

Horsley Evangelical Church ([www.horsleyec.org.uk](http://www.horsleyec.org.uk))

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### Colossians 2:16-19 Fixing our eyes on Jesus.

In this middle section of the letter, the apostle Paul is giving the Christians at Colosse a number of warnings about the strange teaching that was gaining ground in their church. We hear the first of these warnings back in 2:8. **Read 2:8**. The Colossians are warned not to be *taken captive* by the new teaching. But now in our passage this morning we find two more apostolic warnings. In verse 16 Paul warns the church not to let anyone who supports the new teaching *judge them* or *look down* on them. Then in verse 18 Paul warns the Colossians not to let anyone *disqualify them* for the prize – the prize of knowing the Lord Jesus Christ.

The strange teaching in Colosse was being promoted by some who took a proud and superior stance to those who held on to the simple gospel of Christ alone. But Paul warns the Colossian believers never to be ashamed of the gospel. Nor must they take their eyes off the Saviour. For he is the fulfilment of the ages and the source of all spiritual life and growth.

Let's look at our passage this morning under two headings. First, in verses 16, 17 we have **Christ - the fulfilment of the ages**. **Read verses 16, 17**. We've said before in our study of this letter that scholars tell us it's very hard to clearly understand the new teaching that was creeping into the church at Colosse. And that's because it seems to be taken from both Judaism *and* Paganism. The new teaching did not simply come from the Judaizers who insisted that Christians must keep the Old Testament Law of Moses. But neither did it come simply from pagans religions either. It seemed to be a strange mixture of both.

And this is seen in our passage today. Verses 16 and 17 talk about *Jewish ceremonial laws* of the Old Testament while verses 18 and 19 talk more of *pagan mysticism*. And so the 'Colossian heresy' (as it's sometimes called) seemed to be a blend of the two. But Paul is warning the believers not to be taken in by it. And in verse 16 he warns the Christians not to let anyone judge them because they do not keep Jewish ceremonial laws. **Read verses 16, 17**. The fact that Paul says in verse 17 that these things were *a shadow of the reality, which is Christ* suggests that the things mentioned in verse 16 were Jewish laws from the Old Testament rather than pagan or heathen practices.

Some in the Colossian congregation therefore were insisting that they must all follow Jewish food and drink laws and Jewish holy days and festivals that had their roots back in the law of Moses. And the new teaching was that if these things were *not* observed, then it was a reflection on the person's poor spiritual standing before God.

Now Paul deals with the subject of Christians keeping Old Testament ceremonial laws in other letters. He deals with a problem in the church at Rome for example, where Paul describes some in the congregation as 'weak' and some as 'strong'. The 'weak' were almost certainly Jewish Christians who felt bound by their conscience to continue observing the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. The 'strong' however (mostly Gentile Christian believers in Rome) saw no need to keep the law of Moses. And Paul agrees with the theological position of the 'strong'. There is no need for Christians to keep the ceremonial laws found in the Old Testament. But the counsel Paul gives in Romans chapter 14 is interesting.

Paul does not *criticise* the 'weak' Jewish believers, nor does he tell them to change and ignore all these Old Testament laws. Rather, Paul emphasises the need to accept one another in the Lord Jesus and not to judge one another on such matters of *secondary importance*. As individuals we must follow our own consciences before the Lord in such secondary matters without passing judgement on each

another. Let me read a small section from Romans 14 – it's relevant here. [Read Romans 14:1-6](#). And then he says – [read Romans 14:17](#).

Now although the situation in Colosse was different to the situation in Rome, Paul's words in Romans 14 do have some bearing here. [Read verses 16, 17 again](#). The 'therefore' (16) takes us back to what Paul has just said. He has given us four pictures, you may remember, of the wonder of our salvation through Jesus Christ. And it is because of the greatness of our salvation through Jesus Christ that the Colossians must never let anyone judge them if they do not follow food laws or weekly, monthly and yearly religious festivals.

Such things from the law of Moses are not obligatory for Christians. They do not need to be observed to make us righteous before God. Christ has done that! But, if you *want* to keep certain days special (whether that's Jewish festivals, or for us it might be Christmas, or the seasons of Lent or Easter) or if you *want* to abstain from certain foods or certain drinks as a Christian - well that's fine. But do not impose such things on others and make them a standard by which you judge whether another person is spiritual or not. The really important verse here however is found in verse 17 isn't it. [Read 2:17 again](#).

God did indeed give these laws to his people in the Old Testament era. But why did God give them? Paul says here that they were given to *prepare* God's people for the coming of Christ. They were just *shadows*. They had no lasting significance. They were only signposts and pictures and symbols to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. A shadow tells you that a light source is close by. And the Light is Christ. These Old Testament ceremonial laws *do* have meaning. They tell us something about the work and the person and the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. But after Christ himself has come, we must not be preoccupied with the shadows. We are to be taken up with him, Christ!

All these things, concerning special days and festivals and foods laws, tell us different things about Christ - his loveliness, holiness and worth. They speak in some way of his salvation - the forgiveness of sins we have in him, the new life we have in his Spirit, the happy escape from the miserable paths of sin and the sweet fellowship we have with God. And these ceremonial laws speak in different way about the glory to come in Christ. They speak of the spiritual rest for our souls that we have in Christ, the peace and joy we have in him and the fellowship we have with one another in our Saviour. But in themselves these things are only *shadows*. The reality is found in Christ himself. [Read Romans 14:17](#).

So says Paul, do not let anyone make you feel spiritually inferior because you do not obey their religious practices. And never let anyone suggest that you need something else *in addition to Christ*. All these laws are things which God graciously gave his people to prepare them for the coming of his Son. But when the *Son* comes, we are done with shadows. Our life is now found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hebrews talks about these shadows as well. [Read Hebrews 10:1a](#). Old Testament laws point us to Christ. He is the Light. And we are people of the light, not of the shadows. Paul has already told the Colossians how God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. **Christ - the fulfilment of the ages**.

But then secondly, **Christ - the source of all spiritual growth** (18, 19). [Read verses 18, 19](#). These are interesting verses because they tell us more about the so called 'Colossian heresy'. But they also seem to refer to an *individual* – probably the main leader of the strange teaching. The subject here is one of spiritual growth. But Paul tells the Colossians that spiritual growth does not come from any individual, but only from Christ. And so the Christians must not allow anyone to disqualify them from finding their full spiritual potential through Christ.

Look again at verse 18. [Read verse 18 again](#). No doubt Paul had inside information here from Epaphras who was with him when he wrote this letter. First we are told how this individual delighted in

*false humility*. That means he only *pretended* to be humble, but in reality was quite a proud and ambitious man. He was a *Uriah Heap* type of character in Dicken's "David Copperfield". He made a public show of his humility in order to appear *super spiritual*. He wanted people to believe he received these amazing visions from God because of his humility and spirituality.

Other commentators add to this description of *false humility* by suggesting the word Paul uses could mean that he also practised *asceticism*. In other words, the man denied himself things in order to get closer to God. Perhaps he practiced fasting and deprived himself of other comforts in an attempt to appear spiritual. But in this man's case, it was all a sham. He only wanted to appear to be in a position to tell others of the secrets of spiritual life and growth.

We are also told that he *delighted in the worship of angels*. Again this has caused some debate amongst the scholars. Probably it builds on what Paul has already said in 2:8 about *the basic principles of this world*. You may remember that we thought the phrase referred to the belief that different spiritual powers and celestial beings ruled the world and had great influence in the universe. You therefore had to navigate your way through such creatures if you were ever to find God or make progress in the spiritual life.

Now Paul dealt with this in chapter 1 by reminding the Colossians that all of these spiritual powers (which do exist) were created by the Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore our focus needs to be on Christ and not them. This man however delighted not only in *false humility* but also in *worshipping such beings* – or at least his interest in them was unhealthy.

Then in verse 18 Paul tells us that this same man claimed to have seen visions and revelations from God. Paul spares us the details of such visions, thankfully, but Paul tells us how the man loved to tell others about the things he had seen, in great detail. The visions however were not from God. Indeed the man was self-deluded. [Read verse 18b](#).

I well remember, 25 year ago now, being given an old video cassette recording of a man doing very similar things to what Paul describes here. The video lasted an hour - and I think I stuck it out for the 60 minutes. It was all about the ecstatic heavenly visions which God had supposedly given to the man. He went into great detail about what the Lord had told him, the bolts of light which God sent into his heart - and other religious humbug. For he was a late 20<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of the man in Colosse. And I'm sure there have been many more.

The Colossian man would keep you all evening if you let him, telling you about what he had seen. But his mind was not as spiritual as he made out. It was unspiritual. His notions were not based on the gospel. Instead they were idle and empty. Nor was he as humble as he made out. In fact he was puffed up with a sense of his own importance.

But what does Paul tell us here about real spiritual growth? The first lesson is that all spiritual growth comes from God. [Read verse 19](#). Spiritual growth comes only from God. It comes not through techniques or fasting or visions. It comes from God. Of course it does. Who else can give us any growth in the things of the Spirit or the things of eternity? We must stay near God and his word if we are ever to know spiritual growth.

Secondly Paul tells us here that spiritual growth comes from being in fellowship with and submission to the Lord Jesus Christ. [Read verse 19](#). The person in question had lost contact with the Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ did not direct him to do what he did. Perhaps this implies that the man was once joined to the Head. He was once part of the body of Christ, the church. But now, either his behaviour showed that he never really belonged to Christ in the first place, or else that his behaviour was a serious sin he needed to repent of. He had lost contact with the Head. These actions and new teachings were not directed by Christ, and therefore the Colossians are not to follow this man's teaching.

But looked at positively, Paul is telling us here in verse 19 that true spiritual growth comes from the Head of the body who is the Lord Jesus Christ. We grow spiritually by *remaining* in Christ and by remaining in fellowship with him. Spiritual growth comes by walking with our Lord and Saviour day by day. It comes by knowing him, loving him and serving him, the Head.

Anything which is severed from either the head or the body of course is doomed to wither and die. All life and growth come from him who is the Head of the body. So if we want to grow spiritually we must remain in Christ. To change the metaphor, Christ is the vine, and we are the branches. If a branch is separated from the vine, it withers and dies.

But the third important thing we learn here about spiritual growth is that *it comes by being in fellowship with other believers*. Christian life is corporate life. It is about life lived in community with others. Spiritual growth is not given to some individual who then lords it over others. Christian growth is given to every believer within the body. It is given to those who remain joined to Christ and joined to one another in the body which is his church. [Read verse 19.](#)

Paul talks here about the *body* growing, about *every member growth* and not about certain parts of the body growing. The picture in verse 19 also speaks about *inter dependence* within the body. Just as the body is held together by ligaments and sinews, so too Christ holds the whole body together. Growth is in Christ and growth is corporate. We are united with Christ and we are one with each other in Christ.

So once again the overall message of this passage is the same as before. Keep the focus on the Lord Jesus. **He is the fulfilment of the ages.** The holy days, festivals and food laws of the Old Testament had their place. They were used by the Lord to prepare his people to receive Christ. But Christ is the reality and the fulfilment. The other things are mere shadows.

Are you living in the light today? First of all, are you trusting in Christ for the forgiveness of sins? And then are you *taken up* with Christ? Is he at the centre of your life? Is he your King? Is Jesus Christ the most important person in your life? Do you love him best? Do you delight in him? Do you live for him? Paul said in another place that *for him to live is Christ*. And this is true for every Christian. Our focus is not to be on food laws or any diets. Our life is not to be about holy days or holidays. Our life is to be about Christ – knowing him. In Christ we have the fulfilment of the ages. In him we have all things. Heaven will be heaven because we will see Christ, be with him, be made like him and know the full extent of his love.

Now have you forgotten that? Have you forgotten the *point* of it all – which is to know Christ. Then we are reminded here today that **all spiritual growth is from Christ**. Only as we remain in him shall we grow. And only as we remain together in fellowship, in the body, shall we grow. Are you striving to grow spiritually? I hope so. I hope in many ways that we are *dissatisfied* with where we are at the moment, spiritually. We want to know more of the Lord. But the good news is that as we remain in fellowship with God our loving Heavenly Father, and united to his Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and as we remain in fellowship with one another, spiritually growth will happen, by the grace of God.

Do you know the proverb? “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day” (4:18). God will grant us spiritual growth in his Son. And what a day that will be when we see him, the day when we are gathered to him and shall be made like him. But until then, as we remain in fellowship with God we shall grow in grace and in the likeness of Jesus.