

Colossians

UNDERSTANDING CHRIST AND THE CHURCH



Colossians 2:11-23 Inductive Bible Study Lesson with Discussion Questions

Outline

- I. New life in Christ (11-15)
- II. Our focus should be on Christ alone (16-19)
- III. Do not exalt legalism as spiritual (20-23)

I. New life in Christ (11-15)

Discussion Questions

- What is a circumcision made without hands?
- What does it mean to put off the body of the flesh?
- In what way have you been raised with him?
- How is your life different after salvation?
- What does it mean to be dead in trespasses?
- What “debt” did you owe to God prior to salvation?
- Could you ever pay it off yourself?
- How was this debt dealt with?
- How would a person normally respond if someone else paid off a huge debt for him?
- What should you do for God since He paid this debt for you?
- What rulers and authorities were disarmed? How?

Cross-References

1 Corinthians 7:19 – For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.

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Galatians 6:15 – For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

Jeremiah 4:4 – Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”

Galatians 2:20 – I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Verse by Verse Commentary

1. *A circumcision made without hands* – Circumcision was a topic Paul often returned to throughout the epistles. The Jews had been conditioned over a long period of time to believe that circumcision was a ritual that made them better than other people and more acceptable to God. Originally, circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and His chosen people, the Jews. Abraham believed God and had a relationship with God prior to ever being circumcised.

But in the time of Paul, faith was discounted and the tradition of circumcision was exalted. Jews thought that merely by following the law religiously they could merit God’s favor. So, they followed many traditions such as circumcision, washing of hands, keeping the Sabbath, and offering sacrifices. In the meantime, their hearts were not regenerated. They had little awareness of their sinfulness, and thus, little repentance, instead trusting in their works, the key one being circumcision.

In Paul’s letters to the church, he repeatedly reminds them that God is not, and never was, primarily concerned with the outer ritual of circumcision. What God did care about was the circumcision of the heart (Jeremiah 4:4). In this passage it is called “circumcision made without hands” and “circumcision of Christ.”

What is this?

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It is the transformation of one's heart through faith in Christ, which results in the old flesh being put off.

Salvation is not and never was accomplished through good works or the law. It is through the mercy of God and His work in transforming our dead hearts.

Application: Are you in any way relying on your own good works to merit favor with God? Going to church, reading the Bible, praying, and giving to others are good deeds, but these cannot save you. Sometimes these good actions can become a ritual, even an idol that we place our faith in rather than Christ. Neither should we judge those who do not do them as well as we do. Our good deeds should be a loving response to God's grace rather than a prideful habit. Spend some time to pray to God. Confess any prideful attitude or reliance on self. Thank God for His undeserved mercy and grace!

2. Buried and raised with him (verse 12-13) – Paul uses the symbolism of baptism to show a picture of the believer's life before and after conversion. Baptism is a symbol of the old life and sins being washed away (represented by being immersed in the water) and the new life we have in Christ (represented by coming up out of the water). In a similar way, Jesus was buried in the tomb and came out with a new life and a new body.

For believers, we are to have a radical transformation of our life when we are born again. The old self is dead and gone and we have new life in Christ. Verse 13 reinforces this, saying that "you were dead in your trespasses," and "made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses."

What does this mean?

It means that if you have placed your faith in Christ, your sins are forgiven. Every person is dead prior to conversion. We were completely separated from God and had no ability to please God in any way. We had no spiritual life. Even our good deeds were as filthy rags to Him. By sheer will power we could not overcome our sins. The whole weight and guilt of our sins was born by us.

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But salvation changes all of that. The burden of sin is removed. And the believer can, by the strength of Christ, be an overwhelming conqueror (Romans 8:37).

Application: Our application should be two-fold. Firstly, we should thank God for the work He has done in our hearts. Secondly, we should walk in newness of life. We now have the resources we need to win the battle against sin if we will take advantage of them. Sometimes having victory over temptation is as simple as praying a short prayer to God, "help me."

3. *Canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands* – Debt is another way that Paul uses to describe our situation prior to coming to Christ.

It is something that we can relate to in our modern world as well. Imagine a person who has an uncontrollable desire to gamble. He keeps going to the casino halls. Each trip leaves him further in debt. In a desperate attempt to win back the money he has lost, he borrows from family and friends, anywhere he can get it. His credit cards are maxed out. His home is used as collateral. His credit lines at the casino are used up. Finally, he digs himself into such a big hole that there is no return. The sum of money he owes is so vast that his salary will never be enough to pay it off. The consequences of his foolish mistakes are an oppressive weight crushing his spirit and joy, and effecting his relationship with those around him. There seems to be no hope and no way out, no light at the end of the tunnel.

Then one day he meets Bill Gates. Bill writes a blank check and tells him, "your debt is paid." The man is ecstatic. All the burdens have been removed and he is free again. When he is about to walk away Bill also tells, "don't gamble anymore."

This is what Jesus has done for us. He has paid off all of our debts, taking the consequences onto his own shoulders. He did this, not because he had to, and not because we deserved it. It was an act of sheer love and generosity. If you want to pay it back, you cannot. However, this act of love should in turn motivate us to love Him in return, and to live our life differently, not going back to the same sinful habits as before. If the man in the above example went back to gambling, he would be considered the most

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foolish and ungrateful person on the planet. The same is true when we spurn God's grace and return to our former way of life.

1 John 4:19 – We love because He first loved us.

II. Our focus should be on Christ alone (16-19)

Discussion Questions

- What is the main topic of this passage?
- Does this kind of judging take place in the church today?
- Why do some people put such great importance on food, festivals, and other traditions?
- If no one else is to act as a judge of us in these things, then who is the judge?
- How important are these things?
- What does it mean that these are a mere shadow of what is to come?
- What is to come?
- If the focus is not to be on these things, what is our focus to be on?
- What prize do you think is referred to here?
- What kind of false teaching is this person spreading?
- What is the result of falling for that false teaching?
- What should our view of self-abasement be? Worshiping angels? Visions?
- What is the key problem with each of these things?
- How does the church grow?

Cross-References

John 7:24 – Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly.

Matthew 7:1-5 – “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way, you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck

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out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Romans 2:3 – So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

James 4:11-12 – Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

1 Timothy 6:3-5 – If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, they are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.

Verse by Verse Commentary

1. *Verse 16* – It looks like the Colossian church was starting to face some division, likely brought about by some false doctrines that were working their way into the church. Believers began to divide over some of these issues and accuse each other. Christians are not immune to pride. Often times we suffer from the same sense of self-righteousness the Pharisees did. The Corinthian believers pridefully declared, "I am of Apollos," or, "I am of Paul." It seems in a similar way some believers in the church at Colossae proudly declared, "I don't drink alcohol," or, "I keep the Sabbath," or, "I won't eat unclean food." In thus doing, they are going beyond acting on their own personal convictions to accusing and looking down on believers who didn't follow their same ideas. We should note that these are areas where God has given believers freedom.

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For example, Jesus gave us freedom to eat all kinds of food (Mark 7:19). Yet some believers still prefer to keep the Old Testament laws, believing for example that God gave these commands partly for health and sanitary reasons. They believe it is healthier to follow those standards and therefore they don't eat pork or some other foods. Is that OK? Sure! God never commanded us saying we **MUST** eat those foods. We **CAN** if we want to. A believer who still follows those laws should not look down on those who don't.

Keeping the Sabbath is another example in these verses. This command is not repeated in the New Testament and Paul makes it clear in Romans 6:15 that believers are not under the law anymore. We do not have to keep the Sabbath in the same way as during Old Testament times. But what if a believer decides to do no work on Saturday (or they change it to Sunday) and spend the day in prayer, study, and meditation. Is that wrong? Of course not. This is a good thing to do. But this person should not look down on other believers who go to the park, play sports, or engage in other similar activities on Saturday/Sunday.

God is the judge. The Bible is His Word. His Word does act as judge over us. Where God has clearly spoken in Scripture, we can be dogmatic. But where he has not, we must strive to maintain unity (Ephesians 4:3).

In what areas may Christians become self-righteous and look down on others who don't follow their same personal preference?

- Keeping or not keeping certain festivals: Lent, Christmas, Easter, Good Friday, Palm Sunday, etc.
- Drinking or not drinking alcohol
- TV, games, movies, dancing, cards
- How to dress on Sunday
- Which version of the Bible to use
- Music style
- Homeschooling

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2. *These are a mere shadow* – The heart of our faith is not about these things. It is not about rules or rituals. Some of these things have their purpose, such as festivals. But they are a means to an end and not an end unto themselves. The Pharisees did all of these things, but they performed them only as a ritual to demonstrate their righteousness when in fact they were far from God. Do not focus on the shadow.

3. *The substance belongs to Christ* – Don't focus on the shadow. Focus on the real thing. Christ! Our faith is not about rules. It is not about commands. It is not about rituals, or festivals. It is not about going to church. It is not about symbols like a cross or a dove. It is not about wearing Christian jewelry. It is not about performing good deeds. It is not about baptism or communion. It is not even about heaven or reading the Bible. What is it then?

It is about having a relationship with Christ. If you do all of the rest but have no relationship with Christ you are missing the whole point and in fact you have perverted the truth from God and created your own religion. The things above are means to an end. The Bible is a way to let us become closer to Christ. Heaven is a place where we can see Christ face to face. Communion is a ritual to remember what Christ has done for us. Christian symbols are reminders of what Christ has done for us. How can you pursue Christ?

4. *Let no one defraud you* – Paul is referring to false teachers who want to lead you away from Christ. The prize is having a close relationship with Christ. Think of it in this way. Ephesians 5 compares the relationship between Christ and believers to a marriage. The husband's prize is not the flowers, dress, music, food, or decorations of the wedding. These are nice, sure. But they are not the key focus of the wedding.

Imagine a man who went to his wedding and it was spectacular. The cooking was world class. The cake was 10 tiers tall. One of the top bands in the world came to play live music. He rented the Taj Mahal in India for the ceremony. Everything was just perfect. But there is one problem. He was tricked. His bride didn't show up. This man was defrauded of the prize. No amount of decorations, no matter how pretty, can cover up for the fact that the wedding is a pretty empty and meaningless event without the bride.

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This is the same thing that happens when we allow false teaching to shift our focus away from Christ to other matters that sound important. What is your prize? What are you focusing on?

Self-Abasement: Denying oneself just for the sake of denying oneself is not beneficial. Spiritual pride can come in when we follow rules hoping to earn merit with God. Healthy fasting and denying ourselves specific things for a period of time is useful when we use that extra time to worship our Lord.

Worship of Angels: A preoccupation with angels distracts us from glorifying Christ. Jesus is the center of our faith, not angels. We should be thankful that God sends angels to work in this world on our behalf, but we must not lose sight of our King.

Visions: Some people care more about pursuing visions and dreams than they do about pursuing Christ. Christ should be our pursuit and focus.

5. *Not holding fast to the head* – Here is the core problem. Our focus must be on Christ. We must hold fast to Him. We are Christians not “Crosstians” or “Churchtians” or “Bibleians.” Christ is the one who causes us to grow spiritually. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. What are you holding to? What is your priority? Is Christ in the center of your heart or is it something else? How can you get and keep Christ in the center?

III. Do not exalt legalism as spiritual (20-23)

Discussion Questions

- What are the “elementary principles of the world”?
- What decrees are mentioned here?
- Does following these decrees make us more spiritual?
- What things are referred to in verse 21?
- Are there things which we should not handle, taste, or touch?
- What is self-made religion?
- What key tenets of self-made religion can we see in this passage?

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- What are the key differences between God's Word and self-made religion?
- What value is there in severe treatment of the body?
- What is the perceived value in these things?
- Do these restrictions protect against fleshly indulgence?
- Is fleshly indulgence acceptable?
- How can we strike the correct balance between indulgence and forbidding things God has made for our enjoyment?

Cross-References

James 1:27 – Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Titus 3:5 – He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Verse by Verse Commentary

1. Verse 20 – Died to the elementary principles. These are people's ideas which sound wise and lofty, but which are in fact as limited as we are. Man-made religion is filled with these ideas. One of them is that we must in some way make up for the wrong things we have done. We must do enough good deeds to balance the scale. Or we must follow a certain set of rules to become good enough to deserve Christ. These elementary principles reduce a true relationship with God to a set of do's and don'ts. Sounding spiritual and lofty, these rules shift our attention away from Christ onto self. We focus on our own ability to fulfill these rules rather than on Christ's power to forgive us when we fail.

2. Verse 21 – A set of rules which sound spiritual, but are not.

3. Verse 23 – Man-made rules and standards appear wise because we are humans and we made up these ideas. But man-made religion cannot bring us closer to God or take

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away the sin which separates us from him. At the same time these things cannot even keep us from the opposite extreme of fleshly indulgence.

Discuss how we can keep a proper balance between legalism and indulgence.