

# A Free People

Colossians 2:16-23

Pastor Duane Smets

May 26th, 2019

- I. Freedom From Others
- II. Freedom From Self
- III. Freedom From Christ

Good morning everyone. Happy memorial weekend to you all. Tomorrow is memorial day, a day when we remember with gratitude all the American soldiers who died in efforts to either acquire or protect the freedoms we enjoy in our country. To date 1,265,045 US soldiers lost their lives for you and I. Can we just pause for a second and say “thank you”? Let’s let them hear our thanks!

George Washington, the very first president of the United States, who led the very first battle in the American Revolutionary War for independence from Great Britain addressed his soldiers before the battle began. Here’s what he said,

“The time is now near at hand which must probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves . . . The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army. Our cruel and unrelenting enemy leaves us only the choice of brave resistance, or the most abject submission. We have, therefore, to resolve to conquer or die.”

If you’re new to our church, our basic practice for this part of our service is take 25 minutes or so and to read and study the Bible together. The main book in the Bible we’re going through as a church is the New Testament book called Colossians and then when Pastor Buss fills in for me, he’s now taking us through the Old Testament book known as Malachi.

Quite providentially, it just so happens that the next section we’re studying together in Colossians is all about freedom...a fitting passage for this weekend. The title of my sermon today is “A Free People.” Would you stand with me as we read this this incredible, piercing passage which is perhaps one of the best and clearest passages addressing the freedom Jesus Christ purchased and won for all who believe in and follow Him.

## **Colossians 2:16-23 16**

*16 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. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 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, 19 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.*

*20 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— 21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and*

*teachings? 23 These have indeed 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.*

Well, I know a lot of people are traveling this weekend. I heard on the radio that due to the economy doing well and us increasingly becoming a people who like to take trips and go places that experts are expecting record numbers of travelers. But if you happened to have traveled here or just decided to do one of the best things you can ever do on a Sunday and come to church...welcome!!!

You've actually come on a really good Sunday because I think the passage of the Bible we are looking at addressing one of the most critical things facing churches in America today and really taps into one of the things that really makes us unique as a church.

We're a church who has made it a point in our fourteen year history to make the freedom we have from Christ, sometimes called "Christian liberty", a real value that we have fought to protect. And, I believe it is one of the most important things for us if we truly want to grow as people and enjoy the life God means for us to have.

We're a church where you are free to come as you are, there's no dress code or expectation that you need to be all good and have your life all together to get in the door here. We've got young people, old people, successful people, poor people, people who's lives are going well, people who's lives are falling apart, Christians, not yet Christians.

It doesn't matter who you are, where you're at in life, or how well you're doing...there is a place for you here. This is a place where you are free, free to come and experience the love of God...with no conditions whatsoever. That's the deepest longing of my heart for every one of us today.

I've got three points for us to work through from our text in the Bible today, "Freedom From Others", "Freedom From Self", and "Freedom From Christ." I'll probably end up saying the word "free" like a thousand times and that's intentional. It's my goal today to hammer into our heads that we are free because of Christ. There is a life of freedom Jesus Christ offers to us so we can live free lives, free from all the things that try to drag us down and destroy us. Free. Even just that word sounds so good.

## **I. Freedom From Others**

Alright, let's get into it. I'm taking this first point, "Freedom From Others" from the very first line of our passage that says, "Let no one pass judgment on you" and also from the beginning of verse 18 that says, "Let no one disqualify you."

Do you guys know what all-ness words are? They're words like, always, never, everyone and no one. The funny thing about all-ness words is most of the time we use them they're actually not true. If it's always, never, everyone and no one that means without exception, that there is not one case or scenario that could provide any example of the contrary.

I feel like I hear this pretty regularly from our kids. A couple Fridays ago one of our daughters really wanted to go out to dinner at this one restaurant she loves and asked if we could go there for dinner. I

said, "Sorry honey, we're not going to do that tonight." And then the phrase came. "We never get to do anything fun!"

I said, "That's funny because I think I remember us all going out to eat and going bowling last Friday night. Are you sure you NEVER get to do anything fun?"

The difference with God is He speaks perfectly, so when He says "never" or "no one" He actually means no one and it's true. We've got two "no one's" here and anytime you've got the same word or phrase repeated in the same paragraph in the Bible that's intentional. It's meant to add weight, emphasis and importance. It's like saying, no matter what, make sure you get this!

So our first no one is let "no one pass judgment on you" and then gives a few examples of things people back then and often still today judge others for.

It seems to me that we live in a very judgmental society. There is a lot of critiquing, sizing up, evaluating and judging people that sure happens a lot and often it's coupled with insults about a person and what they do, value and who they are. Anyone can say anything and it's almost like you're guilty until proven innocent.

That old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is a total lie. Words are what hurt the most. They cut deep. The book of James in the Bible says the tongue is wild fire full of deadly poison.

The amount of critiquing and constant judging I see in the news and on social media and that I hear when people talk bad about other people behind their back just makes me sick. And sometimes it seems even worse or particularly bad among Christians and churches. Sometimes Christians and Christianity seem to me to be a group of people who are all in this spiritual competition to see who can be the best, who can be perfect, who can be the most like Jesus.

Guess what! You'll never be like Jesus. There is only one of Him and He was and is better than any of us could ever hope to become. And that's kind of the point, it's actually the reason He came to earth and did what He did.

Brennan Manning who's a Christian author I like says, "The American Church today accepts grace in theory but denies it in practice." I think a lot of times he's right.

Here's a definition of judgment and what it is to judge: "To judge is to hold one guilty of a crime or to impose a scruple of conscience so that we are no longer free."

The funny thing about judgment, especially the kind I most often hear from "Christians" is that most of the time the things they are evaluating and critiquing each other for are not even things that aren't even in the Bible! Things like our passage talks about, like what we eat meat or not, whether or not we drink alcohol or not, whether we go to parties or not, or whether or not you're into the moon and the stars or what you do on your Sabbath day of rest. I'd add to that list whether or not you smoke, what you smoke, what TV or movies you watch, whether you use "bad words" or not, who you vote or not and even among some what kind of sex you have or not.

Guess what, there are no rules about any of that stuff in the Bible. If it's not in the Bible, it means God didn't say it and we do not have the freedom to bind people's conscience to things God didn't say. We believe the Bible is final and exhaustive and that God is really good at making things clear in it. If there is something God really cared about He would have put it in the book! So if it's not in there, you're free, free to do what you want and enjoy what you want. And I believe God actually delights in us enjoying the things He's made and gifted us with.

We'll talk more about this in our next point but for now I simply want to give some Biblical and Gospel guidelines on judgment and disqualification, these things we're not to allow anyone to do to us.

The first reason we're not to allow anyone to judge us is we are not judges. God is the judge. And there's actually a ton of verses in the Bible that say this. Here's just a few.

*"Judgment is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." - Romans 12:19*

*"4 It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment." - 1 Corinthians 4:4-5*

*"The Lord will judge his people." - Hebrews 10:30*

*"Judge not." - Matthew 7:1* Pretty clear, straight from Jesus Himself.

Typically it's when we have a problem with something that God has to say it over and over again until we get the point. So it seems this judge-i-ness has been a pretty big problem for a long time amongst mankind.

The first reason then we are not to judge is because God is the judge and He's a perfect judge and we can trust Him to do what is right and fair when He judges everyone.

Here's the second reason, when we do stand before God the judge we actually don't want what is right and fair because, like we said earlier none of us are Jesus. So when all of our lives are uncovered and laid bare before God, the right and fair judgment isn't going to be a good one, so what we need is grace and forgiveness.

Which brings us to the third reason we're not to judge and it's because Jesus was judged for us in our place on the cross. The Bible's teaching and one of the big reasons it says Jesus is so good is that He took the place of judgment for us on the cross receiving the eternal sentence we deserve for the things that are actually in the Bible, namely running from God and trampling on His gift of life to us.

It's because of Jesus and what He did that we then qualify to be accepted by God. We don't and can't qualify ourselves no matter how hard we try. So then, we CANNOT allow anyone to judge or or disqualify us for ANYTHING because Jesus was already judged for us which qualifies us to be friends with God.

It's for this reason one Bible commentator I read this week titled this passage, "Guard your freedom" because when people judge you or try to make you qualify yourself it essentially tramples on the freedom Jesus Christ purchased for us on the cross! Because of Jesus we are free, free from others, free from other people's evaluation, criticism and judgment.

I want to wrap up this point with a quote with one of the best books I've read on this recently. It's titled, "When Being Good Isn't Good Enough." It's written by a man who is older now named Steve Brown. He was a pastor for forty years as well as a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary. Here's what he says on this,

*"For years, as a pastor and counselor, I dealt with the lack of Christian freedom in myself and in others. Over and over again I saw people, who ought to be joyful, free Christians, suffer a strange, unhealthy bondage to the world and to the opinions of other Christians.*

*The message of the gospel is a message of freedom. A Nazarene carpenter went to a lot of trouble to "set the prisoners free," and we dare not ignore the price He paid nor spurn the gift He offers. The sound of the hammer driving nails into His hands and feet was a horrible sound—until someone checked the grave and saw that it was empty. Then we listened again. It had become the sound of freedom. "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36)."*

Friends, family, hear me today, you are free from the judgement and criticism of others. If someone you know, love and trust comes to you truly concerned about something, that's a whole different thing, but if people are just taking shots at you from the outside and they don't really know you...you can't just tell them to talk to the hand because the face don't want to hear it and they can't take their judgment and criticism somewhere else. We are free, free in and because of Christ.

## **II. Freedom From Self**

Alright, we got a lot to talk about in this next point, "Freedom From Self." I told Pastor Buss I could preach on these verses for a month. Maybe one day we'll do a whole series on Christian liberty? So we won't be able to talk about every word and every little thing in our passage but I do want to dive down into the weeds just a bit.

Most of the people in the ancient church of Colossae that this letter book was originally written to were Greco-Romans, who were pretty wrapped up into Greek culture and religious pluralism, which was actually a lot like our culture here and now today in San Diego. People liked to party, they were into astrology, dieting, exercise, being spiritual and over all trying to be good moral people by doing the right things. When it came to God and your personal religious beliefs, Rome didn't dictate it and said pretty much anything goes as long as you pay taxes and don't revolt.

There was a small population of Jews in the city, some of whom had become Christians and joined the church. And Jewish religious culture had very strict rules and belief about a lot of the things and thought most the stuff Greco-Romans were into we're bad and not pleasing to God. In fact, some thought if Greco-Romans wanted to become Christians that they had to become Jews first adopting the Jewish beliefs and practices regarding things like eating meat, drinking alcohol and enjoying sex, which by the way is what that "do not touch" line is about in verse 21. You weren't supposed to have sex unless you were trying to procreate and some even stipulated that you were only allowed to use the missionary position.

What God had the Apostle Paul write for the ancient church of Colossae and by extension for us, which He says at the end of the book, is simply genius because in a very incisive way slams both the Greco-Roman and Jewish systems and beliefs as being antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ because of what Jesus did on the cross and the freedom it acquired for us.

So I want to do something a little different today and go through the passage twice, once in how a Jewish person would read and hear it and then another time in how a Greco-Roman person would read and hear it. And I'm going to call these two different perspectives Legalism on one side and Mysticism on the other because you don't have to be Jewish or Greco-Roman to share their perspectives.

Here we go. Legalism is simply a word to summarize the idea or belief that the way to life is by being a good person. To be good you adhere or conform to the legal law, which may include the local government law, the Jewish laws or even just universal moral laws like don't murder or steal. Legalism at its core is attempt to gain favor, approval, acceptance, love and ultimately salvation from God by trying to be a good person, being very religious and doing everything right.

God handed down a lot of laws for the Jews recorded in the Old Testament. The point Jesus said was for us to realize that no matter how hard we tried we could never do it all, that none of us are perfect and that we need help. Jesus said it was His mission to come and to fulfill the law and be perfect for us on our behalf (Matthew 6:17-20).

The prophets of the Old Testament had been saying this for a long time. God had Hosea the prophet write, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6)." Burnt offerings were one of the main things that happened on the Sabbath mentioned in our Colossians passage.

Likewise David the King and Prophet who was called a man after God's heart said in Psalm 51:16-17 "16 You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Jesus liked to party, he went to lots of them. One Jesus went to a party where He was eating and drinking alcohol with "bad" people, again something our passage in Colossians talks about. These Jewish leaders called Pharisees got mad at Him, criticized Him and accused Him of being a drunkard and a glutton. In response Jesus said, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Matthew 9:13)."

The whole eating meat and drinking alcohol became such a point of tension in the early church God had a whole chapter of the Bible written about it (Romans 14) saying those who had a problem with it were not strong Christians but weak and then just says to have grace for the weak, not force them to eat meat or drink alcohol and for everyone to stop judging each other. That's why we have grape juice and real wine during communion. We try to have alcohol present almost anytime we gather, whether it's on Sundays or community group during the week, it's a great gift of God.

I'm joking. Sort of. The real issue is not alcohol or the Sabbath or sacrifices. It's putting unbiblical and ungodly rules and regulations upon people where you bind their consciences to things God has said is okay. It's exactly what verses 20-23 say in our passage in Colossians. If Christ has freed us from trying

to gain approval, acceptance, love and salvation from God by following moral laws and rules, why, why, why, why would we ever go back to trying to “submit to regulations - Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch? Verse 23 says such a way of life and religion is of NO VALUE. It’s worthless and impossible plain and simple.

John Calvin, the great theologian, church planter and pastor of the 16th century said this about this passage,

*“Traditions are a labyrinth in which consciences are more and more entangled. They are snares that bind and strangle in the end. True piety and holiness is wholeness in Christ. It does not consist in things such as food and drink and clothing which are transient, liable to corruption and perish. What religious men esteem among themselves is often an abomination in the sight of God.”*

Verse 18 calls this “insisting on asceticism.” Asceticism is fancy words imply meaning severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence, particularly for religious reasons.” Such self mortification becomes this twisted form of self exaltation where we put our selves at the center and instead of focusing on Christ we focus on self-awareness, self-esteem, self-help, self-actualization, self-reliance which in reality are all puny purity efforts.

When you focus on being good and doing good and then trying to hold everyone else up to that it ends up giving an impression of godliness but it lacks God. One’s Christianity then becomes Christless when you focus on the rules and God becomes a checklist to mark off instead of a person who loves you and wants to give you life!

I’ve gotta quote Steve Brown again on this because he’s just so good and so spot on. So here’s our forty year pastor and professor again from his book, “When Being Good Isn’t Good Enough”,

*“If you become obsessed with sin prevention it begins to take over everything you do and teach. Pretty soon you become a police officer and the the crime is sin. You spend your time trying to discern what is and isn’t sin, you emphasize “sin prevention” by teaching how to avoid sin and stay pure, and you create a disciplinary process whereby sin is punished in the name of Jesus.*

*The Christian faith isn’t about rules or religion or trying to please other people. The Christian faith is about a relationship with someone who loves you and who has given you the freedom to be His friend. The further we get from that freedom, the further we get from New Testament Christianity and the more our Christianity resembles every other religion—merely a system for keeping the baser instincts of human nature in check. In other words, Christianity becomes a system of rules and regulations. If we live by them, our Christianity becomes pure drudgery with a vague hope that God will reward us in heaven for the drudgery. If we don’t live by them, we either lie about it or give up altogether.*

*If we start with the belief that Christianity is a religious methodology to make people good or kind or loving, we will end with a set of rules and regulations. And those rules and regulations will continue to widen and broaden until the Christian faith becomes like the enslaving Pharisaic religion that Jesus detested. And then Jesus will have died in vain.”*

Friends, family, please hear me. You are free. You are free from the law. As Romans 8:2 says in the Bible, “The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”

We’ve got to stop looking to ourselves and trying to be and perform well enough for God. That’s a failed project. We simply need to look to Christ and trust Him to address the things that need to be addressed in His time and way. Salvation and sanctification are NOT our jobs, they’re His.

Well that’s legalism. I’ve had enough of it. You?

But what about mysticism? Mysticism is a word used to summarize the idea or belief that the way to life is by being spiritual. It’s mysterious, different for every person and is all about what they feel and experience when it comes to God.

This is the typical way most Greco-Romans thought about religion and it’s the way many in our city and culture think today. Maybe even in reaction to legalistic people, spiritualistic people say the point is just being spiritual in whatever form that looks like for you. It’s all based upon you, your own self and your personal experience. Mysticism at it’s core drives you inward looking for happiness and fulfillment in whatever you feel like is true, good, right or God to you.

So in ancient Colossae this resulted in a bunch of superstition about the Greek gods and what they could do for you. This also included angels like our passage mentions. Many looked to angels with supernatural powers asking them for protection for themselves and their loved ones, they would seek them for help in times of need, ask them for success, money or victory over enemies.

Angels are real and are in the Bible but they always shun attention and we’re told not to seek them. It’s one of the reasons why we don’t believe it’s appropriate to pray to either them or saints like Mary or any other godly person of history other than God Himself.

Verse 18 also mentions “going one about visions.” Like angels, visions can be real and can be from God but we’re not supposed to focus on them and get all hyped up about them. Paul himself, whom God had write Colossians says in another one of his books ( 2 Corinthians 12) that he was caught up into heaven and had an incredible vision but says he won’t talk about it because he didn’t want to take any attention off of Christ.

You see, this is what happens I think whenever anyone has some spiritual experience they think is God or think they’ve heard from God saying “God told me” and they want you to accept what they say is true and real and freeing. The problem is in their pre-occupation with their spiritual experience they elevate themselves over others because those hearing about their vision or word from the Lord would love to have a word or vision but they walk away supposing they are not spiritual enough or loved enough by God to get that.

And once again the vision or word always ends up being about them rather than putting more attention and glory on the person and work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Listen, paranormal experiences do not make you more spiritual and can actually lead you away from God. 2 Thessalonians 2:9 in the Bible says this is a favorite trick of Satan to give “false signs and wonders” which lead us into ourselves and our experience and away from Christ.



Lastly on mysticism, we've got this being "puffed up" in a "sensuous mind" in verse 18, which later gets called a "self-made religion" in verse 23. When you're relying on your own ability to reason and when you're picking and choosing what's true and right and good and loving for yourself as though who and what God is, is a buffet table it's very dangerous.

It can sound smart. It can sound reasonable. But in the end it's just self made and to think that we are that great on your own to figure out and determine what is true and right and best for our lives is an extreme arrogance and confidence in ourselves and our piddly ability to reason well.

It's puffed up. It's like a balloon. You can blow it up and it looks all big and beautiful but it's just full of air and one tiny poke deflates the whole thing. I think a lot of what passes for spiritual today is simply silly superstition and the real danger is that we then end up creating these artificial modes of worship out of it that really do not worship God but are actually worshipping ourselves and our own supposedly intellectual superiority. And it's foolish.

Here's what the Bible says,

*"Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your path straight." - Proverbs 3:5-6*

Friends, family, hear me. It is so freeing to not have the pressure of trying to figure everything out or having phenomenal spiritual experiences. We are free. Free to simply trust God, to take Him at His Word and believe that He's got us. It's not our job to determine what is true or to pursue ecstatic experiences and that's so freeing.

And that's mysticism in a big messy ball. Like legalism it too offers no hope. Both legalism and mysticism drive us into a false confidence in ourselves to save ourselves and to fix ourselves and the truth is I don't think I'm that great.

Both legalism and mysticism seem to me to be roads that diverge in opposite directions straight away from Calvary. The cross of Christ stands in the middle as the sign of our freedom, the place where we can be freed from trying and trying to be good and we can be freed from trying to either figure out everything on our own or trust some feeling or experience we tag with the name "God."

I don't know about you but it sure sounds good to be free from all of that. In the end Christianity is really simple, it just about Jesus, not us. He frees us from bondage to ourselves but giving us Himself.

Which brings us to our final point for today, a few final words on the goodness of Christ and the freedom He gives us.

### **III. Freedom From Christ**

I've been talking about Christ and the freedom He acquired for us all the way through. I pray we're starting to grasp it. There's only two things left from our passage in Colossians we've yet to touch on.

One is verse 17 and the shadow versus the substance. Christianity is a very different belief and way of life, different than anything else. And I do mean anything, an all-ness word. Everything else is shadows. They're just dark images on a wall or the floor, where you're not quite sure what the real thing looks like.

Christianity is different because it says that God came to earth in Jesus and took on a physical body in order to free us and not just free us in our minds but free our bodies from death, which is both a quality and quantity of life. The quality is a life of joy instead of life of deadness and the quantity is the promise that our very bodies get renewed and resurrected like Jesus so we can experience unending and increasing joy with God forever and ever in heaven.

Christianity does not tell us to try to appease others or even God and it does not tell us to turn to ourselves and our own good efforts, experience, reason or religion it tells us to look to Jesus Christ for everything.

Verse 19 says what we need to do is have Jesus as our head and hold fast to Him. When we do that, then our whole body, our whole person is nourished, knit together and grows with a growth that is from God. If we want freedom in life it has to come from God and He has offered it to us in Jesus. Growth is guaranteed from God when we hold on to Christ.

Many people get afraid to throw off the chains of legalism and mysticism thinking if I tell people don't worry about rules, religion or spiritual raptures that then people will go crazy, off the rails, sin and just ruin their lives. Maybe. Probably. I just think Jesus is bigger than all that. I've already done my best job at ruining my life but He's loved me anyway and not just despite my sin but including it and He is big enough and strong enough to take care of it for me.

You see it's all about Jesus. One man said to not hold on to the head is akin to not ever beholding the head. It could be that many who have thought they were Christians have never truly beheld the goodness and glory of Jesus Christ. The only and I mean THE ONLY thing we need is to behold Him and to drink deeply from the fountain of life that pours out from His blood at the cross. It's sufficient and powerful enough to free us from any and all things that enslave us. There is freedom in Christ my friends.

Saint Augustine said it this way, "Love God and do what you want." If we do that my friends, if we love God and the gift of His Son we'll be alright. We'll be free.

## **Conclusion**

Well, I started out the sermon today talking about George Washington's speech before the first war of our country when he said we must determine whether to be freemen or slaves.

In one of the most important speeches and moments in US history, Martin Luther King Jr. addressed one of the darkest blots of America, the enslavement of African Americans and he cried out, "Let freedom ring."

Today we've talked about an even darker and deadlier enslavement and I want to end the sermon today saying,

Let the freedom of Christ ring. Let freedom ring in our homes and at our tables. Let freedom ring at our places of work. Let freedom ring in our play with our friends and families. Let freedom ring in our laughter and joy. Let freedom ring in our tears and pain. Let freedom ring deep in our souls. And let the freedom of Christ ring in the ears of all who have yet to hear it's beautiful sound! Let freedom ring!!!