Does Colossians 2:16-17 Abolish the Sabbath or Food Laws?

Context is king:

Colossians 2:16–17 is often wielded as a theological hammer to shatter the permanence of God's Sabbath and dietary instructions. However, a proper reading within its literary, theological, and historical context proves that Paul is not abolishing God's commandments—rather, he is defending new Gentile believers who had begun observing them against critics.

Colossians 2:16–17 — The Text

"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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."

This verse begins with "Therefore," signaling it is a *conclusion* to earlier arguments. We must examine those prior verses to understand what Paul is actually concluding.

Who is Paul Is Writing to: Gentiles or Jews

Colossians 2:13: "You who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh..."

- Only Gentiles are described as "uncircumcised in flesh."
- Colossae was over 1,200 miles from Jerusalem—primarily Gentile territory.
- Thus, Paul is writing to Gentile converts to the faith of Israel.

In This Colossians passage, this is the only way it makes sense:

These Gentiles had *recently embraced* Torah-based observances like clean food laws (Lev. 11), Sabbaths (Ex. 20), and feast days (Lev. 23).

Paul is telling them: "Don't let anyone judge you now that you're obeying these commandments."

So What Was Nailed to the Cross? The Law or Our Debt?

Colossians 2:14: "By canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross."

It was <u>not God's law</u> that was nailed to the cross, but rather our "record of debt" — i.e., our sins and the death sentence they carried (see Romans 6:23).

- God's law is "holy, righteous, and good" (Romans 7:12)
- Psalm 19:7: "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul."

What is Paul condemning? A holy, perfect law is not deceitful philosophy. Paul is not condemning Torah, but pagan traditions.

Exhibit D: Shadow of Things to Come

Colossians 2:17: "These are a shadow of the things to come..."

Paul writes in the **present tense**: "are a shadow" (not "were").

- The feasts are prophetic (e.g., Fall feasts foreshadow Messiah's return)
- The Sabbath foreshadows eternal rest (Hebrews 4:9)
- The new moon relates to end-time restoration (Isaiah 66:23)

Relevance: These observances <u>are still relevant</u>; their ultimate fulfillment is future. Shadows point *toward* substance—they are not meaningless.

Paul Warns Against Man-Made Regulations, Not God's Laws

Colossians 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition..."

Colossians 2:20–22: "Why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!'... according to human precepts and teachings."

Key Insight:

- Paul is denouncing man-made rules, not God's commandments.
- He is attacking <u>asceticism and angel-worship—a pagan</u> mixture, not the Torah.

Rebuking of "the world": This is a rebuke of *Gnostic* or philosophical asceticism, not Leviticus or Exodus.

n So what is Paul saying in Colossians 2?

Paul is not speaking to observant Jews freeing them from the "burden" of God's law. He is encouraging *Gentile believers* who had begun walking in God's ways to stand firm, and not let others disqualify them because of it.

He is saying:

- "Don't let anyone judge you for keeping God's laws."
- "Don't let anyone impose man-made rules on you."
- "Your new obedience is rooted in Christ, not condemned by Him."

The burden of proof lies with those who claim Colossians 2 abolishes commandments that God called eternal, holy, and delightful. Such a reading is not faithful to the text, the context, or the covenant.

1 Summary:

- Paul is writing to Gentiles (v13)
- He rebukes human philosophy, not God's law (v8)
- Sin, not the law, was nailed to the cross (v14)
- The Sabbath and festivals are still prophetic (v17)
- He warns against man-made rules (v20–22)

It defends, not abolishes: Colossians 2 defends God's commandments; it does not abolish them.