

## Lesson 8 – Colossians 2:11-23

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### Review

The apostle Paul is writing a letter to the church at Colossae – a church he does not know and one that is facing heretical attacks on the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. This heresy combined ideas from various religions and philosophies with the truth of Christianity. Its elements included a need for a special knowledge available only to a select few, a denial of the deity and saving work of Jesus, the worship of angels, asceticism, and keeping Jewish ceremonial laws.

1:1-2 – Paul greeted the church

1:3-8 – Paul prayed, giving thanks for God’s work demonstrated in their lives.

1:9-14 – Paul prayed, asking God for continued growth and steadfastness in their Lord.

1:15-18 – Paul refuted the heresy that denied the deity of Christ.

1:19-23 – Paul refuted the heresy that denied the sufficiency of Christ’s saving work.

1:24-2:3 – Paul presented his ministry philosophies and principles.

2:4-10 – Paul presented Christ as supreme and sufficient over the Gnostic philosophy.

That philosophy is empty deception and comes from the human tradition and rudimentary, basic ideas instead of Christ who is supreme and fully sufficient.

Today, we continue looking at some of the other errant teaching at Colossae. Paul presents the preeminent Christ as supreme and sufficient over legalism and mysticism.

### The Supremacy of Christ Over Legalism, Mysticism, and Asceticism (2:11-23)

#### 1. Complete and sufficient salvation (2:11-15)

Paul has just addressed the Gnostic philosophy which he makes clear is empty deception and comes from the human tradition and rudimentary, basic ideas instead of Christ who is supreme and fully sufficient. In Christ believers have “been made complete”. We are spiritually complete with a present ongoing effect or result; we are living now in a state of completeness. Paul will now detail in what ways we have “been made complete”.

#### A. Completely made new (2:11-12)

<sup>11</sup>and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; <sup>12</sup>having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

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<sup>11</sup>In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, <sup>12</sup>having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (ESV)

The Gnostics claimed the ability for enlightenment though secret, higher knowledge. But, that is useless since it does nothing to address the real need that people have which is regeneration – an inward change needed because of the sin nature.

An aspect of fallen humanness is that we take the perfect which God gives, that pictures His grace to mankind and twist it to be something else (e.g., God's character displayed in creation – Rom 1:18-25). The Jewish people have done this with circumcision. What was intended to be a picture of the need for regeneration became simply a means by which individuals became part of the covenant people (Gen 17:10-14). This would be analogous to thinking that being born into a believing family guarantees individual salvation for the children (a belief in some reformed churches).

Circumcision was never the means for individual salvation, but a graphic picture for the need for the “removal of the body of the flesh” or the sin nature. This is seen in the OT as the need for being “circumcised in heart”.

<sup>16</sup>So **circumcise your heart**, and stiffen your neck no longer. (Deut 10:16; see also Deut 30:6)

<sup>66</sup>Moreover **the Lord your God will circumcise your heart** and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live. (Deut 30:6)

<sup>44</sup>**Circumcise** yourselves to the Lord And **remove the foreskins of your heart**, Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Or else My wrath will go forth like fire And burn with none to quench it, Because of the evil of your deeds.” (Jer 4:4)

<sup>29</sup>But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and **circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit**, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. (Rom 2:29)

Paul makes it clear that religious ceremony initiates nothing nor contributes nothing to only what God can do in a person's heart. This is a critical point to understand: in salvation religiosity is useless, likewise, in sanctification religiosity is useless.

#### ❖ **Do you focus on “religion” for spiritual growth (sanctification) or Christ?**

In Christ, the believer has been “circumcised with a circumcision made without hands” or with a spiritual circumcision. “Removal” carries the idea of getting out of something then casting it away. Here it is used figuratively of believers being set free from their sinful nature through union with Christ. “The body of the flesh” or the sinful nature is taken off like an old garment and cast away, setting the believer free from its dominion and power.

How this spiritual circumcision occurs is through Spirit baptism at the moment of salvation. Spiritual baptism is God's act where the believer is united with Christ in His death and raised to new life.

<sup>3</sup>Or do you not know that **all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?** <sup>4</sup>**Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.** <sup>5</sup>For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, (Rom 6:3-5)

<sup>17</sup>Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the **old things passed away; behold, new things have come.** (2 Cor 5:17)

In spiritual baptism, God also places the believer into union with other believers in the body of Christ.

<sup>27</sup>For **all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.** <sup>28</sup>There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; **for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** (Gal 3:27-28)

<sup>13</sup>For **by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body**, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:13)

Romans 6 describes spiritual baptism in detail. The believer's union with Christ in His death and resurrection is the basis of deliverance from sin. The believer is "freed from sin and enslaved to God." We WERE slaves to sin, now we ARE slaves to God. We have changed masters. We must now present ourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and our bodies as instruments of righteousness to God.

❖ **Have you changed masters in your thinking?**

Union with Christ is also the basis for progressive sanctification.

<sup>20</sup>I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. (Gal 2:20)

❖ **Are you living by faith in the Son of God?**

We have been made complete through spiritual circumcision or Spirit baptism. We are also complete because we have been completely forgiven.

B. Complete forgiveness (2:13-14)

<sup>13</sup>When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, <sup>14</sup>having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

<sup>13</sup>And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup>by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (ESV)

Paul could not talk about our complete and sufficient salvation without mentioning forgiveness. First though he details the need for forgiveness. God had "raised [us] up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead." Speaking of "dead", that was you. You were "dead". "Dead" is "nekros" describes literally someone who no longer is alive, but figuratively (the more common NT use) speaks of the spiritual condition of being "dead" – spiritually dead because of sin.

We were described as “dead” for two reasons. First because of “transgressions” which describes what a person has done in transgressing the moral will of God by some false step or failure. Second, because of the “uncircumcision of your flesh”, that is, the sin nature. Because all people are sinners by nature and choice, we are dead. This is the condition of all people, including the Colossian false teachers and those who are being tempted to follow them. Nothing in that philosophy can make people alive.

When we were in a condition of death, (alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds – Col 1:21), God “made you alive together with Him”. This comes from outside our self since dead people cannot make themselves alive. We have no power to fix that. There is no special knowledge to fix that. Following legalistic rules cannot fix that. A rebirth is required and that comes from outside ourselves. We see this thought throughout Scripture (see Eph 2:1-10 and John 3:1-21, for example). God deals with the sin nature, through rebirth. He deals with “transgressions” through forgiveness.

There are primarily two Greek words that are translated “to forgive” in the NT. The gospel writers most often used the Greek word “aphiemi” (Matt 6:12, 14-15; 9:6; 12:31-32; 18:21-35; Mark 2:5-10; 3:28; 4:12; 11:25-26; Luke 5:20-24; 7:47-49; 11:4; 12:10; 17:3-4; 23:34; John 20:23; Acts 8:22; Rom 4:7; James 5:15; 1 John 1:9; 2:12). “Aphiemi” literally means to “hurl away” or “let go” or “give up a debt.” This paints a vivid word picture of forgiveness as sending the sin away. This word was also used in secular Greek to mean “canceling a debt”.

The other Greek word, “charizomai,” was used primarily in Paul’s epistles (Luke 7:42-43; 2 Cor 2:7-10; 12:13; Eph 4:32; Col 2:13; 3:13). It is the word used here in Colossians 2. “Charizomai” comes from the word for “grace” meaning “unmerited favor”. It means “to give freely and unconditionally” or “to bestow as a gift of grace and then to remit a debt”. The idea of unconditionally and completely are conveyed.

“Having forgiven” here speaks of a past completed action (the moment you believed you were completely forgiven). And it pictures God not only initiating the action of forgiveness but participating in the carrying out of the forgiveness.

“Having cancelled out” means to remove by wiping off. The word was applied to the process of obliterating writing on any material. The idea in all the uses is to cause something to cease by obliterating or eliminating any evidence, so here has the meaning to expunge. This is a past completed actions. Our debt is completely cancelled or expunged.

“Taken (John 1:29) out of the way” is literally “taken out of their midst”. God has removed our certificate of debt, the debt of sin we owe, out of our midst completely and we currently enjoy the ongoing results of that. The certificate of debt cannot be presented against us again. “Having nailed it to the cross” pictures our certificate of debt being completely destroyed.

The believer is completely forgiven by God through Christ. There is no other way, no worldly philosophy, not legalism, nothing.

❖ **Are you relying on anything other than Christ for complete forgiveness?**

We have been made complete through spiritual circumcision or Spirit baptism. We are complete because we have been completely forgiven. We are also complete because Christ is completely victorious.

### C. Compete victory (2:15)

<sup>15</sup>When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

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<sup>15</sup>He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (ESV)

“Had disarmed” is literally to strip off or disrobe. “Made display” means to exhibit, to expose, to make a public show or spectacle. In its only other NT use it is translated “disgrace”.

<sup>19</sup>And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to **disgrace** her, desired to put her away secretly. (Matt 1:19)

“Having triumphed over” means to lead prisoners of war (and spoils) in a victory procession demonstrating one's successful conquest of the opposition. The picture here would be familiar to the Colossians of a Roman general having stripped and disarmed his defeated captives, exposing them to public view, and parading them publicly through the streets in a triumphal procession.

Christ's visible death and visible resurrection rendered Satan powerless. To be united with Christ is to be free from Satan's dominion. Believers are free from slavery to sin and from domination in the domain of darkness and have been set free through rebirth and forgiveness. So why worship angels, or lesser “deities” as the Gnostics believed, when Christ is supreme?

<sup>14</sup>Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that **through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,** <sup>15</sup>and **might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.** (Heb 2:14-15)

<sup>10</sup>but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, **who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,** (2 Tim 1:10)

### ❖ Do you live as a slave to death or any other thing?

God through Christ has given believers a complete and all sufficient salvation through a complete rebirth, complete forgiveness, and complete victory. Therefore, do not give up that completeness for useless religiosity.

## 2. Supreme over Jewish legalism (2:16-17)

<sup>16</sup>Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— <sup>17</sup>things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

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<sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (ESV)

“Therefore” refers back to 2:9-15. Christ is God incarnate and believers have a **complete** salvation in Him alone by grace alone through faith alone. There are no works, no philosophies, no higher knowledge, to be added to the complete salvation and His work of sanctification in the believer. Paul now addresses Christ’s supremacy over Jewish legalism and, by so, all forms of legalism.

Since all these things are true concerning who Jesus is and what He has done for us, we are not to be subject to any form of legalism. The following of the law or any system of rules or traditions has no merit or value toward our salvation nor sanctification.

Matthew 15 provides a good description of legalism. “Traditions” are those man-made doctrines, teaching, or rules which take the place of Scripture.

<sup>3</sup>And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup>For God said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,’ and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.’ <sup>5</sup>But you say, ‘Whoever says to *his* father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you has been given *to God*,” <sup>6</sup>he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And *by this* you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. <sup>7</sup>You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: <sup>8</sup>“THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. <sup>9</sup>“BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.”” (Matt 15:3-9)

Legalism...

- Places man-made rules before God’s word (v3)
- Invalidates the word of God by placing man-made rules over it (v6)
- Is hypocritical (v7)
- Appears to bring people close to God but in fact takes them far away (v8)
- Is vain worship of God (v8-9)
- Lies about man-made rules and calls them God’s word (v9)

❖ **What are some man-made rules that people want you follow? What do you think about those – good, bad, wise, foolish, etc?**

“No one is to act as your judge” is better literally and contextually “stop allowing others to negatively influence you by their judgmental attitude”. Some at Colossae had already been influenced/tempted to abandon Christ and His saving work alone as their sufficiency. Paul commands them to stop allowing that damning influence. Do not allow people to tell you that you need to keep certain non-biblical rules (in this case “for you, but not to you” rules) for either justification or sanctification.

The five items mentioned (food, drink, festival, new moon, Sabbath day) were Jewish yearly, monthly, and daily observances. “Food or drink” were OT dietary laws. “Festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day” are references to the Jewish ceremonial calendar. “Festival” is the Jewish feasts or festivals outlined in Leviticus 23. The spring festivals are: Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of First-fruits, and the Feast of Weeks. The fall feasts are the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. “New moon” refers to sacrifices that were offered on the first day of each month (Num 28:11-14). “Sabbath day” was the ritualistic keeping of Saturday or the day that God rested from His creative work.

The OT laws mentioned are a shadow of the things to come. “Shadow” refers to a dim and shadowy sketch of an object, in contrast not only with a full and colored likeness, but with the object itself.

<sup>1</sup>For the Law, since it has *only* a **shadow** of the good things to come *and* not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. (Heb 10:1)

“Substance” is used figuratively as the reality which stands in contrast to the shadow. The OT law is designed to point people to the need for a savior and to the Savior Himself.

<sup>24</sup>Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. (Gal 3:24-25)

So, is the OT law required for the believer in the New Covenant? No (see the VBC position paper “The Christian’s Obligation to the Law of Moses”). Romans 10:4 gives us a direct statement that “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” The word “end” can be translated “goal” but with the sense of completion. Therefore, the Law has ended its application to believers because it reaches its conclusion in Christ.

<sup>17</sup>“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. (Matt 5:17)

Christians who mistakenly believe that elements of the Law of Moses are required for believers in Christ today are, in the words of Peter from Acts 15:10 “placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.”

❖ **Are you a practicing legalist? Do you place rules in your life or the lives of others to further salvation or sanctification?**

### 3. Supreme over mysticism (2:18-19)

<sup>18</sup>Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, <sup>19</sup>and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

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<sup>18</sup>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, <sup>19</sup>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. (ESV)

“Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize” is only used here in Scripture and means “to defraud of the prize of victory”. The prize is Christ and His supremacy in salvation and sanctification. There are those who, in pride, wish to take that assurance of Christ’s sufficiency to save and sanctify away from the true believer by holding to mystical spiritual experience over Scripture.

“Delighting” has the idea of “continually wishing to do something” involving an active decision of the will. These false teachers like to do what they are doing.

“Self-abasement” literally means to think humble. Depending on the context the meaning can have either positive (Acts 20:19; Eph 4:2; Phil 2:3; Col 3:12; 1 Pet 3:8; 1 Pet 5:5) or negative (Col 2:18; 23) connotations. Here, clearly it is negative so it is “false humility”. The false teachers delighted in false humility which then ceased to be genuine humility and became pride. The word was also used in connection with the ascetic practice of Jewish-Christian fasting. Therefore, the ESV translated it “asceticism”.

These false teachers also worshipped angels. A practice condemned in Scriptures (Matt 4:10; Rev. 19:10; 22:9). MacArthur notes in his commentary of Colossians, quoting other sources, that angel worship plagued the churches in the region of Colossae as late as the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century.

The false teachers also claimed to have visions. Their pride drives them to talk and talk about their vision. “Taking his stand” is also “go on and on”. But these visions were not from the Lord, but were from their “fleshly minds”. The false teachers were “inflated” or conceited, proud, or haughty. There was no reason for this inflation. Clearly in a spirit-filled sense, the believer should be truly humble. But even in a worldly sense this is “without cause” or in vain, without a legitimate reason, or for nothing. This is not unlike many today who value being “spiritual” or having “spiritual” experience over the word.

There is no need for mystic experiences because the believer’s sufficiency is in Christ. He is the head. If you want to be mature and grow in sanctification, look no further than Christ. Hold fast to the head.

❖ **Do you seek after mystical experiences or after God’s word?**



#### 4. Supreme over asceticism (2:20-23)

<sup>20</sup>If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, <sup>21</sup>“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” <sup>22</sup>(which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? <sup>23</sup>These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence.

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<sup>20</sup>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— <sup>21</sup>“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” <sup>22</sup>(referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? <sup>23</sup>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. (ESV)

The believer is united with Christ and no longer subject to basic, worldly principles nor living as if a citizen of the world. Therefore, do not believe that depriving yourself of certain things that God’s word does not forbid will lead to sanctification. These are the commandments and teachings of men. Unfortunately, many believers think that they are more spiritual if they abstain from certain activities, certain foods, or certain objects.

These commandments and teachings of men have the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and false humility and severe treatment of the body. These ideas look like spirituality, but are of no value in the war against sin. The war against sin is a spiritual battle requiring spiritual weapons that only Christ provides. These weapons are not secret and available to only a select few. They are not provided by angels. They are not revealed in visions. They are not related to ascetic practices.

Paul points out four weaknesses in asceticism:

1. It is not biblical since all good things are for us to enjoy (2:21).
2. It has no relation to the eternal (2:22).
3. It leads to pride (2:23).
4. It useless in the battle against sin (2:23).

Sanctification occurs as the believer walks in the Spirit (Eph 5:18+; Gal 5:19; 22-23), allows the word of Christ to richly dwell within her/him (Col 3:16+), and puts off sin and puts on righteousness (Eph 4:22-24). These are the only weapons of value in the war against sin.

❖ **Are you striving to progress in sanctification by living by faith in the Son of God (Gal 2:20)?**

## **Conclusion**

Paul continues his attack the Colossian false teaching that denied the person and work of Christ focusing the attack on legalism, mysticism, and asceticism. God has given believers a complete and sufficient salvation – completely made new, completely forgiven, and completely victorious in Christ. Christ is supreme over Jewish legalism because it is a mere shadow, but the substance is Christ. Mystic experiences are worthless because of the believer’s sufficiency in the Head, Christ. Asceticism is worthless because only union with Christ and the indwelling Spirit provides victory over the flesh. My prayer is that we are not pulled away from Christ alone for salvation or sanctification.

## **Additional Study**

1. Read Ephesians 1:3. Make a list of “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ”.
2. Read Colossians 2:1-3. Make a list of “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”.
3. What things in your life distract you from a purity of devotion to Christ, that distract from a dedication to the sufficiency of Christ to save and sanctify?
4. Make a list of the ways you may be influenced by legalist, mystic, or ascetic ideas and commit to turn from them.