

COMPLETE IN CHRIST

COLOSSIANS 2:16-23

FREEDOM FROM LAWYERS, MYSTICS, AND MONKS



FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

Problem

Full and free! Fulness and freedom!" Two great longings of the human spirit. We want to be full and we want to be free. We want to be full of goodness and free from evil. We want to be satisfied and we want to be safe.

That's what Christianity offers the human spirit: fullness and freedom. That's what Colossians is all about: fullness and freedom. Full of Christ and free in Christ. That's what the Apostle wanted for the Colossian Christians, and, indeed, all Christians (Colossians 2:9-10). That's why the devil and his helpers do everything they can to undermine the Christian's fullness and freedom.

They employ three main tactics to empty believers of fulness in Christ and deprive believers of freedom in Christ

- The chains of legalism (lawyers)
- The chains of mysticism (mystics)
- The chains of asceticism (monks)

Solution?

Let's see how God saves us from the lawyers, the mystics, and the monks, and therefore protects and preserves our fullness and freedom. He did that for the Colossians, and he can also do it for us. We can live full and free in Christ.

CONTEXT

The Apostle Paul constantly connects Gospel joy with Gospel warning:

2:1-3	Gospel joy
2:4-5	Gospel warning
2:6-7	Gospel joy
2:8	Gospel warning
2:9-15	Gospel joy
2:16-23	Gospel warning
3:1-4	Gospel joy

Because this Gospel joy is so great, we must beware of anything that takes it away from us. We need both Gospel joy and Gospel seriousness. This is serious joy.

2:16-23 contains three warnings which build upon the declaration and proof of Christ's fulness in 2:9-15. Because of Christ's fulness we are freed from three threats.



**What was the first threat?
The first threat came from lawyers.**



1. CHRIST FREES US FROM CONDEMNING LAWYERS (16-17)

Although society needs lawyers, they are the last thing the church needs. And yet they've never been in short supply in the church. I'm not talking about professional lawyers here; I'm talking about religious lawyers. Paul describes them and how to get free from them.

Lawyers judge with shadows

"Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths" (16-17).

The Colossian church was overrun by religious lawyers who wanted to impose Old Testament ceremonial laws about food, drink, and the religious calendar on Colossian Christians.

Paul is not arguing against the fourth commandment of the moral law. He's not opposing a weekly Sabbath, but additional impositions on the day that were part of the ceremonial law. Sabbath is a permanent moral principle but the laws about Sabbath ceremonies are not.

The Apostle was watching religious lawyers imposing unnecessary rules and regulations on every area of the Colossian's life and said, "Don't let this happen." Why?

Christ frees you with substance

"...which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (17).

All these ceremonial rules belonged to the Old Testament shadows. They had a purpose in preparing for Christ, but the substance, the body of Christ, has now come round the corner and, therefore, they don't need the shadows any more. They are now redundant. Observing them is walking out of the warm sun and back into the dark shadows.

APPLICATION

♥ **Don't be a religious lawyer.** Don't dare impose your own rules and preferences upon others. Make sure anything you require of others is biblically based. Otherwise you are casting a shadow on Christ and upon others' religious lives. You may impose certain rules upon yourself for your spiritual welfare, but don't impose them on others. That turns you into a spiritual tyrant.

♥ **Don't listen to religious lawyers.** They will bring you into bondage. They will put you in chains. When someone tries to impose a rule or expectation upon you, ask: "Whose rule is this? Is this a human rule or a divine rule? Is it

from a lawyer or the Lawgiver?" Don't be intimidated. Don't be bullied. Don't let anyone push you around by their lawyerly looks, words, actions, opinions, or silence. Don't let them shape you or control you. To the extent that we allow ourselves to be controlled by others' expectations we are in bondage. That's putting yourself in chains.

♥ **You are free to obey Christ alone.** Maintain that freedom. In his freedom and fulness, I am free. See Westminster Confession of Faith 20.2.

♥ **What are our "unwritten rules"?**

LAWYERS ARE NOT THE WEAKER BROTHER,
BUT THE BULLY BROTHER



We've got rid of the lawyer!
But who's that white-robed person floating above us all?



2. CHRIST FREES US FROM SUPERIOR MYSTICS (18-19)

This threat is not so obvious as the previous one. We're more alert to the dangers of legalism than we are to the problems of mysticism. But it's still a threat to our spiritual welfare.

"Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God" (18-19).

Mystics rob us of our reward

This is not talking about our heavenly reward, but our earthly joy in Christ. The mystics claimed to be enriching the Colossians but they were actually stealing from them. How?

They delighted in false humility: They communicated that they were super-spiritual and hyper-pious. They wanted to be famous for their humility!

They delighted in worship of angels: This may have been the worship of angels, but it's more likely to be worshipping like angels. They were "angelic" in their worship style.

They delighted in visions: They boasted about what amazing things they saw in visions and dreams. Their sense of superior spirituality came from their "fleshly mind" (18). How ironic!

They did not delight in Christ: They were holding on to their superior worship, visions, and spirituality, but in the process they lost their hold on Christ (19).

Christ is our reward

In verse 19, Christ's relationship to his body, his people is described in three ways: Christ is the head of the body; Christ nourishes his body; Christ grows his body. The more they held on to Christ, the more they grew in healthy spirituality. Although the mystics said they had superior tasting spiritual food, Paul is saying that it's just junk food. It's high carb, high sugar, but it lacks protein. It appeals to our lower (fleshly nature) but it substitutes sugar for steak.

APPLICATION

♥ **Don't be a mystic.** Don't get drawn into the latest spirituality fad. Don't grasp at get-holy-quick schemes. If you do, you let go of Christ. Be suspicious of any spiritual advice that replaces Christ with spirituality.

♥ **Don't be intimidated by mystics.** They make themselves out to be so superior and make you feel so inferior. "You're second-

rate. You don't measure up." If you have Christ you can't get (and don't need) any higher spirituality. You are complete in Christ.

♥ **You are full with Christ's fullness.** We have enough for salvation and sanctification. We must grow, but growth is in Christ. Say to the super-spiritual. I don't need what you have to offer. Christ's fullness gives me freedom. I lack nothing.

MYSTICS PROMISE HIGHER LIFE
BUT MAKE US FEEL LIKE LESSER LIFE



We've got rid of the mystic.
But who's that black-robed person that looks so angry?



3. CHRIST FREES US FROM WORLDLY MONKS (20-23)

“Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (20-23).

When we talk about worldliness, we often think of parties, drunkenness, drugs, materialism. But that’s secular worldliness. The Apostle Paul here introduces us to another kind of worldliness, a religious worldliness. He calls it “the basic principles of the world” (20), indicating that although it had a religious face it was grounded in the same basic worldly principles found in all ungodly lifestyles.

They lived in religious worldliness

Like all unbiblical religion, this was oppressive (“you subject yourself to regulations”), humanistic (“according to the doctrines and commandments of men”), deceptive (“these things indeed have an appearance of wisdom”) and powerless (“they are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh”).

They had tried to overcome their weakness by imposing on themselves numerous ascetic rules and routines: “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle, which all concern things which perish with the using” (21). They tried to change their hearts by neglecting and disciplining their bodies (23). However, although all this “self-imposed religion” had an “appearance of wisdom” (23), as all monks everywhere have discovered, such asceticism can never change the heart.

They died to religious worldliness

Paul unleashes his most potent weapon to take down the monk-monster. It’s a cross-shaped sword with a double edge: (1) You died with Christ; (2) You died to worldliness. As part of his humiliation, Christ put himself under Roman and Jewish law. However, when he died (partly due to the penalties of these legal systems), he was released from all worldly law. The world’s laws no longer had any dominion or power over him. He was dead to the world’s demands and obligations.

Paul urges the Colossians to think of themselves in a similar way. When they died with Christ, they died to all worldly laws, all monkish mandates. Such man-made practices and obligations are over. They have no influence, no sway over you. Christ’s death released the Christian from the secular world’s pleasures and the religious world’s powers. They were freed to live in an entirely new world, the world of Christ’s law and order. It’s a whole new dimension of living.

APPLICATION

♥ **Don’t be a monk.** Don’t impose ascetic rituals on yourself (or others), even if they look religious, and even if you hope they’ll purify your heart. Why are you living in religious worldliness? If you died with Christ to the world, why live like the world?

♥ **Don’t listen to monks.** They give religion a bad name. They communicate that religion is all about asceticism, it’s about stopping all pleasure, even legitimate pleasure. But pleasure is not sinful and pain does not save or sanctify.

MONKS WEAR DARK ROBES,
BUT CAN'T CHANGE DARK HEARTS



CONCLUSION



PRAYER: Liberator, free me from legalism, mysticism, and asceticism by reminding me that Christ is enough, he is more than enough.

FURTHER STUDY

Online Articles

- [The Many Faces of Legalism](#) by Nick Kennicott
- [Three Types of Legalism](#) by R. C. Sproul
- [Tabletalk Magazine on Legalism](#)
- [A Conversation about the Law](#) by Kevin DeYoung
- [Sabbaths in Colossians 2:16](#) by Nick Batzig.
- [7 Areas of Unbiblical Conscience Binding](#)

Book

- [The Finger of God: The Threefold Division of the Law](#) by Phillip Ross

Discussion Questions

1. What does "liberty of conscience" mean? Read the Westminster Confession of Faith 20.2. Link and article [here](#).
2. Which of these are you most tempted by and why: legalism, mysticism, asceticism?
3. What personal laws have you tried to impose on others and what have people tried to impose on you?
4. Who are the modern-day mystics? How do you stop them stealing joy from you?
5. How are you tempted with religious worldliness and how do you combat it?
6. What's the role of the moral law in your life? How do you keep it in the right place?

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COLOSSIANS 2:16-23

FREEDOM FROM LAWYERS, MYSTICS, AND MONKS



Fullness and Freedom in Christ are threatened

- Chains of legalism
- Chains of mysticism
- Chains of asceticism

Biblical answer?



Christ frees from condemning lawyers

- Lawyers judge with shadows
- Christ frees with substance

LAWYERS ARE NOT
THE WEAKER BROTHERS,
BUT BULLY BROTHERS.

Who's the guy in the
white robe?



Fight for, defend, and
give freedom from
lawyers, mystics, and
monks.



Christ frees us from worldly monks

- Lived in religious worldliness
- Died to religious worldliness

MONKS WEAR DARK ROBES
BUT CAN'T CHANGE DARK HEARTS

Action?

GOD ALONE IS LORD OF THE CONSCIENCE, AND
HATH LEFT IT FREE FROM THE DOCTRINES AND
COMMANDMENTS OF MEN, WHICH ARE, IN
ANYTHING, CONTRARY TO HIS WORD; OR
BESIDE IT, IF MATTERS OF FAITH, OR WORSHIP
WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 20.2.



Christ frees from superior mystics

- Mystics rob us of our reward
- Christ is our reward

MYSTICS PROMISE
HIGHER LIFE,
BUT MAKE US FEEL LIKE
LESSER LIFE

Who's the guy in the
black robe?

