

Gospel Freedom!
Colossians 2:16-23

Intro:

- **Illst: The monthly testing of the Tornado sirens:** No one likes to hear the Tornado siren, it is loud, it lasts a long time and it is annoying.
 - Mac and I were outside working on his pickup last month . . .
 - What is the purpose of the siren? Warning! A danger is coming. If you want to live take shelter.
 - **Colossians 2:4-23** is the long blast of emergency siren.
- Since **Colossians 2:4** Paul's pattern of writing has been a warning that false teachers are coming so take shelter in the gospel. Then he repeats the warning and calls them to take shelter in the gospel. In **vv. 9-15** we have an extended gospel explanation of our gospel shelter and in **vv. 16-23** he blasts the warning again but this time he gives the trajectory of the storm and tells us again how to take shelter. This not a test of the emergency system. The warning he gave and the warning for us is that there is imminent danger and we must take shelter in the gospel!
- **The difficult thing is that our struggle here is not like seeing a storm on the radar and tracking it with Doppler.** The fact is the gospel of grace has enemies and the enemies of the gospel of grace are often on the inside of the church. The enemies of the cross want to find life in anything except the person and work of Jesus Christ alone. Oh they do not mind mentioning the person and work of Christ just as long as they can add to it or twist it or make it insufficient or minimize the person of Christ. This was what was going on in the church in Colossae and it still happens today.
- **Illst:** Tertullian, an early church father from Carthage in the second century, said there are Gospel Thieves who desire to steal the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel from us by pulling us away from the gospel to one side or the other.¹ We are going to identify a gospel thief this morning. The Gospel Thief of legalism was wreaking havoc in the Colossian church. Jesus said that if the owner of the house knew when the thief was coming he would have been ready. What Jesus means is that we should be ready because the gospel thief is coming yet the difficulty is that he does not often come in like a storm we see on radar sometimes the gospel thief is in the church and often he is lurking in my heart and your heart. I had a wise old pastor say to me as I began in the ministry, "*Michael never say, 'I will never do that.' Because as surely as you say it you will fall.*" Pride goes before a fall doesn't it?
- **Main point:** *We guard Gospel freedom by holding fast to Christ in whom we are nourished and knit together in love.* **Two points to the sermon:**
 1. **Beware of Gospel Thieves!**
 2. **Guard Your Gospel Freedom**

I. Beware of Gospel Thieves! (Colossians 2:16, 18, 20-23)

- Paul begins **v. 16** with the word, "*Therefore*" which means he is connecting his argument with what he just said in **vv. 9-15**, which is emphasis on the person and work of Christ, how we have fullness in Him and how His atonement means our identification with His death and His resurrection is our being raised to new life in Him. This is our gospel shelter in which we find refuge yet very quickly he returns to sounding the alarm and telling them there is a thief in the house.

¹Tim Keller, article: *The Centrality of the Gospel*, pdf. I don't know where I got this article but I have had it for a while and thought of it as I prepped the sermon. The article is excellent and if you would like a copy I will be more than happy to send you the pdf. It is free.

- In vv. 16-23, Paul gets to the heart of the **Colossian heresy**. Earlier he pulled the alarm on the false teachers by calling their doctrines *plausible arguments, philosophy, empty deceit, and human tradition actually put forth by the elemental spirits of the world*. The *Colossian heresy* was self-made religion whereby the false teachers took the gospel and blended it with Judaism and Gnostic practices.
- They were telling the Colossian Christians that in order to achieve a truly elite spiritual status that they must participate in the latest elite spiritual program. They promised the abundant life but it was not life but in reality they were there to steal, kill and destroy not just individual lives but the local church.

A. The Gospel Thief in the Colossian church was the thief of legalism. (diet, dates, disciplines and devotion)

- **Diet (v. 16a):** "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink."
 - Judaism was known for its strict dietary laws. There was no restriction of drinking anything except the blood of animals. Alcohol was not forbidden only that one should not get drunk nor drink in a way that would offend a weaker brother.
 - When it comes to food, after Jesus resurrection all foods were declared clean. In Acts 10 we find Peter learning this and Paul also had dealt with some issues surrounding eating meat offering in pagan sacrifices but was then sold in the market. He did not forbid it except when it might offend a weaker brother.
 - Most likely the Colossian Christians were exercising their gospel freedom but now the Colossian heretics were trying to steal their freedom by imposing their own laws by perhaps calling them back to a form of Judaism or a new spiritual program that would keep them from sin.
 - Whatever the exact details of their spiritual program was, it was not freedom based on the person and work of Christ.
- **Dates (v. 16b-17a):** "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you . . . with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the thing to come."
 - Clearly the Sabbath is in view here along with other Old Testament festivals and the new moon celebrations practiced by the Jews.
 - When Paul said these are a shadow of things to come he did not mean there was something still to come but that they were to have their fulfillment in Christ. They all pointed to Him so there was no need for the Colossian Christians to submit to their call to return to or to begin celebrating the Jewish holy days.
- **Disciplines (v. 18a):** "Therefore . . . Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism."
 - *Asceticism* is severe self-discipline that punishes the body through fasting, self-denial and even self-mutilation. The goal is to reach a higher moral state and make yourself acceptable to God by earning his favor and mortification of your sin. This was a standard practice of the Gnostics and other pagan religions.
- **Devotion (v. 18b):** "Therefore . . . Let no one disqualify you, insisting on . . . worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind."
 - The issue of devotion centered on *worship*. In particular these false teachers were teaching that Christian worship should incorporate the use of angels (demons) and their spiritual connections and actually invoking them in their worship in order to ward off evil effects of life or ask them for protection enabling them to have visions and elevate their level of spirituality. The false teachers would flaunt their higher spiritual attainment and with false humility broadcast their holiness.

- Listen to Paul's summary of the gospel thieves of legalism: [read vv. 20-23]

B. Legalism has some deadly results in the local church:

- The Gospel Thief of legalism comes to steal, kill and destroy and he develops deadly doctrines and creates deadly divisions in the church.
- **Deadly Doctrine**
 - The doctrine of self-justification . . .
 - The doctrine of sanctification by works . . .
- **Deadly Division:**
 - **Judgmentalism: Verse 16:** "*passing judgment*"
 - **Spiritual Elitism: Verse. 18, "disqualified"** – telling others God accepts them or does not accept them based on their self-made religion and self-styled worship.
- **Application: Identifying Contemporary Gospel Thieves:**
 - **It is difficult to make a one-to-one correlation of the legalism of the false teachers** in Colossian church to our day. Legalism or moralism rears its ugly head in many forms and often exists alongside the gospel in many churches today in the form of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD was in an earlier sermon).
 - **So how do we sound the alarm today?** It is easier to see when we have examples side-by-side. Some of these examples exist in heretical groups and some in isolated positions that well-meaning Christians hold.
 - **Just by way of definition, I define legalism,** as a person's attempt to earn God's approval, acceptance on their own terms apart from Christ or by adding their good works Christ's work in order to earn God's love, favor, acceptance and justification. In other words, a person who practices legalism is trying to justify themselves before God by their own efforts of righteousness. In short it is called *self-justification* as opposed to being justified by faith alone in Christ Jesus.
 - Legalism strategy is to move into areas of conscience where there is gospel freedom. This was what Peter and Paul often encountered. So if you disagree with me on something I classify as a matter of conscience you can email me about how you think I am wrong. My email address is eric@gabcames.org. ;)
 - **Diet: Let's consider a gospel position of diet (food and drink) vs. legalistic position of diet (food and drink)**
 - **Legalistic/Moralistic Position:** (This is a tough one.)
 - Moralism says that you are acceptable to God (justification), the world, others and even to yourself through how you eat and drink.
 - First when it comes to food there is a sin of gluttony or overeating. This is good and right. Now I do not pretend to know how much is enough for each person.
 - Second when it comes to drink there is the sin of getting drunk or offending others or causing others to stumble when it comes to exercising your freedom in this area.
 - **When it comes to food, while gluttony is a sin, the legalist does not make food off limits unless he calls for everyone to fast in the manner he does.**
 - **Yet here is what happens with alcohol.** Their logic goes out the window. **The problem with this position is that the Bible never says to not drink alcohol.** The Bible says to not over indulge and get drunk. Wine is

spoke of as a mocker in Proverbs and then spoken of as gladdening the heart and used for celebration. The point in Proverbs was drinking too much.

The Pharisees (the Moralists of their day) said that John the Baptist who came not drinking had a demon and Jesus who came drinking alcohol was a drunk. Well which one is it? You see the moralist is never satisfied unless you live according to his man-made rule.

- **It is correct that we are to not cause a brother to stumble with our freedom.** Paul says in Romans that for the sake of food and drink to not offend a weaker brother or sister in Christ or even an unbeliever.
- The legalist principle is: "*do not handle, do not taste, do not touch*" and applies this to everyone. He says you are either with me or against me. This is not a gospel position of gospel freedom.

▪ **Gospel Position:**

- What does the gospel position look like?
 - **1 Corinthians 10:31** says *whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything to the glory of God*. If you cannot eat or drink in faith, giving thanks to God and for the glory of God, then it is sin.
 - **The Apostle Paul says in Romans 14 that if your conscience convicts you that it is a sin for you to drink then it is a sin.** However, if another Christian does not think it is a sin to eat certain foods and, let's say, drink a beer then it is not a sin. Neither is to judge the other.
 - **The logic of the legalist is inconsistent.** If you take their logic on alcohol and apply it to other sins such as gluttony (food) or sexual sin it does not work. Gluttony is a sin but we do not say to people quit eating food for fear they might over eat. No we say eat but exercise self-discipline.

Just because there is sexual sin we do not insist that people refrain from sex. No, we say sex is wonderful gift and enjoy it in a covenant marriage.

Likewise alcohol is a not forbidden but do not get drunk nor should you offend someone with your freedom or violate your conscience. If wine gladdens your heart then enjoy it but if it causes you to sin because you cannot handle it or you cannot drink in faith then do not do it but neither should you insist that others adopt your practice as if it is a biblical law.

We go too far if we say, "*Let's just make it a rule that no one drinks.*" You can make that rule for your family or for yourself but you must not for the sake for gospel freedom apply it to other Christians nor judge them for their different position on this.

- **The gospel principle is temperance and deference.** Temperance: do not over indulge. Deference: do not for the sake of food and drink offend a weaker brother. These things are temporary but the work of the gospel is eternal.
- **Brothers and sisters in Christ we are to be knit together** in love and so let's do all things for the building up of the body. If one enjoys his freedom, let's not judge or disqualify and if one abstains let's not look down on or judge. Let's celebrate each one's differences in the areas of conscience and do all things for the sake of the gospel so that we are built up in love.
- **Dates: Let's consider a gospel position on special days vs. legalistic position on special days**

▪ **Legalistic/Moralistic Position:**

- There are some Christians who want to go back to practicing the Laws where they practice the festivals and even the Sabbath. They believe by incorporating the Jewish dates into their Christian life they are more holy and closer to God. They believe Christ fulfilled these festivals but in order to be fully acceptable to God we are still required to keep these festivals.

▪ **What is a gospel freedom position on this?**

- **Anytime a person is keeping Old Testament festivals and special days you must ask: Why are they doing this?** It is inconsistent with the gospel to keep these dates in order to earn righteousness and right standing before God. Jesus is the substance and fulfillment of those days.
- **However, what about the Sabbath and the Lord's Day?** Should Christians call the Lord's Day the Christian Sabbath or what we call Sabbatarian view of the Lord's Day?

This really is up to the person or family. There is no sin for a Christian to practice Sabbath rules on the Lord's Day. This again is a matter of conscience. In other words, if this is how you want to celebrate the Sabbath as a Christian day that is within your freedom but you must not impose your freedom on another who practices the Lord's Day differently. You must not judge or look down on them for their freedom.

○ **Discipline: Let's consider a gospel position on discipline vs. legalistic position on discipline**

▪ **Legalistic/Moralistic Position:**

- As I mentioned earlier *asceticism* is severe self-denial in order to attain a higher spiritual state and earn God's favor and acceptance. It teaches: *do not handle, do not taste, do not touch*. It gives the appearance of super spirituality and wisdom. It makes a person look very pious and as if he or she is really mortifying the flesh in order to stop sinning but Paul very clearly says they are of no value of stopping the indulgence of the flesh. Why is that? These kinds of spiritual disciplines do not make a person holy. None of these things change the heart.
- The confusion comes when we see that there are some of the spiritual disciplines that ascetic's practice that we practice. Ascetic's practice their spiritual disciplines in order to earn God's favor and we practice some of the same disciplines because God has given us His favor by our faith in Christ.

▪ **The Gospel Position is that Christ earned our righteousness and because He did, we love Him and desire to know Him more and make Him known.**

Biblical spiritual disciplines are gifts of grace to help us grow in our knowledge of God and the person and work of Jesus Christ and we do this out of love of the person and work of Christ. The Puritans called spiritual disciplines *means of grace or habits of grace*. Such as:

- Staple Habits of Grace that help us flourish:
 - Reading the Bible
 - Memorizing the word of God
 - Meditating on the word of God, not to empty the mind but fill it with the word of God
 - Prayer
 - Worship with the church
 - Ordinances: baptism & Lord's Supper
- Other habits of grace that you may enjoy but must not be made rules:

- Journaling
 - Fasting (there is a kind of fasting that is sinful and a kind of fasting that is helpful)
 - Some like to practice silence and solitude, again not to empty the mind but to get still with God's word and listen.
- **Devotion: Let's consider a gospel position on worship vs. legalistic position on worship**
 - **Legalistic/Moralistic Position:**
 - **Remember the issue of devotion centered on *worship*.** In particular these false teachers were teaching that Christian worship should incorporate the use of angels (actually demons) and their spiritual connections and actually invoking them in their worship in order to ward off evil effects of life or ask them for protection.
 - This kind of worship still goes on today where there is a development of a "self-styled worship" the "worship leaders" are trying to conjure up a "move of the spirit" a part from the truth of the gospel.
 - **Gospel Position:**
 - Jesus, in **John 4**, had a conversation with a Samaritan woman and He addressed the issue of worship. She asked a question about whose worship is correct- the Jews or the Samaritans- and Jesus told her that the day is coming where true worship the Father in spirit and truth.
 - True worship is in spirit and truth. It is both, not one or the other.
 - Worship that is shaped by the truth of the gospel is spirit-filled worship for it magnifies the work of God in Christ to redeem His people from their sin. This was what Jesus told the woman at the well.
 - True worship is celebrating God's redemptive plan to send His Son, Jesus Christ, to save God's sinners by dying on the cross for our sin and rising from the dead on the third day and that our righteousness is now found in the person and work of Christ. God's. This is the foundation of all of our joy! We were miraculously rescued by God's work in Christ.

II. How to Guard Your Gospel Freedom (Colossians 2:17, 19)

- **Colossians 2:17, 19**, ¹⁷*These are a shadow of the things to come, but **the substance belongs to Christ** . . . ¹⁹**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.***"
- **Likewise Colossians 2:2-3 says something similar**, *"that their hearts may be encouraged, being **knit together** in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."*
- **There are two charges to help us guard our gospel freedom:**
 1. **Holding fast to the Head—Jesus Christ.** The substance belongs to Christ and in Him we find full assurance and understanding of the knowledge of God and the treasures of God wisdom. What this means is that we must apply ourselves to learning the word of God, learning right doctrine and God's purposes for our lives.

I think many of us say, with genuine sincerity, "I love Jesus!" I think what we mean by that statement is that with all our emotions we love Jesus.

However, it is not enough to simply have your emotions formed to Christ but you must have your mind formed to the truth of Christ. As Paul is going to say in **Colossians 3:1-3**, *"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that*

are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your **minds** on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

How do you set your mind on the things above where Christ is seated and not on things that are on earth? The Apostle Paul said in Romans 12:1-2 to no longer be conformed to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. He also said we should desire to have the mind of Christ. So we must study the word. We need to learn the great doctrines of the Bible. We must learn and understand the big message of God's redemptive plan in Scripture so that we see Jesus on every page.

So . . . yes may our emotions be formed to love Jesus but our minds must be transformed by the truth of the word of God by the Spirit of God. As John's gospel says, it is both grace and truth or the Spirit and truth. The common denominator is truth because it is the truth of the person and work of Jesus in our hearts that sets our hearts on fire because the wind of the Spirit has fanned that doctrine into a flame.

2. **Our church body must be knit together.** Here is the kicker. Everything I just mentioned I said we must do it and we must take personal responsibility for our spiritual growth but this text says that spiritual growth and therefore guarding our gospel freedom is not a Lone Ranger project it is a community project.
 - a. **Here is how this works.**
 - i. The thing that bonds us together, Jesus Christ, is the thing that protects us. We come together as a community of faith and our common bond is Christ not our affinities, such as, we are Americans, I like golf, I like to hunt, I am a Cubs fan or I am a Cowboys fan. These things may be interesting but they are not what bring us together. Our supreme bond is Jesus Christ.
 - ii. Second I want to propose that one of the things that help us guard our gospel freedom is church discipline.
 1. **Formative:** Discipleship and teaching
 2. **Corrective:** Corrective church discipline applied by a loving community of faith. Paul is going to say in **Colossians 3:16**, "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*" We are called to love one another enough to be able to correct one another and also be corrected by others.

Conclusion

- What does this mean for us as we take the Lord's Supper?
- Lord's Supper is both formative and corrective for us.
 - Formative: It teaches
 - Corrective: It calls us to repent, re-commit to one another and to press back into our covenant, gospel-loving community