

In the previous parts of the letter to the Colossians the Spirit of God revealed to us that because Christ was cut off in our place, we received the mark of sonship, of belonging to God.

And so we do! Those who believe in this Jesus, the fullness of Deity dwelling bodily, the Head over all rule and authority and powers, the Beloved Son of God who rules an eternal Kingdom, belong to God as He belongs to God.

Isn’t that incredible?! Isn’t that crazy?! It’s not the best people who belong to God...it’s the people united to His Son by humble dependence.

So, what are some of the implications of this truth?

Paul continues his thoughts with a “Therefore” in verse 16, and gives us two specific examples by giving two specific commands, which are most likely related to the particular false teaching which was present in the region, that syncretism between moralistic legalism (you are accepted and find belonging because you obey the rules) and experiential mysticism (you belong and find power because of spiritual encounters with powerful spiritual agents). In this way, the two commands make sense to us, too, even though the particular Colossians forms may not. Legalism and experientialism surely are, because they are present in every human heart.

So, what are these two commands? Well, to be honest, I think that they are really one command given in two different ways. The first is in verse 16, “Don’t let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink or how you set apart your days as sacred.” The second is like it in v18, “Don’t let anyone rule against you because of some esoteric

experience that they have had.” This second command is another athletic metaphor, which is related to being an umpire calling you disqualified or penalizing you. In a football metaphor, the modern colosseum, you could even interpret it as, “Don’t let anyone throw a flag on you.”

The central idea is that those united to Christ Jesus should not submit to any condemnation which is based upon “something other than Christ.” And here we see the principle which Paul has been expounding on: any means of growing in our knowledge of God that is not centered upon our union with Christ is powerless.

In fact, vv16-23 are really a more detailed parallel to 2:8, “See to it that nobody takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elementals of the world, and not according to Christ.” Just as the warning there is to watch out for things which are “not according to Christ”, so also is the warning here, which is a bit more descriptive of what “human traditions” and “elementals of the world” might mean, really about anything which is “not holding fast the Head” and delights in the powerless shadow rather than the reality of the triumphant Christ.

So, let’s look at these descriptions one at a time to see if the Lord may help us understand this freedom a bit more.

First, remember that the basic warnings of 16 and 18 have to do with accusations. As we reflect on the images used last week, circumcision and baptism and triumph, we remember that what we have, when united to Christ Jesus by faith, is the position of belonging to God, fully belonging to God, which means that all accusations against us

are answered by Jesus. It also means that it is *right* that we belong to God, and it is *God's delight and pleasure* that we belong to Him. He did it! He likes you!

These accusations are assuming that you do not belong to God if you have done what they demand you not do, avoided what they demand you must do, or have not experienced what they have experienced.

Now, before we look further, I want to briefly point out that Paul's words here do not deny that there are any commands which we ought to be following and any obedience which we ought to be obeying, as if sin were a means to growth. That is just as headless. Rather, these laws are not according to the Christ, they are not dependent upon Him as our representative, and they do not adhere to Him crucified and risen as the source of life and growth which comes from God. The accusations presented by false teachers is that to really grow, to really be full, to really know God, one must eat or avoid certain foods, celebrate or avoid certain festivals or feasts, and experience certain visions or esoteric experiences and pursue them through the means of manipulating God or His blessings through our performance or experiences.

According to the gospel, however, growth and maturity come from entrusting ourselves to Jesus as our representative and Lord. What Paul calls "the law of Christ" when he wrote to the Galatians churches (6:2) and the church in Corinth (1 Cor 9:21), he called the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus," when he wrote to the Roman churches (8:2), and what Jesus' half-brother James, one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, called "the perfect law of liberty". Our union with Christ is our means of life and growth, "the law of the Spirit of life *in Christ Jesus*", that is, united to Christ Jesus, is the only means which we need.

How is this union with Christ the perfect “law of liberty?” Well, before we were united to Christ, our belonging was based upon our performance. The rules of God didn’t save us, they only revealed how broken deep down that we truly are. That even our best actions were done in a self-serving attempt to barter with God. We did so out of the highest love of oneself, a truly self-interested philanthropy, or we did so out of the highest love for Nature, the idolatrous worship of Nature, or we did so out of the highest love for Man, the idolatrous worship of the image of Man. All of these motives are the bases for the most wicked evil and violent deeds of men and also of the most beneficial and self-sacrificial deeds of men, and none of them out of love for the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. By missing the greatest commandment, such deeds were based upon idolatrous worship misplaced and inordinately elevating some created thing to the place which only God is worthy.

Timothy Keller wrote it this way, **“The key difference between a Pharisee and a believer in Jesus is inner-heart motivation. Pharisees are being good, but out of a fear-fueled need to control God. They don’t really trust him or love him. To them God is an exacting boss, not a loving father. Christians have seen something that has transformed their hearts toward God so they can finally love and rest in the Father.”** (*Prodigal God*, p86)

Thus, in Christ Jesus we have been freed to love God for His sake alone, not to obtain His benefits, but to thank Him for giving them to us by sheer mercy. We obey for God’s glory alone, because such works and words make much of the God gave so extravagantly to rescue, redeem, and restore me to the fullness of humble worship and

the joy of being His delight in holiness. We love Him in response to His love for us, and since we love Him, we seek to obey Him.

Therefore, because God has united us to Himself in Christ and given us a place of belonging, all according to his kindness and grace, means that I don't pursue a moral life in order to obtain such a place of belonging, nor do I have to have certain experiences of spiritual insight or empowerment in order to obtain His pleasure. I can walk freely in loving adoration of Him. This is why Paul spends so much time expounding the beauty and sufficiency of Jesus in the first two chapters. **We grow by looking at God's love and mercy in how He redeemed us: the sacrifice and resurrection of His supreme Son in our place, to gain us back to Himself as heirs and family.**

Therefore, the first command is to not be condemned by anyone concerning what you eat or what day you set aside as holy is not a complete rejection of all moral law, but is particularized to those things which people claim make you more spiritual, more full, **more belonging to God because of those external rituals and behaviors related to them.**

And this is the commonly held belief about what Christianity is, frankly. Some of you are here today, thinking that very thing. And some of you were raised under very strict adherence to such thinking and probably have a very difficult time shaking it free according to Christ. Some of these types of external regulations may be cast in the phrasing of, "Real Christians don't do..."

First, there is the biblical example in the eating of meat or vegetables. "Real Christians don't eat meat because it has all been sacrificed to false gods." The Roman church had this problem and the Corinthian church had this problem. Meat offered in the markets

there was all blessed to the gods first. Some Christians thought that to eat it was a participation in such idolatry. So, they boycotted meat. “That meat is tainted by wicked hands. To eat it taints you, too.” How is this related to our union with Christ? It’s not! It’s rooted in your actions and the supposed power of “tainted wicked hands.” It’s disconnected from Christ! It’s a spiritual growth plan based upon human tradition and it’s headless.

Now, it is also possible to go the opposite direction, right Jared? “Real Christians must love bacon.” ☺ But, Christians throughout history have struggled with this, making laws of distinction based not upon union with Christ, but upon some external avoidances to separate themselves from the world, “Do not handle! Don’t taste that! Don’t even touch that!” Real Christians don’t drink alcohol. Real Christians don’t smoke cigars. Real Christians don’t play those games...they have mythological characters in them! Real Christians don’t dance and certainly not to *that* music. Real Christians don’t celebrate *those* holidays, they are tainted by wickedness. Real Christians don’t work on the Sabbath. Real Christians don’t celebrate the Sabbath. Real Christian women must wear skirts and never pants. Real Christian men must never have beards on their faces or hair past their ears. Or, real Christian men must have beards, love guns, lift weights, drink craft beer. If you don’t, you’re a weak Christian. On and on the list goes, based upon things which are “passing away”. They have the form of godliness but deny the power of it. What Paul calls “the shadow of things to come.” **You see, such dietary and holy day laws, even those given in the Old Testament, were shadows of the coming substance.** Imagine your dear friend coming to visit you, and you get a cell call and discover that she’s just around the corner, and on this sunny

day you glance to the corner of the building and see her shadow lengthen over the sidewalk. You can tell it's her because of the shape of the shadow. That's like the law. It has the shape of the Christ. But, embracing the law as the means of true Christian belonging and fidelity and maturity would be the same as if, when your friend finally rounds the corner and you see her face in all its glory, you dive to the ground and embrace her shadow instead of wrapping your arms around her body. It's insane to embrace a shadow! Even for Eugene.

What Paul is instructing here is that those who insist on such submission to such dietary and festival laws were instructing you to embrace the shadow instead of the body of Christ. And the shadow had a purpose. It anticipated and revealed the shape of the Christ. The Law had a shape and a purpose, too: to reveal the shape and glory of God which was coming, what Paul calls in v17, "the things to come." But, now they have come! Jesus told the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, "all the Scriptures speak of me!" He has rounded the corner and all the glory of God, the shape of God's desires and delights are present in Him, and all the boundaries which God calls us to (there are boundaries) are reflected off of the person of Jesus Christ, and as His body, the Church, we are to be bound by them, too, united to Him as we are. But not to the shadow. To the substance.

The glory of our union with Christ is that we are not shaped, nor do we grow, by our adherence to the outward things, the things destined to be consumed, but by the eternal things: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, self-mastery. That is, the attitudes which flow from a heart which is utterly entrusting itself to Jesus to complete it. It is there, Paul will conclude, where we must keep our eyes fixed as our

hope of glory. **Our hope is not in our works, to complete ourselves, but in His, to keep us belonging to God.**

Do we respond to His work with grateful obedience? Yes! Absolutely yes! In fact, look ahead to Colossians 3:5 and following, where there is a definite shape to a heart which is united to Christ Jesus and relationships shaped by our union with Him. But we are not secured by such outward allegiance to food and drink laws, or feasts and festivals, but by His being consumed for us and being raised up for us and by triumphing over all powers on our behalf, to set us free from condemnation and from the shadow.

It is for the love of the Christ, for gratitude to God in Him, for uniting us to Him according to His grace alone, to which every Christian faithfully responds to Him according to their conscience in the light of the gospel. As Paul told the Corinthians, “Whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do it all for the glory of God.”

So, the question that we should be asking is not, “Should I had handle that, or taste that, or touch that?” But, rather, “What am I doing and what am I doing it?” “Does this action make much of Him, or of something else?” “If it doesn’t, what am I hoping that this will accomplish?” “Is it dependent upon Christ and my union with Him?”

Now, the second command is to not be condemned based upon your spiritual experiences. Unlike those who place their dependence upon their outward adherence to dietary rules and the like, **there are those who place an expectation upon others to have some kind of vision or mystical experience,** a power encounter with God, or with angels, as the means of real spirituality, real power, really walking with God, etc.

There are various ways in which this detachment from Christ manifests itself, but the basic issue is always recognized by the *means* of some better connection with God. By “means” I mean agency, or tool, or even a type of manipulation where by it is assumed implicitly or expressed explicitly that if you really want to know God, or really want to spiritually grow, or be healed, then you must have some kind of experience or encounter with spiritual entities, that is the means of this knowledge.

Just as the above command does not deny commandments altogether, neither those this command deny personal spiritual experiences altogether. However, they are never the *necessary means* of spiritual growth or knowing God. They are certainly not the means of belonging to Him. Such a belief is a detachment from the Christ and a substitution of Him for some other power, be it angelic or impersonal, which is really simply a rejection of Him. It is headless!

Now, we see this in numerous ways, too, some of which are obvious and some of which are more subtle. And they range from the humorous to the disconcerting, although even the humorous ones are severely concerning when we think of the implications. One of these somewhat humorous examples comes from the story told by Beni Johnson, the wife and co-pastor of Bethel Redding. First, notice the implications with which she begins her story. She writes, “As we begin to recognize that [angels] are among us, we will begin to see more angelic activity as we pull heaven to earth.” Do you see what she is implying? We have the power to pull heaven to earth, and we need angels to help us do it.

She then tells a story about a student from Wales who woke a sleeping angel “of the 1904 revival” who was so large she could only see its feet. Beni continues, “Having a

visitation like that would really shake you up. I like angels. When you talk about them, they like to show up! And when they come, they bring the presence of God.” (Beni Johnson’s blog post, March 16, 2009, <http://www.benij.org/blog.php?id=1>)

Moved by this sleeping angel story, she and a group of others were traveling through the desert of California, and she felt compelled by the Lord, so she claims, to pull the van over. She got out and “seeing angels everywhere” began blowing a shofar (a ram’s horn) and ringing a bell, and running around yelling, “Wakey! Wakey!” She claimed to be waking up the territorial angels which had fallen asleep due to the fact that nobody called on them for revival anymore. It was up to her and others to wake them up. Why? Because without these angels, heaven couldn’t be ‘pulled to earth.’

Do you see the error here? **Appealing to angels, or to Mary, or any other mediator than Christ, is a demonstrable detachment from the gospel and from the Christ.** We never pray to angels. We never implore them. We never request from them. We have access to the throne room of God, where Christ is seated, and from there we have everything we need. He is the Head from which all Life and power and sustenance flows, and He works through the Church, who is likened to His body.

A more terrifying example comes from the practice of “grave soaking” or “grave sucking.” This is practice not according to Christ by which people seek to obtain some spiritual gift or power of a saint who has died. So, those who believe that a certain now-deceased saint had a great gift of healing, or of preaching, or of prophecy, will go and lay on their gravestones as a means of “soaking up their anointing”, or their power, so that they can do such works, too. This is a blatant seeking to manipulate power like a spiritual battery, just waiting for the poles to be aligned properly so that it will release

its energy. It is disconnected from Christ. It is not entrusting oneself to Him as a person. It is seeking out spiritual power via the means of cultic performance. In fact, that the word which Paul uses in v18, “worship of angels”, is not the usual word for worship, but rather for “cultic performance” or “ritual.” It is the attempt to achieve or obtain some blessing or power via the means of performing an action or saying a mantra which unlocks some special dispensation of spiritual enablement, like blowing a ram’s horn, ringing a bell, or shouting “Wakey! Wakey!”.

These are the same people who will go on and on about visions that they have supposedly received by God, says Paul, as those who have “entered into the heavenly realm.” In fact, that is the word translated “going on in detail” actually means: “entering”. It is a cultic word of those who would enter into the sanctuary of a temple.

For a person to base their wisdom, their knowledge, their power, their righteousness, their authority, their condemnation of you, upon some claim of having been in the heavenly realm and seen things, is inexcusable to the apostle. It is headless Christianity, severed from the Christ.

In fact, in 2 Corinthians 12 Paul mentions a man who was “taken up” into the heavenly realm in a vision, but listen how he speaks of it, without giving any detail at all: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of body I do not know, only God knows) was caught up to the third heaven...into paradise and heard things too sacred to be put into words, things that a person is not permitted to speak.” Notice the lack of detail. Notice the lack of using the vision to declare that the Church should respond to it. Notice the lack of boasting by the individual. Paul boasts

only in the cross of Christ, of Christ crucified for sinners, of his own weaknesses and not strength, of the grace of God and not the experience of his strength.

But there are those who will boast of their visions, who want to go on in detail about them *as a means of silencing you*. This is why alarm bells go off in my head whenever a person says to me, “The Lord told me....” That is a statement of authority intended to silence any opposition or questioning. In fact, when I start to question a person to see if their position aligns with what God has revealed in Christ, I usually get rebuffed. Headless.

Such people will implicitly or explicitly expect you have such experiences, to pursue them. In fact, the word translated “insisting on” in v18 is actually the word “desire” or “want.” It is a want or desire with the intent of obtaining. Therefore, the concept of pursuing is an accurate one. They pursue visions. They pursue angels. They do so through some kind of ritual, some activity or mantra which they think can “unlock” or “activate” an entrance into the spiritual realm to gain spiritual power, growth, or blessing.

By doing so, and by telling you about them, they imply that you should be having these experiences, too, and that really spiritual Christians, who are connected to God in a deeper or better way, have these kinds visions and mystical experiences. In fact, those in Colossae seemed to be pursuing such visions by a “harsh treatment of the body”, by ascetic practices. Ascetic practices were those which denied the body something in order to obtain some mystical experience. Most likely this referred to fasting as a means to visions. Fasting is never to be the means of obtaining a visionary experience.

Neither is abusing the body in any way, as if the body were the problem to be overcome and the mind is a place of purity.

Hogwash! Says Paul. Pure and utter arrogance, puffed up without good reason by a mind fixed on the things of this world and loving the things of this world. Fleshly and corrupted and passing away. The mind is not pure, the heart is not pure and cannot be trusted. Simply because one really, really, feels something to be true and right and good does not make it so. Insane people believe things to be real and true, and are often ruled by it to their own destruction. The intensity of their mind's experience does not determine its truthfulness.

Now, these are the obvious ones, the obsession with spiritual power and "activation". But, there are more subtle condemnations, too. Do you raise your hands during worship? Real Christians experience God like that. Do you feel joyful or warm or overwhelmed? Real Christians do when they experience God. People who know God intimately and are really close to Him shed tears.

Often, the most subtle of this error is the assumption that if something moves me emotionally and makes me feel happy or feel good, then it must be from God. That is a fallacy.

Think about it. Heroin makes people feel good. It even makes people feel close to God, or to the spiritual realm. But is it good? Is it from God? Does it cause a growth into the full human life? No! It destroys and harms and disintegrates human life.

The same principle works in the spiritual realm. Simply because one feels good does not mean that such a thing is good.

The same principle of admonition here is also true for your encouragement as well. Simply because something makes you feel bad does not imply that it is bad, nor that you are bad. Grief and sorrow and brokenness are not necessarily signs that you don't know God, or don't belong to Him. Jesus grieved and wept and was betrayed as an experience of faith in a fallen world.

Now, are tears bad? Is lifting your arms in worship bad? Of course not! But neither are they due to an experience or feeling of God's presence which can be condemned or demanded by others. **Have you had visions? Great! Don't demand them. Don't even pursue them.**

Don't condemn others for not having them or think that your visions are necessarily signs that you are near to God. False prophets have visions, too. God even speaks to His enemies in such ways. Such experiences are not indicators that one is near to God or even that one belongs to God, and depending upon such experiences is to be headless.

The only thing that indicates if one belongs to God is whether or not one is united to Christ Jesus by faith. Christ Jesus is the Lord, the fullness of Deity dwelling bodily, the Head who rules all powers and authorities.

To functionally rely upon either legalistic adherence or esoteric experiences, rather than upon Christ Jesus as the source of all life and belonging and the only means to maturity, is to be disconnected from the very source of God's growth. It is as capable as a headless person. Don't listen to spiritual growth advice from those we are headless.

And that is the context of all this: grows with the growth which comes from God. That is the intent of the false teaching of legalism. To grow. That is the intent of pursuing esoteric experiences: to grow.

What is your expectation of your means of growth? How do you assume to grow up to walk in the same way in which you received the Christ? A biblical word here is the word “sanctification”, the process of growing up to love and live as Jesus loves and lives.

Often we think that such works or such experiences will generate godliness. But Paul says that such things are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. Such things don't make you more like Christ.

God tells us that His grace generates godliness. It does so by removing the fear of rejection, so that our striving to be like Jesus comes from love for God, a deep appreciation, a warm-hearted desire to honor Him, rather than a cold-hearted fear of being thrown out. Repentance becomes a joy in the light of our union with Christ, because it is robbed of any condemnation.

It is the gift of His Son, of uniting us to Him, of His radical inclusion of us into His family at His own cost, due to His own extravagant love, that lovingly draws us to entrust ourselves to Him. We love because He first loved us, and loved us extravagantly.

Therefore, we do obey, but not somehow to gain a place of belonging or to grow ourselves up, but we obey because we have already been given a place of belonging and

are already children of God through faith in Jesus our representative brother, *the* son of God.

Don't put the cart before the horse. Don't let those who do so condemn you. You don't need to believe their accusations or follow their deceptive manipulation. Christ is your Savior. Christ answers for you. Christ Jesus the Lord presents you holy, blameless, and beyond reproach. I obey, but not to earn God's love, but because I already have it and for that I am truly grateful.

Do you want to grow? Then look to this grace of God which appeared: Jesus! Look at Him become an infant for you! Look at Him obey the Father for you! Look at Him crucified for you! Look at the depths of the love of the Father for you! Look at what love He has lavished upon you, that you would be called children of God, who were dead in your trespasses and sins, hating God and one another!

Read what He has done, and said, and the reasons why He said that he did them or said them, because all growth in your life comes from the Christ. He is the only Head.

There is no other means of growth, and we grow as we behold Him, as we see Him, and there is a coming day when we will see Him unobstructed and in burning clarity...and we will be mature, fully grown.

Set your hope fully on this grace ready to be revealed to you, which John writes so clearly in his first letter:

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, so that we would be called children of God; and *indeed* we are. The reason the world does not know us is because it did not know Him. Beloved, we are children of God now, and it has

not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. ³ And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1 Jn. 3:1-3)