

The Shadow of Things To Come

A Building Foundations Class

Lesson 1: Overview of Colossians 1-2

Key Verse: “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”

Colossians 2:16-17

The Fear: Paul is addressing a fear that crops up when we lose our sense of security in Christ and our assurance that we are pleasing to God through Christ. That fear is going to have some outworkings in our Christian walk and will undermine our fruitfulness.

“No more fear” has been the sermon topic this past summer. In his sermon a few weeks ago, Caleb Pearson addressed the fear that can take us when we consider the future. We battle that fear by rooting ourselves to our identity with Christ and the knowledge that He will build His church, regardless of what happens in this world. We know what is coming for this world. The Lord has told us in His word. The life that we live today is not concerned about securing a place in *this* life and *this* decaying world. Instead, we set our eyes on the world to come, and we rest in the security that Christ has purchased salvation for us on the cross and assured us of a place in His kingdom. What remains for us is to join Him in the task of building up the body of believers which is the church. That is where our focus needs to be, and if we stay focused on that, the fear will not take us.

The Enemy’s Objective: But there is an enemy stalking us in this life, and his objective is to undermine our security and assurance of salvation that we have in Christ. In reality, he can’t take these away from us. Our salvation is assured. But if he can make us think that it isn’t, then he can rob us of the rest and peace of mind that our relationship with God through Christ was meant to give. The enemy can plunder us in that aspect. So, he seeks a way to insert doubt into our minds as to whether or not we are firmly rooted in that relationship.

The Enemy’s Tactic: to cast doubt over *how* you practice your faith. The question is not about whether you have faith or not. It is about whether you are *practicing* it correctly, because if you are not practicing it correctly, then your relationship with God will be in jeopardy and you can lose your salvation—or so the enemy would have us believe.

The enemy’s playbook has not changed over the millennia. He uses the same tactic today that he did in the days of the early church. It is this tactic, which Paul tackles in his letter to the Colossians. This semester, I want to delve into this particular argument over the

practice of our faith in because I hear it cropping up more and more in churches these days, and it can cause a lot of conflict in a congregation and in a believer's life if they are not firmly rooted in an understanding of the practice of their faith. I know this because it caused a lot of conflict in my life when I was approached with this argument while visiting a Messianic Jewish congregation. The Lord sent me into that experience and as I grappled with it, I came to wealth of knowledge and understanding, as Paul would put it, and I would like to share that wealth with you.

I chose Colossians 2:16-17 for this study because these were the verses that launched me into that experience with the Messianic Jewish congregation, partly because I had incomplete knowledge on what Paul was speaking about and I was looking for information. I'll just read the verses for you:

"So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."

Paul says "Let no one judge you . . ." I knew he was speaking to the Colossians, but his words for me as well. Was I being judged for something? No one in the church judges me over what I eat and drink. What festivals is Paul talking about? The new moon was a complete mystery. Sabbaths—now that is something I knew a little about. Every Christian seems to have their own conscience on that, but, you know, to each his own. Live to your conscience. But *then* Paul throws in these statements that these things are a shadow—my NASB Bible says a *mere* shadow—of things to come, and they talk about Christ. I am a Christian. I should know about all these things that talk about Christ. But I didn't. It bugged me. So, I asked the Lord to increase my knowledge of what Paul was talking about, and He sent me to the Messianic Jewish congregation. And suddenly, I found myself standing in the Colossian church being challenged by some Judaizers over how I practice my faith and whether or not I was walking *worthy* of the Lord and in *full assurance* of my salvation.

The argument unfolded like this:

"Do you love Jesus?"

Yes, of course, I do.

"Jesus said, if you love Me, you will keep my commandments."

I did not disagree. They were quoting straight out of John 14:15. But remember, Jesus made a very important statement just prior to that in John 13:34, where He says, "A *new commandment I give you, that you love one another . . .*" These Judaizers failed to mention that verse, whether by design or not, I don't know. I didn't think anything

of the omission at the moment, but it was very significant because they then went on to say . . .

In 1 John 2:7 “*. . . I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning.*”

I did not disagree with this, either. Again, they were quoting Scripture—just not the fullness of it. Jesus did give us a new commandment, to love one another. If the Judaizers had continued into John’s second letter, they would have found a second clarification of this new/old commandment. In 2 John 1:5, John writes, “*And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another.*” That is the new commandment that Jesus gave, which is also an old commandment. You need to understand that the whole purpose of the Old Testament Laws was to do no harm to God or one’s neighbor. If we love one another, we will do no harm. Paul explains this in Romans 13:10, “*Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*” If we love, we have fulfilled the Law.

But this is not what these Judaizers told me next. They said,

“*See? There is no ‘new’ commandment. When Jesus said to keep My commandments, He was talking about obeying the Mosaic Laws in the Old Testament. Those are the commandments we have had from the beginning, which He commands us to keep now, even as He Himself kept them. (They got that statement out of John 15:10.) It says in the Scripture that these commandments are perpetual, everlasting statutes to be kept throughout all generations. (They got that statement out of Old Testament verses like Exodus 31:16 and Leviticus 3:17.) If you do not obey those commandments, then you really don’t love Jesus.*”

Baboom! There is the judgment and the guilt. And if that wasn’t enough, they added, “*If you don’t keep these commandments, you are being disobedient to God. There are consequences for that.*” They didn’t say what the consequences would be, per se, but it was implied that I would go the way of disobedient people. God would thrust me away from Him, He would cut me off, and not let me enter into His kingdom. In other words, if I didn’t practice my faith according to Moses’s Laws, I would lose my salvation.

There is so much wrong with that statement that it is hard to know where to start. But at the time, I was still young and untested in my understanding, and the verses I should have remembered about the new/old commandment to love one another and that love fulfills the law didn’t come to mind. But I knew enough to know that you couldn’t keep those Laws

perfectly enough to satisfy God. That is why we needed Christ to save us. I also knew that these people who were telling me to keep the Laws were not keeping the Laws themselves. I thought that was very hypocritical. So I challenged them on those points. “It is impossible to keep the Laws,” I said.

“It was impossible to keep the Laws,” they corrected me. *“But now that we have believed in Jesus and have a Holy Spirit living in us, we can keep those laws. The Holy Spirit is our Helper.”* That, too, comes from John 14. In fact, it follows the verse they first quoted to me. In John 14:15, Jesus told His disciples that if they love Him, they will keep His commandments. Then, in verse 16, He said He would send them a Helper. But this is a twisting and misapplication of Jesus’s statement. It sounds logical. Why is the Spirit being given if not to help you keep the commandments? But it all hinges on how you interpret which commandments He is referring to—the command to love or the Old Testament Laws. That is why it is vital to read Jesus’s statement back in John 13 about the new commandment to love one another.

We reached a stalemate in the argument, and I left that congregation shortly afterwards. I had come to the understanding of what Paul was saying in Colossians, not just in the regarding those two verses but the context of the book as a whole. The early church was up against an argument (**The Gist of the Argument**) that said Christ may have died for your sins and given you Helper for the journey, but it is up to you, by your own effort, to walk in a manner *worthy* of God, as if your worthiness is under continual scrutiny. You cannot have any assurance of being pleasing to Him unless you obey “the commandments” (which they defined as the Torah laws) and follow the Mosaic practices.

This is the argument that runs in the background of the book of Colossians. This is the side of the argument that you don’t hear but toward which Paul’s words point.

We are going to do a deep dive into the practices of the Sabbaths, new moons, and some of the festivals to understand Paul’s statement here because a lack of knowledge about these can make you vulnerable to certain arguments. So we are going to build a foundation for those with this class.

But before we do that, I want to make a high-level pass over Colossians 1 and 2 to show you how Paul addresses this Judaizer argument. We are just going to focus on some key verses.

Overview of Colossians 1

Paul opens his letter with a litany of the wonderful things he has heard about the Colossians and all the things the Colossian believers already know about Christ and their relationship to Him. He joyously gives thanks over hearing about their steadfast faith and

love for their fellow believers. Their faith has been growing. It is producing fruit. He tells them that he has been praying for them.

Paul's Prayer (Colossians 1:9-10): *"For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;" Colossians 1:9-10 NASB*

The Enemy's Counter-Argument: Paul is already picking up on some of the language the Judaizers are using. How do you walk in a manner worthy of the Lord? Is your walk fully pleasing to Him? Do you know how to do that? They bring your knowledge into doubt. They tell you that you don't know what you think you know. You need more instruction because your knowledge is incomplete. They create this mystery to be pursued and present themselves as authorities on the subject. They rob you of your security in:

- 1) Your assurance of the completeness of your understanding of how to walk in a manner pleasing to God
- 2) Your assurance of your salvation

The question of having complete knowledge has been the argument since the dawn of creation. This is the argument that the serpent posed to Eve. You know what you have been told, but have you been told everything? Don't you want to be more like God? It is a devilish argument that derailed Adam and Eve's relationship with God and severely impeded their fruitfulness.

This throws the Colossians into a quandary over what they know about pleasing God. How do we have a full assurance that we are doing things correctly? Should we be doing more? The enemy has introduced some doubt over that. Their understanding of the practice of their faith and the assurance of their relationship with God through Christ is what needs some clarification and strengthening. This is the vein in which Paul begins. "I'm praying for ya . . ."

Paul begins by reinforcing who Christ is and what He has secured for us as believers. He *has* reconciled us to God. That is a finished work. There is no doubt as to the permanence of our salvation. It is up to believers to simply continue walking with that assurance. As you have received from Christ, so walk with Him—with full assurance. Once a believer begins to doubt that assurance, then the motivation for their works—why they do what they do—will take a wrong turn and end up derailing their efforts. It won't derail their salvation, but it will derail the Christian experience and their fruitfulness.

Paul is going to address why we do or don't do something. You can do the right thing for a very wrong reason. One very **wrong motivation for a spiritual walk**, which Paul goes on to address in chapter 2, is in thinking that our good works and how we practice our faith will count toward our righteousness before God and that we can maintain our salvation through good works and correct Christian practices. That is not true. Righteousness is never accomplished by our own works. Our righteousness before God was accomplished by Christ on the cross, paying the price for our debts. When we accept that payment for our sins, our righteousness is completely assured. That is a finished work. Therefore, we do not pursue righteousness as part of our Christian walk. Pursuing righteousness is a wrong motivation for the Christian walk. God wants us to be focused on others, not ourselves, and trying to establish our own righteousness turns the effort completely on ourselves. Instead of giving us more security, it actually robs us of our security and derails our walk with God.

Don't you want to be worthy of God and fully pleasing to Him? Of course, we do! It's a very persuasive start to the argument. Let's see what Paul has to say in Colossians 2.

[Read Colossians 2:1-7]

Notice, first of all, that Paul addresses this exhortation not just to the Colossian church, but also the church at Laodicea and to all those who have not personally seen his face—that's us. This is meant for us.

Paul mentions being deluded by a persuasive argument in verse 4. What was the gist of the persuasive argument?

- 1) The Judaizers say that obedience to the Mosaic Laws and the "traditions" are what knit us together as a body of believers. Traditions spring up as ways of putting the Laws into practice. These are the things Jewish people do as part of worship and lifestyle that bind them together under one identity and set them apart as a culture. The gist of the enemy's argument is that your identity in relation to God is rooted in obedience to those Mosaic commandments.

Paul says that what knits us together is love. Why would Paul specifically mention love? Because that was Jesus's commandment. It is a commandment that encompasses the intent of the Law but then takes it to a new heart level. Paul is very deliberate in reminding them of this because how a believer keeps "the commandments" is the thrust of the opposition's argument. The Colossians *are* obeying the commandment, regardless of what the opposition says.

- 2) The Judaizers question whether or not the Colossians have a full assurance of their understanding. They say, "You know what you have been taught, but is that all you need to know? Is it even the truth?"

What does Paul tell us about the character of these people in verse 8, 18, 20-23?

Verse 8 tells us that they were philosophers, and they loved wisdom. It was almost an idolatrous pursuit. They were enthralled with philosophy and lusted after knowledge, even to the depths of mysticism.

Verse 18 tells us these Jewish “Christians” were consumed with speculations into the nature and classes of angels. There is that aspect in Judaism. They delved deeply into the ritualistic side of the Mosaic laws and Jewish traditions that ruled every-day life.

Verse 20-23 tells us that they were ascetics—people who (according to AI) *“practice severe self-discipline and abstain from physical pleasures or material comforts, usually for religious or spiritual reasons.”*

This is the opposition who were infiltrating the Christian churches. They come out of Judaism and present themselves as believers, but because of their Jewish roots and old “understanding,” they profess to have “expert” knowledge of the “mysteries” of God, apart from Christ.

But for all their appearance of wisdom and superiority, these people are fearful people. They are afraid that they might lose their salvation for eating a marshmallow or a bowl of Jello. Did you know that eating marshmallows and Jello are forbidden in Judaism because the gelatin in them is pork-based? Pork is not a kosher food. You cannot eat it under Mosaic Laws. I found that out from the Judaizers in that Messianic Jewish congregation. In fact, there was nothing I could bring to the congregational meal after the service except raw fruits and vegetables, because there was no question that those were kosher.

They are fearful people who have no assurance of their salvation or security in their relationship with God because it is based on these practices and not rooted in Christ. And it would seem that their fear has begun to transfer to the Colossian believers. This is what Paul is battling.

Let’s go back to verse 8.

[Read Colossians 2:8-15]

The first thing to note is that Paul begins and ends with statements about authority. He compares the supremacy of Christ’s authority to the authority of the Law. These Jewish people coming out of Judaism and into Christianity have adopted a hybrid kind of identity. It is divided between two authorities—Christ and the Law. The problem is that one person cannot be ruled by two masters. You cannot say on one hand that Christ paid your debt and

assured you of a place in His kingdom, and in the next breath say that if you break the Law, you are out of the kingdom. Does the Law overrule Christ's work and His promises? Which is the greater authority? The Judaizers have placed the Law above Christ, and Paul refutes this by showing just how Christ took away the power of the Law, using the example of circumcision and baptism.

Verse 11: Circumcision. Circumcision is commanded in the Law:

Genesis 17:10-14 NASB95 – *“This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations . . . A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”*

What do you think being “cut off” entails? Does it mean you will lose your salvation?

Paul says, don't let them tell you that you aren't circumcised. You *are* circumcised. When you died with Christ, you put off the body of flesh and became a new man in Christ. That is circumcision—the stripping away of the old sin nature's control of the body. That is the circumcision of Christ, that He performed on you when you died and rose with Him, spiritually speaking. He stripped away the “old man” nature the way a man's skin is stripped away from him in physical circumcision. Physical circumcision is a mere shadow of the spiritual transformation that would happen in Christ.

Physical circumcision is a practice that knit the Jewish community together under one identity, but it did nothing to remove the issue of sin. Paul tells the Colossians they have been circumcised in a transformative way and are knit together in Christ.

- **Verse 12-15: Baptism.** Immersion baptism, which the Jews refer to as *mikvah*, was required for converting to Judaism and several other purification rituals. It is another practice that knits the Jewish community together under one identity. The passage through water represents a change in identity (conversion) or status (from unclean to clean).

The Church adopted the *mikvah* practice as a way of establishing an identity, but it is used strictly for identifying with Christ in a body of believers. The passage through

water represents a permanent change in identity and status—death and resurrection. Because it represents death, it alters our relationship with the Mosaic Laws.

Under the Old Covenant Laws, death was the penalty for sin. When a person died, the Law was satisfied, and it no longer held any power over a person. Dead people don't sin any more than they pay taxes. The Law no longer applies to them. Paul rams this truth home—you have died, you have died, you have died. You may still be breathing, but you are dead in God's eyes. When you went under the water at your baptism, you identified with Christ in His death, and the life that is in you now is Christ's life.

Galatians 2:20 NASB95 – *“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.”*

When you died, the old life and all of its sins are permanently removed—they were stripped away—kind of like a circumcision. The Law can't touch you now. It has no authority over you. Because we are in Him—in Christ—Christ is our go-between in regard to the Law. He satisfies the Law on our behalf, and the Law cannot take away the life that He purchased for us with His blood. As Paul said in verse 10, “in Him you have been made complete,” and “He is the head over all rule and authority,” speaking of the Law. Where the Law was once an authority, now Christ is the authority above the Law. The Law has no power over us now. Only Christ does.

- **Verse 15:** Christ has “disarmed” the rulers and authorities. That word “disarm” means “wholly put off from oneself.” He divested Himself of their authority, like stepping out of a suit or a skin.

So, if you are “in Him,” that means you have divested yourself, that is, separated yourself from those authorities and put on Christ instead. Again, this is the “circumcision” of Christ—the stripping-off action.

Colossians 3:9 NASB95 – *“Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices,”*

Romans 13:14 NASB95 – *“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.”*

He tells the Colossians, they are no judges of you!

[Read Colossians 2:16-17]

Other practices and observances in Judaism:

- Eating kosher food
- Celebrating the festivals (Leviticus 23)
- Keeping the Sabbath day
- The new moon was practiced in the Colossians day while the physical Temple was still standing and a physical priesthood was still officiating sacrifices. It fell into obscurity after the Roman dispersion of the Jews.

So, there are **two reasons for “keeping” commandments**:

- 1) to be deemed righteous before God (the wrong motive)
- 2) to keep the memory of something alive until it is fulfilled in Christ (debatable motive)

The second reason isn't a bad idea, per se, but there are some pitfalls to it.

A lot of traditions get started this way—because you want to remember something from time to time. Communion is a church tradition. In as often as we eat that bread and drink that cup, we proclaim Christ's death until He comes. That is a meaningful tradition. But many Jewish traditions went way off the rails in terms of how much they ruled of people's lives.