

REFLECTION GUIDE

COLOSSIANS 2:16-23

COMMON MISTAKES SPIRITUAL SEEKERS MAKE

KEY TERMS

Festival/new moon/Sabbath - These are Jewish holy days found in the OT with the Sabbath being a weekly celebration, new moons a monthly celebration, and festivals as annual celebrations.

Shadow - With this term Paul is using a popular image from Greek philosophy of a "shadow" and corresponding "substance." Plato famously used this concept in his allegory of the cave. Paul's point is that OT laws and holy days are not bad, but they are only echoes of the reality which was to come (and now has).

Pass judgement/disqualify - The first of these terms, *pass judgment*, has the sense of a legal decision, while the second, *disqualify*, was used for those regulating athletics. This was not just a matter of one group disagreeing or arguing with another, but it appears that there was a group of Christians in Colossae saying that others were to be excluded from the church based on their participation (or lack of participation) in religious rules and rituals.

DID YOU KNOW?

Verse 22 so closely echoes Jesus' words in Matt 15:1-20 and Mark 7:1-23 that most commentators believe Paul is directly drawing from Jesus' teaching on the subject.

BACKGROUND

After reminding the Colossians of what Jesus has done for them once again, Paul begins to encourage the church and to combat some false teaching in Colossae. First, he says, *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* (v. 16). Because the Colossians have been saved and *made alive* by Jesus, they do not need to worry about keeping the dietary laws or festivals. Paul says that these things are only a *shadow* of reality, but Jesus is the *substance* of the realities they pointed towards (v. 17). He continues, this time saying, *Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions* (v. 18). If the first issue was over OT rules and regulations, the issue now seems to be mystical spiritual experience. Paul's message of Jesus' supremacy and power over even this controversy is clear. Jesus is the *Head* of the church who nourishes his people and gives growth (v. 19; see Col 1:18 & Eph 1:22-23). Paul then rhetorically asks, *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 [them]* (v. 20)? Paul is reminding the Colossian Christians that in Christ they've been set free from the tyranny of religious rules and regulations or seeking God through mysterious religious experiences. Paul is not anti-rules or anti-religious experiences. His point again is that those things were only ever meant to be a means to the end of knowing God, and now Jesus is the *only* means needed. He ends this section saying that religious trappings look wise and attractive, but what every person actually needs is Jesus (v. 23).

GOING DEEPER

Read Galatians 5:1-15 and Romans 14:1-23. What does Galatians 5 teach about the freedom believers have in Christ? Why do you think Paul connects freedom in Christ with love for others? How does Paul's teaching in Romans 12 challenge you?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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LEARNING THE WORD

1. Read Colossians 2:16-23. What is the main idea? What is difficult to understand?
2. Paul gives three warnings in Colossians 2, an overall warning in verse 8 followed by specific warnings in verses 16-18. Summarize the three warnings below:
 - Colossians 2:8 – Don't let anyone _____.
 - Colossians 2:16 – Don't let anyone _____.
 - Colossians 2:18 – Don't let anyone _____.
3. Paul is concerned that these believers, many of whom are likely young in their faith, are in danger of being led away from Christian faith. What is Paul's solution to each of these potential problems (see v. 9-10, v. 17, vv. 19-20)?
4. When you consider the erroneous approaches mentioned in Colossians 2, where did each originate (v. 8, v. 22, v. 23)?
5. What do you think it looks like for self-made solutions turn out to be *empty deceit* or the mere *appearance of wisdom*, or of *no value for stopping the indulgence of the flesh*?

LIVING THE WORD

6. In Colossians 2:19, what does it mean to live by *holding fast to the Head*, which is Christ?
7. What happens when believers live by *holding fast to the Head* (v. 19)?
8. Read Colossians 2:6-7, which is the heart of this chapter. When you consider your own spiritual life, how are you doing currently? Are you walking closely with Christ? Are you growing deep roots, being nourished and strengthened in Christ? Are you tempted to look away toward some solution that is not according to Christ?