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The Emptiness of Rules in the Light of Jesus

Colossians 2 v 16-23

Introduction

We live in a connected world. Way back in 1956 the first transatlantic cable was laid, from a beach near Oban to Newfoundland in Canada. It was a great achievement at the time and could carry 36 simultaneous phone calls. Last year the latest optical fibre cable was laid across the Atlantic. It could carry 2 billion simultaneous phone calls. But of course it doesn't carry voice calls, it mostly carries data. Facebook postings, instagram pictures, YouTube videos. Every click of the mouse across Europe that hits a web page in America, all at the speed of light.

And what do we use this amazing technology for? Well, mainly for videos of cats and pictures of people's dinner. Your mince and tatties can travel the world in the blink of an eye.

And what we're finding as a society is that the more we share our lives with the world the more we are judged by others. You can't give an opinion without being told that you're wrong, or even worse that you're a terrible person for saying such a thing. So we can certainly sympathise with the Colossian church in the first century, who are finding themselves under attack in a similar way.

Background to Colossians

We've been studying the book of Colossians, Paul's letter to a church that he hadn't visited but where his friend Epaphras had introduced the gospel message. Many had repented of their sins and started following Jesus, but they were having some trouble. False teachers had come in, and tried to tell them they needed to do certain things, behave in a certain way, if they were to be saved. Paul is writing this letter to reassure them that all they need is Christ.

In chapter 2 we're getting to the point where Paul is going to deal with the false teaching that has been pushed at Collosae. We'll see that there is a three-pronged attack being made against the gospel.

1. The freedom of the gospel is being attacked as the false teachers insist that the Jewish old testament rules must be strictly adhered to.

2. The universality of the gospel is being challenged as these people suggest that there are secret layers to be unlocked, privileged people with special knowledge.
3. And the transforming power of the gospel is being challenged by suggesting the Christians had to return to following empty rules and trying to earn their salvation

Therefore

V16 of chapter 2 starts with the word “therefore”. It must be pointing back to what Paul has just said, at the start of chapter 2, which we studied last week. We learned that Jesus is fully God. He died for our sins and paid the full price for our salvation. He was fully victorious over death and we have been made fully alive in him.

Therefore...

Therefore what?

Jesus has given you new life and freedom from sin. Therefore don't get distracted by false teachings about rules and rituals. That's what this passage is about. Paul wants the Colossians to know the freedom that they have through Christ and not be drawn back into old ways or drawn aside by ideas of secret knowledge.

First, Paul warns about:

Old Testament Practices

v16-17: 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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Paul says don't feel bound by Old Testament practices. They are a shadow of what was to come: Jesus; and now that the fulfilment is here, the shadows don't matter.

When my wife Claire was pregnant we knew that there was a life growing inside her. We went to the classes where they showed you how to hold the baby, how to support its head, how to bath it and change it. All very helpful but ultimately you were just playing with a doll.

We went to get an ultrasound scan and that was amazing. The nurse could see that the baby was developing well, could measure it to check its growth rate, and even tell if it was a boy or a girl. We got a printout to take away, but really all that was was a shadowy image. It was a picture of what was to come. When the child was delivered we had the substance, in flesh and blood, in living colour and 3 dimensions (plus a good deal of sound and smell). It was the fulfilment of what that shadowy picture promised.

And this is what Paul is saying. The Old Testament rituals were good, they served a purpose. The food laws were a healthy diet but they also helped the Israelites understand the difference between pure and impure things, and hence pure and impure thoughts and actions. The sacrifices and offerings they made showed them that they needed to be thankful for blessings, and that they needed a payment for sin. The holidays helped them see that they needed to dedicate time to appreciate God.

But these were all just shadows. They were pictures of a promise to come. And the fulfilment of that promise was Jesus. When he burst onto this scene he was purity and holiness, and in comparison we are impure, sinful, lacking. We didn't need those food rules to show us pure and impure, it was right in front of us. He was the true sacrifice that paid once and for all for sin. So all those burnt offerings were no longer required. And in knowing him we realise he deserves our whole life, not just one day a week.

So in knowing Jesus, the "substance", there was no need any more for the "shadows". The Colossian Christians could choose to follow the Jewish diet or not. They could celebrate holidays or not. But Paul says don't let anyone judge you on these things. Jesus is all that you need.

Secondly, Paul tackled a big problem that had arisen among the church:

Mysticism

v18-19: 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, 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.

Paul says don't be swayed by mysticism. God is not a God of secrets. The gospel is open, clear and simple. Don't get detached from the head.

Secret knowledge can make us feel important, it can even give us an advantage. In the 13th century the glass makers of Venice were the best in the world. They had discovered recipes and techniques that made the highest quality glass you could find anywhere. They had high social status, but they were also prisoners. They were restricted to an island called Murano, so their knowledge could be protected and Venice could set the price of their glass and control the market. They had secret knowledge that set them apart.

But we don't want the gospel to be a secret. We want everybody to know.

There was a group of people in Paul's day called the Gnostics. They claimed to have secret knowledge. They said that material things were evil and taught that people should deprive themselves of food and other pleasures. Paul says not to let them insist on this "asceticism".

Our bodies were made by God and it's good to enjoy them. We certainly don't gain much by starving ourselves and wearing a jaggy shirt.

He mentions the worship of angels. It is thought that these people had a false humility such that they could not worship God directly: they weren't good enough. Instead they took a step down and worshipped angels. Not only was this forbidden (in Romans 1v25 Paul say "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator") but it was also a false premise. Through the goodness of Christ we have direct access to the father. We don't rely on our own goodness for this but wholly on Jesus. So we don't worship angels, saints or any created being. We come before the presence of God the Father and worship him. That was the message behind the veil being ripped in two in the temple when Jesus was crucified. Through the blood of Christ we have access to the holy of holies, being made clean and righteous.

And then he talks about visions. The Gnostics would claim that they had special knowledge, given only to a select few, special revelation from God. And this is something that still happens today. People will tell you they have a word from God, that he has given to just them. Be very wary, and test everything with God's word. That is his revelation. As the gospel was spreading across Asia and Europe there was a group of believers in a place called Berea. And they're given a special mention in the book of Acts: Acts 17v11 - "they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."

God doesn't intend the gospel to be a secret, given to just a privileged few. He made it open, transparent, simple to grasp, and for everyone. Paul says the people teaching these things have become detached from the Head, Jesus. The church only has life, only grows, if it has Christ at the head, and we grow together as a body, not under an elite layer of specially favoured chosen ones.

Finally Paul urges us not to:

Return to Useless Rules

v20-21: If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"

He says don't go back to the old ways of trying to do it yourself. It doesn't work. Jesus has done it all and you have a new life to live.

Imagine trying to light a fire in the olden days. Rubbing two sticks together for minutes or hours, trying to get heat into them and spark a flame. Then imagine being given a box of matches. Suddenly everything changes. Instant flame, with so little effort. You would never want to go back to the old way.

That's what Paul is saying here. They had previously known the struggle of trying to live up to God's standards. And that just proved to be impossible. When they accepted and followed Jesus, suddenly there was no effort required. Jesus had done it all. Oh, the Lord wanted them to live good and holy lives now, but not to try and earn salvation - instead it was as a thanksgiving offering for the grace that God had already poured on them. Why would they think about going back to the life of strict rules and regulations? A life they had died to.

Paul finishes by warning that these can sometimes seem wise, they seem to make a kind of sense. But in fact they are useless, and do nothing to help you avoid sin.

Conclusion

So Paul is concerned about the Colossians. He sees the possibility of them straying from the true message of the gospel - that new life is given through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ once and for all to all who believe. He urges them:

- Not to be pressured into complying with old testament practises
- Not to be swayed by those claiming to have special knowledge
- Not to fall back into trying to earn their salvation by obeying rules

How does this apply to us today? We live in a judgemental time. Every man and his dog wants to tell us what to think and how to act. And it's no bad thing to examine ourselves: our attitudes, thoughts and actions. But we must remember that our position in Christ does not depend on right thoughts, right words, right actions. It doesn't depend on any secret knowledge or special abilities. It rests wholly on him who has paid the price for our sin. If you have believed on him then you are saved and you are secure.

If you don't know Jesus as your saviour, please don't try and do good deeds to win your way to heaven. And don't go looking for mystical secrets that promise some sort of enlightenment. Just open up your Bible and read about God's son. Read about how he went to the cross to pay the price of your debt of sin. And ask him for forgiveness, that you can be included in that great redemption.

So have your mince and tatties, and enjoy them. Even take a picture of them and share it with the world. Praise God for what he's given you, and most of all praise him for his son, who has given you freedom and new life.