

Cling to Christ

3 Freedoms Found in Jesus

Colossians 2:16-23

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Introduction

Is the Christian religion a set of rules to be followed? You've heard it said that Christianity isn't a religion, but it's a relationship. I think that's true. But I think this does oversimplify things. For instance, do I really have to go to church? Can't I just worship God at home? What's the big deal about small groups when I can just meet with God on my own? Maybe most importantly and fundamentally: What about the 10 Commandments? Do they even matter anymore?

Jesus was once getting ready to go on a journey, when a young man interrupted him. This young man was rich. He was educated. And he was polite. He knelt before Jesus, and he said "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus didn't dismiss the man. He didn't say that he was busy. Jesus said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" Things just got interesting. Was Jesus saying that in order to have eternal life, we still have to live under the law?

Context

The church in Colossae was working through this issue. As Paul wrote to the small church in Colossae, "a dangerous teaching was threatening the church... one that lessened Christ's role and undermined the new identity of believers 'in Christ.'" (ESV Study Bible) We're going to tackle those false teachings today. These false teachings came from false teachers, and these false teachers were passing judgment, disqualifying, and condemning Christians. Paul is fighting against these false teachers, and proclaiming freedom in Christ. Jesus has already defeated the Devil at the cross. One tactic Satan still has is to accuse Christians of not being good enough, tricking them into thinking that they can earn or add more to their salvation. By doing this, Satan wants to put you into a spiritual prison.

Sermon Preview

Our sermon will share 3 freedoms found in Jesus. Legalism, mysticism, and asceticism are things that try to earn or add more to our salvation. I'll define these terms as we go through them, but know that they are ways of thinking that you can save yourself from your sin. The false teachers tried to put Christians back into spiritual shackles, and in some ways they succeeded. This spiritual bondage still happens to believers today, and our text explains how Jesus is the key to free you.



1. Legalism

The first freedom found in Jesus is freedom from legalism.

*16 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.** 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)*

Salvation Based on Law-Keeping

The word “legalism” does not appear in the Bible, but the concept is contained in our passage. The false teachers were passing judgment on the Christians in Colossae. They were questioning their spiritual maturity. And their questioning was concerning food and drink, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths. These were Jewish observances, dietary laws and ceremonies that were present in the times of the Old Testament. At the heart of these Jewish holidays was holiness. You had to be holy to please God. To be sure, we still do need to be holy to please God - but our holiness comes from the blood of Christ - not the blood of bulls and goats. *Legalism is looking at our own ability to keep the law and believing that our works can still secure our salvation. Legalism believes that our law-keeping is still the basis of our acceptance before God, even after becoming a Christian. Legalism is not to be saved by God’s grace, but to be saved by your works. This is heretical to the Gospel, and antithetical to Christ’s work on the cross.

Shadows and Substance

It’s important to understand that the Jewish observances, dietary laws and ceremonies that were present in the times of the Old Testament were good in helping us to understand God, but they ultimately served to point us to Christ. In verse 17 of our passage, Paul calls them shadows of the things to come. Think about God having a shadow. When you see the shadow, you have evidence of God, giving you an idea of what he was like. But the substance of the shadow - the person, the reality behind it - is Jesus. He is the substance, the body behind the shadow. The false teachers missed the point. Or more specifically, they missed the person. They focused on the signs instead of the Savior. And, unfortunately, these shadows were elevated to be symbols of spiritual advancement. They said, if you don’t observe these Jewish customs, you must not be a Christian. Paul says, don’t let these false

teachers judge you. Because of Jesus, you are free from legalism — looking at our own ability to keep the law and believing that our works can still secure our salvation.

See the Savior, Not the Shadows

So, will you see the savior, not the shadows? Although we are removed from the Jewish context, I think there are still some shadows we elevate to be symbols of spiritual advancement here in the church. We might focus on the shadows, thinking that we are Christians, when we should really be focusing on Christ. We might focus on baptism, or attending church on Sundays, or saying the sinners prayer. These mean nothing if we don't actually see Jesus in our life. Or think about serving on leadership. Serving on worship team. These are all good things. But they are shadows. They mean nothing if you don't have Jesus. True life is found by moving past the shadows and seeing Jesus Christ. This part of our passage takes on a supportive tone, so I want to offer some encouragement. If you are a new believer, don't let anyone tell you that you don't belong or are less of a Christian because you're not in leadership or on the worship team. It's good to serve, but the goal is the Savior. If you are a more mature believer, or if you are in leadership or worship team, don't judge others. Remember that we don't always know what's happening in people's personal lives. We should be praying and helping those who are hurting. Take this as a warning - to focus on Jesus the Savior - not just serving him.



2. Mysticism

The second freedom found in Jesus is freedom from mysticism.

*18 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**, 19 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. (Colossians 2:18-19)*

Seeking Extra Experiences and Keeping Busy Spiritual Activity

Again, we have the false teachers disqualifying, deciding against Christians because of a type of mysticism. They are supposedly disqualified from winning the prize of eternal life, and it has been decided against them that they do not get to enter heaven. The word asceticism appears a couple times in our passage. This instance refers to willingness to worship angels, wanting to win them over, showing homage to them, and giving up your body for visions. The sensuous mind is looking for things related to fleshly experiences, things that are carnal and worldly. We “experience” God by acknowledging his presence, knowing him through his Word, having a heart-posture of prayer, and fellowshiping with the church. *Mysticism is seeking special spiritual insight through extra experiences and keeping busy spiritual activity. It’s keeping busy spiritual activity, but not keeping close to the actual person of Jesus.

Hold Fast to the Head

Notice Paul’s counterpoint to the worship of angels and mysticism — it’s holding fast to the head. Jesus is the head of the church. The church is his body. And when you hold fast to the head, the rest of the body gets nourished and knit together. And it doesn’t grow by magic or mysticism - but by maintaining contact with Christ. The false teachers said, if you don’t worship angels, if you don’t have extra experiences and spiritual activity, you must not be a Christian. Paul says, don’t let these false teachers disqualify you. Because of Jesus, you are free from mysticism — the need to seek special spiritual insight through extra experiences and keeping busy spiritual activity.

Stay Close to Christ to Grow in God

So, will you stay close to Christ to grow in God? When Jess and I were dating, we liked to experience different things together. We went to Tanaka farms, we went to LACMA, we saw Wicked, we went on a double date to make succulent pots, we went to the fair and Disneyland, OC fair and LA fair every year dating, we went to Disneyland. This was our dating life. We're married now, and while I still enjoy going out on dates – the real joy comes from living out our daily lives together. This part of living life together is the heart of our relationship, because it's not about the extra activities that we do, but it's about simply enjoying each other. When I was younger, my relationship with Jesus was centered around activities - church camps, VBS, retreats. You might be inclined to say that this is when you felt closest to God, or when you experienced him the most in your life. But think about what you're doing at retreats – you're spending days away from the world and centered around God. Of course you feel close to him! While these things are good for our spiritual health, they should not be our only means of connecting with Christ. We are to stay close to him in our daily lives. The real joy comes from living your regular life together with Jesus. The relationship grows from holding fast to each other, not the extra experiences. I challenge you to not be focused on extra experiences and busy spiritual activities, but to find true spiritual life in the actual person of Jesus.



3. Asceticism

The third freedom found in Jesus is freedom from asceticism.

*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— 21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:20-23)***

Relying on Your Own Strength and Not Resting in God

With this third point, Paul gets more personal – he’s talking directly to the Christians as they have succumbed to some of the false teachings. He confronts his fellow Christians. Note the quotation marks used in verse 21: “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.” These were specific rules that the false teachers had imposed, and that the Christians claimed as the Word of God. The false teachers made these rules appear wise, but they were simply human rules of religion – self-made as our text says. We see the word “asceticism” again, and this time it refers to false humility, self-denial, and possibly self-mutilation as you see it says “severity to the body.” But this is all dangerous self-confident spiritual growth in the flesh and not being confident in Christ’s work on the cross. *Asceticism is fleshly self-denial that relies on our own strength and not resting in the strength that God supplies. It’s forgetting that, as a Christian, you have died to yourself and the world and you are supposed to be alive in Christ.

Sinful Rebelliousness

Look at Paul’s reasoning as to why these rules are worthless. This self-made religion, these self-imposed rules are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh, the sinful rebelliousness that lies deep within our hearts. The religious rules that we make for ourselves are useless in our sanctification, and worthless in our attempt to offer worship to God. The church in Colossae said to themselves, if we don’t fight sin on our own, we must not be Christians. They forgot about the help of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes after you become a Christian, you want to hold on to your pride, saying I can do this.

God wants you to say that you can't. Or we think that we must be exceptional in order for God to love us. God says that you don't. Paul says, don't be fooled. Because of Jesus, you are free from asceticism — any fleshly self-denial that relies on your own strength and not resting in the strength that God supplies.

Spiritual Disciplines Driven by Love

So, will you seek true spiritual disciplines that are driven by your love for the Lord? *Disciplines of a Godly Man* by R. Kent Hughes is a modern classic book about growth in godliness. He says that the key to spiritual disciplines is finding the right motivation. The wrong motivation seeks to gain merit from God. The right motivation comes from loving God and wanting to please him. The book details many areas where we can be spiritually disciplined, from relationships to our soul, to our character, and ministry. Let me give you some examples. The spiritual discipline of purity should come from the fact that you love God more than sensual pleasures. The spiritual discipline of integrity should come from the fact that you have intimacy with God. The discipline of the tongue - keeping watch over your words - should come from the fact that you see your words as worship to God. The discipline of work - or studying if you're a student - should come from the fact that you do your work diligently as if you're doing it for the Lord. The discipline of giving comes from the fact that everything you have has been given to you by God. The discipline of going to church comes from the fact that you are committed to God and his people - the spiritual community of believers. If you think about it, discipline is part of discipleship. I encourage you to live like Jesus, not because of the law, but because you love him.



The Gospel

I want us to step back for a second. I've been talking this whole time about freedoms found in Jesus, but maybe you don't think you need to be freed at all. Maybe you feel perfectly fine, and this sermon doesn't really apply to you.

The fact of the matter is that we're all under spiritual slavery. Our sermon focused around freedoms because our text talked about spiritual slavery. Slavery means bondage, being a prisoner, being captive. Spiritual means it's not physical, but relating to our souls, our minds, and our hearts. Spiritual slavery is having your heart held captive to anything other than Christ. The center of spiritual slavery is sin. Jesus says that everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. (John 8:34) Sin is anything that goes against God's standards. You are owned by sin, and by Satan. This doesn't mean that you commit the most heinous sins, but it does mean that your heart is held captive — and you are destined for hell. Your sin condemns you.

But if you believe in Jesus, that he is the Son of God, that he lived a perfect life without sin, that he died in your place to take the punishment for your sins, and that he resurrected — proving that he reigns supreme over sin and death, then you will be saved. Jesus will become your king, and he will set you free. You will have the mind of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. You will no longer be a slave to sin, but a slave to God. You will give your life to him because you love him. And you will share in his heavenly kingdom, adopted into his family as sons.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

If you are already a believer, stand firm. Find rest in your freedom. And remember that this is not a license to sin — to submit again to a yoke of slavery — but a lesson in love. Love the Lord with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength. We have so much to be thankful for this Thanksgiving. And at the end of it all is a kind and generous God, who is patient and not wanting anyone to perish. Be bold and courageous in proclaiming the power of Christ and the Good News of God.



Big Idea

First, because of Jesus, you are free from legalism — looking at our own ability to keep the law and believing that our works can still secure our salvation. So, will you see the Savior, not the shadows? Second, because of Jesus, you are free from mysticism — the need to seek special spiritual insight through extra experiences and keeping busy spiritual activity. So, will you stay close to Christ to grow in God? Third, because of Jesus, you are free from asceticism — any fleshly self-denial that relies on your own strength and not resting in the strength that God supplies. So, will you seek true spiritual disciplines that are driven by your love for the Lord?

Here is our big idea: Cling to Christ and be set free from sin and spiritual slavery.

Conclusion

Let's go back to the beginning again for our conclusion. I asked you: Is Christianity a set of rules to be followed? The answer is no. Remember, Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship. What do we do about the Ten Commandments? Let's go back to that story with Jesus and the rich young ruler. Jesus said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" Was Jesus saying that in order to have eternal life, we still have to live under the law?

*21 And he [the rich young ruler] said, "**All these I have kept** from my youth."*

The rich young ruler actually thought that he had obeyed all of the law, and that he kept the commands from his youth! Jesus knows, of course, that this was not the case. This man did not understand the depth and deception of his own sin. Jesus hits him where it hurts. This man is rich, so to test him, Jesus tells him to let go of his money:

*22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, **follow me.**" 23 But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. (Luke 18:21-23)*

And the rich young ruler can't do it. The rich young ruler learned a lesson from the Good Teacher that he couldn't keep the law. The law shows us that we can't live a perfect life. The law will always condemn us if we think they're the keys to eternal life. We can't fulfill the law. We can't follow it perfectly. And so they point us to Christ who can. Christ is the key.

And look at what else Jesus says. He says follow me. Christianity is not about following rules, but about following Christ. Christianity is not about keeping the law, but loving the Lord. When your heart belongs to God, the Holy Spirit helps you live a life that pleases him. The commands still remain relevant. They reveal to us the character of Christ. They point out our sin and point us to the Savior. We won't be able to keep the commandments perfectly, but we'll be able to keep them in our hearts — showing us the way to live and love as children of God.

What would have happened if the rich young ruler said, Jesus — that's really hard for me to do right now. My heart loves money. I realize I can't keep the law. I'm conflicted and torn. I'm tired of fighting. I'm broken before you. Please help me? I don't know. But here's what God's Word says: The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:17) This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome. (1 John 5:3) Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. (Mathew 11:28) All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. (John 6:37) Cling to Christ and be set free from sin and spiritual slavery.



Cling to Christ

Free to live and free to love
Freedom from the ones that judge
They claim that we must keep the law
They say our works can save us all
And sometimes our hearts falsely trust
That we can earn the Father's love
But Jesus, on the cross he died
A perfect life, our sacrifice
And all our sins were nailed to him
And in our place, he stood condemned
He died, in 3 days rose again
No longer enemies, but friends
And children of the gracious king
Set free from Satan's slavery
We love you Lord, to Christ we cling
For freedom Christ has set us free

References

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Special thanks: Hanley Liu, Kevin Quan, and Jessica Lee