

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 1 of 12

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Today we begin a new section in our study of the book of Colossians. We are now shifting our attention to Colossians chapter two, verses 11 through 17. The focus of this part of our study will be on the problem of legalism, the sin of legalism, in the life of the individual Christian and in the life of the church.

This is a very relevant subject for the church in our time. Many individual Christians, and many churches, have fallen into the Satanic trap of legalism. Many individual Christians have been the victims of legalism. We need to understand what legalism is, according to Scripture. We need to understand why the Word of God tells us that it is a great sin. And, we need to understand how the Word of God tells us to safeguard ourselves and our churches against it.

### **Getting Our Bearings**

Now as we begin this next part of our study of Paul's epistle to the Colossians, I want to remind you of where we have been thus far in our study, where we are presently, and where we will be going in the weeks and months ahead, the Lord willing.

I have mentioned many times during this series of messages that the book of Colossians is structured in a rather unique way. The outline of the book is what I have called a "John 14:6 outline". And of course, in that great verse, our Lord Jesus declares, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man comes to the Father, except through Me." And those three great declarations, those three central

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Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 2 of 12

---

facts, about the Lord Jesus Christ also form the structure or the outline of the book of Colossians. In Colossians chapter one, Paul declares that Jesus Christ is the Way. In Colossians chapter two, Paul declares that Jesus Christ is the Truth. And in Colossians chapters three and four, Paul declares that Jesus Christ is the Life.

In chapter one, Paul *declares* the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is exactly what makes Jesus the only Way that mankind can come to God the Father. In chapter one, verses one through fourteen, Paul declares that Christ is preeminent in the Gospel. In chapter one, verses fifteen through seventeen, Paul declares that Christ is preeminent in the Creation. In chapter one, verses eighteen through twenty-three, Paul declares to us that Christ is preeminent in the Church. And in chapter one, verses twenty-four through twenty-nine, the end of the chapter, Paul declares that Christ is preeminent in genuine Christian ministry.

And then as we come to Colossians chapter two, the chapter we're focusing on at present, we find that Paul *defends* the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ. He tells us that Jesus Christ is the Truth, over against and in contrast to three specific threats or weapons that Satan uses in his attempts to undermine and overthrow individual Christians and entire churches and denominations.

In chapter two verses one through ten, the section we have just finished, Paul declares that *worldly philosophy* stands in opposition to the truth as it is found only in Jesus Christ. In chapter two verses eleven through seventeen, the section we begin considering today, Paul declares that *legalism* stands in opposition to the

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 3 of 12

---

truth as it is found only in Jesus Christ. And then in the remainder of chapter two, verses eighteen through twenty-three, Paul declares to us that *man-made doctrines* stand in opposition to the truth as it is found only in Jesus Christ.

So in chapter one Paul *declares* the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Way, and in chapter two he *defends* the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Truth. And after we have considered all of these things, the Lord willing, we will move on to chapters three and four, where the Apostle Paul *demonstrates* the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ as the focus of every aspect of the life of the individual Christian, the family, and the church, in all of the activities of our life in this world, and in all of our relationships with one another in this world.

### **Legalism: A Long-Standing Problem**

And so at this point in our series we have come to this very important subject of the great danger, and indeed the great sin, of legalism. This is a very, very relevant subject for the church in our time. And we also find that legalism is a long-standing problem in the church. As we look at the history of the church, we find that legalism has always been a problem. Legalism has always been one of the things that Satan has used most successfully in his efforts to draw individuals and entire churches away from the truth as it is found only in the all-sufficient Christ.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 4 of 12

---

As we look at the New Testament record, we find that legalism was a great problem and a great threat to the church, not only in Colosse but also in all of the other early churches. We see this all through the New Testament.

Our Lord Jesus Christ deals with the problem of Jewish legalism in the Gospel accounts. And then as we come to the record of the development and the spread of the early church in the book of Acts, we find the apostles and other early church leaders dealing with the sin of legalism from the very beginning.

The Apostle Paul confronts legalism in various forms in every one of his epistles. Legalism was a problem in Rome. Legalism was a problem in Corinth. Legalism was a great problem in Galatia. Legalism was a danger to the church at Ephesus, and the church at Philippi, and the church at Thessalonica. Paul speaks of the dangers of legalism as he writes to Timothy and Titus. And even as we read Paul's very personal letter to Philemon, we find the spectre of the problem of legalism hovering in the background as Paul encourages Philemon to receive his slave Onesimus back into his household as a newly-converted brother in Christ.

And then as we move further on in the New Testament, we find that one of the great themes of the book of Hebrews is the danger of professing Christians being drawn away from their steadfastness in Jesus Christ, and into legalism. We find James, Peter, John, and Jude confronting legalism in their epistles.

And even as we read the very last verses of the book of Revelation, we find a warning against adding anything to, or taking anything away from, the written

---

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 5 of 12

---

Word of God. And this warning is itself, to a very large degree, an admonition against the sin of legalism. That is how legalism gains its foothold – when we begin adding things to the Word of God.

And so we find warnings and admonitions against the sin of legalism all through the New Testament. And then as we move forward in the history of the Christian church, we come to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and we find the Protestant Reformers engaged in a great conflict against legalism. Legalism was, and is, one of the great sins of Roman Catholicism. It is one of the things that marks out Roman Catholicism as a false religion.

And in the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the sin of legalism in its various forms still plagues the church, and still plagues individual Christians. I'm going to discuss some of the forms that legalism takes in today's church, in our next message.

And so with all of this background in mind, we come to these verses in the middle of Colossians chapter two, where the Apostle Paul addresses this sin of legalism, one of Satan's triple threats to the Christian and the church.

As we begin this part of our study, let me read those verses for you. And if you are able to do so, I trust you will open your own copy of God's Word and follow along. Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eleven. The Apostle Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, makes a series of tremendous declarations. He says, verse eleven:

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Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 6 of 12

---

In Him [that is, in Jesus Christ] you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it [that is, in the cross]. So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

### **What Is Legalism?**

Now as we begin studying this section, we need to ask a very basic question: What is legalism, and why is legalism a sin? So let me now answer that two-part question for you. Now, first of all, legalism is not a word that you will find in the Bible. But it is a term that describes something that the Bible clearly warns against. We need to take note of the construction of the word. Legalism literally means "law-ism". Now what is an "ism" when we are speaking about theology? An "ism" is a system of doctrine. So to begin with, legalism is quite literally *a system of doctrine based on laws or regulations*.

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Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 7 of 12

---

But that is only the beginning. In Scripture we find that there are *two kinds of legalism*. One type of legalism that the Bible speaks against is legalism regarding the critical question of how a person is made right with God. The other type of legalism that the Bible condemns is legalism regarding the way in which Christians are to live their lives after they are saved. To put it even more directly, the two kinds of legalism that the Bible condemns are legalism regarding salvation, and legalism regarding sanctification.

### **Why Is Legalism a Sin?**

And this brings us to the second part of our question: Why is legalism a sin? Well, here is the answer.

*Legalism regarding salvation is a sin because it is rooted in the false teaching that the finished work of Jesus Christ is not sufficient for salvation.* Legalism regarding salvation says that you need Christ plus something else, or Christ plus someone else, in order to be saved. And everywhere we turn in Scripture, Old Testament or New Testament, we find that the Bible condemns that kind of legalism.

That kind of legalism is as old as Cain and Abel. Cain tried to please God by the fruits of his own labor, and God rejected him. Abel came to God in the prescribed manner, with the blood sacrifice for sin, the sacrifice that prefigured and looked forward to the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. And God accepted Abel, as the writer to the Hebrews tells us, on the basis of faith. That is how Abel was justified in God's sight.

---

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 8 of 12

---

The Old Testament saints, Jew or Gentile, were not saved by keeping the law or fulfilling a ritual. They were saved by faith in Jesus Christ. New Testament saints, Jew or Gentile, are not saved by keeping the law. We are saved by that same faith in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament saints looked forward to, and placed their faith in, the Redeemer who would come, and we New Testament saints look backward to, and we place our faith in, the Redeemer who has come. But it is all by faith. The Apostle Paul gives us a great discourse on these points in Romans chapter ten, and he sums it up by saying that "Christ is the end of the law [literally, the termination of the law] for righteousness to everyone who believes."

*Legalism regarding the Christian life is a sin because it is rooted in the false teaching that the Word of God and the indwelling Holy Spirit are not sufficient and authoritative guides for sanctified living.* Legalism regarding sanctification says that you need a list of man-made rules and regulations that you will not find in the pages of Scripture. In other words, legalism regarding sanctification says that the Bible is not enough. And beyond that, legalism regarding sanctification says that the Holy Spirit is not enough. You need a church leadership, or someone else, to make up that list of extra-Biblical regulations, and you need a church leadership, or someone else, to enforce that list of extra-Biblical regulations.

And often individual Christians make up their own extra-Biblical list of regulations, and they decide that anyone who does not live by their particular list is somehow spiritually inferior, or perhaps not a Christian at all. But we have already seen, in Colossians chapter one, that there are no spiritual elites in the

---



Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 9 of 12

---

church of Jesus Christ. There is a difference between spiritual elitism and spiritual maturity. The Bible encourages and commands us to grow toward maturity in Christ. But the Bible condemns spiritual elitism, which is so often the companion of legalism. In Colossians chapter one, Paul says that the focus of his ministry was “warning every man” – no exceptions – “and teaching every man” – no exceptions – “that we may present every man” – no exceptions – “perfect [or complete, or mature] in Christ Jesus.”

And even the great Apostle Paul himself said this to the believers at Philippi. He said, “Not that I have already attained or am already perfect” – not that I myself have reached the end goal – “but I [myself] press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule [that is, the same standard], let us be of the same mind.” (Philippians 3:15-16)

Paul is making the point that Scripture is the rule and the standard. Christ is the rule and the standard. Let no one set up any other.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 10 of 12

---

## **What is the Bible's Answer to Legalism?**

Now I'm going to have more to say by way of introduction to this important subject of legalism in our next message. But before we conclude this first message on the subject, I want to state for you six propositions that we find in this section of Colossians chapter two that deals with legalism. What is the danger of legalism? What is the answer or the antidote to legalism? That is Paul's focus here in verses eleven through seventeen, and I want to place before you six propositional statements that we find in the text:

Proposition number one is in verses eleven and twelve: *The Christian's saving faith is in the working of God in Christ, not the working of man for his own merit.* "In [Christ] you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands," Paul says, "by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

Proposition number two is in verses thirteen and fourteen: *The requirements of the law have been satisfied, once for all, in Christ.* "And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."

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Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 11 of 12

---

Proposition number three is also in verses thirteen and fourteen: *Legalism has to do with death; the Christian has been made alive in Christ.*

Proposition number four is in verse fifteen: *Legalism is of the enemy, it is of Satan, who has been defeated at the cross, but who is still active awaiting his final judgment.* Paul says that at the cross, our Lord Jesus “disarmed [or set aside] principalities and powers [the powers of Satan and his legions], He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in [the cross].”

Proposition number five is found in verse sixteen: *No one has the right to place extra-Biblical, legalistic requirements upon any Christian.* “So,” Paul says, because these things are true, “let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths.”

And finally, proposition number six is found in verse seventeen: *The law was a shadow that has passed away, but Christ is the substance, Christ is the fulfillment – once for all, and forever.*” Food or drink, festivals or new moons or sabbaths, “are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”

## **Our Next Message**

Well dear friends, we’re going to continue to delve into this subject of legalism in our next message. I think that it is probably safe to say that every Christian has been affected by legalism in some way or another at some point. For some Christians, and for some churches, it is a great problem and a great bondage.

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Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Sin of Legalism" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/12/2011

Page 12 of 12

---

I trust that as we explore this subject further in the messages to come, that if you are under some kind of legalistic bondage, you will be freed from it. And I also pray that if anyone listening to this message and the ones to come has been legalistic toward others, that you will see just how wrong the Bible says this is, and that you will come to understand that there is but one Gospel centered in the all-sufficiency of Christ, and one standard for Christian living centered on the authority of the Word of God, and of God the Holy Spirit.

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