

"Guard Your Freedom!"
Colossians 2:16-23
Series: Book of Colossians [#6]
Pastor Lyle L. Wahl
February 22, 2009

Theme: **Guard Your Freedom Against Man-Made Freedom Killers.**

Introduction

Freedom! Freedom is a word that lifts and inspires our hearts. It is a quality that is cherished. There are, of course, many kinds of freedom.

- Freedom from slavery and limitations to full independence and rights.
- Freedom from worry and doubt to peace and certainty.
- Freedom from political domination to political representation.
- The greatest, the most important is spiritual freedom.

There are several kinds of spiritual freedom. Freedom from slavery to sin, its death and punishment to spiritual life, serving God and His rewards. Freedom from other people's imposed rules and judgment to living a life of conviction based on God's Word.

Jesus said that His "truth makes you free" (John 8:32); and also, "... if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36)

Paul wrote to the Galatian churches, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."

This is great! *But ... but ...* there are many freedom killers. The first century Christians at Colossae faced them just as we do today. In today's section, Paul gives the call to "*Guard Your Freedom!*" The call to "*Guard Your Freedom Against Man-Made Freedom Killers.*" He singles out three specific man-made freedom killers. First ...

Guard your freedom against empty ritualism's judgment.

First, let's be clear on the meaning of *ritualism*. A *ritual* is a repeated or customary act. For example, some baseball players follow a *ritual* to get ready to hit when they step into the batter's box. The New York Yankees' Derek Jeter steps into the batters box, then raises his right hand back toward the home plate umpire requesting some extra time to get set. His teammate Hideki Matsui steps into the batter's box, takes a couple of swings and then gazes somewhere between the left field foul pole and the third base dugout for about a second. Then he gradually moves his head to face the pitcher. Sometimes he twitches his right shoulder. *Rituals*: repeated or customary acts.

Ritualism takes it a step farther, emphasizing the importance, or even the necessity of the act, or ritual. Let's go back to our baseball players. If a player not only follows his ritual

to help him get ready, but believes he can only get a hit if he performs it, that then is *ritualism*. When it comes to the Christian faith and churches, the definition and value of rituals and ritualism have often been the subject of great and heated debates.

With this in mind, let's look at the conditions in Colossae. Verse 16, "Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day..."

The first word, "Therefore," points us back to what Paul has just written, which we looked at last week. Go back to verse 6.

"Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude." (6-7)

Verse 8 follows with a warning about being deceived and taken captive by false teaching. Verses 9-15 remind us that Christ, in whom the fullness of God dwells, is all we need. That is the basis for the warnings in this section.

False teachers were judging the Colossian believers because of what they did or did not do with respect to food and drink, festivals and special days. As I pointed out earlier, the false teachers were not from one specific group. Some were Jewish or with some Jewish background, while others were from the regional and Greek culture.

These false teachers *ruled* that if you did not follow their practices you were not enlightened or mature spiritually, and perhaps not a believer at all. And so, they were *judging*, finding fault with these true believers. For the false teachers, these practices were not voluntary acts of obedience from personal faith and conviction, but acts to earn God's favor. Their *rituals* were mandatory, binding and choking practices. Their teaching and practice was *ritualism*.

Paul's response is found as we go on to verse 17, "things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ." These foods and days are not what is really important. They are only a *shadow*. They may have the shape of the real thing, but they are not the real thing. The reality, the substance, the One whose shadow they are is Jesus Christ, who is not only reality behind them, but the One who has fulfilled them.

Consider two examples of Old Testament *festivals*. The *Passover* celebrated and reminded Israel of how God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. It is a *shadow* of the redemption from slavery to sin that Christ provides. 1 Corinthians 5:7, "... Christ *our Passover* [also] has been sacrificed."

Then, *The Day of Atonement*. It was the day when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies and atonement was made for all the sins of the people. When Christ died on the cross He did not, as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, present "the blood of goats and calves," but "His own blood," offering Himself "*once for all*" (9:12; 7:27). He is the truth the *shadow*

pictured. He fulfilled it.

So, where the Bible does not speak with explicit statements or in clear principles, we are free. As Paul wrote to the church at Rome,

“One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.” (14:5-6)

That same passage lists the one restriction to this freedom: we are not to exercise our freedom in a way so that it becomes a stumbling block to a fellow believer (e.g., 14:13-21).

Empty ritualism is alive and well today. We enjoy freedom in the choice of what we eat and drink. If you choose to be a vegetarian, or not, don't let people judge you on that. If you choose to drink coffee, as I do, don't let people judge you on that. If you choose to make nor not make Christmas, Good Friday and Easter cornerstone days of celebrating your faith, don't let people judge you.

However, there are those who pass judgment on others who do and do not make the choices they make. Whenever the focus is on “the right way,” “our way,” or “my way,” you are probably face to face with empty ritualism.

There are some examples of this that leave us not knowing whether to laugh or cry. One man tells of regularly driving through a small town. He always laughed when he saw the sign on one church: Left Foot Baptist Church. His curiosity grew over time. So one day he stopped and asked about the name. Some years earlier an argument broke out in a local church which practiced foot-washing. The argument was not about whether to do it or not, nor about how often, but *how to do it*—which foot should be washed first? And, yes, you've got it, those who insisted that the left foot had to be washed first split away and started their own church, the Left Foot Baptist Church.

Paul's first warning is “Be on guard! Watch out for the man-made freedom killer of empty ritualism's judgment!” The next warning moves from the excess value placed on certain non-essential practices to flat out false teaching.

Guard your freedom against false doctrine's fraud.

Let's survey the scene, the conditions those believers faced. We continue at verse 18.

“Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.” (18-19)

Those false teachers were delighting in their falsehood, which included “self-abasement,” or false humility. You know, the “I’m humble—and proud of it!” attitude. The translation “self-abasement” reflects the idea that their false humility may have been prominently displayed in their fasting and other acts of self-denial. The core motive, however is clear—they delighted in their false humility. They were like the people Jesus spoke of in Matthew 6:16,

“Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.”

Pride, selfishness and arrogance are an unholy trinity that characterizes most false teaching.

Next, it included the worship of angels. This could have come from both Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds. There is historical evidence that the practice of worshiping angels either directly or as intermediaries, persisted for centuries in that region.

Then, their falsehood included basing their teaching on visions which they had seen, or claimed to have seen. Many people down through history have claimed to have had visions that revealed new, different truth which they used as a basis for trying to change established beliefs of their religion or faith, or to come up with their own religion.

God has used visions to communicate to people. In recent years we know that God has communicated with people seeking him in parts of the Islamic world. Paul dismisses the claims of the false teachers at Colossae as coming from their own prideful, sinful minds.

How could the Colossians know Paul was correct? Go back up to 2:7, where he tells them they have been

“firmly rooted and [are] now being built up in [Christ] and established in [their] faith, just as [they] were *instructed*” They needed to rely on the clear, authoritative teaching they had received, not the latest flash in the pan visions or experiences.

They could know as they followed the example of the people at Berea who “examin[ed] the Scriptures daily to see whether . . .” Paul’s proclamation of the gospel, of Jesus Christ was so (Acts 17:11). The Colossians did not have the completed New Testament, but they had the Old Testament and the established teaching of Paul and the other apostles to measure all claims to truth.

Go back to verse 19 once more,

“and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.”

These false teachers did not have a true, solid connection with Christ and His truth. It is Christ through His truth who brings true growth from God, not the self-inflated minds of

people. Paul told the believers to be alert, to guard their freedom from the freedom killer of false, fraudulent doctrine.

Let's move forward to our own times. Often we point to mainline, theologically liberal denominations as the source of many fraudulent doctrines. They certainly are the source and sustainer of much of it. In 1993 a "Re-Imagining God" conference was held. One speaker said "I want to share three images of God ...and how these... [goddesses] transformed my Christianity. Kali [a Hindu image], Quani [Buddhist] and Enna [indigenous goddess of the Philippines] ... my new Trinity. [W]e are here together in order to destroy the patriarchal idolatry of Christianity." Another speaker said, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all. I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."

On other fronts, one writer asserts, "The preacher can no longer assume that just because a text is in the Bible that it is from God or is even valuable." And, "The resurrection of Christ ... is not about believing in a resuscitated corpse. ... I believe the remains of the historical Jesus decayed like all humans decay."

Enough. More than enough.

But we also hear voices within the broad evangelical community saying things such as, "We can't be sure that anything is true beyond our own experience," or even, "nothing beyond our own experience is true." Or, "True Christianity is not defined by certain true beliefs or facts, but by personal encounters with God which do not reveal him, but lead us to a personal, mystical insight or experience."

God calls us, just as He did the Colossian church in the first century, to be like the Bereans, to search the Scriptures to see what is so and what is not; to ground all of our thinking in God's inspired Word.

Finally, Paul tells the Colossian church...

Guard your freedom against valueless asceticism's slavery.

Asceticism refers to practicing strict self-denial as a spiritual discipline, especially in the physical life. It frequently comes with the belief that this frees a person from the sin or bondage of his physical being and either unites him with or brings him closer to God.

Physical self-discipline has a legitimate place. Turn back to 1 Corinthians 9. Beginning at verse 20,

"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified."

Paul's words about the asceticism being pitched at the Colossian believers begin at verse 20.

“If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

All of these practices, whatever they were, had no value. Self-discipline is good and is to be developed. But these severe treatments, this self-abuse, whether it is based on “physical is bad and spiritual is good” or whatever other kind of thinking, cannot control sin. Some may think they are *really spiritual* because of these practices. But it is not godly spirituality.

Rather than freeing a person from sin, it becomes another addictive force, enslaving those who follow it and leaving them feeling even farther away from God. Martin Luther was a classic example of this when he was a monk, continually seeking forgiveness, peace, and God's blessing through a severe regimen. He spent up to five hours each day confessing his sins. He often went without sleep. He tried to survive the coldest nights without a blanket. He whipped himself. But this only increased his awareness of his own sinfulness and left him in deep despair.

He later wrote, “If anyone could have gained heaven as a monk, then I would indeed have been among them.” Again, “I lost hold of Christ the Savior and Comforter and made of him a stock-master and hangman over my poor soul.”

So, “Guard yourself against valueless asceticism's slavery!”

But what about today? What about us? Is asceticism still around? There are some Roman Catholic orders that have a discipline of silence, slowing down, a full-day routine of discipline with prayer and contemplation.

On Good Friday last year Luciana Reyes was nailed to a cross for the 19th time. She vowed to continue this practice every Good Friday for as long as she can. Crucifixion and pounding their backs bloody with bamboo sticks are fairly common practices among some Catholics in the Philippines as a form of sacrifice, believing these things will atone for their sins and be a cure for illness.

Some people apply the term asceticism in different ways. So we have the phrase and practices of “Downsizing as a Form of Modern Asceticism.” It refers to a counter-cultural stance in contrast to the notion of ongoing, infinite economic expansion and consumption. Often it also contains elements of social justice, the environment and a return to religious

values and symbols. Most of the Christians who use this language don't use it in the technical sense of denial to gain freedom from sin or favor with God, but in the sense of stating key elements of godly living and self-discipline.

The key point in all eras is to reject the false notions that the body and physical are evil while the spiritual is good and is enhanced by self-abuse, and that these practices free from sin and gain favor with God.

Conclusion.

“Guard Your Freedom!” Guard your freedom against man-made freedom killers. This is a real, life-long battle. If we take it lightly, we will end up as victims rather than victors.

The first battle of Bull Run, or Manassas, was the first real battle of the U.S. Civil War. The North thought it would be an easy victory which would lead to a quick conclusion of the war. Hundred's of government officials, socialites and ordinary people packed picnic baskets, got into their buggies and drove out to watch the battle from a grassy slope near to what they assumed would be the site of a quick victory.

Then the battle began. The Confederate forces gained the upper hand and set the Union troops into retreat, and the picnickers into a panicked rush back to Washington, D.C. At then end of the day there were about 5,000 casualties.

We cannot afford to miscalculate, to take spectator's picnic view of the attacks from man-made freedom killers.

As you reflect with God now, thank Him for the freedom you have in Jesus Christ and, again, for His sacrifice on the cross to purchase your freedom. Ask God to help you as you determine to be on guard to protect and live in the freedom He has given you.

© 2009. Lyle L. Wahl

Scripture, unless otherwise noted, taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®,
Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation.
Used by permission.