

## **BREAKING SPIRITUAL GROWTH BARRIERS**

**Colossians 2:16-23**

**By Andy Manning**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

1. The concept of growth barriers has been around for a long time. Churches face attendance growth barriers. There's the 65 growth barrier, the 100 growth barrier, the 250 growth barrier, etc. Volumes have been written on the subject. I have a book in my study called, *How to Break Growth Barriers* by Carl F. George, a classic book on church growth. Body builders face muscle growth barriers as they are trying to get bigger and stronger. Businesses face financial growth barriers as they are trying to make more money.
2. There are spiritual growth barriers as well. A spiritual growth barrier is something that will keep you from being a healthy, growing Christian. There are many different growth barriers: Sins, laziness, bad company, false teaching, weak preaching, an unhealthy church, ignorance.
3. If you want to go to the next level in your relationship with God, you must identify and break through the barriers that are getting in your way.
4. In our text today, we're going to see two growth barriers that were preventing the ancient Colossian church from growing.

### **II. TEXT: Colossians 2:16-23**

16 Therefore, don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.

17 These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ.

18 Let no one condemn you by delighting in ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm. Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind.

19 He doesn't hold on to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, grows with growth from God.

20 If you died with Christ to the elements of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations:

21 "Don't handle, don't taste, don't touch"?

22 All these regulations refer to what is destined to perish by being used up; they are human commands and doctrines.

23 Although these have a reputation for wisdom by promoting self-made religion, false humility, and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value in curbing self-indulgence.

### **III. TWO SPIRITUAL GROWTH BARRIERS**

#### **1. Holding on to Old Testament laws that have been fulfilled by Christ.**

- i. **Colossians 2:16** "Therefore, don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day."
- ii. The Colossians were holding on to two types of OT laws.
  1. The Colossians were holding on to the OT diet: "food and drink"

- a. Many of the Colossian Christians were formerly, Jewish, and they were trying to hold on to their Jewish rules and rituals, and trying to push them on others.
- b. The OT law (the Law of Moses; Torah; Pentateuch; first five books of the OT) provided a list of foods that were unclean, foods that Jews were forbidden to eat. You can get a good idea of the kinds of foods they could not eat in Leviticus 11.
  - i. Land animals: Only those with a divided hoof and that chewed the cud. For example, no pork. Lev 11:3-8
  - ii. Water animals: Only those that had fins and scales. For example, no shellfish or squid. Lev 11:9-12.
  - iii. Birds: Not eagles, vultures, kites, ravens, owls, hawks, ospreys, storks, hoopoes, and bats. Lev 11:13-18
  - iv. Insects: Only locusts, katydids, crickets, or grasshoppers. For example, no grubs. Lev 11:20-23
  - v. No animals that walked on their paws. For example, no dogs or cats. Lev 11:27
  - vi. No weasels, rats, lizards, geckos, skinks, or chameleons. Lev 11:29-30
  - vii. No creature that moves along the ground, such as snakes. Lev 11:41
- 2. The Colossians were holding on to the OT days: “festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day”
  - a. Festivals: The Jews observed many festivals throughout the year. Three of them are called Pilgrimage Festivals, because every Jewish male is required to attend all three festivals every year. These are the Passover/Festival of Unleavened Bread (between mid-March and mid-April); Pentecost/Festival of Weeks (50 days after Passover, in late May or early June); and Tabernacles/Festival of Ingathering (mid-September to mid-October).
  - b. New Moons: The first day of every month was a holiday for Jews, called the New Moon. There was feasting and the offering of sacrifices. (Num. 10:10; 28:11–14; Ps. 81:3)
  - c. Sabbath day: The Sabbath was held every week from sundown on Friday, to sundown on Saturday. The Jews were forbidden to work during that time. It was one of the Ten Commandments.
- iii. How should we view the OT law?
  1. **Colossians 2:17** “These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ.”
    - a. Paul was stating that Christians are no longer under these Old Testament laws. Instead, they were a shadow of Christ. They pointed to Christ. They illustrated Christ. But now that Christ

has come and died for our sins, we no longer follow those Old Testament laws.

2. Galatians 5:24-26 “24 The law, then, was our guardian until Christ, so that we could be justified by faith. 25 But since that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, 26 for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”
  - a. The law was like a guardian that kept the Jews close to God. It showed them how to please God. It showed them God’s nature. It showed their sin and their need for a sacrifice. But now that Christ has come, we are made right with God by faith in Him, and therefore we no longer need the law. We no longer need the law to stay close to God. We have Christ.
  - b. Romans 10:4 “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes,”
3. Does this mean the Old Testament law is obsolete and irrelevant to Christians today? Absolutely not. Romans 3:31 “Do we nullify the law through faith? Absolutely not! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”
4. There are 613 laws in the Old Testament, and they can be divided into three categories: The Ceremonial law, the Civil law, and the Moral law. The ceremonial law regulated Jewish worship. It included priesthood rules, purity rules, dietary rules, festivals and holy days, the sacrificial system, and rules about the tabernacle/temple. The civil law governed the Jews as a nation, including property laws, slavery laws, laws for waging war, laws about indebtedness, and penalties for breaking the laws. The moral law is God’s eternal rule of righteousness based on His unchanging character and binding upon all people for all time.
5. The NT tells us that we are no longer under the ceremonial law. It was meant to be a shadow of Christ; a type of Christ. It was fulfilled by the work of Christ.
  - a. Colossians 2:16-17 says, “16 Therefore, don’t let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day. 17 These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is the Messiah.”
  - b. Hebrews 10:14, 18 says, “14 For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who are being made holy.... 18 And when sins have been forgiven, there is no need to offer any more sacrifices.”
  - c. Rom. 14:17 “for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”
  - d. 1 Cor 8:8 “Food will not bring us close to God. We are not worse off if we don’t eat, and we are not better if we do eat.”

- e. Rm 14:5 “One person judges one day to be more important than another day. Someone else judges every day to be the same. Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind.”
- 6. We are also no longer under the civil law because now that Christ has come, the people of God are no longer the nation of Israel, but the church of Jesus Christ, which consists of Jews and Gentiles from every nation and language.
  - a. Colossians 3:11 says, “In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.”
  - b. Now Christians are called to submit to the laws of the local government where they live, unless that government requires them to sin.
  - c. **Philip Ryken** “The civil law has also expired, but for a slightly different reason: The church is not a state. We do have a king (namely, Christ), but his kingdom is spiritual. Therefore, although the civil laws of the Old Testament contain principles that are useful for governing nations today, God’s people are no longer bound by their specific regulations.”
- 7. We are still under the Moral law, God’s eternal rule of righteousness based on His unchanging character and binding upon all people for all time. Why?
  - a. The moral law is still binding because it is a reflection of God’s unchanging character, and therefore does not change.
  - b. The moral law is still binding because it will last for eternity.
  - c. The moral law is still binding because it was written on human hearts before it was even inscribed by God’s finger on stone tablets. Rm 2:14-15
  - d. The moral law is still binding because the NT upholds it. For example, the NT affirms and emphasizes every one of the Ten Commands but the Sabbath.
- iv. **Hebrews 12:1-2** “Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith.”
  - 1. The writer of Hebrews says there are two things that can slow you down in the Christian life: hindrances and sins. You know what sins are. But what are hindrances? Hindrances are Old Testament laws that you are holding onto. I have a weighted vest that I use for exercising. It looks like a bullet proof vest. In the front and in the back there are slots to put in metal plates so that it is harder to do pushups, and pull ups, and even to run. You can add as much as 50 pounds to the vest. Holding on to OT commands is like trying to run a race with a weighted vest on. You cannot win the race like that. How

do we win the Christian race? The writer of Hebrews says to lay aside every hindrance – every unnecessary rule and law – and keep your eyes on Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT. Keep your eyes on His perfect sacrifice; on the righteousness you have in Christ by faith.

- v. How do we know which OT laws to obey? Usually it is easy to tell when a law is ceremonial or civil. But the easiest thing to do is to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. If Jesus and the apostles reiterate on an Old Testament law, then we know that it is binding.
- vi. So, the first growth barrier is holding on to OT laws that have been fulfilled in Christ. We no longer need the Ceremonial and Civil laws to grow and have a healthy walk with God. We have Christ.

## 2. Heaping on new commands and doctrines to the Bible.

- i. **Colossians 2:18** “Let no one condemn you by delighting in ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm.”
- ii. Some members of the Colossian church were not only holding on to OT commands, but they were heaping on new commands and doctrines to the Bible. Commands and doctrines that are not found in the Bible. These included:
  - 1. Asceticism.
    - a. Britannica defines it as “the practice of the denial of physical or psychological desires in order to attain a spiritual ideal or goal.”
    - b. Comes from the Greek, *askeo*, to exercise, or to train.
    - c. The idea is to avoid all pleasure and to seek out pain and discomfort. This will help you to overcome sin and grow closer to God.
    - d. Some ascetic practices include fasting, exposing oneself to heat or cold, sleep deprivation, flagellation, and even self-mutilation.
  - 2. Angel worship.
    - a. There was a false teaching that believed that everything physical is evil, and therefore God did not create it. Instead, God, created angels, spirit beings, and they created the universe.
    - b. Because we are sinful, we cannot communicate directly with God. Instead, we must communicate with through angels.
    - c. Some claimed to receive special visions and revelations from these angels.
- iii. Next, Paul explains why these extra-biblical commands and doctrines are growth barriers. 7 Problems with Extra-Biblical Commands and Doctrines:
  - 1. They lead to pride. Verse 18 “Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind.”
    - a. The ascetic grows proud because he looks down on those who are not as strict.

- b. The angel worshiper grows proud because he claims to have special visions and revelations that others do not have.
- 2. They are empty notions. Verse 18 “Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind.” They are empty notions – worthless; meaningless; pointless; having no benefit.
- 3. They are unspiritual. Verse 18 “Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind.” They do not help you grow closer to God; they do not come from God.
- 4. They are a departure from Christ.
  - a. **Colossians 2:19** “He doesn’t hold on to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, grows with growth from God.”
  - b. To grow you must cling to Christ. Colossians 2:6-7 “6 So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, 7 being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude.”
  - c. These practices were not taught by Christ. They contradict Christ. They dishonor Christ. They ignore Christ. They focus on things other than Christ – asceticism and angels.
  - d. As long as you focus on things other than Christ and the teachings of Christ, then you cannot grow and be a healthy Christian.
- 5. They are not binding upon Christians.
  - a. You are not bound by any rules but the rule of Christ.
  - b. **Colossians 2:20-21** “20 If you died with Christ to the elements of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations: 21 “Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch”?”
  - c. When you get saved, you die to your old life, and Christ becomes your life. Philippians 1:21 “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” You are not obligated to follow any rules or teachings outside of Christ. Christ is your only authority. You only have to do what He says. You don’t live by rules, but by the rule of Christ.
- 6. They will not increase your heavenly treasure.
  - a. **Colossians 2:22** “All these regulations refer to what is destined to perish by being used up; they are human commands and doctrines.”
  - b. These practices will perish. They do not last for eternity. But when you follow the teachings of Christ, your good works store up eternal treasures for you.

- c. Mt 16:27 For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will reward each according to what he has done.
- 7. They do not help you grow.
  - a. **Colossians 2:23** “Although these have a reputation for wisdom by promoting self-made religion, false humility, and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value in curbing self-indulgence.”
  - b. Asceticism and angel worship don’t help you overcome sin and become holy.
- iv. So, beware of extra-biblical teachings – commands and doctrines that are not in the Bible. Stick with Christ – with Christ as your righteousness; and Christ’s teachings as your rule of faith and practice.

**IV. HOW TO GROW IN CHRIST:** Now that we have covered two spiritual growth barriers, let us briefly review the basics of spiritual growth – how to have a healthy, growing relationship with God.

1. **The mandate to grow.** We are commanded to grow. 2 Peter 3:18 “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”
2. **The meaning of growth.** Spiritual maturity is loving God and others more and more. Mark 12:29-31 29 Jesus answered, “The most important is Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. 31 The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these.”
3. **The measure of growth.** We don’t compare ourselves to one another, but to God. Our aim and standard is the very character of God and Christ (Eph 5:1). 1 John 2:6 “The one who says he remains in him should walk just as he walked.”
4. **The method of growth.** We grow by abiding/remaining in Christ. Keep a constant, close connection with Him through Bible reading, private prayer, and church participation. John 15:5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me.”
5. **The motivation for growth.** We do not grow to earn our salvation, or to impress others, or to get blessings from God, or just to be happier. We grow to glorify and serve the Lord. 2 Peter 3:18 “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity.”

**V. CONCLUSION**

1. God has given you everything you need to grow in Christ (2 Pt 1:3). And there is nothing more important rewarding than growing in Christ. Thomas Watson said, “Grace turns to joy, as milk to cream.” But you have to do your part. And that includes avoiding spiritual growth barriers. Today we looked at two, but there are many.
  - i. For some, the barrier is legalism – holding on to OT rules that no longer apply to Christians today (Col 2:16-17).
  - ii. For some, the barrier is loading – adding commands and doctrines to those of Christ (Col 2:18).

- iii. For some, the barrier is laziness – not going to church regularly, neglecting private disciplines, neglecting personal ministry (Heb 10:24-25).
  - iv. For some, the barrier is licentiousness – refusing to give up your sin for God (Gal 5:19-21).
  - v. For some, the barrier is love – you love the world more than Christ. It is not that you are choosing sin over God, but you are choosing to do other things over God, and that is sin (1 Jn 2:15-17).
  - vi. For some, the barrier is Lordship – they accept Jesus as Savior, but have not surrendered to Jesus as Lord (Col 2:6).
  - vii. For some, the barrier is lousy friends – your close friends are worldly and sinful, and they are holding you back (1 Cor 15:33).
- 2. If you are up against a spiritual growth barrier today, I encourage you to do whatever it takes to let it go; to overcome it; to push through it.
- 3. 1 Cor 2:9 “What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no heart has conceived – God has prepared these things for those who love him.”