

5-Day Devotional: Shadows and Substance

Based on Colossians 2:16–17

Day 1 — The Shadow Is Not the Savior

Scripture to Read: Colossians 2:16–17, Hebrews 10:1, Luke 24:27, John 5:39

Paul says the food laws, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths were “a shadow of the things to come,” but the substance belongs to Christ. That is not Paul belittling the Old Testament. It is Paul putting it in its proper place. Shadows matter because they point to something real. But a shadow is not the thing itself. It has shape, but not fullness. It gives an outline, but not the whole picture.

That is how the old covenant ceremonies worked. God gave them. They were good. They taught His people holiness, separation, atonement, worship, and expectation. They prepared Israel to recognize the Messiah when He came. But they were never meant to be the destination. They were signposts on the road, not the home at the end of the road.

This matters because people still confuse signs with salvation. We still drift toward what is visible, manageable, and measurable. We still prefer religious systems we can track over a Savior we must trust. But Christianity is not finally about keeping shadows in place. Christianity is about Christ Himself.

Jesus said Moses and the Prophets were speaking about Him. That means when we read the Old Testament, we should not treat it like a detached religious museum. Nor should we read it as though Christ has not come. We read it as Christian Scripture that finds its fulfillment in Him.

A shadow can tell you someone is near. But once the person steps into the room, you do not cling to the shadow. You look to the person. That is Paul’s point. God did not give us an entire history of promise, sacrifice, priesthood, and ceremony so we would stay there forever. He gave it so we would know His Son when He came.

And He has come.

Reflection Questions

1. Do I tend to read the Old Testament as though it stands apart from Christ?
2. Am I more drawn to religious structure than to Christ Himself?
3. Where am I tempted to confuse signs of faith with the Savior of faith?

Practical Application

Read an Old Testament passage this week and ask, “How does this prepare the way for Christ?”

Prayer

Father, thank You for giving Your Word as one unified story that leads to Your Son. Forgive me when I settle for outlines and forget the reality. Teach me to read all of Scripture with Christ at the center. Help me to love the truth of Your Word and to see its fulfillment in Jesus. Keep me from living in shadows when the substance belongs to Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Day 2 — Do Not Let Legalism Condemn You

Scripture to Read: Colossians 2:16, Galatians 5:1, Romans 8:1, Romans 14:4–5

“Let no one pass judgment on you.” That is not a throwaway line. Paul is guarding the consciences of believers. False teachers were pressuring the Colossians to measure spiritual maturity by diets, calendars, and old covenant observances. In other words, they were saying Christ was not enough. If you really wanted to be serious, really wanted to be mature, really wanted to be acceptable, you needed Christ plus more.

That is how legalism always works. It does not usually walk in and announce itself. It sounds responsible. Careful. Serious. It can even use Bible words. But at its core, legalism is a religion of human achievement. It shifts confidence away from Christ and toward performance. It tells you that peace with God, or growth in holiness, rests on how well you maintain the code.

Paul says believers must not submit to that.

That does not mean holiness is optional. It does not mean obedience does not matter. It means no one gets to bind your conscience where Christ has given freedom. No one gets to act as though your standing with God rises and falls with man-made standards, extra-biblical rules, or preferred religious culture.

Some believers live under constant spiritual pressure because they are always trying to satisfy voices God never authorized. They are always wondering whether they are doing enough, avoiding enough, or matching the right model closely enough. Paul’s words are meant to lift that burden. If you are in Christ, there is no condemnation. Your standing with God is not held together by your ability to keep somebody else’s list.

The gospel frees us from that kind of slavery. Christ did not die and rise so His people could trade one yoke for another. He fulfilled what the shadows pointed to. He bore our guilt. He canceled our debt. He brought us near to God. So do not let anyone sit in judgment over you where Christ has spoken peace.

Reflection Questions

1. Where am I most tempted to measure myself by performance rather than Christ?
2. Have I allowed the opinions of others to function like divine law in my conscience?
3. Do I really believe that my standing before God is secure in Christ?

Practical Application

Identify one burden you have been carrying that comes more from human pressure than from Scripture, and consciously release it to the Lord.

Prayer

Father, thank You that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Forgive me for

the ways I drift back into performance and allow my heart to be ruled by fear. Guard me from legalism, and keep me from binding my conscience where Christ has given freedom. Help me stand firm in the liberty Jesus purchased for me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Day 3 — The Damage Legalism Does

Scripture to Read: Colossians 2:16–17, Matthew 23:23–28, Galatians 5:13, Romans 14:17

Legalism always promises order, seriousness, and holiness. But what it actually produces is something far less beautiful. It produces a thin, tense version of Christianity that may look polished on the outside while the heart quietly withers underneath.

One of legalism’s great dangers is that it majors on what can be seen and measured. It is deeply interested in visible conduct, but strangely casual about the inner life. It can obsess over diets, dress, days, habits, and outward forms while ignoring pride, envy, bitterness, fear of man, gossip, lust, or coldness toward God. Jesus rebuked that kind of religion in the Pharisees. They cleaned the outside of the cup while the inside remained filthy.

Legalism is joyless because it replaces communion with Christ with the pressure of performance. Instead of delighting in the Lord, people begin managing an image. Instead of walking in the freedom of grace, they become anxious scorekeepers. And once externals become the measure, uniformity follows. Everyone must start matching the code, even if that code is more cultural than biblical.

That kind of religion may produce conformity for a while, but it cannot produce holiness. True holiness flows from union with Christ and the work of the Spirit. Legalism can restrain behavior, but it cannot change the heart. It can train people to look right while leaving them spiritually shallow.

This is why Paul’s warning matters so much. Legalism does not simply make churches strict. It makes them judgmental, joyless, and thin. It teaches people to fear man and perform for approval instead of walking in love, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

So if you find yourself more concerned with appearances than with knowing Christ, more eager to judge than to pray, more committed to your standards than to the Savior, this passage is a mercy. It exposes the problem before it hardens into a culture. The answer is not less holiness. The answer is holiness rooted in Christ rather than holiness replaced by checklists.

Reflection Questions

1. Am I more focused on visible standards than on the deeper condition of my heart?
2. Has my Christianity become more about pressure than about communion with Christ?
3. Do I tend to judge others by externals while ignoring the sins of my own heart?

Practical Application

Spend time in honest confession before God over one “respectable” inward sin you may have been overlooking.

Prayer

Father, search me and know me. Expose whatever in me is more concerned with image than with true holiness. Forgive me for pride, self-righteousness, and the desire to measure myself and others by externals. Root my life in Christ. Produce in me real holiness by Your Spirit, not a surface faith that only looks right from a distance. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Day 4 — Liberty Is Not an Excuse for Laziness

Scripture to Read: Colossians 2:16–17, Galatians 5:13, Titus 2:11–14, John 14:15

Whenever Scripture talks about freedom, somebody is tempted to take a nap in it. Paul says believers are not to be judged by ceremonial shadows, and some immediately hear, “Great. So none of this matters.” But that is not what Paul means, and it is not what the gospel produces.

Christian liberty is not freedom from Christ. It is freedom to obey Christ without man-made bondage. The same grace that frees us from legalism also frees us from lawlessness. Jesus did not save us so we could drift through life spiritually lazy, prayerless, distracted, and self-indulgent while hiding behind the phrase “don’t judge me.”

Paul is saying that ceremonial shadows and human additions cannot serve as the basis of spiritual judgment. He is not saying holiness does not matter. He is not saying wisdom does not matter. He is not saying obedience does not matter. In fact, grace trains us to renounce ungodliness and live self-controlled, upright, godly lives.

That means we cannot trade legalism for laziness. Some people live under man-made rules and need to be set free. Others hear about freedom and use it as an excuse to neglect prayer, ignore the Word, indulge sin, and love the world. Both miss Christ.

Real liberty leads to glad obedience. It produces a heart that says, “I do not belong to a religious system. I belong to Jesus.” And belonging to Jesus changes how we live. We pursue holiness not to secure acceptance, but because we have already been accepted in the Beloved. We obey not to earn sonship, but because we have been brought into the family.

Freedom in Christ is not vague. It is not spiritual fog. It is not a permission slip for self-rule. It is clean, strong, joyful freedom that enables us to love, worship, repent, and obey without the weight of man-made religion hanging around our neck.

So do not let anyone enslave you. But do not use grace as camouflage for drift. Christ frees His people for Himself.

Reflection Questions

1. Am I confusing Christian liberty with spiritual passivity?
2. Where am I tempted to excuse laziness with the language of grace?
3. Does my freedom lead me toward Christ-centered obedience?

Practical Application

Choose one neglected area of obedience this week—prayer, Scripture reading, repentance, or gathered worship—and give yourself to it gladly.

Prayer

Father, thank You for the freedom Christ has purchased for me. Forgive me for the ways I have twisted liberty into carelessness. Deliver me from man-made bondage, but also deliver me from spiritual laziness. Teach me to use my freedom to love You, obey You, and walk in a way that honors Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Day 5 — The Substance Belongs to Christ

Scripture to Read: Colossians 2:17, John 1:17, Hebrews 4:9–10, 2 Corinthians 1:20

Paul ends this passage with a line that holds the whole thing together: **“the substance belongs to Christ.”** That is not just a clever contrast. It is the heartbeat of the gospel.

The old covenant shadows were real, but they were not final. The food laws pointed to holiness, but Christ brings true cleansing. The sacrifices pointed to atonement, but Christ is the once-for-all sacrifice. The priesthood pointed to mediation, but Christ is the great High Priest. The Sabbath pointed to rest, but Christ gives rest now and will bring eternal rest in glory. The ceremonies had purpose, but Christ is the fulfillment.

That means the Christian life is not about trying to rebuild shadows once the Savior has come. It is about resting in the One to whom all the shadows pointed. Christ is not a supplement to the old order. He is its goal. He is not one option among many. He is the substance.

That is why this passage lands so clearly on Him. The answer to legalism is not becoming more relaxed, more casual, or less careful. The answer to legalism is Christ. The answer to guilt is Christ. The answer to self-righteousness is Christ. The answer to fear-driven religion is Christ. The answer to shallow outward faith is Christ.

And this is not only for mature believers. This is the hope of sinners. If you have been trying to clean yourself up enough for God to accept you, you need to hear this plainly: the shadows cannot save you. Your morality cannot save you. Your church attendance cannot save you. Your family background cannot save you. Only Christ can.

So come to Him. Rest in Him. Stand in Him. The substance belongs to Him, and everyone who belongs to Him by faith has fullness in Him.

Reflection Questions

1. Am I functionally looking to something other than Christ for acceptance or peace?
2. What “shadow” am I tempted to cling to instead of resting in Christ?
3. How does this passage call me to trust Christ more deeply today?

Practical Application

Take a few quiet minutes today to thank Christ specifically for one way He fulfills what the Old Testament anticipated.

Prayer

Father, thank You for Your Son, who is the substance and fulfillment of all Your promises. Forgive me for the ways I cling to shadows and look for life in things that cannot save. Teach me to rest in Christ alone for righteousness, peace, and hope. Fix my eyes on Him and keep me near Him. In Jesus’ name, Amen.