

LSB Colossians 2:20 - 23 Christ Plus this, Christ minus that

NASB77 20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 21 “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” 22 (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? 23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

3:1 Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For you died and your life has been hidden with Christ in God.

We live in a generation that is completely obsessed with defining freedom. The culture is in a battle with itself over . . . freedom. The complexities of checks and balances, if any, on freedom.

The goal is absolute personal autonomy. But hidden within that goal is the original goal of Satan who stated it this way. *I will be like the Most High God.* Isaiah 14:14 Ezekiel 28:2

Follow this reasoning. Psalm 115:3 states the godness of God clearly. 3 *Our God is in heaven; He does as He pleases.*

Human absolute personal autonomy is nothing more and nothing less than Satan's original challenge to become . . . gods. It is not less than a challenge and rebellion against the absolute sovereignty of God who created us and owns us. We reject God as sovereign and place ourselves as god instead.

We want that autonomy. We don't want God to be God, we want to be Him. We want absolute autonomy to do as we please. Right down to creation order that God designed and put in place.

Are you unhappy being a girl, be a boy. Are you unhappy with only binary choices of gender, be something you design yourself, after all, you're god. Have you procreated a baby you don't want the responsibilities of, you're god, you decide if it lives or perishes.

Since the old God is dead and we're the new god, the sky's the limit. Have as much sex as you like with whoever you like as often as you like however you like it. No husbands, no wives, no family, no order, unless you decide you want those things and then you work out what you want and how you want it, because . . . you're god.

The world is a cafeteria for you to pick out whatever you please. Psalm 115:3 is about you, not some sky God. 3 *Our God is in heaven; He does as He pleases.*

Well, it gets messy pretty quickly, because, well, we're not God and somehow we have to co-habitate with all the other gods running around being god, and it's super frustrating that even though we killed the God of heaven off, we just can't seem to make this god business really work out. Even though I killed off God, I still can't really do as I please.

Right about now you're asking yourself, what does this discussion of personal freedom have to do with our text this morning? Good job. You listened to our text when we read it, and you've listened to my opening discussion about freedom.

Here's the connection that Paul is actually arguing for. Let me read Paul's argument written to the Galatians. His first letter ever written, as far as we know. Anything earlier is lost to us. God in heaven decided which letters of Paul's would be scripture. Paul, under the inspiration of God, writes these words in Galatians 5:1

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. gal 5:1

There are parallels between the problems in Galatia and the problems at Colossae. Paul is addressing freedom in our verses this morning. So I want to go beyond the immediate issue at Colossae and try to understand this freedom that we have gained . . . IN Christ.

I think Paul's directive to the christians at Colossae is fairly easy to understand, and it's a problem we are NOT so far removed from now, but it takes a minute to try to understand. People are locked into doing religious stuff that God could care less about. Prayer rugs that face mecca daily, or rosary beads and hail mary's. Both modern versions of man made religion that God actually hates.

20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees: 21 "Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch"? 22 Which deal with everything destined to perish with use, which are in accordance with the commands and teachings of men;

The connection to Moses and judaism is just too close 30 years after Jesus resurrection. All of the dietary restrictions, all of the washings and cleansings, the clean unclean rules, the Sabbath day observances, the life is in the rules, the laws keeping you grew up with, if you were born into that system, it's ingrained. It defines you. How do you just turn that off and walk away from it?

So all of these influences that seem rather foreign and removed, non issues for us 2000 years later, were a big deal to these first century saints. The jewish influence in first century christianity would have been huge.

And the jewish christians were prevailing upon the gentile christians, this is what you need to do. This is how it works. It's the law of Moses. You

have to do stuff.

So let's talk about that for a minute, because there's still confusion even today. Paul tells Timothy, famously; *Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman unashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.* 2 Tim. 2:15

(A little side bar. When I graduated grade 6 which was the jump in those days from elementary school to junior high school, my dad gave me a little King James bible, -that's all there was in those days- and on the frontice page he wrote II Tim. 2:15. Not the verse, just the address. I had to find it and look it up. His message to me at age 12, study God's word and become a workman that needs not be ashamed. Thanks Dad)

How do you rightly divide the laws of Moses? What do we keep today, and what doesn't apply to the church age? Jesus gives us the parameters; 17“*Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.* 18“*For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.* Matt. 5:17,18

Here is where rightly dividing becomes necessary and workmanlike approval is necessary. God through Moses gave the moral law, the 10 comandments. He gave the ceremonial law consisting of laws of worship that were all shadows and types of His coming annointed one. And He gave civil laws of government for Israel to be a distinct nation under God given civil laws.

Ceremonial law, all of the types and shadows of their religious orinances, is accomplished, fully, in Jesus. All of those pictures have become the reality.

Civil law, the government of the nation of Israel, is for the nation of Israel. We would argue that when Israel was set aside during the entire church age that we are living in, their civil law became mute. They were civil government for the nation Israel. I don't pay attention to Canadian civil laws, if I'm not in Canada. Same applies to Israel's civil law given by

Moses. For them, not me.

That leaves God's moral laws. Rightly dividing the word of truth is segregating which laws are which.

The early church immediately abandoned all of the sabbath day observances and instead made Sunday, the first day of the week, which was Jesus resurrection day, it's day of rest and worship.

Sabbath was ceremonial. Worship was moral. They made that division. They met for worship on the first day of the week, not the seventh. That's a lesson for us in rightly dividing.

So what do you say to christians that want to hold onto ceremonial laws keeping. Sabbath keepers. Washings and cleansings and do not do things in this time frame, and don't eat this or that, and all of those Sabbath related and ceremonial related laws they want to observe?

There's grace for people who are having a hard time letting go. But grace has to be challenged when those people who still want to observe, are coercing other people to also do unnecessary stuff.

You want to not eat pig. Knock yourself out. But don't try to tell me I shouldn't eat pig. That's what Paul is battling here. We want to find a balance of grace for folks having a hard time leaving old ways behind, we try not to judge or offend them, but we don't allow those rules to inhibit everyone's freedoms in Christ.

20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 21 "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" 22 (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?

Notice the last phrase. These are man made rules. We're talking about

extrabiblical rules here. Things that are physically material in this world, and things that are not scripturally banned.

Somebody makes a rule that some manner of fasting means you're more spiritual than someone who doesn't fast. Don't drink this, do drink that, whatever. Extrabiblical rules of no spiritual consequence. Don't drink Coca Cola because it has caffeine. Don't drink coffee or tea because it has caffeine.

23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

People make up extrabiblical rules of man made spirituality, and then they actually harm themselves following their own man made religious rules. If eating no meat makes you more spiritual, maybe starvation is even more spiritual.

History is rife with ascetic people doing things to themselves that are actually harmful, in the name of self designed man made religions and spirituality.

And in the end, Paul says, all of your made up stuff is no actual gain at all against actual fleshly indulgences. Physical punishment doesn't satisfy or control your inner lustful self. You can't solve spiritual problems with fleshy physical self abasement and harms.

Jesus said poke your eye out rather than lust. It's that important, if that would work, but it won't. I can poke my eyes out and my brain could keep the images and the lust going without any eyes. His point was, escaping hell would be worth going through life blind, if that would actually work, but it won't.

Paul's setting us up for an **either - or** comparative argument, but someone put a chapter break, right in the middle of his comparison. Chapter and

verse numbers were added later, for our help. But they don't signify the end of one thought or paragraph and the beginning of something different.

Paul's either - or is that the world's religions are replete with rules that accomplish nothing.

Instead, we are IN Christ, and He accomplished everything. For us. In our place. But there is real effect for Christians.

In Wesley's hymn, Oh for a thousand tongues to sing; The hymn writer exults in this actual practical truth of freedom in Christ. He writes;
He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free. His blood can make the foulest clean; His blood availed for me
That's why we love the old hymns. There is theological depth in what Wesley states.

Sin is like quicksand that we fell into, and were trapped. Enslaved and held captive by Satan. Jesus paid the debt and broke me out of that prison.
Romans 8:2 *For in Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set you free from the law of sin and death.*

We think Ephesians 4:8 may be a line from an ancient hymn they were singing in the early church.

Therefore it says,

“WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH,
HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES,
AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN.”

I love the idea here that Christ captured captives and led the captivity on high. He broke me out of Satan's jail. Actually He purchased me by paying my debt.

In Jesus first recorded for us sermon at Nazareth He declared His purpose was exactly that. To purchase us out of our bondage to sin and Satan and to free those captives whose sins are forgiven. He quoted Isaiah 61:1,2a

*1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
Because the LORD has anointed me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives,
And freedom to prisoners;*

2 To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD,

Christian freedom, freedom IN Christ, is different from the world's absolute personal autonomy.

I am not free to become a little god and do every sinful thing that the sin I was in bondage to caused me to desire. Christian freedom is being broken free from that bondage. Free at last, with Jesus Holy Spirit to empower and help me, to actually keep God's moral laws, both in my heart and in my body.

So Paul's argument is; If Christ has broken you out of the prison of sin that captured you in this old world which is in bondage under sin, why would you waste time following it's rules which can't break anyone free from sin's bondage. We're at a whole different level, in Christ. Those old things are past. All things are new.

2 Cor. 5:17 Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

Paul says, IF that's true, IF you're a new creation, IF old things have passed away, IF all things have become new, IF you were captured by Christ and freed from this world's captivity to sin . . .

. . . WHY would you fiddle around with meaningless nonsense from the old world that has no power to free anyone from the bonds of sin. All of that is part of the old things that passed away. Why are you wasting time on that

stuff. Chasing squirrels that take you away from what's truly important, which is devotion and time spent, with Jesus.

23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

The old world, captured in sin, by Satan, gives big licks to man made religions that accomplish exactly nothing.

God designed us to be worshippers. It's built into us. So, Satan, in his war against God, manufactures all kinds of worship systems, in this fallen world, that use up that God given energy to worship, something, anything. Man made religions that accomplish nothing. Lots of motion. Lots of noise. Lots of smoking pots and robes and vestments and wailing and burning candles and chanting and crying and bobbing up and down and even singing. Lots of religious commotion.

None of it means anything to God. It's useless. It's part of this fallen world that is passing away.

Paul says, make the distinction. Don't waste time and energy on this world's nonsense religious activity that God rejects and hates. Instead;

Col. 3:1 Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For you died and your life has been hidden with Christ in God.

Notice with me, please, how often Paul uses the important little conjunction; IF. Chapter 2 vs. 20 ***If** you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world*

Again in 3:1 *Therefore, **if** you have been raised up with Christ,*

The question here is whether salvation is complete; valid. It's written as a rhetorical question with the assumption of yes. Yes I have died with Christ to the elementary principles of this world. Yes I have been raised up with Christ in newness of life. Yes old things have passed away, new things have replaced old things. Heavenly things have replaced this world's things.

But there is always an element of people who are not born again. Remember what Jesus told Sardis? *for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.* Religious folk to be sure, but they were incomplete, spiritually. They had stopped short of new life in Christ.

Paul makes the rhetorical argument; If this is true, then I should be seeing this. The IF clause in vs 20 and 3:1 is profound. People who think they're OK when they are incomplete in Christ's eyes are in harms way.

Paul's argument is frightening. If you're really born again, regenerated from death to life Christians, why are you dabbling in man made religiosity that is pointless and has zero value in honoring God.

This has always been the conundrum of people working their way to God by being religious. Doing religious stuff. Babbling religious words with their minds and hearts disconnected from God.

Let me take you to an old testament story. This happens early on in Israel's history. They reject God as king and tell Samuel they want a physical king like other nations in the world have. That broke God's heart, but He gave them the king they chose. Saul. Head and shoulders taller than all the other men and I'm sure dashing handsome, Saul.

And God sends Saul on a mission. Saul and the armies of Israel are sent to eliminate the Amalekites. Ethnic cleansing, ordered by God. Deal with it. It's actually what every rebellious sinful human deserves immediately, but God limited his wrath at this place and time to Amalek who were particularly wretched.

They had done some cowardly and despicable damage to Israel while they were traveling to the promised land. Vile, and worthy of death, but not moreso than me.

God tells Saul, basically, I want them wiped out. Men, women, children, babies, animals, everything. Sort of like what God Himself accomplished at Sodom and Gomorrah, but this time He doesn't use fire, He orders Saul and Israel to do it.

And Saul does it, but he stops short. He takes Agag, the king of Amalek, in chains, like a trophy. And he stops short of killing the best of the animals. He disobeys God's orders so that he can worship God by sacrificing these animals he captured instead of destroying. Disobedience in the name of worship.

Listen to the record of 1 Samuel 15:

10 Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, 11 "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands." And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night. 12 And Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul; and it was told Samuel, saying, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself, then turned and proceeded on down to Gilgal." 13 And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed are you of the LORD! I have carried out the command of the LORD." 14 But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" 15 And Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed." 16 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Wait, and let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night." And he said to him, "Speak!"

17 And Samuel said, "Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of Israel? And the LORD anointed you king over Israel, 18 and the LORD sent you on a mission, and

said, 'Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.' 19 "Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD?"

20 Then Saul said to Samuel, "I did obey the voice of the LORD, and went on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. 21 "But the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal." 22 And Samuel said,

*"Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
As in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to heed than the fat of rams.*

23 *"For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
He has also rejected you from being king."*

God hates religion. God is after repentent obedient hearts that love Him.

The old testament is replete with that truth. From Eve until each one of us today, disobedience is as the sin of divination. You may as well worship Satan if you choose to rebel and disobey God's book. God is only interested in repentent hearts and obeying Him. Worshiping Him with a clear conscience and pure hearts.

Jesus said it in Matthew 15.

7 *"You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying,*

*8 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.*

*9 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.'"*

10 And after He called the multitude to Him, He said to them, "Hear, and understand. 11 "Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man."

The pharisees were canceling Jesus and the disciples because they were rolling heads of grain in their hands on the Sabbath and eating the grain. Man made rules that God despised.

Listen to Isaiah 29. Old testament. And see if it isn't an echo in the room of what Paul is saying to a gentile church. God never changes. He is always looking inside men, not outside. This is the actual verse that Jesus quoted to the pharisees;

Isaiah 29:13

Therefore the Lord said: "These people draw near to Me with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. Their worship of Me is but rules taught by men.

That's Paul's exact argument here in Colossians end of chapter 2 and beginning of chapter 3. God is honored by heart religion. The man made stuff is so much vomit.

20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees: 21 "Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch"? 22 Which deal with everything destined to perish with use, which are in accordance with the commands and teachings of men; 23 which are matters having, to be sure, a word of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. 3:1 Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For you died and your life has

been hidden with Christ in God.

We're out of time, again, but rest assured we will spend some time in the beginning of chapter 3 next week. So much important truth in this letter to the Colossians, for us.