

LIVING IN ANOTHER WORLD

SERIES: WALKING IN THE MYSTERY



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Colossians 2:16-3:4
3rd Message
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I want to start off by telling you about a children's book call "Bear Shadow."¹ It's a story about a bear who discovers his shadow. Bear is really bothered by his shadow so he tries to run away from it, hide from it, and even outsmart it, but nothing works. Through this story we see the challenges that Bear faces as he tries to get rid of his shadow, but to no avail.

Shadows are curious things, aren't they? On one level, they are pretty simple. It's just a spot where direct light has been blocked. No big deal, right? But on another level, they're kind of mysterious. Sometimes they seem creepy. Sometimes maybe even a bit scary. Do you remember as a kid those shadows on your wall that seemed like they were going to come to life and swallow you whole? Sometimes shadows can be terrifying.

We're on our third week of our series in the book of Colossians called *Walking in the Mystery*. Two weeks ago we encountered Paul's very powerful metaphor of walking in Christ. We talked about what it might look like to walk around in the constant presence and awareness of Christ. Last week we looked again at the idea of being "in Christ" and saw Paul describe how we are filled when we are in Christ.

This week, Paul continues to expand the idea of what it means for followers of Christ to be "in him" by using the idea of two different worlds. He says that the world we live in—the world we are most familiar with—is a world of shadows. It isn't the fullness of reality. But he also says that we don't live in that world. He says that when you accept the gospel proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord, you move from that world to another. The problem is that there is always a temptation to stay in the world you are familiar with; to live in the shadows. Today we'll be talking about living in another world.

Normally, I think the idea of shadows and darkness brings to mind really bad stuff happening. Dark, smoky rooms where bad people are doing bad things: drugs, prostitution, crime. But the world of shadows that Paul describes is a religious world. He's addressing issues of legalism, being judgmental, and false spirituality. If you've spent any time in a Christian setting, you know that these issues are very practical.

So today we'll be looking at Colossians 2:16-3:4. As we look at these verses, we're going to see a warning to not continue living in the world of shadows. We'll see Paul explain why we don't live in that world anymore and finally, we'll see a picture of what it means to live in this new world that Christ has opened up for us.

Don't live in the shadows

Let's start by looking at the first four verses of this section. This is where Paul sets up the contrast that frames his discussion in this whole section. Here we are introduced to the world of shadows.

Colossians 2:16-19:

¹⁶Therefore 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. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸Do 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. ¹⁹He 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.

Paul has two different instructions that he gives the Colossians. For us, the first one refers to religious attitudes that we encounter within the church and the second talks about religious attitudes that we encounter in the world. Both of them have to do with shadows of a true reality and have to do with losing hold of Christ.

Legalism

His first instruction is to not let anyone judge you according to certain standards. The specific things that he lists aren't ones that apply to us in our culture, but they are all religious standards that certain groups adhered to; churchy rules. Paul was probably talking about specific

things that the false teachers in Colosse were using as a way to judge true belief. This is legalism. Judging someone else based on “religious rules” of what it is supposed to look like to be a Christian.

It has probably been a while since someone judged you for not making an appearance at a New Moon festival. However, I’m sure it hasn’t been that long since you have felt judged by someone’s particular religious standards. It may have been even more recently that you judged someone else.

When I was in college, I spent a lot of time thinking about my faith and how it related to money. I still think a lot about those issues. They are worth a lot of consideration. Following Christ has to affect how you spend money because as we’ve been seeing in Colossians, being in Christ affects every aspect of our being. It’s going to affect each of us in unique ways. So while I was thinking about all this in college, I met with someone who was an elder at PBC. We drove out to share a meal together. And I rode with him ... in his Mercedes.

But that caused a bit of a problem for me. Is it OK for a Christian to drive a Mercedes? Aren’t Christians supposed to not be materialistic? Could a person that was serious about their faith, who was an elder at a church, really drive a Mercedes? Didn’t that make them materialistic?

One of the problems with thinking like this is finding where to draw the line. If it’s not OK to drive a Mercedes, what about a Toyota? Or what about driving an older Mercedes? Which is more spiritual? What about a beat up Mercedes over a brand new Toyota? Or maybe Christians should only drive American cars? Or are we all supposed to drive hybrids because Christians are supposed to care about the environment? But hybrids usually cost more and we’re not supposed to be materialistic, so maybe Christians shouldn’t drive hybrids. But cheaper cars often burn more gas, so maybe we should all just ride bicycles? But some bicycles cost a lot of money. This is one of the big problems. When you start thinking in this way, there is no end to it. You can’t win.

The sad reality is that these types of religious attitudes permeate most Christian communities. What happens when you start following Christ is a deeply personal change that is very much within us, but it’s also a cosmic allegiance on a very profound spiritual dimension. The problem is that it’s very hard for me to look at you and see what’s going on deeply within you or on a profound spiritual dimension. Yet, we love to evaluate. We love to judge and assign grades and come up with rankings. But I can’t see

your heart, so the only things I can use to judge you are things I can see. Since I have this driving need to judge you, I end up using things like what you eat or drink or what activities you attend or what car you drive as a way of judging your spirituality.

Shadow-world

In verse 18, Paul says that those external measures are only shadows. When you judge people in this way, you’re operating in the shadow-world.

It’s really brilliant what he does in verse 18. A few hundred years earlier, a Greek philosopher named Plato said something that most people in Paul’s day would be familiar with. He said that everything we experience is really just a shadow of some truer reality. He used what he called the *The Analogy of the Cave*.²

In this analogy, he said that all of us are like prisoners chained against a wall in a cave. Behind us, somewhere that we can’t see, is a fire. In front of that fire are objects, real objects—true reality. But we can’t see the objects. All we see is the shadow they cast on the wall of the cave in front of us. This is our reality. It’s not really real. It’s just shadows of something else that is real. Plato also said that the philosopher is the one who can escape those chains and see the true world of reality. How convenient for him, right?

So Paul takes this idea that people are familiar with and he changes it a bit. He takes all these religious things that we do: Sabbath celebrations, New Moons, the cars we drive, the books we read, and the songs we sing. And he says that they are the shadows. They aren’t the real thing. But the real thing isn’t behind us. It’s not something that we can’t get to because we’re in chains. The real thing is ahead of us. It’s coming. The true reality is what will happen when God’s final work of redemption is complete.

The author of Hebrews said something similar. He talked about the old tabernacle, where the Jews used to worship, and compared it to Jesus. He said this, “They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain’” (Hebrews 8:5). It’s as if Moses was invited into the experience that for us is coming. He saw the real thing and he came back to help describe how to build a tabernacle that was a shadow of the real thing that was to come. That’s why there is so much detail in the Old

Testament about building it this way or that.

Paul then summarizes, by saying that the “reality” is found, literally in the “body of Christ.” The NIV translates this as “reality.” But Paul actually uses the Greek word for body. There’s a lot of debate about why he doesn’t use the more common word that Plato used of “image.” But given that two verses later he talks extensively about the church as Christ’s body, I think Paul is saying that the real world, the true expression of things that are coming, are also expressed in some form by the body of Christ.

All of these things that we tend to judge people on are simply shadows of what we actually will experience when Christ returns and what we experience on some level in the church right now. Wow. That is an incredible thing to say of the church, that in the community of Christ, our experience is more “real” than what we normally experience in everyday life.

That makes it all the more tragic when we in the church, who have the fuller reality, judge each other by the shadows of what we already have in Christ. Why should I judge your spirituality based on what you drink or what car you drive when there is something much more real going on between us? It is something more real, but harder to perceive.

Paul takes Plato’s idea of the shadow-world and tweaks it. He says the true reality is coming and the true reality is found in Christ and His church. His instruction to believers is to reject that world of the shadows that we use to live in. Don’t let it rule you. **Don’t live in the shadows.**

This is something we need to understand. We need to learn that legalism comes from being stuck in the world of shadows. It comes from stubbornly holding on to shadows and hints of true reality instead of being willing to take the time and energy to understand what is really going on spiritually for someone. You can’t judge someone’s relationship with God by the events they attend, the car they drive, or the food or drink they consume.

Syncretism

Then Paul has a second instruction for the Colossians. First, he warns them against legalism, saying that is what happens when you live in the shadows within the church. He talks about what happens when you live in the shadows outside of the church. He starts talking about false humility and the worship of angels. These are ideas from whatever system the false teachers are talking about and it’s probably something that scholars call syncretism. Syncretism is what

happens when people create a pick-and-choose religion based on ideas they like from different sources. It’s a kind of do-it-yourself religion that makes sense to you because you only select the parts you understand and appreciate. And this is actually a very relevant topic for us as well.

If legalism is the biggest threat facing our faith from within the church, then syncretism is the biggest threat facing our faith outside of the church. One of the most common trends in our world, when you get right down to it, is to claim that all religious systems are basically the same. This happens most often by identifying a few key ethical values and saying that these are the basis of all religious practice. Consider a book recently updated called *Oneness: Great Principles Shared By All Religions*. This book claims that beneath the superficial differences of world religions lies a pool of universal truth. That truth is all based on ethics.

This is what happens when you try to be religious in the shadows. Take away where history is headed—the fact that God is going to do something final that will change all of reality. Take away Christ: the unique person who alone is filled with the fullness. Without those things, you’re left with shadows; religion in the shadows—which is all about ethics; doing the right thing.

What’s the big deal about Jesus Christ if you can work at Google, not do anything evil, volunteer for a homeless shelter, and be nice to the people around you? Isn’t that enough? Besides, a lot of Christians are weird and sometimes even prejudiced. Maybe all this focus on Christ can even draw us away from really doing good in the world. Maybe we need to move past Christ to really “get it.” Maybe Christ is holding us back.

This is the attitude of a lot of people in our world. Religion is fine if it makes you a nicer person. But as soon as you start talking about how Christ is unique or how God actually has a plan for history, that’s too much. Paul says when you start talking this way, you’ve lost contact with Christ. You aren’t in Christ who was there at creation. Christ who is supreme over everything. You may still think you know Christ, but it’s a watered down version of who he really is.

This is what we’ve been seeing over and over again as we read through Colossians. Walking with Christ. Being in Christ. Being connected to the Head. This is the goal. It really is all about Christ.

Focusing on the shadows within the church leads to legalism. Focusing on the shadows outside of the church

leads to syncretism: combining religions into simple ethical systems. Either way, the problem is a disconnection from Christ. Losing hold of the one thing that really defines who we are as Christians.

My family has recently discovered the joy of tubing behind a ski boat. It's one of my kids' new favorite activity. Sit on a tube as you're racing through the water, being splashed and jostled about. It gets really fun when the driver is trying to make things as crazy for you as possible. Because tubing is quite simple, there's only one rule: hold on. Hold on. No matter what happens. No matter how much water splashes on your face. No matter how high you fly into the air. Hold on.

That's what we do as Christians. We hold on to Christ; just one simple rule. When we stop holding on, we start judging each other according to ridiculous rules and we construct false ways of thinking about God and this world.

You don't live in the shadows

After telling his people not to live in the shadows, Paul moves on to explain just how it is that these things don't apply to them anymore in verses 20-23.

Colossians 2:20-23:

²⁰Since 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: ²¹“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? ²²These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³Such 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.

He begins by referring back to the ideas we talked about last week: those who believe in Christ have died with him. Here he says that what we have died to are what the NIV translates as the “basic principles” of the world, which we have identified as spiritual forces opposed to God.

These are the forces that put Christ to death. Earlier in the book, Paul explains that Christ is supreme over these spiritual powers. Here he says that we have died to their authority. They have expended all their authority in putting Christ to death and there isn't anything left for them to do. Since we joined Christ in his death, we are

dead to them too. There isn't anything more they can do to us. That is what Paul is saying. **You don't belong to the shadows.**

Plato said that philosophers were the ones that could see the true reality. Paul says that it is those who believe in Christ who see what's real. You don't have to live like that because you don't live in the shadows anymore.

Yet Paul says that his readers still listen to those voices. Still listen to rules and regulations that come from an authority other than Christ. This applies to us as well. We know that following Christ means that everything is different. We know that it is a radical life decision. So we want a radical lifestyle to represent that. It adds to the confusion sometimes when God calls people to radical lifestyle choices to follow him. He calls some people to give up all their material possessions. He calls some people to move to a different country and pursue ministry full-time. He calls some people to dress, speak, or live in odd ways. The truth is that he calls us all to make radical decisions, but some of them are less obvious, less external.

So we want to make clear, radical choices that demonstrate the fact that we are trying to follow God. “Don't touch this.” “Don't taste that.” Simple, clear rules that we can use to show ourselves and everyone around us that we're serious about following Jesus. But then we're focused on the shadow world that we already died to.

Because we know we don't really belong in this world, Christians have often decided to just check out completely from everything of this world. “Don't touch anything.” “Don't go out.” “Don't be involved with anything outside of the church.” This started as early as the 4th century when monks would go live their entire lives alone in the desert to avoid being contaminated by the world.

This is not what it means to avoid the shadows. Paul says that because we don't belong to the shadows, those things don't have any power over us anymore. The great mystery is that as we choose to live in the world of Christ, we're actually able to engage this world in deeper and more meaningful ways. Not belonging to shadows allows us to have real relationships with people who do belong to the shadows. We're not bound up by the same things they are. We are free and our freedom lets us go back into the cave to really engage with people.

I moved from Connecticut to Texas just before my sophomore year of high school. This was quite a change for me. Some Texans would have you think that they're a different country, but I checked on it and they're not. But

there were certain things that I used to do in Connecticut that didn't make sense in Texas. The music people listened to, the phrases they used, and the activities they enjoyed. A lot of it was different and there were things the Texans did that we'd never have thought of in Connecticut. In a lot of ways I refused to engage in those things. I didn't want to become a Texan. I didn't want to live in my new world.

One very clear way that Texans expressed themselves was through country music and cowboy boots. I made a vow when I lived in Texas never to buy cowboy boots. I wanted to stay in my old world and I kept that vow. In fact, it wasn't until I moved to California that I bought a pair. As a family we did some horse-back riding so I finally broke down and bought cowboy boots. I went to Boot Barn, a store I wouldn't have been caught dead shopping in when I lived in Texas, and I bought cowboy boots. I have to say, they are pretty comfortable and they work great for riding horses.

What are the ways that you are holding on to the shadow world? Are you refusing to buy cowboy boots because of some petty prejudice against Texas culture? Are you holding on to old attitudes, legalistic tendencies? Trying to change people by creating strict rules? What is it for you?

Focus on Christ

But Paul's message is a positive one. He says that we don't have to live in the shadows because we don't belong to the shadow world anymore. In the final section of our passage, Paul explains more about the world that we do live in. In the first part of chapter 3, he tells us about the spiritual reality that we've entered into as believers in Christ.

Colossians 3:1-4:

¹Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

In the last section, we saw what we had died to. Now we see more about what we've come alive to. We died with Christ when he hung on the cross. Then, when he was raised from the dead, on that first Easter Sunday, we were made alive with him as well. Our old life passed away and a new life has begun. Paul says that because you've been

raised with Christ, that's the world that you should pay attention to.

He uses an interesting phrase. The NIV has a good translation of it: "things above." It strikes me as a very non-specific way to describe something as, "things above." What things? Where's above? Upstairs? The PBC attic? The clouds? In heaven? He specifies this "above" by saying that it is where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. But that doesn't really help all that much. Where is that?

I think Paul is being a bit vague on purpose. Remember he's been using locations all throughout Colossians to refer to different spiritual realities. We walk around in Christ. That's a location, but not a physical location. Now he says to set your hearts on things above; another location. But where is this location? It's where Christ is reigning. It's a spiritual location. Maybe it's another dimension. Maybe it's right here and we can't see it. The shadow world is here among us, but the real world is above.

In John 18, Pontius Pilate asks Jesus why everyone is mad at him. He answers by saying in verse 36, "My kingdom is not of this world ... My kingdom is from another place." What does he mean by, "Not of this world" and "From another place"? These statements are so vague. Where is this kingdom? Where are we supposed to set our hearts? How can we set our hearts there if we don't know where it is?

Christ is above us

Well, Paul gives us answers of a sort in the verses that follow. He doesn't really give us a location, but he points us in the right direction. In verse 2, he repeats the phrase "things above" and contrasts it with earthly things. **Christ is above us.**

So at least we know that this world with its rules and judgments and comparisons and petty religious ideals isn't what he's talking about. He's told us what earthly things are. They are the shadows of what's real. They are hints of what is coming.

It doesn't mean that our lives aren't guided by some kind of ethic. As we read further into Colossians, Paul gives very practical instruction about how to live our lives. Taking our minds off earthly things doesn't mean we can do anything we want or that there are no moral guides. It just means we're asking different questions. So far we know that Christ isn't here—he's above us. He is reigning in a different world.

Christ is around us

In verse 3, Paul repeats the reminder that we have died, but adds that our life is hidden in God. What does that mean? What does it mean for my life to be hidden in God? Throughout the New Testament, the idea of being hidden with God carries the notion of security. It is in a safe place, ready for when it is needed. No one can take it away from us. God protects it. **Christ is around us.**

So Paul isn't saying that our lives aren't visible or aren't lived out in the world. He is saying that this new aspect to our life is protected, kept safe. Those voices that might try to steal it away can't get to it. We are hidden with Christ. We are kept safe by our presence with Christ. First, Paul said that Christ is above, now he says we're with him. He's around us. We're here in this world, but we're kept safe in another as well.

Christ is above us. Christ is around us.

Christ is awaiting us

In verse 4, Paul has a bit of a different perspective. He goes from describing Christ in a location to describing him in a time. He's above us, he's around us, but now he is awaiting us. He talks about the time when Christ appears; the end of the age; the return of the Messiah. This is the event that we as Christians live our lives toward. It is where history is headed. This is what we anticipated in the first part of our Colossians series during the season of Advent. Not the coming of Christ that already came, but the coming of Christ that is yet to come.

Paul looks toward that day and says that where "up here" is; it will be revealed and completely known at some point in the future. When Christ appears, this new world, this new life, will be fully realized. All the pieces will come together. It'll be like the end of a movie that has a hundred different storylines that all come together in one beautiful finale at the end. At the end of the story is Christ. **Christ is awaiting us.**

This new world—the one that we are supposed to set our hearts and our minds on—is coming. It is what we're waiting for. In some sense, it isn't all the way here yet. So we can't expect everything here to look like it. What we have are the shadows, the hints of it. The trick, Paul says, is to figure out how to live in a world of shadows as you're waiting for the world that is real.

Christ is above us. Christ is around us. Christ is awaiting us. This is the "up here." This is where we are to set our

hearts. It's a grand and glorious vision, but it's also quite practical and specific. As we move on in this book, we'll see how Paul describes our lives, our families, and our communities when we set our hearts on the things above.

Conclusion

We started out by hearing the story about Bear who was trying to escape from his shadow. He tried everything he could think of, but nothing worked. Bear finally realized that he couldn't escape his shadow. So he made a bargain with it; a compromise. He'd have to live with his shadow, so he may as well make the best of it. In the end that worked. He caught a fish and his shadow caught a fish too.

This ends up being what many of us do. We've given up on the possibility of ever escaping the world of shadows so we make do. We have rules and standards that are based on shadows. We forget the importance of Christ. We try to improve ourselves with strict programs and regimens. All of this draws us away from the person of Christ.

The Book of Colossians calls us to live in a new world and to stop trying to live in the shadow-world. We don't belong to the world of shadows. We belong to Christ. That is where we live now. That is what the church is a picture of.

So we leave with Paul's instruction to focus on Christ. He is above us, he is around us, and he is awaiting us. Don't hold out stubbornly and refuse to buy the cowboy boots. Jump all the way in. Stop pretending you're still in Connecticut and live in Texas. Go to Boot Barn. Buy the boots. Live in Christ.

NOTES

¹Frank Asch, *Bear Shadow*, (Simon & Schuster Inc., New York, 1985).

²Plato, *The Analogy of the Cave*, (*The Republic*).

Interpretive Translation: Colossians 2:16-3:4

So don't let anyone make you feel guilty about what you eat or drink or whether you go to a party or watch a movie or attend some religious event. All of these things are only a faint shadow of the full life that God has in store for us. Christ is the complete picture.

Don't let people make you question your relationship with Christ. There are people who will try by being extremely disciplined, talking about their deep spiritual sensitivity, and describing what unbelievable spiritual experiences they've had. But they are only trying to make themselves better than others because of their insecure nature. In reality, they aren't connected to Christ at all. When a community is connected to Him, relationships deepen, people support each other, they care for each other, and real growth happens in a way that only God can produce.

You know that when you believed in Christ, all other spiritual forces in the world lost their power over you. So why do you still let them tell you what to do? Why do you try so hard to follow the rules like, "Don't handle", "Don't taste", "Don't touch"? These rules are stupid for lots of reasons. First, they refer to things that go away once you use them. Second, they are based on nothing more than someone's good ideas. Finally, they sound good because they sound spiritual and deep and they tell you to treat your body harshly so you can experience something more. However, the ironic truth is that they only make you want to indulge those desires more and more.

Your faith in Christ has opened you up to a whole new realm of reality. Now you should see everything according to this reality, where Christ is at the center of everything. Think about the world through the filter of Christ so that you can see things as they really are. Your old experience is completely over and your real life now only makes sense with Christ in God's presence. At the end of the age, all the world will recognize who Christ really is. Only then will your life be complete because your life is tied together with the life of Christ.