

7. No legalism but Christ

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Man-made religions give men and women a false sense of security. It is nothing more than a futile effort of mankind of trying to climb up to the place where God is. Even the process itself gives false comfort to men's hearts for a short time. Because it is made by men, it does not have the right substances, hope, and the peace people are longing for. As a result, those religious people are still looking for something to soothe their churning minds.

The religion that is coupled with the human ego demands others to do exactly what they are supposed to do, even if those religious people themselves cannot do what their own rules and regulations say. They become legalistic and looking down on those who can not meet their standards and expectations.

The apostle Paul is going to tell us and the believers of Colosse who were swayed by the gnostic people and the Jewish legalists about what the Lord Jesus had done for them on the cross. We must pay attention to what he teaches us.

A. BY THE CIRCUMCISION OF CHRIST

Colossians 2:11-12 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.

A Catholic Priest decided that there had been too much tension between his faith and the Jewish faith. So with this in mind, he remembered that there was a Rabbi who lived nearby and he determined he would go and wash his car as a gesture of kindness to him.

So one Monday morning he went over to the Rabbi's house and began washing his car. The Rabbi did not realize the priest was doing this until the priest was almost done. As the priest was dumping buckets of water upon the rabbi's car to rinse it off, the rabbi looked out the window and saw him drenching his car. The priest looked up at the window and smiled at the rabbi. The rabbi smiled back at him and waved.

The following day the rabbi went to the priest's house and taking out a saw began cutting the tailpipe of the priest's car. The priest saw him cutting up his car ran out of the house into the driveway and shouted, "What are you doing to my car?" The rabbi smiled at the priest and said, "I saw you baptizing my car yesterday, so I decided to come over and circumcise your car"

Not only did the Colossian Christians have wrong ideas about Jesus, but they also had wrong ideas about things like circumcision. Most of the Colossian Christians were Gentiles who had never been physically circumcised. Apparently, they were being taught that they had to be circumcised to be right with God by these Jewish legalists. Paul makes it clear that they are circumcised spiritually, by putting off the sins of the flesh.

Another important thing to keep in mind is that no outward religious ceremony brings us to Christ. The issue is whether or not we are born-again. If we are born-again, we do know Jesus as our Savior and Lord. If we do know Him, we are identified with Him.

Identification with Christ is "putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ," which is a spiritual circumcision. It was the power of God that changed us, not the power of water. The Spirit of God identified us with Jesus Christ, and we were buried with Him, raised with Him, and made alive with Him. Because God raised His Son from the dead, we have eternal life.

B. CANCELLATION OF OUR DEBT AND VICTORY

Colossians 2:13-15 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 (1) Having disarmed principalities and powers, (2) He made a public spectacle of them, (3) triumphing over them in it.

Salvation is not the improvement of the old nature. Rather, it is the impartation of a new nature. Before we have a new life, we are dead. Before a person comes to a new life in Jesus, they are not a sick man who needs a doctor. They are dead people who need a Savior.

"Handwriting of requirements" should be translated as a 'Certificate of debt' as New American Standard Bible says for a better understanding.

When Jesus Christ shed His blood for sinners, He canceled the huge debt that was against sinners because of their disobedience to God's holy Law. In Bible days, financial records were often kept on parchment, and the writing could be washed off. This is the picture Paul painted. How could the holy God be just in canceling a debt? Because His Son paid the full amount of debt when He died on the cross.

If a judge sets a man free who is guilty of a crime, the judge cheapens the law and leaves the injured party without restitution. God paid the debt of the sinners when He gave His Son on the cross, and He upheld the holiness of His own Law.

Jesus had three great victories on the cross:

1) Having disarmed principalities and powers

Jesus stripped off satan and his army of whatever weapons they held. Satan cannot harm the believer without the approval of God.

2) He made a public spectacle of them

In His death, resurrection, and ascension, Christ vindicated God and vanquished the devil. The public spectacle of defeated demonic spirits makes their defeat all the more humiliating.

3) Triumphant over them in it

Whenever a Roman general won a great victory on foreign land, took many captives and much loot, and gained new territory for Rome, he was honored by an official parade known as "the Roman triumph."

2 Corinthians 2:14 Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.

The death of Christ on the cross looked like a great victory for satan, but it turned out to be the greatest defeat from which satan cannot recover. Jesus Christ won a complete victory, and He returned to glory in a great triumphal procession. In this, He disgraced and defeated satan.

Ephesians 4:8 Therefore He says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men."

C. CHRIST, THE ANSWER TO RITUALS

Colossians 2:16-19 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. 18 Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, 19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

From the flashing red signals at a railroad crossing to the skull and crossbones on a bottle of rubbing alcohol, warnings are a part of our daily life. Some of the warnings are a matter of life or death. When we don't heed these warnings, whether it is physical or spiritual aspects, we are sitting ducks to be taken out.

God warns us through His Word that we must be aware of false doctrines that make us stumble in our walk with Him. Because Jesus won such a glorious victory on the cross, we don't have to be the receiving end of legalism for food or drink we consume. A life that is centered on Jesus and what He did on the cross has no place for legalism.

Thus Christians are free to keep a kosher diet or to observe the sabbath if they please. There is nothing wrong with those things. However, they cannot think that eating kosher or sabbath observance makes them any closer to God, and they cannot judge and consider another brother or sister who does not observe such laws as lesser.

These legalistic regulations had to do with foods and with eating and drinking – partaking or abstaining. Under the Old Testament system, certain foods were classified as “clean” or “unclean” according to Leviticus 11. But Jesus made it clear that, of itself, food was neutral. In Matthew 15, it was what came out of the heart that made a person to be spiritual or unspiritual. Peter was reminded of this lesson again when he was on the housetop in Joppa according to Acts chapter 10 and when he was rebuked in Antioch by the apostle Paul for not hanging around the Gentiles.

A Christian who fails to obey God's directions does not lose his salvation. But he does lose the approval of the Lord and the rewards He has promised to those who are faithful. Certainly, God does not owe us anything. We ought to be so grateful that He has saved us from the judgment that we would serve Him whether we received a reward or not. Just as there are degrees of punishment in hell according to Matthew 23:14, so there will be degrees of glory in heaven – even though all believers will be like Christ in their glorified bodies.

Matthew 23:14 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

1 Corinthians 3:11-15 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 14 If anyone's

work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

The false teachers in Colosse claimed to have visions and made contact with angels. In bypassing the Word of God and the Spirit of God, they were opening themselves to all kinds of demonic activity – because satan knows how to give counterfeit experiences to people.

2 Corinthians 11:14 And no wonder! For satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.

I asked you to notice what it says in v18. The gnostic would say, "I am not good enough to come directly to God, so I will start with one of the angels." All of this mystical ceremony was wrapped up in a false humility that was actually an expression of pride.

One of the reasons why legalism does not die down is that it breeds through our pride. While we label others lower than us, it fans our ego which allows us to look down on others. It is no wonder why Jesus hated the legalistic attitude of the Pharisees and still hates any legalistic mentality that we sometimes have.

Trying to reach God the Father through anyone or anything other than His Son, Jesus Christ, is a way of cults.

D. THE ESSENCE OF LEGALISM

Colossians 2:20-23 Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations– 21 "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," 22 which all concern things which perish with the using–according to the commandments and doctrines of men? 23 These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

This v21 is a perfect description of legalistic religion, defined more by what we don't do than by what we do.

The key to living above legalism is remembering that you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world. Our identification with Jesus in both His death and resurrection, as mentioned before in Colossians 2:12, becomes the foundation for our Christian life.

All the legalistic rules may have an appearance of wisdom – but they have no real value. Legalism doesn't restrain the flesh. It feeds pride to the flesh subtly and powerfully.

I found this news clipping: Scripps Howard News Service profiled former lawyer James Kelley of Washington DC in 1997, one of a small group at his local church who are enthusiastic Episcopalians but who do not believe in God. Said Kelley, "We all love the incense, the stained glass windows, the organ music, the vestments and all of that. It's drama. It's aesthetics. It's the ritual. That's neat stuff. I don't want to give all that up just because I don't believe in God."

Self-imposed religion is mankind reaching to God, trying to justify himself by keeping a list of rules. Christianity is God reaching down to mankind in love through Christ.

Does this mean that the Old Testament law has no ministry to New Testament Christians? Of course not. The law still reveals the holiness of God, and in the law, Jesus Christ can be clearly seen. The law reveals sin and warns of the consequences of sin – but it has no power to prevent sin or redeem the sinner. Only God's grace through Jesus Christ can do that.

E. APPLICATION

Self-imposed religion is mankind reaching to God, trying to justify himself by keeping a list of rules. But Christianity is God reaching down to mankind in love through Christ.