

# Freedom In Jesus

## Colossians 2:16-19

### Freedom in Jesus (2:16-19)

*(16) Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: (17) which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. (18) Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, (19) and not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.*

After combating heresy in positive terms by establishing the sole sufficiency of Jesus, the epistle directly confronts the false teaching at Colosse. This passage issues a twofold warning against ritualism/asceticism and mysticism; evidently both were characteristic of the Colossian heresy.

*Verse 16.* “Therefore” points back to the all sufficiency of Christ. Because our salvation is in Christ alone, we do not need to be concerned about people who would judge us in ritualistic matters. Because Christ nailed the ordinances to the cross, we should not let anyone condemn us in these matters. As verse 17 shows, the examples in this verse relate to Jewish ceremonial law and possibly to more stringent elaborations on its regulations. The examples given fall under two categories.

The first category is eating and drinking. (The KJV “meat” simply means “food.”) The law of Moses classified certain foods as unclean (Leviticus 11:1-32). Water or other liquids could also be unclean, or forbidden because of a vow (Leviticus 11:34-36; Numbers 6:3).

The second category relates to sacred days. The Greek words here mean (1) a festival or feast, (2) a new moon festival, and (3) Sabbaths (plural). The festival or feast was an annual holy day such as the Passover or Pentecost. The new moon festival was a monthly holy day (Numbers 10:10; 28:11-15). The Sabbaths were weekly holy days.

It appears that we have here an exhaustive description of sacred days throughout the year, similar to their listing in many Old Testament passages. (See I Chronicles 23:31; II Chronicles 2:4; 31:3; Isaiah 1:13-14; Ezekiel 45:17; Hosea 2:11.) Hence the Twentieth Century New Testament translates the phrase as “annual, or monthly, or weekly festivals.”

This verse does not prohibit people from continuing to observe certain dietary laws and religious days. As a matter of culture or personal preference, individuals can continue these or other similar practices as long as they do not become contentious over them or make them issues of salvation. The point is that no one should try to compel observance of such rituals, nor should someone feel condemned for not observing them.

The church today is not under God’s covenant with Israel as epitomized by the Ten Commandments but under the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 7:5-6; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:21-31; Hebrews 8:6-13). As a result, the church no longer observes the physical signs and ceremonies of the old covenant, such as circumcision (Galatians 6:15). God and His Word are unchanging, but some of His commands relate only to certain people or a certain time. While God’s moral law never changes, Christians are not subject to the ceremonial law of the Old Testament (Acts 11:5-9; 15:1-29).

Specifically, Christians are not compelled to obey the dietary laws (Mark 7:14-19; Acts 10:11-16; I Timothy 4:1-3). Nor is physical Sabbath keeping a requirement under the new covenant (Romans 14:5-6, 13; Galatians 4:9-11).

*Verse 17* explains the purpose of these superseded ceremonial laws. Literally, they were a shadow of things coming; they were prophetic or typological. (See Hebrews 8:5; 10:1.) Like the shadow cast ahead of

someone who is walking around a corner, they provided significant preliminary information about the One who was coming.

The body (substance, reality) is of Christ. He is the One who cast the shadow ahead of Him. Now that we possess the reality, we no longer need the shadow. Now that we can learn of Him directly, we no longer need to participate in rituals that teach about Him indirectly and incompletely. God used the ceremonial law—including blood sacrifices, dietary laws, circumcision, Sabbaths, and feasts—as types of truth to be found in Christ and His gospel. Since we now have the substance, we no longer need to observe the types and shadows.

*Verse 18* issues a warning against mysticism. It evidently describes the specific character of the Colossian heresy, and its use of singular pronouns seems to indicate that one person was particularly responsible for the false teaching.

The verb translated as “beguile . . . of your reward,” means to rule against, give judgment against. It portrays an umpire disqualifying a competitor for a prize in a contest. By extension, the word can mean to rob, condemn, defraud, or cheat. By following the sort of teacher described in this verse, a Christian could lose his reward of eternal life.

The specific nature of the false teaching in Colosse was “a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels.” The word translated as “voluntary” is a present participle that means to wish or to delight. The teacher that this verse warned against wished to disqualify people by so-called humility and angel worship, or perhaps the verse means he delighted in these errors. Such a teacher misleads people by a false humility.

Humility is a virtue, but in this context the word has a negative connotation, leading translations such as the NKJV and NIV to supply the adjective “false.” Humility that one delights in is not humility; moreover, the latter part of the verse states that this teacher was actually full of pride.

Such a teacher also misleads people by angel worship. In this regard, the teachings of Colossians 1:16 and 2:10 become especially significant: since

Jesus created and exercises authority over all principalities and powers, including angels, we should worship Him and not angels.

The phrase “intruding into those things, which he hath not seen” apparently means that this type of person tries to delve into and expound upon spiritual matters that he really does not understand. The verb translated as “intruding” can mean to take a stand on, enter into, or dwell on. Phillips’s translation says, “Pushing his way into matters he knows nothing about.”

The type of person described in this verse is futilely made conceited by the mind of his flesh. “His unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions” (NIV). Contrary to his appearances or claims, he does not have true humility.

*Verse 19.* The reason for pride and false doctrine is that the false teacher does not hold fast to the Head, who is Christ (Colossians 1:18; 2:10). He does not cling to Christ and so loses connection with Him. Here, Christ’s designation as the Head is not so much a statement of His authority, which other verses have already proclaimed, as it is a description of Him as the origin and only source of spiritual life and health.

From the head, the whole body is supported and held together by ligaments and sinews (or joints and ligaments). This metaphor shows the need for contact and attachment between Christ (the Head) and the rest of the church (the body). (See Ephesians 4:16 for a parallel passage.)

As the result of a proper relationship with Christ, the church grows with the growth of God. It grows as God causes it to grow; it grows in accordance with the plan of God.

### **Results of death with Jesus (2:20-23)**

*(20) Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (21) (Touch not; taste not; handle not; (22) which all are to perish with the using) after the commandments and doctrines of men? (23) which things have indeed a*

*shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.*

The NKJV is helpful in conveying the meaning of this passage: “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.” This passage takes the truths of verses 11-15 and applies them to refute the false teachings described in verses 16-19. In particular, it explains the practical consequences of dying with Christ as mentioned in verse 13.

*Verse 20* reminds us of our death with Christ. The Greek verb is in the aorist tense, indicating a specific past event. In other words, we died with Christ at the time of our conversion.

Christ’s death annulled the law’s demands on us, superseding the Mosaic law and instituting the new covenant. Since we died with Christ, there is no reason for us to be subject to the Mosaic law or to the fundamental principles of the world. As the commentary on verse 8 discusses, in the context of Colossians “the rudiments of the world” seems to mean legalistic traditions or teachings based on worldly, fleshly thinking.

“Ordinances” appears here and in verse 14, where it refers to the Mosaic law. Apparently, verse 20 does not refer to the Mosaic law itself, for the law leads to Christ (verse 17) while “the rudiments of the word” in verse 20 lead away from Christ and so do the related “commandments of men” in verse 22. (See also verse 8.) The argument of verse 20 seems to be: If the law of Moses, which God instituted, has been superseded by the new covenant, then certainly mere human laws and ceremonial regulations cannot now be added to the new covenant and made mandatory.

Our death with Christ has a fourfold significance, and Colossians presents the logical application of each aspect:

- *We died to the law* (Romans 7:4-6). Therefore, we are not subject to the ceremonial law of the old covenant (Colossians 2:16-17).
- *We died to the world* (Galatians 6:14). Therefore, we are not subject to the fundamental principles or elements of the world system (Colossians 2:8, 20).
- *We died to self, to the flesh* (Galatians 5:24). Therefore, we are not subject to man made laws; nor should we practice asceticism or sensuality (Colossians 2:22-23).
- *We died to sin* (Romans 6:6-8). Therefore, we must put off sinful attitudes, habits, and activities (Colossians 3:5-10).

Verse 21 provides examples of ritualistic laws that are no longer binding on us: Do not touch, nor taste, nor handle. It is important to understand that Paul did not issue these admonitions; rather, he quoted false teachings.

It is also important to understand that this verse does not speak of moral issues but of ceremonial regulations or man-made rules (verses 16, 22).

“The context points rather to ceremonial uncleanness in terms of meats and drinks which perish in the using.” Many passages of Scripture make it clear that under the new covenant Christians still have commandments to obey and guidelines to follow (Matthew 28:20; John 14:15; II Timothy 2:3-5; I John 2:3-6). Christians still must abstain from morally unclean practices and separate themselves from worldly appearances, associations, and activities (Romans 12:2; II Corinthians 6:17; 7:1; Colossians 3:5-9; I Thessalonians 5:22).

The regulations cited here concern prohibitions on eating, drinking, or touching ceremonially unclean things. This verse possibly refers to Jewish ceremonial law, which was fulfilled and abolished in Christ (verses 16-17), but more probably it speaks of man-made regulations (verse 22). Perhaps these rules were elaborations based on Jewish law; perhaps they were created by the false teachers at Colosse.

*Verse 22.* The things that these illegitimate prohibitions relate to are meant for destruction in the process of being consumed; these things perish as they are used. Again, we see that the discussion does not relate to principles of holiness but to morally neutral practices. Specifically, perishable food can neither make someone holy or unholy, so under the new covenant there is no point in adhering to regulations regarding it. (See Matthew 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23.)

*Verse 23.* These man-made regulations have a reputation, show, or appearance of wisdom. By implication, they do not actually manifest true spirituality. Instead, they display three negative characteristics:

- “Will worship”: self-imposed worship, religion, or ritual; self-made religion.
- A professed “humility.” As in verse 18, the context reveals that this humility is false or assumed. Actually, the practitioners are puffed up with pride.
- “Neglecting of the body”: severe discipline of the body; harsh treatment of the body; austerity; ascetism. It is true that the Christian must deny self, submit to God’s will, reject sinful desires, kill sinful deeds, and live a self-disciplined life (Luke 9:23-24; Romans 8:5-6, 13). For example, disciplinary practices such as fasting are needed. But the purpose of self-discipline and self-denial is not to punish the body, for it is God’s temple, or to earn favor with God, for it comes by God’s grace. Rather, the purpose is to control the flesh, establish spiritual priorities, focus on the things of God, and develop faith for needs.