

## BOB HALLMAN - THE EPIC LIFE

### “The Illusion Of Legalism”

Colossians 2:16-23

2004

#### Introduction

The believers in Colosse were being influenced by false teachers who were promoting a mixture of doctrinal error, humanistic philosophy, pagan superstitions, and Eastern Mysticism --- sounds like life on Kauai.

In yesterday's paper I counted no less than 5 articles that were promoting the very same 3 false teachings that Paul addressed in the book of Colossians:

1. Legalism: The strict adherence to certain laws, rules, or standards with the objective of suppressing the flesh and gaining a right standing with God.
2. Mysticism: The pursuit of spiritual knowledge and insight that transcends ordinary understanding by means of contemplation, meditation or some extra-biblical practice.
3. Asceticism: The practice of extreme self-denial or self-mortification for the purpose of spiritual purification and spiritual elevation.

“The focus of each of these practices is trusting in the religious activity rather than trusting in God. It is putting our confidence in a practice rather than in a Person. And without fail this will lead us to love the practice more than the Person.”

Jack Deer, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*, p. 151

#### I Paul's Warning Concerning False Teachers

A. Do not let anyone **judge** you by: [Verse 16a]

**Judge** = Krino = “To try, condemn, punish”

Why? Because through the all-sufficient work of Christ on the cross, God has:

1. Given us fullness in Christ
2. Made us alive with Christ
3. Forgiven us all our sins
4. Canceled the written code that was against us and stood opposed to us
5. Conquered Satan's forces and triumphed over them by the cross.

Judging others by external behavior has been one of the consistent pitfalls of the church. This is generally referred to as legalism.

At its core, legalism is the effort to pursue holiness by self-effort, instead of accepting the holiness that God freely gives us in Christ.

Philip Yancey writes, "legalism contains enough inherent dangers to elicit the strongest warnings in the Bible. NO other issue -- not pornography, adultery, violence or the things which most rankle Christians today -- inspired more fiery outburst from Jesus.”

### 1. What you eat or drink

Dietary restrictions in the Old Testament were designed to:

1. Make the nation of Israel a peculiar and holy people, distinct from all other nations.
2. Protect the Israelites from “yet-to-be-discovered” health risks.
3. Foreshadow the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah.

The problem was that people were observing these dietary restrictions without connecting their spiritual significance or their ultimate purpose in pointing to Christ. We are guilty of the same thing today ...

### **Illustration**

Catholics who forgo eating meat on Fridays.

Jews who keep a kosher kitchen, but don't even know why.

Protestants who give up some pleasure, usually some favorite food or activity, during Lent.

Various Eastern religions that require a vegan diet.

And while they have the appearance of spirituality and religious devotion, they are external to the heart and therefore have little real value in producing a godly life.

Mark 7:18-19 “Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")”

1 Cor 8:8 “... food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”

B. Do not let anyone judge you with regard to: [Verse 16b]

#### 1. A religious **festival**

Besides the daily temple worship, the law prescribed a number of annual festivals including:

1. Passover
2. Pentecost
3. Feast of Trumpets (or new Moon)
4. Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)
5. Feast of Booths

Rom 14:5-6 “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord.”

## 2. A New Moon celebration

During the New Moon celebration (Num 10:10; 28:11-14):

- a. All work was suspended (Amos 8:5)
- b. The temple was opened for worship (Isa 66:23)
- c. The prophets and priests read from the law
- d. The trumpets were blown and sacrifices were made

It was a joyous time of celebration and worship of God. But even a celebration meant to honor God can become empty ritual.

Isa 1:13-14 “Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations -- I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.”

## 3. A Sabbath day

**Sabbaton** = “Sabbath rest from secular work” [Weekly]

The Sabbath commemorates God's creation rest and was later instituted by God on Mount Sinai as a mandated day of rest from man's labor.

Ex 20:8-10 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.”

But in Hebrews 4:9-11, the Sabbath is presented not as a day to be legalistically observed, but as foreshadowing of the spiritual “rest” of the believer who has “rested [ceased] from his works” and trusted in Christ.

- a. These are a **shadow** of the things that were to come [Verse 17]
- b. The **reality** is found in Christ  
**Reality** = Soma = “The body or substance”  
 Heb 10:1 “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming -- not the realities themselves.”

What is Paul saying? Simply this:

The Old Testament law had certain requirements that foreshadowed or prepared the people of God to recognize and receive the Messiah.

### **Illustration:** Pictures of Becky

When I was away at seminary before Becky and I were married:

1. I had a picture of her on my desk.
2. I wrote her a type written letter every day.
3. I spoke to her on the phone at least once a week.

But imagine how ridiculous it would have been if, once Becky I were married, I continued with my routine and in the process ignored

Becky by placing higher priority on the things that symbolized my connection to Becky over against Becky herself!

That is what Paul saying: If you continue to emphasize the shadow of Christ after the reality has come, it's just as absurd as me ignoring the real Becky in preference of looking at her picture.

So Paul isn't saying that the OT laws or festivals were *bad*, simply that they were a shadow of what was to come. And now that the reality or substance - Jesus Christ - has come, we no longer need the shadow, whether it be the OT dietary restrictions, the feasts, the sacrifices, physical circumcision, or even the Sabbath day.

Gal 3:24-25 "... the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law."

C. Do not let anyone who: [Verse 18a]

1. Delights in **false** humility

**Humility** = "Self abasement"

**Illustration:** The New Age movement

At the heart of the New Age Movement is the effort to become "one with God and the universe." And the means to this oneness is to move beyond yourself and to achieve a state of "nothingness." But to move beyond yourself, you must focus on certain things; like your diet, or breathing exercises, or certain stretching routines, all of which require a great deal of self-focus, which in turn inhibits the state of "Nothingness." The reasoning is circular and despite the effort at self abasement, the outcome is self-promotion.

2. Delights in the worship of angels

The Colossian Heresy taught that there is a hierarchy of angels who act as mediators and spirit guides between God and man, and that one's spiritual knowledge could be enhanced by such contact.

Rom 1:25 "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator -- who is forever praised."

a. **Disqualify** you for the prize

**Disqualify** = Katabrabeuo = "To defraud or beguile (of salvation):

It carries with it the idea of an umpire who is calling you out because you have not obeyed the rules.

Gal 4:9-11 "But now that you know God-or rather are known by God -- how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You

are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.”

## II Paul's Observations Concerning False Teachers

- A. They go into great detail about what they have **seen** [Verse 18b]  
 These are the kind of people who are eager to tell you the "latest word from the Lord", but they were describing nothing more than vain imaginations.

Ezek 13:1-3 “The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: 'Hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!'”

**Illustration:** Prophecies about Kauai being the epicenter of world-wide revival.

- B. Their unspiritual mind **puffs** them up with idle notions [Verse 18c]  
*Puffs up* = Phusioo = “To inflate or blow up” AKA: “Big head”  
 They and draw the attention of believers to themselves rather than to Christ!  
 1 Cor 8:1 “Knowledge **puffs up [Phusioo]**, but love builds up.”

- C. They have lost **connection** with the Head [Verse 19]  
 Gal 5:2-4 “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”

### **Illustration:**

To our horror as a nation, we have seen over the last few days what happens when a head is cut off from the human body -- all life ceases.

According to Paul, the same catastrophic thing happens in a spiritual sense when someone has wandered into doctrinal error and has rejected Christ and His Word!

1. From whom the whole body
  - a. Supported, held together by its ligaments and sinews  
 Eph 4:16 “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”
  - b. Grows as **God** causes it to grow  
**God’s plan:** Stay connected to Jesus, and God will bring the growth.

John 15:4 “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit

unless you remain in me.”  
 1 Cor 3:6 “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.”

### III Paul's Reproof Concerning False Teachers

- A. You **died** with Christ to the basic principles of this world [Verse 20a]  
 Col 2:8 “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”

In Galatians 4:9-11, Paul refers to them as “weak and miserable principles.”

- B. Why do you **submit** to its rules: [Verse 21]  
**Rules** = Dogmatizo = “Dogma; ritualistic requirements”

1. Do not handle! = Haptomai = “To touch or to attach oneself to” (Gen 3:2-3)
2. Do not taste! = **Taste** = Geuomai = “To eat or experience” (Gen 9:3; 1 Pt 2:2-3)
3. Do not touch! = **Touch** = Thiggano = “To manipulate, have to do with”

This, BTW, is a perfect definition of legalism: “Do not -- do not -- do not!”

#### Illustration:

Martin Luther tried to live a godly life by living a life of “don’ts.” He became a monk. He isolated himself from sinful influence. He did all the acts of penance. He went without food. He denied himself every possible pleasure. He would lie naked in his cell all night long in the bitter cold, beat his body and even torture himself. But none of it brought him peace. It was only when Luther understood the doctrine of grace through the finished work of Christ on the cross that he finally found peace with God.

- C. These are all destined to **perish** with use, because: [Verse 22]  
**Perish** = Phthora = “To decay or be destroyed”
1. They are based on human commands  
**Commands** = Entalma = “Religious precepts”  
 In contrast to the 2 commands of Christ, the Pharisees had developed a system of 613 laws, 365 negative commands and 248 positive laws. And if that weren’t enough, they spent their days thinking up more and heaping them on people who were already crushed under the weight of just the first 10.  
  
 Matt 15:9b “They worship me in vain; their teachings are but **rules [Entalma]** taught by men.”
  2. They are based on human teachings  
**Teachings** = Didaskalia = “Instructions learning or doctrine”  
 Matt 15:9a “They worship me in vain; their **teachings [Didaskalia]** are but rules taught by men.” (Isa 29:13)  
 1 Tim 4:1 “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the

faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught [Didaskalia] by demons.”

**The danger and draw of legalism:**

1. **It gives power to the wrong person:** When we emphasize rules we are not focusing on Christ, but on gaining the approval of the people who made the rules.
2. **It puts the focus in the wrong place:** Legalism focuses on superficial spirituality when God is looking at the heart. It's easier to put on the right kinds of clothes than it is to put on the nature of Christ.
3. **It gives a false sense of security:** We can conform to a group's idea of godly living and yet fail to be conformed to the likeness of Christ.
4. **It makes a person critical and judgmental**
5. **Legalism alienates the world**

**Steve Brown writes:**

“There is nothing that pushes people away faster than legalists. They portray Jesus as a Drill Sergeant who is concerned that you: "Stand up straight, cut that hair, put out that cigarette, turn off that radio, don't read that book, sing this song, read this version of the Bible, pray this way, seek this experience. Is it any wonder that many want nothing to do with the Savior?”

D. Such regulations have an **appearance** of wisdom: [Verse 23a]

1. With their **self**-imposed worship
  2. With their **false** humility
  3. With their **harsh** treatment of the body
- Harsh treatment* = Aheidia = “Neglect or asceticism”

From a human perspective, it would seem reasonable that this kind of rigorous self-discipline would produce a godly life.

But the reality is that these activities are simply man's effort to justify himself before God by reaching up to God by means of good works.

In contrast, Christianity is God reaching down to man in love through Christ.

E. But they lack **any** value in restraining sensual indulgence [Verse 23b]

Paul emphatically states in Gal 4:9 that all these rules and regulations are “weak and **miserable principles**”

*Weak* = Asthenes = “Powerless, feeble, impotent”

That's the Bible's assessment of legalism – it is powerless to restrain the flesh.

Worse yet, it excites the very passions the rules are designed to suppress!

**Illustration:** Charles Spurgeon

“I have found, in my own spiritual life, that the more rules I lay down for myself, the more sins I commit.”

Legalism, mysticism and asceticism have one thing in common -- they cause you to lose sight of Christ and they enslave you to the very thing you are trying to overcome!

If you want to protect yourself from being taken captive by these false teachings, then simply return to Jesus – the author and perfecter of your faith. Simply love God with all your heart and love one another.

It's all so simple – come back to Christ and embrace the free gift of God's unmerited favor as you live a life of faith in the finished work of Christ!

### **Conclusion**

Let me ask you, "What is your Christianity like?"

1. Is it focused on yourself or on Christ?
2. Is it focused on your sin and failure or on God's grace and forgiveness?
3. Is it anchored in personal experiences or in the Word of God?
4. Has it set you free or tied you up?
5. Does it make you cry, or dance?

Gal 5:1 "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

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