

Lesson 4 Commentary

Christ's Sufficiency

Colossians 2:8-23

The Colossian believers were confused by worldly philosophies and legalistic rituals. So they needed to learn how to match their actions to their beliefs. Paul helped them see that because they were free in Christ, they should live as free people. Because they had died to worldly ways of thinking, they no longer needed to be obsessed with rules to gain enlightenment. They had all they needed in Christ. Their lives and practices were to reflect that truth.

The Problem with Human Tradition

Paul knew that Christ had set the Colossian believers free through grace. He did not want to see them taken captive again by human philosophies and traditions. Paul exhorted the believers not to be deceived by such thoughts. He warned against the “elemental spirits of the world” that are contrary to Christ. *Elemental spirits* is an obscure term. It may refer to basic principles of the world, such as the laws of nature or the fundamentals of mathematics. It could also refer to the basics of religion, like the Jewish ceremonies that had foreshadowed the truth found in Christ (see Galatians 4:8-10). Other possible meanings include the pagan superstitions that abounded in Colossae or the study of astrology.

Why were these alternative belief systems wrong? Paul explained: All God's fullness dwells in Jesus. Christ is not one option out of many. He is superior to all, for He is God in human form. Then, Paul shared more amazing news: Jesus is not the only one in whom God's fullness dwells. When people put their faith in Christ, they also are “filled in him.” When we are filled with Christ, we are complete and need nothing else.

Freedom in Christ

Believers are not only filled up in Christ; they are also circumcised and baptized in Him. Circumcision and baptism make a statement about identity. Circumcision identified Jews with Israel's relational covenant with God. Those of us in Christ are spiritually “circumcised.” This involves cutting off fleshly sin. It means that Christ has freed us from ungodly desires and actions. For Christians, water baptism signifies a covenant relationship with Christ and identity with His body of believers. It marks their death to sin, resurrection to new life in Christ, and Holy Spirit empowerment to live godly lives.

If we are in Christ, we are no longer dead in our sins. Instead, we are “alive” and “forgiven.” And that's not all! God has also canceled the record of our debt of sin. In Paul's day, a debtor would write a statement telling what he owed and to whom. It was a written record of indebtedness. It stood against the debtor until the debt was paid. Likewise, the written law, which no human being could actually keep, stood against all humanity. But Christ came and canceled it by nailing it to the cross.

Paul's word choice would have reminded the Colossians of a practice from Roman crucifixion. When the Romans crucified someone, they nailed a sign to the cross over his head. The sign stated the crime the person was being executed for. Paul told his readers that when Jesus died, it was as if God had nailed the list of their sins to the cross above the Savior's head. Jesus had no sin-debt He needed to repay. But God applied His Son's payment for sin to each believer's list of offenses, marking them fully paid.

At the cross, God also “disarmed the rulers and authorities.” Paul said God had triumphed over them. Paul was probably thinking of a Roman victory parade. Rome honored its victors with triumphal parades in which they could display and humiliate their captives. When Christ paid for our sins on the cross, He put Satan and his army “to open shame.” Disarmed and humiliated, they lost their power against Christians.



Think about our accuser. Satan continues to taunt Christians with a record of past sins. We read in Revelation 12:10 that he accuses Christians day and night before God. His accusations are a powerful tactic. His goal is to keep believers in defeat and despair. But as followers of Jesus, we are wise to remember that Satan's accusations have no power. Jesus has paid the price for our sins. He has disarmed Satan and put him to shame. And Revelation 12:11 tells us how the story ends: believers conquer Satan “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.”

The Problem with Empty Religion

Most belief systems try to address two basic human needs: to remove past guilt and impart future hope. Some people seek to meet these needs by following religious rules. They follow a formula, hoping to atone for past sins and ensure eternal peace. Others turn to religious experiences. These people hope to earn forgiveness and reward by communing with spiritual beings or receiving special revelations. Still others adopt a lifestyle of self-denial in an attempt to restrain sinful desires and obtain God’s favor. The false teaching in Colossae included these errors, so Paul addressed each one.

Legalism. Legalism emphasizes behavior. It prescribes what people must do and not do. Yet the Jewish ceremonial laws were never intended for the Gentile believers to whom Paul was writing. These laws had served a purpose before Christ came. But after His death and resurrection, such observances were unnecessary. The Colossians were strictly insisting on following rules. And they were losing sight of what was most important—the worship of Christ.

Angel Worship. Next, Paul warned about certain religious experiences, including worshipping angels. Some people in Colossae believed that because God is spiritual and holy He could have no close contact with this sinful material world. Thus He needed angelic intermediaries, which misguided people worshiped. Scripture clearly shows that Jesus alone is our way to God (see John 14:6). We need no intermediary (see 1 Timothy 2:5).



Think about angels’ roles. Angels were created by and for Jesus. Scripture is filled with descriptions of their work. They can be messengers of joy or agents of destruction. But one of their primary roles is to serve Christ’s followers as “ministering spirits” (Hebrews 1:14). Jesus did not create angels so we would worship them. In fact, when the apostle John tried to worship one, the angel reproved him: “You must not do that!” (Revelation 19:10). The angel then described himself as a fellow servant. The role of angels is to minister to us and to serve alongside us in God’s work.

Spiritual Revelations. Paul was concerned about spiritual practices that cause pride. He specifically addressed those “going on in detail about visions.” These visions may or may not have actually come from God. Regardless, when God gives a vision, it is not a reason for pride—its purpose is to reveal His greatness. The vision the prophet Isaiah had did not inflate his view of himself. Instead, it caused him to realize his sinful condition in the presence of the Lord. In response he could only cry, “Woe is me!” (Isaiah 6:5). We can avoid spiritual arrogance, Paul said, by focusing on Jesus. He nourishes the whole body, not only those who gain certain spiritual revelation.

Asceticism. Asceticism is a lifestyle of self-denial. It is an attempt to deal with temptation and sin by denying the body its natural desires and pleasures. Many people have pursued asceticism throughout the ages. But it simply does not work. Saving a soul takes a lot more than simply denying the body. It takes the blood of Christ. Rules and regulations have no lasting effect because they are only temporary, man-made efforts to be godly. They are merely human teachings. They have nothing to offer those who have died to the world and found new life in Christ.

Legalism and asceticism may appear to be wise or humble, but they are powerless to restrain sin. Such rule keeping is not only self-deceptive, it also leads to pride because it focuses on outward behavior rather than inner attitudes. The power to defeat sin comes only through Jesus. The answer is to focus on Him—knowing Him, loving Him, submitting to Him, and allowing Him to empower us to live a life that pleases God. He sets us free from sin.



Personalize the TRUTH!

The Colossians had not walked away from Jesus; rather, they were being tempted to believe that He was not enough. Can you identify with that temptation? Do worldly ideas ever lure your attention from Christ? Are you ever tempted to add to the gospel, as if Jesus were not enough? Ask God to reveal anything that keeps you from staying connected to Him. If He reveals something, confess it and ask for His strength to resist whatever threatens to deceive you.