

Paul Warns Against the Dangers of Religious Legalism

Colossians 2:11-17

Colossians 2:11-17 - *"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, ¹² 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. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. ¹⁶ So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷ which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."*

Background Notes

Throughout this letter Paul was warning the Colossian believers about the danger of being taken in by the false teaching that was circulating in Colossae. Paul was primarily concerned that no element whatsoever of the false teaching should creep in and be mixed in with the truth, and thus the Colossians would settle for a diluted or distorted brand of Christianity.

One distortion that can develop when elements of false teaching are mixed with the truth is **legalism**. What's legalism? It is the "ism" that makes keeping a list of rules your #1 priority. The religious legalist rigidly runs his (or her) own life by a personal set of rules – and he also judges other believers by his own set of rules. He may even try to convince everyone else that they ought to run their lives by *his* set of rules!

The false teaching that was circulating in Colossae was a mixture of Judaism and what later became known as Gnosticism. If any of the elements of this false teaching were mixed into Christian doctrine, legalism was a possible result. Judaism, in particular, put a great emphasis on rigidly observing all the Old Testament laws and rituals. Mixing any of this in with Christianity would result in a distortion of the gospel and the Christian faith. So this passage refutes legalism – both then and now!

Doctrinal Point

Legalism is a distortion of biblical Christianity.

Legalism usually looks good on the outside, because the legalist generally appears more religious or "spiritual" than the non-legalist. Remember the scribes and Pharisees? They were the legalists of our Lord's day. They looked a lot more

spiritual than the run-of-the-mill person at that time. The scribes and Pharisees meticulously kept all their rules, and they even thought that scrupulous rule keeping brought salvation. That's the worst form of legalism - thinking that by keeping rules and doing works, you can make it with God and get salvation. There's only one way to God through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.

Maybe there are some Christian legalists listening to this Talk. If you think you're more spiritual than other believers because you keep a certain list of dos and don'ts, and you look down on believers who don't measure up to your list, that's legalism.

This passage shows us why legalism is wrong. It's a distortion of biblical Christianity! The argument is in verses 11-15, and the conclusion is in verses 16- 17.

Let's look at the conclusion: "*Therefore 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*"(v16-17). The dietary laws of the Old Testament and the feasts and the special days were only a shadow of things to come. They were pictures that all pointed forward to Christ. But now Christ has come! High noon is here – there's no more shadow - so don't set up a list of rules.

To make verse 16 a little more contemporary, let's put it this way: don't let anyone judge you or tell you what translation of the Bible you should read, or what kind of Christian music you should listen to, or what kind of clothes you should wear on Sunday morning. Don't let people judge you in those areas! Setting up a list of dos and don'ts like that is legalism. What you prefer to read or wear, or what you believe would be honoring to God, is between you and the Lord. If you set those things up as your list of what makes you spiritual, or if you judge the spirituality of others based on *your* list, that's legalism.

Verses 11-15 are the argument as to why legalism is a distortion of biblical Christianity. Three points are mentioned here. Legalism forgets our position in Christ (v11-13); legalism forgets that the Law ended with Christ (v14); and legalism forgets that the enemy was conquered by Christ (v15).

a. Legalism forgets our position in Christ.

What is our position in Christ? As we see here, God looks at us as if we died with Christ, as if we were buried with Christ, and as if we were raised with Christ. When we died with Christ, our position before God is that our sin nature was cut off. That's what this part about circumcision is all about: "*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.*"

In the Old Testament, physical circumcision was a physical cutting off the flesh. Physical circumcision was a picture of spiritual circumcision, the "*circumcision made without hands.*" In "spiritual circumcision," or the circumcision of Christ, our sinful natures were cut off. Not literally, because we still sin, but that is our position before God. Our position is that we have died with Christ, we've been buried with Christ, and we've been raised with Christ. Our baptism pictures this. I believe verse 12 indicates baptism by immersion is the mode of baptism that best pictures this positional truth.

Does the risen, ascended Lord Jesus Christ have to keep the Law? Of course not! Well, that's the argument. As believers, we are so completely identified with Christ that our position before God is that we're *"in Christ"*! If we start keeping a bunch of rules as to the measure of our spirituality (or someone else's spirituality), we have forgotten our position in Christ. And we're legalists.

b. Legalism forgets that the Law ended in Christ (v14).

When you're in debt, there's an IOU. There's a certificate or document that states your debt - or as this translation puts it, *"a handwriting of requirements or ordinances."* That's what the Law was to us – it was a debt we couldn't pay. Someone had to pay the debt for us. Our Lord Jesus kept the Law perfectly so He could pay the debt. The custom in those days was to nail the charge against the person to his cross. When the Lord Jesus died on the cross, God took our "certificate of debt" - our IOU - and He nailed it to the cross.

Do you see what God is trying to tell us? Our certificate of debt, our IOU, has been nailed to the cross. That's why verse 14 says, *"having nailed it"*- not having nailed Christ. The Law ended in Christ. We're free! But the legalist forgets that the Law ended in Christ.

Watch out that you don't unintentionally slip into a legalist mindset. If you're a true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, your goal in life is not to try to keep the Ten Commandments with all your might. That could very easily lead you into legalism. Your goal as a Christian is to fall more in love with Jesus Christ - to follow Him and to love Him. And if you love the Lord and seek to follow Him, you'll do more to keep the Ten Commandments with that focus than you ever could do in your own strength. Trying to keep the Law, even as a Christian, is very close to getting involved in legalism. Legalism forgets that the Law ended in Christ.

c. Legalism forgets that the enemy was conquered in Christ.

Verse 15: *"Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it."* The picture here is of a "Roman triumph" – a victory procession. When a Roman general was triumphant in battle, a victory procession was held in his honor, with the general riding at the head of the parade. The captives and prisoners of war were led, disarmed, stripped, and made a public spectacle in the general's victory procession. In the same way, when Christ won the victory on the cross, the evil principalities were conquered, and they were openly made a public spectacle.

How does this tie into legalism? There's no doubt that the evil powers are involved in religious legalism. They're conquered, but they're certainly still in operation in getting believers involved in the problem of legalism. 1 Timothy 4 speaks about "doctrines of demons." One of those doctrines of demons is to abstain from certain foods. That's legalism. So both in Judaism and Gnosticism, there was an aspect of legalism - and it still operates today. Legalism forgets that the enemy was conquered by Christ.

We might apply the truth that the enemy was conquered in Christ this way: As a Christian, would you prefer not to sit in Row 13 on a plane? Would you hesitate to have your office on the 13th floor? Is it because you're superstitious? If so, what's behind superstition? Is it somehow the idea that you don't want to take a chance because of the spirit world out there? Avoiding things associated with the number 13 is a form of legalism – it's keeping a certain set of rules. Legalism forgets that the enemy - all the principalities and powers - were conquered in Christ!

Legalism is a distortion of biblical Christianity because it forgets our position in Christ, because it forgets that the Law ended in Christ, and because it forgets that the enemy was conquered by Christ.

Practical Application

Let's not get hung up with legalism!

Legalism is running your life by a list of dos and don'ts rather than from a burning love for Christ. We're not talking here about the specific dos and don'ts that are given to us in Scripture – like not lying, or not stealing. What we're talking about here are the “non-moral” issues that the Bible is not clear about - areas where God expects us to use our Christian liberty. What clothes are appropriate for Sunday? How much makeup should a woman use? What translation of the Bible should you use? Should Christians dye their hair? What kind of Christian music do you enjoy?

There certainly are areas of life where we should properly use our Christian liberty. We should exercise our Christian liberty in such a way that we don't offend and stumble *weaker* Christians. Romans 14 indicates that we're not to judge other believers who “see it differently” in the non-moral areas.

Let's not begin to think we're spiritual if we keep our list of dos and don'ts. And let's not judge the spirituality of another believer by our list of dos and don'ts. Let's not get hung up with legalism!