



Community Group Discussion Guide:

Freedom in Christ

October 1, 2023 | Colossians 2:16-23

MOTIVATE

Starter Question

⇒ ***What are some rules you've observed that seem like nonsense? How do these rules even come into being?***

Optional Activity: To demonstrate the difference between extrinsic (Old Testament law) and intrinsic motivation (New Testament grace), present two pop cans: one that is open and empty, the other unopened and still pressurized. Enlist two volunteers and give each one of the cans to hold in their strongest hand. Have a contest to see who can crush a can first using only the designated hand. If things go as planned, the empty can will crush immediately, the pressurized can will not budge. Here's the point:

- Extrinsic motivation is external pressure from the outside. With nothing inside to push back, collapse happens. This represents what occurs when we only follow sets of rules. Having rules in the head is no substitute for obedience from the heart.
- Intrinsic motivation exerts internal pressure from the inside and prohibits collapse. This represents what happens when we are obedient to Christ because we have the Spirit within to guide us. His presence enables us to push back against anything that is not of Christ.

DISCUSS

In Colossians, Paul defended the Christian faith against the threat of false teaching. Its clear Paul's audience was being challenged by errant, local teachers who diminished the primacy and sufficiency of Christ. While we can't be certain what philosophy Paul attacked, he gave clues in Colossians 2:16-23.

It may have been new "knowledge" freshly revealed to a cult leader; it may have been ecstatic experiences which were supposed to usher the individual into new insight; it may have been legalistic activity believed to demonstrate sincerity.¹ Whatever the case, false teachers were telling the Colossians that they were lacking and needed something more than what they had found in Christ.

⇒ ***Discuss this quote: "It's as if the false teachers were saying, 'Faith in Christ is fine, but you are not really right with God, accepted by God, or protected by God unless you also _____.' It makes no difference how the sentence is completed; it is false and not according to Christ."***²

Paul reminded the Colossians there was nothing they could do to achieve a godly lifestyle on their own. No self-imposed discipline, solemn rites, or mystical experiences would make them more saved, more forgiven, or more fully secure in Christ. Paul wanted to build up their faith so they could resist these deceptive heresies. When they were confident that everything they needed was already accomplished by Christ, they could clearly see these antagonists had nothing to offer them.

- ⇒ ***Are you tempted to think more is needed to complete your life in Christ?***
- ⇒ ***How can you find full assurance in Christ alone?***

¹ Anders, M. (1999). [*Galatians-Colossians*](#) (Vol. 8, p. 305). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

² Garland, D. E. (1998). [*Colossians and Philemon*](#) (p. 159). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Colossians 2:16-17 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.

Paul did not want believers to be made to feel unspiritual, unfaithful, or in need of something more. In verses 13-15, Paul declared that Jesus completed the full work of salvation. Paul implored the Colossians to not let others find fault with or criticize their faith by any other standard than Christ. Paul knew if the Colossians had confidence in Him that they would not be bumped off course by the judgment of others who wanted to disqualify them according to some human standard.

⇒ *Upon what should an evaluation of our Christian life be based?*

False teachers decided it was their job to determine who did or did not belong to God's chosen people. They declared the Colossians as lacking because they failed to measure up to manmade codes of behavior. These antagonists were trying to force their strict regimens and guidelines on others by stating that the truly spiritual maintained a particular diet and properly observed all the right holy days.

1. **Food laws:** Regulations against eating certain types of food are found in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, including rules about clean and unclean animals. It seems these false teachers were attempting to move the Colossian believers from the freedom they had found in Christ back to the burden of law keeping. Paul reminded the Colossians that believers can only come close to God through Christ, not through spiritual checklists of obligations.

⇒ *What is the danger in using any other standard than Christ and His redemptive work?*

2. **Sacred days:** Religious festivals, new moon celebrations, and Sabbath observance were Old Testament days set aside to worship God and make sacrifices. While significant, none of these qualified believers for membership in a higher class of spiritual worshippers.

⇒ *What rituals and legalisms threaten to replace the gospel today?*

Paul maintained those proposing these standards lived in a "shadow world" and did not yet realize that the fulfillment of all their hopes had already come in Christ.³ Their systems had no value in the sanctification of the believer and could mislead some into thinking they had done all God required.

The "body" which casts the shadow is only found in Christ. The Old Testament regulations were simply a shadow cast backward from Christ. With His sacrifice, Christ also casts a shadow forward over believers' lives, determining how we should live today and hope for the future.⁴

⇒ *Consider this question from the Holman Commentary: Why play in the shadow world when you have experienced the real thing?*

⇒ *Why do those with Christ no longer need to worry about keeping Old Testament regulations?*

Colossians 2:18-19 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.

³ Garland, D. E. (1998). *Colossians and Philemon* (p. 187). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁴ Anders, M. (1999). *Galatians-Colossians* (Vol. 8, p. 321). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

In verse 16, Paul commanded, “Let no one pass judgement on you.” In verse 18, Paul gave another command: Let no one disqualify you. The NIV Commentary words these commands in this manner: Let no one impose upon you his arbitrary standards of Christian conduct; do not feel yourself inferior because your own life is not governed in the way that he declares to be necessary.⁵

⇒ *What do Paul’s two commands indicate about what was happening with the Colossians?*

Paul was speaking out against a religious position that seemed to have a wisdom it did not actually possess. He addressed two specific practices:

1. **Ascetism:** A common definition of ascetism is severe legalism. This involves measuring spirituality by the ability to dutifully keep man-made rules. Skillful application of biblical principles to life’s situations is unnecessary. Just comply. Not only was this a rigid and confining way to live, but it also fostered hypocritical pride.⁶

⇒ *How can legalism foster pride?*

2. **Worship of angels:** The Holman Commentary says, “The mystical experience began with initiation into ascetic rituals which led to supernatural visions in which the individual was ushered into the heavenly realms to worship the angels who emanated from God or to join with the angels in the worship of God. The worshiper would then return with all kinds of stories about what he had seen in his vision. The mystical journey was intended to restore a lost dimension to spiritual experience.”⁷

⇒ *How can an obsession with seeking spiritual experiences undermine our commitment to Christ?*

⇒ *Are we tempted today to believe that astrology, secret knowledge, or strange regulations somehow treat a “salvation deficiency?”*

The Colossians were told that if they really wanted to reach new levels of spirituality they needed to engage in these kinds of religious experiences. Paul’s use of the words “puffed up without reason” implies that these practices came from a place of false humility. These severe, ascetical, or mystical rituals actually increased the practitioners’ pride—the core of human sinfulness since Creation.

⇒ *Discuss this quote: Believers may have spiritual experiences of varying kinds. Experiences themselves are not evil. When we try to make our experience the standard for all believers or when we measure our own or someone else’s spirituality based on that experience, we’re being arrogant and unspiritual.*⁸

Paul affirmed that Christians cannot truly experience God or salvation apart from Christ. Paul reinforced this point with the metaphor of the head and body. The head provides the body with everything necessary for life. Without the head, the body dies. As no member of a physical body can live by itself, believers cannot live apart from Christ, the Head, the only source of fullness and freedom.

⁵ Garland, D. E. (1998). *Colossians and Philemon* (p. 189). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁶ Anders, M. (1999). *Galatians-Colossians* (Vol. 8, pp. 308–309). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁷ Anders, M. (1999). *Galatians-Colossians* (Vol. 8, p. 309). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁸ Anders, M. (1999). *Galatians-Colossians* (Vol. 8, p. 309). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Colossians 2:20-23 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.

⇒ *If you’ve been truly set free, why would you even consider submitting to burdensome, manmade restrictions?*

False teachers had definitive, organized systems that forbade certain practices and demanded others. Paul called this legalistic and enslaving. It looked spiritual because those involved went through all sorts of self-sacrifice to supposedly bring themselves closer to God and gain greater approval from Him. These practices were superficial and failed to address the sinful self which Christ desires to transform. In other words, all this external performance has minimal effect on restraining internal urges.

⇒ *Are we in danger of worshipping the rules more than we worship Christ?*

⇒ *Why must Christ be central to all we do?*

Paul warned against any teaching that only has the appearance of wisdom yet is incapable of producing what it promises. Believers have no reason to become enslaved by legalistic living, mystical experience, or rigid self-denial. The fullness and freedom that are ours in Christ ought to motivate us to understand and live out the truth of the gospel. We have the Spirit on the inside. We simply need to yield to Him.

TRANSFORM

1. Personal application: Whatever the topic, Paul brings believers back to what God has done through Christ. Jesus is the sufficient Savior, the whole reality of God. The Christian life is not a matter of legalistic conformity to a man-made code nor is it the seeking of flashy experiences. It is a relationship with Jesus resulting in loving obedience to Him and His Word.

⇒ *Have you been tempted to focus on legalist practices more than on your relationship with Christ?*

⇒ *Do you find yourself seeking more than Christ alone as if He is not sufficient?*

⇒ *How can you guard against practices, experiences, or worldviews that are a substitute for a real relationship with Jesus?*

2. Pray: Thank Jesus for His sufficiency in our lives. Ask God to keep us confident in Him when all the world around us is clamoring for more. Express repentance if you’ve allowed yourself to be distracted from the supremacy of Christ.

STUDY: Resources used, compiled from, and quoted:

- *Holman New Testament Commentary, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, pages 300-302, 308-322.
- *The NIV Application Commentary, Colossians and Philemon*, pages 172-199.
- *Shepherd’s Notes, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, pages 56-58.