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Pentecost 2 – Colossians 2:13-17 – Religion Isn't About Rules, It's About Freedom
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Have you noticed that lots of people today like to talk about Christianity not as a religion, but as a relationship? If you listen to Christian radio or see enough social media you'll hear things like that, because nowadays people talk about "religion" like it's just a bunch of rules someone made up and wrote down a long time ago to control people and squeeze money and hard labor out of them.

But Christianity isn't like that. Christianity is not slavery. Christianity isn't about rules, it's about freedom. Slavery is doing what you do because you're *forced* to, whether you like it or not. And actually, apart from Christ, that's exactly what our lives are. We are slaves to sin under the power of the devil, because no matter what we do, no matter how well intentioned we are and how hard we try to prove our worth to God, without a Savior, we have no choice in God's eyes but to live in sin and the inevitable outcome of our life is hell. Apart from Christ and lost in sin, that's slavery we can't escape. But in Christ and through faith in Christ, we have freedom – we do what we do now because we *want* to and we know it's truly best for us as we walk the path of life. Christ has freed us and empowered us to follow him by guiding us with his Word and finally bringing us home to heaven. Yes, only in Christ can we know the truth about religion: it's not about slavery or control or rules. It's all about freedom.

And it's freedom that's so much more appreciated because we know what it's like to not be free. Paul says that "*the written code, with its regulations, ... was against us and... stood opposed to us.*" That's actually a pretty ugly picture. That "*written code, with its regulations*" Paul talks about is actually what we might think of as a record of our debts. Before God, we're a lot like the guy in the article I read online some years ago. It was about a 36-year-old named Nick Keith who managed to rack up \$142,000 in student loan debt from a culinary school in California. But that's not even the worst part. Since the loans he took out were from a private company, he got locked into a 17% interest rate and monthly payments of \$1,300. That's a pretty hefty price tag when the best job your culinary degree can get you, as this guy found out, is on a meal assembly line making \$10 an hour. Now that's pretty bad. But what's maybe even worse is that the article said he couldn't legally declare bankruptcy or get

any help because his debt was in student loans. Nick Keith ended up homeless and buried under a pile of debt that only just kept growing on top of him, with no hope of ever digging himself out.

That kind of a debt record is something that people just can't kick. It follows them around and always hangs over their heads to remind them of their mistakes and shortcomings. That's just what Paul says God's Law did for us – like a bill collector that just wouldn't leave us alone, it constantly hounded us about the impossible debt of sin we owed to God and it demanded payback. Only our debts to God weren't in dollars – they were in obedience to his commands and regulations, and our record only got longer and heavier every time we broke the Law God gave us. Every verse of that Law in God's Word was like an official legal charge of sin on our spiritual rap sheet that stood opposed to us and condemned us for not keeping it, and that confronted us with the fact that our debt had to be repaid in blood.

And so it was – just not with our blood. See, without Christ we were spiritually dead and lost, hopeless slaves to sin and Satan. But then Christ came to save us. As Paul says, "*[God] forgave us all our sins... he took away [the written code... that was against us and that stood opposed to us], nailing it to the cross.*" Rather than calling us to account and charging us our own lifeblood to make right what we owed him, God blotted out our debt, he canceled it and washed it away in the lifeblood of his Son and our Savior Jesus. Our sins were nailed to the cross of Christ, so they can never come back to be thrown in our faces or held over our heads again. When Christ died for us on the cross, he paid our debts in full, and so that record of our debts that once accused us and enslaved us died with him.

That record was that one thing powerful enough that our spiritual enemies could use to keep us under their control and keep us in fear and spiritual slavery, but no more. What would it feel like if that kind of debt were suddenly gone? What would it feel like for Nick Keith? What would it feel like for you, if you've ever been in that situation? That crushing weight of debt you once knew would give way to grace and peace and freedom unlike anything you've ever known. Well my friends, Christ *has* taken away your sins and he *has* canceled your debts; he *has* triumphed over all our spiritual enemies, and that means we triumph with him! That victory is your life and your joy. That record of our debts that the devil

once proudly threw in our faces to prove that we deserved punishment in hell has been overturned by the proof we have in Jesus' resurrection and in his Word and Sacraments that we are now God's children and heirs of his heavenly kingdom, and that we have the certainty of forgiveness and salvation and freedom.

And for Christians, that freedom doesn't just mean freedom from the Law's accusations. It also means freedom from the Law's restrictions. See, in the Old Testament, God gave the Israelites lots of laws about how they dressed and presented themselves, what they could eat and drink, how they had to worship and so on – but these weren't just rules for the sake of having rules. God gave those laws to set Israel apart as his holy people from the unbelieving nations around them, and to teach them about the coming Christ and what he would do for them. That's what Paul meant when he said, *“These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”*

It's like this: when someone comes around a corner or comes up behind you, you can tell they're approaching and some things about them when you see their shadow – how big or small they are, how fast or slow they're moving, what shape that person or thing might be. Well, it was the same way with the festivals and the sacrifices and the whole worship life of Old Testament believers – every part of it was meant to teach them something about their Savior or some aspect of the salvation he was going to bring them. But now that Christ has come, now that he's won our salvation and made it known to the world, God's people have a completely different way of doing things. Our Lord wants us to be known now not by what we can't or won't do, but by the acts of generosity and love that we *want* to do, and so he's given us freedom to serve and worship him in any number of ways. Christ fulfilled the Law perfectly for us; he met its demands and freed us from them, so Paul says, *“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.”*

So does that mean now Christianity is some kind of moral free-for-all, where we can do whatever we want with no spiritual consequences? No, Christ won us freedom *from* sin, not *for* it. It means that Christians live a new life now and operate under a different standard and with a different purpose. For us now, the Law is a guide showing us God's eternal will for how Christians can live loving and God-pleasing lives in this world.

God's Law isn't a terrifying thing for us; it's a beautiful thing for us now, because this is how we can show our love to our Savior, and he loves it when we do. So as long as everything you do is within the bounds of God's Word and what he says is beneficial for you and for the people around you, you have the freedom to eat and drink whatever you want and have any kind of celebration or festival or holiday you like, while tempering your actions with responsibility, love, and wisdom like mature Christians do. And here's what that might look like in practice.

When should you worship? Old Testament believers had to worship on Saturday, the Sabbath day – but now for us, the day and time don't matter anymore, because what God really cares about is that we're meeting together regularly around his Word and Sacraments and our worship comes from joyful hearts of love and thanks to God for everything he did for us first. We can do that any day of the week. What should you wear to worship? There's no specific dress code, other than that everything we do should give glory and honor to God and show special reverence for the occasion, and there's freedom there for each person's expression. So then is it okay to go to a Halloween or New Year's Eve or St. Patrick's Day party? Sure, they have their abuses, but that doesn't mean we have to abuse them. For us, every holiday can be a time to celebrate God's blessings and good company, and that's always a good thing. So can we eat blood sausage and shellfish and pork products and drink beer and wine? Can we dance and play cards and even gamble sometimes? Yes – just not in excess or in a way that will needlessly expose us to temptation, and not around someone who might be offended or blindsided. We have the freedom in Christ to worship and glorify God in any number of ways, so long as we don't abuse those things to the spiritual and physical harm of ourselves and others.

So remember: Christianity isn't about rules; it's about freedom – freedom from sin and freedom to serve in love. That freedom and that motivation that Jesus gives us will get us to do things for Christ and for our fellow people that a list of rules never could. Rules by themselves mean nothing. Faith in Christ and living for him means everything. What really matters in God's eyes is our relationship with our Savior and the motivation of our heart in what we do to reflect that relationship. So people of God, rejoice in the freedom Christ has won for you, use it wisely and generously and lovingly, and know that *this* is what religion is really all about. Amen.