

“Breaking the Bondage of Legalism”

Colossians 2:16-23

Turn with me in your Bibles this morning to the second chapter of Colossians, where we will read from verses 16-23. In seventeenth-century France, there was a mysterious prisoner known as “The Man in the Iron Mask.” His true identity has been debated for centuries. The story was embellished and made famous by French novelist Alexandre Dumas. One interesting theory said he was the twin brother of King Louis XIV. Others claimed he was a disgraced nobleman. But no one knew for certain because no one ever saw his face. For more than thirty years, this man was kept in total isolation. He was moved from prison to prison, always under the strictest guard, and wherever he went, his face was hidden behind a heavy iron mask. He could breathe, he could eat, he could speak—but he could never be free. He lived, but he did not live free. He existed, but in confines. And all the while, the very thing that imprisoned him kept the world from learning who he truly was.

In many ways, that’s the picture Paul paints in Colossians 2. The believers in Colossae had been set free by Christ, but false teachers were trying to put the mask back on. They said, “Faith in Jesus isn’t enough. You need more rules, more rituals, more religion.” And Paul writes to say, “No way! You are complete in Christ. Don’t go back into bondage.” That’s what legalism does to the human soul. Legalism places its ‘iron mask’ over the face of grace. It hides the beauty of the gospel behind manmade rules and religious performance. It imprisons believers in a system that says “do more, try harder, prove yourself,” until joy evaporates and freedom is forgotten.

Many Christians today are living behind such an iron mask, breathing the air of religion but not the freedom of grace. They know the language of faith, they

attend services, they check the boxes, but inside they are trapped behind an iron mask of fear and guilt brought on by legalism's demands. Paul wrote Colossians 2:16–23 to tear away that mask. He wants the believers in Colossae to see the face of freedom again, to remember that Christ has set them free from the bondage of rules and regulations. (Read)

The false teachers in Colossae were trying to chain the church back to a religion of restrictions which said that real spirituality consists of following a certain diet and observing certain rituals while embracing a strict way of living. They claimed salvation involves, “Don’t eat that, don’t drink that, don’t touch that.” But to that, Paul says, “You died with Christ! Why are you living as though you’re still in prison?” When you live under the bondage of legalism, you can still move, you can still breathe, you can still serve—but you do it all from behind a mask. You’re not motivated by love for God, but you’re driven by fear. You don’t rest in His grace; you strain for His approval. But when Jesus removes that mask, everything changes and you’re finally able to see the gospel’s face of grace. You finally breathe the fresh air of freedom. You finally discover that you were never meant to live hidden behind the iron bars of performance, but to live in the free air of God’s grace.

S. Lewis Johnson — *“One of the most serious problems facing the orthodox Christian church today is the problem of legalism. One of the most serious problems facing the church in Paul’s day was the problem of legalism. In every day it is the same. Legalism wrenches the joy of the Lord from the Christian believer, and with the joy of the Lord goes His power for vital worship and vibrant service. Nothing is left but cramped, somber, dull, and listless profession. The truth is betrayed, and the glorious name of the Lord becomes a synonym for a gloomy kill-joy. The Christian under law is a miserable parody of the real thing.”*

Do you really believe that all of your sins are forgiven? Do you really believe that you are free, which means that you do not live up to someone else's expectations of you? It's been my experience that a lot of Christians struggle here. Theoretically speaking, we think of ourselves as forgiven, but practically speaking a number of God's people live under a cloud of guilt. We say we are free, yet most of us are more sensitive to what other people think or say than what God thinks and says.

Steve Brown said that the difference between a legalistic church and a grace-oriented church is like the difference between a taxidermist and a veterinarian. If you take your sick dog to the wrong place, you've got problems. In both cases you get your dog back, but one collects dust while the other wags its tail with the joy of seeing you. It is the difference between a stuffed dog and one full of life and all that is associated with that. Far too many people have a 'stuffed' religion and not a vibrant, liberating faith. Jesus said:

John 8:32—“If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

The word used there for 'free' is a word that means to be liberated from bondage, from the control of other persons, or some other arbitrary power over you. In this last half of Colossians 2, Paul deals with this very subject. As we've seen, the situation in Colossae was such that the church's understanding of the gospel was being confused by false teachers who claimed that Jesus wasn't enough for an informed faith. So Paul sums up their dangerous ideas in verse 8 as being nothing more than empty philosophy and deceit which was according to human tradition and even demonic influence. All the evidence suggests that these believers in Colossae were facing a mixture of ideas that involved elements of

Greek mysticism and Jewish legalism and strict asceticism which threatened to lead them away from simple faith in Jesus.

Mark Johnston — *“Seeds of doubt were being sown in their minds as to whether or not what was offered in the gospel was enough.”*

We need to keep in mind the indicative language that Paul uses in the previous paragraph. Indicative language refers to statements that describe what is true, rather than what should be done. It indicates facts or realities. What were the facts? He tells them that:

- They are completely filled in Christ (2:9-10)
- They are completely forgiven in Christ (2:11-13)
- They are completely free in Christ (2:14-15)

And so this leads Paul to now say in verse 16, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink” and so on. Verse 18, “Let no one disqualify you by insisting on asceticism.” Legalism tries to earn what God has already given. It says, “If I do enough, God will love me.” However, grace says, “God already loves me and has already accepted me in Christ—so I will live for Him!”

Do you really believe that you are free? Which means that you live to please God and not people? One of the most common missteps for those who follow Christ is an attempt to earn God’s favor. By following man-made rules, or by avoiding simple pleasures, we mistakenly believe that we have advanced our status with God. Our fleshly attempts at self-piety and self-denial do little more than frustrate us. The gospel of Jesus Christ provides us a way of escape when

it comes to performance driven faith. Now, having said all of that, let me show you some things about legalism.

1—Legalism SUBSTITUTES shadows for substance (2:16-17)

“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.”

The first thing I want to mention about legalism’s bondage is that it substitutes shadows for substance. It gets caught up with various pictures of religion, but misses the point of relationship. It fixates on externals so that it forgets about the internals.

The exhortation Paul gives

Verse 16 says, “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.” The word ‘therefore’ connects this verse to what he has just said in verses 13-15. He has declared that Christ canceled the record of debt, disarmed the powers of darkness, and triumphed over them by the cross. In other words, believers are completely forgiven and completely free in Christ. And because of that reality, no one has the right to impose additional requirements for acceptance before God. Jesus Christ has set us free. A similar argument is made by Paul in the book of Galatians where the church was being led astray by the ‘Judiazers.’

Galatians 1:6-7—“I astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.”

Galatians 3:3—“Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

Galatians 5:1—“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

The false teachers in Colossae had been influenced by Greek mysticism as well as certain elements of Judaism which they now tried to smuggle into a version of quasi-Christianity. Their legalistic ideas involved both diets and days.

Apparently, they were trying to reinstitute some of the dietary laws of the Old Testament and apply them to Gentile Christians. The other had to do with observing certain festivals and religious ceremonies. These were foreign to the Gentile believers in Colossae, but now were being told that unless they observed them they were not truly spiritual. And it wasn't true at all.

And so Paul is warning the Colossians not to let anyone sit in judgment over them for not keeping certain ceremonial rules or traditions. He tells them, “Don't let anyone pass judgment on you, don't let anyone condemn you in these matters.” Don't let anyone lead you to believe you are spiritually inferior for not keeping certain outward rituals. Your standing before God rests not in ceremony, but in Christ. We're not saved on the basis of diets and days, but by our Deliverer! And don't let anybody else try to tell you otherwise. That's his exhortation. Then notice:

The explanation Paul gives

Notice he says in verse 17, “These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” Why would anyone exchange substance for shadow? Legalism substitutes shadows for substance by clinging to symbols,

rituals, and external observances instead of embracing the spiritual reality those things were meant to point toward—Jesus Christ Himself. But legalism makes two very critical mistakes:

- It clings to the symbol and misses the Savior

The Old Testament law was filled with ceremonies, dietary rules, and festivals that pointed forward to Christ—He is the Passover Lamb, the true Sabbath rest, the Bread from Heaven. Legalism tries to hold onto those shadows as if they were the point, while the reality that cast the shadow is standing right before us in Christ.

- It confuses the temporary with the timeless

All of the dietary laws, ceremonial observances, and feast days of the Old Testament foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah. They were ‘types’ that pictured some aspect of His saving work, intended to direct people’s faith toward Him. One such example would be the temple located on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the place where God would dwell with His people. The New Testament sees this building as finding its fulfillment in Christ who became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Solomon’s temple was the shadow, but Christ is the substance. And within the temple was the furniture which Moses had been given instructions about, important things such as the:

- The Ark of the Covenant → Christ as God’s presence and mercy seat (Rom. 3:25)
- The Veil → Christ’s flesh, through which access to God is opened (Heb. 10:19–20)
- The Lampstand → Christ the Light of the World (John 8:12)

- The Table of Showbread → Christ the Bread of Life (John 6:35)
- The Altar of Incense → Christ our intercessor (Heb. 7:25)

Within the temple were the animal sacrifices of the Mosaic Law described in the first seven chapters of Leviticus 1–7. And each one of those sacrifices were shadows intended to picture Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross, which is the substance. It is the same with the Passover lamb and all that was associated with its careful slaughter and application of its blood on the doorposts of the home. It all was a shadow that pointed to the substance.

Hebrews 10:4—“For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

The same thing with Aaron and the priesthood. All of that was the shadow, and Christ was the substance:

Hebrews 10:12—“But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God.”

Those ceremonies and laws under the old covenant were temporary scaffolding meant to prepare for the finished structure of Christ's redeeming work. But legalism tries to keep the scaffolding in place. It doesn't see that the temple of grace has already been completed in Him. The old has passed away, and the new has come!

A shadow is cast backward as the light strikes on the true object, and it is in this same way the shadow of the New Testament gospel can be perceived in the Old Testament ceremonies. A shadow is an outline, a trace of something that is real. Kind of like an artist's sketch compared to the finished masterpiece. That's what Paul is saying here to the Colossians. Once the Old Testament scaffolding has

come down, why would we ever try to put it up again? In His death on the cross, Jesus declared, “It is finished!” It was the cry of a master artist who had added the finishing touches to His work, and nothing could ever be done to add anything to it! There’s a second thing that we need to understand about legalism:

2—Legalism SUBVERTS a relationship with Christ (2:18-19)

“Let no one 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, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.”

Legalism substitutes shadows for substance, but it also will subvert a relationship with Christ by emphasizing external rituals to the exclusion of internal realities. It likes to focus on outward regulation rather than inward transformation. In that sense, it subverts or undermines a vibrant relationship with God.

How it insists upon performance

Verse 18 says, “Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions.” The word ‘disqualify’ there is an interesting word.

“Disqualify” —the Greek word is *καταβραβεύω* and means to defraud someone; to act as an umpire against

The NLT says, “Don’t let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things.” In other words, the false teachers were telling the Colossians that if they subjected themselves to strict discipline, if they served angels, and if they sought to receive some vision, then they would be truly spiritual people. The more physically

miserable they made themselves, the more spiritually ‘in tune’ they would be. In that sense, they are not unlike the people who tell us that if we don’t get up at 4:00am to read so many chapters of the Bible, or spend so many hours in prayer, or give so much money away to missions, then we are second class Christians. The super-spiritual saints are the ones who perform to certain standards. Those who do not are despised in our eyes. They’re not ‘committed’ like we are. But that sounds a whole lot like the attitude of the Pharisee whom Jesus described in His parable in Luke 18:

Luke 18:9-14 (NLT)—“Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: ‘Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer, ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like this tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give You a tenth of my income.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even to lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Friend, our standing with God doesn’t come through our own moral performance. You can have a religious resumé that is impressive by man’s standards. But religious ritual is not what changes the heart. Grace is what changes us. Grace is what ushers us into God’s presence. Legalism likes external control while resisting internal change. It insists on “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle” (Col. 2:21), thinking those restrictions make a person holy. But holiness doesn’t

come from what we avoid—it comes from who we abide in. You say, “Well, what about the law then?” What good is it? That depends on what you think the law is intended to do. The law could define sin but could not deliver from it. It could reveal guilt but could not remove it. For OT Jews, the law was a shadow of righteousness; Christ is the substance of righteousness. How does legalism insist upon performance?

- By replacing relationship with ritual

The purpose of the law was to lead us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). Legalism, however, stops short and builds its home in the shadows. It turns spiritual practices into empty routines. Instead of fellowship with the living God, it offers a checklist of religious performance. The result is motion without real motivation, ritual without reality. Christ offers communion, while legalism offers ceremony.

- By exchanging the grace of a Person for the grind of a performance

The ‘substance’ of our Christian life is found in a Person—Jesus Christ—not a program or a list. Legalism takes what was meant to be a joyful relationship and turns it into a joyless regimen. It substitutes the warmth of grace with the cold shadow of rules. The shadow has form, but not life. It cannot impart power. Only the living Christ can do that.

How it inflates man’s pride

Look at the last part of verse 18, “Puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind.” Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way, “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, that’s all they are.” Legalism inflates our pride by giving us a false sense of

security. If I put up a fence and stay within its perimeters, things will be good between me and God. But the problem is that it puts up a fence where no fence is required, and then turns the fence into a requirement for everybody else. Obviously, I'm not talking about doctrinal perimeters. Nor am I talking about God's moral law. Grace is not the same thing as license. But what I am referring to is this tendency to come up with our 'man-made' rules and requirements which we impose upon others and insist that they follow. Now, there's nothing wrong with preference and personal conviction. In fact, conviction is good when it flows from love for Christ. But legalism elevates personal conviction into universal command. So that it says, "If you don't live like me, look like me, if you don't think the same way I do about every secondary issue, you're not spiritual." Legalism thrives on comparison. It measures devotion by what you don't do.

That's why Paul says, "Let no one judge you, let no one disqualify you." The moment we let someone else become the judge of our spirituality, we've traded the gospel for an iron mask. The gospel says we are accepted in Christ, but legalism says we are accepted if we perform. The gospel says, "It is finished." While legalism says, "You better keep working." So it insists upon performance, it inflates man's pride, and then notice:

How it ignores Christ's preeminence

The legalistic requirements of the false teachers insisted upon various externals, angel worship, and experiences out of a puffed up sense of pride. And here's the kicker in verse 19 says, "And not holding fast to the Head, from the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God." Do all this other stuff in addition to faith in Jesus if you really want to be spiritual. Yet the spiritual life of the body flows from the Head. It is our connection to the Head that gives us life, not our list of do's and don'ts.

It is amazing at what legalistic people will insist upon doing for what is thinks is real spirituality. Unless you attend so many services, unless you dress a certain way, unless you read so many books, unless you knock on so many doors, you're not spiritual and don't love people. (It reminds me about a story I heard where a new pastor was going door-to-door visiting his congregation. One day he knocked on a door but nobody answered. He could tell someone was home, he heard movement inside, but after waiting a while, he finally gave up. So he took out one of his business cards, wrote a Bible verse on the back, and slipped it in the door. The verse was Revelation 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." The next Sunday, the offering plate was passed, and to his surprise, his business card came back in it! Under his verse someone had written Genesis 3:10, "I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked!")

The point is not that any of those activities are necessarily bad. No, the point is that they don't give you any standing with God. He doesn't love us more because we do or don't do certain things. Legalism reduces Christianity to nothing more than a spreadsheet. Because I do this, God will love me. Friend, the gospel says, "Because Christ has done all that is necessary, God accepts me on His merit, clothes me in His righteousness, gives me a place at His table." I now worship Him from a redeemed heart that has been set free. His grace is what motivates my obedience and service.

3—Legalism SUPPRESSES true spiritual freedom (2:20-23)

"If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teaching? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in

promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity of the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”

The third point I want to make about legalism in addition to these other two is that legalism suppresses true spiritual freedom. That’s the truth that Paul is driving home in these last four verses. Because they had been forgiven in Christ, the Colossians were also free in Christ. But the legalism being smuggled into the church had a suppressing, stifling effect on that freedom.

It chains us

Listen to his reasoning here in verse 20, “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world,” which is referring to our union with Christ described back up in verses 11-15. He’s saying, “Since with Christ you died to the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to its regulations—‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch?’” You’re free in Christ, but legalism is a return to bondage in the way it reduces Christianity to a list of rules. Why take up again the chains that Christ has set you free from? Our freedom doesn’t come from a list but from the Lord! If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed! (John 8:36)

It cheats us

Look at verse 23, “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” In other words, their legalistic demands look spiritual. They seem wise, disciplined, and deeply religious. Their ascetic practices meant they rigidly followed rules, fasted often, or abstained from pleasure and appear to have superior devotion. But it’s only a facade of

holiness. Legalism looks pious but lacks spiritual power. It actually cheats the one who relies upon it.

How do we break the bondage of legalism? Let me give you just a few closing principles by way of application as I finish.

- Since we are filled in Christ, we don't need man-made substitutes

If there is one thing that you can count on in the realm of human ideas that lead you astray, it will always take you away from God's Word and the simplicity of faith in Christ. Whether is it legalism or any other '-ism,' the Word will be deemphasized and the Lord Jesus will be demoted. But there is no substitute for the Word of God and the person of Christ. Don't settle for self-made religion. Don't place your confidence in your own performance. The key here is remembering that in Jesus Christ we are complete.

- Since we are forgiven in Christ, we are no longer slaves to sin

To be fully forgiven is to be truly free! Jesus said that His truth is what sets us free. In His death, He has canceled the record of debt that stood against us with all its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross! Which means we are completely and totally forgiven of all our sin. We are no longer held under its bondage.

- Since we are free in Christ, we give ourselves to Him as His servants

He alone is your Master and the One you seek to please. It is impossible to please everyone else. No one can serve two masters. Jesus said that about money, but it can also apply to anything else we're tempted to serve as a master.

Are you truly forgiven, and are you truly free? The answer is a resounding 'yes' if you are trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior. The reason you are forgiven is

that He died for your sins, and the reason you are free is that He has saved you by His grace. Friend, maybe you've been living under the weight of legalism. Maybe you've been trying to earn God's approval by your performance. Maybe you've been comparing yourself to others and living with constant sense of guilt. Hear once more the gospel promise:

You are complete in Christ. Completely forgiven, and completely free!

You don't have to strive for His acceptance—you already have it. So shake off the chains and remove the iron mask of legalism. Stop hugging the shadow when the Substance stands before you. Rest in His finished work!