

“The Indulgence of the Flesh”

The Sixth in a Series of Sermons on Colossians

Texts: Colossians 2:16-23; Isaiah 29:9-13

Paul’s letters usually contain two parts. Generally speaking, the first half of his letters deal with the gospel as grounded in the doing and dying of Jesus, the benefits of which become ours only through faith in Jesus’s person (as Messiah and Son of God) and work (his obedience, death, and resurrection). These God-given promises (i.e., the indicative mood) are spelled out as facts which believers must understand to be true, and then in which we trust (rely upon) as the basis for our justification before God and the gift of eternal life which flows from a not guilty verdict and our union with Christ. The second half of Paul’s letters (usually) contain a series of commands or instruction which explain how those who embrace the gospel promises through faith, as explained in the first half of his letters, are now to live in light of their faith in Jesus (the imperative mood).

Getting this distinction between indicative and imperative right and keeping it clear enables us to understand what is commonly known as the proper distinction between law (command) and gospel (promise). We can also speak of this as the distinction between justification (being declared righteous before God) and sanctification (in which God conforms us to the image of Christ). The gospel indicative is exactly what we found in our study of the first half of Colossians (1:1-2:15), which ends with the declaration “*and you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*” The second half of Colossians (vv. 2:16-4:19), opens with the imperative in verse 16, “*therefore let no one pass judgment on you,*” letting us know that a series of commands and instructions are coming to all those whose sins have been forgiven through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

When we read Paul’s letter to the Colossians, we are reading Paul’s mail to a church in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor—a region in southwestern Turkey with several new churches (in Colossae and Laodicea), but which were facing a serious challenge from a destructive heresy sweeping through the region. Scholars have long debated both the source and the specifics of what is commonly identified as the “Colossian Heresy.” From what Epaphras told Paul (Epaphras was likely one of the pastors of this new church, who had made his way to Rome, when Paul was imprisoned there), the Colossian heresy was very likely a Jewish heresy which orthodox Jews would have renounced with the same vigor that Christians also opposed it. It is highly probable (although Paul does not say so) that an unnamed charismatic figure with a new teaching had caused much controversy and attracted many followers. We know from Epaphras’ report and Paul’s response to it that practitioners of this false religion were stirring up trouble for the new churches in the area. Paul’s letter to the Colossians contains his instructions to the Colossian Christians as to how to respond.

As we discover in this section of the epistle (the second half of chapter 2), the “Colossian heresy” emphasized participation in Jewish feasts (new moons and Sabbath observance) but to which was added the worship of angels—something which orthodox Jews would have thought blasphemous. The law of God condemns the worship of any creature, only YHWH who is the true and living God. This heretical teaching probably took the form of a religious mysticism (emphasizing personal experience) since its adherents worshiped invisible creatures (angels), sought visions, and practiced rigorous forms of self-

denial, which, it was thought, made one ready and/or worthy for participation in this group's various rituals. Difficult rules keep out the hangers-on, and folks who are not really serious about spiritual things. Based upon what Paul does tell us in his response, the "Colossian Heresy" is probably a combination of some local pagan religion (found in the Lycus Valley) mixed with traditional Jewish teaching, and would have been condemned by both Christians and Jews.

There will be much application throughout this section of Colossians for us since modern Americans (like those ancient pagans in the Lycus Valley) seem to have no problem with any combination of religions unless and until one religion dares make the claim to be objectively true—such as Christianity. The implications of this are profound and important. Our faith is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and is therefore true even if no one believes it. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, Christianity could not be true even if everyone believed it. Christianity does not stand or fall based upon what we experience or how we feel about it. Americans think they are free to experience anything, think anything, do anything, so long as we do not tell others that what they are doing is wrong. So, Paul's warning and instructions about false religions emphasizing "spirituality" and combining elements of different religions (syncretism) will speak directly to the world in which we now live.

The other point where we will find important application is Paul's reminder that religious rules—no matter how rigorous or demanding—have absolutely no power to help us restrain the lusts of the flesh. In fact, many times such rules function like throwing gasoline on smoldering embers. All someone has to do is tell me not to eat something, think something, do something, and I can now think of nothing else. Rules may help restrain sin in some areas, but like a person squeezing into a pair of pants which is two sizes too small—there is going to be a muffin top. Some sins might be restrained, but others only encouraged. We know how this works—I stopped committing sin "x," but now I am proud and taking credit for the fact I don't do it. Paul knows that these things are of no value in restraining fleshly indulgences. This is why we must understand what Paul tells us about the gospel and the saving work of Christ in the first half of his epistles, before we try to live the Christian life by starting in the second half.

The good news which Paul announces is that because of the saving work of Jesus, the death grip in which sin holds us has been broken and we are now indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The instructions Paul gives to the Colossians (and to us) will only make sense if we understand that our sins were nailed to the cross when Jesus suffered and died for us. Only when we understand this and keep it before our eyes will we make any real progress in the Christian life. This is why, as we go forward with the second half of this letter, it is important not to overlook how the second half of Colossians opens. Since the Colossian Heresy involved rigorous self-discipline and self-denial regarding certain foods, keeping "holy" days, worshiping angels, all grounded in what Paul describes as "*philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ*" (Colossians 2:8), we must not overlook the fact that Paul's instructions to the Colossians are grounded in the necessity of guarding the freedoms and Christian liberty which Jesus has secured for us when he set us free from such things which arise within the sinful human imagination.¹

This is very similar to Paul's instructions in the transition to, or found in the second half of other epistles such as Romans (6:11—the first imperative is "*so you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus,*") and Galatians (5:1, "*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*"). Those advocating the Colossian heresy will win if they

¹ Bruce, Colossians, 113.

can successfully deceive the Colossians into thinking that the human problem is ignorance of the spiritual principles which they can teach you, not sin and guilt before God. If this were a matter of spiritual principles, then the human problem can be solved by more rules, more ceremonies, or trying that much harder to deny and control one's urges. If the fundamental human problem is sin, these things are useless and misapplying them only make things worse.

So keeping all this in mind, we pick up with our text in verses 16-17, when Paul writes, "*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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*" Opposition to the Colossian heresy begins when the Colossians refuse to allow themselves to be judged by the religious standards of others who know not Christ. The Colossians are to live as Jesus has commanded in his word, and as taught by his chosen apostles (including Paul). The Colossians are not to follow the so-called "wisdom" of those who worship angels, crave visions, treat certain clean foods with contempt as though they were unclean, and who practice strict observance of religious festivals.

Paul's words to the Colossians echo what he told the Christians in Rome in a previous letter—"Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him" (14:3). In the case of those advocating the Colossian heresy, the eating of certain foods (presumably non-kosher) was considered either sinful or detrimental to one's spiritual development. Yet Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19) so whether one eats pork or shellfish (or anything else forbidden under Jewish law), in the new covenant these things are a matter of personal preference or dietary wisdom. If a food has been used in a pagan ceremony, then Christians might feel abstaining from that food is necessary for the sake of a weaker brother. But eating non-kosher food is not a sin in itself. Paul mentions "drink" here as well—probably a reference to the false teachers insistence that Christians abstain from wine and strong drink, which are not forbidden to a Christian but the consumption of which must not lead to drunkenness or to the stumbling of those of weaker conscience who feel the consumption of such things is sinful.

Paul's point is that to give any food or drink up for religious reasons (as a means of self-purification or of acquiring righteousness) is to chip away at the freedom won for us by Christ in his suffering, death, and resurrection. The Colossians are to follow the teaching of Jesus, and not the heretical teachers. What looks like wisdom and self-sacrifice is actually the first step in becoming re-enslaved to the very things from which Christ has set us free—the law and or the rules and regulations of sinful people, who invent these things as though obeying them will help us draw closer to the "divine."

The same thing holds true of religious feasts and holidays. New moons were used to track important events and Sabbath observance was an defining element of Israel's identity. Certain feasts were binding upon Israel under the Sinai covenant and kept Israel distinct from Gentile nations around them. The observance of a national Sabbath was not only good for Israel—a divinely sanctioned day of rest and worship—but established two important redemptive-history markers. First, the Sabbath pointed Israel ahead to a heavenly eternal rest. Second, the observance of a national Sabbath marked Israel off from the Gentile nations as that chosen nation consecrated to YHWH—the Sabbath being that seventh day (Saturday) when Israel's work ceased and the nation was to be devoted to the worship of YHWH. As Paul tells us these things were all intended to point ahead to the coming of the Messiah, in whom they are fulfilled, because he is their substance (their reality). Note that Paul uses the word "*soma*" here—which is usually used of the body, but here is used in the sense of Christians, who as members of Christ's body,

possess the substance of these things.² We'll return to this point momentarily—so hold that thought.

We know from Israel's history (in the Old Testament) that there is a direct connection between Israel's declining Sabbath observance (over time) and an increase in idolatry. Israel's idolatry brought God's wrath down upon the nation. What Jews (who failed to see Jesus as Israel's Messiah who fulfilled these things, and to whom they point) and those advocating the Colossian heresy could not see nor understand is that God's wrath came upon his disobedient covenant people because their hearts were far from him, which led to their disobedience and idolatry. Doubling down on observing new moons, Sabbaths, dietary laws, seeking mystical religious experiences tied to the worship of angels and visions can do nothing to change the human heart or remove the guilt of sin.

Jesus told us that the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27), and that all foods were clean because he came to fulfill the types and shadows which pointed to him. He is their reality—these things are not ends in themselves. To seek God's favor through human effort in keeping holy days and avoiding certain foods—no matter how sincere—is not a sign of genuine piety. Rather it is a sign of genuine human sinfulness—seeking to earn righteousness based upon doing and observing things which only expose our sin, because we cannot do them perfectly, nor can we do them from the proper motives. If the Colossians fall pray to this way of thinking, then they are voluntarily placing themselves back under the very powers which Jesus defeated on the cross—sin, death, and the condemnation of the law.

Paul is perfectly clear—these things are but a shadow of Christ who is their substance. The entire religion of the Old Testament—the sacrifices, the priesthood, the temple, the law (including the Sabbaths and the dietary laws), the feasts, and the promises of material blessing all pointed forward of that one of whom Paul has said . . .

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

If this is true of Jesus, why worship an angel? Why seek a vision? Why avoid certain foods and drink? Why observe feasts and holy days? Why do these things to become “righteous” or gain insight into hidden principles? Why sell ourselves back into the slavery of sin, seek the cruelest master of all (sin and guilt), and then put back on the shackles which degrade us and rob us of our freedom and dignity?

In this context, Paul's warnings take on a grave seriousness. In verse 18, he tells the Colossians, “*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.*” Most world religions acknowledge “holy people” or profound teachers or spiritual gurus who teach the principles they think we need to know to liberate ourselves from bondage. Paul has a different take upon such people. They seek to disqualify us from our inheritance in Christ, by claiming that their way is better than his. Such people may be wise, possess great insight, and seem to live above the troubles of life. Paul sees them as “puffed up,” in the sense that such people are

² Bruce, Colossians, 113.

inwardly quite proud of all they have attained—like the guy who proudly wears his “first place in the humility contest” button on his chest. It is not about motives—whether such people are sincere or not. It is about false doctrine—is what they teach biblical or not? To teach or embrace any method to spiritual enlightenment or attainment apart from faith in Christ is to be deceived. Paul says it is to be “puffed up,” with a mind darkened (not enlightened) by the flesh—flesh as used here takes the sense of seeing the world through the lens of sinful human nature, not through the light given us by the word of God.

When such people see spiritual matters from the perspective of the flesh, they are not (as Paul says in v. 19), “*holding fast to the Head [Christ], from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.*” How can a body (—a *soma* as just mentioned) function without a head? How can members of Christ’s body (the Colossian church) survive without Christ, who is the head of his church and who holds his people together? Chop off the head and you have a dead body. Cut a believer off from Jesus (as those advocating the Colossian heresy were attempting to do) and there will be no more life. The Colossian heretics may have thought they offered spiritual enlightenment, but all they could offer (in reality) is spiritual death—a headless corpse.

Paul moves on to remind the Colossians of the stake involved—eternal life. He tells them in verses 20-22, “*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— “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?”* Having previously reminded the Colossians that they “are in Christ” (participants in his death and resurrection), Paul emphasizes this point yet again before specifying what this means. Christians have been set free from “elemental spirits of the world.” The very things from which the advocates of the Colossian heresy were promising, have already been defeated by Jesus. There is nothing to fear from the unseen—whether that be the demonic, spiritual beings, spells, spiritual principles of fertility, good weather, good fortune—anything like this. These things have no reality for a Christian—therefore we are not to fear such things, even when false religions tell us these things are real and we must master them. The death of Jesus put an end to this.³

So, if this is true—Jesus’ death defeated all such forces and because we are in union with Christ—why would the Colossians want to go back to the humanly devised rules, regulations, and principles from which they’ve been set free. Why should we not handle, taste, and enjoy the things God made and which he pronounced as “good.” Of course, we can and often do abuse the good things which God gave us. Wisdom dictates we should not be mastered by anything we are free to enjoy—but avoiding these things to gain spiritual insight or increase our personal “holiness” is simply foolish. This is not only a false concept, but we miss out on enjoying the good things which God has given us.

Many see Paul making an allusion here to Isaiah 29:13, part of our Old Testament lesson. “*And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.”* This is likely the case since Paul has already told the Colossians that these things arise from deception, the traditions of men, and do not come from Christ (2:8). Paul sees in the Colossian heresy many of the same things of which Isaiah was warning Israel—commandments taught by men, and which have nothing to do with Christ. In the section from Isaiah (of which our text was a part), Isaiah is warning Israel of idolatry, and how created things can become idols. The root cause of this idolatry is that the people’s hearts (which are far from God) do not match their outward expressions of piety and religiosity. Now that Jesus has come and

³ Moo, Colossians, 234.

fulfilled the types, shadows, and promises of the Old Testament, it is likewise idolatrous to substitute these types, shadows, and promises for the reality that is Christ—their true substance. Those practicing the Colossian heresy are fundamentally idolaters, and therefore certain to come under God’s judgment.⁴ Why go back to embrace the very spiritual principles for which Jesus has died to set us free, and which are destined to perish? Why not embrace the substance and reality which is Christ?

But from a human perspective, it just makes sense that if you wish to find spiritual enlightenment you look within. Or you find someone who can teach you the secrets to spiritual mysteries. Or, you take something which is a known quantity—like the law of God—and renew your devotion to it by striving even harder to obey. Apparently, the Colossian heresy combined all of these elements and knowing that this kind of religious stew would appeal to Greco-Roman pagans, Paul issues a stern warning “*let no one pass judgment or disqualify you,*” in verses 16 and 17, followed by an explanation as to why such spiritual technology will only end in failure. As Paul puts it in verse 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.*”

To those apart from Christ, these rules and spiritual instruction sound right. The Greeks and Romans of Paul’s day would have been familiar with these basic principles (self-denial, mystical, esoteric ideas), even if this particular localized heresy combined them with Jewish law and custom. Paul quite candidly says, “these things have the appearance of wisdom.” But they are self-made (i.e., humanly invented). They may enable adherents to control certain appetites and urges, but when push comes to shove, they are of no value whatsoever in dealing with sinful human nature. The problem is not in what we eat (or not), what we deny ourselves (or not), or in not knowing of hidden spiritual principles (which, supposedly, we should seek) or the keeping of holy days which pointed forward to the coming of Christ. The problem is with the flesh—not our bodies—but the sinful nature which springs to life in our bodies.

In verses 11-15, Paul has already spelled out for the Colossians that Jesus has defeated the power of the flesh. I mentioned this previously, but his answer is worth repeating again, so as to be sure we do not miss Paul’s point.

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

We have been delivered from the power of the flesh through the death and resurrection of Jesus, a victory which has been signed and sealed unto us in our baptism. We *were* dead in sin, but now alive. We *were* guilty but now forgiven. The law *condemned* us, but now it does not. The rulers who enslaved and deceived us have been exposed and defeated. Unless Christ delivers us from the flesh (our sinful nature), we will not and cannot be delivered from sin and death, no matter how many spiritual principles we seek to learn, how many rules we strive to obey, how many holy days and feasts we observe. Trying harder,

⁴ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 860-861.

renewing and redoubling our efforts, are of no effect in helping us control the indulgence of our flesh.

No, our victory over sin (both its guilt and its power) and the flesh (our sinful nature) was won for us by Jesus Christ. And since he has set us free from elementary principles which have the mere appearance of wisdom but can do nothing, let us listen to Paul, and refuse to be judged or disqualified from our inheritance by those who know not Christ. There are many religious ideas floating around out there, many of which have the appearance of wisdom. But the fact is, these things can do nothing to stop the indulgence of the flesh. That requires a life of perfect obedience, a bloody cross, and an empty tomb, and for us to place our trust in the only one who is spiritual substance—Jesus. Why go back to a life of slavery? The Colossian heresy (and all modern equivalents) do not enlighten, they only flatter our darkened understanding. They tell us end our pilgrim journey and to go back to Egypt and return to slavery. But Paul reminds us that in Jesus our flesh has been crucified with him and his victory was signed and sealed in our baptism. It is our union with Christ that gains victory over the indulgence of the flesh