

VI. Colossians  
*The Preeminence and Prominence of Jesus Christ*  
“The Formula for Failure”  
Colossians 2:16–23  
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This may sound like a weird question to start with but who likes false teaching? Hopefully no one. Jude calls false teaching clouds without water in Jude 1:12 so here's a second question. Do clouds without water ever have a silver lining? We see this in Scripture and in history that bad teaching offers the opportunity for good teaching. Think about our doctrines of grace of the sovereignty of God and election which has an acronym – TULIP, Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints. It is a great comfort. Recently, I was in a conversation with someone on this subject, and when they said they didn't believe in it, my first reaction wasn't to get into some logical rhetorical barrage, but I thought, ‘How do you go from day to day without this beautiful trust in the sovereignty of God?’ Where did the writing and the exploration of that teaching come from? It was a response to bad teaching.

How about I Corinthians 13? It's the most beautiful passage on love and even non-believers know I Corinthians 13. What's the context? It's division and scandal. Some bad teaching going on at Corinth, right? Bad teaching provides an opportunity for beautiful presentations of the truth and Colossians is no different. It unfolds the majesty of Jesus Christ in beautiful, mighty, and wonderful ways but Paul's pen is responding to some bad teaching. In this study of Colossians 2, we're going to see what these false teachers are made of and it's going to help us understand who Christ is better. There's a need today and also in the time at Colossae where people are coming in and it's now Gospel plus something else as they are modifying the faith of the Gospel. Maybe it's not the exact same way we see it today but it is absolutely true that people are modifying the truth and they're still trying to sell it to you, push it to you and Paul's response is profound and simple. It is not modification of the message that draws you to worship God. It is Christ Himself.

The outline for the section we will cover in Colossians in this study is the body, the head and the dead. Now let's look at Colossians 2:16-23 which says [16] *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. [17] These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. [18] 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, [19] 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.*

*[20] 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— [21] “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” [22] (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? [23] 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.* This is God's holy Word.

When the Bible uses the word *therefore*, we know it is there for a reason and it's used in Colossians 2:16. It's worth saying that everything that's happened thus far is building. We're not

existing in a vacuum. We're moving from one place to another, and we're a step on that journey and what has happened preceding our passage is important. The fullness of deity dwells bodily in Christ Jesus. We are to be Christ centered, Christ focused, Christ oriented. The things that He's done, the person He is, is to be the central feature of who we are, what we do and how we see the world. Christ as the foundation. So the *therefore* here is saying, given all of that, with that expectation, **let no one** pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. Let no one judge you.

In the last study, Christ, we heard, canceled the power of sin and debt. That's the kind of cancel culture we need today as a professor of mindset, for I'll be quoting a few professors with statements similar to that. We have this idea that we've been judged in Christ. We're in Him. We died in Him, we're raised in Him, we're alive in Him, and we're full in Him. You have been judged in Him. This isn't moral value judgment. This isn't them saying, 'you should have done this instead of that.' It's not a behavior issue. It's the false teachers who are judging you and saying without doing a modification, you cannot come and worship God, but you've already been judged and you can come.

Here are the reasons that they say they believe there's something other than belief in and union with Christ that is necessary to bring you into God's presence. First we see these food laws that are mentioned in Colossians 2:16. Think about no food, no drink. What's the deal with this? Is this our teetotaler or our bootlegger passage? I think if you think about the Old Testament – the Nazarite vows or the book of Leviticus – there are food and drink laws which are about two words, clean (food) and unclean (food). There are also clean people and unclean people and if you eat unclean food, you become an unclean person. If you do all these unclean things, you stay unclean but why is it so important that you're clean?

What can clean people do? They can go into the temple and they can worship God. These are restrictions, telling the Christian, 'You can't go into the temple and worship God. You can't have access to God without some additional dietary restrictions.' The same is true for these festivals, new moons and Sabbaths. These are references to feast day ceremonies. It's not saying that you can get a job on Sunday to ignore a Sabbath for that reason, but what it is saying is you don't need to do preparation before you come to worship God if you're in Christ Jesus. You don't need to have a diet and you don't need to have a feast or a festival to prepare you to come into worship. These false teachers are taking and urging the Church of Colossae to go back in time to the Old Covenant and trust the Old Covenant Laws and restrictions which are designed to prepare an Old Covenant people for worship and they're saying "Christian, you have to do this."

While these dietary restrictions and feast days and festivals and new moons and Sabbaths had their purpose, Paul says in Colossians 2:17 that these are a shadow of things to come. In the Book of Hebrews it says that the laws and sacrifices were foretastes of the reality that was in Christ. It's the reason we don't need blood sacrifices anymore. Christ's blood satisfied the sacrifices needed in the Old Testament. But those sacrifices were effective in instructing and building up the faith of the Old Covenant community because there was a reality that they pointed to. We sometimes think of types and shadows as this anticipation of Jesus seeing these rules and laws as He came to Earth saying "I'm going to act out those things over there. I'm going to be like those things over there." But the reality is, the shadows are pointing to a body that casts a shadow. We'll come back to this idea in a second.

Think about this. When we look at the Greek here, it says not the substance, but the body belongs to Christ. So the shadow points to Christ. He's fulfilled those things or as a professor said, 'Christ filled full those things' and the shadow points to a substance. But in the Greek, it

has the word for body and yes, we said substance for a very good reason. You don't want to think that the shadow points to the body, which is the church, right? That's not what it points to. You also don't want to think that it points to Christ's physical body. They translated it substance because it is the substance that is casting the shadow and when you see a shadow, you would trace it to a person. Old Testament shadows always pointed to a person. The imagery there is a body that is casting that shadow. So, Christ is what everything in the Old Testament pointed to. It is His body, His substance. The Old Testament, dietary laws and feast days were sketches of the reality. So why, when the body shows up, would you ever look at the shadow?

Remember when you got your driver's license? Who got their driver's license and then just insisted that their parents kept riding with them? It's madness, right? Or who sees a beautiful sunset and takes a picture on their phone and then turns around and looks at their phone instead of the sunset or the chief offender (I'm stepping on my own toes with this one so don't be ashamed) who goes to a concert and gets their phone out to record the concert and they hold it up and the spectacle is in front of them but where are you looking the entire time? You have reality in front of you and you're looking at your phone and you're not going to send it to anybody. The audio is not good. The shaking in your hands is obvious. Why would you look at your phone when reality is before you? Why would you look at the shadows when the body is here? The shadows of the real thing are not worth your adoration and when the Son has beckoned you to come forward and approach God with Him, don't go back to the old ways. It's not just the body they ignore.

According to Colossians 2:18-19 they also are going to have a problem with the head. Paul amplifies this language about false teachers. It's not just judging you for now they're disqualifying you. J.B. Lightfoot writes that the Christian's career is the contest of the stadium. We run a race. We focus on the prize. We strive for the prize. Paul uses boxing terminology, military terminology. We've got our victory in Jesus and these false teachers are saying, "No sir, no way. No prize, disqualified." It's like the umpire that you hate to see who says 'You're out of there. Get out of the game.' You have no business with the prize. They're not just judging you. they're saying that victory that's promised in Jesus, you don't get it.

Here are two reasons why these false teachers say this. First, is asceticism – false humility by way of severe self-discipline. Consider those dietary laws, why would they do that? Why would they say, don't eat? They are whipping themselves up into a frenzy, perhaps literally whipping themselves up into a frenzy in preparation for worship. In order to go and to worship God you need to beat yourself or at least have enough humility to look like you've beaten yourself but it's not humility. It's fanatical pride. It's as if they're saying, "If only you were as humble as me. I'm so humble." That would be like me saying "You can always recognize the Richard's for we're tall, handsome, smart and most of all, we're incredibly, incredibly humble. I dare you to find someone more humble than someone in my family." That's not humility. That's pride.

Wait there's more. Not only do you need to walk around barefoot in dirty clothes and acting like you've been beaten or beat yourself in public, but you need to worship angels like we do, they say. I don't want to spend too much time here either, but the gist is this; You are not a first order, Christian. You're maybe not even a Christian at all if you don't ascend into a spiritual realm, have a supernatural experience with angelic figures and worship them. If you don't do that, you can't go worship. You can't have access to the temple. You don't get access to God unless you have a supernatural experience. Now, I do want to give the false teachers a little bit of understanding here, because you might be thinking 'these seem like really dumb things.'

Think about Stephen who was stoned in the Bible. He's beaten and what does he see? He sees a throne room experience. We can see where this comes from. It's not totally out of left field, is it? People who are beaten and abused and have hard times, we have stories of them seeing things. Think about John who wrote the book of Revelation. He sees angels and he almost worships them. It's an easy mistake to make if you see an angel. A lot of times when angels show up in the Bible, they say, 'Don't worship me' so we can understand where it comes from but the issue is these false teachers are turning experience into a prerequisite. They're saying what we've done you must do so this is the character of this teaching. It's Old Testament Law mixed with pagan, mystical teaching and it leads to arrogance. Worse than that, it says they don't hold fast to the head. Paul just said, 'Jesus is all' and the cosmos are dancing on His fingertips. He's holding it all together. It's all for Him, through Him and by Him. What did they just say? We're going to worship the angels. We're going to puff up ourselves, and we're not going to hold fast to the head. They've dethroned Christ.

Think about this contrast now. We have shadow to body, right? The shadow is not as good as the body and now Paul is contrasting our puffed-up mind with the head that causes growth. The puffed up, irrational, sinful mind says "Do X, Y, Z" but Paul is saying 'hold fast, stay true to the head.' The head is what causes growth for the body this time, the church. That beautiful language, is all knit together so why would we trust our own broken minds or the broken minds of false teachers when it's crystal clear that Christ is the head? My son Charlie, was staying at a friend's house and we came to pick him up and he was very excited because they had a trophy on the wall. It was a turkeys tail and its two legs. Charlie said, 'Dad, they cut off his whole body.' Well, what happens when you cut off the whole body? Certainly not growth, but worse, it leads to death. Getting your body cut off is death. It's dangerous.

I think it would be easy to find examples of this today – humility, supernatural bragging, requirements before you come to worship. I'd like to personalize this sin just a bit. Again, I have fingers pointing back at me. How do we share our testimony sometimes? Do you ever share your testimony and at the end, the other person feels like their spiritual life is wanting because they didn't have the downs that you had and maybe they didn't have the majestic mystical experience that you had. Recently I walked away and realized I told them a whole lot about my story, but I'm not quite sure I ever got around to mentioning His story. I was bragging about my journey, and I have to be honest wonderful things have happened to me. I've felt low lows and I felt spiritual highs but I can't make that the prerequisite to being a Christian. I shouldn't make somebody feel like they're a second-class Christian because they didn't have this experience. Do you ever chase the highest highs and then lead other people on that same chase?

Perhaps you have this; 'Come to church, you'll have a spiritual experience' but it should be, 'Bring them to Him. Come to church. Christ is there.' I'll be clear about when you come to Briarwood, I think you will have an experience but hear this with clarity. When you listen to our music director or pianist, they're not preparing you for worship. They're leading you in worship. They're not saying you need to do X, Y, and Z. They're saying, turn your eyes on Jesus. Listen to the way that the people who lead you talk. You don't need to do things before you come and worship God. When you come to Briarwood, we want you to turn your eyes on Jesus. I have very good news. It feels really good, but it can't be the prerequisite it. God gives great gifts, but we have to hold fast to the Giver and it's easy to slide into that temptation at least it's easy for me.

So what do we do with this information? Colossians 2:20 starts out with a loaded 'if' and Paul is saying, if with Christ you die to the elemental spirits of the world, that this is an assumed

true statement. He's assuming what he just said is true about the reader. Christ caused you to die to this world. Remember, He disarmed rulers and authorities. He's conquered the world. In Him you died, in Him you are risen, in Him you will be raised, in Him you find fullness, in Him you have victory. It's all in Him. Do you call Christ, Lord? Do you believe He rose from the dead? Do you believe He is the Champion, the King? Do you believe He passed through the veil? Do you believe He's the Lion who will rule? Do you believe He's the Lamb that was slain? He was. He is. He is to come. He came. He saw. He conquered. Do you believe that Christ is this Person? If that's true, then why would anyone ever live as though they were captives to the spirits and laws of this world? Lightfoot again says, "If you are citizens of heaven, why do you bow your neck to these old ways to food and drink, these perishable, trivial things?"

Paul calls them the elemental spirits or elemental principles. This is actually a tough bit of Greek. Greg Beall makes a compelling case that it might just be the elements of the world, those things which are burned up in II Peter 3. It's the entirety of the old fallen sinful world, spiritual and material, but there's also a foundation for the old world that needs to be addressed. Sin, which causes division. When you died to Christ, you died to the old world and are separated from it and now what's the new principle? What's the new element? It is Christ.

So, the Old Testament laws and pagan mysticism are separating features. The Old Testament gave us these laws so that you would be separated from all the other nations. Don't eat, don't drink. Do these things and you'll not be like your neighbors but Jesus upended that. Later on in Colossians it says 'There is no Greek or Jew, no circumcised or uncircumcised, no barbarian, no Scythian, no slave, no freeman, no male, no female for the Gospel comes to all without distinction.' Don't bring back those dividing lines. What is the hierarchy of pagan mysticism? More dividing lines. It's crucial you understand this about false teachers. It's the reason why they want you to resubmit to division and resubmit to hierarchy. False teachers have come to cause division. It's their M.O. to pervert grace and divide them any way possible. That's why they do what they do.

Paul closes this section by setting his sights on the teacher for what they really are. Paul says they present the appearance of wisdom. It's not wisdom. It looks like it, but it's not wisdom. It's self-imposed piety. It's self-imposed humility. It's self-imposed self-severity. It's all about self. Self-made wisdom maybe looks good, but does it do what is needed to be done to the desires of the flesh, what your flesh wants in sin? Can self-made things satisfy that? Can anyone conquer the desires of sinful flesh by human powered piety? Can anyone conquer the sinful desires of flesh by human powered humility? Can anyone conquer the sinful desires of the flesh by human powered anything? How can the flesh conquer the flesh when the flesh is the problem? Your flesh cannot do it. The world only has a formula for failure. If you do these things and depend on these things, you're subscribing to the formula for failure. So what's the formula for success? We will go over this in the next study.

I would like to leave you some application. This is going to be related, maybe not directly to the false teachings, because I'm not sure how many times these things are going to show up but these are things that maybe have the same fundamental issues as false teachings. We all are children, children of God. Think of the rules for children. There are a lot of rules, right? Rules for safety – stop, look and listen, when you cross the street. Don't pick up that spider, it'll bite you. Don't look at that chair, you don't know where it's been. Perhaps you know where it's been but you don't know who's been there. Don't touch that vase, you'll break it or worse, you'll smudge it. Don't, don't, don't, don't. In my house the dog says woof, cow says moo. Dad says, No, no, no. There are a lot of rules for young people and if you're older, be home by 9pm. Don't

spend all day on social media. There are a lot of rules for your safety and for your well-being.

When it comes to coming to Jesus, do come, do believe, do listen. Do come to Jesus because He's better than daddy and He can bring you to your Father and you can worship. There are good don'ts in your life, but there's not a single good don't that stands before you and coming to Christ. So parents, I just revealed there are a lot of don'ts in my house and some of those don'ts are really good but most are not. Most are a bit excessive if I say so myself so, please know that I'm guilty of what I'm about to ask you. Do we ever capitalize the don'ts and brush past the do's? How you lead your children and how you lead your spouse is how you lead them to understand Jesus. We have to protect our family, but we can't protect them from coming boldly to the throne of grace.

There are new believers reading this. Maybe you have grave clothes on. You have your old way of life and it's just beckoning you 'Please come back to me. We had such a good time together.' Maybe there are new voices. What are they saying? 'You're just a baby, Christian. You're not really ready for this, are you? You need to do more.' If you're a new Christian, ignore those voices, please. If you're a mature Christian, do you have habits that are good but they've become the end? When you're running a race I think it's easy to look back at what you've done and say, 'That's what got me here.' I know for me personally; I think sometimes my day can't be going well unless the first thing I do when I get to work is read my Bible. Is that a devotional or does it become a work that I have to do before I pray? Good goods make bad gods. Good things make bad prerequisites to worship. I'm not saying stop your devotions, please don't hear that. I'm saying is this; If you depend on your devotion to come to Jesus, it's a work and it'll tire you out and it'll break you.

Maybe there's someone reading this now who doesn't know Jesus. Maybe you feel like you've have to claw tooth and nail up to God. Bad news. You can't climb up to Him. Good news is for God so loved the world that He sent His Son (John 3:16). You don't have to climb to get to your Father, you have to cry out to His Son. You have to call out to the One who died for your sins, rose from the grave, ascended to the throne, is seated at the right hand of the Father on high. Call out to Him. Guess what? You don't need dietary laws. You can keep your bacon and you don't need to add anything to your faith to approach God. Now, there is a lot of work to be done for sanctification. Don't hear me on that one either. There's much to be done, but you don't need to do anything before you come to Christ.

I'd like to close with an illustration that a professor shared in class. It's a scene from a movie called Anna and the King. It stars Jodie Foster as Anna and Chow Yun-Fat as the King. He's the king of Siam and it's a retelling of the King and I. You need to know something about the King of Siam and that is you are not allowed to be on his level. Your eyes can't be where his eyes are. There's a scene in the movie where he keeps making Jodie Foster go lower and lower and lower and lower and lower. You cannot be on the king of Siam's level, no way, no how. There is a scene where the king's son gets into a fight with Anna's son, the schoolteacher. She's come there to teach his children. The fight goes from verbal sparring to physical pushing to them rolling on the ground. One of the king's daughters, a very cute little girl, gets up and runs. Then the scene transitions to the throne room.

What's going on in the throne? There are people everywhere in the throne room and all of them are on their knees. Their faces are on the ground. They're kowtowing to the King of Siam, every single one of them, except for a couple at the front and they're kneeling before the king who is seated on his throne. This couple is looking up and trembling with fear, as all these people have come to the throne room to ask for help, wisdom, or advice. What happens? That little girl

runs in the back and runs to the front, passed every bowing person, and she climbs up on her daddy's lap and she looks at him eye to eye. She whispers in his ear and he stands up and he leaves with her. No worry about bowing. No worry about being eye level with the king when you're His child.

If you're a child of the King, you don't need those old regulations to come see Him. If you're a child of the King, you don't need Gospel plus to come call out 'Abba Father.' If you're a child of the King, when God looks down from His throne, He sees His Son. You don't need more to come to Jesus. Cry out because you are united with Him when you do. You become a brother of Christ and when you're a brother of Christ, you are a son of the King. When a child of the King comes, you don't worry about this or that. You worry about climbing into your Father's lap and looking Him in the eye and saying, "I need you."

Don't let them judge you. Don't let them disqualify you. If Christ is yours and you are His, you may come to the throne and you may worship. How do you become a victor? The One who calls upon the name of the Lord will have victory – the wreath, the prize, victory is in Jesus. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for this time spent in Your Word. Help us to come to You for everything in our life for You are our everything. Nothing else or no one else satisfies the soul but You. It is in You that we live, move and have our being. May we bring glory to You in all that we do and say. May Your Name be praised forevermore, in Jesus' Name, Amen.