



SESSION OBJECTIVE: COLOSSIANS 2:20-3:4

To understand how Jewish festivals point to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Reprogrammed

There are not many franchises as storied as *Star Wars*. The very first installation, *A New Hope*, redefined the sci-fi genre, and every movie after that contributed to the lore surrounding that wonderful galaxy far, far away. It wasn't until somewhat recently, the fabled saga saw a sequel trilogy (which in true *Star Wars* fandom fashion was met with very mixed reviews). Sandwiched in the midst of the new trilogy, however, was a standalone film that took the spotlight: *Rogue One*. There are a lot of great characters and a fun amount of nostalgic throw-backs to the original trilogy, but one of the fan favorite additions was the reprogrammed Imperial security droid, K-2SO. K-2SO was a walking contradiction; an Imperial unit programmed to be committed to the Alliance. He injects a fair amount of humor into the film and fills an essential role in the band of rebels' plan to thwart the Empire's newest creation, the Death Star. He also is a good picture of something that the Apostle Paul talks about in this week's passage.

In Colossians 2:20-3:4, Paul untangles a strange conundrum in the heart of the believer. Christians endure a constant struggle between the flesh that they are bound to and the Spirit, now made alive by Christ, within them (Rom. 7:21-25). It's as if we've been reprogrammed; an Imperial shell with a heart for the Alliance (nerd alert). This week we will talk about what it means to, "set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2). But what does he mean by the things that are on the earth? What philosophies, ideologies, and worldviews threaten our focus?

The Context

Colossians 2:20-23 is best understood as a continuation of the passage that we discussed last week. The heresy that had infiltrated Colossae was distinctively Jewish in flavor, as it elevated the feasts and sacred days of Judaism to a point beyond the substance to which those things pointed (Jesus). Paul sought to encourage the Gentile believers to not be burdened, or fall under judgment from these false teachers for not practicing these rituals, but he certainly didn't condemn the practices by believing Jews with the right frame of context in mind either. This is a formula that we will apply later, so remember it: *"Don't be taken captive by [ideology/philosophy/framework], but don't be condemned for viewing it in the right frame of context, either."*

THE RIGHT LENSES

The central theme of Colossians is Christ as the central and supreme authority in not only creation at large, but within the church body and the individual believer's life. Jesus' position of power should influence the way Christianity is played out. What that means, then, is that a believer will have no choice but to see these Jewish rituals differently than he saw them prior to salvation. Imagine that you are wearing a pair of red colored glass. Everything you see is tinted red as a result of the lens you are looking through. But then, the moment you are born again, you lose those red tinted glasses and put on some Jesus' colored glasses (we'll say blue from here on out, for simplicity). Now, you see the same world you've always seen, but it's no longer red. This sudden change of color causes you to look at everything you've always seen more slowly and cautiously. You see things a little differently. Perhaps the red tint shaded certain things a certain way, but now that you see things through a blue colored lens, some of the flaws and imperfections of what you've always looked at are more noticeable.

This is what Paul is calling the believers in Colossae to understand - these rituals, religious behaviors, and heretical rules all possess, "an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh" (Col. 2:23). With the red lenses, they look like wisdom! They appear to be good for disciplining the sinful urges of the flesh. The blue glasses, however, reveal the truth: they are of no value in actually accomplishing anything spiritual. There were strict rules instituted by these false teachers in verse 21, ("Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch"), but they fall short in executing spiritual development because they don't address the deeper spiritual problem of sin.

REGULATIONS

In verse 20, Paul says, "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?" The word here for "regulations" in the Greek is the word *δογματίζω* (*dogmatizō*), from which we get our English words *dogma* and *dogmatic*. The idea here in these regulations is that they are not merely rules; they are oppressive. It carries with it the concept of dominion over the person adhering to it. In other words, these regulations are meant to provide identity to the person keeping them; if you follow these regulations, it is something *you are known for*.

A BETTER FOCUS

Rather than insisting on such frail attempts at sanctification, Paul has an alternative suggestion: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1). The aim of the false teachers was a commitment to earthly, religious practice, but Paul is suggesting that we are to seek heavenly things. To, "set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2). These few verses in the beginning of chapter 3 establish a couple of really important truths. For one, the ability to set one's mind on heavenly things is an ability reserved only for

Christians. Paul says, “If then you have been raised with Christ,” indicated he is speaking to believers (there is almost a baptismal element to his language here). It is impossible to reflect on heavenly things and not be perpetually distracted by the currents of the world unless you know Jesus as Savior.

Secondly, this speaks to where the battle for the Christian is located: the mind. Paul says in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” It is not behavior that transforms us into the image of Christ. Our behavior does not dictate our mindset, but our mindset directs our behavior. It is a dangerous place when our behavior shapes our mindset. The battle of the mind is not won by sheer religious commitment or pious behavior but by setting the mind on the things of Christ: grace, unconditional love, compassion, justice, and mercy. That means that what you fill your mind with will dictate your spiritual condition to a great degree. I don’t mean merely policing movies, music, or media (although not everything is profitable). On the contrary, I mean the disposition of your thought life. You can watch no TV, only listen to worship music, if your mind is constantly fixed upon what people think of you (performancism), you will have lost the battle. On the other hand, if you watch movies, listen to some secular music, and read comic books, and your mind is fixed upon the grace of God and the freedom you have in Christ, you will be truly setting your mind on the things that are above. The battle of the mind is not won by religious rigor, but by recognizing that you have died to your own desires, and now find your life in Christ (Col. 3:3-4).

Making an Application

There are a number of applications that could be made from this text, but for the sake of time and context, I will narrow this study down to two areas in which this passage applies to us today. Certainly there are false teachers in the world who seek to derail the Christian Gospel. Many great preachers and teachers have done a fine job of calling attention to these heresies in an effort to protect newer believers from these dangerous heresies (The Prosperity Gospel, Liberation Gospel, Modalism, etc.). However, there are other brands of ideology that, in my opinion, are much more pervasive because they don’t appear as “heresies” in the general sense. Because of this, they find their way into the lives of Christians and often put them at odds with biblical living. For example, a strong dogmatic adherence to a political ideology (on either side) is exactly the kind of earthly focus that Paul is speaking against. Christians, especially in America (where individual freedoms are emphasized more), can often become more concerned with their freedoms as American citizens than their freedoms in Christ. This is dangerous territory. It is good to, “render to Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Matt. 22:21), but we often forget the second part of that verse: “...and to God what is God’s.” It is good to be subject to the governing authorities you live and exist under (Rom. 13:1), but also recognizing that God is the highest authority.

Consider what you speak the most about. Is it the kingdom of heaven, or something of this world? The answer to that question will tell you what you have set your mind on. Now, remember that rule that I told you to remember? I will state it again: “*Don’t be taken captive by [ideology/philosophy/framework], but don’t be condemned for viewing it in the right frame of context, either.*” Understand that things like politics are similar to these sacred days in that they should never be the primary lens you view the world through, but they also should not be totally abandoned. We need Godly men and women to think deeply about political and ethical issues. However, we also must realize that no governing authority holds the keys to our salvation either, and that regardless of what happens in our world, Jesus is King. Don’t be taken captive, but don’t be condemned for viewing such things in the right frame of context, either.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Colossians 2:20. What question is Paul posing here? To what have Christians died? What are the regulations that Paul speaks of? What do these regulations really mean? (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read Colossians 2:21. What are the three commands that were apparently prominent among the false teachers in Colossae? What were they likely connected to?

Day Two

1. Read Colossians 2:22. What two things were these commands according to?

2. Read Colossians 2:23. What did these commands have an appearance of? What three reasons were given for this? Did they actually accomplish anything of value? Why or why not?

Day Three

1. Read Colossians 3:1. If you have been raised with Christ, what are you to seek? Where is Christ located, according to this verse?

2. Read Colossians 3:2. What things should Christians think about? What things should Christians not think about?

Day Four

1. Read Colossians 3:3. What truth is revealed in this passage? Where is your life located?

2. Read Colossians 3:4. When will you appear with Him in glory?

Week 9 Discussion: Law and Grace

The passage we are studying this week hinges greatly on the distinction between law and grace. The Christian life is often attempted through the law, but it is a futile attempt. We are not made right with God by our own merits, but through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is His righteousness, not our own, that the Father sees and is pleased with. Thus, as we live our life under His Lordship, it is not our behavior that transforms us, but our minds fixed upon the Gospel. Talk as a group this week about why rules and regulations are easier and more tempting to live by over grace, but why they also fail us.

1. Icebreaker: Do you consider yourself a, “rule follower?”
2. When you think about living a life pleasing to God, do you think more about commandments or relationship? Why?
3. Does your relationship with Christ shape your obedience to God’s commandments, or does your obedience to God’s commandments shape your relationship with Christ? Why?
4. Do you ever break God’s commandments? How do you feel when you do so? What gives you peace when you know you’ve sinned?
5. What is the purpose, in your opinion, of the commandments?

Takeaways:

1. The demands of the false teachers in Colossae were not capable of affecting spiritual transformation.
2. Believers are to fix their minds upon the things of Christ, and not on earthly ideologies or philosophies.