeit Christian doctrine are often two-fold. While some erroneous doctrine comes from misinterpretations of God’s Word (verses 16-17), there is a brand of erroneous doctrine that comes from an attempt to mix the Word with the world. It seems that this latter issue was the one Paul was addressing in verses 18-19.

#### “Let No One Disqualify You”

Notice the personal nature of Paul’s words. It seems he had a particular person in mind as he wrote. The words “no one” and the pronoun “his” seem to point to a single individual within the church at Colossae. Quite likely, Paul’s readers knew exactly who he was talking about. His words were a direct refutation of a polarizing figure who was polluting the fellowship with inferior Christian teaching.<sup>1</sup>

In using the word “disqualify,” Paul chose a word that was often applied to a first-century umpire or judge.<sup>2</sup> It carried the basic meaning of “to regulate the contest” or “to dispense the rewards.”<sup>3</sup> If an athlete didn’t compete according to established rules, a residing judgment could disqualify that individual from competition. The word Paul used was a ? cognate, or a word with a similar derivation of the Greek word for a prize given at an athletic competition (1 Corinthians 9:24; Philippians 3:14).<sup>4</sup> As used in our verse, the term spoke of an athlete being disqualified from winning a prize.

This word “disqualify” was similar to the word for “pass judgment” back in verse 16. Some regard it as a synonym for that word.<sup>5</sup> However, it seems the word for “disqualify” carried a stronger meaning.<sup>6</sup> Calvin has translated Paul’s words as meaning “Let no one take from you the palm.”<sup>7</sup> In the original Olympic Games in Olympia, victors were handed a palm branch upon completing of their race. They then performed a victory lap, running in front of

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Example: have you ever played board games with someone who seems to change the rules as you play? The false teachers at Colossae were making up their own rules and disqualifying those who didn’t play according to their rules.

<sup>1</sup> Johnston, Mark G. *Let’s Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 71.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Davenant, John. *Geneva Series of Commentaries: Colossians*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 496.

<sup>4</sup> Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931) 496.

<sup>5</sup> Beale, G.K. *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 224.

<sup>6</sup> Robertson, 496.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

spectators as they waved the palm. Paul's words in our verse painted such a scene for Christians who were being wearied by the expectations and judgments of other professing believers.

Paul used such a first-century occurrence to graphically portray what was going on in a spiritual sense in Colossae. True believers were allowing a certain teacher within the church to judge them as unfit for spiritual growth and advancement. As a first-century umpire would announce that an athlete was not allowed to compete in a game, a self-appointed leader at Colossae was announcing that genuine Christians were not qualified for church membership.

What was the exact prize that Paul's readers were being disqualified from? What was the proverbial "palm" at stake? We can learn the answer to that question by looking at some of Paul's words to the church at Philippi. In writing to that church, he spoke of the prize he pursued in Christian living: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). According to Paul, believers forsake the prize of pursuing Christ when they allow themselves to be disqualified by inferior forms of Christian doctrine. Jesus and Jesus' calling on one's life is what's lost.

The faithful at Colossae needed to stop allowing the person in view to judge them. Interestingly, Paul used a cognate of the Greek word "disqualify" later in his letter. In Colossians 3:15, he would use it to speak of how we are to let Jesus' peace rule in our hearts, saying, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful." Instead of listening to a false teacher's judgments, Paul's readers were to allow the work of Christ to determine the state of their spiritual well-being.

#### *"Asceticism"*

Asceticism involves a renunciation of food, drink, and other creature comforts for the purpose of earning favor with God. Oftentimes, such a practice is driven by a desire to impress others. It is for this reason that some have translated the Greek word for asceticism in our text as referring to "excessive humility" or "false humility."<sup>8</sup> Paul knew that a false teacher in Colossae was adamant concerning abstinence from food and drink. Like others who practiced asceticism in the ancient world, the man likely believed he was spiritually enlightened through the practice. Ancient religions often used fasting as a means to experience transcendental visions.<sup>9</sup> It seems Paul knew there was a man at Colossae who was promoting such things. The man was apparently driven by an unholy desire to impress others. The apostle called the man's false religion what it really was — it was a form of false humility.

#### *"Worship of Angels"*

Along with asceticism, the erroneous leader at Colossae was promoting mysticism. He was telling people they needed to engage in "worship of angels." When we read Scripture, we learn that worship is to be reserved for God alone. Does not God's Law tell us, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them..." (Exodus 20:4-5). When angels appeared to humans at various times in the Bible, they strictly prohibited people from worshipping them (Revelation 19:10). In addition, the Bible is clear that worship exists to give praise to God. When Isaiah and John were both teleported into the presence of God, they saw angels worshipping the Lord (Isaiah 6:2-3; Revelation 4:6-8). Angels don't receive worship. The

<sup>8</sup> Johnston, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 121.

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Example: Show a Palm Branch

Lyrics to Song "Palms of Victory"

I saw a blood washed pilgrim, a sinner saved by grace,  
Upon the King's highway, with peaceful, shining face;  
Temptations sore beset him, but nothing could afright;  
He said, "The yoke is easy, the burden, it is light."  
Refrain

Then palms of victory, crowns of glory,  
Palms of victory I shall wear.  
His helmet was salvation, a simple faith his shield,  
And righteousness his breastplate, the spirit's sword  
he'd wield.

All fiery darts arrested, and quenched their blazing  
flight;

He cried "The yoke is easy, the burden, it is light."  
Refrain

I saw him in the furnace; he doubted not, nor feared,  
And in the flames beside him, the Son of God  
appeared;

Though seven times 'twas heated, with all the  
tempter's might,

He cried, "The yoke is easy, the burden, it is light."  
Refrain

'Mid storms, and clouds, and trials, in prison, at the  
stake,

He leaped for joy, rejoicing, 'twas all for Jesus' sake;  
That God should count him worthy, was such supreme  
delight,

He cried, "The yoke is easy, the burden, is so light."  
Refrain

I saw him overcoming, through all the swelling strife,  
Until he crossed the threshold of God's eternal life;  
The crown, the throne, the scepter, the name, the  
stone so white,

Were his, who found, in Jesus, the yoke and burden  
light.

Refrain

Lord is the only one worthy of our praise and adoration. Christians should always be careful to not worship any being other than the Lord. He alone — not an angel, icon, statue, idol, or saint — is worthy of humanity’s praise.

In the first-century church at Colossae, the worship of angels was tied to pagan philosophy. The Gnostic heresy had a belief system in which angels were regarded as mediators between the supreme god and who. It was believed that different angels had emanated from God’s presence over a span of ages and aeons. To really interact with God, one had to pray through such angels. The teaching was akin to modern teachings that promote praying through saints.<sup>10</sup> The Gnostics drew their system of beliefs from Platonic philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Some believe that Simon Magus of Acts 8:9-24 was a proponent of such mystical philosophy.

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Example: Show a picture of a relic in France that is used for prayers.

#### *“Going on in Detail about Visions”*

In speaking of “visions,” Paul had in mind what we would call “private revelations,” “personal revelations,” or “extra-biblical revelations.” The language Paul used conveyed a basic meaning of “to set foot in.”<sup>12</sup> Many believe the term was a cherished one of his opponents. It meant “to enter.”<sup>13</sup> Maybe the false teachers boasted of teleporting and “setting foot into” different spiritual realms through their visions. Perhaps they boasted that they had experiences similar to the one Isaiah had in Isaiah 6:1-3. Maybe they claimed they entered into the heavenly realm, saw angels in God’s presence, and worshipped through those angels.

It has been the belief of many throughout church history that such a sort of revelation from God was only reserved for prophets and apostles, those the Lord ordained to be the revelatory vessels of his truth (2 Peter 1:20-21). Paul seemed to indicate that visions were specially reserved for a special group of people. When he was forced to defend his role as an apostle, he said, “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? *Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?*” (1 Corinthians 9:1).

Throughout church history, there also have been Christians who have claimed to receive extra-biblical, personal revelations from the Lord. These can be of the most serious sort, such as Joseph Smith claiming to receive visions concerning the “restoration” of the church. Or they can be of a less serious sort, such as a professing believer who claims to have received a vision of Jesus or a special encounter with the spirit realm. There is also a version of this error that seems so commonplace and harmless that it goes on almost undetected by the average Christian. I am speaking of those who often speak of their interactions with the Lord by saying something like “God told me.” While the one who speaks in such a way may not mean to claim that he or she has experienced a private revelation from God, he or she must be aware of how such a claim sounds. It gives the appearance that one has the ability to personally receive audible revelations from the Lord.

Modern believers should be on guard against such things. The Lord’s special revelation of himself was given to a special group of people — the prophets in the Old Testament and the apostles in the New Testament (Ephesians 2:20; Ephesians 4:11). The revelation they received from the Lord is sufficient for giving us the truth we need for life and godliness (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 3:15-17). It is best that if anyone says, “God told me,” he or she should be ready to point to a chapter and verse through which God has spoken.

#### *“Puffed up”*

<sup>10</sup> Robertson, 497.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, 195.

<sup>12</sup> Robertson, 497.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, 123.

With the words “puffed up without reason,” Paul pointed to the primary cause of inferior religion. Pride is the source of all aberrations from God’s truth. Do we not learn this from Satan’s own rebellion? When he twisted God’s truth and rebelled against the Lord he was motivated by an unholy zeal for self-glory (Isaiah 14:13). When he deceived Adam and Eve, he coaxed them into operating by the same perverted pride (Genesis 3:5). A prideful heart often lurks behind the scenes of erroneous Christian teaching.

In 1 Corinthians 4:6 and 8:1 Paul spoke of the way arrogance often drives false beliefs. He himself knew the temptation toward pride in things related to religion. On one occasion, he experienced a revelatory vision through which his soul was extracted from his body and he was caught up into the presence of God. He saw marvelous and majestic things of which he did not feel he could speak (2 Corinthians 12:4). In recounting such things, he told of how the Lord gave him a “thorn...in the flesh” lest he should become “conceited” (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul knew the temptation to boast in one’s religious progress. If such enticements exist when one’s religious experiences are in alignment with God’s truth, how much stronger might they be when one is in the clutches of false, man-made religion? Such was the problem in Colossae. Man-centered doctrines were making some to be puffed up with pride. Those who boasted of their harsh self-discipline, mystical encounters, and extra-biblical visions were guilty of living for their own glory over God’s glory.

#### *“Without Reason”*

The words “without reason” could be translated “without cause.”<sup>14</sup> It pointed to the utter futility of false philosophy and the pride that often accompanies such false philosophy. Paul’s intent was to say that nothing was achieved through the doctrines and self-congratulatory attitudes of the false teachers at Colossae. Paul’s judgment was in alignment with the Psalmist who condemned the vanity of idolatry in his day by saying, “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat” (Psalm 115:4-7).

#### **Verse 19**

After pointing to inferior sources of spiritual advancement in verse 18, Paul spoke of the true source of spiritual advancement by saying, “...and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.” In speaking of “the Head,” Paul undoubtedly meant to refer to Jesus. He had used the designation for our Lord earlier in his letter (1:18; 2:10). Paul’s words contained various layers of meaning. In one sense, they were aimed at the exclusivist tendencies of the false teachers at Colossae. Through their twisted doctrines, such teachers attempted to disbar genuine believers from the fellowship of the church (2:16, 18). Though speaking of such teachers as being separated from “the Head,” Paul indicated that it was the false teachers who were actually unworthy of being a part of the church.<sup>15</sup>

#### *“Holding Fast”*

In speaking of the way believers receive spiritual nourishment from Christ, Paul held up the need for “holding fast” to Christ. His verbiage carried ideas of remaining closely united with someone.<sup>16</sup> His language was a picturesque way of describing the faith-filled pursuit of Jesus.

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<sup>14</sup> Wright, 122.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, 124.

<sup>16</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 465.

Such activity is described in different ways in the New Testament. On one occasion, Jesus told his followers to abide in him (John 15:4-5). On another occasion, he said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). The author of Hebrews likened the faith-filled pursuit of Jesus to running a race (Hebrews 12:1-2). The important thing for us to note is that all these descriptions are different ways of saying the same thing. The believer's spiritual strength and sustenance comes from communion with Christ. It is a faith-oriented communion with Jesus that results in transformation of the human soul. The spiritual substitutes of legalism, asceticism, and mysticism are profitless in enacting real change.

#### *"The Head"*

As we have already seen, the title "head" pointed to Jesus' authoritative rank over the church (Matthew 28:18), but it also pointed to the way Jesus provides vital life to his church. As a human head supplies a human body with neurological signals, and thus brings life to the body, Christ similarly endues his people with the spiritual life they need for godliness. Jesus spoke of this reality himself by using a different metaphor — "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Paul used the head metaphor when writing to the Ephesians as well. In that epistle, he similarly showed that Christ the head is the source of all true spiritual growth: "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:15-16). The genuine Christians in Colossae didn't need to look to asceticism or mysticism for spiritual life. Christ was the source of all spiritual vitality.

One has called separation from the head (Christ) as "that capital crime of seducers."<sup>17</sup> It seems every false form of Christianity errs in this regard. In all our Christian considerations, we should make sure Christ is first. The person and work of Christ is the source of our spiritual life and vitality. Without the God-Man we have nothing in a spiritual sense. Paul told the Romans, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Romans 8:9). Do you have Christ? Are you clinging to him as the source of your spiritual security, sustenance, and strength?

#### *"From Whom The Whole Body"*

In speaking of "the whole body," Paul included every member of the church at Colossae. His point was to highlight the reality that spiritual growth and advancement is something every believer can enjoy. It is not something reserved for a specially selected group of spiritual elite people.<sup>18</sup> The Gnostic heresy was well known for its exclusivist tendencies. Those who boasted of a special knowledge often looked down on others who weren't as enlightened as they were. They often imagined that they had top-secret threshold on the truth and that they were a part of an elite spiritual brotherhood. Paul debunked such notions by reminding his readers that "the whole body" could receive growth from communion with Christ.

#### *"Nourished and Knit Together Through Its Joints and Ligaments..."*

Notice that Paul spoke of the "body" being moved by "its joints and ligaments." The two body parts in view made up the skeletal and muscular system of the human body. Those two systems are ones that contribute to the movement of the human body. Paul's intent was to

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<sup>17</sup> Davenant, 513.

<sup>18</sup> Johnston, 73.

portray the church moving forward in progress underneath the head of the church, Jesus Christ.

Paul used the words “joints and ligaments” to speak of the individual believers at the church at Colossae. The metaphor of “joints and ligaments” reveals a few things about the body of Christ and the nature of spiritual growth. First, it points to the mystical bond between God’s people. Because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in their souls, God’s people are spiritually tied together. The Spirit of Christ makes them spiritual family. Paul’s words “knit together” speak to these realities. He used the same word earlier in his letter to speak of the unity of the church (Colossians 2:2). False teaching at Colossae was isolating and dividing the church; thus, it was keeping people from a healthy experience in Christian community that led to spiritual growth. Paul wanted to remind his readers of the way they had been made one through Christ. They needed to be on guard against deceitful doctrines that divided the body.

Second, Paul’s metaphor of joints and ligaments reveals that Christ, the head, often works through his church to provide spiritual growth for the individual members of his body. The Reformers’ emphasis on the body of Christ as a “means of grace” was accurate. It could be argued that no one grows spiritually in isolation. We need the church in order to mature into what the Lord wants us to be.

Third, the metaphor of “joints and ligaments” indicates that each individual member has a part to play in the growth of the entire body. Paul indicated this to be true through his use of the words “nourished and knit together.” The word “nourished” means “to furnish,” “to provide,” or “to support.” Paul used the term in reference to the spiritual nourishment Christ provides in 2 Corinthians 9:10 and Galatians 3:5. In our current passage, he used it in the passive voice of the Greek language; thus, his idea was “to receive help.”<sup>19</sup> His point was that individual members of the body receive help and support from the Lord through other members of the body. Such a reality is central to how spiritual growth occurs within the church.

The Lord has graciously given spiritual gifts to his people. Some have the ability to preach, teach, encourage, or lead. Others are supernaturally empowered in reference to generosity, exhibiting mercy, or serving (Romans 12:4-8). In his providential wisdom, the Lord supplies his body with exactly what it needs for mutual edification, equipping, and encouragement (Ephesians 4:11-15; Hebrews 10:24-25). When individual members are committed to using their gifts for the glory of Christ and the good of his body, the church will grow in accordance with his purposes.<sup>20</sup> Paul wanted his readers to know that such is the path of true spiritual advancement, not the counterfeit forms of Christianity being peddled at Colossae.

*“...Grows With a Growth That Is from God.”*

In speaking of the growth that comes from Christ, Paul said the church “...grows with a growth that is from God.” The verb tense of the word translated “grows” indicates a continual growth.<sup>21</sup> Paul’s idea was that the church will consistently grow in a spiritual sense when it remains in communion with Christ. To divert from Christ and pursue ascetic practices, interactions with angels, or private revelations would have cut the church off from such growth. This is true because growth only comes from God and God’s Son. When writing to the church at Corinth, Paul said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6). To seek growth outside of Christ is to construct castles made of sand that will eventually melt

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<sup>19</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 466.

<sup>20</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 466.

<sup>21</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 466.

into the sea (Matthew 7:26-27). It is for this reason that Peter told his readers, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen” (2 Peter 3:18).