



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Watch Out for Legalism

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COLOSSIANS 2:11-15

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"The reason that Christianity is the best friend of Government is because Christianity is the only religion that changes the heart." Those words were not spoken by a pastor, but by President Thomas Jefferson. Though the maturity of his own faith has been debated, even Jefferson realized that there is something uniquely powerful about the message of Jesus – something that our government desperately needs.

INTRODUCTION

As we continue our study through Paul's letter to the Colossians, we find ourselves in a section where he warns of the danger of substituting anything else for the blessings that are ours through Jesus Christ. In our last study, we discussed the need to watch out for ungodly philosophies. Today we come to a second warning – that of *legalism*.

Legalism is a word that describes religion based on human effort and rule-keeping. There is nothing wrong with rules and laws – many of them are necessary. (Some of you who are reading this are lawmakers, so you probably agree.) The Bible, especially the Old Testament but also to some degree the New Testament, contains many rules and laws that are from God, and these laws are "holy, righteous, and good" (Romans 7:12). And, of course, God does want us to do good works (Ephesians 2:10). However, throughout the New Testament, we see repeated warnings about thinking that our salvation is based on keeping God's rules. One strong warning is found here in Colossians 2:11-15.

WE DO NOT BASE OUR SALVATION ON RULES, BECAUSE THROUGH CHRIST:

1. WE HAVE A NEW HEART. (11-12)

11 In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; 12 having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

A bit of Bible history is helpful for understanding these verses. The first Christ-followers faced a big challenge.

Almost all of them were Jewish and as such were devoted to trying to follow the Old Testament laws. Circumcision was chief among these laws, for it was the sign of God's covenant with Israel (Genesis 17:9-14). Now, thousands of uncircumcised Gentiles (non-Jews) who knew nothing of the law were coming to believe in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.¹

A disagreement ensued among the Jewish Christ-followers concerning how to handle these Gentile believers. Some reasoned that any Gentiles who wanted to follow Jesus must convert to Judaism. They would need to be circumcised and meticulously attempt to obey the hundreds of dietary, ceremonial, and moral laws found in the Old Testament, as well as the many hundreds of additional laws that had been passed down by rabbinic tradition. This was understandably not a popular choice for most Gentiles.

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- THOMAS JEFFERSON

Apostolic leaders, however, beginning with Peter and Paul, came to a new understanding that brought clarity to the situation. They realized that God had, through Christ's death, provided a way for both Jews and Gentiles to be saved apart from the law (Romans 3:28, Ephesians 2:11-16, Galatians 2:16). Christ fulfilled the law on our behalf (Matthew 5:17)! Colossians 2:11 shows that when we trust in Christ, God regards us as if we had actually kept the law. One application of this is seen here. God considers us circumcised inwardly in our hearts even though we may not be outwardly on our bodies.² This is incredibly good news! We can now approach God on the basis of His grace rather than our works.

God's work in us doesn't stop there. He then gives us a desire to obey Him and new ability to do so. He frees us from our controlling sinful nature, called here in Colossians 2:11 "the body of the flesh" (see also Romans 6:6). His Holy Spirit indwells us and empowers us to do His will (John 14:15, Galatians 5:6-16). As God helps us to love Him and

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY/FELLOWSHIP MEETINGS

LEGISLATORS: WEDNESDAYS @ 8:00 AM, ASSEMBLY RULES COMMITTEE ROOM
STAFF/LOBBYISTS/OTHERS: THURSDAYS @ 12:00 NOON, CAPITOL ROOM 125

California

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love others, we can practice the spirit of the law.³ It really is as described in 2 Corinthians 5:17 “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” Verse 12 shows that this profound life change is best pictured by baptism.

2. OUR DEBT IS PAID (13-14)

13 When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, 14 having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Did you know that you owe God a debt? Verse 14 shows that all mankind has figuratively written a “certificate of debt” (what we might call an I.O.U.) to God. This certificate consists of “decrees” (*dogmasin*, from which we get our word dogma) that are “against us,” which is a reference to the Mosaic Law (also in Ephesians 2:15). “The Jews had contracted to obey the law, and in their case the penalty for breach of this contract was death (Deuteronomy 27:14-26; 30:15-20). Paul assumes that the Gentiles were committed, through their consciences, to a similar obligation, to the moral law in as much as they understood it” (Romans 2:14-15).⁴ Unfortunately, no one but Jesus has ever kept the entire law. We are therefore all unable to pay our debt to God and are deserving of His judgment. We may now try to earn His favor by being good and following rules, but our best efforts will always fall hopelessly short (Romans 3).

Verse 14 boldly declares the good news that when Jesus died it was as if our “certificate of debt” was “nailed to the cross” with Him. When the Romans crucified someone, they would hang an inscription over their head indicating the charge by which they are condemned. Over Christ’s head, they hung a sign that read, “King of the Jews.” From God’s perspective, your debt to Him was also nailed there. Jesus died to pay the penalty of the law that you and I could never pay.

This verse also says that through Christ’s sacrifice, our debt is “canceled.” The strict meaning of this Greek term is ‘wiped out’ or ‘wiped away.’ In secular literature this term was used of blotting out writing or of abolishing a law.⁵ It is as if our sins were written on a white board and God erased

them forever! (See *Acts 3:19*). The famous old hymn called “It is Well With My Soul” by Horatio Spafford (1873) celebrates this wonderful truth:

*“My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!”*

3. OUR ACCUSERS ARE CONQUERED (15)

15 When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

This verse alludes to a practice that was common in the first century. At that time, the Roman Empire ruled much of the world. Whenever their powerful military conquered a new region they celebrated this victory with a massive parade through the streets of Rome. The conquering general would ride in his chariot at the front of the procession, followed by his troops, who were then followed by the spoils of battle: vanquished kings, officers, soldiers, and treasures.

In a similar way, God has achieved absolute victory for us through Christ. We dare not forget this. The devil is constantly accusing us of not measuring up. If we are not careful, we can begin to listen to his lies and believe that we must do more or work harder to somehow earn our salvation. Colossians 2:15 reminds us that God conquered the devil and demonic powers through Christ’ death on a cross for us. He has “disarmed” (literally *stripped*) them of their weaponry and strength forever. Because of Christ’s gracious sacrifice for our sins, we can go forward now and enjoy our relationship with the Lord and serve Him confidently and joyfully.

¹ Note that the Hebrew (Jewish language) term Messiah is translated as “Kristos” (Christ) in Greek (Gentile language).

² God had always regarded Jewish circumcision as symbolic of an internal change of heart. See Deut 10:16, 30:6; Jer 4:4, 9:26; Acts 7:51; Romans 2:27-29.

³ Matthew 22:37-40, Romans 13:8-10, Galatians 5:14; James 2:8; Romans 3:31; Galatians 3:25

⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 44, Colossians, Philemon* (Thomas Nelson, 1982), 125

⁵ Curtis Vaughan, *Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1978), 201.