

**All Things New**  
**Week 6: Shadows or Substance**  
**Colossians 2:11-17**

When the girls were young, there was a short season when *the height* of entertainment for them was making shadow puppets on the wall. They got a kick out of learning how to make a rabbit or barking dog. I can still hear their little giggles.

Last year, we were watching America's Got Talent and there was a young man from the Philippines who came out on the stage and when the judges asked him what he would be doing, he said, "Shadow puppets." Simon kind of scoffed like, *let's just get this over with*, and I thought, "Oh, this poor dude..." By the time he was finished, all four judges, even Simon Cowell, were giving him a standing ovation. He ended up placing 3<sup>rd</sup> overall. He was incredible.

It's amazing what people can do with shadows. Even groups of people can tell a powerful story using only their shadows. Check out this video...(play video)

The people in that video used their shadows to tell a powerful story about love. And I think that's the visual that the Apostle Paul taps into for our text today. Look again at Colossians 2:17...(READ)

This is such a brilliant word picture that Paul uses here. A shadow is the shape of something, but it doesn't have the substance of it. Like, if my wife walked up behind me with the sun at our backs, I'd probably know it was her because of her shadow, but the shadow's not her. I couldn't look at her shadow and see the funny way her eyes change colors based on the light around her. Her shadow doesn't reveal her strength of character or that she loves Taste of India.

Shadows aren't bad, they're just lacking. They point to the real thing, but just lack the substance of it. And at this church in Colossae, there were these false teachers who were lifting up the shadows as the substance. They were elevating practices that were shadows meant to point us to the substance of Jesus. And, in doing so, they were actually minimizing who Jesus was and what he came to do. So, Paul's basically asking, are you going to settle for the shadow, or are you going to hold onto the real thing? Are you going to grasp for air, or grab onto the substance of Jesus?

And in our text, Paul mentions three Old Testament practices that were ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. That Jesus is the substance that these shadows represent. And the first one is circumcision. And, this is when the series gets awkward! But, I've got a sign in my office that says, "Awkward is my specialty," so let's lean into the awkward together!

Paul's just got done saying in verses 9 and 10 that the fullness of God lives in Jesus and because Jesus lives in us, we've been brought to fullness. He's brought the completion of all things and in him, we are complete. And he says in verse 11...(READ Col. 2:11-12)

So, why does Paul make it weird with all this circumcision talk? Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant. In Genesis 17, Abraham was 99 years old and God reiterates a promise he made to him back in Genesis 12. A promise that God would bless Abraham, make his descendants into a nation, He would be faithful to them and the whole world would be blessed because of them. In verse 10 of Genesis 17, God says...(READ Gen. 17:10-11)

Notice, circumcision wasn't the covenant, it was the sign of the covenant. A sign of the relationship between God and His people, that they have been separated, or set apart, for Him. And so, circumcision was a sign of their relationship with God, but it's not what brought them into that relationship. It just pointed to it. It was a shadow of the substance. Skip ahead to Colossians 2:16 and we find some more...(READ Col. 2:16)

Paul rattles off a handful of Old Testament practices that were being elevated to Christ-like status. Things like religious restrictions, festivals, and celebrations. These were all about holiness and cleanliness. Being set apart for God. And again, Paul's point is that all of these are shadows that find their substance in Jesus. They're good, but they're incomplete. Look at Ezekiel 45:17...(READ)

The word "atonement" means to cover something up. And so, these sacrifices made at the religious festivals could cover up the sins of God's people, but they couldn't remove them. So, they had to be repeated over and over and over. They were a sign of God's grace that would one day find its fullness in Christ's sacrifice that was made once, for all. A shadow that pointed to the substance of Jesus.

And then Paul mentions the Sabbath. Exodus 31, verse 12 says...(READ Ex. 31:12-13) Again, notice that the Sabbath didn't make them holy or set them apart. The Lord did that. The Sabbath was just a sign that they had been set apart by Him. While everyone else in the world labored and toiled for seven days a week, the Sabbath was God's invitation to step away and rest with Him.

In Egypt, they had been worked to death as slaves. Sabbath was a sign that they were God's people, loved and cared for by Him. It was a sign of their relationship with God and that they could trust Him, even with their unfinished work. Sabbath was a shadow that pointed to their relationship with God and the rest He invites us into.

All of these rites and rituals and festivals, they were only shadows pointing to the substance of Jesus. Circumcision marks your body, but only Jesus can change your heart. Festivals celebrated God's forgiveness and redemption, but only Jesus can make us fully forgiven and redeemed. Sabbath was a command to rest in our relationship with God, but only Jesus can provide rest for our weary souls and bring us into a relationship with God.

These were all shadows, and shadows aren't bad, they're just incomplete. They have the form, but they lack the substance. Paul's point is, you have the substance in Jesus, why would you

settle for the shadows? Why would you go back to the sign, when you have the real thing. So he says, “Don’t let people judge you for holding onto Jesus and letting go of his shadow.”

And even though we’re probably not at risk of turning back to Jewish feasts and celebrations to find our identity or forgiveness, I think we’re still really good at elevating shadows of Jesus above the substance of Jesus. Elevating the signs of our religious bona fides, and how we live out our faith, over our relationship with Him.

We can do this in so many ways. All of us worship differently. Some are more expressive while others are more stoic and reflective. It’s easy to take our style and judge others by it. The expressive worshipers can look at the more stoic ones and be like, “Do you even worship, bro?” And the more stoic ones can say, “We’re worshipping, not doing calisthenics!” We’ve taken a shadow and made it the substance.

We can do it with prayer. There’s no command or even instruction in the Bible to pray with your eyes closed and head bowed, but have you ever locked eyes with someone in church during a prayer?! You’re either like, “Ah, I’ve been busted!” or “My man. We’re rebels together!” We’ve taken a shadow and made it the substance.

I have to remind myself of this when I’m preaching. You wouldn’t believe the conversations I have with myself in my head while I’m preaching! I have to remind myself that some people learn by leaning in, but others tell me they learn best with their eyes closed and mouths agape. They assure me it’s learning by osmosis, not sleeping! I have to remind myself that learning styles are a shadow, not the substance!

We can do it with the way we serve Jesus. You might be super passionate about an issue or a project and think that everyone else should be as concerned about it as you are. And that’s okay. Having passion for a project or people group is good, but it’s only a shadow cast by Jesus’s heart for others. When we turn that shadow into substance, it’s easy to wonder if people even love Jesus as much as I do if they don’t care about the things I care about, or do the things I do, the way I do them.

Anytime you become prideful of something in your life, even if it’s a shadow that points to Jesus, it’s not too long before you start becoming judgmental of others who don’t hold onto the same convictions that you do. We are so quick to judge others when we turn a shadow into the substance. When we take a conviction and make it a requirement for others. That’s what was happening at this church in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Colossae and it can so easily happen in the church today.

So, if all of these are only shadows, then what’s the substance? What is the thing that matters most? It’s Jesus. His death, burial, and resurrection. All shadows find their substance in Him. Paul says it like this in the pinnacle of our text today. **Colossians 2:13...(READ vs. 13-14)**

That word translated, “charge,” it’s an interesting word. It’s the only time it’s used in the Bible and it means a written promise to repay a debt. It’s a handwritten IOU (show IOU photo), which of course is as good as money, sir!

But, in this context, Paul’s saying that our sin has created a debt with God that we cannot repay. Our stack of IOU’s stand against us, condemning us. We are buried under them. Dead because of them. But, instead of holding us accountable for what we owe Him, God canceled our debt through the cross. Jesus, the only one who never wrote a single IOU to God, carried all of ours to the cross. He paid the debt of our sin that we could not pay and when we put our faith in him, he rips up all of our IOU’s and marks us “Paid in Full.”

The beauty of the Gospel is that The ONLY one who owed nothing is the VERY one who paid off all of your IOU’s. They were nailed to the cross with him and when you put your faith in Jesus, you bear them no more. That is the substance of the Gospel to which all other shadows point.

Jesus has canceled our guilt, so we don’t have to live in the shame of not being enough, or being too much. We’ve been given a new identity in Christ, set apart and adopted into God’s family through Him. In Christ, we’ve been given peace. Jesus has disarmed the voices of condemnation and fear that speak against us. He’s stripped them of their power over us and defeated them on the cross.

We can now live in the victory of Christ and take the good we’ve received from Him and give it away to others. Inviting them to find a new identity, new community, new peace, and new freedom from guilt and shame in their life, too. Jesus is the substance of what our hearts truly desire and in Him, we have all we need.

So, what’s the difference between the shadows and the substance? Between what these false teachers were saying and the Gospel? The false teachers were saying, “Do all these things and you’re good.” Practice these rites and rituals just right and God will love you. But the Gospel says, “Jesus did all these things, so you’re good.”

You’ve got the substance, why settle for the shadows? You’ve got Jesus, and he’s all you need.