

Colossians Part 3: Fullness and Freedom

Week 5: Freedom from shadows

Sunday, February 12th 2023

✠ A huge *therefore*...

- **Question- what are most important single words we see in NT... GOD. JESUS. LORD. LOVE. GRACE. SIN. FORGIVE... There's one easy to not think of, but very important- NIV occurs over 160 times. THEREFORE.**
- **In scripture THEREFORE connects a statement of truth to the consequence of that statement of truth- what this truth LOOKS LIKE in life- here's why this MATTERS..."**
- **Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,**
- **Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**
- **Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.**
- **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!**
- **In COLOSSIANS, we have three THEREFORES... the first one we see today, and it is HUGE.**
- **Over past three Sunday's we've heard Paul exclaim...**
You have been made complete in Christ, set free of your flesh, raised with Christ, made alive with Christ, you are fully forgiven, and all our spiritual enemies have been humiliated by the stunningly unexpected love and humility of the cross... THEREFORE, don't be judged or defrauded – don't have your joy and freedom sabotaged by obsolete religious shadows that are not the real thing!
- **Paul's warning addresses two big pitfalls of Christian culture, and these are religious pride and legalism.**
- **Beneath both of these is a very unlikely temptation. When we think of temptation what probably comes to mind are things like lust, greed, gossip, anger, fear.... THIS temptation, on the other hand, may be considered by some to be a virtue, but if so it is a sheep in wolf's clothing. This is the temptation to RULES.**
- **Instinctively we think people don't like rules- that we just want to do whatever we want whenever we want- and in some ways that's true- but the honest reality is that in our human condition- especially the religious expressions of the human condition- we LOVE RULES.**

✠ **The unlikely temptation... why we love rules.**

- **Seven years ago I told you about a song by the Christian musician Derek Webb- it's called 'A New Law'- the lyrics are a bit uncomfortable, but he is hitting at the heart of this truth...**

Don't teach me about politics and Government

Just tell me who to vote for

Don't teach me about truth and beauty- Just label my music

Don't teach me about moderation and liberty

I prefer a shot of grape juice

Don't teach me about loving my enemies... Just give me a new law

Don't teach me how to live like a free man...Just give me a new law

I don't wanna know if the answers aren't easy

So just bring it down from the mountain to me

I want a new law... Gimme that new law

- **Video on youtube. Grainy but powerful. [Linked](#)**

- **Its ironic that while people outside the church tend to look at Christians as rule-driven, the New Testament, proclaims- EXCLAIMS- that In Christ we are free from the motivation of law- of guilt and obligation. This is what Paul describes in...**

Romans 7:6 *But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.*

- **I've preached on this passage multiple times over the years, and it's incredibly important! And yet we still love our law. But WHY, and why are we warned against this, time and again? FEW THOUGHTS....**
- **Law appeals to pride. If my behavior is motivated by keeping the rules, or more of the rules, it's easy to look down on people I think aren't, easy to be judgmental- and in doing so elevate myself.**
- **Another- rather than raising the bar of moral behavior, the motivation of law actually moves people toward the lowest acceptable standard. Throughout church history perhaps no law has been more precious than the TITHE. You are to give 10% of your income to the church, or you are being disobedient to scripture, and to God. Of course, this is solely based a boiled down formula of various teachings from the Mosaic Law (Old Covenant), but to this day we love to hang on to it. In fact, it's not hard to find churches that teach the incredible liberation of Romans 7:6, and yet somehow make an exception when it comes to the tithe.**
- **But if our giving is based on the tithe, what's an inevitable question? PRE or POST tax? We want to know the minimal acceptable standard. On top of this, if we know we are failing to meet this standard, it opens the door to say, well, why really even bother.**
- **In contrast, the NT/NC proclaims, be a vibrant part of the body! Give what you have decided in your heart to give, cheerfully, generously, with LOVE, and without the burden of guilt and obligation!**
- **But the worst thing about living under the yoke of religious rules and regulations- they have NO POWER TO CHANGE OUR HEARTS. LISTEN to what Paul tells the church in 2 Corinthians 3...**

2 Corinthians 3:7-11 *Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone (**the law!**), came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit (**motivation of the spirit, of love!**) be even more glorious? ⁹ If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ¹⁰ For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory (**life in the Spirit!**). ¹¹ And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!*

- **That last sentence has 2 levels- Paul here says the law- from its origin- was never meant to be God's permanent solution for how we live! It was always meant to be temporary, until Christ would inaugurate NEW WAY of Spirit. LIKEWISE, in our own personal lives, law does have ability to motivate us for a period of time, but the motivation of law always ultimately FAILS! Put a tray of freshly baked cookies in a room with your kid- or your husband- and say "DON'T EAT THE COOKIES!"... just a matter of time.**
- **BUT MOTIVATION OF SPIRIT, of our identity, of LOVE... NEVER FAILS. When we are walking by Spirit, we WILL NOT gratify the desires of our flesh, because to do so would violate the very nature of WHO WE NOW ARE!**

- *As Paul said in Galatians 5... “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free! Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery!” What is the yoke of slavery? THE LAW.*
- *And so back to Colossians... this is a message from Colossians... There were false teachers spreading heresy in this young church, and here we see our biggest clue as to what this heresy actually was. It was the temptation to think our rightness with God, our wholeness and wellness as God’s people- was based on religious performance. On keeping religious law and having elite and mystical religious experiences.*
- *In response Paul exclaims, DON’T LET THESE people condemn you! Don’t let them pass judgement on you, and don’t fall prey to their bankrupt religious philosophy with all its rules and regulations!*
- *If Paul were writing this today, he may have looked at these legalists and said...*

† **Don’t judge me bro!**

Colossians 2:16 *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.*

- *The word ‘judge’ here carries the idea of exclusion. The Colossians were being tempted to judge- to push away and exclude people these false teachers thought didn’t meet an acceptable level of moral requirements, which very likely were elements of the Mosaic Law- the OT dietary laws, Jewish festivals and holy days, and as we’ve already seen, the practice of circumcision.*
- *For most churches today these aren’t issues. But what are equivalents in the church now we may use to judge or exclude people based upon a miss-led sense of doctrinal, cultural, and social purity?*
- *Not this isn’t that big of a deal here, still is in church culture. The way we dress, the way we talk, our vocabulary about things- maybe the type of music we listen to, way we express ourselves in worship. These all are perfectly fine things if sincere, but they can easily become social tests that exclude people or make them feel unwelcome and judged.*
- *How about politics? Assuming everyone has the same politics, has the same way of thinking about current events and social issues- and talking about these issues in such a way that could easily make a person feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.*
- *Think about your top 3 political/social issues – things you have passionate thoughts/opinions. If you’re really honest, do you think a person would have to agree with you on this to be a sincere Christian who loves the Lord? If they didn’t, would you struggle accepting them? This can get messy- nuanced- a NT world view should inform how we think about politics and social issues! Details matter. But so often it’s just easier to draw our law-based lines and say- even if to ourselves- for me to view you as an equal brother or sister in Christ, to have genuine fellowship with you, you have to be on my side of this line.*
- *NOW, this doesn’t always happen, and a thing I’ve always LOVED about Trinity is the political diversity within our church family. But people leave churches over political issues all the time, and it hurts the body.*
- *Big picture- If our sense of spiritual maturity leads us to distance ourselves from other believers rather than draw us into unity, we likely have a problem.*
- *GOING ON, Paul describes these things- external & material religious rules, doctrinal litmus tests- as SHADOWS, and says there is only one thing that is truly SUBSTANCE.*

† Shadow and substance

Colossians 2:17 *These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ!*

- **God says: These legalistic matters are just shadows! They aren't real thing! Don't be judged, and don't judge each other on fleeting issues that miss the only thing that truly matters, which is Christ! Who He is, what He has done, and what this means for you as his disciples!**
- **This is pretty straightforward- and yet for the church in Colossae, there are two other things here that are subtle, but powerful, and were likely understood by the Colossian believers.**
- **FIRST is the paradox Paul draws between shadow and substance. In fact, the NASB translates this as "The SUBSTANCE belongs to Christ."**
- **(NOTE- the word for 'substance' or 'reality' is the same greek word in other contexts translated as 'body', as in the 'body of Christ.' It's possible Paul is making a double-entendre- referring to the substance of Christ, and the 'body of Christ' at the same time, noting how both are essential for the fullness of LIFE IN CHRIST.)**
- **In our flesh- old human way of thinking- we would likely consider spiritual things- things of faith- as the shadows. Murky. Mysterious. Unseen, Uncertain... and physical things we can experience without faith as being that which is 'substantial' and real.**
- **But the opposite is true! The NT reveals it is things of the SPIRIT, the reality we enter through FAITH that is truly of substance, that will not pass away... and it is physical and external things of this world that in fact are temporary and shadowy. This was a theme in the writings of CS Lewis- so much so that his biography, and movie based on his life, was titled 'Shadowlands.'**
- **NOW, THAT SAID, ALSO CORE to a NT world view is that this world, this life, DOES MATTER! Christianity is a faith firmly rooted in reality of life. Our expression of God's nature and character is expressed in context of THIS LIFE. God calls us to make world a better place!**
- **Within a generation of Paul writing Colossians the great heresy that will confront church was GNOSTICISM... it said the spiritual world was all that mattered, and physical world had no meaning whatsoever, therefore anything you did 'in the flesh' was perfectly fine.**
- **This is NOT the perspective of the NT. We express our faith, we worship, we work, and we understand God's moral leadership, all in the context of life today.**
- **The bigger point Paul makes is a contrast between the old age- the age of law- and the NEW AGE- the NEW COVENANT, the age of life in the Spirit. And this leads to the second point here....**
- **This new age has ALREADY come. We've talked about this before: we tend to think in terms of the current age as history as we know it, and the age to come as heaven when we die or what will happen after the second coming of Christ. But recurring proclamation of NT is that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the NEW AGE has already been inaugurated in heaven, and through the work of the Holy Spirit- through God's redeemed people, this New Age is breaking out in the midst of NOW- in midst of history as we know it. SO WE- as citizens of heaven- are already part of the new age, and thus the things of the old age- such as the bondage of law, guilt, and obligation- no longer have any meaning or power over us.**
- **The grammar Paul uses here points toward this. NIV- THESE ARE A SHADOW OF THE THINGS THAT WERE TO COME. This is awkward in the English- it's like the phrase is both**

future and past tense at the same time. In fact, multiple English translations try to solve the awkward grammar by render this “the shadows of things that are to come”... but THE MORE ACCURATE TRANSLATION IS ... that WERE TO COME.

- **MEANING-** the age to come, the fulfillment of God’s promises to humanity through Israel, the fulfillment of God’s blessing... these **WERE TO COME** because they have already come!

- **This is what Paul exclaims in 2 Corinthians 1...**

2 Corinthians 1:20-22 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. ²¹ Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, ²² set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

- **The promises of God, the blessings of God, they have already come, fully, to every believer in every situation, because they are received IN CHRIST. His presence, his Spirit, and the new life, new identity we have through faith in Him.**
- **PAUL: THIS IS WHO YOU ARE! So don’t let anyone JUDGE YOU, and YOU, don’t judge others, based upon these things that are only shadows.**
- **NOW Paul makes a parallel point, but he turns from external legalism to internal pride... “These false teachers would appear to be super spiritual... but there is a time when....**

† **When ‘super spiritual’ is actually unspiritual**

Colossians 2:18 Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.

- **Here is described a person who claims to have an elite, probably highly emotional, spiritual experience that other people don’t have. Maybe visions, special revelations, hearing from angels. Image is of a person who is so caught up in the emotion and drama of their spiritual experiences that they in fact are worshipping their experience rather than God. (NTW) “This kind of worship, while seeming super spiritual and heavenly minded, actually borders on idolatry.”**
- **This is spiritual pride, and rather than being highly-spiritual, such people are actually unspiritual, their humility false, and worship is really all about them.**
- **So Paul warns: beware of such people- don’t let them disqualify you- steal away, cause you to doubt the vibrancy and fullness of your faith in Christ, and Christ’s presence in and with you.**
- **Leave that there..**
- **One of my favorite TV shows.. Parks and Recreation... great scene where character Leslie is sick, but refusing to go to the doctor. ANDY- not the sharpest chacter, played by Chris Pratt- is at a computer and says “Leslie! I typed in your symptoms and it says you have network connectivity problems!”**
- **Paul goes on to say- core problem of legalism and spiritual pride is that they both result from AND lead to...**

† **Connectivity problems- Spiritual connectivity problems with our true source of life... CHRIST**

Colossians 2:19a They have lost connection with the head,

- **Paul's point- simple but powerful- is that the true evidence of whether or not a person belongs to God's people is NOT the observance of legalistic religious rules or super-spiritual experiences... but whether you belong to CHRIST, having received Christ's life by faith.**
- **And if we HAVE been made NEW IN CHRIST, this will be evidenced by how we continue to GROW and MATURE in our relationship with Christ... which of course is evidenced by HOW WE LIVE.**
- **This is how Paul concludes this paragraph, as he points out there are....**

✠ Two realities of genuine spiritual growth

Colossians 2:19 They have lost connection with the head (CHRIST)... from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

- **First absolute reality of spiritual maturity- to use Paul's language, is that CHRIST is our head. CHRIST is our foundation, our identity, WHO WE LOOK TO for our hope, our CHARACTER, our peace, security, contentment, LOVE... and it is CHRIST TO WHOM WE ARE SURRENDERED as our center and authority.**
- **NOW, we fail at this- but I expect we would all agree, YES, the most important reality of maturity IN CHRIST is CHRIST HIMSELF.**
- **BUT WE SEE HERE A SECOND indispensable reality of spiritual growth, and that is our active participation in the BODY OF CHRIST. Paul's language here is compelling- CHRIST IS THE HEAD OF HIS BODY, and while the individual parts of the body all equally look TO THE HEAD as their source, THEY ARE SUPPORTED AND HELD TOGETHER BY EACH OTHER.**
- **The verse ends by saying 'the BODY grows as God causes it to grow.'**
- **Church- this is a strong statement, but also one of great encouragement and hope. According to this statement- and MANY other similar passages and themes throughout the NT, if we desire to genuinely say "CHRIST IS MY HEAD, MY SOURCE, MY AUTHORITY- AND... I desire for the Spirit to continually grow my understanding and experience the GOODNESS of the new life I have received in Christ- THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THIS HAPPENS IS OUR loving, forgiving, encouraging, and servant-hearted participation within the community of faith.**

SO! CHURCH! You have been made complete in Christ, raised with Christ, made alive with Christ, you are fully forgiven, all your spiritual enemies have been humiliated by the stunningly unexpected love and humility of the cross...

SO- as a family of faith- don't be judged or defrauded – don't have your joy and freedom sabotaged by obsolete religious shadows that are not the real thing!

- **In the FOLLOWING PARAGRAPH we see just why religious legalism is so powerless and even dangerous-and we will go there, NEXT WEEK**