

Take Your Bibles, Please...

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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, 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. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:16-23 ESV).

In our text today the apostle brings in their religious practices. There is no elaborate discussion of these; only brief notices are given, with warnings that the erroneous practices are to be avoided. Remember where we have been. Paul simply makes the point that we, as Christians, are free. We have spiritual liberty in Christ. We are free from the bondage of the guilt of our sins; we are free from the stern, impossible demands of the law of God; we are free from the sinister binding power of evil. This freedom is a blessed benefit of the cross-event. The true statue of liberty is the Cross of Jesus Christ. On the cross, through His death, He has won the victory over the world, the devil and death.

We don't always beat the devil. I am reminded of a story about a camp meeting at Frost Bridge, Mississippi, where Bud Robinson was the evangelist. The last Sunday had arrived and "uncle Bud" had gotten up to preach in the afternoon service. A great throng of people was present and there was every reason to expect the camp meeting would have a happy and triumphant closing day. But listen to what happened, as reported by Bud Robinson himself:

"Just as I got up to preach, I happened to look over to my right and there near the end of the altar bench stood the biggest bulldog I ever saw in my life. He was a big, bench-legged, yellow dog, and his gaze seemed to be directed to something over to my left. I looked and there stood a big white bulldog, and while I was taking my text the two dogs met right in front of the pulpit and passed a few remarks and took hold. I said, 'Won't somebody take these dogs out of here?' Then one fellow yelled, 'Let 'em fight!' One man said, 'My dog ain't never been whupped,' and another said, 'And my dog ain't never been whupped.' Then Bud called out, "Where is the high sheriff of this county?" Now it happened that the camp meeting shed stood right on the dividing line between two counties, and two men arose and came forward. While the two dogs were battling and women and children were screaming, these two sheriffs had a brief consultation, and then announced that unless the owners of the two dogs came forward and separated them, each sheriff would proceed to shoot a dog right through the head. The owners came and each man got his dog by the hind legs and some other men proceeded to choke the dogs until finally they were able to pry them apart. Bud concluded by saying, "One feller took his dog and went off into the woods on my left, and about half of the

crowd followed him. Then the other feller took his dog and went off into the woods on my right, and the rest of the crowd followed him, and the camp meeting was over. That was the meanest trick the devil ever done me."

Every once in a while the devil plays a mean trick on us too, but Jesus has won the victory! We are free from his power forever because of the cross. Our freedoms are lost unless they are continually fought for. History reminds us that freedom is a privilege of life that is always under threat. Throughout the history of our country, each generation has had to face some new threats to our priceless freedom. Socialism is only the latest of these threats. The same is true spiritually. There are always forces seeking to take away the spiritual freedom that belongs to you in Christ Jesus. Paul saw the false teachers that had invaded Colossae as being agents of this force. They were seeking to steal from the Christians the glorious liberty that they had in Christ Jesus. The exact character of their teachings becomes clearer as we study this word of warning. It is an urgent warning to avoid the attempts to rob them of their liberty.

The threats are still real. Some of the faces have changed but the voices are the same. Many of the religious movements of our day are threats to your spiritual liberty. Some of them are the same ones that threatened the liberty of those early Christians.

First, Religious Ceremonialism Is a Threat to Spiritual Freedom (vv. 16-17):

The question is "How does a man acquire right standing before God and then how does he live a holy life?" The false teachers who came to Colossae were Gnostics with a Jewish background. In addition to their claims to special spiritual knowledge, they called on men to live according to the Old Testament ceremonial law. They were claiming that keeping these things was necessary for being what God demanded of man.

- ✚ "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink." This is a reference to the Old Testament' food regulations which was a part of the ceremonial law. It probably included the regulations which our Lord confronted concerning how one ate. Actually the Old Testament had more to say about foods to be eaten than it did about drinks. The question was should a Gentile Christian submit himself to these practices in order to be a full Christian.
- ✚ Also, "let no man therefore judge you in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days." "An holy day" is actually the word to describe the Old Testament festivals, those which were observed once a year, the annual feasts. Included would be the Passover, the feasts of Pentecost, and the others. New moon refers to the monthly Jewish observance: Sabbath to the weekly observance of a holy day. So, all the religious days of the Jews are included. When a Gentile becomes a Christian, is he bound to keep these days in order to live the Christian life?

The answer of Paul is clear. The Christian is to not allow someone to judge him in these matters. He is free from all such ceremonialism. These ceremonies were meaningful as shadows, but substance of Christ has come. This is a very helpful explanatory note about the purpose of the old order. All of these related to the ceremonial law of the Old Testament were shadows. They were designed to help Israel catch a glimpse of the shape of the coming Savior. Another illustration could be the relationship between a picture, a photograph, and the

person. A few years ago a number of mothers across our land were showing their little children photographs of their fathers whom they had never seen. Their fathers were prisoners of war. The mother wanted them to recognize their fathers when they returned from the war. No one would ever think of making the photograph a substitute for the real father. The Old Testaments feasts, sacrifices, and religious days were nothing but little photographs of the coming Savior. When the Savior came, they were to be abandoned for Him.

All attempts to maintain the Old Testament ceremonialism are threats to our spiritual freedom. This includes those who would still impose on Christians the regulations of the Old Testament Sabbath. There is no day that you have to observe, or no ceremony you have to perform, in order to become a Christian or to live the Christian life. All that is needed for this is Jesus Christ Himself.

Second, Mock Humility Is a Threat to Spiritual Freedom (vv. 18-19).

- ✚ *Our lack of knowledge of the exact details of the teachings of the false teachers makes it difficult to understand this passage. However it is clear that it is rebuke to a mock kind of humility.* "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels." To beguile is to act as an umpire. It is just another figure of the judgment already referred to. If a man has assurance of a faith in Jesus Christ, he is not to allow the judgments of others to affect him.
- ✚ *"Voluntary humility" seems to have been a mock humility. Literally it is "Wishing or desiring humility."* The Bible never speaks despairingly of true humility. The practice seems to have been a mock sense of worthlessness that prompted them to say, "We are not worthy to approach directly. Seeing that we are earthly mortals, basically evil, we must not intrude into his presence. What we must do is approach God through the angels. We will worship the angels and allow them to intercede before God for us." **The consequence was a false humility and the unacceptable worship of these heavenly beings, the angels. This had very bad results. First, it caused them to be puffed up with pride. They seemed to have based the actions on some type of vision. The result was carnal pride. Furthermore, it caused them to turn away from Christ as the head of the body. Turning away from Him, they were turning from the only source of spiritual growth and development.**

I must confess that I do not know any worshippers of angels in our day. Do you know of any? This does not mean that we are free of this error. I have folks approach me and ask me to pray for some request of theirs often, as you have also. However, occasionally, I will have someone who will ask me to pray for them because they feel "too sinful", too lowly, to pray. Some would protest that they were unworthy to approach God or Christ. Since I was a preacher, they felt I had a better chance of being heard before God! Of course nothing could be further from the truth!

Catch the implication here though. These folks were expressing a false humility, and any humility that takes you away from Jesus Christ as the only hope is a false humility and robs you of your spiritual freedom! Because of His death upon the Cross, you have as much right into the presence of God as He does. Does that sound like mockery or blasphemy? He died that we might be clothed in His righteousness. Because of Him we can stand before Holy God with the very acceptable righteousness of Jesus Christ. No bypass is needed. This is a part of the freedom that belongs to us through the cross. We are free to come into His holy presence.

Third, Ascetic Rules Are a Threat to Spiritual Freedom (vv, 20-23).

An ascetic is defined by the dictionary as "a person who practices unusual self-denial and devotion or severe discipline of self for religious reasons." There was a strain of asceticism in the teachings of these false teachers who invaded Colossae. Their motto seems to have been, "Touch not, taste not, handle not." It was probably rooted in the idea that the body and everything that had matter was inherently evil. If all material things were evil, then denial and discipline were the ways to confront the evil. Consequently the teachers gave to the people severe rules by which you lived if you were to live a Christian life.

Such ideas have caused others in other generations to refrain from marriage, to starve the body, to wear rough clothing to hurt the body, to refrain from any type of physical enjoyment or pleasure. Living by these rules is the essence of their Christian living.

- ✚ *Paul labels the whole system as being "after the commands and doctrines of men."* Such things did not originate with God. There is no semblance of any such rule system found in the written word of God. The Bible is not a religious rule book.
- ✚ *Furthermore, they are but a show of wisdom of man and false humility.* Any humility that does not grow out of an awesome vision of God is false humility. It involves the neglecting of the body which is contrary to the teachings of Christ. Also, all such rules are utterly powerless to make any change in the desires of the flesh.

The thing that is wrong with man goes deeper than the desires of his physical body. You may deny the natural desires of your physical body, but you have not made yourself holy or acceptable before God. Until a power is found to change the wicked nature that is resident in you, you have not been helped. No amount of ascetic rule keeping can ever accomplish this. This is something that can be done only the Risen Christ. He alone can change a man from within. Christianity is not a rule-book religion. It is not a system of religious rules and ceremony. Rather the Christian faith is a union with a risen Christ. We live the Christian life as we abide in Him. We must depend upon Him for everything. He is the One who makes us acceptable before God. He is the One who comes within to enable us to live the Christian life. Christ is the all in all.

A Final Thought

Not long ago I heard of an interview with a very successful young jockey. He had quickly risen through the ranks and carved a reputation for being unbeatable. No matter how far back his horse was at the three-quarter pole, it invariably put on a burst of speed to win easily. What made the jockey's winning streak even more amazing was the fact that he carried no whip or goad. When the horse was ahead, he rode in a normal way; but if the horse was behind, he would lean over and whisper something into the horse's ear. The horse would then give him a terrified look, lower its ears, and hightail it to the finish line. Finally, someone asked him what it was he said to the horse. He answered: "I just whisper very softly, 'Roses are red, violets are blue; horses that lose are made into glue.'"

Too many of us are "running our race" from fear of the glue factory. Christ has accomplished the victory from that kind of life. You don't need to run from a motivation of fear, rather run from a heart full of love. How about you today ...let us pray.