

**Col 2:20-3:7, Conditionals**  
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**Overview**

Pick up from previous study.

1. The entire conditional section participates in another structure that grows out of the positional truth of 2:12. The two conditions (2:20-3:7) are centered around one positional summary (3:3-4), and the following verses (3:8-14) form a chiasm around another (3:9b-10).

2. Summary of this section:

- a) 2:20-23, If you have died with Christ, why be governed by old religious laws?
- b) 3:1-7, If you have risen with Christ, fix your attention on heavenly matters. Three commands, each with a motive.

**A. 2:20-23, If you have died with Christ, why be governed by old religious laws?**

Paul characterizes the false teaching, and gives two reasons to reject it.

1. The nature of the false teaching.

- a) As in 2:16, they were being condemned for not following the ritual Jewish law. Here the emphasis is on unclean objects that communicate defilement by mere contact.
- b) This law is called "the rudiments/elements of the world." Cf. Gal. 4:3-5, for the same phrase in the same sense.
  - 1) "Rudiments" means "elementary teachings," and the word is used in this way of the elementary teachings of Christianity in Heb. 5:12, "first *principles* of the oracles of God," enumerated in 6:1-2.
  - 2) "Worldly rudiments" refers to regulations that connect godliness with specific foods or seasons. Judaism shares with pagan religions this kind of regulation. Not intrinsically bad, since God used it in Israel to teach the basic discipline of obedience. But elementary, suited to children (Gal. 4:1-3) whose life is centered on the earth, not to full sons risen with Christ to heavenly life.
- c) Those who have died with Christ are set free from the world and all such laws peculiar to it. Cf. the problem of obeying American traffic laws in Great Britain! We are citizens of another realm, and our principles of life are different.

2. First argument against the false teaching: its *content*.  
Contained in the parenthesis in 21-22a (which is accurate). These commands all concern things (like food) that are intended to

"perish with the using," to become corrupted and destroyed as they are used. Food, drink, and dead animals have no eternal significance. God made them to be used and eventually to decay. Cf. the Lord's argument in Mark 7:18-19, and note that "purging all meats" describes the effect of his words: making all meats clean. How could our relation to such transient things be the foundation of our spiritual condition?

3. Second argument against the false teaching: its *motive*.

- a) 22b, this teaching is "after the commandments and doctrines of men." The phrase is quoted from Isa. 29:13, where "precept of men" is in the LXX "commandments of men and doctrines." People do these things because MEN tell them to, in order to be accepted by these men; not because they are the commands of God. Isaiah anticipates Paul by arguing that the rituals of Judaism, though given by God to Moses, become abhorrent to God when they are executed in a fleshly way; cf. Isa. 1:11-15.
- b) 23, thus, in spite of its "spiritual" reputation, it fosters fleshly gratification. The syntax of this verse is tangled, but has recently been explicated by an SIL linguist, Bruce Hollenbach. (See Colossians folder for *NTS* article.)

Improved translation, which is mainly a matter of punctuation: "Which things indeed, though having a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body, not in any honour, lead to the satisfying of the flesh."

- 1) These laws "have a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body." By denying bodily appetites they seem to prove their dedication to wisdom and spiritual matters. Note the three characteristics of these false injunctions:
  - a> "Will-worship" is a literal translation of the word, which Paul appears to have made up. The sense seems to be a religion that people dream up according to their will, a self-made religion.
  - b> "Humility" in itself is not at all bad (cf. 3:12), but in the context (2:18) it is a "voluntary humility," a humility of which one is proud.
  - c> "Neglecting of the body" is asceticism, a demonstrative display of self-abuse. The Lord Jesus does not condemn spiritual disciplines, but requires that they be done in private (Matt. 6:16-18).
- 2) Nevertheless, they are "not in any honor." Such a hypocritical display is dishonest and not worthy of respect by God's children.
- 3) In spite of their appearance of spirituality, these

practices actually "lead to the satisfying of the flesh." For Paul, "flesh" is everything that is opposed to "spirit," Gal. 5:17ff, where in 20-21 note the emphasis on strife and envy. Thus it includes pride and any mechanism by which one person seeks to elevate himself above another--including public deprivation of physical appetites!

- c) Summary: the motive behind observing the ordinances of the false teachers is to please the men who have instituted them. Regardless of the source of the regulation, this motive renders such observances fleshly and displeasing to God.

4. *Application*: What about the believer and the law? How can we avoid antinomianism?

- a) Deal with each law case by case.

- 1) Some laws are retained and even cited in the NT: 1 Tim. 1:8-11. Cf. Paul's concept of unrighteousness in 1 Cor. 6:9-10. Thus it certainly is NOT the case that we are released from all constraints on our behavior.
- 2) Some are explicitly withdrawn: forbidden foods in Acts 10:9-16; Mark 7:19; sacred seasons here in Col. 2:16.
- 3) Others: we must seek out the Lord. Usually we can find a principle that carries over, just as Paul uses the law of the ox in 1 Cor. 9:8-10 to support the right of the missionary to support.

- b) The motive is critical. In Rom. 14:1-6, 22-23, Paul respects those who observe even the laws of diet and calendar that lie behind the false teaching in Colossae, so long as they are observed "unto the Lord."

**B. 3:1-7, If you have risen with Christ, fix your attention on heavenly matters.**

Just as our death with Christ should turn our attention away from worldly ordinances and the desire to impress men, so our resurrection with him should focus our attention on his heavenly realm. Three motivated commands: The first two are concerned with "things above," heavenly virtues such as are inculcated in the following verses. The last two warn against "things on the earth." (Thus the second overlaps.) In the first two the motive follows the command; in the third, it precedes it. The motives deal successively with our Possessions, our Position, and our Prospects in Christ: what we have, where we are, and what we shall do.

1. 1b, Command based on our Possessions: What we Have in Christ

- a) Command: seek those things which are above. Actively go after them. Cf. the agates--you know where they are and go out of your way to get them.

b) Motive: twofold.

1) That is where Christ is, and he is the source of your blessing. Whatever we ask the Father in Christ's name will be given us. But he is above; the riches that he has available are heavenly riches, and we will be most satisfied when our desire corresponds to his wealth. Cf. Ps. 37:4, "Delight thyself in the Lord, and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart."

2) Christ is not only in heaven, but he is seated at the Father's right hand, so that all the resources of heaven may be bent to his interests (Psa. 110). If we seek heavenly things, we seek not only what Christ has, but also what he is powerful to give.

c) Summary: When a friend or relative goes on a trip, they sometimes ask us, "What would you like me to bring you?" If they are going to Florida and you love baby alligators, you're in great shape. If they're going to the UP and you love agates, that's OK, too. But what if they're going to the UP and your heart is set on baby alligators? Our benefactor is in heaven. If we desire heavenly things, we shall be satisfied.

2. 2-3, Command based on our Position: Where we Are in Christ

a) 2, Command: looks in two directions: heavenward and earthward. Thus mediates between the first and third command.

1) Set your affection on things above.

2) [Do not set your affection] on things on the earth.

"Set your affection" describes the whole focus of the mind, as "seek" does the will. Fix your mind on heavenly, not earthly things. Don't daydream about sinful activities and false pleasures; instead, spend your idle moments meditating on the Word of God and anticipating the blessings of heaven.

b) 3, Motive: you are already in heaven with Christ. Now we go beyond the promise of what we receive FROM Christ, to our present session WITH him. This position is "hidden." Unlike the ostentatious asceticism of the false teachers, those around us cannot see it ... for now.

c) The thought of this command is that of Phil. 3:20. Our conversation (lit. "citizenship") is in heaven. Why should we preoccupy ourselves with worldly concerns?

3. 4-7, Command based on our Prospects: What we shall Do with Christ. This time the motive comes first.

a) 4, Motive: We shall be associated with Christ in his glorious return. In Paul's mind, that return is associated with judgment: 2 Thess. 1:7-10.

b) 5-7, Command: Mortify your earthly members by abandoning impure practices.

1) The Practices: Paul begins with something specific and becomes progressively more general.

a> fornication: any form of sexual activity that violates the law of God. Includes premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality.

b> uncleanness: includes not only actions but also thoughts; the whole mind-set that takes pleasure in impurity; the foundation of the modern entertainment industry.

c> inordinate affection: "ungovernable affections" (Lightfoot). Passion.

d> evil concupiscence: strong desire, which can be good or bad, and is here qualified as evil.

e> covetousness, which is idolatry: any dominating desire to possess something or someone. The effect is to make that thing a God, and thus lead us into idolatry.

2) 3:6-7 recalls the motives, not only for this command, but for the entire section.

a> 6, Since you one day will sit in judgment on practices such as these, how can you persist in them?

b> 7, These practices belong to a former way of life, one that you no longer pursue.

## Analysis

### A. 2:20-23, Conditional on False Teachers

1. 2:20 Ei) a)peqa/nete su\n Xristw^| a)po\ tw^ n stoixei/wn tou^ ko/smou,

2. ti/ w(s zw^ntes e)n ko/smw| dogmati/zesqe,

a) Example:

1) 2:21 Mh\ a(/yh|

2) mhde\ geu/sh|

3) mhde\ qi/gh|s,

4) 2:22 a(/ e)stin pa/nta ei)s fqora\n th^| a)poxrh/sei,

b) kata\ ta\ e)nta/lmata kai\ didaskali/as tw^ n a)nqrw/pwn;

1) 2:23 a(/tina/ e)stin ... pro\s plhsmonh\n th^s sarko/s.

a> lo/gon me\n e)/xonta sofi/as e)n e)qeloqrhski/a| kai\ tapeinofrosu/nh| [kai\] a)feidi/a| sw/matos,

1> ou)k e)n timh^| tini,

### B. 3:1-7, Conditional on Godliness

3:1 Ei) ou)^ n sunhge/rqhte tw^ | Xristw^|,

1. motive p

- a) text: ta\ a)/nw zhteite,
- b) motive: ou(^ o( Xristo/s e)stin e)n decia^| tou^ qeou^ kaqh/menos:

2. motive p

- a) text: 3:2 ta\ a)/nw froneite, mh\ ta\ e)pi\ th^s gh^s:
- b) motive: 3:3
  - 1) 3:3 a)peqa/nete ga/r, kai\ h( zwh\ u(mw^n ke/kruptai su\n tw^| Xristw^| e)n tw^| qew^|.

3. motive p

- a) motive: 3:4 o(/tan o( Xristo\s fanerwqh^|, h( zwh\ u(mw^n, to/te kai\ u(mei^s su\n au)tw^| fanerwqh/sesqe e)n do/ch|.
- b) text: 3:5-7
 

*We expect this to appear in 2:20-23, but since its theme is godliness rather than the formal errors of the false teachers, it has been attracted forward.*

3:5 Nekrw/sate ou)^n ta\ me/lh ta\ e)pi\ th^s gh^s, pornei/an, a)kaqarsi/an, pa/qos, e)piqumi/an kakh/n, kai\ th\n pleoneci/an h(/tis e)sti\n ei)dwlolatri/a,

  - 1) 3:6 di' a(\ e)/rxetai h( o)rgh\ tou^ qeou^ [e)pi\ tou\s ui( ou\s th^s a)peiqeias]:
  - 2) 3:7 e)n oi(^s kai\ u(mei^s periepath/sate/ pote o(/te e)zh^te e)n tou/tois.