

## **In Christ: The Substance Belongs to Christ**

Colossians 2:16-23

What Jesus has done and is doing and will do for your salvation looks good on paper.

Listen to how Paul has described Jesus to you so far in Colossians.

In His own death on the cross, Jesus Christ severs you from your sin.

Jesus Christ makes you alive together with Him in His resurrection.

In Jesus Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and the knowledge of God.

In Jesus Christ all the fullness of deity dwells bodily.

You have been filled in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ, you have been forgiven all your sins. The record of debt that stood against you has been canceled.

In Jesus Christ, the spiritual forces of evil that oppose you have been stripped naked and exposed to open shame. Jesus stands triumphant over them.

In Jesus, and through Jesus, and to Jesus, are all things, and He is the Head over His Body: the Church.

The question that you must ask is whether all this is real, or simply words on paper.

You pray, and often it feels like your prayers hit the ceiling.

You read your Bible, and you do not feel God's presence.

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You ask for help with your problems, and your problems seem to get worse.

You ask God to take away your fear, your bitterness, your insecurity, and they remain.

You try to love others, and it comes out all wrong.

In your frustration, you become more self-absorbed than ever.

As a result, you begin think there must be more.

Christ sounds good on paper, but when the rubber meets the road, it is up to me to make things happen.

Real growth depends on me.

And I must make use of the known resources around me.

Instead of continuing to trust in a Savior that I cannot see, I begin relying upon things that I can see.

Before long, we are not living by the faith that we had at first.

Instead, our religion looks more “Self-made” than “God made”.

Paul is calling the Colossians to return to the faith they had at the beginning. He wants them to live by the faith that they had when they received Christ.

But Paul knows that as soon as the Colossians begin to apply this, they will immediately hear other voices telling them that they are wrong.

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These voices will come from other well-meaning members of the Church.

They will sound something like this:

What Jesus has done for you is wonderful... now it is up to you...

And let me tell you what you must do.

If you are not willing or able “to do” what has worked for me, then I will look down at you. I will consider myself “better than you”.

Paul has called the Colossians to rely upon Christ alone for all of their salvation.

And he knows that others in the Church will “judge” those who do this.

In our passage today, Paul wants to help his hearers deal with being judged by other believers.

Read Colossians 2:16-23.

16       Therefore  
          let no one pass judgment on you

The passing of judgment that Paul anticipates comes from other members of the Church.

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Do not let others “in the Church” pass judgment on you!

How is it possible to prevent someone from passing judgment on you?

You cannot.

And Paul is not telling the Colossians to confront those who would judge them... force them to stop.

He is not even confronting the judgers: Stop judging!

So, what is Paul saying?

Do not take their judgments to heart. Do not let those judgments deeply affect you.

Let them roll off you like water on the back of a duck.

Most of us find this very difficult to do. We do not have very thick skin. We are deeply concerned about the opinions of others. It is not that this is all bad. To have no concern for the opinions of others is not healthy. But most of us are overly concerned with what others think of us. We are more driven by the opinions of others than we are the truth of the Gospel itself.

The truth is that as you live out your life “in Christ”, other Christians will make criticisms of you.

In Colossai, the criticisms took several forms:

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Some had to do with:

in questions of food and drink,  
or  
with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

Paul is most certainly alluding to the ceremonies of the OT.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Ezekiel 45:17** It shall be the prince's duty to furnish the burnt offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings, at the feasts, the new moons, and the Sabbaths, all the appointed feasts of the house of Israel: he shall provide the sin offerings, grain offerings, burnt offerings, and peace offerings, to make atonement on behalf of the house of Israel.

The Colossians are living far from the Temple. They are a congregation that is predominantly made up of Gentiles. But they would have been somewhat familiar with the OT. And some of the believing Jews in their midst, must have had the inkling that these OT ceremonies had spiritual value in promoting a closer intimacy with God and a greater victory over sin.

The Gentiles among them would have easily accepted these inklings as truth. After all, Greek religions were very superstitious. The idea of performing ceremonies that would

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prepare you for deeper spiritual encounters with deities was etched in their minds.

In the OT, in order for the priest to enter the Temple, he had to engage in various ceremonies that purified him. Greek religion would have had similar practices.

Only the priests could enter the inner sanctuary, and only after performing the proper ceremonial rituals of cleansing.

Picture yourself in the shoes of the Colossian believers. You have believed in Jesus. But your experience of God's presence is somewhat lacking. You want more out of your Christianity. And the person next to you is ready to give you the answer. "What you are lacking is the proper preparation. Let me show you from the Bible how it works.

The priest had to do certain things in order to be able to enter the sanctuary. It only makes sense that you are being held back in your own spiritual experience because you have not properly performed these ceremonies."

I still remember wrestling with something similar when I was still a young Christian. I was living here in Morganton and did not have a regular job. So, I worked through a temporary agency. This meant that I would often work in one place for a couple of days and then move on to another place, and so on.

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Well, one place that I worked was the old Coca Cola plant. (Now Seiren on the by-pass) I learned very quickly that assembly line work was not for me. But I will never forget a fellow-worker coming up to me and asking me if I had been baptized in the Spirit. It was obvious that he was telling me that unless I had that I was “missing out” on true Christianity.

I was experiencing a “dry spell” in my devotion to God. And so, I took very seriously what he was advocating. Maybe there was something else that I had to do if I wanted to “really experience God”. My faith in Christ was not somehow enough.

Thankfully, this man never convinced me. And I moved on to another job rather quickly. But that encounter forced me to go back to the Bible to see if I was really missing out because I had not had this 2<sup>nd</sup> experience of being “baptized in the Spirit.”

He was judging my experience as lacking. And I did not want to be lacking.

In Paul’s day, someone would whisper to other believers, “Are you abstaining from these certain foods?”

Because if you are not, God will not allow you to experience Him in the inner sanctuary.

“Are you regularly keeping Sabbath regulations, new moon celebrations, and annual feast days?” Because if you are not,

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you are missing out on the “holy times” in which God meets with His people.

Only if you faithfully attend to these religious feasts will God allow you into the inner sanctuary of his presence.

Paul is encouraging the Colossians, “Do not buy into this sort of thinking.”

Do not let their “judgments” work down into your soul such that you give into them in your own assessment of yourself.

Why not?

17            These are a shadow of the things to come,  
                 but  
                 the substance belongs to Christ.

“These things” are the ceremonial commands of the Mosaic Law. Not eating certain foods and observing various rules of purification in preparation for entrance into the inner sanctuary of God. And participating in various feast days as if God has made them portals into His holy presence.

Paul calls all of these rituals “shadows”.

If you have a man standing with the sun shining on him, his body will cast a shadow.



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The shadow is not the man. Unless you are a cat, you realize that the shadow nothing at all. It is only an outline of the body that is blocking some of the sun.

Paul says that the substance, the reality, is Christ.

God used these shadows so that OT believers could be pointed to the substance, but they are not themselves the substance.

Now that we have the substance, these shadows no longer have a purpose.

And to insist on doing them implies that they have some reality of their own, in addition to Jesus.

They do not.

I have to take a moment to talk about the weekly Sabbath, the Lord's Day. As Presbyterians, we believe that the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment is still relevant for NT believers. We still follow 10 Commandments, not 9!

This verse seems to contradict that belief. "Do not let anyone judge you whether you keep a Sabbath."

I will say that verses like this have challenged me to be very thoughtful in how I understand the Sabbath.

One reason why I think that the Sabbath is still binding is that Jesus took lots of time to correct the various errors of the

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Sabbath practice. Why would he take such time to explain the nuances of keeping the Sabbath if it was to have no relevance after his resurrection?

Another reason is that the Sabbath had multiple functions. One function was to point to the rest that we have in Jesus Christ. But another function was to imitate God in His pattern of working and resting in Creation.

And lastly, the Sabbath continues to point us to our eternal rest, which we have not yet reached.

This being said, I do believe that in some way that Sabbath does function as a foreshadow.

If you read the OT carefully, there were many Sabbaths (days of rest) in addition to the “weekly Sabbath”.

I do not know of Sabbatarians that argue to keep all the various Sabbaths.

And, some of the Sabbath laws were tied to Temple worship. For instance, there was a law regulating the distance that you could travel on the Sabbath. Therefore, you would have to stay relatively close to Jerusalem if you wanted to offer sacrifices at the Temple on the Sabbath. There may be some application we can make today, but it is not a direct application.

Much more could be said. I have a study on the Sabbath if anyone is interested.

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But, at a minimum, this verse should prevent even the most ardent Sabbatarian from thinking that keeping the Sabbath is a human means of attaining a deeper spiritual experience.

We must not turn keeping the Sabbath into one part of a “man-made religion”.

Jesus is the substance of our faith, not the Sabbath.

There were various forms of “man-made” religion. Abstaining from foods and keeping holy days was only one form.

In verse 18, Paul defines another.

<sup>18</sup> Let no one disqualify you,

Not letting someone “disqualify” you is similar to not letting them judge you.

Christians are prone to acting like umpires in a baseball game. They want to look at your life and decide whether you are worthy to receive the prize, whether you are “in or out”.

And sadly, we are prone to believe them.

Umpires make bad calls. They get it wrong.

With technology, we know this to be true. Watch a baseball game and they will put an outline of the strike zone on the screen. And you can watch the trajectory of the pitch down to

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the millimeter. If the ball is inside the outline it is a strike. If it is outside it is not. So, as a fan you can tell if the umpire gets the right call.

Sadly, in life, it is not so easy. People judge us. They, in effect, call us out. They tell us that if we do not follow their example in some specific “do or don’t”, then we will not enjoy the fulness of our salvation.

Paul says, “Don’t let them do this to you!”

You do not stand or fall based upon their opinion of you – period.

What is the cause of their disqualification here?

These Christians are:

insisting on  
asceticism  
and  
worship of angels,  
going on in detail about visions,  
puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

Each phrase of this verse requires some comment.

It is not so much that the umpires of your life have the authority to require anything.

What they have is the power of suggestion.

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All they have to do is imply that certain activities are necessary to the full Christian life.

They suggest to you that their form of asceticism is necessary to experience the full Christian life.

According to Elwell's Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, asceticism is "the disciplined renunciation of personal desires...".

That doesn't sound all that bad, right?

But there is a huge difference between putting "sin" to death and putting away all legitimate desires.

One should fight against the sin of drunkenness. But one should not then argue that all partaking of alcohol is forbidden.

This was made clear when Jesus changed the water to wine in John 2.

Asceticism is the renouncing of legitimate desires as a means of attaining greater spirituality.

The classic example of this is Lent in the Catholic Church. You abstain from meat, or anything that you enjoy, for a season, in preparation of better receiving Jesus during the Easter Celebrations.

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But you do not have to be Catholic for this to occur.

When I was on staff with Campus Crusade, our founder Bill Bright engaged in a 40 Day liquid only fast. The desire was to humble himself and to seek greater blessing from God.

It is not for me to judge Mr. Bright.

But I have not been convinced to follow him in this, nor to encourage you to do this.

Legitimate fasting accompanies mourning or a heart of repentance. It is not a means of preparing yourself for greater spiritual experience.

Throughout history, monks would often engage in asceticism. Some would build a pillar and then live up on the pillar for years at a time.

St. Simeon was said to live on a pillar for 37 years.

Some monks slept on beds of nails.

Others purposely wore itchy clothing.

Some denied themselves sleep.

The basic idea is that if you are able to deny yourself some legitimate desire, then it will transfer over to being able to conquer some sinful desire. This sounds good, but it is entirely wrong.

Paul is not against individuals practicing “self-denial”. A person who has struggled with drunkenness very likely should abstain

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from all alcohol. But, his personal abstinence should not become the rule for others.

If it does, it will inevitably lead to pride and looking down upon others who do not follow your example.

Instead, of humility, it will lead to “false humility”.

“The truly humble person is unconscious of his or her humility, let alone taking delight or pride in it.” Bruce, 118.

And when you begin to think that your asceticism enables you to enter into a “higher form” of spirituality, then you are denying what God has given for you to enjoy. John Calvin says it well,

“Throughout the history of the church, Christians have been tempted to devalue the richness of creation, as if it is more “spiritual” to live a life devoid of beauty, and music, literature, painting, and all the other things man has produced out of God’s bounty. Should the Lord have attracted our eyes to the beauty of the flowers, and our sense of smell to pleasant odors, and should it then be sin to drink them in?”

The prophets of Baal did all sorts of harsh things to themselves to get their gods to answer them. Elijah simply prayed.

Asceticism is not the means towards greater spirituality.

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Next Paul says that some were insisting on the worship of angels.

The error of the Colossians is probably not that they were replacing God with angels in their worship.

The angels were seen as those having access to the inner sanctuary of God. And as such, they were the ones who were able to guide Christians into the inner sanctuary.

Practically speaking, the Christian would then give more attention to the angel who was helping him than to Christ.

The worship of angels is then connected to the experience of visions.

The “umpires” would go into great detail about the visions that they had.

The other Christians had not experienced such visions.

They must be doing something wrong. Their experience of God was less than these others.

But Paul says that these visions only work to puff them up with pride.

Paul would know because he had these sorts of visions.



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And he said that God gave him a thorn in his flesh to keep him from getting too puffed up.

Great spiritual experience can often lead to arrogance and pride.

And when you achieve this experience through human means, it becomes a “self-made” religion.

Ultimately... you are not...

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.**

I want you to be sure to notice Paul’s mention of “the whole body”.

One problem with “man-produced” experiences is that they are not experienced with the rest of the body of Christ. And they are not really concerned for the entire body. In truth, only the

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strong can experience the fullness of God, only those able to sit on a pillar for 37 years.

Paul envisions a much more organic growth as Christians are joined with the rest of the body to the Head – Jesus Himself.

Paul is not interested in individuals having powerful spiritual experiences that cause them to feel superior to the rest of the body of Christ.

Self-made religion disconnects you from Christ.

And self-made religion disconnects you from the rest of the Church.

Christ, the substance, is concerned with feeding the entire body of Christ.

Growth that comes from God is not built upon “man’s strength.”

Otherwise, only the strong could survive.

God teaches His people that His power is made perfect in our weakness.

That is why Jesus must kill us to give us true life.

<sup>20</sup> If with Christ you died  
to the elemental spirits of the world,  
why,

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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 the second time Paul has used the term elemental. The first was back in verse 8.

The ESV translates the word "elemental spirits" implying that Paul's focus is upon angels.

I agree that the spirit world is included, but I think Paul has an even broader application.

Other translations have "elemental principles" and "elemental forces."

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Elemental principles in some way refers back to the shadows that Paul has already discussed. The ceremonies of human religion are elementary. They do not provide what is necessary for true growth of the whole church.

Elemental forces would also refer to the forces of this present creation.

The first creation was built upon elemental forces: Earth, wind, fire, and water. These forces are powerful. But they are not powerful enough to produce what sinful man needs: true growth in godliness.

Something far more powerful is needed.

If something belonging to this present creation could achieve the fullness of our salvation, then the Incarnation would not have been necessary.

For a person to be saved, God must crucify him with His Son, and bury him in His burial.

“If” you have died implies “since” you have died.

Your death occurred in Christ’s death.

This is not a theory or a doctrine. It is reality.

When a person dies physically, they leave this world.

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The forces of this world no longer have any hold on them.  
The spiritual forces of evil belong to this world.  
The physical forces that have been subjected to the curse belong to this world.  
Even more important, the evils of your sinful heart belong to this world.

Do you struggle with fear and anxiety that you cannot seem to shake? It belongs to this world.

Do you struggle to be gentle and kind? Harshness and cruelty belong to this world.

The struggles of gender confusion flow from the corruption of our nature that belongs to this world.

Are you tired, depressed, bitter...? All of these belong to this world.

When you die, you leave this world. You are free from its clutches.

Well, Paul believes that through faith in Christ, you have already left this world.

why,

as if you were still alive in the world,

When Jesus rose up out of the tomb, He no longer belonged to this present creation. He left this world.

And you who are “in Christ” have left this world with Him.

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You have not physically left this world.

Paul is not denying the obvious. But union with Christ in His death and resurrection is not just a theory.

It is more than fine sounding words on a piece of paper.

Jesus is the substance of our religion.

God spoke this present creation into existence. He created the elements. He established the laws of nature.

But while the first creation was built on these “elementals”, the New Creation is built upon the resurrected body of Jesus Christ.

Picture the planting of a seed that becomes a great Oak Tree. The Oak Tree is the New Creation. The seed is the resurrected body of Jesus Christ.

The New Creation is built upon Christ’s body.

Jesus is the first seed of the New Creation.

And you belong to the New Creation “in Christ”.

This is the reality that Paul wants us to live each day, even while we continue to suffer under the struggles of this world.

On the one hand, you are very much alive in this world.

Evil and corruption are everywhere around us. And they are still very much present in us.

But on the other hand, you have already died to them all, in Christ.

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If you hear nothing else, here this next statement:

Jesus Christ, and your being united with Him in His resurrection body, is the only “force” powerful enough to overcome evil.

If you could overcome evil with human will-power, self-discipline, man-made religion, ecstatic experiences... then Jesus would not have had to die.

**John 16:33** <sup>33</sup> I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

The problem is that we want a victory that belongs to this world. We want our victory now, so that we can go on living in this world. And so, we return to the rules of this world to conquer the evil within us.

When we are desperate to overcome sin, we will do almost anything to put it to death.

The desire to put sin to death is evidence of the Spirit working in our heart producing a true repentance. And our effort is certainly a part of our growing in sanctification.

But how do we distinguish a healthy “effort” produced by the Spirit, and the effort of “self-made religion”? It is not easy.

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Jesus wants us to have a certain desperation in our fight against sin.

ESV **Matthew 18:8** And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.

**1 Corinthians 9:24 - 27** <sup>24</sup> Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. <sup>25</sup> Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. <sup>26</sup> So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. <sup>27</sup> But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Our desperate struggle against sin will often lead us to impose restrictions on ourselves.

The drug addict will sometimes have to move to another town to remove himself from all the triggers that drive him back to his sin.

The person who is consumed with issues of self-image and body shame, may have to disconnect from social media.

The one who is full of constant fear over the degrading effects of culture, may choose to quit watching the news every day.

These personal restrictions are good and healthy.



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But, when you begin to think that these things are the substance of true growth in Christ, you are missing the Gospel.

If these human activities could produce true freedom, then Christ died for nothing.

These activities have the appearance of wisdom. I know this because I have done many of them. But in themselves, they do not have the power to genuinely transform your desires at the core. They are band aids.

We must not treat the band aid as if it is the solution. We are doing this when we take the rules we have embraced for ourselves and impose them on everyone else.

Do not handle!

Do not taste!

Do not touch!

These become the essence of our religion.

As if Jesus died to keep us from a full and satisfying life.

As if the rigor of self-discipline is all that is needed to stop the indulgence of the flesh.

Self-discipline can be its own form of the flesh.

Why else would it lead us to such pride? Such disdain of others who have not been able to be as disciplined as we?

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- 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.

Moving to another town may be helpful to keep the drug addict from returning to his old lifestyle, but it will not truly kill his addiction to sin, nor will it give him that for which his soul yearns.

The monk who spent 37 years on a pillar did not stop the inner cravings of his old nature.

The dangers of the internet are real and many of us need to learn how to place restrictions on ourselves for our own health. But not using the internet will not stop our indulgence of the flesh.

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The truth is that in this world we all must live with some band aids.

We all must develop some ways to cope with the fallenness of this present existence.

But God forbid, that we would make the sum of our faith these band aids.

1. When you embrace personal restrictions, do not make them the rule for others.
2. Remember that Jesus is head of the whole body, not just you.
3. When other Christians play umpire over you, do not take those judgments to heart. Living according to the opinions of others is slavery that drives you away from Christ.

The substance of all true religion is found in Christ, and Christ alone, and your union with Him, both now and forevermore.