

## Jesus: Our Freedom

Colossians 2:16-19

*<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. <sup>18</sup> Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by a sensuous mind, <sup>19</sup> 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. (ESV)*

As we looked at the book of Colossians, remember the background I gave you that Colossians is sort of an odd book with the apostle Paul because usually he would have written letters or traveled to major Metropolitan areas. Colossae, the city, was not a major metropolitan area. It's more like it would be to Hierapolis or one of those cities as maybe Renton or Kent is to Seattle. It's just an average city. People maybe had heard of it but it wasn't a big player, if you will. Yet, Paul wrote them a letter. The letter is not even really responding to problems but, in fact, is preempting problems. Epaphras, the guy who started the church, probably asked Paul, "What does my church need to know? What is the most important thing?" And that is what Paul did. He writes this letter to the church at Colossae. It really answers two questions at the end of the day. The first question is, "Do I need Jesus at all?" And the second question is, "Having seen a need for Jesus, do I need anything else?" In other words, "Is Jesus enough?"

We saw over and over again where Paul would say when you were alienated from God, you were enemies of God, you were dead in your trespasses and sin. You do need Jesus, Paul would say, to forgive your sins, make you alive. But the other question that Paul even talks about more is whether or not Jesus is enough. Teachers apparently were coming in or they went around to churches in the area, and Paul was either addressing teachers or preempting them. Or basically saying, "You can't add anything to this thing we call the Gospel." In other words, your good works plus Jesus equals zero. If you have Jesus you have everything you need. You can't get any more full. Remember when he talks about Jesus, he laid out the immensity of Jesus in creation. That all things in heaven and on earth, all powers, rule and authority were created to him, for him, and through him. But he also talked about the sufficiency of Jesus in redemption. That in Christ all of your sins have been wiped away, nailed to the cross, and there's nothing else to be done. There's nothing more you can do to become acceptable to God. The question is, "Now what?" That's where Paul is getting to. He's laid this out over and over and over again. As we look at today's text, Paul is going to start branching into the application of all the things he's taught us before. The three things he's going to look at today, the practical applications of the Gospel that he has laid out so far, are going to be these three. If you're a note-taker, you'll want to write these down. The first point is, "Don't let anybody judge you." Point number one. The second point is, "Don't let anybody cheat you." That's point number two. Point number three is, "Don't let anybody fool you." So don't let anyone judge you, don't let anyone cheat you, and don't let anyone fool you.

Let's look at the first point, "Don't let anyone judge you." Verse 16 says,

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The first thing I'll point out is, remember the "therefore." The "therefore" ties what Paul's about to say with what he has just said. If you somehow could do a "Man on the Street" interview with Christians and you laid it out to them and said, "Okay, Jesus has saved you from your sins. He has made you right with God, he has given you all the righteousness of himself, and now you stand blameless before the Father. Therefore \_\_\_\_\_." Fill in the blank.

What do you think the average Christian would write in there? What do you think the average person who's not a Christian would write in there? From my experience, I can tell you what they'd write in there. Jesus has done all the work on your behalf and you're completely righteous and acceptable in the sight of God. Therefore be good. Right? Now you're just supposed to "be good," correct? No. That's not what Paul says. It should surprise you, because Paul lays out the whole Gospel and then he says, "Therefore, don't let anyone pass judgment on you."

Why? Because you're free. You're free from the guilt of your sins. Paul was preempting people who come along and judge people by what they ate or drank, or whether they observed certain festivals, feast days, the Sabbath. Paul says, "Don't let them do that to you. Don't let them judge your spiritual fitness according to what you eat, drink, or what Sabbath days, what festival days you obey. Don't let them do it."

I was talking to a friend this week about preaching and I said the interesting thing about when you preach a text like this is that you're thinking through your congregation and you think, "Who's the target here?" In other words, is the target people who feel like they are constantly being judged? Which, by the way, we've had people leave our church for that reason. They felt that way. Or, is it the people who judge them?

All of you are here. And so the question is, why does Paul say, "Do not let anyone pass judgment on you?" The other question I'm going to add in there is, "Why would you judge in the first place?" Don't be a judge.

Since I've been here, (and I haven't been here long), there have been issues that come up. Some people don't even mention the word "dance" because your spiritual fitness would be in question. Don't propose anything within 30 feet of the back of the sanctuary or else you'll be in question. Paul says all that stuff has nothing to do with your salvation. He gives two reasons for why it has nothing to do with your salvation, and why you should not let people pass judgment on you. The first reason is before this verse and the second reason is right after this verse 16. The first reason is what we talked about last week. I'm going to give it to you by way of a different spin. Why should you not let people judge you? Simply because of this. Have you ever seen the film, "When a Man Loves a Woman"? I think it was in the '90s. It starred Andy Garcia as the very high-powered attorney, very wealthy living in Laguna Beach, California, Malibu or somewhere. And Meg Ryan was his very beautiful, upscale wife. Except that the dirty family secret was that she was an alcoholic. As the movie progressed she sort of spiraled down until eventually toward the end of it she finds herself in basically a government-run rehab center. She is in rehab for alcoholism with people that she would have never even talked to before, she never would have looked at, and she never would have rubbed elbows with before. And you find out in the course, the one in the family with the bigger problem is not Meg Ryan. She realizes she has no hope and she needs to get some help. It's her husband who's the controller. He rushes down to the rehab center when he figures out she's down there, and he barges in and he says, "You need to come home with me right now." She says, "Why, I'm being helped here." And he says, "I just don't think these people are a good influence on you." And she steps forward and says to him, "Whatever you think of these people, you better think of me. Husband, you really get it. You really understand this problem. You realize that I'm no better than any of these people. Whatever you think of these people, think of me."

Now, what's that got to do with our text? The reason Paul says, "Do not let anyone judge you" is because Jesus says the same thing. He says it one way and then he says it another. You see, when Jesus goes to the cross, he says things about the most despicable sinners, the people who are the most guilty, and the people who need him the most. When God looks at them he says, "What ever you think of these people, you think of me." And God does exactly that, and he pours out his wrath for the sin of the world onto one person. What he thinks about the world he pours into Jesus and then after the resurrection Jesus stands up and he says the exact same thing, except that he reverses it. When God looks at his people, Jesus says, "Now, what ever you think of me, think of these people, because I stood in their stead." Paul says, "If Jesus has stood in your stead and Jesus has credited you with his righteousness when God looks at you, he thinks of Jesus. What more can you add to that?" Is there anything you can add? Who would presume to add to the goodness and righteous of Jesus that's been credited to their account? Paul says if you've got that, how can anyone judge you as to whether you're acceptable to God or not? In fact Paul says, "Don't let them do it."

The second reason Paul says, "Don't let them do it" is what comes right after. Notice verse 17. He says in verse 17,

<sup>17</sup> *These (all these sort of legal demands) are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (ESV)*

You see Paul is basically saying, "Are you going to be defined by Jesus and his acceptance? Are you going to be driven by people whose acceptance you long for and desire?" You have to answer that question first. Are you

driven by what people think of you or are you driven by what God thinks of you? If you trust in Jesus, he thinks that you're as righteous as Christ. If you're driven by what people think of you, you need to start with Jesus.

Once you get there then the question is, "What about all these laws? What should I do with them? Do I still have to obey them in order to be acceptable to God or not?" Paul says, "These things are but a shadow." Jesus is the substance. In other words, Paul is saying, "Why would you fear the shadows when you possess the substance. Why would you be driven by the shadows, the law, and the things that pointed to Jesus and pointed to your need for Jesus, when in fact you possess Jesus? What drives you? The fact that Jesus owns you and you possess him, or the fact that you're wondering whether or not things are really clear? The shadows, the law, the things that point to him. What drives you?"

You know, years ago when we lived in Capitol Hill, I would take the girls for walks and we'd often walk down Broadway. We lived near there. We saw a number of interesting things on Broadway over the years, especially at Halloween. But, I remember one day—it might have been Tuesday, we were walking down Broadway and on a corner in front of a QFC, there was a group of Hare Krishnas. The girls were very small, maybe seven and eight. They were dancing fervently, which I'd never seen Hare Krishnas do, to be honest with you. They've always seemed very mellow to me. But, they were dancing. They were going crazy. The girls asked, "What are they doing?" I said, "Well, they're trying to please their God as they understand it." And Flannery, my middle daughter, immediately said, "But don't they know Jesus?" In other words, *she got it*. If you know Jesus you don't have to dance in order to please God. On the other had, if you do know Jesus you dance because you know God is pleased with you. Paul says to people who trust in Jesus, "Don't let anyone judge you" because when you're driven by other people's judgment what you're saying is their acceptance means more to you than acceptance of Christ. But he goes on and he says not only, "Don't let anyone pass judgment," he says, "Don't let anyone cheat you", or "let anyone disqualify you" my version says. Notice what he says in verse 18. He says,

*<sup>18</sup> Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by a sensuous mind, (ESV)*

So that word there can be translated, "let no one cheat you," "let no one disqualify you," "let no one rob you." And it's interesting if you've ever been robbed (which Judy and I've been robbed a few times) you feel violated. And, in every instance we've been robbed, people have robbed us by taking something from us. What Paul says is, "Don't let anyone rob you, or cheat you, or disqualify you" not by taking something from you, but by giving you something. He says, "Let no one disqualify you by offering you asceticism or worship of angels or any other thing." In other words, Jesus plus anything equals zero. Paul says, "Don't let anyone who comes to you offering these things say that they're going to help you," or "this is going to help your relationship with God." In fact Paul here is almost like making a mockery of these guys.

As I was reading it, I thought about asceticism. Most of what's meant by that is fasting. Basically, many people think these guys came in and said, "If you fast long enough and you're hard enough on yourself eventually you'll have heavenly visions and ecstatic visions." I remember reading that this week thinking, "Yeah, everyone who's been to Ranger school experiences that." Right? One meal a day for two or three months and eventually you're having visions of Pizza Hut and everything else. Like, that's nothing special. But what Paul goes on to say, is they're puffed up about this and they're proud, in effect, about their humility. Now, think about that. Here's a principal for you. As soon as you begin to feel proud about how humble you are, you've lost the humility. Paul says, "You can tell these teachers don't get it because they're not humble." If they really had heavenly visions, they'd be like Paul. Remember to what happened with Paul? Paul had a heavenly vision and God gave him afterward a "thorn in the flesh." And Paul knows if they'd really seen what they claimed to have seen and were really able to offer what they're able to offer instead of being proud they would be humble. You see, because the closer you get to Jesus, you don't become more proud, but you become more humble. That's where Paul is going with this. He says, "Don't let them rob you or cheat you or disqualify you by trying to give you something that you don't need. It's just going to slow you down. All of these things. And so he goes from saying, "Don't let people judge you." "Don't let people rob you." Then finally he says, "Don't let people fool you." He actually doesn't say that. That's my interpretation of where he's going with this. Notice what he says in verse 19. Paul says,

<sup>19</sup> 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. (ESV)

Notice verse 19 says that these teachers are puffed up, or they're proud about their visions and then he says basically, "They're not connected to the head." What does he mean by that statement? Remember the Church is the body, Jesus is the head. And remember he said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing." He's making a statement about these teachers and he's either saying one of two things. Either they are Christians who have no idea what they're talking about, or they're not Christians at all. In other words he's saying these guys who are coming in and who are telling you that, "You need to be obedient. You need to have Jesus plus you need to be obedient to certain laws. You need to have Jesus plus you need to avoid certain food, or certain drink. You need to trust Jesus and you need to worship angels." He says, "Anyone who would add anything to Jesus either doesn't understand the Gospel or doesn't believe the Gospel. And so the question is, "Since we all do that, where are you?" Are you in a place where you don't believe the Gospel or are you in a place where you don't understand the Gospel? For me, I believe it, but more and more I find myself not understanding it, at least in my practice. Because, I've become puffed up. I've become disconnected. Paul says, "They're disconnected because what they're looking for when they tell you to practice asceticism and the law and all these things, is they're looking for moral reformation instead of spiritual transformation. Let me say that again. Whenever people come in and they say, "In order to be acceptable and pleasing to God, you need to be morally reformed." If you try to have moral reformation without spiritual transformation you lose every single time. That's why moralists are among the most angry people you'll ever meet. Because someone who's a moralist and they're trying to enforce their morals: you shouldn't drink, or you shouldn't dance, or you shouldn't do this or that, or you shouldn't vote Republican or you shouldn't vote Democrat. They're always frustrated because if you skip spiritual transformation, the change of heart, it never works – ever. So these people are disconnected from the head because they're shooting for moral transformation, but they are lost, they don't have a clue about spiritual reformation. Notice the very last thing Paul says here. He talks about the church is a body that grows with the growth that is from God. That if you grow spiritually, if the church grows, it is a growth that comes from God. Do we utilize means? Certainly. But is God going to bless you just because you're gutting it out? Absolutely not.

Now, are moral transformation and spiritual transformation disconnected? No. In fact they're dependent on each other, but they are always usually reversed. Moral reformation always comes behind spiritual transformation. If you want to change, if you want people to change their mind about a certain issue that you hold dear, that you think is a moral issue, the question you have to ask yourself, "Is their heart changed?" If their heart isn't changed, all the morals of the world are not going to help them. Paul says basically, "These guys don't get it. So don't let them fool you when they come at you."

What's the upshot of the whole series? It's just this. I may have told you this story before when Judy ran her first triathlon. When Judy ran her first triathlon a few years ago, she was a little bit nervous. The day before she'd gone and set up her bicycle and gotten her T-shirt and registered and all that stuff. The day she was leaving, she was getting ready to go compete, and I said, "Are you doing OK?" She said, "I'm nervous." I said, "Why are you nervous?" and she said, "You know . . . it's the competition." I leaned over, I remember, and said, "You don't need to be nervous. They already gave you the T-shirt." They gave you the T-shirt! What do you mean by that? Well, you see you've got the T-shirt, so now you've just got to go run because after the race who knows who the winner is? You all got the same T-shirt. What Paul is saying is if you really trust Jesus, you've got the T-shirt, you wear his righteousness and now you don't need to be nervous about the race. You need to run it, and you need to run it hard. You need to run it obediently and you need to run it for him, but the fact is even if you trip and fall and stumble when you get up, guess what? You've still got the T-shirt, and you get the T-shirt before the race even begins. The extent you understand that is the extent you can believe this, "No one can judge me, I've got the T-shirt!" You didn't run the race . . . Got the shirt. But the analogy breaks down because I wear Judy's T-shirts after these races and I don't do anything. So, think about that as we continue into the fall.