

SESSION 7

Christ's nourishment

Teacher Preparation

- ☐ Are you a stickler for rules? Do you police the traffic around you while driving around town, pulling traffic violators over in your mind? Do you get irked when someone cuts in line in the grocery store or when your favorite team is robbed because a ref missed a call?
- ☐ When we see others break rules or fail to enforce them, we can develop a sense of superiority, thinking we must be better than all those rule breakers out there. But rule-breaking is a universal problem, especially when it comes to character. None of us is perfect. We all sin.
- ☐ Read Colossians 2:16–23. Rules serve to curb people's behavior, but they are powerless to change people's hearts. Paul wrote to the Colossians about not giving it to the temptation to make Christianity all about trying to please God by keeping a set of rules. Trusting in Christ and drawing on Him for nourishment is our only way to grow as a believer.
- ☐ Impress upon your students that God is never impressed with self-righteous rule keeping, especially when the rules have been invented by man. Encourage them to rest in the Lord and to serve Him because He has made them acceptable.

Session Summary

Gnostics were trying to persuade the Colossian Christians to be legalistic, mystic, and ascetic. Paul taught that legalism is a misuse of the law. The solution is to look at the law as a shadow of the substance, which is Christ. Mysticism seeks to know God through spiritism. Those who practiced it in Paul's day were falsely humble. They needed to look to Christ for spiritual growth. Asceticism is putting ineffective restrictions and rules on people who wanted to please God. Christ, however, already made a sufficient sacrifice. Believers are free to live for God, not so He might accept them but because He has accepted them.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Colossians 2:16–23

BUILDUP THEME



INTERNALIZE GODLINESS

Christ provides the nourishment believers need to grow spiritually.

MEASURABLE RESPONSE

The learners will recognize their need to hold fast to Christ for their daily nourishment as believers.

MEMORY VERSE

"Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ" (Colossians 2:16, 17).

Session Starters

Option 1—Rule Breakers

Steps

1. Ask your students about following rules.

ASK: How do you respond when you see someone blatantly disregard a traffic law? (Q1)

ASK: What do you think of yourself after watching someone blow a stop sign or zip past you on the shoulder? Do you think you must be better than that person? Why? (Q2)

2. Transition to the Bible study.

Rules serve to curb people's behavior, but they are powerless to change people's hearts. If we are honest, we would all have to admit to being rule breakers. Paul wrote to the Colossians about not giving it to the temptation to make Christianity all about trying to please God by keeping a set of rules. Trusting in Christ and drawing on Him for nourishment is our only way to grow as a believer.

Option 2—Mary or Frank?

Steps

1. Present the following two scenarios.

Mary is a devout Catholic. She takes her religion seriously and therefore never misses a Mass. Mary loves her family, supports her husband, volunteers at her local hospital, and has never been known to say an unkind word to anyone.

Frank has been in and out of jail for the past ten years. His list of offenses includes assault and drug use. He is nearly homeless and has not had a regular job in months. Frank's wife left him after he started abusing her in fits of drunken rage.

2. Discuss the scenarios.

ASK: Which of these two people would probably be harder to win to Christ? Explain. *Mary, because she believes she is diligently working her way to Heaven and would see no reason to repent.*

ASK: How would most unbelievers, especially ones like Mary, respond if you told them that Mother Theresa's eternal destiny had nothing to do with her good works? *They would be offended by the notion that Mother Theresa's works had no effect on her salvation.*

Mother Theresa was a Catholic nun who famously served others sacrificially her entire life.

3. Transition to the Bible study.

Paul presented three false ideas about earning God's favor with the view of gaining salvation. He dismantled the views by pointing the Colossians to Christ. His cases are the subject of this session.

Bible Study

Gather

- Gift-wrapped box.
- Flashlight.

Sociologists may classify people by national origin, race, political party, income, vocation, spending habits, physical characteristics, and religion. The Bible, however, classifies people as either saved or lost. All who trust in Christ as Savior are saved. Everyone else is lost. Without Christ as their Savior, even devoutly religious people are lost. Neither religious rules nor pious practices provide salvation. Salvation is by grace through faith. It is a gift of God and not a result of works (Eph. 2:8, 9).

I. Legalism's Emptiness (Col. 2:16, 17)

A. Explanation

Far too often believers who hold Biblical standards of morality or who judge their spirituality on outward actions and appearances rather than on the inner state of the heart are accused of being legalistic, but legalists are not believers. Strictly speaking, legalists are those who depend on good works to save them. Legalism is the philosophy that salvation is acquired by adhering to rules and religious observances. Key words in the legalists' vocabulary are "do" and "conform."

Cain was a legalist. He expected God to accept what he had produced (Gen. 4:3). He was wrong. The Lord rejected Cain and his vegetable offering (Gen. 2:5).

The Pharisees were legalists too. They subscribed to a lengthy man-made list of religious dos and don'ts as requirements for gaining God's favor and everlasting life. They required their followers to adhere to thousands of rules, but they refused to allow God to rule their hearts. They prayed to be heard by others, but God didn't hear their prayers. They meticulously performed ritual handwashing, but their hearts were unwashed. They took pride in their zeal for the law, but they had no love for the Lord.

READ: Matthew 23:23–28; Mark 12:38–40. **ASK:** What good did the Pharisees' legalistic acts do for them? (Q3) *None. Christ pronounced woes against the Pharisees Christ and said they would receive the greater condemnation.*

The annual feasts were intended to be "the feasts of the Lord" (Lev. 23:4), but hypocrisy turned them into feasts of the Jews. (See John 2:13, 5:1, and 6:4.)

Jesus condemned the Pharisees' legalistic ways as hypocritical. He quoted Isaiah, who prophesied concerning the Pharisees, saying the Pharisees would draw near to God with their mouths and honor Him with their lips while their hearts were far from God. Isaiah added that the Pharisees would teach their own commandments as doctrine. Isaiah predicted their worship would be worthless (Matt. 15:7–9).

B. Problem: Misuse of the law (2:16, 17a)

READ: Colossians 2:16, 17a.

Paul instructed the Colossians to let no one judge them in such matters as diet and religious observances (Col. 2:16). The brand of Gnosticism confronting the Colossian believers embraced legalistic elements of Judaism and, therefore, insisted that the Colossians observe Old Testament dietary laws and special days.

Leviticus 11 taught Israel to distinguish between clean and unclean food sources. Certain passages in the Old Testament designated some days as holy unto the Lord. The Ten Commandments required Israel to remember the sabbath day and to keep it holy (Exod. 20:8). The Old Testament law summoned the men of Israel to congregate before the Lord three times a year to worship Him. These occasions were the Feasts of Passover (Unleavened Bread), the Feast of Pentecost (Harvest), and the Feast of Tabernacles (Ingathering) (Exod. 23:14–18; Lev. 23). Leviticus 16 describes the Day of Atonement that Israel was to observe yearly, and Leviticus 25 describes the Sabbatical Year and the Year of Jubilee. Israel's lunar calendar also marked each new moon/month as a special occasion of rest, worship, and celebration (Num. 10:10; 28:11; 1 Sam. 20:18). But none of these Old Testament requirements transferred to the church. Furthermore, in the history of Israel they degenerated into lifeless, empty, hypocritical occasions.

Paul found no fault with the law of Moses. His complaint was against the legalists' misuse of the law. He characterized the law as a "shadow."

READ: Colossians 2:17.

OBJECT LESSON: Place a gift-wrapped box near a wall. Shine a flashlight against the box in such a way that its shadow appears on the wall.

ASK: What are the basic characteristics of a shadow? (Q4) *Shadows are simply a reduction of light in a specific area caused by a light source shining across the object casting the shadow. Shadows show the outline of the object but have no substance.*

The law was merely a shadow of the reality believers find in Christ. It had no substance in that it could not be the means through which someone gained eternal life.

C. Answer: Christ is the substance (2:17b)

A shadow, of course, offers nothing except the assurance that reality is nearby. No one can withdraw funds from a bank's shadow, buy groceries from a grocery store's shadow, shake hands with a person's shadow, or drive the shadow of a car. A person, however, could withdraw funds from a real bank, buy groceries at a real grocery store, shake hands with a real person, and drive a real car. Similarly, the law of Moses merely shadowed the reality that Christ provides. "The body," or substance, belongs to Christ.

READ: Colossians 2:17.

Believers draw from Christ salvation and grace for every need. They worship God through Christ, and they find perfect rest in Christ. No wonder Paul urged the Colossian believers to let no man judge them (2:16).

READ: Galatians 3:10–13, 24. **ASK:** What is the condition of those who are under the law of Moses? (Q5) *They are still under the curse and not justified.*

ASK: How did Christ gain our freedom from the curse of the law? (Q6) *Through His death on the cross.*

READ: James 2:10. **ASK:** Why is an ardent legalist as lost as a flagrant violator of the law of Moses? (Q7) *No one can keep all the law, and if one law is broken, the person is guilty of the entire law.*

II. Mysticism's Emptiness (Col. 2:18, 19)

A. Explanation

First-century Gnosticism contained not only an element of legalistic Judaism but also an element of mysticism. Mysticism emphasized internal feelings and sensations above real facts. Mystics claimed to reach a higher reality. Their religious practices included an attempt to connect with the spirit world apart from the Holy Spirit and the Bible. Ultimately mysticism promised direction and solutions for life from within a person. In Colosse, the false teachers believed they were contacting angels and having supernatural visions. Of course, such claims were attractive to the Colossian believers. Paul warned them not to be deceived by the mystics' fanciful tales.

B. Problem: False humility (2:18)

READ: Colossians 2:18.

The Colossian believers needed to be on guard against mysticism. The danger existed that the Gnostics might cheat the Colossians out of the rich blessings that God had made available to them in Christ. The

Paul's warning that opens verse 18 means, "Don't let anyone defraud you, or cheat you, or act as an umpire against you, or sit in judgment on you."

Gnostics must have argued that their humility led them to approach God indirectly through spirit intermediaries. Likely they accused the Christians of pride and presumption because they claimed to worship God directly. If the Christians fell for the Gnostics' line, they would miss the blessings of being in Christ.

ASK: What would the Colossian believers be cheated out of if they followed the Gnostics' mystical teachings? (Q8) *A fruitful life on earth and their reward in Heaven.*

Although the Gnostics may have tried to appear humble, they were proud—"puffed up" in their minds. The words for "puffed up" come from a word meaning "loud shout" or "roar." The Gnostics' minds resembled inflated shouts. Pride had filled them with a lot of hot air! Their claims to have an inside track to knowledge and to have received special insights through their contacts with the spirit world were bogus.

C. Answer: Christ causes growth (2:19)

READ: Colossians 2:19.

We must avoid any thought of receiving authoritative spiritual knowledge outside the Bible. The Bible is God's fully inspired, authoritative, inerrant Word. We may trust it fully to teach us what to believe and how to live. Yet some professing Christians claim to have received extrabiblical revelation. "The Lord spoke to me in a dream," they say. Or they claim, "I received a word from God in a vision." Or they insist, "I heard God call my name while I was walking through the park. Then He told me to . . ." If we look to sources outside the Bible for guidance, we run the risk of falling into dreadful error.

ASK: How would a solid understanding of the Bible free you from the risk of falling into error? (Q9) *Error is often a twisted version of the truth. A solid understanding of the Bible will give you a frame of reference from which to spot "twisted" truth.*

ASK: How would you counsel a believer who claims to receive direct revelation from God through dreams and visions? (Q10) *God no longer gives direct revelation to believers today through dreams and visions. All that we need from God is given to us in His Word. The Holy Spirit will illumine our minds as we read and study God's Word.*

ASK: Does the fact that something is supernatural mean it is automatically from God? What other supernatural forces are at work? (Q11) *No. Satanic and demonic forces are at work in the world.*

Spirit beings cannot do for us what Christ alone can do—He nourishes and strengthens us (Col. 2:19). Just as the head controls the human

body, Christ, the Head of the church, controls His Body, the church. He supplies all that we believers need for healthy, productive spiritual existence and growth. The Gnostics failed to acknowledge the preeminence and all-sufficiency of Christ (2:19).

ASK: If Christ is a believer's lifeline for spiritual health, what would you conclude would happen to believers who fall prey to the mystical attempt at spirituality? (Q12) *They would grow spiritually weaker and become more vulnerable to falling into all kinds of sin.*

III. Asceticism's Emptiness (Col. 2:20–23)

A. Explanation

Since the Gnostics believed that matter is evil, they practiced asceticism. Asceticism is an attempt at securing righteousness through denying self. The Gnostics reasoned that their spirits would benefit if they neglected their bodies and denied themselves certain comforts and pleasures. In the ascetic view of life, the poor are more righteous than the wealthy since wealth is associated with evil.

B. Problem: Ineffective restrictions (2:20b–23)

READ: Colossians 2:20, 21.

The ascetic rules being pushed in Colosse involved not touching, tasting, and handling certain things. The emphasis was on what people were *not* supposed to do. But ascetic rules had to do with temporal things. No eternal value comes from an ascetic life.

READ: Colossians 2:22.

Furthermore, the ascetic commandments and teachings were devised by men. The restrictions had no credible backing or authority. Only a heart filled with pompous pride would dare to create rules that define what God finds pleasing and unpleasing. Yet that is exactly what the ascetics in Colosse were doing.

The Colossian believers saw the asceticism of the false teachers in Colosse and couldn't help but think that the false teachers were doing something wise. Criticizing someone for at least attempting to do something good doesn't come naturally. Paul recognized that fact in verse 23.

READ: Colossians 2:23.

The last statement in verse 23 brought the Colossian believers back to reality. All the rules of denial, the supposed humility, and neglect of the body by the ascetics were worthless in overcoming the lusts of the flesh. Paul was in essence saying that trying to overcome the flesh with the flesh doesn't make sense. Yet the core teaching of asceticism

in Colosse was to deny the flesh in the power of the flesh to overcome the flesh.

READ: Isaiah 53:6; 64:6; Romans 3:10, 23. **ASK:** What do these verses say about the possibility of gaining a righteous standing with God through ascetic means? *The verses clearly teach that humanity is thoroughly evil. Ascetic rules can curb the flesh, but they will never overcome or destroy it.*

EVALUATE: To be spiritual, you must be miserable. (Q13) *Spirituality has nothing to do with misery. Making yourself miserable is a work of the flesh. No one can become spiritual through a work of the flesh.*

C. Answer: Christ's sufficient sacrifice (2:20a)

READ: Colossians 2:20.

Paul explained that believers are identified with Christ in His death. God has accepted us in Christ. We don't have to set rigorous rules of self-denial and endure hardships to gain righteousness. Our righteous standing before God comes from our identification with Christ, not our ascetic practices.

ASK: What is an ascetic person in essence saying about the sufficiency of the cross of Christ? (Q14) *That it is insufficient to make a person righteous and that it didn't satisfy God.*

A believer cannot mix asceticism with the work of Christ on the cross. Paul told the Colossians that they had died with Christ. Therefore, no list of regulations demanding an ascetic lifestyle is needed. In fact, a list of regulations is an affront to God, Who gave His best—His Son—to pay the price for salvation.

Does God want us to ignore all His commands and live rule-free? Of course not. But obeying His commands should be done out of gratitude for His Son's death on the cross, not as an attempt to become righteous. We are already righteous because of our identification with Christ.

READ: Romans 7:24, 25.

Legalism, mysticism, and asceticism cause spiritual malnutrition, but Christ gives spiritual health and vitality. Christ has set the believer free from the law and man-made rules, as well as from sin and its penalty. He has given the believer the opportunity to walk in newness of life. The liberated believer has the power to cast off sinful habits and to lead a life that pleases God.

Session Application

Steps

1. Discuss our tendencies to be legalistic.

Because Christ has set us free from sin and the notion that religious works acquire salvation, we enjoy peace and a sense of purpose. But we can get into a legalistic mode and begin to live as if our actions alone please the Lord.

2. Encourage your students to prayerfully complete the self-evaluation under question 15 of their student books on their own. Also, have them consider any adjustments they need to make to stop living in a legalistic mode and start living free in Christ. (Q16)
3. Discuss how to help someone who is trying to earn salvation. (Q17) Encourage your students not to be critical of those who are wrapped up in legalism, mysticism, or asceticism, but rather to pray for them and to try to reach them for Christ.

