

Colossians 2:16-19

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Paul warns the Colossians about confusing the means for the ends, worshipping shadows rather than the Light to which they belong.

The conjunction, *therefore*, pairs these verses with the ones preceding. What follows is the effect of what came before. In the previous section (Colossians 2:13-15), Paul described the incredible working of Jesus on the cross and what it means for the Colossian believers. He shows the unique power of Christ in both the physical and spiritual realm.

This unique working of God has made it possible for believers to be in relationship with Him, having been justified through Christ. The controversy of the day was whether or not Gentiles (non-Jews) needed to do anything themselves (such as circumcision) to be grafted into God's kingdom, and become righteous. Paul's position is that Christ has done it all. Nothing more is required.

Therefore (or, as a result of what Christ has done), *no one is to act as your judge*. This is a pretty direct warning from Paul. He is telling the Colossians that no one ought to be acting as their *judge*. And the implication here is that if anyone is, they are wrong and need to be ignored or confronted.

A judge is someone who determines and makes decrees. They approve or separate. They pronounce an opinion of justice and, because of their authority, it is obeyed and followed. One way to seek control over another person is to judge them. We naturally desire to avoid judgment, so are inclined to conform to the desires of others in order to escape the condemnation that might be heaped upon us.

What Paul says here is that none have a genuine authority to make such judgments. This is because of what God has done. Colossians 2:12-14 made it clear that Jesus had "canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us." We have a discharge of our debt, therefore no one has authority to try to collect the debt. In this case, the "debt" is our transgressions against God. If God has forgiven us, having nailed every sin to the cross, who is any human to condemn? So, the reasoning goes, any attempt to condemn that comes from a mere human is without merit. Paul is asking the Colossians not to submit to any authority other than Christ.

He goes into specifics to help hammer home the point. *No one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.*

Paul, in these examples, runs the gamut of Jewish religious practice. These are "traditions of men" (Colossians 2:7:8). There are religious guidelines for *food* and *drink*. These are largely concerning religious laws of ceremonial purity. What is permissible and what is not. How to keep oneself from being ritually defiled.

For Paul's purposes here, it seems most pertinent that these are daily practices. The clear message from Paul is, "Do not submit to seeking to be justified through religious practice in order to avoid criticism from men."

In addition to daily rituals, Paul includes periodic festivals. There were several festivals celebrated throughout the year, similar to our national holidays. They were ways to honor various aspects of God and His relationship to His people. A *new moon* (festival) was a more consistent celebration. It marked the beginning of each month, wherein no Israelite could fast or mourn—they must celebrate. The Jewish calendar was lunar, so any mention of a "month" in the Old Testament is talking about the cycle of the moon. New Moon Festivals were essentially monthly celebrations consecrating the next cycle to God.

Just as with *food* and *drink*, the Colossians should not allow themselves to attend the Jewish festivals as a means of seeking to be justified. They have already been justified in the sight of God through Christ's death on the cross (Colossians 2:14). Therefore, to perform any religious practice in order to seek to be justified is futility. It is seeking to add to what Christ has already completed (Galatians 2:17).

Numbers 10:10 *says*, "Also in the day of your gladness and in your appointed feasts, and on the first days of your months new moon, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be as a reminder of you before your God. I am the LORD your God."

A *Sabbath Day* is the traditional day of rest in Jewish practice. It is a part of the weekly rhythm. There is nothing awry about any of these things. But the Colossian believers are not to allow anyone to impose upon them these religious practices as a matter of necessity, in order to be justified. There is only one means of justification, and that is through faith in Jesus, lifted up on a cross (John 3:14-15; Colossians 2:14).

Paul gives examples of daily religious practice, weekly religious practice, monthly religious practice, and seasonal religious practice. He says these are *things which are a mere shadow of what is to come*. Even in the Old Testament we get indications that these are representative of something bigger. Isaiah says,

"Bring your worthless offerings no longer,
Incense is an abomination to Me.
New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—
I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly.
I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts,
They have become a burden to Me;
I am weary of bearing them."
(Isaiah 1:13-14)

These practices, then, are beneficial when taken in their proper context. They are a *shadow* of the deeper truth. They are meant to remind and reflect what matters most—Paul says, *what is to come*. These practices are a call to remembrance. They are to point our hearts to a deeper

meaning. That deeper meaning is found in Christ. The criticism of men seeks the control of men. Paul desires that his Colossian disciples avoid coming under the control of men, and rather live in the freedom of Christ (Galatians 5:13).

These religious practices might have begun as acts of obedience, or perhaps with other good intent. Yet, as humans so often do, many people have repurposed these practices. Rather than a tool towards achieving the end, they have made them a part of the end itself. They are meant to reflect what matters, not to be what matters.

As Jesus said of the Pharisees' application of rules concerning the Sabbath "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The purpose of the Sabbath was to bless people, and the religious leaders had twisted it into a burden. They imposed their polluted version of Sabbath through criticism, as demonstrated when they judged Jesus for not keeping their Sabbath rules (Mark 2:23-27).

The Colossian believers are instructed not to allow religious critics to define the standard of judgement. That authority belongs only to Christ. Being great at following religious ceremony is not what we should aspire to achieve.

Joining in Christ's sufferings and resurrection is the path to our greatest fulfillment. We are already justified in God's sight, so spending time seeking to be justified is a complete waste of time and effort (Galatians 2:17). Our great opportunity is to spend our time and effort serving others in love, following in the footsteps of Jesus. It is through suffering as He suffered, serving others, that we gain the greatest reward of life (Romans 8:17b).

All of these religious disciplines/practices involving food, festivals, Sabbath, and other such elements of religious practice are reminders of a deeper reality, *but the substance belongs to Christ*. The Greek word for *substance* is "soma," which means "body." This phrase is likely intended to have a double-meaning, representative of the paradox, mystery, and beauty of Christ and His Body, which is the church, consisting of all believers.

In one way, saying *the substance (body) belongs to Christ*, Paul is describing how the shadow (religious practice) is a mere reflection and the *substance* is God. So, *body* here, means the significant matter. Christ is the being, everything else is just the expression. Christ is the thing that is. He is the only authority, the only power, and the only judge. Therefore, adjusting our behavior to avoid being judged by others is to be ruled by shadows rather than reality.

The second of the double-meaning could be this: Christ is the head to which the body of Christ belongs. This is the analogy Paul uses throughout Colossians and much of his writing—that believers are the body of Christ and are answerable solely to our head, which is Christ. *The substance belongs to Christ*, then, may be a way of saying that believers fall under the headship of Christ. Religious rules, practices, and disciplines do not own us. Religious teachers who demand we follow their interpretation do not own us. Christ does.

Therefore, when we serve the body of Christ by contributing our gifts to serve our shared mission, we are participating in the true *substance*. If we have such an incredible opportunity, why would we stoop to serving shadows?

The key here is that Christ is the thing that matters. The only thing. We do not need Him plus a set of practices. We need Him. And when we walk in His resurrection power, we have the privilege to live out being a part of His Body, the very definition of *substance*.

Paul then gives a direct and strict warning to the Colossians: *Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels*. The phrase *keep defrauding of your prize* is all one word in Greek. It is “katabrabeuo.” The word basically means when an umpire (or judge) makes a decision against you. They keep you from the reward, in essence.

In this context, Paul is giving an imperative (*let no one*) to implore the Colossians to no longer allow someone to stand in the place to improperly judge (*defraud*) them. The place of judgement is a place only Christ can properly stand. Paul implores them to stop listening to others who teach by some other message than the supremacy of Christ and His ways. Christ is the only judge that matters.

And it is Christ who will judge the works of all believers and decide their rewards. All deeds will be tested by the fire of judgement (1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10). When believers submit to the judgement of men, and do their bidding, they cannot do Christ’s bidding (Matthew 6:24). We therefore gain the prize of men, and lose the prize of Christ. Paul asserted that his own life was focused on winning the prize of life, which was to willingly discharge the stewardship God had entrusted to him ([see commentary on 1 Corinthians 9:24-27](#)).

Once again, Paul gives some examples of how this *defrauding* takes place. The first is *delighting in self-abasement*. The Greek word for *self-abasement* is “tapeinophrosyne” and is often translated as “humility” in other parts of the New Testament. When this word is used in Scripture, it is most often used in a positive way, encouraging believers to do it. But here it is partnered with *delight*, which almost turns the phrase into a paradox, an oxymoron. How does one *delight* in humility? If someone is proud that they are humble, then are they actually humble? Likely not. This is false humility. True humility is seeing things truly. This false humility is manufacturing an image.

Paul seems to be suggesting that the focus here is on oneself and the posture of oneself. This is self-referencing, rather than being rooted in the substance that is Christ. He ought to be our *delight* and all of these things an expression of that delight. When we *delight* in what we are doing/how we are chasing God, very often we confuse the ends with the means. When we are rooted in the true substance of life, which is Christ, then our humility is genuine, because we are seeing life through a lens of reality.

The condemnation here is that these fraudulent judges have usurped Christ as the ultimate end—the source of *delight*. It is not men who can grant us the greatest prize of life. It is only Christ. The core of *self-abasement* is contained in the endless subjugation to rules.

In the same vein, *the worship of angels*, is confusing the messenger(s) with The Message. The word translated *angels* is a Greek word that means “messengers.” It makes no sense to worship a messenger who is bringing a message from someone who is greater than them. In the same manner, it makes no sense to focus on pleasing men rather than pleasing God.

A person who worships messengers rather than the one who sent the message is *taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind*. The Greek word for *taking his stand* is “embateuo,” which means “walking into.” It could be translated “intruding upon.” It refers to a person who goes too far in an inappropriate direction.

Paul says this person is *taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind*. So he takes legitimate *visions* and uses them in an inappropriate manner. It may even be a supernatural vision from *angels*. But this person is using it in a manner that is inappropriate. He *inflates it without cause* (some translations say “puffed up”) *by his fleshly mind*. The defrauder here is taking the ingredients and making them idols. He is taking the parts and making them a whole.

This improper worship of angels is a means to control others. It has this in common with rules-based judgment. Each focuses attention on “me.” Rather than “me serving you,” I focus on “you affirming me.” Paul does not want the Colossians to follow men, no matter how impressive or persuasive they might be.

This person who is leading others based on his *visions* leads in a manner that is *inflated* due to his *fleshly mind*—at the cost of *not holding fast to the head*. We cannot follow the *flesh* and also *hold fast to the head*. We can not have a view of ourselves that is *inflated* while properly viewing Christ as supreme.

It is worth noting that Paul does not dispute that a fleshly person might see a vision. After all, he was himself a fleshly person who had seen a vision (1 Timothy 1:15; Acts 26:19). Rather, Paul emphasizes that just because someone might have seen a vision does not mean that is someone that ought to be followed.

Paul returns to the analogy of Christ as the *head* of all things, where people who have believed constitute His body. A spiritual defrauder, in the sense Paul is explaining, is one who acts like a disconnected appendage seeking to be its own head.

Paul is warning the Colossians to stop paying attention to these false messages and the ones who espouse them. To do so is to follow the wrong leader. Christ is our leader, and we ought to follow Him. This underscores that God leaves us with a choice to decide who to follow. Our choice has immense consequence. We need to be careful to always ensure we are following Christ as our head.

Now Paul turns to explain a little about the headship of Christ and how believers work in concert with Him.

... *the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.*

The *entire body* of Christ is made up of all believers in Christ. This *entire body* is *supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments* of the body. In this analogy, the connection comes from *the head*, which is Jesus, and flows throughout the body. To the extent the members of the body are connected, it is because they serve the *head*.

On a physical body, *joints and ligaments* are connectors. They bond the body together, uniting the physical form to accomplish complex tasks. And they keep the body parts attached to one another, the essence of community and connection. All under the guidance of the head.

This unified connection not only makes it possible for the body to perform complex functions; it also enables it to *grow*. To expand. The Greek word here means “increase.” The body *grows with a growth which is from God*. Like all things, the body’s expansion is guided by the head.

Therefore, it is essential to ensure we are following Christ. We should not follow men who judge us because we don’t follow their religious rules. Jesus paid our entire debt before God, so we should not fall under the sway of those who condemn. Further, we should not fall under the influence of men who have seen visions, but who use those visions in a fleshly manner. We need to remain connected to Jesus, the true *head*, that we might *grow* and prosper.

Any mechanism that seeks growth or production apart from the *head* is not working for (or with) the *body*, but against it. In one sense, this is an encouragement to the Colossian believers. God has grown the body to include every believer, and now each believer is a part of its complex functioning. In another way, this entire section is a warning: do not align with anything apart from Christ. Make sure you are following the supremacy of Jesus, and do not allow any part of the body to claim itself or its functions as the head. If you get disconnected, you can lose the great benefits that come from staying connected.

Biblical Text

¹⁶ Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—¹⁷ things which are a *mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.*