

Finding Freedom and Fulfillment in

Your Christian Walk

Lesson 10

GROW DISCIPLESHIP CURRICULUM

Engaging the Learner

Juanita slowly exhaled as she climbed from the gym parking lot to behind the wheel of her luxury SUV. Checking her reflection in the rearview mirror, she noted faint lines around her eyes and mouth. “Better make an appointment with John,” she thought as she reached for her cell phone. John was a woman’s savior. Two quick injections, and she’d be good as new. “If you’re gonna spend time on the body,” she often remarked to her friends, “you can’t forget about the face. Timmy’s got half a dozen girls in his office that never quit.” At thirty-five, her husband Tim was the physical ideal of manhood. Juanita was still beautiful, but their two sons, Eric and Jay, took their toll. So, in addition to a forty-five minute-a-day exercise regime, Juanita had begun having a little work done on her “problem areas” a few years earlier.

Juanita flipped through her Christian CD’s. For a second, she longed for her now discarded secular albums. Finding nothing, she punched in the local Christian radio station and started home. A Christian for only two years now, she was still trying to get her walk together. First, she’d converted to Christian CD’s. That was okay—a lot of the new music really was good. Then there was the conversion to all Christian books. The Baptist bookstore sold everything from romance and adventure to mystery and self-help. They were readable, but they often seemed a little...sanitized. Sometimes she missed the realism of her favorite authors. No one had ever actually said anything to Tim and her about their need to change these things, but the looks they got when the mentioned certain albums, movies, or books had let them know. While she didn’t quite understand the problem with some of them, Juanita had gamely given them all up.

Then at church last night the speaker had talked about the evils of public schools. The speaker even suggested the only really Christian answer for parents was home schooling. Juanita didn’t know what to think about that. Glancing around the sanctuary, she saw many of her new friends nodding their head in approval. She’d looked forward to the twins starting pre-school the year before so that she could get back to work. Goodness knows they needed the money, and the thought of staying home for another 14 years drove her crazy. Between work, being a mother, looking good, and church, when could she possibly find time for that? “I thought Christianity would free me,” she would later tell Tim, “but it just adds one more list of things I have to do well. I just don’t know if I’ve got it in me.”

Exploring the Lesson

Perhaps you can relate to Juanita’s dilemma. All too often we come to faith in Christ, expecting freedom, only to find ourselves still saddled with the expectations of society. Plus, we’re given a whole new list of “church rules.” In Juanita’s case, she feels the expectations of a society that demands physical perfection and financial wealth. As a Christian, she also experiences the expectations of becoming part of the “faith

ghetto.” “Faith ghetto” describes the Christians sub-culture in which people read only “Christian” literature, listen to only “Christian” music, look at only “Christian” artwork, and attend “Christian” events. While Christians have always partaken in a separate lifestyle, the diversification of Christian commercialism allows Christians to live just like their secular counterparts, but with crosses and scripture references attached to everything.

While God has standards for His church, He also provides freedom from the demands of this world and needless religious expectations. Paul explains how we can grasp this freedom in Colossians 2:6-3:3. Take a moment to read over this passage before continuing.

Life in Christ & Human Philosophy

Paul is writing to encourage his young converts in the church of Colosse. While living in a pagan culture which placed financial and religious expectations on its citizens, these new gentile Christians were also receiving pressure from Jewish Christians to conform to Jewish religious traditions. Paul’s instruction to these believers also serves to guide us in our quest for freedom. He begins by exhorting us to continue to live in Christ. “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him.” (2:6-7). Serving Christ as Lord, rooting your self-understanding and value system in Him, is foundational to becoming free. Paul goes on to encourage searching Christians to strengthen their faith and to “overflow” with thanksgiving. Why should we be thankful and strong? We are thankful because Christ gives us freedom, but we must be strong enough to perceive and take this freedom.

Paul also challenges us to perceive human philosophies for what they are (2:8). Philosophies are those things that govern what we believe is important. In other words, why we do the things we do. Juanita (and many contemporary Christians) mistakenly thinks her worth lies in physical beauty and wealth. Other philosophies governing our world are that happiness lies within you, intelligent people have more worth, and sexuality is the greatest good. Our culture puts huge pressure on us to conform to the philosophies. However, Paul reminds us we have freedom from the human and worldly expectations because they are based only on human tradition.

How does Christ grant us the power to reject human philosophies? In other words, what’s more powerful than human opinion? Paul answers this question in verses 2:9-12. These verses begin “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority” (9-10). God’s power trumps human regulations and expectations! Because we can proclaim Jesus is our Lord and God, God can supersede human philosophies with His own. This is our source of freedom. When we became Christians (“were baptized” in Paul’s writing), we died to human expectations and became alive to God’s expectations!

Freedom from Religious Judgment

In Colossians 2:16-23, Paul deals with non-essential human religious convictions. Some of these writings deal with Jewish customs that governed before Christ came, while others deal with false teachers who were worshipping angels. Still more concern legalistic personal convictions taught by some leaders. Although many of these teachings were individual preferences, others were blatantly pagan. No matter the source of these expectations, Paul proclaims that none are binding for believers. About these he writes, “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” (2:23).

But how do Christians know which rules are essential, and which can be avoided as human? Paul outlines several ways to determine human commands. 1) If the leader is not living a Christian life, he or she has lost connection with Christ (2:18-19). 2) Avoid rules that do not reflect universal and eternal truths (2:21). Universal truths are truths taught in the Bible. The teachings of Jesus and the New Testament writers are especially helpful. When evaluating an expectation, ask yourself, “What is the basis for this rule? Will it make a difference in the end?” 3) Follow laws that encourage holy living (2:23). Many rules,

although appearing spiritual because they are severe, do not actually shape a person to be more godly. Discard these rules.

Set Your Mind Above

Beneath any set of rules is one internal issue: Where is your heart and mind? Colossians 3:1-3 places the rest of the passage in perspective. "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above" (3:1). Christians live their life concerned with Christ, not the issues of this world. That doesn't mean we don't have physical needs or concerns. Far from it, we are called to live as Christian even while we meet the needs of life. Nevertheless, the concerns of this world don't dictate what we hold to be important or determine what we should or shouldn't do. Those issues are controlled by our eternal relationship with God. If we hold our gaze and heart on God, the rules of this world tend to find their place.

Enhancing Our Lives

God truly wants to free you from the philosophies of this world and the religious expectations of others. Having studied Colossians for guidance, let's walk through some exercises designed to help you courageously claim the freedom Christ offers.

1. Identifying human philosophies. When you run up against teachings you question, ask yourself the following questions:

- A. Does this philosophy put someone or something in competition with Christ?
- B. Does it deny the deity of Christ?
- C. Does it claim to be exclusive to a certain group?
- D. Do its leaders claim special revelation from God?
- E. Are other writings put on equal basis with the Bible?

2. Tapping God's power to make you free.

God has the power to free you from human expectations. However, you must give Him the freedom to do so.

- A. Be open to God's desire to remove chains from you.
- B. Give God your greatest concern or unmet expectation.
- C. Visualize yourself and Christ. Imagine He is removing whatever imprisons you. Watch Him remove the bondage from you. Let out a long breath as you feel the weight removed. Thank Him for this freedom.
- D. You may pick up this burden again. Give it back as soon as you can.
- E. Concentrate on God's solution, not your circumstances.
- F. Live as though you are free, even though you may not fully believe you are. Base your decisions on your expectation of freedom.
- G. Continue to trust Christ, even during the temporary reappearance of your bondage.

3. Handling human judgment or condemnation.

Like Juanita in the opening story, you may encounter instances when Christians disagree with your decisions. You may even sense that you have been condemned by them. Use the following steps to determine whether or not their concerns are justified.

- A. Thoughtfully consider if there is truth to their criticism.
- B. Prayerfully ask God to show you areas of need in your life.
- C. If improvements are needed, change your thinking or actions.
- D. If the criticism is invalid, weigh the consequences of not conforming:
 - 1) Will you harm someone else by not conforming?
 - 2) Are you willing to absorb social disapproval?
- E. You may want to proceed as before with or without explanation of your philosophy.
- F. Do not act defensively, e.g. scoffing, belittling, or arguing.
- G. If you are right, God will reveal it in time.

4. Remaining free from human regulations.

Here are some helpful tips for establishing a life of freedom in Christ.

A. Repeat these promises often:

“ Christ has made me free.”

“ We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”

“ I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

B. Don't make friendships with people you know will imprison you with their worldview. For example, some people you know are always concerned about personal appearance or money.

C. Don't join organizations that contradict your beliefs. This includes jobs, civil organizations, and even some churches.

D. Trust your own thoughts as valid.

E. Develop your priority list.

F. Discipline and supervise yourself to follow your priorities.

G. Involve yourself in constructive and helpful activities.

Outline for Small Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

All questions and exercises are useful for either personal or small group reflection. While exercises marked with an asterisk (*) are written specifically for a small group leader, individual learners can easily modify the exercise for their personal study.

Engaging the Learner

What expectations do you feel the world as a whole placing on you?

Do you think some Christians have unfair religious expectations for you? When you first became a Christian, what things did you need to give up? How did you know you needed to change those things?

Exploring the Lesson/Enhancing Your Life

*Ask someone to read Ephesians Colossians 2:6-3:3 to the class.

Consider the priorities in your life. What are they? Who has made these a priority for you? Society? Your faith? The Church? Yourself?

Life in Christ and Human Philosophy

*Divide a dry erase board into three columns. As a class, list in the left column the primary values of our society. After you have completed that list, move to the middle column. Ask the class to raise their hands if they feel pressure to conform to this value on the left. Count the hands and put the number in the middle column. Finally, in the right to column, ask whether or not that value is a Christian value. Label each value as either Christian (C), “Not Christian but Compatible with Christianity (NC/C) or Not Christian and Not Compatible with Chistianity (NC/NC).

Where must Christians root themselves?

Why are Christians able to be free from human philosophies?

Freedom from Religious Judgment

Read Colossians 2:23. Make a list of Christian regulations throughout history that appeared to have wisdom, but eventually the Church discarded as lacking eternal significance.

Are you aware of any current expectations or rules imposed by yourself or others that “lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (Colossians 2:23)?

How are Christians to determine which rules have eternal significance?

*As a class, discuss the expectations that class members have for themselves and other Christians. These might include regular church attendance, devotional time, decisions regarding child rearing, and entertainment choices. Now, go back and establish the basis for these rules. Are they Biblical and eternal? If they aren't, does this mean they should be discarded?

Set Your Mind Above

How do you keep your mind focused on God?

Is it possible to be aware of your earthly needs without letting them control you? Why or why not?

***End the class in prayer.**