

The Covenants, Grace and Law (Part 21)

Colossians (B)

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In the last sermon, I began by trying to impress upon you the deep respect that the apostle Paul had for the Old Testament. This respect is shown in his very frequent use of Old Testament concepts though either direct quotations or, at times, illustrations that were taken right out of the Old Testament. Sometimes there were allusions within the arguments he was making, and sometimes there were theological themes that he used, as well.

E. Earle Ellis, who is the author of the book from which I quoted said, "Paul's use of the Old Testament cannot be understood apart from his attitudes towards it. To him, the Scriptures are holy and prophetic. They constitute the very oracles of God, and they are written for our learning." (*Our* meaning the Church of God, and that is a direct quote from Romans 15: 4.)

As I have been telling you in the last several sermons, Paul is saying that the Old Testament was written for the sake of the church. It was written with us in mind; therefore, it is not to be denigrated in any way. This is an important concept for evaluating the content of Paul's writings because, far from doing away with Old Testament laws and concepts, he was teaching their application under the New Covenant.

Basically, right at the foundation of this, the teaching is that although we cannot be justified and therefore saved by keeping them, obedience to the laws is still necessary for sanctification because this—along with God's Spirit—is the means through which God's laws, and therefore character, is written in our hearts.

We are going to begin where we began last time, in Psalm 119.

Psalm 119:1 Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law
of the LORD.

The second phrase there, "who walk in the law of the Lord," defines what is meant by *undefiled in the way*. The way to be undefiled in the way is to walk in the law of the Lord.

If you just understand the opening that I said here, and you understand that Old Testament laws have their application under the New Covenant, then you understand that Psalm 119:1 was written for you and me. The way to be undefiled in the way is to walk in the law of the Lord.

Walking is an action. It requires effort. It requires this in order to get somewhere. It is doing something. I say this because there is a teaching abroad that proclaims something like this: "You cannot overcome spiritual sin by doing physical things." Brethren, that is satanically deceptive because it does not give a person a clear picture of what God requires.

God's laws have a physical application. They are to be used. They are to be kept. They are to

be observed in our life experiences—interacting with other human beings and the rest of God's creation. The reason that they have to be observed or kept, and the reason we have to "walk," is for sanctification. Let me put that in another way: The character God is creating in us does not become ours unless His way is used, unless it is kept.

Character can be defined as highly developed traits that are so much a part of our personality that we act according to them without even thinking. Character can be good or bad. What God wants is His character, good character.

Good character can be defined as highly developed skill in living. Like any other skill, it does not become really useful without practicing it. Skill, or expertise, does not happen magically. Please remember this because at the end of the sermon this is going to become important: It is the combination of natural ability and education, training, and discipline.

I will give you an example. When I sit down at the keyboard in front of my computer, I do not have to think about where each letter is on the keyboard. Why? It is now written within me. It is a part of me that I will never forget. I think you can see that clearly. Apply that same principle in regard to God and what He is having us do. We must DO God's Word, or it never becomes a part of us.

After the opening of last week's sermon, we plunged into Colossians with the purpose of showing the background to the issue that motivated the writing of that Epistle. That issue must be understood if we are going to get a clear fix on Colossians 2:16-17, which we will get to today. Paul clearly labeled the issue, in Colossians 2:8, as a philosophy. That is going to be fundamental to the sermon today.

Colossians 2:8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy?

So the problem here is *a philosophy*. It is essential to remember this because Judaism, which is the most commonly accused culprit, was and is to this day NOT a philosophy. We saw that Paul laid the foundation in chapter 1, by admonishing the Colossians to remember what they heard in the beginning of their conversion.

Colossians 1:5 For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven,
whereof you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel.

The key for this sermon is "which you heard before." Before what? Before this philosophy became a problem, or before conversion—because hearing the gospel led to their conversion. He is taking them back all the way to the beginning, and he is doing that because he wants to remind them in what they had faith at the beginning.

This same principle is at work in our lives now. Those who have been devastated by what has happened in the Worldwide Church of God have to be taken back to the faith once delivered in order to begin rebuilding on that, or they will never recover. Paul was faced with a situation somewhat similar to that. He said, "Look, brethren, let us go back all the way to the beginning and remember what we heard in the gospel." In this case, apparently, it was preached by

Epaphras.

Paul, in chapter 1, focused on Christ. There were two things about Christ on which he focused. One was His preeminence to all things in terms of time.

Colossians 1:15 Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature.

That is basically saying that Christ existed before all other things. And the second area that Christ is preeminent is in position. He was before everything not only in terms of time but also in terms of position.

Colossians 1:17 And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist.

His position is Creator. As a result, He is in authority over all things created. Paul then admonished these people (beginning in verse 21, but verse 23 is the one I really want):

Colossians 1:23 If you continue in the faith?

He admonished them to continue what they had learned at the beginning, all the way to the end.

Colossians 2:8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

Paul gives us four descriptions of the underlying problem: (1) It was a philosophy; (2) it was empty deceit; (3) it was human tradition; and (4) it was the rudiments of the world.

Can you just imagine Paul, with his deep respect for God and for the Old Testament, naming anything at all that might have originated in God as empty deceit? As being of the world? As being a tradition of men? As being a philosophy?

I want you to consider these things in light of Colossians 2:16-17, which people use to justify saying, "Well, the holy days are done away. Well, you do not have to keep the Sabbath any more." Are you beginning to understand that is not even in question here? I will show you more of this as we go along.

We know from history that the philosophy was Gnosticism. Gnosticism later became a religion on its own; but at this time, it was not yet so. It was a philosophy that came straight out of the pagan nations surrounding Israel, and it was added to existing religions by its adherents as a way to enhance their religious experience.

Gnosticism was an elaborate system of strange concepts that included, among other things, asceticism. This particular form of Gnosticism did have Jewish elements to it; but that is of less

importance than the asceticism and, as we are going to see, a few other practices (as the context of what Paul wrote here reveals).

The Gnostics also believed in the immortality of the soul, as well as in what we now call Docetism. Docetism proclaimed that Jesus was not really human, that He only appeared to have a body, that He really did not die on the stake, and, in fact, that He did not even leave footprints when He walked in the dust. They also denied that Jesus was God, or that He was Creator. Instead, they taught that He was merely an emanation from God and that the earth was created by a different emanation.

Pay attention to this statement: Their teaching regarding redemption is that man is a prisoner in this evil material world. It is important to understand this. What does God's Word say? Here is God's own statement regarding His Creation:

Genesis 1:31 And God saw every thing that He had made [We are talking about the material creation], and, behold, it was very good.

Not evil! God said it is "very good." You can begin to see already that these Gnostics, in their beliefs, were not in harmony with God's Word. They did not believe God. They believed the material creation was evil, but God said that it is very good. Hang on to that.

They are already off on the wrong foot, and this very greatly affected their approach to life.

In order to escape this through redemption—and that is interesting, too, because the earth is our inheritance but they wanted to escape it; they had everything mixed up—the Gnostic must be given secret knowledge by a redeemer, which enables him to propitiate the evil spirits who are on guard at a series of gates that lead from this evil world to the realm of light, or heaven. We are not going to heaven either. You can see that they did not believe the Old Testament, because it is very plain that the promise to Abraham was to inherit the earth.

As for the Colossian variety of Gnosticism, these people did not believe in enjoying the pleasures of life. Indulgence of the senses was deemed wrong. They fasted very often. There was some vegetarianism, with people refusing even to eat clean meats; and alcohol was forbidden. Everybody was kept in line through social pressure. They instituted "blue laws" to hinder the spread of any conflicting ideology. They believed in paying indulgences and paying for their sins through denying themselves pleasures.

An interesting sidelight to this is that early Catholic writers (the church "fathers") call asceticism "philosophy." Where is the law of Moses ever called "philosophy," "tradition of men," or "the rudiments of the world"?

Catholicism, as it always does with other religions and with religious thought, absorbs. *Catholic* means "universal." It is all things to all men. If you want to keep your pagan deities, you are allowed to do so. If you want to keep those practices, it is allowed. Either on television or in magazines like *National Geographic*, have you ever seen some of the strange practices that take place in Catholic countries? Have you ever seen what happens down in New Orleans at Mardi Gras? Do you think that came out of the Bible? Catholicism absorbs. It engulfs. Those converted to Catholicism bring those things together with them into Catholicism. Catholicism absorbed

Gnosticism.

Colossians 2:20-22 Wherefore if you be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are you subject to ordinances, (touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?

These things that Paul briefly describes as being "touch not, taste not, handle not" seem good to the human mind, but from where did they come? If you will notice, the phrase *rudiments of the world* appears now in this chapter for the second time: first in verse 8, and now in verse 20. The English word *rudiments* means "basics; elementary things (as contrasted to complex things)."

What do you learn in the most elementary grade at school? You learn the most elementary form, or basic rudiments, of English: the alphabet. "A," "B," "C," etc.—which are the rudiments of the English language.

What we are talking about here are the rudiments of the world. One thing wrong with this is that the English word *rudiments* really does not give a correct impression, even though it is literally correct as to definition. What we are looking at in this phrase is the beginnings of this world. Mark that in your mind—the rudiments, the beginnings, the elementary things of this world.

What is "the world" in the Bible? *World* comes from the Greek *cosmos*. A broad, general definition or usage of this word in the Bible is that the *cosmos* is *the system opposed to God*. It is the system not connected to God, the system contrasted to God's system. We are looking at the elementary things of the system opposed to God.

From a commentary named *Hermeneutics* (a Greek word that means "the science of interpretation"), this word that is translated into the English from the Greek is transliterated as *stoichea*. It means "elements, supports, firsts, or foundations." However, that does not tell us what further research shows, what *stoichea* means when it is used in reference to a philosophy that is from this world.

I am going to give you a comment from *Hermeneutics* in reference to Colossians 2: 8 and "rudiments of this world."

Consequently, elements of the universe [They decided to translate *cosmos* into *universe* rather than *world*] cannot be taken as an expression that the author of Colossians [Paul] has chosen to discredit that philosophy [Notice:] as a man-made tradition which was concerned merely with the elements as inadequate supports of man's being. Rather, elements of the universe must have played a special role in the teaching of the philosophers.

The confrontation of the elements of the world and Christ [that is,

within Paul's writings] already indicates they are conceived as personal powers.

Are you paying attention? That means living beings. Continuing the quote:

Furthermore, the context as a whole shows that the elements of the universe are precisely the demonic principalities who want to exercise tyranny over men.

Therefore, *stoichea* in this context indicates those who first inhabited the earth, those who are also at the foundation of *this system opposed to God*—called in the Bible the *cosmos*, or world. Are you with me as to where the source of this philosophy is? It is demons! No wonder he calls it empty deceit.

From the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Volume 11, page 193:

The doctrine which Paul combats, then, appears to involve an exposition of the nature of the physical world and man's place within it in terms of astrological determinism?

I am going to stop right there and ask you if you know what "astrological determinism" is. You probably do not. Do not be surprised. It means the belief that the events of life are determined by the heavenly bodies. Have you ever heard of that before? Do any of you still look at your horoscope every day? Do you shuffle the Tarot cards? Do you see with what we are dealing here?

Continuing the quote:

?and the instruction in the occult practices (asceticism, taboos, angel worship) which will propitiate these astro-spirits and enable the devotees to attain fullness of life.

Now look at Colossians 2: 18, and it will make so much sense to you.

Colossians 2:18 Let no man beguile you [trick you, deceive you] of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.

Angel worship! Not the good ones even, but the demons. The unseen leaders behind this

anti-God, philosophic system were demons. As you are going to see whenever we get to the book of Galatians, it included the celebration of special days based on astrological forecasting. We will see that in Galatians 4.

Again, another quote from the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Volume 11, page 200:

There are indications of a strain of Jewish influence in the Colossians' syncretism, but these prohibitions are ritual observances not harnessed to a pharisaic legalism or even to the worship of the one true God, but to the propitiation of the elemental spirits.

That is pretty clear.

Colossians 2:9-10 For in Him [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And you are complete in Him, which is the head of all principality and power.

Paul is saying, "Look, brethren, you have contact with and guidance from God. Why settle for demons?" You can look back in chapter one, and you ought to begin to see clearly why Paul wrote what he did. He was establishing the greatness of Christ as contrasted to demons. In Colossians 1:10 is something that we did not pick up before, but there is a subtle put-down of Gnosticism there. He says:

Colossians 1:10 That you might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

The Gnostics claimed that they knew more than anybody else. *Gnostic* means "to know." Gnosticism was the process, or system, of knowing more than anybody else. However, the word that Paul used here that is translated "knowledge" is *epignosis*; and it means "complete knowledge."

Paul is saying, "Brethren, you already have complete knowledge. These people cannot add anything to you." "You are going backwards," is what he is saying. "You are giving up the riches of the knowledge of God for nothing more than bread crumbs by comparison." Paul is warning the Colossians not to allow themselves to be taken captive, as if booty of war. That is what verse 8 says.

Colossians 2:8 Beware lest any man spoil you?

It means to take you captive and into enslavement to demon worship through a philosophy that might appear on the outside to be enhancing your relationship with God but is really a

perversion of the truth.

Colossians 2:13-14 And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, has He quickened together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses; blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross.

Prior to conversion, it is very likely that these Gentile Christians followed the same practices. Then they had repented of them, been forgiven, been baptized. They had received God's Holy Spirit and were now really, truly alive—with eternal life. Paul was saying, "Why will you put in jeopardy what you already have?"

A reminder: I think it is essential to understand that Paul is not aiming his verbal guns here at Judaism but at Gnostic Judaism. Remember that Gnosticism was a philosophy that its adherents added to an already existing religion. Gnostic Judaism was a perversion of what we know of as being historic Judaism. Verses 8 and 18 prove this clearly.

Historic Judaism was a very, very bad interpretation of the Bible; but it was drawn largely from God's Word nonetheless. This, though, at which we are looking in Colossians, is basically the same group that we are going to find in the background of Galatians.

Christianity had a number of things in common with Judaism, but it had almost nothing in common with Gnostic Judaism. Gnostic Judaism, as you can begin to see here, was totally perverted.

Back to verses 14 and 15. What is "the handwriting of ordinances"? The far-out argument is that the Ten Commandments, the statutes and judgments of God, were *against us*. Let us ask a question here. You have to start thinking: What part of God's law was against us? Given Paul's respect for the Old Testament, do you think that he would have the slightest idea that he would write to fellow Christians—for whom he was responsible to God—that any part of God's law was against us? Think about this. This same apostle wrote:

Romans 7:12 Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.

Was Paul contradicting what he writes here? The Scriptures do not contradict themselves. Scripture cannot be broken. Something is wrong somewhere, and I think it must be in people's interpretation.

Romans 7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.

It seems to me that spiritual things—those things emanating from God, especially His law—would be holy, clean, pure, designed in love, extended in love, given in love, and would

operate in love. It would hardly seem to me that Paul would call something like that "against us."

Most of you know what Christ did in Matthew 19:17, when the young man came running to Him and said, "What must I do to have life?" If anybody knew how to answer that question, it was Christ. Can you imagine Christ giving this young man instruction that was not good for him, that was "against" him? Christ said:

Matthew 19:17 "If you will enter into life, keep the commandments."

There is no contradiction here. I am saying these things for you to see whether the idea of "that which was against us" had anything at all to do with God's law. We will work back from that point. Once we can see the extreme, then we can begin to see what was intended here.

There is another place in this same apostle's writings where Paul says:

Galatians 3:24 Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

The very purpose of the law was to bring us to Christ. How can that be bad? How can that be against us? How can something designed to lead us to the place where we can have eternal life be bad, be against us? We can even look at Hebrews 9:1-9, where it shows very clearly that the ritualistic law and the ceremonial law were of divine origin.

What is intended here has nothing at all to do with the law of God. Neither does it have anything to do with historic Judaism, per se. This "handwriting of ordinances" that is "against us" has something to do with the philosophy. It has something to do with what Paul calls "empty deceit," and "a tradition of men," and something that was of this world.

Consider something here. Are you familiar with, when you went to school, outlining a sentence and diagramming it? You draw the line. You put down the subject and then the predicate. Then you put down the object, and everything other part of the sentence. I cannot remember all the terms any more, but *handwriting of ordinances* is a prepositional phrase.

What word in that prepositional phrase is the object of the pronouns that follow it? To what are the pronouns referring? I want you to notice that the pronouns are singular. "The handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took *it* out of the way, nailing *it* to His cross." Is the object there singular (*handwriting*) or is it plural (*ordinances*)? It is obvious.

It is the handwriting that was taken out of the way. Even the translators understood that. Why would they understand it? The Greek grammar used in the sentence demands singular pronouns. *Ordinances* is plural. What was taken away was the handwriting.

I think we can say that since it is not laws that were taken out of the way but handwriting, we need to concentrate for a while on *handwriting*. It is the word *cheirographon*, and it means "a handwritten [thus the translation as "handwriting"] document of indebtedness." It is an acknowledgement of debt given in handwriting. I just turned it around a bit. The one who does the handwriting is the one who gives whatever it is the person is indebted for.

It is an acknowledgement of debt given in handwriting. Another usage is "a bond that stands against us." I am going to make it very plain now, because we are going to update it into more modern and common terminology. This one you will get: It is an IOU. To use a modern application: It is a summons or a traffic ticket.

It was the traffic ticket, the summons, the IOU, the bond of debt that was nailed to the cross. That is quite plain. We have to identify what was nailed to the cross, to the stake.

Acts 3:19 Repent you therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.

The penalty for sin is death. When we sin, we owe God something. There is an IOU. Our life is in His hands. We have been given a ticket. We have been given a summons. We are in debt to Him because we have broken His law. Even when you break a traffic law and you are caught, you owe the civil government. You are in debt to them until that debt is satisfied.

II Corinthians 5:18-21 And all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and has committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us. We pray you in Christ's stead, be you reconciled to God. For He has made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

What was nailed to the stake? Christ. What did God make Christ to be? Sin.

Romans 8:3 For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh.

Now look at Hebrews 9:28 to finish this section. I think you can get a very clear picture of what is taking place here.

Hebrews 9:28 So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

What was blotted out, what was nailed to the cross, was sin in the person of Jesus Christ. That is what took away the bond of indebtedness. That is what wiped away the handwriting that was against us. That is what paid our traffic ticket. That is what did away with the IOU. That is what

cleared us of the summons to appear before the judgment seat of Christ and to give our lives.

Very likely, the specific sins to which Paul is referring in context here were those these people had committed in their former days while obeying the demons in their lives.

Colossians 2:16-17 Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of any holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ.

The main point in these verses is given at the beginning of verse 16: "Let no man therefore judge you." The word *therefore* indicates that he is reaching a conclusion. It is not the final conclusion, but it is a conclusion up to that point. They were not to allow these people to judge them.

Paul's point was that their sins had already been judged by God; therefore, they needed nothing more to get past the demons. They had received mercy, because their sins had been wiped out by Christ's blood. They had been given life and the Holy Spirit of God. They now had access to God. The angel worship, the ascetic practices, and the working of one's way past the demons and through the gates and into the realm beyond the stars were totally, absolutely inappropriate to Christianity.

For what were they being judged? It can be only one of two things: either (1) for keeping the holy days, new moon, and Sabbaths; or (2) for the way that they were keeping them. It can be only one of those two things. The grammar tells us a very great deal. Just like the grammar in verses 14-15, the grammar in verses 15-16 is also important.

Unfortunately, there is a mistranslation in the King James Version, and it carried through into the New King James Version and into most of the modern translations. We will just say that it was done honestly, as a compromise for smoothness because it is not an easy verse to translate into modern English without adding a lot of words. At the same time, we will give the translators the benefit of the doubt in that they are deceived in regard to the holy days.

The first thing that is mistranslated is the phrase *in meat and in drink*. It should be translated "eating and drinking." This tells us very much. It begins to tell us that the persecution that these people were receiving did not involve the fact of what should or should not be eaten, but the acts of eating and drinking involved in the process of worshipping.

I will repeat that: The persecution did not involve the fact of what should be eaten or what should not be eaten, but rather the acts of eating and drinking in the process of worshipping God. Why would that be an issue? Think again about what I said at the beginning of this about what the Gnostics believed. They believed in asceticism. They believed that it was wrong to indulge the flesh. Feasting was considered by the Gnostic as indulging the flesh, and thus detrimental to propitiating the spirit.

I am going to give you two quotes from fairly renowned researchers of the Bible. The first is from *The Expositor's Greek New Testament*, Volume 3, page 530, by W. Robertson Smith (who is a fairly big name in research). Talking about Colossians 2:16-17, he says:

The question is not altogether between lawful and unlawful food, but between eating and drinking or abstinence. Asceticism, rather than ritual cleanliness, is in his mind. [How does Robertson Smith know that?] The law is NOT ascetic in its character. [He means the law of God.] Its prohibition of meat rests on the view that they are unclean. And drinks are not forbidden save in exceptional cases and, even then, not for ascetic reasons.

Now a second quote, from *Word Pictures In The New Testament*, Volume 4, page 496, by A.T. Robertson:

Paul has here in mind the ascetic practices of the Gnostics—possibly ascetic or even with pharisaic influence. The Essenes [one of the sects of the Jews] went far beyond the Mosaic regulations."

As for this part of the statement in verse 16, the topic in question is not clean and unclean meats at all, but asceticism as contrasted to Christian rejoicing and feasting. You know what the Bible says: "Come before Me and rejoice! Spend your money for what you want to eat, and drink, and have a good time."

This helps to set the stage for understanding the rest of verse 16. Again, there is a misleading translation—this time involving the word *respect*, in the King James Version. In the New King James Version, it uses *regarding*. Many modern translations will use the word *regarding*. Again, I think that they probably did this to keep things smooth, and there is a far-out application for the word *regarding*. However, even the margin of my Oxford Bible (not a commentary or anything) suggests *in part* for the word *respect*.

I also have a Lamsa translation. Incidentally, let me recommend it. For those of you who want to study, it is a very fine translation. Hardly anybody uses it, but the Lamsa translation actually has the oldest source of any Bible translation. It is not translated from the Greek, though. The difference is that it is translated from the Aramaic, the common language of the people in Judea and Galilee during the time of Christ.

The Lamsa translates verse 16 this way:

Colossians 2:16 (Lamsa) Let no man therefore create a disturbance among you about eating and drinking, or about the division of the feast days, the beginning of the months and the day of the Sabbath.

Did you catch it? "About the division of the feast days."

Both my Oxford King James Version and the Lamsa are more correct translations of that word. Still, it does not seem to make any sense, which is why they added the word *respect*

or *regarding*. However, they never should have done that.

What does Paul mean? The word that is translated *respect* or *regarding* is the noun *meros*. It comes from the verb that means "to cut in part." It is used fairly frequently in the New Testament, but virtually every time it is used it is translated into the English words *in part* or *portion*. What the word denotes is a sharp division, or a separating of something, as in cutting something and parting it.

When it is used conceptionally, as it is here in Colossians 2:16, what it does is present a clear distinction between what it represents and that to which it is contrasted. I will simplify that by telling you that what it does, then, is show the need for separate consideration of two matters. In effect, what Paul is saying is, "I want you to consider this, and I want you to consider that." You have divided them. Consider them separately.

Now we are going to add something to this. You will notice that there is no definite article preceding the word *festival* or *feast*. The phrase *festival, new moon, or Sabbath* does not have the definite article *the* appearing before it. When this occurs in Greek grammar, it draws attention to quality rather than identity. If I said, "a holy day," it does not identify which one; it could be any one. If I said, "the holy day," it identifies a specific one.

Since this is talking about things generally, the emphasis is in another part of the sentence. It refers to the eating and the drinking. We are talking about quality, about the way something is kept. Therefore, the Colossian Christians were being criticized by the Gnostics for *the way* that they were keeping the holy days, the new moon, and the Sabbaths—rather than the fact that they *were* keeping them. This agrees perfectly with Gnostic belief, because they did not care which days were kept. Their concern was to enhance, they felt, the religion—any religion—through their philosophy.

Paul is saying, "Let Christ's body, the church, be the judge of how you observe the days. The Gnostics are not to determine how we live, but Christ—through the church—is to determine how we live." I am going to paraphrase this: *Do not let any man judge you in eating and drinking, or in the way you observe a holy day, new moon, or Sabbath day; but let Christ's church be the judge.*

I am going to translate it again, paraphrase it; and I think you will really like this one. You will see it so clearly: *Do not let any man judge you in eating or drinking, or in any portion of your observance of a festival, new moon, or Sabbath.* It makes sense, does it not? He is saying: "Do not let these people judge you in anything regarding the way you keep the holy days—not one part of it! Let God's church be the interpreter of God's Word, and teach you how to keep it."

Let me give you just a little bit of additional information. This involves the way that the new moon, which is mentioned here, was kept in the first century. This comes from *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Volume 1, chapter 2, page 495. The author is Marvin Vincent.

The day [new moon] was celebrated by blowing of trumpets, special

sacrifices, feasting, and religious instructions. Labor was suspended, and no institutional or private fasts [asceticism] were permitted to take place.

The authorities were at great pains to fix accurately the commencement of the month, denoted by appearance of the new moon. Messengers were placed on commanding heights to watch the sky; and, as soon as the new moon appeared, they hastened to communicate it to the synod, being allowed even to travel on the Sabbath for that purpose. [That last phrase is very interesting.] Even any restrictions in Judaism regarding how far you could travel on the Sabbath were suspended for the keeping of new moon day.

Was there any asceticism at all connected with that? Of course not! This reflects right back to the holy days, which were kept with great rejoicing, feasting, and happiness! That made those sourpuss Gnostics upset. Therefore, they judged those people and called them on the carpet for not propitiating the evil spirits by fasting, or being ascetics, or keeping dower looks on their faces all day long and not moving out of their chairs.

There is one large Sabbath-keeping group out there that does not keep the holy days. This is one of the verses that they use as their authority, but their "proof" cannot be proof at all. The Greek word translated *holyday* or *feast*, in verse 16, is the same word that is commonly used in the New Testament for the Old Testament feasts. It is *heorte*. You can look it up, if you want to, in Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance*; but I will give you two references where you will see it—Acts 18: 21 and Luke 2: 41. In both cases, it is translated *feasts*; that is, the feasts of the Lord.

We now are going to transfer that thought back into Colossians 2: 16. Obviously, if the word *holyday* refers to the Old Testament feasts, then *Sabbath* or *sabbatismos* must mean the weekly Sabbath. Otherwise, Paul would then be repeating himself in verse 16 by saying, "Let no man judge you in respect of a holyday, new moon, or the holyday." Paul would be out of his mind to make a mistake that obvious.

You can search for a thousand years, and you will not find a single verse negating one jot or tittle of the Fourth Commandment. One of the things that is important in regard to what I just went through is that it confirms that the weekly Sabbath and the holy days stand or fall together. They are all part of the Fourth Commandment.

We are going to summarize and conclude for today with four points, very quickly.

Colossians 2: 4 And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words.

Colossians 2: 8 Beware lest any man?

Colossians 2: 16 Let no man therefore judge you?

Colossians 2: 18 Let no man beguile you?

Colossians 2:22 Which are all to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?

Point number one is that the keeping of the weekly Sabbath and holy days is NOT a doctrine of men. Paul is not doing away with God's commandments. He is warning against false teachers who were saying that, if the believers did not keep these days according to certain human practices involving demonic-inspired asceticism, they could not overcome the flesh.

Now I will quickly give you two translations of Colossians 2: 23, first of all from the Revised Standard Version.

Colossians 2:23 (RSV) These [doctrines of men] have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh.

From the Revised English Bible:

Colossians 2:23 (REB) Such conduct may have an air of wisdom with its forced piety, its self-mortification, and its severity to the body; but it is of no use at all in combating sensuality.

I read those so that you will begin to catch the essence of what the problem is. The problem is asceticism; the problem is the way things were done.

Point number two is that what Paul is condemning is a philosophy. God's Word is NOT a philosophy; therefore, Paul's concern in context is the way a philosophy is impacting upon those keeping the Word of God.

Point number three is that Paul calls this philosophic system "vain deceit." Can you even imagine Paul calling any part of God's Word by that epithet? That is blasphemous! "Every word of God is pure," God's Word says. There is not a bit of deceit there.

Point number four is that Paul names the authors of this philosophy and the recipients of the deceived people's devotion through this system as demons—not God. No wonder he calls it "empty deceit."

Brethren, the commandment to keep the Sabbath and the holy days cannot be nullified by condemning an abuse of keeping them. Was Paul condemning the keeping of the Sabbath and holy days, or was he condemning the doctrines of men who added ritualistic and ascetic restrictions to faith in Christ?

We will stop here. The next time I speak we will pick up again in Colossians 2, where there are still a few loose ends that we still need to get. Then we will move into Galatians and begin to tie this whole thing together.