

# Were the Commandments "Nailed to the Cross"?

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**It's frequently taught that the ten commandments were "nailed to the cross," and so are not obligatory for Christians. Yet, the Bible plainly states that individuals who insist on violating these very commandments -- lying, stealing, committing adultery, etc. -- will NOT inherit God's kingdom, unless they repent. This article will open your eyes to the real truth about this question -- IF you're willing to believe it!**

The New King James Version of the Bible translates Colossians 2:14 as follows: "...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." And Colossians 2:16-17 is translated: "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."

These verses are often wrenched out of context and cited as proof that the ten commandments, other of God's commandments, and the Sabbath especially, were "nailed to the cross," and are not obligatory for Christians.

For example, the Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown (JFB) *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* comments on verse 14 as follows: "The law (including especially the moral law, wherein lay the chief difficulty in obeying) is abrogated to the believer...." And further, "' The handwriting ' (alluding to the Decalogue [the ten commandments], the representative of the law, written by the hand of God) is the whole law...." It goes on to remark that the law, hence the ten commandments, "was against us," an "adversary to us." And it, the law, the commandments of God, was "taken ... out of the way ... by 'nailing it to *the* cross.' "

Is that really what Paul is teaching?

Important keys to understanding the Bible include: (1) Examine any Scripture in light of its immediate context, and (2) in light of the context of the entire Bible. Nearly anything can be "proven" by taking a statement out of context and applying one's own interpretation to it.

So let's begin to see if we can really understand the meaning of these verses by reviewing the immediate context:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the

uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. (Colossians 2:11-17).

### What Is Sin?

Above I quoted verses 11 – 17 to get a sense of the context in which verses 14 and 16 appear. In verse 11 we see that Paul is addressing a Gentile church, not literally circumcised in flesh, but in spirit and heart by “putting off the body of the sins of the flesh.” What is sin, that which the Colossians had put off? “...sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4, KJV). So sin is the transgression of the law, and the Colossians had put off the “body of the sins of the flesh.” The idea is that they were living lives of repentance, no longer disobedient to God's commandments.

If, as we've seen, sin is the transgression of the law, what are sins of the flesh? Paul lists some of them, “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

Notice that in this list are included sins which are direct violations of some of the ten commandments. Included are adultery and fornication (*porneia*, sexual sin), either of which violates the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14). Idolatry is certainly a violation of the first commandment, and often several other commandments as well, especially the second and third (Exodus 20:3-7). Murder violates the sixth commandment, as does hatred (Exodus 20:13; 1 John 3:15). In principal, all the works of the flesh that Paul mentions in the passage quoted violate one or more of the ten commandments. And note that Paul said if you make a practice of committing these sins, i.e., breaking these commandments, you will not inherit God's kingdom. It's obvious, then, that these commandments have not been “done away” or “nailed to the cross.”

Moreover, Paul also wrote, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Besides the commandments specifically alluded to earlier, Paul here states that making a practice of violating the eighth commandment (stealing, Exodus 20:15), and the tenth commandment (covetousness, Exodus 20:17), would keep you out of God's kingdom. Liars, too, shall be excluded from the kingdom (Revelation 21:8, 27; 22:15). But those who keep the commandments will have right to the tree of life (eternal life), and will enter in (Revelation 22:14).

### A License to Sin?

Note that Paul said the Colossians to whom he was writing had been baptized (verse 12). Did Paul believe that baptism gives us license to sin, i.e., break God's commandments? In the context of discussing baptism, Paul wrote to the Roman church, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" (Romans 6:1-2). He went on to say that baptism symbolizes, "... that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Romans 6:6). And further, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God" (verses 12-13). So baptism clearly does not mean we are given license to sin, i.e., break the commandments.

In Colossians 2:13 Paul told the Colossians that they were previously "dead" in their trespasses. In other words, they were condemned, under the penalty of death due to "trespassing," or breaking, God's commandments (John 3:18; Romans 6:23). If God's commandments had been "nailed to the cross" and hence "done away" there would have been nothing to transgress, hence no sin, and no condemnation, nothing to be delivered from or forgiven of.

In Colossians 3 Paul warns them about falling into sin. "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds" (Colossians 3:5-9). Again we see several of the ten commandments specifically alluded to in this warning of God's wrath as a consequence of disobedience.

Whatever was "wiped out" and "nailed to the cross," as Paul put it in Colossians 2:14, it was not the ten commandments or similar laws. This will become even more clear as we proceed.

### What Was Blotted Out and Nailed to the Cross?

In analyzing Colossians 2:14 it's important to pay attention to the number (singular or plural) of the words used, because that is a key to understanding the verse. Note the New King James translation of the verse above. Now following is my own translation of the verse. "Having blotted out the bond of debt that was against us from ordinances, which was contrary to us, and took it away, nailing it to the cross."

Note that what was expunged or blotted out was a "bond of debt." Verse 14 is a continuation of the thought carried over from verse 13 concerning the forgiveness of trespasses. The Greek word *cheirographon* found in verse 14 was commonly used of a note or bond of debt (*Greek – English Lexicon*, Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich). "The late compound *χειρογραφον* [*cheirographon*] (*χειρ* [*cheir*], hand, *γραφω* [*grapho*]) is very common in the papyri for a

certificate of debt or bond" (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, A. T. Robertson, on Colossians 2:14). When we sin by breaking God's laws we incur a debt, which under certain circumstances may be forgiven, or blotted out (compare Psalm 51:1, 9; Isaiah 44:22; Matthew 6:12; Luke 11:4; Acts 3:19). The word *εξαλειφω* (*exaleipho*) means wipe away, expunge, blot out. The King James Version has "Blotting out" where the New King James reads, "having wiped out." So it was the "bond of debt" that was blotted out through God's forgiveness, not the laws that were broken to incur the debt.

"That was against us" refers to the bond of debt, not the ordinances, in this Scripture. "That" (Greek: *to*) in this clause is singular, referring to the bond of debt, also singular, not the "ordinances" (*dogmasin*, lexical form *dogma*), which is plural. Yet, many commentators try to make the case that the "ordinances" referred to here include the ten commandments and similar laws and that these commandments are "against us."

Were God's commandments "against us"? God urged Israel to keep his laws "that it may be well with you" (Deuteronomy 6:3; cf. 12:28; 28:1-14). "... the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes... for our good always... (Deuteronomy 6:24; cf. 10:13; 30:15-16; Isaiah 65:2; Jeremiah 5:25; 6:16; Micah 2:7). Paul wrote of God's commandments that they "are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law [Greek: 'therefore fulfillment of the law is love']. And do this ..." (Romans 13:9-11; cf. Matthew 22:36-40). The commandments of God tell us how to love God and neighbor (1 John 5:3). So they are certainly not against us.

In Colossians 2:14 "it," not "they," was taken out of the way, and "it" was nailed to the cross. "It," singular, refers to the note of debt, not the ordinances, plural. With Christ, our debt, as it were, incurred by the sins and trespasses of those who believe, was "nailed to the cross," and taken out of the way (Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 53:4-6, 11; Matthew 6:12; 8:17; Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 2:24).

In Colossians 2:15 Paul tells us how Christ, through his death on the cross, thus removing the guilt of sin from the faithful with its penalty, triumphed over the dark powers of this world, especially referring to Satan, our accuser, and his demonic horde (John 12:31; 14:30; Ephesians 4:7-8; 6:10-12; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8; Revelation 12:10-11). The "principalities and powers" also encompasses the panoply of false gods representative of Satan and the demons, and the human rulers subject to their influence.

### Who's to Judge?

Paul has up to this point told the Colossian brethren that Christ had removed from their charge the debt of sin, and triumphed over the spiritual powers that had held them enslaved in darkness and spiritual blindness. He now continues, "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (Colossians 2:16-17). The *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* is typical of the approach of many Protestant commentators on this passage, in commenting on verse 16 as follows, "Food laws and calendar observance were not required

for the Gentiles' newfound faith" ("Philosophy," p. 613).

Oh? If "calendar observance" is no longer required, why then has the professing Church historically enforced Sunday observance? And why has it enforced rules setting the date for Easter? Why has it established a calendar replete with all sorts of religious "Saint's days," and holidays such as Christmas, All Souls day, etc.? Or is it just the calendar that God established in his word, with its required holy days, that they object to?

If "food laws" are no longer in force, why has the professing Church often enforced eating or not eating certain foods at particular times, such as meatless Fridays, and Lenten "fasting." Or again, is it only food laws God ordained in his word that they object to? Why do some professing denominations use wine at the "Lord's supper," and others only grape juice? These Churches have not hesitated to set their own rules about food, drink and calendar observances, while they condemn the keeping of the laws God himself established concerning these things.

What is it that Paul is really saying in these verses?

Let's pick up more of the context in which Paul is writing by looking at verse 8. "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ." In this chapter Paul is addressing the danger of heresies arising from philosophical speculation based on human traditions and the underlying concepts that shape human society in this world. Specifically he is alluding to gnostic ideas that blended Christianity with pagan religion and philosophy. These ideas often viewed anything tangible (or material) as evil. Hence some gnostics taught that the human Jesus Christ was not really God in the flesh. In writing of certain gnostics, Irenaeus, wrote, "... according to their hypothesis, the Word did not become flesh at all ..." (*Against Heresies*, 1.9.2 ; cf. John 1:14). And certainly God could not have a body. For example, in commenting on the teachings of the gnostic Marcus, Irenaeus writes, "He [God] whom thou maintainest to be destitute of body and form..." (*Against Heresies*, 1.15.5). But Paul assures the Colossians that "in Him [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (verse 9).

Moreover, gnostic heresies conceived of a panoply of spirits, or emanation, or "aeons," often identical with the gods of paganism, that were lesser divinities. God could only be approached through association with these lesser deities ("principalities and powers"), of which, in their doctrine, Jesus Christ was one. These ideas eventually developed into the concept of approaching God through the mediation of dead "saints" or "Mary," and similar practices and teachings. The Colossian heresy included the "worship of angels" (verse 18).

These heretics commonly rejected God's commandments, but had their own rules of behavior based on various superstitions, the "commandments and doctrines of men" (verse 22). Paul warns the Colossians not to be judged by such impostors in respect to religious observances. "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,..." (verse 16). Note that he does not tell them they are not to keep festivals or sabbaths, anymore than he's telling them not to eat or drink. He is saying let no one *judge*

them regarding these things.

He goes on to say, "which are a shadow of things to come,..." (verse 17). Note the sabbaths are, present tense, indicative mood in the Greek (*esti*), which implies present and continuing action. The sabbaths are – now – and continue to be – shadows of things to come. That is, the sabbaths, and the annual festivals that accompany them (cf. Leviticus 23), have prophetic significance. Like a shadow provides an outline of an object which gives us an idea of what it looks like, so the sabbaths give us an outline of God's plan, including the "things to come." The weekly Sabbath, for example, points to God's "rest," when his kingdom will be established on earth (Hebrews 4:3-6, 8-11; cf. 2 Peter 1:10-11). Like the rest of the ten commandments, the fourth commandment is still in force. "Therefore sabbath observance remains [*sabbatismos*, sabbath rest, sabbath observance, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich; keep sabbath, *Analytical Greek Lexicon*; often translated "Sabbatism," meaning "keep the Sabbath," *Webster's Dictionary*, 1913] for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9; cf. Isaiah 56:2, 8; Ezekiel 45:17; Luke 4:16; Acts 13:42-44; 16:13; 17:2).

Then he continues, "...but the body of Christ" (verse 17), an exact translation of the Greek: "τὸ θεῶν σώμα χριστοῦ [*to de soma kristou*]" . They are to let no one judge them concerning the things mentioned, but the body of Christ. The body of Christ is his Church (1 Corinthians 12:27). The true Church is made up of those who live according to the word of Christ, not the false traditions and commandments of men (John 8:31; Colossians 2:8, 22). Christ is the head of the Church, his body, thus those who are truly of his body will be ruled by him through his word (Matthew 4:4; Colossians 1:18; 2:19; 2 Timothy 3:14-17). God's word, spoken by his own voice, is "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:1, 8). Jesus Christ is "Lord of the Sabbath," and he guides and judges us in how to keep it through his word (Matthew 12:8; cf. John 5:22; 12:48). So we are not to let others judge us or condemn us in it's keeping, as men will seek to do. It's ironic that men professing Christ -- claiming to be his Church -- have not infrequently judged and condemned those who would keep the Sabbath, and not infrequently murdered them.

Keeping the weekly Sabbath is a command of God, as is keeping the annual Sabbaths, and distinguishing between clean and unclean foods (Leviticus 11; cf. Revelation 18:2). These are Scriptural teachings practiced by Jesus Christ himself and the New Testament Church which he established. The gospel accounts of Jesus' life include many examples of his instruction in how to properly keep the Sabbath, not according to Pharisaic rules which themselves are mere commandments and traditions of men, but in accordance with its true intent and purpose. And there is not one word anywhere in the Bible telling us that the Sabbath was ever "done away."

On the other hand, Sunday keeping, Easter, Christmas, Lent, and many other practices of the professing church are not Scriptural at all, were never commanded by God, but are merely the traditions and commandments of men, the very things Paul warns us in Colossians 2 to beware of and avoid.

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