

**Message from the Master**, Broadcast Date: **March 9, 2008**

**Sermon Series:** Colossians: The Supremacy and Sufficiency of Christ

**This Sermon: Christ's Supremacy & Sufficiency re: the Law (Colossians 2:13-23)**

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Are you familiar with the phrase, “to damn someone or something with faint praise?” This means to criticize a person or thing indirectly by giving a slight compliment. If a book critic, for example, should say that a certain book is “not as bad as some I’ve read,” the critic is damning it with faint praise. To put it another way, it is to praise something or someone in such a weak way that it is obvious you do not really admire them as you should or as you pretend to do. And Jesus Christ has this done to him more than anyone else in the world. False religious teachers and false teachings regularly have relatively high and noble things to say about Jesus – but they invariably do not think he is as great as he really is. To call him a “good man, a really good man” but to deny his deity is damning him with faint praise. And to say that he is mankind’s savior and that he is to be trusted, but then to say there are additional things needed to save sinners, that is damning Jesus with faint praise. And this is exactly what false teachers at work in the city of Colosse were doing. They would say, “Jesus is positively wonderful and you should have faith in him if you hope to be saved.” But at the same time they were saying, “In addition to trusting Jesus you must do this or not do that or observe this set of rules to be really pleasing to God.” Jesus was important but not all-important. He was great but not so great that he didn’t need our assistance to accomplish our salvation.

We are in the middle of a sermon series that is taking us through the New Testament letter to the Colossians. The theme of the book and of the sermon series is *the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ*. This morning our focus is on **Colossians 2:13-23**. The focus is on Christ’s supremacy and sufficiency over against religious law – religious rules, regulations, and rituals. Working through this section of Scripture makes it obvious that the Christians at Colosse were being told that they did not have complete salvation or sufficiency in Christ but that they had to add man-made traditions and philosophies in order to be complete. In response, Paul emphasizes that Christ has complete adequacy to meet human needs. *In these eleven verses Paul emphasizes Christ’s supremacy and sufficiency (1) in giving us spiritual and eternal life and also (2) in leading us to express this new life that we possess in him.*

Is Christ 100% sufficient to give us spiritual and eternal life? Here is what Paul says in verses 13 through 15: **When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, <sup>14</sup> having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup> And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.** To summarize: Jesus Christ has done three things: (1) he gave us life when we were dead, (2) he forgave us all our sins, and (3) he clearly demonstrated his victory over our enemies. All of that adds up to his being supreme and sufficient – and nothing less than our full-service Savior and Giver of spiritual and eternal life.

When we were dead in our sins, separated from fellowship with God and destined to hell, we received life in Christ. “All” of our sins were forgiven – every single one, even those that we have a hard time forgiving ourselves for. The “written code” of the law was against us since we stood guilty of disobeying it and deserved to be punished for our sins. The law code was like a written ledger of our trespasses that called for punishment. Paul says that in Christ our sins have been wiped away. Our rap sheet has been canceled. All of God’s legal requirements have been met on our behalf by Christ and our death sentence has been taken away, nailed to the Christ’s cross when he submitted to death as our substitute. In Christ we are credited with his perfect obedience to the law and in Christ we are credited with his death sentence that fully atoned for our sins. In Christ we are free from all demands of all law required for a right relationship with God. No religious rules, regulations or rituals have power over us or are even needed.

Nor is this a here-today-and-gone-tomorrow victory. We have completeness in Christ -- new life, complete forgiveness, and total triumph over powerful evil enemies: **“Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”** The word for “disarmed” is literally “stripped,” as in stripping a defeated enemy of armor on the battlefield. The powers and authorities of this evil world stripped Christ of his clothing and popularity, made a public spectacle of him on the cross, and thought they had triumphed over him by putting him to death. But the victory actually belonged to Jesus. Evil no longer has power over us because Christ defeated and disarmed Satan and all inhabitants of hell. The imagery used by Paul in this verse has a rich cultural background. When Roman generals and armies defeated enemies and won a war, they would march the defeated foes back to Rome where they would have a huge celebration. Roman citizens would line the streets to watch this “public spectacle.” At the front of the parade would be the conquering general followed by the victorious army. Then at the rear of the procession would be all those who had been conquered. The people could jeer at them, cast insults, and were assured the victory over them was real and complete. Paul uses this imagery to stress that Jesus has turned his captors into captives, displaying them in his victory celebration. The Colossians had participated in that victory, and so have we. This has supremacy and sufficiency written all over it. Jesus is the victor, he has triumphed at the cross, and we share complete and enduring victory in him. To say or think anything less than this about Christ’s work is to damn him with faint praise. To say we must believe in Jesus AND do this or that, or submit to this or that religious rule, to really be right with God is to despise Christ’s work. In Christ alone we have it all.

After focusing on Christ’s supremacy and sufficiency in giving us life and salvation, Paul now shifts our attention to everyday living. His overall point is that Christ remains perfectly sufficient in leading us to express this new life that we possess in him. We do not need or want rules, regulations or rituals to maintain our right relationship with God. Starting at verse 16 Paul writes: **Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. <sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. <sup>18</sup> Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. <sup>19</sup> He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.**

Food restrictions, special diets, observance of ceremonies and holy days were a part of Old Testament religious life. Religious festivals were annual, New Moon celebrations were monthly, and the Sabbath was weekly. Old Testament rituals looked forward to Christ, and since Christ has now come, special days and diets are no longer necessary. They were just shadows of the reality that is fulfilled in Jesus. Hebrews 10:1 puts it succinctly: “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.” But if, as the false teachers in Colosse were saying, observing diets and days and other rituals is still needed above and beyond Jesus, then Christ was not 100% sufficient. To insist on rules, regulations and rituals to maintain spiritual and eternal life is again to damn Christ with faint praise. Paul would have none of this.

The attraction of seeing rules as religious necessities is perhaps obvious. It’s relatively easy to judge by externals. If there’s something you’re not supposed to eat and you avoid it, then everything’s OK. If you attend when you’re supposed to attend, then you must be doing OK. If you kneel when you pray, then you must be close to God. But this whole approach to religion has one deadly flaw – the focus is on human performance rather than on Christ. Those who seek standing with God in this way actually become disconnected from the head. They are severed from any hope of spiritual vitality because they are not finding their sufficiency in Christ. Any and all experiences and activity that do not treat Christ alone as perfectly supreme and sufficient are worthless and worse than worthless: they lead us away from God and true spiritual life.

In verses 20 through 23, Paul finishes this focus on the sufficiency of Christ for our life with God. The basic point is that since Christ has given us full life, full forgiveness, full victory, and fully maintains our relationship with God – why would we even think of looking elsewhere for religious blessing? Here are the apostle’s words: **Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules:** <sup>21</sup> **“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”?** <sup>22</sup> **These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.** <sup>23</sup> **Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.**

The false teachers in Colosse focused on personal denial as the way to curb bad appetites. This sounds really good on the surface because we all agree that we need discipline in our lives. But they were teaching that these disciplines were necessary for fellowship with God. To say that is to damn Jesus with faint praise. This idea basically says, “He did a lot, but not enough. I must finish the task.” But we don’t and can’t live the Christian life that way. We cannot earn God’s favor. All we can do is receive it. Did you notice what verse 23 states very clearly? Religious regulations, though they may look and sound good, “lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” Rules don’t abolish the inner appetite for sin. They might curb external behavior patterns to some degree, but they create no new heart and produce no changed will within us. Using law to maintain spiritual life will take a vibrant faith and make it dull and lifeless. It will evaporate enthusiasm, jettison joy, and stifle spirituality. Instead of finding freedom through Christ, souls become burdened by the church. Insisting on rules, regulations, and rituals in religion may produce large quantities of self-righteousness coupled with frustration. It majors in guilt and misguided sacrifice by urging people to evaluate their relationship with God on the basis of self-produced standards and scores. It short-circuits the work of grace. We need God’s

power working within us to maintain true life. It's his grace, his unearned yet freely given love in Christ, that produces real religious improvements in daily living. In Titus 2:11-12 Paul says this: **“The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It (God's grace) teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.”** The grace of God in Christ remains 100% sufficient and must remain our focus.

Almost every state in our nation still has laws on their books that have over the years become useless and deserve to be ignored if not formally abolished. In Florida, a woman may be fined for falling asleep under a hair dryer. In Indiana, citizens are not allowed to attend a movie house or ride in a public streetcar within four hours after eating garlic. In Eureka, Illinois a man with a moustache may not kiss a woman. In Normal, Illinois, it's against the law to make a face at a dog. And in Wisconsin it's against the law to serve apple pie in public restaurants unless there is cheese on top of it. These may be laughable laws, but none claim to have an impact on our relationship with God. Far worse are religious rules that make demands on us by damning Jesus with faint praise – denying his utter supremacy and sufficiency for our life and salvation. Let the truth be told: Christianity is not a matter of what you do or what you don't do. Christianity is what is done for you by Christ. It's not spelled D-O but rather D-O-N-E. When Jesus died on the cross, he said, “It is finished.” The price has been paid. The debt has been erased. The victory over Satan is assured. You are complete in Christ. You are alive. Your sins are forgiven. Christ is and will remain fully supreme and sufficient, forever!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we praise you for your full and free love for us in Christ our Lord. Continue to lead us and many others recognize the deadly nature of trusting rules, regulations, and rituals to give or foster our faith-life. Lead us to rejoice in the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ for all aspects of our Christian faith and live. Also hear us as we join to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.