

Dead to the World's Rules

COLOSSIANS 2:20-23 (WEB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

You already died with Christ to the whole system of rules that promises to make you holy, so the harder diet and the stricter routine can't do the one thing they keep promising, because they never touch the heart where the real trouble lives.

Opening Lines

Say three words out loud, slow: don't handle, don't taste, don't touch. Feel how each one gets tighter than the last. Paul is quoting a slogan the Colossians heard shouted at them, and he's about to tell them why it has no power at all.

Before You Teach

- Goal: Get the room to see that self-denial with a 'show of wisdom' cannot conquer sin, and that their standing was settled at the cross, not by any fence they built. They leave naming one rule God never gave that they've been enforcing.
- If you're short on time, cut: Cut the full walk through all four cross-references. Mark 7:19 alone carries the point that external rules can't clean a heart.
- Where the moment lives: It lives the moment someone admits out loud a rule they enforce that Scripture never commanded — the tone about clutter, the badge of frugality. Naming it is where the fence comes down.
- Your prep: Do the exercise on yourself first: find your own ungiven rule before you walk in. If you can't name one, you're not ready to ask them to.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Classroom opening, say the three words together (0-4). Read the passage (4-8). Teach stoicheia with the kindergarten-chair image, land on 'no value against the flesh,' silence (8-18). Questions 1-3 (18-32). Question 4, you go first with your own fence, long silence (32-42). Big idea verbatim + close in spontaneous prayer over what was named (42-45). Transformation lives at question 4. Cut the cross-reference walk first; Mark 7:19 alone makes the point.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Small-group opening, go around naming a proud self-denial (0-8). Read passage (8-12). Teach stoicheia + the flat verdict, silence (12-22). Questions 1-4, slowing hard at 4 where you go first (22-45). Table question / question 5, let people actually help each other weigh

a voice (45-55). Commitments out loud + spontaneous prayer over their actual words (55-60). Transformation lives at questions 4-5. Cut question 1 if needed; jump to why self-denial feels like it works.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Coffee opening about giving things up vs. real heart change (0-5). Read the passage together (5-9). One line on stoicheia and 'no value against the flesh' (9-14). Straight to question 4 — you name your fence first, then they name theirs (14-24). Big idea verbatim, then pray briefly over what each person named (24-30). Transformation lives in the mutual admission at question 4. Cut nothing; just protect the time on question 4.

Go First, Go Real

This is a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach — this week we drill it deliberately. You've now done Go First twice (weeks 1 and 6), so level three raises the bar: this passage is about a rule you enforce that God never gave, and that is embarrassing to admit. Don't go first with a safe, generic confession. Before you ask the room to name their ungiven rule, name YOURS out loud — the actual tone you use about clutter, the actual thing you feel secretly superior about. Specific, unflattering, and true. If your example makes you a little uncomfortable to say, you've found the right one. The room will only go as deep as your first sentence gave them permission to.

Why This Passage Matters

Every religious person in your room is carrying a fence they built themselves and secretly trust. The stricter diet, the tidier house, the cheaper coffee they feel righteous about — Paul is naming an instinct that never dies: harsh treatment of the body feels like it must be doing something, because it's measurable, visible, demanding. It photographs well. And Paul lands the verdict flat: none of it has any real power against the pull of sin. That is a hard, freeing word, and most people have never had anyone say it to them plainly. They've been told to try harder their whole lives. This passage tells them the trying-harder machine was pointed at the wrong target the whole time. You get to be the person who says out loud that their acceptance was settled at the cross, not by the fences they've been exhausting themselves to maintain. Few things you teach will land with the relief this one carries when it finally reaches someone who's been starving themselves spiritually for years. You get to hand a tired room the news that holiness rests on the life of their Lord, not the strength of their willpower. That's a privilege.

Catch the Fire First

Before the room ever hears the question, you sit with it yourself this week. Find the rule you enforce that God never handed you — the tone you take about clutter, the private ranking of family by how tidy their habits are, the thing you deny yourself so you can feel righteous. Name it specifically, on paper, in one unflattering sentence. Then notice what happens in your chest when you admit it: the small defensiveness, the urge to justify it as

'just being responsible.' That flinch is the flesh laughing at the fence. When you teach, you're not describing this from a distance. You're one person who already found their fence, inviting the room to find theirs.

Bring Your Own Story

- A time you treated a discipline — a diet, a budget, a routine — as proof you were holier than someone else.
- A rule you enforced on your family or a roommate that you now realize Scripture never actually commanded.
- A stretch when you tried to starve or discipline your way out of a sin, and it didn't touch the sin at all.
- SAMPLE (polished vs real) — Polished: 'I learned that legalism can't produce true sanctification.' Real: 'For two years I was proud of how little I spent on myself, and I honestly thought God was more pleased with me for it. He wasn't. I was just cheap and smug.'
- Guardrail: real, not raw — tell a fence you've already seen for what it is, not a wound you're still bleeding from mid-argument.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "Say three words out loud with me, slow, and notice each one gets tighter: don't handle, don't taste, don't touch. That's a slogan the Colossians heard shouted at them as the road to God. Paul quotes it back to them — and then pulls the floor out from under the whole thing."

Physical repetition makes an abstract point land in the body.

SMALL GROUP: "Quick one around the circle: name one thing you're a little too proud of denying yourself — the cheap coffee, the strict routine, the thing you won't buy. No judgment, just say it. Paul's got something to say about exactly that instinct, and it's not what you'd expect."

A shared, low-risk admission opens the door before the deep question.

COFFEE: "You ever notice how much easier it feels to give something up for God than to actually let him change your heart? Fasting feels like progress. There's a passage where Paul says that whole instinct — impressive as it looks — can't do a thing against real sin. Let's look."

Name the everyday version of the passage's temptation before naming the passage.

Teaching the Word

Teach the word *stoicheia* — Paul says you died with Christ 'from the elements of the world' (the *stoicheia*). It means the ABC's, the elementary building blocks, the basic principles a child learns first. Here's the image: picture a grown adult sitting in a tiny

kindergarten chair, knees up by their ears, being drilled on the alphabet again. That's what going back under rule-keeping looks like to Paul. You died to those baby-steps of the old religious world, and then you crawl back into the little chair? A dead man is not governed by the rules that governed the living. Then read it flat and stop: 'they aren't of any value against the indulgence of the flesh.' [Silence. Let it sit before you say another word.]

Discussion Questions

1. Paul says these rules have 'a show of wisdom.' What are some spiritual disciplines or standards that LOOK holy and impressive from the outside?

Coaching note: Warm-up. Let them list — fasting, minimalism, strict schedules, plain living. Don't correct yet; you're just getting the phenomenon named.

If it stalls: What's something a Christian could do that would make everyone assume they're really serious about God?

2. Why do you think harsh treatment of the body 'feels' like it's working, even when Paul says it isn't?

Coaching note: Push toward: it's measurable and visible. You can count what you gave up. The heart is invisible and won't submit to a checklist.

If it stalls: When you skip a meal or deny yourself something, do you feel more spiritual afterward — even a little? Why?

3. Paul says you 'died with Christ' to these elemental rules. What does it change to think of yourself as already dead to the rule-keeping system, rather than still fighting to keep up with it?

Coaching note: This is the pivot from diagnosis to gospel. Slow down. Let someone feel the relief of it. A dead man isn't governed by those rules.

If it stalls: If your acceptance by God is already 100% settled at the cross, what would you actually stop doing this week?

4. Where do you enforce a rule that God never actually gave — a tone, a standard, a private ranking of people by their habits?

Coaching note: This is the room's turning point. You go first here — name yours before you ask. Give real silence. Do not rescue it with a joke.

If it stalls: Is there something you correct in your family or friends that, if you're honest, isn't in the Bible at all — it's just your preference?

5. The table question: what's an idea or voice you've found yourself trusting more than Christ lately? Name it, and let someone help you weigh it.

Coaching note: Land here. Connect to 'precepts and teachings of men' — the online voice selling a stricter path. Let people actually name it and be helped.

If it stalls: Whose voice — a podcast, an account, a person — has been shaping how you think about God more than Scripture has lately?

Questions You May Hear

"So is Paul against all fasting and self-discipline? Aren't those good things?"

He's not against discipline itself — he's against treating it as the path to God or as proof you're holy. His verdict is that on its own it has no power against sin; it restrains the hands but never cleans the heart.

"What are the 'elements of the world' he keeps mentioning?"

The Greek is *stoicheia* — the elementary principles, the ABC's that ordered the old religious world before Christ came. Paul uses the same language in Galatians 4 for religious calendars and dietary rules dressed up as devotion.

"Didn't the Old Testament command exactly these food and touch rules? Was God wrong then?"

No — the law was good, holy, and it exposed sin, but it could never kill sin. Jesus himself closed the case in Mark 7 when he 'declared all foods clean'; what the law couldn't do, God did through his Son.

"If rules can't make me holy, how DOES holiness actually happen?"

It flows from union with a living Christ, not from regulation. Christ crucified and risen, joined to you, puts sin to death from the inside — your holiness rests on his life, not the strength of your fences.

For Experienced Leaders

- When you ask 'where do you enforce a rule God never gave,' the silence will feel long and awkward. It's supposed to. Do not fill it — your patience is what makes the honest answer possible.
- Watch for the person who confesses their fence and then immediately starts defending it ('but somebody has to keep the house clean'). Gently name it: 'Hear yourself justifying it? That's the flinch. Just let it go.'
- If someone opens a genuine crisis mid-discussion — a marriage falling apart, a diagnosis — stop and give it real weight: 'That's heavy, and I'm glad you said it.' Then hold the room warm and firm: 'I want to give this the time it deserves, so can you and I talk right after?' Then actually stay after. A five-minute real conversation and a text the next day does more than thirty public minutes ever could, and the room learns pain is handled here with care, not spectacle.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Go around and have each person finish this out loud: 'The rule I enforce that God never gave is ___, and this week I'm letting it go.' Out loud, not in their heads — the naming is the point.

Close by praying out loud over the specific fences and voices people just named — the actual tone about clutter, the actual account they've been trusting. Don't reach for a written prayer; say their words back to God and thank him that acceptance was settled at the cross, not by any of it.

If you run out of time: If the room only gets to question 4 and someone honestly names a rule they enforce, stop there. That admission is the whole lesson. Don't rush to the table question just to finish the list.

Midweek follow-up: Midweek, text each person: 'Did you catch yourself tightening over that rule this week? What happened when you let it go?' A one-line reply keeps the fence down.

Free at digdeeper.ai/devotionals/colossians/2-20-23/lesson

Handout

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During the lesson:

- Say them slow and feel each one tighten: don't handle, don't taste, don't touch. Write the one rule you tend to shout loudest at yourself:
- One discipline you're a little too proud of denying yourself (the cheap coffee, the strict routine, the unbought thing):
- A rule you enforce on someone — a tone, a standard, a ranking — that Scripture never actually commanded:
- An idea or voice you've found yourself trusting more than Christ lately (an account, a podcast, a person):
- Finish it: 'My acceptance by God was settled at ___, not by ___.'

Take-home actions:

- At home tonight, listen for the rule you enforce that God never gave — a tone about clutter, a standard for how the kids dress for church. When you catch yourself tightening, say so out loud to the person you were about to correct, and let it go.
- Next time you deny yourself a purchase, check your heart BEFORE you tell anyone. If you're doing it to feel righteous, that's self-denial with a show of wisdom and no real power over sin.
- When a voice online sells you a stricter diet or purer routine as the path to God, name it for what it is — 'precepts and teachings of men' — and close the tab. Christ already secured your standing.

The rules end with use. Christ does not.