

# The Substance of a Shadow

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Proper 12/10afterPent

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Colossians 2:6-19

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Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

While at the Seminary, some of my fellow students and I found out about a game called “Would you rather?” For any of you who don’t know how the game works, you are presented with two options from which you must pick one or the other. You don’t get a choice. The two options are generally fairly zany and it made for good ice breakers or ways to get to know one another. This morning, then, I have a “Would you rather” question for you, though the options may not be quite up to par with a real “Would you rather” question.

Here it goes: Would you rather have the shadow of a sumo wrestler land on you or the sumo wrestler himself? Remember, you have to pick one. You can’t bow out. How many of you picked the sumo wrestler himself? No one? Okay, then, how many of you picked the shadow of the sumo wrestler? All of you? How come?

As I’m hoping you can tell from my tone, I’m just playing with you. I know the reason you would pick the shadow is because a shadow has no substance; it’s not the thing itself or person him or herself. That’s the very idea Paul gets at in his letter to the Colossians this morning, although if you look at the back of your bulletin, it probably won’t have the word shadow in there. Paul’s mention of a shadow comes in a part of the epistle text that is optional and is not included in your bulletin, but is the reason you had to listen to me go on a little bit after the text on your bulletin stopped.

So let’s dig into this part of Paul’s letter to the Colossians and see why he would even bring up a shadow, and what it meant for those living in Colossae, as well as us today.

## Verse 1

Right off at the start, Paul encourages the Colossians to “walk in (Christ), rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as (they) were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” He wanted them to cling to the substance of Christ, rather than return to the shadow of the ways of the Old Testament, or, what would be even less, the “philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition (which were) according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

Paul gives us the same warning as we hear his words for those in Colossae. Christ is the substance of our faith and the Old Testament the shadow leading up to Him. We are called to walk in Him and not turn to human ideas as basis for our faith. After all, how often do people agree with one another? Granted, you might not turn to joesomebody.com or some of your neighbors for advice in your faith, but what about those with degrees? Do you ever turn to scientists for what to think concerning God? The same scientists who over the years have said the egg was first healthy to eat, then not healthy, and now are back to saying it’s healthy? Now scientists have come up with some theories and ideas which have been proven time and again—and which don’t go against Scripture. These you could hear and be okay. But do you now want to trust your eternal soul to the thoughts and ideas of human beings?

Or perhaps not scientists but pop psychologists. Psychologists also have impressive degrees sometimes. Yet some of them say going to church is only a good activity to do to keep up socially, like a club, or to maintain family connections. Is that how you learned Christ? Or were you not taught, instead, that Christ loved His Bride the Church, and that He Himself taught in her and that He continues to come to us in His Word as it is read and taught whenever it is read?

Without Christ, we would be blown about by the winds of human ideas. If you have been, as one who has not yet been taught the Word of God about Christ, continue to come and hear! If you are one who has been

taught Christ already, have you so quickly forgotten that “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” and that He is “the head of all rule and authority”? Christ Jesus is God made flesh and crucified and raised for you. He has proven Himself the only reliable source for our eternal well-being time and time again in His Word.

## Verse 2

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision without hands, by putting off the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God.” Skipping ahead a few lines for the moment, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.”

Just as we might be tempted to consider the blowing winds of human ideas, we might also be lured into trying to earn God’s love through the wily ways of the devil. We in the Lutheran Church do not agree with the heretic Marcion who thought it was okay to get rid of the Old Testament now that Christ has come. He forgot the use of the Old Testament in foreshadowing the fullness to come in Christ’s substance. After all, what good would having a Savior be if we did not have the Old Testament to give us the Ten Commandments to show we have done wrong?

At the same time, Marcion’s warning does apply. We must be careful not to fall into thinking we must or somehow can complete the Law for salvation either on our own or in Christ. As he was writing this, Paul had been dealing with the debate between the Jewish believers in Christ and the Gentile converts. The question of the day had been whether the Gentile converts had to be circumcised. But as Paul points out, no, no one can complete the Law and so no one should let another judge them by Old Testament Sabbaths or circumcision. Instead, the Gentile converts had been given all they needed in Christ, giving them, as it were, a “circumcision without hands...by the circumcision of Christ.”

In the same way, today we don’t need to let anyone judge us by whether we follow Old Testament customs. We, you and I, have all we need in Christ for salvation. We have been circumcised in Him without hands, and what is more, you have been buried with Him “in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses...God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. (He set it) aside, nailing it to the cross.”

## Verse 3

Yes, God “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in (Christ Jesus, and His death and resurrection).”

We do not have earthly enemies, but the rulers and authorities—the devil and the forces of sin and evil—have been defeated in Jesus Christ. Satan, the Accuser’s, power was in pointing out your sin and saying, “Aha! You have sinned; you deserve to die!” But since Jesus has paid the price for your sin, Satan has lost the power to say that. God has totally disarmed his power.

“‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’”

“Let no one (then) disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head (Jesus Christ), from whom the whole body (His Church), nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.”

Dear friends in Christ, you have been set free in Him; don't fall back to the ways of the Old Man, listening to the shifting winds of human reason or the ways of the Old Covenant for your salvation. Instead, by the New Man given you in your baptism into Jesus, grow in the Church with the growth that only God can give as you continue to come and hear the Law and especially the Gospel Good News of Christ crucified and risen for you. In Jesus' Name. Amen.