

November 19 Lesson 12 (NIV)

Freedom from the World

Devotional Reading: Leviticus 25:8–17

Background Scripture: Colossians 2:6–23

Colossians 2:16–23

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸ Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. ¹⁹ They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? ²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Key Text

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith—Colossians 2:6–7a

God’s Law Is Love

Unit 3: Christ Frees, Law Enslaves

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Simple vs. Complex

B. Lesson Context

I. Troubling Judgment (Colossians 2:16–19)

- A. Shadowy Practices (vv. 16–17)
- B. Misdirected Humility (v. 18)
- C. Spiritual Decapitation (v. 19)

Staying Focused

II. Worldly Rules (Colossians 2:20–23)

- A. Died with Christ (v. 20)
- B. Temporary in Application (vv. 21–22)
- C. Limited in Force (v. 23)

The Customer Service Manual

Conclusion

- A. Seek the Head!
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

ColossaeKo-*lahss-ee*.

ColossiansKuh-*losh-unz*.

GalatiaGuh-*lay-shuh*.

Introduction

A. Simple vs. Complex

I once owned a Buick LeSabre with power windows. Because of bad design or poor construction, every window of that vehicle required repair at some point. Either the windows wouldn't lower, or they wouldn't raise. After completing the first repair, I longed for previous models' old-style, hand-crank windows. Those windows certainly didn't break as often—or so I remembered. These power windows should have made life simpler; instead, they had done the opposite. I experienced more difficulty and annoyance because of those windows.

In today's Scripture, false teachers in Colossae had been troubling Colossian believers by requiring additional practices for the people. These excessive requirements might have caused the Colossian believers difficulty in following Jesus. These false teachers weren't merely annoying the apostle Paul and the Colossian believers; their false teachings had eternal ramifications.

B. Lesson Context

The apostle Paul wrote the epistle of Colossians in the first half of the AD 60s. The recipients of the epistle were a community of believers in Colossae (see Colossians 1:1–2), a city in modern-

day Turkey. When Paul composed this letter, he had not yet visited the area (see 1:4–7; 2:1). He likely penned the letter while under arrest (see 4:3) in Rome (see Acts 28:16, 30).

Whether or not Paul ever visited Colossae is unknown, but he had heard from others about the faith of the Colossian believers (see Colossians 1:4). He intended the letter to encourage the Colossians (2:2–3) and address false teachings that had infiltrated the church (see 2:4–5)

The exact nature of the false teaching in Colossae is unknown. Most of our modern-day understanding comes from reading the letter of Colossians and drawing informed conclusions based on the addressed topics. Taking this approach, we can assume that both Jewish and pagan teaching in Colossae threatened to lead the believers astray. This syncretistic belief system was comprised of various elements from different religious and philosophical traditions that were not rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The false teaching likely included aspects of Judaism. Paul provided correctives regarding lifestyle markers that distinguished Jews from Gentiles, such as circumcision (Colossians 2:11–15), dietary restrictions, and the observance of holy days (2:16). However, other aspects of the false teaching, such as angel worship (2:18) and misdirected fasting (2:23), mirrored pagan philosophies and cults. Paul proclaimed this belief system “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition” (2:8). This belief system concerned Paul because it added requirements for believers beyond God’s work through Christ Jesus.

Colossians 1:15–22 and 2:6–15 feature Paul’s corrective to the Colossians regarding Christ’s preeminence. Christ has made believers complete (Colossians 2:9–10) and raised them to a new life (2:12–14). Further, he has triumphantly “disarmed the powers and authorities” (2:15). These other philosophies, beliefs, and practices had taken the Colossians spiritually captive. If they continued to follow the false teachings, they would essentially deny the power of Christ’s work.

I. Troubling Judgment (Colossians 2:16–19)

A. Shadowy Practices (vv. 16–17)

16. Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.

The Law of Moses prohibited Jews from consuming particular meats (see Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14:2–20). These prohibitions would not have applied to Gentiles. However, first-century church leaders added prohibitions regarding the Gentiles’ consumption of food (see Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25). Paul provided further guidance in this regard: believers can consume as long as it does not cause others to sin (see Romans 14:20–21; 1 Corinthians 8).

Alcoholic *drink* was standard in the first century AD (example: John 2:3–10). The Law of Moses did not prohibit consumption except for specific situations (examples: Leviticus 10:8–11; Numbers 6:1–4). Likely some believers in Colossae had consumed alcohol, leading others to *judge* the believers. However, merely eating certain foods or consuming certain drinks cannot cause spiritual uncleanness (see Mark 7:14–19).

Religious festivals and certain holy days held importance in Judaism, both during the Old Testament (examples: Leviticus 23; 1 Chronicles 23:28–31; Ezekiel 45:17) and the New Testament (examples: Luke 2:41–42; John 6:4; 7:2). The Jewish religious calendar is partly based on the lunar

cycle. Therefore, *a New Moon* marked a new month and indicated the timing of certain celebrations (see Numbers 10:10; 28:11–15). Additionally, the Law of Moses required observance of the *Sabbath day* for rest (see Exodus 20:8–11; Leviticus 23:3).

First-century churches in Rome and Galatia encountered conflict regarding similar regulations and observances (see Romans 14:1–10; Galatians 4:8–11). Paul rejected such regulations because they would cause division (4:17) and destruction (Romans 14:13–18). Believers should serve others with love, rather than chase appearances of holiness that disregard love. Out of this consideration and love for others, believers may limit their freedom to avoid causing other believers to sin (see 14:19–21; Galatians 5:13–15).

17. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

By calling *these practices a shadow*, Paul may have used the wording of Greek philosophy of his day. Plato, a Greek philosopher who lived approximately three centuries before Paul, is one possible reference. Plato's work *Republic* described the physical world as a shadow of the ideal reality. Therefore, Paul used the philosophical language of his day to make a teaching point. The Law of Moses and its requirements were temporary and could not offer salvation (see Romans 3:19–20; Galatians 3:21–25). They are “a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves” (Hebrews 10:1). Instead, these requirements would find fulfillment in a new era of salvation.

The *things that were to come* is one way that Paul describes salvation in and through Christ Jesus (compare Galatians 4:4–5). *Christ* is the culmination of all requirements for salvation (see Romans 10:4). “Christ's physical body through death” brings redemption to all people who believe in him (Colossians 1:22). Salvation comes through faith in Christ's merciful and generous giving of himself (see Ephesians 2:8; Titus 3:5; etc.).

B. Misdirected Humility (v. 18)

18a. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you.

Paul commanded the Colossians to live with humility (see Colossians 3:12). However, the pagan teachers in Colossae had developed a misdirected sense of humility. The nature of their displays of *false humility* is unknown. One possibility is that Paul was referring to voluntary practices of self-denial, such as fasting. Jesus had warned his followers regarding people who make a public spectacle of their fasting (see Matthew 6:16). These displays revealed an insincere or misdirected sense of humility. Rather than showing humility, these false teachers had become hypocritical and prideful through their actions (compare Colossians 2:18c, below).

The exact meaning of *the worship of angels* is unknown. One interpretation is that the false teachers believed that angels would intercede to God on behalf of humans. However, worshipping a created being is a misdirected form of worship (see Revelation 22:8–9; see also Luke 4:7–8; Romans 1:25). Throughout the letter to the Colossians, Paul highlights the superiority of Christ over creation (Colossians 1:16–17; 2:9–10). Because of Jesus' role as the “great high priest,” believers confidently approach God without any other intercessor (Hebrews 4:14–16).

The underlying Greek word behind *disqualify* presents translation challenges. This instance is the only appearance of the Greek word in the New Testament. The Colossians were in danger of being deceived and led astray by false teaching. Their deception would result in their being disqualified from receiving the reward of a life submitted to God's rule.

18b. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen;

Extreme practices of self-denial can sometimes result in a dramatic (and unhealthy) physical response, like a hallucination. Some false teachers in Colossae were likely experiencing such denial-induced hallucinations. These seemingly out-of-body experiences led them to have experiences that seemed like visions.

God has revealed himself to people through visions (examples: Genesis 28:10–12; Acts 9:10–16). However, not all such occurrences come from God (examples: Ezekiel 13:6–7; Zechariah 10:2). The false teachers in Colossae led people astray by claiming their experiences as evidence of their supposedly heightened spirituality.

This verse includes the only appearance of the Greek word translated *goes into great detail* in the New Testament. Its meaning in this verse is unclear to modern students. One interpretation teaches that the word refers to the false teachers' act of going into great detail regarding their vision-like hallucinations.

18c. they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.

The *unspiritual mind* is hostile to God and God's will (see Romans 8:3–12) and is a part of the flesh. The flesh includes any human desires that are hostile to God (see Galatians 5:16–17, 19–21; compare Romans 8:7; 13:13–14).

The false teachers in Colossae had reached a point of misdirected spiritual "wisdom." Instead of listening to God as the source of wisdom, they sought worldly wisdom that fed the *idle* desires of their flesh. As a result, their so-called knowledge had *puffed* them *up* with pride (compare 1 Corinthians 8:1).

C. Spiritual Decapitation (v. 19)

19. They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

The comparison of the church to *the body* frequently occurs in Paul's writings (examples: Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 4:14–16). He had previously declared Christ as *the head* of the church (Colossians 1:15–18; see Ephesians 1:22). If *the whole body* is cut off from the head, it will die. The Colossian church was on the verge of perishing if it did not maintain a *connection* with Christ (compare John 15:1–7). Colossae's false teachers risked obstructing their students' connection to Christ. Spiritual death was certain if they were not rooted in Christ.

Each member of the church has a particular role and work, just as *ligaments and sinews* have in a human body. The church will increase as its members abide in Christ (example: Acts 2:42–47). Growth comes not from human works, as what was likely taught by the false teachers in Colossae. Instead, the church grows because *God causes* it to do so (see 1 Corinthians 3:6).

II. Worldly Rules (Colossians 2:20–23)

A. Died with Christ (v. 20)

20. Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules:

The elemental spiritual forces of this world are the powers—visible and invisible—that hold temporary authority in the world. These could include demonic forces, pagan philosophies, or rules of vanity regarding the consumption. These forces are the “powers and authorities” (Colossians 2:15) that lead people to follow “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition” (2:8).

Although the Colossian believers lived in *the world*, they were not to *submit to its rules*. This manner of living described their old life. However, they had *died* to that way of life. Instead, they had been raised into a new life through Christ’s death and resurrection (see Colossians 2:11–13). As a result of their new life, they would reorient their hearts toward heavenly things (see 3:1–3) and live as “God’s chosen people” (3:12–17).

B. Temporary in Application (vv. 21–22)

21. “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”?

Paul summarized the ordinances and commands of the false teachers. To *do not taste* likely refers to their judgment regarding the consumption of food and drink (see Colossians 2:16, above). The meaning behind their commands *do not handle* and *do not touch* is unclear. The Law of Moses prohibited people from handling certain items (example: Leviticus 5:2–3). However, the false teachers might have expanded those prohibitions beyond the scope of the Law of Moses.

The generality of these commands might also indicate a particular perspective from the false teachers regarding the physical world. They might have taught that people should withdraw from the world. This perspective is contrary to the behavior expected of followers of Jesus. Believers are not to separate themselves from the world. Instead, they must remain in the world but be sanctified from it (see John 17:15–21; Romans 12:2).

22. These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.

Human commands and teachings cannot provide eternal value. These things would eventually *perish* and no longer apply (compare 1 Corinthians 6:13). However, these *rules* are not always worthless. Some can lead to growth and maturity in a person’s spiritual health, but adherence to these practices does not reliably indicate the status of a person’s heart toward God (see Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:1–9).

C. Limited in Force (v. 23)

23a. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body,

The false teachers in Colossae had taught that following human commands would bring unique wisdom from God. However, these *regulations* could never bring wisdom from God.

Instead, they led to worldly *wisdom* and foolishness (see Romans 1:21–23; 1 Corinthians 3:19–20).

Paul unpacks three aspects of such commands and teachings. First were their requirements for *worship*. They focused on worshipping the created and not the Creator. Second, such worship led to “*false humility*” (Colossians 2:18a, above). Such displays of misdirected humility likely included practices of self-denial.

Third, these requirements and displays of humility can lead a person to *harsh treatment of the body* (see Colossians 2:16, 21, above). Practices of self-denial are not always harmful. Scripture commands believers to “honor God with your bodies” (1 Corinthians 6:20). Therefore, denying certain physical pleasures can help shape a believer’s faith and trust in God. These practices, however, are not required to have a right relationship with God. The false teachers were more concerned with demonstrating self-denial than actual spiritual maturation.

True wisdom comes from knowledge of God’s will rather than through misdirected worship (see Colossians 1:9). God gifts it to his people (Ecclesiastes 2:26; James 1:5). He wants his people to share this wisdom with others (see Colossians 3:16).

23b. but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

The attempts of the false teachers to control the flesh through misdirected worship and self-denying practices had failed (see Colossians 3:5–8). Only people who demonstrate faith in Christ and receive God’s Spirit can confront the flesh. Such people have life made new in Christ (see 3:9–10). Even if these self-denying practices and expressions of worship were of *some* value, such things could not completely prevent sinful desires.

Conclusion

A. Seek the Head!

Some false teachers in Colossae had made the Christian life more complicated than what was required by God. They had added obligations beyond God’s to the Colossian believers. We do not know why these teachers presented the Colossians with these things. The false teachers had forgotten or altogether disregarded the importance of a connection to Christ, the head of the church. Instead of seeking life in Christ, they vainly sought wisdom through human regulations.

It can be tempting to believe that we don’t add anything extra to our faith. Yet, the reality is that we often do. Sometimes, we set explicit or implicit rules on ourselves and, by extension, on other believers. Our observance of these rules or guidelines does not mean that our hearts are automatically more or less holy. But issues arise if we raise these rules to the same level as God’s Word. We or other believers may be spiritually harmed.

We should carefully examine our behavior regarding such regulations. Ensure that you first maintain a relationship with Christ, the head of the church. What, after all, can be added to the gospel of salvation through Christ? What more do we need? Only when we accept that Christ’s work has accomplished what we needed for reconciliation can we be filled with his wisdom. Ask for the Spirit’s guidance to discern whether you are following the world’s wisdom or God’s wisdom. At the Spirit’s leading, we will be free to engage in practices that lead to the glory of God and the edification of other believers. Seek the Head! And heed the Spirit.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, we want wisdom that only you can give. Soften our hearts so we can be attentive to the work of your Spirit. Guide us to follow your will. May we, as the body, always remain attached to Christ. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Spiritual life comes from Christ Jesus, the head.