

A young lawyer was setting himself up in his first private practice. As he sat in his office, which was basically bare except for his desk with a telephone on it and a book case filled with important-looking legal books, he wondered how long it would be before he got his very first client.

Then, as luck would have it, from his window he saw a man crossing the street and coming towards his front door. Feeling nervous and wanting to make a good impression on the working-class looking man, he quickly picked up the phone receiver and began talking to an imaginary client on the phone. The man, now standing in the office in front of his desk, waited several minutes while the lawyer concluded his conversation with this seemingly very important client.

Finally, after ending the conversation, the young lawyer looked up at the man, now directly in front of his desk and with an attitude of smugness and superiority said to the man “Can I help you?”

The man looked at the lawyer and without missing a beat said “I’m from the telephone company and I’m here to connect your phone.”

So, this lawyer wanted to look good, he sought to inflate his ego, but in doing so, when faced with the reality of a telephone repair man, he looked very foolish. In a roundabout way, the false teachers who had come to Colossae were doing the same thing. They wanted to appear superior, they sought to elevate themselves, and in their deceptive and self-righteous teaching – which was a fusion of Christianity, and Judaism, and other philosophies, they taught that favor with God was earned by looking good – thereby diminishing the finished work of Christ. They claimed that Jesus was a great starting point but, in the end, He was not enough – the Colossians needed to do more *apart from Christ*.

Well, if you recall from last week, in this letter, the Apostle Paul gave the Colossians a reality check, and he explained that when they were born again, at the moment of their salvation, they were spiritually united to Christ in such an intimate way that Paul referred to it as being “*in Him*.” In this spiritual union, they were in Christ – full and complete – they had everything they needed, and therefore there was nothing they could add through their own self-effort. Paul poked great big holes in this false “*Jesus plus*” teaching – and he’s not done.

So, if you have your Bible turn to **Colossians 2** and we will begin with **verse 16** where Paul begins to address three challenges that the church was facing. He says,

¹⁶ Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— ¹⁷ things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

If you notice, this passage begins with the word “*therefore*” or the word “*so*” depending on your translation, and it’s an important word because it connects these words of Paul to his previous thought – namely, that *in Christ* believers are complete.

In Christ, our sin debt has been wiped away because it was nailed to His cross. In Christ, the power of sin can no longer dominate a believer. We can now say “*no*” to those things we once said “*yes*” to. In Christ, we share in the victory accomplished by Him – we are alive because He is alive, and as a result, we are free to walk in this life with Him. We are complete in Christ, we have everything we need – that is the spiritual reality of every single believer, and as such, Paul says don’t let anyone **act as your judge**.

So, what does Paul mean by that? Well, it’s this. Since we are complete *in Christ*, we should not allow others to intimidate us, judge us, or enslave us with a bunch of religious rules and rituals – thinking if we do them, we’ll be more acceptable to God. Apparently, these false teachers tried to convince the Colossian believers – who were predominantly Gentile, that their spirituality was based on how well they followed certain Old Testament Jewish rules and rituals they never heard of – specifically here, rules pertaining to their *diets* – what they ate and what they drank, and rules and rituals pertaining to certain *days* – such as festivals, new moon ceremonies, and even the Sabbath.

These false teachers taught that a person’s approval and acceptance by God was gained and maintained by keeping the rules to look good. Their focus was not on the righteousness that believers have in Christ, but rather their focus was centered on the self-righteousness and the self-effort of man – the performance of man, which we call *legalism*.

Legalism is a focus on religious rules as grounds for earning God’s favor – or we could just as well say, “*It’s a failure to be amazed by God’s grace.*” The false teachers measured spirituality by keeping lifeless rules – not rules like “*love the Lord with all your heart or love your neighbor as yourself*” – but rather rules pertaining to such things as their diet and their holy days – rules they enforced through guilt and shame that led to nothing but misery.

I want to read you something from Max Lucado. He says,

*“A legalist believes the supreme force behind salvation is you. If you look right, speak right, and belong to the right segment of the right group, you will be saved. The brunt of the responsibility doesn’t lie within God; it lies within you. **The result?** The outside sparkles. The talk is good, and the step seems true. But look closely! Listen carefully. Something is missing. **What is it?** Joy.*

Legalism is slow torture, a suffocation of the spirit, an amputation of one’s dreams. Legalism is just enough religion to keep you, but not enough to nourish you. So, you starve. Your teachers don’t know where to go for food, so you starve together. Your diet is rules and standards. No vitamins. No zest. Just bland, predictable religion.”

Max Lucado is absolutely right, and I know he is right because for many years I fell into this trap. Oh, I knew I was saved by grace, but I wasn’t living by it, and every time the church door was open – I had better be there, and when asked to do anything in the church, I could not say “no” because I was trying to make myself acceptable to God on the basis of my own efforts. I felt like a hamster on a wheel, moving as fast as I could and getting absolutely nowhere. It completely sucked the joy right out of me – and when the joy was gone, so was my worship.

You see, legalism does not recognize grace for living, instead it makes you feel hopeless as you try to please God – who in your mind, never seems to be pleased with you. For a legalist, God is constantly judging you with a harsh critical eye, making sure you are crossing your “T’s” and dotting your “I’s” just right, and if you don’t – and you won’t, then you have lost His favor. Legalism is exhausting, it’s *performance-based* – not *pardon-based*, it makes you miserable, and oddly enough it makes you judgmental of others who don’t do what you do.

Now in this passage, I want you to understand that Paul was not condemning food or drink, or holy days, or even rules for that matter. There are things in the Bible that we are specifically told are wrong – things we should not do. Sexual promiscuity is wrong. Lying and stealing are wrong. The Bible is very clear about these things, and we need to obey God in these things – but for these false teachers, they were trying to impose a Jewish legalistic system on Gentile believers – believers who knew nothing about the Old Testament, telling them they had to abide by certain “*cherry picked*” rules – usually *man-made* rules in order to earn and to keep God’s favor – claiming that God accepts us because of what we do or don’t do, when in reality, God accepts us because Jesus lived a sinless life and

went to the cross and died on our behalf. He paid our sin debt in full – we are debt free – our sin was nailed to His cross, we are pardoned, and to add anything to that is to suggest that Jesus was not enough and His work was not sufficient to save. So, if a Christian wants to eat a kosher diet – then go for it, but don't get the idea that it makes you more spiritual and brings you closer to God for you are already complete in Christ – and don't judge someone else who does not eat a kosher diet.

Don't judge and don't let someone judge you – don't let someone intimidate you with their legalistic *Jesus plus* teaching. Yes, it might sound good, it may appear spiritual, it may seem Christian-sounding, but Paul says “*don't do it*” – you are complete in Christ – you need Jesus plus nothing else – Jesus is enough, and everything else except for Him Paul says is but a **mere shadow**.

Now what does Paul mean by that? Well, a shadow is cast when something or somebody blocks the light, and Paul says that these false teachers were living in the shadow of religion – a shadow that was given in advance of the One who actually casts the shadow. They were focused on the rules and the rituals of religion while ignoring the reality of Christ.

If I returned from a long trip and Trish dropped to the ground and started kissing my shadow, I would say, “Hey Trish, I'm up here. Kiss the real lips.”

That's what Paul is describing here. Once the you have found the real thing, once you have found Christ, you don't need the shadows anymore. Christ is the reality, and much of what we read in the Old Testament was simply a shadow cast from Him.

In the wilderness, the Jews ate manna, but that's a shadow, for Jesus is the true manna from heaven – the bread of life. They celebrated Passover and sacrificed lambs, but that's a shadow, for Jesus was the true Passover Lamb that God had sent to take away the sin of the world, and only by His blood, is there eternal life. They observed the Sabbath, but that too was a shadow, for the true rest, the everlasting rest is only found in Jesus. You see, everything points to Christ.

Listen, if you live in the shadow of religion, if your spirituality is based on keeping rules, if favor with God has to be earned, then you have fallen into the trap of legalism and you are missing out on the reality of a gracious and loving relationship with Jesus Christ. The false teaching of legalism was a challenge faced by the Colossian believers, but there was a second challenge. So, let's continue beginning with **verse 18**. Paul says,

¹⁸ Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

In this passage Paul moves from legalism to *mysticism* – to which you might ask, **what is mysticism?** There are several definitions out there but I would describe mysticism as a spiritual quest to have spiritual experiences with the spirit world apart from the Word of God or the Holy Spirit. The false teachers claimed to have **visions** and contact with **angels**, they claimed to step into the invisible realm – taking trips outside the body, and they told the Colossians that if they wanted to reach the levels of spirituality they were at – which was a lie, then they too needed to seek out these kinds of mystical experiences.

So, they used these experiences as a basis to measure one's spirituality. They told people to humble themselves before spiritual beings, to seek visions, and to worship angels – something Christians should not do, and unfortunately, in bypassing the Word of God and the Spirit of God, they were opening themselves up to demonic activity. I think we are seeing a lot that today with the fascination of the paranormal. Paul said to the Corinthians that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, and I suspect that in these paranormal experiences, Satan and his fallen angels can also masquerade as the dearly departed who once lived among us.

Now, I know there are angels. If you recall, we just finished with the book of **Daniel** where we were introduced to two of them by name – Michael and Gabriel. I believe in miracles and signs and wonders. I know that believers can have various kinds of spiritual experiences, I get that – but the danger comes when a person becomes obsessed with seeking these things. When that happens, when the experience becomes the primary focus – when the need for an experience turns into a compulsive desire – then Jesus becomes an afterthought or as Paul says, they lose their connection with the **head**.

When a Christian loses their connection with the head, Paul says there is no spiritual growth and the Christian could be **defrauded** out of their prize, and when speaking of the **prize**, many suggest that Paul is referring heavenly rewards. Christians could lose rewards when they appear before Christ for judgment – that could happen, but there's another thought, and this is where I tend to lean. *Apart from Christ*, believers could be cheated out of the real experience of living their lives to the fullest in Him.

The false teachers were telling the believers at Colosse that mystical visions and conversations with angels and deeper experiences were necessary to make them truly spiritual, but once again, Paul brings them right back to Christ. In Christ, they don't need to seek anything or anyone else.

So, we looked at the challenge of legalism and mysticism that confronted the Colossians, now we come to the last challenge in this passage. Beginning with **verse 20**, Paul says,

²⁰ If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ²¹ “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” ²² (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? ²³ These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Paul condemned legalism and mysticism, and now he condemns *ascetism*. **So, what in the world is that?** Asceticism is a philosophy which teaches the body is evil – it's an enemy – and depriving the body of its normal desires is a means of becoming holier and gaining the approval and acceptance of God. It seems to be an exaggerated form of legalism because it too is wrapped up in a system of man-made rules, but it's extreme in that it calls for strict and severe forms of self-neglect, and self-denial, and even self-torture in order to become more spiritual.

Throughout history, treating one's body as an evil enemy has been seen in various ways. It could include the wearing thick shirts made of hair – as if itching and scratching was spiritual. It might include sleeping on hard beds, lying on a bed of nails, whipping themselves to a pulp, castrating themselves, not speaking for days or maybe years, going without food, going without sleep, no contact with strangers – I mean the list goes on and on. As a monk, Martin Luther fell into ascetism before he became a believer. He would lie naked in his cell all night long in the bitter cold and he beat his body and he tortured himself, trying to find peace with God.

But Paul says this is all wrong, it's all man-made stuff, and once again he reminds the Colossian believers they are in Christ. They died with Him, they were buried with Him, and they are alive because He is alive. They are complete in Christ – Jesus has paid their sin debt in full on a cross and He has already secured God's favor, and acceptance, and approval for them. Jesus did that – it's a done deal, **so**

why submit yourselves to these rules such as **do not handle, do not taste, and do not touch?**

Now just for clarification, Paul is not saying don't take care of yourself. If you are overweight, don't eat a Bic Mac with a large fry and a chocolate milk shake every day. Do not taste even though it tastes good – *I know*. If you are allergic to peanuts, do not eat peanut butter even though *Peanut Butter Pie* is awesome. That's wisdom, that's self-discipline, that's restraint – these are things we need to practice as Christians. We should live disciplined lives, at times we need to use restraint, many times we have to do the hard and difficult things that God wants us to do – but in all these things we do so out of love. That's our motivation – and quite frankly, motivation is the key in all of this.

We don't do these things to earn God's love and favor, we do them because we are loved and favored – and it's something the false teachers just could not grasp. The false teachers presented legalism, and mysticism, and asceticism as a self-righteous way of earning God's love and favor, and getting closer to Him, but they did not understand that in Christ, believers are loved and favored far more than they could ever know, and God was nearer than they could ever image.

Yes, the keeping of the rules, the visions, the contact with angels, the self-denial of the body looked very religious and seemed really spiritual, there appeared to be some **wisdom** in it, but to Paul it was all for show, it was false humility, and there was absolutely **no value** in it. You can do all that stuff, but *apart from Christ* it won't make you a better person. You can join a monastery, and wear a robe, and live in poverty, and take a vow of silence, but that does not change the heart, it doesn't save, it doesn't earn the approval of God, and it doesn't add a thing to Christ because there is nothing to add.

Imagine for a moment that you are poor and needy. You are desperate. You haven't eaten in days. You are cold, and you are tired because you have been walking all day. Darkness comes and you notice some lights in the distance through the trees. Your aching stomach urges your throbbing feet to keep going just a little farther. As you draw closer, in the night you see the lights are coming from a huge house. The curtains are drawn back, and you move closer for a better look until your face presses against the window. You stand there for a few moments without being noticed—shocked at what you see. It's a feast. A huge table is covered from end to end with more food than you've seen in months—green vegetables, steaming meat, cold drinks, warm bread. Your stomach rumbles; your mouth waters. You feel faint from hunger.

As a butler is serving the guests, the master of the house glances over and notices your face pressed against the window. He thinks to himself, there is a person in need, and he motions for the butler to go out and speak to you. Your first instinct is to run away and hide, because you think they want to punish you for trespassing, but the butler calls out to you, “Please, the master would like you to come in and dine at the table with him.” So, you go in—and eat. Your great need has been met by the master and the fullness of his table.

In a similar way, our great spiritual need has been met beyond measure by Christ. Jesus is the fullness of God, and from His fullness, He has made us complete in Him. We brought nothing to the table nor can we. Jesus provided everything we need, and therefore, Paul might ask, **“Why would you look anywhere else?”**

Source Material:

John F. MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005)
Enduring Word – David Guzik
Daryl Ellis, “Commentary on the Book of Colossians,” in *Galatians through Colossians*, ed. Robert E. Picirilli, First Edition., *The Randall House Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications, 1988).
Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996).
Charles R. Swindoll, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 9, *Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2017).
R. Scott Pace, “Colossians,” in *Exalting Jesus in Colossians and Philemon*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2021).
Max Anders, *Galatians-Colossians*, vol. 8, *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999).
Colossians 2 – Joe Focht, *PhillyResources*
Through the Word, Colossians 2 – Kris Langham