



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Watch Out for Legalism – Part 2

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COLOSSIANS 2:16-17

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This is certainly a busy time in the Capitol – with committees, debates, protests, marches, “Tea Parties” and (outside the building, of course) tireless fund raising and campaigning. May the Lord help us to remember and believe that He matters most and will guide and direct us when we seek Him wholeheartedly and often. No matter how busy it gets, let’s keep looking up to Him!

INTRODUCTION:

Last week, we discussed Colossians 2:11-15 which was a passage about religious *legalism*. Today, we continue this theme in Colossians 2:16-17. We have spoken a lot about this topic, but that is only fitting because it is a constant theme of the New Testament and it still a snare for many people today.

Colossians 2:16-17 “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— things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”

As one commentator explains, “Legalism is the religion of human achievement. It argues that spirituality is based on Christ plus human works. It makes conformity to manmade rules the measure of spirituality. Believers, however, are complete in Christ, who has provided complete salvation, forgiveness, and victory. *Therefore*, Paul tells the Colossians, *let no one act as your judge*. Do not sacrifice your freedom in Christ for a set of manmade rules. Inasmuch as “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4), to become entangled again in a legalistic system is pointless and harmful. Paul reminded the Galatians, who were also beguiled by legalism, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).”¹

In Colossians 2:16-17 we are warned to not feel constrained by the Old Testament ceremonial laws. “Food or drink” is at least in part a reference to Jewish dietary restrictions (See Leviticus 11). “Festivals” refers most likely to annual Jewish celebrations, such as Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles, and

so on. (See Leviticus 23). “New Moon” describes the first day of the month, which was a time for special sacrifices (Numbers 10:10). “Sabbath day” was the setting aside of the seventh day of the week as a day of rest with strict rules of conduct. Though God originally ordained each of these laws for the Israelites, and they are good (Romans 7:12), they were really but “a mere shadow of what is to come,” i.e. of Christ. Each of these rituals and traditions found their fulfillment in Jesus. To embrace the law now is therefore to go backwards (see also Galatians 4:10-11).

Why does it matter? It matters because religious legalism is dangerous, for a variety of reasons.

FOUR DANGERS OF LEGALISM:

1. Legalism presents a false salvation.

Legalism suggests that one is saved through good works, but in truth we are only saved by trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. *Galatians 2:21 “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”*

2. Legalism cannot restrain the flesh.

The legalist is focused on specific examples of outward conduct, but sin originates internally. But even an unsaved person can be outwardly moral. God wants to deal with our heart first. *Matthew 23:25-26 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.”*

3. Legalism leads to pride and judgmentalism.

The legalist can’t help but look down on those who have no interest in his list of rules. Ironically, the legalist, though concerned about morality, eventually ends up falling into some of the greatest sins – pride, judgmentalism, and hypocrisy. Consider this powerful story from Jesus Himself:

And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt. Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY/FELLOWSHIP MEETINGS

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

Watch Out for Legalism – Part 2

this tax collector. 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-17)

4. Legalism burdens those around us.

Jesus warned the legalists of His day, "*Woe to you ... For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear...*" (Luke 11:46).

Consider this story of Hans the tailor:

"Because of his reputation, an influential entrepreneur visiting the city ordered a tailor-made suit. But when he came to pick up his suit, the customer found that one sleeve twisted that way and the other this way; one shoulder bulged out and the other caved in. He pulled and managed to make his body fit. As he returned home on the bus, another passenger noticed his odd appearance and asked if Hans the tailor had made the suit. Receiving an affirmative reply, the man remarked, "Amazing! I knew that Hans was a good tailor, but I had no idea he could make a suit fit so perfectly someone as deformed as you." Often that is just what we do in the church. We get some idea of what the Christian faith should look like: then we push and shove people in to the most grotesque configurations until they fit wonderfully! That is death. It is a wooden legalism which destroys the soul."²

MODERN DAY LEGALISTS:

Despite these dangers, some who call themselves Christians today seem to prefer to operate on a legalistic basis. They believe they are more mature than others because they live according to their personal list of non-biblical rules and they look down on those who do not follow them. Today's legalism manifests itself in various forms, some of which might not commonly be considered legalism.

- **The person who works for their salvation.**

This person believes that they are going to heaven because "they are a good person," though in truth no one will be saved by their own efforts. Yes, God wants

us to do good works, but even those works should be done in humble gratitude for his saving grace. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

- **The person who feels they are right with God because they are moral (or politically conservative, or politically liberal).**

I am saddened that so many people in the Capitol think they are fine with God because they claim to keep the Ten Commandments (though in truth, no one does – Matthew 5), or because they vote pro-life, or because they care for the poor. These may be good things, but they are not nearly enough to forgive our many sins. The one and only remedy for our sin is the atonement that came through Jesus Christ (Romans 3).

- **The person who feels superior to others because of what they do or what they know.**

Some churchgoers even boast of the brilliant theologians they have read and can quote, as if knowing the right authors or owning their books somehow rubs off on you to make you more holy. One who is truly saved knows that their salvation is a gift of God and that they are no more deserving of it than anyone else. As has often been said, we who preach the gospel are no better than a beggar who tells another beggar where to find free bread. All who hope to receive anything from God must come empty handed.

- **The person who feels too sinful to turn to God.**

This one often surprises people, but someone who says "I will come to God when I get my life in order" unknowingly reveals their own brand of legalism and pride, for they apparently believe they must achieve a certain standard of self-righteousness in order to yield to God. The truly repentant know that they can do nothing to earn so great a salvation, and so they gratefully and joyfully receive it.

The truth is, there is a little "Pharisee" in most of us. May the Lord help us to avoid the trap that so ensnared them.

¹MacArthur, J. (1996, c1992). *Colossians* (117). Chicago: Moody Press.

²Richard J. Foster, www.sermonillustrations.com.