

“A Poor Substitute” Colossians 2:16-23 Steve Harden 11/1/20

Welcome! Alright, Colossians chapter 2! We’re continuing our trek through the book of Colossians, one of my favorites, because it tells us so much about Jesus. Colossians 2. And this evening we’re going to read verses 16-23. Colossians 2:16-23.

“¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions,^[a] puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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— ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 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.”

This is the word of God.

Well, our text tonight addresses a disease and I know you’re tired of hearing about diseases but this one is important for us to know about. This disease’s effects are more far reaching even than covid-19 that we’ve been experiencing. In fact, they are even more devastating. And one of the interesting characteristics of this disease that we’re going to talk about is that this virus is very selective in who it infects. Those who are most at risk in this disease are church people. Exclusively! It just affects us and of these church people it seems like it affects most severely the ones who have the strongest longings to obey the Bible. Those who desperately want to please God in their behavior are often the most affected. This disease that we’re talking about tonight is extremely contagious and again, its effects are devastating. Churches are often divided over it. Lifetime relationships are severed because of it and joy is nowhere to be found when it is present. Well by now, you probably know the disease that I’m talking about. The disease is legalism.

Legalism in the church is devastating and it’s a huge issue in our subculture. Its tentacles reach almost every person in our subculture through temptation and most certainly every church to one degree or another. Now it’s insidious because it morphs and it changes in form probably as often and as convincingly as Mystique in the X-men and it’s really, really hard to see sometimes. And because of this deceptiveness, it often goes undiagnosed. It’s been several years now, but I remember sitting in my office with a broken man who was a pastor of a really large church, or really large compared to everything that I’ve known, probably 300-400 people, because he saw his church self-destructing before his eyes and he could do nothing about it. And my heart just went out to my friend. What was happening? Well there was a number in his congregation who felt that those in the congregation who were not following a specific, what they called “Biblical” diet, were sinning and should be church disciplined. This is a major church

in a major city. And the church self-destructed. It is no longer a church. All because of legalism. It's evil. And I believe every church and every Christian needs to be aware of its ugly tentacles, not only in the church, but in our own hearts, because we can easily be deceived.

This evening, I simply want to give you a description of and then the treatment for the disease of legalism. And so, first of all, the description of the disease. Let me suggest three distinctive elements of this disease. First of all, we find rules over relationships. Rules over relationships. Legalism involves having a preoccupation with obeying rules and regulations, the dos and don'ts of the faith, a strong desire to obey the rules while neglecting our relationship with Jesus. It's putting those two together. We must always guard ourselves against desiring a list of dos and don'ts more than relationship. Have you ever found yourself saying, 'Just give me a list! I don't want to think about it, just give me a list and I'll check the boxes to see how I'm doing in the Christian faith!' You see, it's moving over into legalism if it's no longer about a relationship with Jesus. Again, it's insidious because we know that God does desire for us to obey His commands, they are ten commands not ten suggestions and with just a cursory look at the Old Testament you will see that Old Testament Israel faced severe consequences for disobeying and neglecting God's commands. The issue lies in the question: why do we keep God's law? What is our motivation? Keeping God's law must never be an end in itself, or to itself, a means by which we seek to make ourselves right with God. Let me give you an example, just of Old Testament Israel and God's law and the ten commands, right? God gave His commands on Mount Sinai. What was the context of that? Well, it was a context of grace and relationship! What had He already just done? He redeemed Israel out of Egypt! He redeemed them out of Egypt; He rescued them. He put His power on display for the whole world to see. He acted on behalf of His chosen people, the descendants of Abraham. Everyone in the ancient world knew that Israel was God's own people! And it was after this magnificent display of mercy and grace, of rescue, and in the context of covenant love, that He gave them His law! He showed them what was important to Him and what this special relationship with Him required. Legalism is isolating the law of God from the God who gives the law. It's a separation of the two. The legalist seeks to obey the law devoid of a personal relationship with that God, so rules over relationship.

Now, the second way that legalism can sneak in is letter over spirit. Letter over spirit. A characteristic of legalism is the emphasis on keeping the letter of the law without regard to the spirit of the law. A rigid adherence to the rules without consideration of why that law was given, the heart and the purpose of the law. I love a story that R.C. Sproul tells that best illustrates this, I think. He describes a man who is a stickler for following the speed limits. He would not break the law because of speed limits. He rigidly obeys that law and would not break it for any reason, now that sounds pretty noble, right? He's keeping the law. He's doing what's right. But let's say he's on the interstate in the middle of winter and there's ice on the road. Our man knows that the minimum speed limit on the interstate is 40 miles per hour and so he pushes his car to the limit to reach 40 miles per hour because he knows that's the law! It's ridiculous, isn't it? He's putting himself and everyone else in danger to keep the letter of the law. Why was the law put into place? It was to keep motorists safe. So you see, the letter of the law as opposed to the spirit of the law is legalism. The Pharisees in Jesus' day hated Jesus because he violated the Sabbath. Do you remember what He did that caused so much hatred? He healed a man and he did it multiple times! He healed on the Sabbath and they hated Him for it because according to the letter of the

law you were not supposed to do anything like that. Do you see how they missed the reason behind the law? They did not see the spirit of the law that God provided a Sabbath for His people to rest, to illustrate to His people that God was the one that provided for them and that one day there was coming a day when they would have a Sabbath rest in heaven! It wasn't about that at all for the Pharisees; it was celebrating the letter of the law. The letter over the spirit.

Okay, so we have rules over relationship, letter over spirit, but the third characteristic of legalism is regulation over liberty. Regulation over liberty. When we establish our own regulations and treat them as if they were God's regulations, that's legalism. Okay? If we judge ourselves or judge others spirituality based on our own self-established rules or regulations, then we have missed the boat. I shared my personal example about my friend and his health-conscious congregation. Let me share another story written by Elisabeth Elliot. In her book, *The Liberty of Obedience*, she tells about a man's quandary about seeking to follow Jesus and he writes to a Christian school saying, "I am in earnest about forsaking the world and following Christ, but I am puzzled about worldly things. What is it I must forsake?" In reply they wrote, "Colored clothes for one thing, get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot, if you are sincere about obeying Christ, take warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against him who created us, to attempt to improve on his work." Now how's that for a list? She comments, "Does that answer sound absurd? It is the answer given in the most celebrated Christian schools of the second century." All the way back then, they were putting together rules and regulations that were extrabiblical. Then she asks the question, and this is where I'm going, "Is it possible that the rules that have been adopted by many twentieth century Christians will sound just as absurd to earnest followers of Christ a few years hence?" And that plagues me. It makes me think, what are those things that I feel are so important, are they indeed found in the word of God? Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for this type of legalism. He told them: 'You teach human traditions as if they were the word of God.' My friends, we are prohibited from binding the conscience of another by our own rule making, judging others as to the reality of their spiritual maturity, based on our own set of regulations and restrictions. That's what is happening with the Colossians here. They were in danger of embracing this legalism which forbids what God has not forbidden and commands what He has not commanded. Listen as I read verse 21 and following: ²¹"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" ²²(referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 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." You see, Christianity is not about setting up our own set of rules and then following them or trying to follow them and then calling it righteousness as if it were the righteousness of God. That's not what it's about. Rules over relationship. Letter over spirit. Restriction over liberty.

Now, the thread that binds all these things together is that there is an attempt to add our own effort to the finished work of Christ, to add our own contribution to our own righteousness, to somehow enhance our standing with God through our effort. To trust in anything other than Jesus and His finished work on the cross, suggests that we are trusting in our own righteousness and our own goodness. Oh my friends, we must abandon the idea that salvation has anything to do with our own righteousness giving us a right standing with God. The Colossians were being deceived into believing that their standing before God ultimately depended on what they had

achieved. It is possible to begin our life in Christ believing in Him alone for our salvation and then adding to that our own works! It is possible to fall into the trap of imagining that it is up to us to finish what He has started. Legalism, you see, is always an expression of self-reliance and self-assertion and self-sufficiency. That's the description, the three-part description, with the thread of our own righteousness running through it.

So, how do we treat this disease? How do we look at it in terms of our own selves? Well let me give you three suggestions, and this is good for us and good for our church, right? Number one, learn to be a good diagnostician of your soul. Learn to diagnose well. Ask yourself the question, am I pursuing a deeper, richer, fulfilling relationship with Jesus or am I predominantly trusting in my own morality or my own behavior for right standing with God? I can't do that for you, you can't do it for me. Am I pursuing Him and a relationship with Him more than I am following the rules? Especially my own rules. Second question, am I quick to pass judgment on another based on my self-imposed restrictions? Does my inner dialogue go something like this, "If they were as spiritual as me, they would act like me or do what I do or believe what I believe"? Does that go through your mind? That's legalism.

Number two, second suggestion, is seek to obey all things He commands and not add to His commands. We are not given liberty to make up our own list of subcultural taboos. We're just not given the liberty to take our own self-introduced dos and don'ts and then declare ourselves or somebody else righteous or sinful based on our own lists. If God does not speak to a subject in His word then I am at liberty to determine my response, but I must also give liberty to others to allow them to determine for themselves what they do, and there's a long list of those type of things. On any given subject, the rule of thumb that I try to follow, and I encourage you to follow, is to go as far as Scripture goes and no further. Go as far as Scripture goes and no further. We need to obey the commands of God, but we don't add to the commands of God because we go further than the commands of God. Do you see? Go as far as the word of God and no further.

My third suggestion for you: recognize that your standing with God is not dependent on your righteousness. Your standing with God is not dependent on your righteousness. It never has been, and it never will be. I've never been righteous. Ever. My redemption has never been about my righteousness. It has always been about Jesus' righteousness. Jesus' righteousness was imputed to me, given to me, and then I was declared as righteous. As I've said every week since beginning this study, the letter to the church of Colossae is about Jesus. His supremacy and sufficiency. He's over all and He's sufficient for all. In this context, Paul tells them that they are right to long to grow to spiritual maturity. Every Christian wants that; they long to grow in their relationship with God. But the rules that these false teachers were telling them to obey, the dietary rules, the keeping of days, the worshipping of angels, the ascetism, treating the body harshly, even experiencing visions, weren't getting them where they wanted to go. In verse 6 of this chapter, do you remember what he said? "As you have received Him, so walk in Him." When you came to Him, you recognized that your hope was not found within yourself, it was not found in getting any better or ceremonies or your own effort in any way at all. It was found that if you trusted Him, by faith, you trusted Him that His death was adequate payment for your sin and somehow through your unity with Him and your identity with Him, His death was counted as your death and then in like manner when He rose from the dead, His resurrection was a

promise that you too, because of your unity and identity with Him would rise again one day. See, the essence of being a Christian, my friend, is union with Jesus. It's identity with Jesus and clinging to that union and clinging to that identity. That is what provides spiritual maturity. Adding ceremony or depriving your body, anything that presents as self-made religion at best has no value and can be very harmful to yourself and to the body of Christ. Seeking to add anything to the finished work of Jesus is a very, very poor substitute indeed. Let's pray.

Father, this is kind of a hard one to hear, it's not positive. We see in ourselves the propensity to make it about rules. Lord, save us from that. We want to be people who are free, who love the liberty of grace that you have given to us, and who long to grow more like Jesus. Father, help us to seek spiritual maturity through being unified and identified with You, seeking You in all things. I pray this in the name of Jesus, Amen.