

[Colossians 2:16-23](#)

Freedom in Christ: Fruit of Gospel Hope

Introduction

As I was preparing this sermon, the realization of my lack of dependence upon the Lord Jesus for my freedom in Him kept jabbing at me. Even as our small group discussed the topic of freedom in Christ this past week, the Holy Spirit convicted me of my insistence to "add-on" to the finished work of Christ. And to top it off, I depend upon myself and others to try harder in finding favor with God, as if that solidifies our standing with Him.

But wait! What if the church, the body of Christ, celebrated its freedom through dependence upon Christ and Him alone? No add-ons needed. Freedom in Christ means the debt of sin is cancelled, along with its legal demands. Man-made rules and regulations are no longer binding. No need for trying harder to find favor with God. Dependence upon Jesus for freedom is all that matters. Nothing more and nothing less.

The apostle Paul dealt with this very sort of thing with the church at Colossae. He wanted the church then, and now, to understand there is reason to celebrate freedom in Christ. So, here are three (3) points that we can take away from today's text ([Colossians 2:16-23](#)). With regard to ourselves and others, freedom in Christ means there is absolutely:

- No passing judgment (vs 16-17)
- No disqualification (vs 18-19)
- No need to try harder (vs 20-23)

Freedom in Christ - No Passing Judgment

Passing judgment means to pronounce a sentence upon or claim the right to decide for someone else. In the context of these verses ([Colossians 2:16-17](#)), Christians were judged on whether or not there was adherence to Jewish traditions in addition to salvation in Christ. This was determined by what they ate and drank, as well as whether they attended Jewish festivals, made sacrifices during a new moon or participated in keeping a Sabbath.

For example, the Mosaic Law spelled out to the Jews which animals could be eaten ([Leviticus 11](#)). Festivals, such as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks and Feast of Tabernacles, were all times to remember God's faithfulness ([Leviticus 23](#)). A new moon festival was considered a time where sacrifices were offered and the new month was consecrated to God ([Numbers 10:10](#)). The Jewish Sabbath is at the end of the week, commemorating God resting from His work of creation ([Exodus 20:8-10](#)).

Jewish leaders taught that all of these laws and ceremonies were binding on all who trusted Christ. However, God's Word stipulates the truth that there is freedom in Christ ([Romans 8:1-2](#)). Legal demands of the law are no longer binding. The debt of sin which prevents anyone from keeping the law was completely cancelled by Jesus' death on the cross. That's the essence of the gospel, the good news message that Christ died for

sinners. There is freedom in Christ. That's the good news message of the cross. Here's [Colossians 2:13-14](#).

¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

[Col 2:13-14](#) (ESV)

So the apostle Paul emphasized that no one had the right to impose on Christians any of the Mosaic laws or ceremonies. Neither could anyone condemn those in Christ if they didn't keep these. Sacrifices, celebrations and Sabbath rest were a shadow of the things to come. They pointed to Jesus as the perfect sacrifice, the celebration of salvation and the One in whom eternal rest is found. After all, shadows aren't the real thing; they're an outline. The Lord Jesus is the real thing. He is the substance of gospel hope.

Gospel hope is not about keeping rules and ceremonies. Those won't draw us closer to God. In fact, there are two dangerous things that can happen. First, keeping rules and ceremonies may look good on the outside, but on the inside, hearts are evil and far from God. Jesus warned the religious leaders, the Pharisees, about this. Here's [Matthew 23:28](#).

So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

[Matt 23:28](#) (ESV)

Second, passing judgment creates a stumbling block to brothers and sisters in Christ. Here's [Romans 14:13](#).

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

[Romans 14:13](#) (ESV)

Take for example the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Whether intended or not, passing judgment on what others should do or shouldn't do with regard to COVID-19 can be a stumbling block. This applies to the entire spectrum of viewpoints from masks to social distancing. Whether spoken or written, judgmental remarks can be perceived as inflammatory. They're like a spark that sets the whole forest ablaze. Passing judgment has negative effects on people, including the church. It causes division, not unity. People stay home. People get angry. People gossip and slander. All of this can be a stumbling block to brothers and sisters in Christ.

What stumbling blocks are you and me laying? Has our interaction with others, whether it be verbal, written or by our actions, shown the love of Christ? What's more important, our individual freedoms or freedom in Christ? Jesus Himself warned about trying to fix others, while we ourselves need fixing. Here's [Matthew 7:3](#).

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?

[Matt 7:3](#) (ESV)

Passing judgment is not the fruit of gospel hope. It's the bad fruit of self-supremacy and self-righteousness. Freedom in Christ is suppressed. And when freedom in Christ is suppressed, there's a tendency to view others as disqualified because of what they do or don't do.

Freedom in Christ - No Disqualification

The emphasis here is that freedom in Christ means no disqualification for the believer ([Colossians 2:18-19](#)). Disqualified from what and why? What - the body of Christ. Why - by not meeting standards of worship and conduct someone other than God has determined. In other words, unless you do certain things, you're not qualified to be a Christian.

Consider the following statement: "Unless you abstain from cussing, smoking, drinking, dancing and playing cards, you can't be a Christian." This was the gospel as I knew it growing up in the "Bible Belt" of the South. Adhering to certain strict practices was supposed to bring one closer to God. Little did I know then that this is defined as asceticism. Asceticism is the practice of austere self-discipline in order to bring unity with God. It would be similar to an athlete in training following strict guidelines with regard to diet, exercise and rest. Why not apply those same principles to worshipping God?

However, asceticism can actually be dangerous. In reality, practicing disciplines that set us apart from others for religious reasons is faulty. In fact, it's a faulty and phony religion. Freedom in Christ isn't found in religiosity. Religion involves much time and effort investing in keeping rules. There's little investment in treasuring the Lord Jesus. Religion gets in the way of the gospel.

The gospel is all about the body of Christ, the church, holding fast to the Lord Jesus, the Head of the body ([Colossians 1:18](#)). Scripture states the whole body of Christ is nourished and knit together through its various members, which are those trusting Christ. Unless the Head is attached to the body, it dies. In Christ, the body is alive; it is nourished and grows. That growth comes from God, who qualifies all the members of the body.

Fill in the blank: Christ plus _____ equals salvation. What did you fill in the blank with? The answer is zero or nothing. That's what qualifies a believer. Christ alone! Nothing else. God Himself, through the work of the Holy Spirit, qualifies every believer. And every believer can give thanks to God. God's qualification for those trusting Him is totally based on the precious blood of Jesus, which was shed on the cross for sinners like you and me. Here's [Colossians 1:12-14](#).

¹² ...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Col 1:12-14 (ESV)

What qualifications are we basing our acceptance with God? Are we turning prayer, worship, serving and charitable giving into religious disciplines? They look good on the outside. Meanwhile, on the inside there's a stone-cold heart that is far from God. Ceremonies and rituals don't qualify us to be made right with God. Strictly adhering to rules and regulations won't save us. Trying harder to appease God doesn't make us righteous. The Lord Jesus Christ is our only hope, our only freedom.

At the 2019 graduation ceremony at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, the commencement speaker announced that he and his family would donate millions of dollars to erase the student loan debt of every graduate. Imagine the relief and the freedom of those whose debt was paid in full, for some as much as \$100,000.

That's a thumbnail-illustration. The enormity of God erasing the debt of sin is staggering. It's an eternal gift undeserved, yet given anyway. That's God's grace. If you're in Christ, your debt for sin is paid in full by the precious blood of Jesus. Once you were bound for eternal hell and damnation apart from Christ. Now, being found in Him means trusting, savoring and treasuring Him forever. That's freedom in Christ, the fruit of gospel hope. In Him, grace abounds; freedom resounds.

If you had been one of the students at Morehouse College, would you have turned down the gift of having all of your debt paid in full? Of course not! If you did, that would be like turning down the cure for COVID-19. If you haven't received Christ, you can be set free by God from your enormous debt of sin. Why would you turn away from Him? To do so is saying "no" to the richest, most unfathomable gift of freedom a person could ever have - Christ Himself.

Do you have freedom in Christ? If not, today is the day of salvation. Repent and believe. Turn to Jesus. Experience a change of heart and mind that treasures Him more than life. Receive God's gift of freedom in Christ through faith alone by God's grace alone. Once set free from sin, the fruit you reap leads to holiness, and the outcome is eternal life ([Romans 6:22](#)). That's true freedom, which means there's no need to try harder to find favor with God.

Freedom in Christ - No Need to Try Harder

Right out of the gate, the apostle Paul admonished the church at Colossae ([Colossians 2:20-23](#)). He warned them about false teaching, which encouraged submitting to man-made rules and regulations instead of being totally rooted and built up in Christ. In essence, Paul was saying "Beware of those who try to convince you to live like people of the world when you're people of God" In fact, here's what he stated in [Colossians 2:8](#).

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

[Col 2:8](#) (ESV)

Why look to the world, which is controlled by man-made rules of "do's" and "don'ts"? In fact, turning back to the world's ways instead of embracing freedom in Christ Himself is like leaving a vacation at the Grand Canyon to sit in a ditch and make mud pies. If Christ has set you free, you are free indeed ([John 8:36](#)). A Christian lives in the freedom of an identity found in Christ. But to some degree, we can all struggle with trying harder in order to find favor with God.

Consider an entanglement with lust. Believe me, I can relate to that. How about you? Reading my Bible more, meeting with the church regularly, and giving generously to charity won't resolve the issue. Doing more and trying harder has the appearance of wisdom. But what appears to be of value is in reality of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh ([Colossians 2:23](#)). Therefore, it's a matter of the heart and not about trying harder.

If I'm trying to find favor with God by making up for what I've done or haven't done, I'm wasting my time. Favor with God is found only through Christ. His completeness, perfection and purity are mine because I belong to Him. My heart, which is deceptive and evil ([Jeremiah 17:9](#)), needs to die to sin and live by faith in Christ. Here's [Galatians 2:20](#).

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

[Gal 2:20](#) (ESV)

A person who has true freedom in Christ experiences a change on the inside. There's a dependence on Jesus birthed by the Holy Spirit. Abdication of the reign of sin is needed. In fact, until a person confesses sin and admits the need for God's grace and mercy, there is no change of heart; there's no real lasting freedom from sin. Here's what Paul Tripp, pastor and author, says about bringing true change in a person's heart. "So what we need most is not a change of locations or relationship, but a fundamental rescue of the heart, and that is exactly what God's grace in the person of the Holy Spirit provides for us." That's freedom which is grounded in Christ. That's the fruit of gospel hope.

Conclusion

Here's one last Scripture, which reiterates what freedom in Christ is all about. Take a look at [Romans 8:1-2](#).

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

[Romans 8:1-2](#) (ESV)

In closing, here's something to think about. In a culture that's adamant about individual rights and freedoms, to what or whom do we ultimately depend upon for freedom? If freedom isn't in Christ alone, then we have no real freedom at all. Not from sin, not from death, not from anything. The reality of living in a sin-filled, broken world means we'll continue passing judgment, often in condemnation, about what others should do and shouldn't do. We'll continue to disqualify others because they don't follow certain rules

and regulations. And we'll continue imposing on others and ourselves an "if-only-we-would-try-harder" attitude. None of this matters. Freedom in Christ, wrought by the Holy Spirit, is the fruit of gospel hope. It is totally dependent upon the Lord Jesus. That's what matters. Nothing more and nothing less. Amen.