

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Complete in Him 3

Colossians 2:16 – 23

Here is the practical application of verses 1 – 15. In light of the fact that we are complete in Christ – in view of the reality that He has given us new hearts and we have been buried with Him in baptism and raised up with Him by faith – on account of our sins being forgiven and we stand justified before God in Christ and with Him victorious over all the forces of hell - **Therefore.** There are some crucial truths that flow from being complete in Christ. And there are some dangerous lies that work to defraud the believer of His assurance in Christ. **Paul presents the truths by pointing out the lies.**

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. Colossians 2:16 **The lie is that participation in the shadow guarantees participation in the substance. The truth is that the shadows only point to the substance.** The regulations are merely the shell of the real thing and only serve to point to the reality which is Christ: *These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.* Colossians 2:17 When you see a shadow – you don't embrace it or interact with it. You realize that the shadow only proves the substance of the real thing. Just because you go to church doesn't mean you're a Christian – any more than sleeping in the garage means that you are now a car. There are a lot of people that have convinced themselves that behaving holy is being holy – but the truth is that holy behavior flows from being holy – not the other way around.

Eating and drinking physical food only serves to highlight the fact that Christ is our real food and drink. Jesus told the unbelieving, regulation-trusting Jews in John 6: *'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.'* John 6:53-54

Celebration of festivals, literally, 'feasts' only serve to emphasize the truth that Christ Himself is our feast – He is the Passover Lamb as 1 Corinthians 5:8 tells us: *For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the [feast],* 1 Corinthians 5:8 And it reminds us that one day we will join Christ our Bridegroom at the wedding feast of the Lamb. *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son,* Matthew 22:2

Paul mentions new moons, and both Jews and Gentiles had observances on the appearance of a new moon at the beginning of another lunar cycle. For the Jews this designated the beginning of a new month, and it was to be a time to offer sacrifices in worship and praise of God. **Observance of new moons and worship in rituals only works to highlight the fact that Christ is the one who is to be worshipped.**

And finally Paul mentions Sabbaths – a subject near and dear to a Jew's heart. The Sabbath was first and foremost a day of rest – signifying that God rested from His work in creation – and we are to rest from ours during the week. **And the celebration of Sabbaths serves only to remind us that Christ Himself is our rest** – as Hebrews tells us: *So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from His.* Hebrews 4:9 -10 This not only points to our rest and enjoyment in God throughout eternity, but points to the fact that **Christians are those who have stopped trying to reach God through their own good efforts.**

On the one hand – there is nothing wrong with regulations about food or feasts or festivals or Sabbaths – but we need to understand that these are the shell and not the kernel – the shadow and not the substance. If we lean on these things – we are leaning on shadows. Essentially Paul says, **'Don't let anyone tell you that eating or drinking, or not eating or not drinking, a certain thing or celebrating or not celebrating a holy day, is any mark of whether or not you are saved. These things are the shadows and Christ is the substance.'**

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism [humility] and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, Colossians 2:18 **The lie is that miraculous experiences and visions are essential to growth. The truth is that Christ is the means and measure of Christian growth.** The real danger, Paul says, is that we might *be disqualified*. And that word he uses is best translated as an idiomatic expression which means – '**let no one rob you of the prize**'. It is a meaning drawn from athletic contests, where a judge might rule a contestant out of the contest for some reason and he loses the prize by virtue of being disqualified. And Paul's point here is that **those who let anything seduce them away from their completeness in Christ are being robbed of the reward.** Because in Him is fullness of joy – and at His right hand are everlasting pleasures.

Paul mentions those who insist on **asceticism** and he ties it together with the worship of angels and visions. The word asceticism here, I believe is better translated **humility**, as it is translated either as **humility of mind** or **lowliness of mind** in all six of the other places it is found in the New Testament. And here Paul is clearly not talking about humility as a virtue but rather something like a false modesty. You know what that is – perhaps you've indulged in a bit of it yourself. It is the practice of wording things so they sound humble and self-effacing – **but they have the effect of projecting all the glory on to you.** Here Paul says these people insist on **a kind of humility that sounds right but deflects all the glory from Christ to themselves** – and they promote some highly subjective spiritual experience at the expense of the reality of Christ. And very often those miraculous experiences are promoted as essential to growing in the faith.

The emphasis on spiritual encounters and visions had the effect of puffing these guys up – literally inflating their egos – and robbing them of the prize. How often have we seen people run after the latest spiritual encounter or flock to hear the latest word from a so-called prophet? The latest weird phenomenon to sweep through some Christian churches is the appearance of what is being called 'heavenly gold dust' and 'heavenly bling-bling' – jewels from on high. I watched a video on YouTube of jewels falling from the ceiling in a church in Puerto Rico, and pictures reported to be gold dust on people in a sanctuary in the U.S. The funny thing is, this has been reportedly going on in this church in Puerto Rico for three years and nobody seems to be getting any richer and the sanctuary still has plain concrete walls and metal chairs, and I didn't see anyone driving new Cadillac Escalades. **The problem with miracles is that they don't last.** One day Jesus fed the five thousand. The next day they were looking for Him because they were hungry. Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead and opened deaf ears and blind eyes and caused the lame to walk – and they were healed and raised and seeing and hearing and walking – **until they died.** Miracles don't last. That doesn't mean we don't pray for miracles. Jesus never said, 'Don't ask Me for a miracle'. **But don't make the miraculous the focus of either your worship or your affections.**

The reason these guys got off was that they were promoting something other than Christ. They were *'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.* Colossians 2:19 The way to avoid being disqualified is to **'Hold fast the Head'**. This word translated **'hold fast'** is an aggressive word that means to take hold of forcefully, to get possession of, to lay hold of. 'Hold fast the Head, which is Christ' Paul said. Forget about the angels and the visions. If you want to grow in this faith – grab on to Jesus – don't look to angels. They were holding on to something other than Christ – they had lost the connection to the Head. And as we all know – it is not a good thing to lose your head. Hold on to Christ – He is the one through whom the nourishment to grow flows. Watch out for those who promote mystical and miraculous experiences at the expense of Christ. Be wary of those who talk about visions and secret revelations and encounters with angels or other spiritual beings. Paul uses strong language here and says that those things rob you of the prize – Christ Himself. Hold fast to the Head.

Finally Paul presents the third truth that combats another lie. *'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?'* Colossians 2:20 **The lie here is that regulations will control the flesh. The truth is that the only cure is death.** All the regulations do is give an appearance of control: *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 2:23 The truth is, all the resolutions and regulations in the world are ineffective in controlling the flesh and the lusts that come from the world. In the early history of the church, asceticism led to people abandoning their jobs and families and going off to live in cloistered communities that were dedicated to the proposition that if you tortured your flesh enough, lust and pride and all the sins of the flesh could be eradicated. Apparently they had never read Colossians 2:23: *they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.* The flesh is not a problem that is solved by hair shirts and floggings – experience has shown that it only makes things worse. Monasteries were notorious for unbridled licentious behavior and not a few children were born to celibate priests. Whipping the flesh is no solution – what the flesh needs is a good death.

It does no good to write all kinds of legislation against the flesh – morality cannot be legislated with laws that say: *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?" Colossians 2:21-22 The implication here is that **those who build regulations about things you handle, things you taste or things you touch do not know what it means to die with Christ to the power of the world and the flesh.** If you have truly died with Christ to the seductions and attractions of the world and the flesh – why are you acting like you are still alive to them? Regulations are for people who are living – not dead. How many regulations does a dead man need? Not a single solitary one.

Paul was helping the Colossians guard their hearts against the sin of legalism. **Legalism means that you take biblical standards of conduct and make them regulations to be kept by one's own power in order to earn God's favor.** And then legalists build a whole system of specific requirements of conduct beyond the clear teaching of Scripture and make everybody pass the conduct code in order to be part of the family of God. The rules then become the means whereby someone is qualified to be a Christian, or to fully participate in the church. And because legalists are so enamored of rules and regulations, they often stray into unbiblical territory with their rules. They command things the Bible never commands and they forbid things the Bible never forbids. There are clear biblical teachings on lots of things – but there is a lot the Bible is simply silent on. And the rule, if you want a rule, is that **where the Bible speaks, obey – where the Bible is silent – shut up.**

When Kim and I were in Ukraine back in 1996, we visited a lot of churches. But one church we visited were foot-washers. That is they practiced foot-washing as part of the communion service. After the service we held, there was a big meeting of the church leaders to talk about an issue that had arisen. Some time before we had come, this church was in need of a pastor, and so they asked an evangelist they knew to fill this position. He did, and the church really grew – especially with new converts. About a month before we got there, this pastor had taken 20 new converts to another church that had access to a pool for a baptismal service. The problem was however, that this church was a non-foot-washing church – and the question before the leaders was this: 'Was that baptism valid, performed as it was in a non-foot-washing church?' **I could almost hear a heavy sigh from heaven.** But when we base our righteousness on outward behavior and conformity – these are exactly the situation in which we find ourselves.

Paul's point here flows from the idea that in Christ we have been made complete. **It is the rule of Christ on the inside that rules our behavior on the outside.** Not the other way around. Legalism really is a failure of faith – it is blatant unbelief. It is trusting in something other than Christ to make ourselves behave. **It is a failure to trust in Christ's power for our sanctification. And it is a failure to depend on His power to sanctify others.** All these things, food and drink, feasts and festivals and Sabbaths – are merely shadows of Christ who is the substance.

I am not saying that there are not certain behaviors the Bible doesn't address that are hindrances to our walk as Christians. The Scriptures tells us to *'...lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus,* Hebrews 12:1 Lay aside everything that does not bring you to Christ – lay aside every sin that keeps you from Him. The church I grew up in was death on the Big Five: drinking, dancing, smoking, gambling, and going to the movies. But they were regulations that had no specific biblical reference other than a moral persuasion. The Bible does not say, 'Thou shalt not drink'. It does say 'Don't get drunk'. It doesn't say 'Thou shalt not smoke'. It does say 'Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit' and you better be careful what you bring into the temple. The Bible does not say 'Thou shalt not dance.' In fact I can quote you several places where dancing is expressly approved. Complete in Christ does not mean that we simply follow a list of do's and don'ts. Now this is where you need to listen especially carefully and attentively. I don't want any cards and letters, nor do I want you going home and saying your pastor endorses these things.

What I do want you to say, to yourselves and to others, is that everything not of faith is sin. Because that is what the Bible says. And what that means is that everything that does not spring from your relationship of faith in Christ is ultimately sin because it is a reliance upon your own efforts to make yourself or others pleasing to God. If Christ is not ruling and reigning in your hearts through faith, then all the regulations and all the rules in the world will never help you overcome the world, the flesh and the devil. **In regards to any activity or any habit or practice – one rule will suffice – 'Does this bring me closer to Jesus or does this cause my affections to wander?'** Am I grabbing at shadows or embracing the real thing? Am I more in love with the miracles and visions or do I know the One who is the miracle-maker? Am I depending on rules and regulations instead of pursuing my relationship with Christ? Do I really believe that I am complete in Him?

Our gracious heavenly Father,

Grant that we would have great confidence in the finished work of Christ. Let the truth that we are complete in Him go deep into our souls and change the very core of us. Open our eyes to the miracle and wonder of what You have already done and forbid that we would ever try to add to Your work or think that we could do it ourselves. May we be enamored of the substance and not the shadows. Forgive our eager willingness to embrace the appearance of holiness and shun the Holy One. Never let us substitute a form of holiness for the real thing or cherish the rules and not their Author. May we be those who love You and not the just the work of Your hands. Forgive us for making Your good gifts a substitute for You. Satisfy us with Yourself and make us glad in You always. Cause us to live as those whose joy has been made full in You and live to make the nations glad in God, we pray in the precious and powerful name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***