

## **Colossians 2:16-23 Study Questions**

Paul has completed the introduction of his letter, highlighting the preeminence of Christ and explaining his own apostolic role in the divine plan for history. (Col. 1:1-2:5) He now turns to the heart of the matter to directly confront some of the false teaching being offered at Colossae. (Col. 2:16-23) In light of who Christ is and what he has done for humanity, the Colossian faithful (subsequently all believers in Christ) are now free from human rules and are to reject the false teaching being offered by some people in their midst. Believers in Christ have all they need for salvation and for their ongoing life with God. Paul now offers a warning to believers if they are to enjoy their fullness in Christ.

A central pillar of Paul's thought surfaces beginning in Colossians 1:14 and continuing through Colossians 2:15, with his frequent use of the phrases "in him" or "with him" (i.e., Christ) at key points in the argument. Paul understands that believers enjoy an unbreakable and everlasting new spiritual identity and spiritual union with Christ, which began the moment they first placed their trust in Him. Because of this union, what is true of Christ becomes true of His followers. He is filled with God's fullness; and by virtue of their union with Him they are also filled. (Col. 2:9-10) In His "circumcision" (i.e., death), they are "circumcised." (Col. 2:11) In His burial and resurrection, they have undergone burial and new life. (Col. 2:12-13) In His decisive defeat of the demonic powers, they experience victory. (Col. 2:10, 15, 20)

Paul teaches that believers—by virtue of their union with Christ—have died and been raised in Christ's death and resurrection. This means that we no longer belong to the fallen world and present evil age. Christ lives with God, free from the sin and death that characterize this age. By virtue of His work for us on the cross and our union with Him, the world's powers likewise no longer enslave us. We are free from the penalty and power of sin. This includes freedom from the "elemental spirits of the world," the satanic forces who oppress the fallen world and devise false worldviews to lead it astray.

Reflect on the following questions:

1. Read Colossians 2:16-23. What robbed the Colossians of their joy in Christ? What are some circumstances that rob you of your joy in Christ?
2. The word "religion" seems to be a loaded phrase for so many, including those outside of the church. How would you describe your experience and understanding with religion? According to verse 16, what is commonly the number one identifier of how religious people view others?
3. In the light of verse 16, how should we view vegetarians? How should vegetarians view meat lovers? What happens if someone keeps the Sabbath? How should Sabbath keepers view us? Is it right or wrong to observe Christmas? How should we view those who drink alcohol in moderation, and how should teetotalers view those who enjoy a glass of wine or a beer?
4. Following on from the previous question, we may be tempted to think that everything is permissible, and that Christianity is free from all constraints as long we don't judge

others. It is true that there are many areas of life where the Bible is silent and we can make our own choices about whether we should or shouldn't do something. In 1 Cor. 10, there are four principles that guide Christians in matters which are open to individual choice. What are they? [Hint: 1. Is it helpful? (10:23a); Does it build up? (10:23b); Is it good for my neighbor? (10:24); Does it bring glory to God? (10:31)] In the light of these principles, what would you say to Christians who take liberties with recreational marijuana, vaping, gory R-rated movies, etc.?

5. How would you define the following terms so a child could understand them: legalism, mysticism and asceticism? How do these dangers exist in Christian circles today?

6. The Old Testament taught us to observe many things such as, keeping the Sabbath, not to have tattoos, not to eat pork, not to wear a jumper mixed with both wool and cotton, not to forget the Passover, etc. According to verse 17, are these things no longer applicable? Why is legalism such a common occurrence even in sincere Christ followers?

7. Mysticism (i.e., the pursuit of a deeper spiritual experience) is not bad per se. Yet, when some people insist on harsh "secret knowledge and deeper experiences," or they insist on angels and spirits, or they insist on visions, what effect does this have on other Christians who aren't there in their spiritual walk or have had bad encounters with these "experiences?" What would you say to someone who comes to you and says, "God gave me a vision for you"?

8. Legalism is all about what you do. Mysticism is all about an experience. Asceticism is all about what you don't do, what you don't permit yourself to have. Harsh treatment of the body, rules about 'not touching' and 'not tasting' always look impressive. People who are vegetarian or fast or live poorly or don't dress nicely (although not brushing your teeth is never a good practice) or don't order dessert at dinner (you know how many kids in Africa don't even eat?) because of their beliefs tend to look more sincere than people who are more relaxed. For example, to the average Joe, the Roman Catholic priests look very spiritual. They dress differently; they have a whole lot of rules and regulations; they are extremely harsh about the body, abstaining from sex. They have given up sex to be devoted to God. They fast during Lent and they do many other extremely religious things. Look closely at verses 20-23. What is it saying? Do man-made religious rules have any 'value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh'? Why not?

Disclaimer: Outward conformity cannot change the heart. True spirituality is internal, and Spirit-led as we cling to Christ. Not that doing these things is wrong in itself – we must not judge others – but we do insist that as a way of growing in godliness and spirituality they don't help. It is not wrong to be a vegetarian. It is wrong to insist that it is spiritually better to be a vegetarian. It is not wrong to not abstain from having sex and staying single for God. It is wrong to insist that it is more spiritual to do so. It is not wrong to live modestly and within your means (highly encouraged). It is wrong to insist that it is spiritually better when you do those things.

Digging Deeper:

What determines the difference between obeying rules and being legalistic? What can you do this week to keep obedience and legalism in their proper places?