

o8. Colossians 2:16 - 3:5



Colossians 2:16-17

Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to the Messiah.

Paul is not especially critical of the practices which he mentions in verse sixteen. It is sufficient for him to state that they are only a 'shadow' (σκιὰ); 'the substance (σῶμα, 'reality', compare σωματικῶς, 2:9) belongs to the Messiah'.

Colossians 2:18-19

Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on humility and worship of angels, dwelling on visions puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

Verse eighteen takes us to the heart of the problem. They are striving for **humility**; they are desirous of having **visions**; and they want the experience of joining in the **worship** offered to God by angels. However, what is actually happening is that they are being '**puffed up**' with pride. The problem, says Paul, repeating an earlier statement, is that they are caught up in '**a human way of thinking**' (see 2:8). They fail to grasp what **humility** is as a Christian virtue. By turning aside from Jesus the head and the source of coordination and growth in his body, the church, they are undermining communion.

Colossians 2:20-23

If with the Messiah you died to the principles of the world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch’? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

In baptism we died to our past way of life in which we followed principles that belong to this world only. Now we are living Jesus' life. Why submit again to regulations that are based on principles that have their origin in worldly thinking but are unrelated to Jesus? These are no more than **'human commands and teachings'** (see 2:8). Self-motivated asceticism is unable to check self-centred behaviour. We must look to Jesus. If we truly live his life what is not of him will be crucified. We are to have **'faith in the power of God'** (2:12). Only activity inspired by the risen Jesus and flowing from our **'being made alive together with him'** (2:13) can **'make peace'** (1:20).

Christianity is about ordinary, real, human experience. It is about the pain and fidelity of Jesus' love, and about our struggle, personally and as a community, against the sin that clings to us and distracts us. It is about being instruments of God's love in this world. Paul is reminding us of this and drawing us back to Jesus, lest our lives be spent in social, political, theological, and personal distraction, and our contribution to the world be empty, because unredeemed by his love, and **'vitiating by pride'**.

The Christian virtue of **humility** (ταπεινοφροσύνη)

Thinking of oneself as being 'low' (ταπεινος)

Being 'low' has no value in itself, but it does attract God's compassionate love, and it does hold out hope for redemption.

The following text from Isaiah is typical: 'Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his lowly ones (ταπεινος)' (Isaiah 49:13).

Sirach recommends lowering oneself before God: 'They who fear the Lord keep their hearts prepared and bow down their souls in his presence' (Sirach 2:17; see also 7:17; 18:21).

Greek moral philosophy, outside the Bible, has no place for ‘thinking of oneself as low’. ταπεινοφροσύνη does not occur prior to Paul. Shortly after him we find it being used by Plutarch, Epictetus and Josephus, but always as a vice, never as a virtue. As they use ταπεινοφροσύνη, it is best translated ‘small-minded’ or ‘mean-spirited’. It is the equivalent of having a low self-esteem.

In the Greek Old Testament the related adjective [ταπεινοφρονος] occurs once: ‘A person’s pride will bring humiliation, but one who is **lowly in spirit** will obtain honour’ (Proverbs 29:23).

The related verb (ταπεινοφρονεω) also occurs only once in the Greek Old Testament, in a Psalm 131 which prepares us for its use in the New Testament: ‘O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed [The Greek reads: ‘I think of myself **humbly**’] and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and for evermore.’

The following scene from the Gospel recalls Psalm 131: ‘The disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 18:1-4).

The little child is offered as a symbol of humility for it beautifully captures Jesus’ own childlike trust in the God whom he calls ‘Abba! Father!’ He wants his disciples to have a heart that is humble like his (Matthew 11:29). Because Jesus looked up to God in loving trust, he was able to look up to everyone, delighting in people with the delight that belongs to the innocence of childhood and experiencing it as a privilege to serve them.

All this provides the background to the virtue which appears for the first time in Greek in Paul. 'Thinking of oneself as low' (or 'humility') is an attitude of mind and heart that recognises oneself as God's child, sharing the life of his Son, and therefore as living in total dependence on God. The humble person delights in this dependence, knowing that God is a Father and can be absolutely counted on as a source of life, love and hope.

The self held a central place in the ethics of the Greek and Roman moralists, for they thought of their individual nature as sharing in the divinity. The divine in each person was thought of as identified with the self. It was important, therefore, to recognise and respect one's self, and not to think of oneself in a servile way.

For the Christian the divine Spirit which sanctifies the self is not identical with it but is the Spirit of Jesus: 'It is no longer I who live, but the Messiah who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). To know how to obey the divine will, Christians do not look to their own nature and strive to act accordingly. Rather, they listen attentively to the call of the Lord, and strive to be obedient to one in whose wisdom and love they trust.

The highest freedom experienced by disciples of Jesus is to be his slave, to allow him to live in them and to find in the freedom given by Jesus an opportunity to be 'through love, slaves of one another' (Galatians 5:13). Christians experience a radical and liberating change of perspective: 'If anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In this new creature, humility is a basic virtue. Everything now is possible, not to the one who is most self-sufficient, but 'for one who believes' (Mark 9:24). The self is no less important, but perfection for the self is a flowering of the gifts of the Spirit, and the way to this perfection is in self-giving, after the example of Jesus, and by the power of his Spirit. 'Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it' (Luke 17:33). Humility as a Christian virtue is a sharing in the life of Jesus, the child of God, and in the intimacy of his trust in his Father.

Paul believes that it is Jesus who is living in him and in the Christians to whom he is writing. He wants them to let this special trusting dependence of Jesus on his Father find expression in their lives too. Then they would have no difficulty in looking up to others, delighting in their gifts, looking after their interests. Humility for a disciple of Jesus has nothing to do with belittling self or, as in Colossians, abasing oneself before the angelic powers. It is the recognition of oneself as a child of God and a trust that one's self will be created by God's love.

Colossians 3:1-4

So if you have been raised with the Messiah, seek the things that are above, where he is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God. When he who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Paul has already written, earlier in the letter: 'As you have received the Messiah Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him ... For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him ... when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him' (Colossians 2:6-7, 9-10,12).

Since God has raised us from the dead, and since the life we are living is a sharing in the risen life of Jesus, we should look to him and seek from him the graces which he offers us from his position as Lord, ‘seated at the right hand of God’ (see Psalm 110:1). God now exercises his power (the redeeming power of God’s love) through his anointed Messiah.

If we are truly to live a life of communion with the risen Jesus, we must not set our hearts and fix our thoughts on the things of earth. Rather, we must look to him, be attentive to his word and be ready to carry out his will.

Things were once different, but ‘he has rescued us from the power of darkness’ (1:13), and in him ‘we have received redemption, the forgiveness of our sins’ (1:14). We who were once ‘estranged and hostile in mind ... he has now reconciled’ (1:21-22). The record of our guilt has been ‘set aside, nailed to the cross’ (2:14). Our sinful past was buried with him when we were welcomed into the community of believers in baptism and began a new life.

‘I have been crucified with him. It is no longer I who live, it is the Messiah who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:19-20).

‘How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ... But if we have died with the Messiah, we believe that we will also live with him’ (Romans 6:2,8).

Y’ou have died ... so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God’ (Romans 7:4).

This is matter of faith. Jesus has not yet appeared in glory, and it is not yet fully apparent that we are living his life. In this sense we are ‘**hidden with the Messiah in God**’. But it will be made apparent ($\phi\alpha\nu\epsilon\rho\acute{o}\omega$, see 1:26), and, in this hope we are to live the new life with which we have been graced.

Colossians 3:5-9

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things — wrath, explosions of anger, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another

In the previous passage Paul laid down general principles that should guide the Colossians in living a life that is possible and fitting for them as baptised Christians. He now describes the kind of life they were living (see 1:21), the kind of life which died and was buried in baptism and to which they must not return. Similar lists of immoral behaviour can be found in his earlier letters (see especially Galatians 5:19-21; 1Thessalonians 4:3-6). Though parallels can be found in Stoic moral manuals of the day, Paul is mainly reproducing the kind of list we find in descriptions of behaviour judged by Jews to be typical of Gentiles. He is, in effect, saying to the Gentile Christians of Colossae: 'Don't return to the kind of life you lived before your conversion to Jesus'.

Colossians 3:5

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).

The list begins with ‘fornication’ (πορνεία): a word covering a whole range of morally irresponsible behaviour in matters of sexuality. He puts it first because the way we relate sexually is central to who we are and to the way we express or fail to express love. He then speaks of ‘impurity’ (ἀκαθαρσία): the pollution of our physical environment bears no comparison with the harm caused when we pollute the mind and heart. He goes on to name the vice of ‘passion’ (πάθος). He is thinking of inordinate passion. The sin translated here as ‘greed’ (πλεονεξία) refers to an aggressive ruthlessness which also finds expression in the area of sexuality.

Being a Christian means living in a certain way. It concerns the truth of who we are as persons. It is not surprising, therefore, that Paul moves immediately to speak of sexuality, for where else do all the dimensions of being human meet more intimately and more mysteriously than in our identity as man or woman? It is traditional Jewish and Christian wisdom that sexual relationships are meant to be sacraments in which we encounter the divine at the heart of another person cherished in love. There are divinely mysterious depths in every person. Sexual experience invites us into this mystery in which two people enjoy, encourage, heal, forgive and create each other in loving trust.

There is a restlessness and a mysterious yearning at the heart of sexuality, for we know that we are not sufficient of ourselves. We need the other; we long to be in communion with the other. It is common human wisdom, born of experience, that when we give expression to our sexual desire we should do so in a way that recognises the sacredness and the dignity of our own person and of the other.

Paul is speaking here of sexual behaviour which ignores all delicacy, by-passes love, and uses, even abuses, another person in a selfish attempt to assert one's own power or gratify one's own **'evil desire'**.