

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "21st Century Judaizers" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/26/2011

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## **The Passage Before Us**

In this part of our series in Colossians chapter two, we are focusing on the snare and the sin of legalism. I want to call your attention once more to the section of Colossians chapter two in which the Apostle Paul exposes and condemns this evil.

If you are able to do so as you are listening, I trust that you will open your own copy of God's Word as we look at this passage, and also at two other passages today that give us some very vital teaching against legalism that is very relevant for the church in our time. So we begin in Colossians chapter two, at verse eleven. The Apostle Paul writes this:

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

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sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

## **Two Categories of Legalism**

As we begin today, let me briefly review what we have discussed thus far on this subject of legalism, in order to set the stage for the part of our study that we are going to now take up. Most of what we have covered so far has been by way of introduction.

We have seen that the church at Colosse, like the church in our own time, was threatened by two kinds or categories of legalism. First, there were those who wanted to reintroduce elements of the Jewish law, especially the ceremonial law. They insisted that you needed to keep that ceremonial law, in addition to believing on Christ, in order to be saved. And secondly, there were those who wanted to introduce man-made regulations into the church. They wanted to introduce these things either in place of, or in addition to, the moral law of God.

## **Three Aspects of God's Law**

We have also taken note of the fact that there are three aspects to the law of God as we find it in the Old Testament.

The first aspect is the moral law of God. We have the essence of that law stated for us in the Ten Commandments. But we saw that this law is not merely a set of do's and don'ts. It is a law that is rooted and grounded in the holiness of God. It is a law

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that deals with matters of the heart of man. And, it is a law for all men, in all times and in all situations. It is our violation of this law that condemns every human being before the judgment seat of God. But the believer in Christ has been freed from this condemnation. For us, the moral law of God is no longer the burden of our condemnation. The moral law of God is the expression of that which the new man, made alive in Christ and indwelled by the Holy Spirit, desires to do out of love and gratitude for what Christ has done for us. As we read in First John chapter five, beginning at verse two: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:2-3). God's commandments are no longer a burden, but a blessing, to the believer in Christ.

We saw that the second aspect of the law of God in the Old Testament was the civil law that God gave to the ancient nation of Israel. This law had its foundations in the moral law of God, just as the laws of all nations must have their foundations in the moral law of God if they are to honor Him. But we have seen that the civil law of ancient Israel applied only to the theocracy of ancient Israel, in that land and in that time. It does not apply to any nation existing today.

And then we saw that the third aspect of the law of God in the Old Testament was the ceremonial law, which included circumcision and the sacrificial system. The Old Testament sacrificial system was designed to provide temporary atonement for transgressions of the moral law of God. But the book of Hebrews tells us that this entire system pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ as the One who would make the

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final sacrifice for sins, the sacrifice of His own blood, once and for all. And so Hebrews tells us that this part of the law, like the civil law of ancient Israel, was also temporary. It was temporary because it would all be fulfilled, and it would no longer be necessary, because of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Understanding Legalism in Today's Church**

Now, I have said several times in these introductory messages that legalism is a great problem in the church in our time. And I've also said that in order for us to understand why and how this is true, we need to have two things clearly in mind.

First, we need to understand what I have just explained, and that is the nature of the law of God. We need to understand that in the Old Testament there are three parts to the law of God, and we need to understand that only one of them – the moral law of God – is still in force for mankind today.

And then secondly, with this understanding of the nature of the law of God clearly in our minds, we need to survey the position of the church in our time. We need to identify the major movements that are exerting a legalistic influence on the church in our time. And, of course, we need to know how to answer these legalists.

And so that is where we begin today. What are the major movements that are exerting a legalistic influence on the church in our time? How can we answer these legalists? We find that in our day, we face the same two kinds of legalism that the Colossian believers were facing nearly two thousand years ago. First of all, there

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are those who want to place believers back under elements of Judaism. And secondly, there are those who want to establish some other set of man-made, extra-Biblical rules and regulations, and insist that believers live by them.

### **The Messianics: Modern-Day Judaizers**

So now I want to take up the first category. There are people in the church today who want to bring back elements of Judaism. As we shall see, they do this in various ways. And within this category I want to mention three groups of people specifically. Some of them want to bring elements of the Jewish ceremonial law directly into the church *in our time*. Others among this category of people see a *future* re-institution of the Jewish ceremonial system.

First, let me mention the Messianic Jews. This is a group that has gained increasing prominence over roughly the last forty years. Who are the Messianic Jews, and what do they believe, and what is the problem with their teachings?

The Messianic Jews do embrace some elements of orthodox, Biblical Christianity. For example, they believe in the Trinity. They believe that Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Trinity and the Messiah. They believe that the New Testament is the inspired Word of God. They make these orthodox statements.

But the Messianic Jews deviate from authentic Biblical Christianity in this essential respect: Most Messianic Jews embrace what is called "One Law Theology." The main teaching of One Law Theology is that both Jews and Gentiles

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are required to observe the entirety of the Old Testament law. These Messianic Jews define sin as any violation of any part of the first five books of the Old Testament. They insist that this is what Jesus taught in the four Gospels. They insist that this is what the apostles, including the Apostle Paul, also taught. They believe that the Apostle Paul remained a Jewish Pharisee all of his life. They believe that he personally kept all of the Old Testament regulations and rituals.

Now, what are some of the practical consequences of Messianic Jewish theology, this One Law theology? There are a great many truly destructive consequences, but because of the limits of time I will only name a few. Many Messianic Jews teach, for example, that a Gentile believer in Christ must be circumcised in order to be a member of the covenant. They also observe the Old Testament Jewish feast days. They hold their worship services on Friday evenings or Saturday mornings rather than on Sunday, the New Testament Lord's Day. And in their teachings they avoid the use of the term, "the cross" because they consider it to be a Gentile term, and they emphasize the use of Hebrew terminology in their teachings.

### **What Say the Scriptures?**

Dear friends, what must we say about all of this? Well, first of all, we must base what we say on the authority of Scripture alone. And on that basis, we must say that the teachings of Messianic Judaism are contrary to the Word of God.

What the Messianic Jews are teaching is the same falsehood that the early church faced at the very beginning. In the fifteenth chapter of Acts, we find the apostles

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and other church leaders coming together to consider this question: Must a person keep the Jewish ceremonial law, in addition to believing on Christ, in order to be saved? Here is what we find, in Acts chapter fifteen, beginning at verse one:

And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the Gospel and

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believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them [the Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us [believing Jews], and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.” (Acts 15:1-11)

Dear friends, what do we find in this passage? We find a direct and systematic contradiction and refutation of the teachings of Messianic Judaism in our time.

Clearly, the apostles did not teach that either a Jew or a Gentile must keep the ceremonial law in order to be saved. Paul and Barnabas were absolutely firm in their opposition to the Pharisees who wanted to bring the Jewish ceremonial law into the church. How can Messianic Jews possibly teach that Paul remained a legalistic Pharisee? In all truth, they cannot.

Notice also what Peter says: It is the indwelling Spirit of God who saves, not a man’s keeping of the ceremonial law. And so, Peter, a Jew says this: Why do you Jewish legalizers test God? You are calling into question that which God has already settled and determined. How do we know that? We know it by no less of an indication than this: that God has given the gift of the Holy Spirit to both Jew and Gentile alike. “God, who knows the heart,” Peter says, “acknowledged them” – these Gentile believers – “by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us

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[Jews], and [God] made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith [as well].”

So why, Peter says, why in the world do you want to deny what God has done in Christ, by putting a yoke of bondage on the necks of these people that neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? Why do you want to put them back under the ceremonial system? It is through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ by faith that we Jews shall be saved in the same manner as they, the Gentiles.

Dear friends, nothing could be a more clear and direct condemnation of the teachings of the Messianic Jews in our time, than this account in Acts chapter fifteen. The fact is that the Messianic Jews are putting up, once again, the middle wall of separation between Jew and Gentile. Paul tells us in Ephesians chapter two that Christ has broken down that wall forever. Here is what we read, in Ephesians chapter two, beginning at verse eight:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Therefore [because your salvation is absolutely and completely by grace through faith in Christ] remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh — who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands — that at that time you were

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without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.

And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the [New Testament] apostles and [Old Testament] prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:8-22)

Messianic Judaism denies the peace that Christ has brought, by re-imposing the ceremonial system that was done away with in Christ. Messianic Judaism

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effectively denies that Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners in the eyes of God. Messianic Judaism denies that there is, as Paul tells us later in Ephesians two, only one household of God, one building, one holy temple for the Lord, one dwelling place for God the Holy Spirit, one body in Christ.

### **How Are Christians Deceived?**

Now despite all of this, today many Evangelicals accept Messianic Jews as brethren in Christ. Perhaps you are wondering why anyone would want to do this.

Well, let me tell you the reason: Most people in the Evangelical church are not hearing the things that you have heard in today's message. They are not being taught that Christ is the end of the ceremonial law, the termination of the ceremonial law, for everyone who believes in Him.

Most people in Evangelical churches today have very little if any understanding of the meaning and the significance of the Old Testament ceremonial law, and the relationship of Christ to that law, and the relationship – or I should say, non-relationship – of the New Testament believer in Christ to that ceremonial law. The vast majority of Evangelical churches are not teaching this very vital aspect of Bible doctrine today.

And what is the result? The result is that most Evangelicals do not understand the dangers of Messianic Judaism. Many people in Evangelical churches today accept people who teach all kinds of false gospels. They accept these people without a

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second thought because they don't know enough of Bible doctrine to exercise Biblical discernment. And so they allow these people to bring their false doctrines into the life and thinking of the church, and the results are disastrous. You cannot reject that which is false unless you clearly understand that which is true, and unless you clearly understand that there is an eternal life-and-death difference between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. And this is a great condemnation of many Evangelical churches in our time. They are not doing this. They are not teaching this.

### **Standing Against Legalistic Deception**

Dear friend, if you understand what the Bible says about these things, if you carefully evaluate where these people stand against Scripture, you will soon realize that Messianic Judaism is in fact no different from the Jewish legalism that threatened the early church. Messianic Jews are in fact adding law-keeping to Christ, just as the Jewish legalizers did at Colosse and Galatia in the time of the Apostle Paul.

The Apostle Paul in the book of Galatians condemns this as "another gospel, which is not another." He says that anyone who teaches such things is justifiably under God's curse. This is serious business, dear friends. True believers in Christ must stand against this, just as Paul admonished the Galatian believers, and the Colossian believers, to stand against it. Legalism is one of Satan's triple threats to the church. And this is one of the forms in which it comes into the church.

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Remember what Paul says to the Christians at Colosse, to Jew and Gentile alike. He says, do not be trapped into that yoke of bondage again. Don't let anyone bring that yoke of bondage into the church. "You," Paul declares to us, "being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He [God the Father] has made alive together with Him [with Christ], having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of [ceremonial] 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" (Colossians 2:13-14).

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