

## Freedom From Human Rules Col 2:16-23

We could spend our time listing and talking about a whole list of rules for churches. What are some of them? Observing Sabbath habits. Tattoos. Marijuana. Pre-marital sex. Hymns or choruses? How we celebrate Christmas. Interracial relationships. Should we focus on Mother's and Father's and Grandparent's Day? Beards. Long hair on men. The way we dress. Alcohol. Don't cause a fight. Wedding rings.

Simply put, we all have a whole list of likes and dislikes, often for good reasons, usually out of tradition, history and culture. Some are described in our constitution. Many rules are simply understood but not written out like we are to act in prescribed ways. We need rules to help us get along. But rules can become a burden and a distraction from following Jesus.

Often we see problems with rules when we look back in our history or at another culture. For example, in Brasil, to try to understand and learn about the Brazilian Christian church, we attended a variety of worship services of all kinds of groups. But when we attended Pentecostal groups, Rose and I were dressed wrong. I didn't use a suitcoat and tie, and Rose wore a blouse with no sleeves, had short hair, and wore moderate jewelry. A few times we were told we were inappropriate, even though it was hot – usually around 30 degrees. Our dress seemed more important than who we were and why we were there. On the other hand, you know who was going to Pentecostal churches.

Let's remind ourselves that here in chapter 2, Paul is settling down to address some specific problems in Colossae. We have looked at the warning in **Verse 4: "I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine sounding arguments."** Then **Verse 8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ."**

And for today, we start with the warning of **verse 16. "Therefore do not let anyone judge**

**you by what you eat or drink, or with regards to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day."**

Paul has been teaching us that we are not just to focus on our conversion. Instead, we are called to demonstrate our commitment to Christ on a daily basis by going deeper with Him. Our knowing should lead to growth and wisdom.

But this growth can be stunted, or even choked to death by the weeds of legalism. Legalism can be defined as a strict adherence to the law. Specifically, as it relates to faith, a legalist is one who believes that performance is the way to gain favor with God. Legalism is the human attempt to prove our spirituality and gain salvation by outward conformity to a list of religious "do's" and "don'ts." It is often disguised in Christian terms and behavior. And we tend to spend a lot of time of these.

However, let's consider some factual practical results of rules and legalism with a list from Bill Brian. **First, we tend to think others are legalistic, but that we are not.** But we are all legalistic by nature. We tend to judge others by our own standards of what is acceptable and what isn't. In essence, we think our sins smell better than other people's. As you probably have admitted to yourself at times, we have very little tolerance for people who sin differently than we do.

**Second, legalism is highly contagious.** While it is probably, usually, less systematized and conscious in our minds then it was among the Jews and Pharisees of Jesus' time, legalism can spread like a bad virus through the entire congregation. That is why Jesus reserved his harshest criticism for religious legal list makers like in **Mark 7:6-8. "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teaching are but rules taught by men."**

**Third, we need to be aware that legalism can take a vibrant faith and make it lifeless and dull.** It can evaporate enthusiasm, jettison joy, and stifle spirituality. Instead of finding

freedom through Christ, too many believers become burdened by the church.

I was part of a marvelous multi-cultural Bible study that was flourishing with around 40 people, until one man joined us. He effectively cut off any questions or observations by coldly respond with a Bible verse in a very bad tone. When he talked, it felt like – what is wrong with you people? Here is this verse, do it! This attitude and tone did not take into account that people were struggling with the issue they raised. His style of response indicated no concern for people's real problems. So the study dwindled down to 6 people in just 4 sessions.

**Fourth, another dynamic is legalism produces large quantities of self-righteousness, judgment and condemnation.** I don't think that was the intent of the man I mentioned, but his kind of responses produces this result. Legalism majors in guilt and misguided sacrifice, urging its followers to evaluate their relationship with God on the basis of standards and expects others to do the same. Superficial spirituality short-circuits the work of grace.

One Sunday Rose and I happened to be driving home and we took the long scenic route on a highway that paralleled the ocean. But we surprisingly observed, church after church with the title, Independent in it, with a wide variety of various other descriptions in their title. Many of them included the term Bible. We were glad to see all those churches, but noticed, none had more than 8 cars in their parking lots. So I'm judging, but wonder, were the names of the churches an indication of rule focused legalism, right and wrong fixation?

**Fifth, legalism makes us narrow & divisive.** The legalist insists that everyone live up to the standard they have adopted. In other words, everyone needs to be like me and then our fellowship would be perfect. When we think & act this way, and impose it on others, we miss the delight of diversity in the church as well as those life questions that we all wrestle with.

**A Sixth result of legalism is, it is impossible for people to see Jesus.** There is nothing that pushes a seeker away faster than an over focus on rules & regulations. The effort to enforce them accomplishes the opposite of the intention. We inadvertently portray Jesus as a drill sergeant instead of a loving Savior. You could add to this list of why religious legalism fails.

I would add at least one more to this list. In my experience, **A legalistic spirit is often really an effort to keep or gain control.** It is done nicely, with a smile, and great logic, but it's intent and effect on others is control. Rules are important to have, but so often they are used to defeat an out pouring from the Holy Spirit. Or to prevent creativity. Or to keep power. And avoid real dialogue and discussion. An old book titled, Well Intentioned Dragons describes this dynamic and its various effects.

One reason groups and congregations over time find it hard to find volunteers is various kinds of legalism. Then it gets worse when we label it a spiritual problem. A simple example is, in one church I soon realized that you did not work *with* two individuals. Instead you worked *for* them on their committees. By the time I was pastor there, the only people these two could recruit were their family members. Fortunately both were people who had creative ideas and got things done. I appreciated them, but unfortunately they could not pass on their gifts to others, because people would not expose themselves to their type of leadership.

Most of us fall into legalism without trying to do so. Here is an imaginary example. One Sunday Stella led in prayer for the persecuted church. When Stella prayed, she graciously invited us to kneel, if we wanted to. Now, let's imagine that as you knelt, you did so with very good motives. You wanted to focus on Christ and intercede for the needs of beleaguered believers around the world. But you took a peek and noticed that only about half of the people were on their knees. A seed of judgment began to germinate, as you wondered why others were not doing as you were doing. You also may have been a little embarrassed.

Then, because you found kneeling helpful, you began kneeling during your quiet times, family devotions & in prayer time on Sundays. But, within a few Sundays, you notice, no one but you knelt during prayer, so you felt angry, but also strangely smug, because at least you were doing what everyone else should be doing.

And then there were those members who had a hissy fit about seeing people's back sides and having sore knees and on and on. The whole value of using kneeling as a physical posture to help our spiritual posture, becomes lost and sidelined fairly quickly in incidences like this.

Do you see how subtle and sneaky legalism is? Its weeds are under the surface in each of our lives. Kneeling to pray is a good thing, but it can easily become the standard by which we judge other people's spirituality. Or it becomes something we resist and react against, which causes the church to divide up into sides. In short, if we are not careful, we will default to a performance based discipleship, and miss out on what Paul wants for us – more of Jesus.

That is exactly what was starting to occur in the church at Colossae. The New Testaments books of Romans, Galatians and Hebrews also fight legalism. We must be taught over and over that everything is by grace. We are saved by grace and we mature by grace. In our text today, Paul argues that if we want to pull the weeds of legalism, **we must focus on 2 truths. First, remember who we are in Christ** as he writes about in verse 9 to 15. We are complete. We are alive. Are sins are canceled and we have victory over powers and authorities. **Second, we need to resist the lures of legalism.**

So when Paul writes about legalism in verse 16, do not let anyone judge you, he is warning us to not adapt certain Gnostic practices. He's saying don't regress in your faith. He is thinking of asceticism and immorality. This ties into the struggle with Jewish Christians as well as those Jews opposed to Jesus as Messiah. Paul was focused on all the Jewish food laws with their list of things clean & unclean. Since all matter is seen as evil, then the body is evil.

With this belief – it divides into two opposite conclusions. First, if the body is essentially evil, it does not matter what we do with it. It makes no difference in how we abuse it. This goes way beyond the Jewish food laws.

Second, if the body is evil, it must be kept down. It must be beaten, starved, and every impulse denied. So Gnosticism can either result in complete immorality or in rigid asceticism. Paul is focused on asceticism here. He is saying, **'Have nothing to do with people who identify religion with laws about what you may or may not eat or drink.'**

**Jesus also said this. (Matthew 15:10-20; Mark 7:14-23)** Food and drink are so unimportant that they are destined to decay. But the Gnostics wished to make religion a thing of regulation about eating and drinking.

Another rule the Colossians Christians faced were regular feast days, new moon celebrations and the Sabbath, on which certain things must be done or not done – prescribed ritual. Like in one of my congregational assessments I learned some church members insisted, that the only time Silent Night could be sung, was on Christmas Eve, with candles. There were other such rigid rules, not worth fighting over. This led quite a few members to leave the church.

But Paul says, "You have been rescued from all the tyranny of these rules. So why do you want to enslave yourself all over again?" He drives this logic home in **verse 17. "These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."**

The law is a shadow. Rules are not the main point. They only point to the real thing. They are evidence of the real thing. To make more of Old Testament law than we should, is like making more of a shadow that it is. To make more of a tradition than we should, it is like thinking a shadow has substance, or is physically real. Don't be fooled. It's ok to use sweet potatoes, the staple, for communion in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, makes

more sense than bread, which is a food that was introduced by westerners.

**Next we have verse 18** - another clear direct warning about rules and freedom. Gnosticism often focused on special visions and the worship of angels. But Paul instructs, **“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great details about what they have seen, they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.”**

The Message translation goes, **“Don’t tolerate people who try to run your life, ordering you to bow and scrape, insisting that you join their obsession with angels and that you seek out visions. They are a lot of hot air.”**

**Then verse 19: “They are completely out of touch with the source of life, Christ, who puts us together in one piece, whose very breath and blood flow through us. He is the Head and we are the body. We can grow up healthy in God only as he nourishes us.”**

If you read Colossians from the start to this point, in one sitting, I suspect you can sense how Paul gets increasingly worked up about the heresies and the rule orientation the Colossian believers were getting involved in. This is life and death stuff. These additions to the faith are not just minimal distractions. They are clever false humility moving faith away from its main and center point, Christ Jesus. And let’s not fool ourselves – this occurs today also.

These false teachers are intruding into those things which they have really not seen. But they use this mysticism, angels, rules, and so on, as a special way to feel better than others and claim special power, special secrets over others. Some Jews of the time had a well developed doctrine of angels. Gnostics believed in all kinds of intermediaries. So they taught about them, worshipped them, instead of Jesus.

We can see why Paul was angry and upset. People were being taught lies – in the name of Christ. Jesus calls Satan the father of lies.

Jesus accused a bunch of people when he said, **“You belong to your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”** (John 8:44) Unfortunately this still occurs today. It perverts the Gospel of Christ.

To summarize Paul’s accusations here, he says first, the heretics only have a shadow of the truth. (vs 17) Second, he says they display a false humility. (vs 18 & 23) Third, this leads to sinful pride. (vs 18 & 23) Fourth, believing their falsehoods is a return to unchristian slavery instead of Christian freedom (vs 20), and does not free us from fleshly lusts, but only keeps them on a leash. So don’t be cheated.

Instead, Christian freedom comes not from restraining desires by rules and regulations, but from the death of evil desires and the springing to life of good desires by virtue of Christ being in the believer and follower in Christ.

Rules can be dangerous. But I am offering a disclaimer. I believe rules are helpful. We need them. They help us get along without having to frequently negotiate every little issue. But we need to remember we have the human tendency to overdo rules for our own benefit, control and comfort. Our history and the pain it has caused, proves this. So, let’s take seriously Paul’s admonitions to not add to the Gospel.

Let us conclude Colossians chapter two with wisdom from Earnest Martin. “For the church of Jesus Christ, the challenge always, is to equip the saints with balanced teaching; provide pastoral care that delivers persons from spiritual bondage and frees us to grow in their life in Christ; proclaim the gospel of freedom, power and victory, and resist and confront the spiritual powers that bind, oppress, and destroy those for whom Christ died and rose again.” Easy to say but we can meet the challenge of having rules and also freedom in Jesus.