

THE GOSPEL'S FREEDOM

Colossians 2:16-23

What does it mean to have freedom? The idea of “freedom” is certainly appealing to most people. What freedom means to some people could be “do anything, at anytime, at anyplace without regard to the impact on anyone else and without any accountability.” A better term of that description would be anarchy. In a Biblical context, “freedom” would generally be understood as “to not be enslaved” but would not include a license to do things that would harm others. When people do things that harm others, then the society generally will take action to limit the “freedom” of the person responsible for the harm. Any nation or group that fails to restrict those who harm and destroy and fails to encourage those who help and protect will end up in chaos.

We even limit ourselves with assumed barriers and self-imposed limitations that are really not there. How many times have we backed off doing something someone told us that we might enjoy by telling ourselves, “I’m too old for that?”

In our spiritual growth, we can find many things that inhibit our development and prevent us from growing. We find forces all around us that would mold us to a certain “size and shape.” In Paul's letter to the Romans, he wrote, “Do not be conformed to the world . . .” Traditions, customs and preconceived ideas do the same thing to our lives. Traditions, customs and preconceived ideas are especially powerful when they are incorporated into the “laws” or mandates by which a society lives. These “laws” can be codified into legal documents, or they can be passed on from parent to child as traditions in the family, or they can be superstitions that we learn from friends and family. Such “laws” bind us and inhibit our growth, but faith frees us and lets us go. Even the laws of physics can bind us. You might be thinking that our faith can't do a lot about the laws of physics in setting us free. But just consider that Simon Peter by faith walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee.

Since we have been redeemed, we have the life of Christ which sets us free from the prisons of the ways of the world and religions. With this freedom, we then have all the benefits and responsibilities that come with that life. God also provides the power for us to carry out those responsibilities and to enjoy the benefits by His very presence in our lives. Part of Paul's admonishments or warnings to them regarded the need to put various things we encounter in life in proper perspective.

Freedom in Worship – 2:16-17

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Colossians 2:16–17 (ESV)

It is impossible keep other from judging whatever we do or don't do. Just because we may be criticized or even praised for the way we live; we are not to be overly influenced by what others say or the way they behave toward us. Admittedly, there could be something we could learn from such “feedback” but we need to consider the source and whether what we are doing and/or the feedback we are receiving are aligned with Godly principles and precepts. This observation could apply to all of life and it is certainly applicable to worship practices which were the focus of what Paul was addressing in this letter to the Christian in Colossae.

Since we are free in the “all sufficiency” of Jesus, we do not have to be entangled in the rules that men have set up regarding eating and drinking. The questionable rules that were being used to judge people went beyond what foods or drinks were permissible but included how they

were to be prepared, whether to abstain from eating or not, and may have included such things as eating certain kinds of things on certain days of the week as was part of some pagan religions. Both Israelite and pagan religions observed certain days and included multitudes of rites and rituals. Our salvation does not depend on whether we eat or don't eat certain foods, observe or not observe certain holidays or even which day of the week we set aside as a day of rest to honor and worship God. Our salvation is centered in Christ Jesus and the fact that we acknowledge Him to be Lord of our lives in thoughts, words, and deeds.

Whether a Christian was previously involved in paganism or Judaism there were legalisms in both areas and an important freedom Christian have is freedom from legalisms. The legalisms in the old Jewish system impacted all aspects of their lives and it defined a lifestyle ethic or set of actions that foreshadowed and pointed to the Messiah that was to come. The entire set or system was a mere shadow of the reality that was revealed in Christ. Warren Wiersbe commented that "Christ and his new order are the perfect reality to which these earlier commandments looked. The reality has already come and the things of the shadow have no binding force; they are no longer a norm for judgment. Any demand today to abstain from certain foods or to keep religious festivals as a requirement for growing as a Christian brings down upon it the same severe criticism."

Paul's focus was primarily related to not being in bondage related to carrying out various rites, rituals and practices that people had been using to gain a good standing with whatever deity they worshiped. A related question might be whether it was appropriate for Christians to participate in observances and practices that the culture in which they lived embraced. For example, would Paul have told the Jewish Christians living in Judah to not observe Passover? (Probable answer is "no.") The argument might have been made that this was part of their historical tradition rather than attempting to justify themselves before God. What about Gentile Christians still living in predominately pagan cultures? Would Paul have told these Christians to stop participating in celebrations honoring (for example) the Queen of Heaven where there were community festivities throughout the area? Why might one be OK and the other prohibited?

Freedom from Falsehoods – 2:18-19

¹⁸ 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, 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. Colossians 2:18–19 (ESV)

The picture we could visualize here is with regarding to running a race and finding ourselves either going in the wrong direction, running on the wrong track, or being distracted from the actual finish line. We have some familiarity with Olympic race participants who were disqualified from receiving a medal because they had used performance enhancing drugs or they had broken some rule.

Paul mentioned several concerns regarding distractions or wrong finish lines that could hinder growth in Christian maturity. The false teachers were really serious about keeping all sorts of rules, being careful to observe certain practices such as showing excessive humility (some people are proud of how humble they are), observing all the right rites and rituals and any number of "religious" based practices. According to Lightfoot "Humility, when it becomes self-conscious, ceases to have any value."

Some commentaries connect the deliberate or voluntary humility with reference to angels. Apparently, some were teaching and practicing that we (individual, common Christians) are so insignificant that we cannot come boldly to God's throne of grace but we have to appeal to God through angels acting as intermediaries for us. Of course, the literal, ordinary translation of

the Greek word “aggelos” is messenger. There are some religious groups today in which the people present their prayers and petitions to “priests” who then pass along the prayers to God. In some other cases, prayers are made to certain recognized deceased Christians who are regarded as saintly and these “holy ones” then offer petitions to God on behalf of those who need prayer.

Apparently, some of the false teachers were relying on some special religious experience or visions they had or claimed they had and used this as a basis for their authority rather than relying on the authority that comes simply from being called by God to fulfill the ministry to which they are sent to do. Even today, we can find books written about fulfillment of prophecies in the end time that rely on what some scholar claims to have received special insight or revelation about. When multiple persons believe they have been blessed with such higher reasoning power and, consequently, go into minute details about how all such things fit together regarding information that the Scriptures do not address, then we can find ourselves with multiple versions of predictions. We even give them names such Pre-Millennialism, Post-Millennialism or Amillennialism. We get different opinions and predictions about the mark of the beast, the great tribulation of seven years or what is considered to be the fulfillment of the wrath of God, who is included in the group called the true Israel, what is Armageddon and if it represents a physical or spiritual battle, are Gog and Magog related to Russia, and it goes on and on.

We do not venerate dead saints or put our trust in angels and assign great powers to them. We need to realize that if the Scripture does not address certain issues that we have no authority to make up our own version of what is going to happen. Instead, we are to look to Jesus as not only necessary but totally sufficient for all of life. He is the HEAD of all things and it is from Him that all things are connected and supplied with truth rather than speculation.

Freedom to Live – 2:20-23

²⁰ 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— 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. Colossians 2:20–23 (ESV)

In verse twenty, Paul again mentioned the concern regarding submitting ourselves to or giving deference to “the rudiments of the world” or “elemental spirits of the world.” In addition to the religious rules that influence our lives, there are more basic “rules” that have grown up in most cultures that we are cautioned to never violate. We might find that we should avoid the number 13 because it is supposed to be unlucky. The next time you go to a hotel in a large city, see if you can find the 13th floor. Have you ever owned a rabbit’s foot? What goes through your mind when a black cat crosses your path? What about the concern that some have over a broken mirror?

These taboos and superstitions are similar to the elementary principles of the world and we are not to observe these or be influenced by them since we are not part of the “world system.” In some areas of the world, the superstitions and the religious practices are difficult to separate and appear to be intermingled. Some groups may practice cutting themselves or walking on hot coals or lying on a bed of nails as a way to bring their bodies into submission. Paul’s conclusion was that such practices do nothing to curb the appetites of the flesh. The solution to that issue was addressed in the work of the cross by which we have died to all these influences of man-made religions and traditions.

Layered on top of the pagan practices so prevalent in the surrounding culture, these

churches were also being influence by the Judaizers who wanted to imposed rites, rituals, and customs that were part of their traditions. If a person wants to eat only kosher food, then do that. However, this should never be a necessity of or for salvation.

There were observances and rituals in the Israelite religion that had taken on such significance that the ritual had become more important than the reality which the rituals and rites represented. While the spiritual aspects of paganism were vastly different from the spiritual aspects of Judaism, the ritual observances seem to have some commonality. Paul was concerned that the Christians in the churches in the Gentile areas were simply moving from pagan belief confinement rituals to Israelite Law confinement rituals rather than walking in the freedom that faith in the completed work of Christ gave them.

Now, lest we think too highly of ourselves, just think of what we do with regard to rites and rituals and observances in our churches today. If the subject of “baptism” comes up in a Baptist Church, then there will almost always be a teaching opportunity to emphasis that immersion in water is the proper way to baptize rather than sprinkling since it represents the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. While that is the truth, very seldom will anyone point out that the way disciples are made is to immerse them into the character and nature (name) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which is a lifelong undertaking and is forward looking to sanctification through faith. Baptism in water is a testimony or ritual in which we proclaim publicly that we identify with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection which is looking back on our being justified by faith. Based on the emphases we see; it appears that the ritual is more important than the reality.

Going beyond the “religious” things we do and considering the everyday happenings in our lives, we may find ourselves turning to the ways of the world for help or guidance rather than turning to the Lord for ability and direction. When we have to make a decision of what to do, we normally consider only factors that are no different from what a non-Christian would consider. It is not overly spiritualizing things if we seek the will of the Lord as the first step. Using the ways and wisdom of the world puts us back under the control of the world system and can limit the blessings God has for us.

There is a hymn that states it so well, “He’s all I need, Jesus is all I need.”