

COLOSSIANS 2:16-23 | MATURE IN FREEDOM

VERSE 16 - BLUE

Having removed "the handwriting of ordinances that was against us" (v. 14), we can "therefore" walk in freedom as it relates to things we eat, drink, or the celebration (or non-celebration) of holy days. Each of the things mentioned in v. 16 relate to the Law. When Christians substitute Mosaic Law for a new law, or they put themselves back under Mosaic law, they reject the glories of this dispensation which God has given. The imposition of kosher regulations or feast observances or sabbath days is a return to the Law. Sadly, many find a self-congratulatory comfort in returning to portions of the Law, almost always insisting that others join them.

VERSE 17 - BLUE

In Greek, the words "shadow" and "body" share a poetic resonance not found in English. They are σκιά (skia) and σῶμα (soma), respectively. In this context, σῶμα (soma) represents the reality, while σκιά (skia) stands for the testimony or witness.

The use of the present tense linking verb, "are," in this context is intriguing. If the things of verse 16 are the "shadow" of a "body" yet to come, then it raises the question of why we or anyone else would want to dissociate from these things. This presents several possibilities for interpretation:

1. We could reinterpret "are" as "were," implying that these things were precursors to Christ, now fulfilled in Him. Since the shadows have completed their "pre-announcement" function and the body is now present in reality, it would make sense that we would not want to be judged by the shadows, but by the substance. However, this interpretation of verb tenses is rather liberal ought to make us uncomfortable. In practicality, however, I suspect that almost all evangelical interpretations of this verse assume that "are" means "were." In fact, the New International Version simply disregards the present tense and translates the beginning of verse 17 as, "These are a shadow of the things that were to come." There really is no linguistic basis for this change, as far as I am aware. It seems the NIV has made adjustments in tense to reflect their perceived intent of the original text. In this regard the NIV is not a Bible version, but rather a version of evangelical perception of the meaning rather than the words of Scripture. But what the NIV has done "on paper," most evangelical teachers do "in voice," assuming a past-tense rather than present tense. For example, BibleRef.com, a ministry of *Got Questions?*, has this commentary on verse 17:

"This is the reason adherence to the Law is not a requirement: The Law was merely an outline; it is a shadow, or a hint of things to come. Christ is the actual substance. In making this statement, Paul did not speak against the Law, but rather spoke of Jesus as superior to the Mosaic law. It is the difference between a book and the author of a book. The Law could not exist without the Author. Jesus serves as the author of life (Acts 3:15). He fulfilled the Law..."¹

In saying, "Christ is the actual substance" they change "are" to "were," making the verse past tense.

2. Another possibility is to see them as a foreshadowing of the future messianic reign (thus "Christ" in a future sense), which aligns with the verb tense but prompts the question of why Paul wouldn't regard them as still

¹ BibleRef.com. "What Does Colossians 2:17 Mean?" BibleRef.com, accessed 20 June 2024, www.bibleref.com/Colossians/2/Colossians-2-17.html.

worthy of adherence. By interpreting the present tense as referring to the future, it implies that these observances still have significance as they point to future realities in Christ. This perspective maintains that while Christ has come, there remains an eschatological aspect that these shadows still signify.

Some would suggest that there is a “shadow” factor in the Jewish feasts, giving at least some of them a futurist interpretation. While this satisfies the future aspect of the verb-tense, it does not satisfy the curious question of Paul seemingly abandoning that which still displays an outline or shadow of the future. Furthermore, verse 16, it seems, has far more than just the Jewish feast days, including kosher regulations and Sabbath observance.

3. Alternatively, we could take a somewhat poetic approach, not interpreting them as shadows (outlines), but rather as not being "the important thing" in a person's relationship with Christ. However, on the surface it seems there are far better ways to communicate that one thing is more important than another.

While I am reticent to take a poetic interpretation of any verse in which the context does not clearly demand it, this may be a case for doing so. There is the poetic resonance in the Greek previously mentioned between σκιά (skia) and σῶμα (soma). Further, the things of v. 16 are not a literal "shadow," so some degree of figurative interpretation is required. Finally, Paul is giving us a freedom to do with these things as we wish, which seems at odds with option #2 above, and option #1 above takes a rather flippant attitude towards verb tenses. So, while I am reticent to take poetic interpretations, I think that is the best solution here.

Considering Hebrews 10:1 can add useful context to this discussion. The verse states, "the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things...." This passage, presumably written around A.D. 68, addresses Hebrews, for whom the obligations of the Law would be quite different from those for Gentiles. Both Colossians and Hebrews discuss aspects of the Law, using the present tense and referring to these aspects as a shadow of future things. Both are written to different audiences but convey similar messages. Moreover, if we interpret the theme of verses 16-17 as "Christ is superior," this aligns with the overarching theme of Hebrews, further supporting a poetic interpretation of Colossians 2:17.

VERSE 18 - BLUE

After instructing us to “let no man...judge you” (v. 16), Paul now warns us not to “let no man beguile you of your reward”. The Greek term used here, 'καταβραβεύω' (katabrabeuo), means 'beguile', and is unique to this passage in the New Testament. The root word, 'brabeuo', denotes 'to rule or control', as used in sports-related contexts like an umpire. The prefix 'kata' intensifies the root, hence the word represents 'overextended control'. The apt analogy is an umpire who excessively controls the game beyond the rules and cheats you out of the prize. It's essential to note that 'reward' isn't present in the original text but is implied by the Greek term's necessary extension.

Paul then lists three behaviors of those who might beguile you of your reward:

- “Voluntary humility”—literally, 'it is his will to be humble'. The phrase suggests a false humility, one built on self-righteousness.
- “Worship of angels”—literally, 'worship of messengers'. This could indicate that the person either worships angels or, more likely, venerates the prophets instead of the One to whom the prophets pointed. Note that the Greek word θρησκεία (threskia), translated “worship” is used here to refer to a form of religion that promotes religious work but not true worship, as seen in Acts 26:5, where it is translated “religion”.
- “Intruding...”—this word implies 'going into detail' when the person doesn't genuinely know the facts.

At the core, this person is “vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.” Such a person should not be given leeway in our lives.

VERSE 19 - BLUE

Paul underscores that this individual, possibly a Judaizer, is "not holding the Head," which is undoubtedly a reference to Jesus Christ. Though Paul is speaking metaphorically about the Body of Christ, he employs highly accurate physiological understanding, demonstrating him to be a learned man in a learned society addressing other educated individuals. The body is held together "by joints and bands," and these joints and bands draw their nourishment from the head.

VERSE 20 - BLUE

The phrase "if ye be dead with Christ" is stated in such a way that, in the context of the Greek language, the condition can be assumed to have been fulfilled. Thus, for this audience, it is assumed to be true. These are individuals who are "in Christ" and are complete in Him, as stated in Colossians 2:10.

Paul appears to equate "rudiments" and "ordinances" as the same thing. The basic elements of life, or rudiments, are not the things that should dictate our daily living. There seems to be a shift in Paul's discourse here, from the ordinances of the Law to the ordinances of mankind - that is, general societal expectations. This shift indicates that not only are the believers free from the constraints of the Law, but they are also not bound by the expectations and norms of society. This makes sense since we are "in Christ" and not of this world.

VERSES 21-22 - BLUE

Paul first provides an example of the world's "rudiments," such as "Touch not; taste not; handle not" (v. 21). He suggests that the very things the world commands you not to touch, taste, or handle "are to perish with the using" (v. 22). In other words, these elements carry their own consequences, rendering them self-punishing. Hence, as Christians, we don't need an additional set of rules to abide by, but rather, we should exercise wisdom in our decisions. Observing consequences is significantly more effective than following a book of rules. Essentially, Paul is saying, "Don't reduce the Christian faith to a mere list of do's and don'ts." Instead, we should let these worldly matters speak for themselves.

VERSE 23 - BLUE

Paul explains that rudimentary human ordinances display three main characteristics:

- They exhibit "wisdom in will-worship". This means they give the appearance of wisdom through the creation of self-made religions.
- They demonstrate "humility", but in this context, it is a false humility. This false humility forsakes our position in Christ for the artificial values of a fabricated humility, as seen in verse 18.
- They include a "neglecting of the body". Worldly wisdom often views the body as inherently evil, falsely believing that neglecting and punishing it makes one more religious. This reflects the worldly asceticism found in some Christian circles.

Despite these practices carried out with apparent honor, they are actually undertaken for "the satisfying of the flesh". In other words, even though they involve self-sacrifice that may seem holy, they are, in reality, a reflection of worldly wisdom.