

The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

“Don’t Be Afraid of Shadows”

Colossians 2:16-19

Mark Vroegop

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. 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 (Col 2:16-19) ESV

Insecurity. Being accepted. People thinking well of you. Reputation. Popularity. Fear of man. Peer pressure. These are strong words that evoke powerful emotions, don’t they? Sometimes we think that these emotions are only a part of adolescence, but I’m sure you discovered what I have: insecurity, peer pressure, and the fear of man don’t go away when you become an adult.

A few years ago I was asked to serve on the Advisory Council of ABWE, and part of that responsibility is attending a board meeting in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I had never served on any board, and I knew very little about anything, including where to go and what was expected. Although the Home Office gave me great instructions on many of the logistics, I had no idea what to pack or even what to expect. So I packed a lot—two suitcases in fact.

Well it wasn’t long until my Freshman status began to show. Other pastors arrived, and they only had one suitcase. It didn’t take long until someone pointed out how much luggage I had. I arrived on site, and I had no idea what to do with my luggage. Then I walk into a room, and I knew hardly anyone. Finally, I hear during the announcements that we need to find someone with whom to car pool after our meetings. It was a miserable first day of feeling insecure, worrying about being accepted, and trying to not look like an idiot.

I called my wife at night and she asked how the board meetings were going. “Fine,” I said. “Except that I feel like an insecure Jr. Higher!” Have you ever felt like that?

So what happens when you start to feel that way in a church or with a group of people who claim to be spiritual? Insecurity, fear of man, the need for acceptance, and peer pressure can create the fertile soil for spiritual drift or blatant legalism. Power emotions and powerful people combine as deadly weapons in the enemy’s hand to pull us away from Jesus so we can be part of the “in” crowd.

The last number of weeks we have been looking at what Christ-centered thinking looks like. We have walked through some glorious passages of Scripture, and it has been so refreshing to see, with fresh eyes, who we are in Jesus. I've called you to think about your thinking, to live vicariously, and to live out the spiritual reality that you've been brought from death to life. I have tried to establish a direct connection in your mind between who you are **in Christ** and how you live **in life**. I have tried to help you understand your freedom in Christ so that you can live differently.

Our text this morning calls us to see the freedom that we have in Christ and to guard it. That's right; guard your freedom in Christ! This may be a new thought for some of you because we don't often think of the need to guard our freedom in Jesus. But that is exactly what Paul says here: Don't be intimidated and don't be sidelined – guard your freedom!

Don't Be Intimidated (v 16-17)

Freedom in Jesus or Christian liberty, as it is often called, is usually seen through the lens of Romans 14-15 where Paul calls believers to be willing to give up their freedoms for the sake of weaker brothers. You are probably familiar with the warnings about causing a weaker brother to stumble, and that is something that we all must guard against.

However, there is a fine but important line between the loving concern for a weaker brother and allowing the legalistic preferences of others to unduly affect our lives. And I'm not sure that we've thought enough about the difference. I have heard a lot of things put under the banner of "don't give an offense," or "cause a stumbling block", and the result was an oppressive culture as people walked on egg-shells trying not to be offensive toward those who really do not fit the definition of weaker brother and really have an unbiblical view of spiritual growth and maturity.

There is a great example of this in Galatians 2. Paul records his public confrontation of Peter for his improper coddling of people who were "offended" and should not have been. The problem was Jewish leaders from Jerusalem who refused to eat with Gentiles. They were not weaker brothers; they were legalistic people who needlessly held to man-made religious standards. Paul didn't defer to them; he confronted them with zeal. He guarded freedom in Christ with passion (see Gal 2:11-21).

How does this idea relate to Colossians? Remember that Paul did not want these believers to drift from Christ. They were in danger of putting their spiritual trust in other things, and there were teachers and leaders who were pointing them that direction. The pull of this drift which leads to blatant legalism was twofold:

- 1) It offered people a deeper spiritual life, a missing link to their spiritual growth

- 2) There was a pressure (stated or implied) to be part of a special group, appealing to pride or to the fear of man

This is the power of all forms of legalism – the promise of more and the pressure to conform. And Paul goes after this dangerous teaching.

Verse 16 is blunt: “Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you...” The word “therefore” points back to the positional reality that we learned about in verses 8-15. In light of what Paul had just said, they needed to stop allowing people to pass judgment on them. The structure of the original language points to the fact that this judging was going on presently. So you could translate verse 16 as “Therefore, stop letting people pass judgment on you.”

The rest of the verse indicates the focal point of the judgment: foods, drink, and religious holidays. Attaching religious significance to food and holidays was a common battle in the New Testament (see Rom. 14:3 and 1 Cor. 8:1-13). However the addition of “drink” into the equation here seems to indicate that this problem was different. It seems that there were people suggesting even more stringent regulations that involved regulations similar to a Nazirite vow, and they were attaching a spiritual significance to these regulations that was over the top. Further, the observance of certain holidays was also thrown into the mix, attaching obligatory spiritual significance to these as well.

So what is the problem? The problem is that the observance of these regulations had become a matter of spiritual obligation offering an improvement upon their position in Christ. Now it probably didn’t sound like that. Most people would recognize a blatant shift away from Christ. The danger of this is the subtlety with which it happens. It manifests itself in a sense that you feel like you are not either a real Christian or if you are, you are not very spiritual.

It is interesting here that Paul says, “Stop letting these people judge you!” This means that they needed to stop being intimidated by these people. They needed to stop letting these people control them or make them feel insecure or less than what they really were.

That is why in verse 17 Paul says, “these things are a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”¹ The true reality is Jesus. In other words, they were in danger of having a misplaced focus and trust. These false teachers were adding all sorts of baggage to their lives, and it was creating a practical trust in things that were shadows compared to Jesus. The Colossian believers were being intimidated by spiritual shadows. And Paul says “the substance belongs to Christ.” NIV says, “the reality...is found in Christ.” NLT says, “For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.”

¹ This is similar to what Hebrews 10:1 says: “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.”

Do you see his point? It is so easy and dangerous for the focus to shift to things that really do not matter. And Paul doesn't want them to be intimidated by these people, but instead to put their confidence in their position in Christ. Don't be intimidated; focus on who you are in Christ.

I have felt this personally, and I'm sure that you have too. When I was at Calvary, there were a few churches in our area that had very narrow definition of which churches were good and which ones were bad. I discovered that when we began using NKJV verses KJV, and incorporated small groups into our ministry model that we became known as "Calvary Used-to-Be Baptist Church." I heard that we were accused of "going liberal." I heard of family gatherings that were filled with tension or a complete inability to even talk about church because certain family members went to a church that viewed me as a liberal. And let me tell you, there were times when it was intimidating.

Paul is not suggesting that we be rude, proud, or vengeful. But he would also say, "Don't give in to this! Know who you are in Jesus. Guard your freedom!"

Don't Be Sidelined (v 18-19)

Being intimidated is one thing, but there is a further development in verses 18 and 19. Paul is concerned that giving in to the spiritual confidence tricksters would result in the Colossians being disqualified. The danger here is more serious. It means that they would lose their way, take the wrong path, or run the wrong race.

I have talked with many "recovering legalists" who would point to a particular season of their life (in some cases most of their life) and say that they fought the wrong battles, climbed the wrong mountains, and died on the wrong hill. Split churches, fractured families, and disillusioned children are the nasty fruits of legalism. But do you know what would be even worse? To stand before Christ and hear, "You fought the wrong battle."

The danger here is directly attached the word "disqualify." It refers to an unfavorable ruling in a competition by a judge or an umpire. It means that you compete in a race but you are not eligible for the reward at the end because the judges rule you to have competed incorrectly. These false teachers could have done exactly that. First, they could have created a culture in which certain people were not deemed useful unless they had the right "standards." Secondly, they could create a loss of reward as people waste their gifts, time, and energy in worthless spiritual practices. That is why I've chosen the word "sidelined." The idea here is that you should not take yourself out of the game. Stay focused on Christ and don't quit.

How would this disqualification happen? Paul lists three areas: 1) False humility (asceticism), 2) Spiritualization (worship of angels), and 3) Claim of special spiritual insight (visions). These teachers were inviting people to be part of the "in" crowd through mystical and overly spiritualized experiences or through rigorous self-discipline. It may have sounded like this:

“Look, you can get to next level spiritually where you’ll really have spiritual clarity and insight, but you are going to have really work at it. Most people in our church don’t get this stuff, but I’m telling you man – there is a new level of freedom here. It worked wonderfully for me, and here is what I did...” That’s what the pitch would sound like.

But verse 18b peels back what is really there: pride. The person is “puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind.” The longing for spiritual progress done this way actually leads to spiritual disaster. That’s the trap! In the name of spiritual growth these people were being swept into a trap of another kind—the trap of do-it-yourself religion.

Verse 19 tells us why this is so problematic: it cuts one’s connection to Christ. Notice what the verse tells us about the importance of being connected to Christ:

- 1) He nourishes the whole body
- 2) He holds it all together
- 3) The growth is from God

So you see where the credit will lie don’t you? Jesus provides the nourishment; Jesus holds everything together; and God is the one who is making it work! Real spiritual growth and real maturity should cause you to grow more dependent and more in love with Jesus. If you can explain it or give a four step plan, what do you need Jesus for?

Paul doesn’t want us to be sidelined by the pull of “self appointed umpires blinded by their own prejudices.”² So we need to watch out. David Garland gives a few characteristics to look for:

- Anything that judges and disqualifies others according to arbitrary human measures
- Anything that substitutes sham battles with asceticism for the real struggle with sin, which Christ has already won for us
- Anything that makes subjective feelings or mystic states the norm over the historical event of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection
- Anything that cuts people off from Christ, the Head, or Christ’s people, the body³

So we must be careful that we not become sidelined or that we create a situation that may cause others to be sidelined as well.

How to Guard Your Freedom

Let me quickly give you a few ideas that I think could result for a right understanding of this text.

² David Garland. Colossians and Philemon – NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1998. p 187.

³ Garland, p. 189.

- 1) **I know my position in Jesus.** I've said this before, but I just keep coming back to it time and time again. We've got to really understand and rehearse the beauty of our position in Christ so that can live in it.
- 2) **I have to connect my heart to my position ("In Christ, In Life").** My salvation, my security, my hope, my righteousness, my safety, my power, my sanctification – all of it—comes from Him! Alone in that hotel room in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, I needed to connect my heart to who I am in Jesus.
- 3) **I have to watch out for "do-it-myself" religion.** I need to watch out for it in the teaching that I receive and the solutions that I embrace. I have to be sure that the gospel is always central. So I need to watch out for it when it comes at me. But I also need to watch out for it in my own heart. I would guess that most of the false teachers were absolutely convinced that what they were doing was right and maybe even helpful. We have to constantly be on guard because you can drift from the gospel by liberalism or legalism. Both are disastrous.

Listen! Legalism is simply trusting in something other than Jesus. And it isn't hard to have do-it-my-way parenting, do-it-my-way marriage recovering, do-it-my-way counseling, do-it-my-way music, do-it-my-way preaching, and do-it-my-way church.

We have to guard our freedom – even from our own hearts. The penchant for do-it-my-way or you-ain't-doin-God's work is a sick part of every one of our hearts. We ought to resist any efforts to sideline us that way. And we ought to be fearful of ever doing that to someone else. And it is easy to do.

I remember when I first realized this as a Dad. When our twins were very young (about 5 or 6), they asked if they could watch a program on PBS called "Dragon Tales." At the time I told them no because I didn't like all the emphasis on magic, but when they asked why I simply said that the show was not a good show to watch. Well, one day they came home from Sunday School completely outraged and disgusted. "Dad", they said, " you are not going to believe what happened in Sunday School today!" I was alarmed because of the tone in their voices. I was waiting to hear about the newest and biggest scandal. That's when they told me the big news: Mr. and Mrs. _____ let their kids watch Dragon Tales. Sarah and I tried not to smile, but I also knew that I had to do a better job of explaining that Dragon Tales was not listed on the 10 Commandments.

Look, the promise of more and the pressure to conform are real. We've got to guard our freedom in Christ!

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