

Colossians 2 (Part 4) v16-23 •

Legalism and Spiritualism

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Colossians chapter 2. If you're there, we continue on. This is our fourth installment in this particular chapter. And we've been going kind of slow just because there's a lot here and so forth. And the Apostle Paul is going to talk to us in this part—this latter part of Colossians 2 about things that are threats to our Christian walk, things that come along potentially to derail us.

And frankly, the things that he talks about are still, they're still threats today. And you guys know that, right? You know that as a believer there are things that can crop up in your walk with Jesus and can really throw you for a loop sometimes, and I know that it happens to people. He's going to address some of the things that were kind of threatening the church there in Colossae, and we're going to do our best to apply those things to today, all right.

We're beginning to read in verse 16 down through the end of the chapter. I'm reading out of the ESV so follow along in your Bible as I do, it goes like this:

“¹⁶Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²²(referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” (ESV)

Let's stop there and let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we lift up our hearts to you as we dig into the Word, and we pray that you would speak to us now through the Scriptures. And make these things, Lord, come alive in our hearts and help us to understand the dangers that we face in our walk with Christ—those things that come along to attempt to derail us. We pray that you would help us to stay safe and to pay heed to the things that are here in this verse and to apply them to our lives. We ask that you would open our hearts. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, amen.

Well, as I said, we finally get into that kind of place in Paul's letter. It's taken him this long to actually begin to start to address the issues that were a problem or at least a threat in the church there in Colossae. And he begins by talking about really two different things. He's going to deal with legalism, and by the way, legalism still rears its ugly head and tries to draw people off course.

Then he's going to talk about mysticism or spirituality. And those are, and again, that's something that Christians deal with even today. So legalism and spiritualism, and some of you might not even understand the difference between spiritualism and being spiritual, and hopefully, we'll be able to address those.

But he begins with legalism. And you'll notice that he says in verse 16, "*Therefore, let no one pass judgment...*" And that literally means just what it says: to pronounce judgment on you because of your lack of keeping these certain things, which he refers to that are part of the mosaic law. There are three things he really brings out here. We'll put him up on the screen for those of you who are taking notes and just to kind of see it together. He's addressing issues of:

- **Questions of food and drink**
- **Religious festivals**
- **Sabbath regulations**

Now, you'll remember that legalism was also a threat in the churches of Galatia, but in that case, they were really pushing hard the circumcision thing, right? Well, he doesn't even bring it up here. So, apparently that wasn't happening in Colossae, but the Judaizers or, if you will, the Jewish legalists, were pushing these things, apparently. Issues related to what you put in your mouth and whether or not it brings you closer to God or whatever. Remember, that was a Jewish belief. They believed if you put something in your mouth that wasn't appropriate, and I'm talking about food that was unclean, that it would cause you to become unclean.

And Jesus had to address those issues and say, guys, don't you know that whatever you put in your mouth just goes through your digestive system and comes out again? And it doesn't do anything to defile a man. He says, what's in

a man's heart is what causes him to become defiled and so forth. (Matthew 15:10-11)

So, Jesus has dealt with these things. Paul's been teaching these things in the church. But still these Judaizers come along. And people, they're still around. Those folks who like to make their way in and kind of point the bony finger and say, are you doing this? Are you doing that? Are you doing it right? And so forth. Questions of food and drink, religious festivals—are you keeping the festivals?

And, of course, the Sabbath issue still is a huge thing today. Paul says, "... *let no one pass judgment on you...*" or as the New American Standard Bible says, "...*no one is to act as your judge concerning these things...*"

Then he tells us why in verse 17. Look with me in your Bible in verse 17, it says, "*These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*" I looked up that whole verse in the Greek, and what Paul is doing is he's actually using a picture of a shadow of a man. That's the picture he's drawing.

He's saying, when you see the shadow of a man, that's not the man; that's just his shadow. Let me put it up on the screen. You can see it for yourself. I mean, you know what a shadow looks like.



This is a picture of a shadow, but I want you to know something, that is not a picture of a man. That's a picture of the shadow of a man.

Now, the fact that you can see the shadow tells you that there's something of substance that cast that shadow, right? But that's not the actual man, that's just the shadow. And that is the point that Paul is making related to the things he mentions, like food restrictions—what you can and can't eat, right? Or at least what was restrictions under the law is what he's talking about related to the festivals, keeping the festivals, and it's what he's talking about related to keeping the Sabbath. He says, those aren't the real thing. The real thing is what cast the shadow.

And that's why he goes on to tell us that the reality of those things is Jesus. He's the one who cast the shadow, but all those things, the things you see in the law, are a shadow of Jesus, right? He's the one who cast them. And that is why Jesus said in Matthew chapter 5 up on the screen,

Matthew 5:17 (ESV)

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

That's a very important statement that he's making there, I've come to fulfill them—the Law and the Prophets. What does he mean when he says that? Well, what he means is it's really kind of a twofold meaning. He's saying, first of all, I came to do what you could not do, and that is keep the law perfectly. I kept all of its regulations, all of its restrictions, all of its demands. I kept them without fail, right? And so I did that for you because you couldn't do that. And we couldn't and we know that.

But he also, when he says I've come to fulfill the law, he's actually saying, I am the fulfillment of the law. I am the fulfillment—I am the law embodied, if you will, and all of the things that go along with it. I fulfill those things, right?

Jesus is making a wonderful statement here that we then begin to have a greater understanding about statements that are made later in the New Testament about how when we put our faith in Jesus, we now keep the law through faith, right? (Romans 3:28)

Isn't that crazy? If somebody comes to you and says, hey, are you keeping the Sabbath? Do you keep the Sabbath? Have you ever had somebody ask you that? What they're asking is, do you keep the Saturday Sabbath? Because, by the way, Saturday is a Sabbath. People ask me sometimes, so when did the Sabbath change from Saturday to Sunday? I say, never. It's always been Saturday. Sabbath has always been Saturday.

And they'll say, well, do you keep it? What they're asking is, do you keep it like the Jews were commanded to keep the Sabbath? Our response is, A, no, we don't keep it in the way that the Jews kept the Sabbath. But, yes, we keep the Sabbath. What do you mean? Because, you see, the Sabbath is a shadow. The reality is Jesus. I have Jesus in my heart. He has filled me with His Spirit, and by faith in Him, who is the reality, the fulfillment of the Sabbath, I keep the Sabbath.

You may say, well, how does that even work? I'll just give you this one example, because I can't go through and explain how He fulfills all of these things. But in the Sabbath, it's kind of interesting. What's the Sabbath all about? Well, it's about resting, right? God told the people of Israel to rest on the Sabbath, but we find out here that it's a shadow. It's a pointer. The reality is Jesus. We're told to rest in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, well, I say "we," the Jewish people, but in the New Testament, we find out that Jesus is our Sabbath rest.

And what were the Jews doing? They were resting from what? Work. What are we doing in the New Testament? We're resting in Jesus from our works, our good works. And instead of working for our salvation, we're resting in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross and knowing that he did what we couldn't do, right? He's our Sabbath rest. He fulfills the Sabbath. As I trust in Jesus for what he did on the cross, I keep the Sabbath, not one day a week, seven days a week, right? You with me?

And that's how Jesus fulfills the law and so forth. By the law, or excuse me, by faith, we keep the law, right? That is why Paul said what he said to the Romans in chapter 3:31. He asked the question,

Romans 3:31 (ESV)

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

"Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? (Because, no) By no means! On the contrary (look at, look at, look at), we uphold the law." See, faith doesn't ignore the law. Faith upholds it, right? Through our faith in the fulfillment of the law. You with me? That's really very cool, you know? We uphold the law through our faith in Jesus.

And the writer of Hebrews—which I love the book of Hebrews—he also spoke about how the law is a shadow. Look what he says in chapter 10:1.

Hebrews 10:1 (ESV)

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.

He says, "*For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never* (and then he mentions one aspect of the law, which is the sacrificial system), *by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.*"

Now, you could take that part out about sacrifices, and you could put any aspect of the law in there. And that passage would still be the same. You could have it read something like, for since the law was but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of those realities, it can never, by keeping the Sabbath, make perfect those who draw near, or it can never, by keeping the food laws, make perfect or complete or acceptable before God, those who do those things, you see? You could put anything related from the law in that verse, and it makes the same point, that the law, keeping the law, will not make you acceptable to God. Period.

In fact, the Bible says without faith it is impossible to please God, right? Without faith—faith in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. (Hebrews 11:6)

Now, if you think I'm belaboring this a little bit, well, I suppose that's a possibility. But the only reason that I may be is because I still get a lot of people asking questions about this, coming about Sabbath questions and food laws and how, you know, what are we supposed to do about this?

And I've gotten to the point now where when somebody—when I see a question happening repeatedly, I will usually write about it on my blog so that when the next person writes, I can say, well, just go here and I can explain the whole thing without having to go through all of it.

I don't know if you guys have ever actually seen my blog, but it's there just as a Q and A for Bible questions. Let me show you kind of what this one looks like.

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Q&A: Are Christians Under the Law of Moses? And what about the Sabbath?



Question: Are Christians under the same covenant as Israel, and does that mean we are required to keep the Sabbath?

There are two points that I want to make in regards to the Law and specifically the Sabbath. And I will show you the evidence for each of them through the Scriptures.

1. God made a covenant with Israel that included Sabbath-keeping. That covenant is called "The Mosaic Covenant" and it was limited to God and Israel. The Mosaic Covenant was NOT made with the Church.
2. The meaning of the Sabbath was fulfilled in the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

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Let's take the first point. There is an assumption by many Christians that the covenant God made with Israel is fully binding on the Church — the Body of Christ. I say this is an assumption because it is NOT supported in the Word of God. The Scripture is clear that God

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About Pastor Paul



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Q&A: Are we ALWAYS to obey the government — even if it's corrupt?

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Q&A: I'm hearing conflicting information about tithing and whether or not God commands us to do it

Q&A: Can you please clear up the confusion

This page, you can see the address there, and it is linked through our website. But you can see the title of this one is [Q&A: Are Christians Under the Law of Moses? And What About the Sabbath?](http://pastorpaul-cco.blogspot.com/2013/08/q-a-are-christians-under-the-law-of-moses-and-what-about-the-sabbath.html) And I went through and explained and used a lot of scripture and talked about how we as believers are not under the law and if you guys want to tune in on to that on your computer or phone or whatever, you can do that.

But what's interesting about this is that some people just don't get it. There's just a gravitational pull in some people to just think legalistically, and it's just huge. In fact, I've had people—let me put Matthew 5 back up for you for a moment. I've actually had people quote this passage as a proof text that we have to keep the law.

Matthew 5:17 (ESV)

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

You know what they do? They quote the first part and not the second. And they'll say to me, Pastor Bill, don't you know what the Bible says? It says Jesus said he didn't come to abolish the law. See? He didn't come to abolish the law. It hasn't been abolished. You're saying it's been abolished, which I never did.

And you know, it's funny, I talk about the law and that we're not under the law, and people who have a legalistic mindset say to me, oh, so you're saying God abolished the law. Jesus, I didn't say that. I just said we're not under it as a requirement to be acceptable to God. That's what I said.

Jesus said yes, I have not come to abolish the law, but I have come to fill it up, to fulfill that law and so forth. When folks stumble over this area of law-keeping, it's a serious thing and it's a very challenging thing. I want to show you what Paul wrote to the Galatians who were being threatened with falling to the law, stumbling. This is such an important passage to see.

Galatians 3:23-25 (ESV)

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

Paul writes: “*Now before faith came* (okay? That's our faith in Jesus), *we were held captive* (he says) *under the law* (in fact, he even uses the word) *imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then* (he says), *the law was* (at that time) *our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But* (now look what he says) *now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.*”

I want you to note here that Paul likens the law to a guardian and then he says, we're no longer under that guardian. Why? Because we have the Spirit now, living in our hearts. If you need it any clearer, I can give it to you as clear as crystal from Romans 6:14.

Romans 6:14 (ESV)

...you are not under law but under grace.

You're now under grace. And that is the Spirit of Grace who lives within us, who leads us to walk by the Spirit, not by rules and regulations.

When we raised children, Sue and I raised four of them, you have to be fairly legalistic with your little kids. I mean, when they're little, right? Because they don't know any better. They see a hot stove and there's like, whoa, great sort of a thing, you know? You've got to go, no, don't do that. You may not. And then you have to say, you can't go there. You can't do this. Here's the way. And you give them guidelines and you give them barriers and you give them rules, right? You've got to give kids rules. Kids without rules are an accident waiting to happen.

But there comes a point in the maturity of your child where you expect them to grow up, to mature, and to understand what's behind the rules that you gave them when they were children, right? You expect them to come to that place of going, I'm not going to do that because that's stupid, that's dangerous or that's foolish, or whatever the case might be.

Can you imagine telling your 26-year-old, don't touch that. I told you not to touch that. I mean, how demeaning would that be? No, this kid's—it is an adult. This person's an adult now, they understand in a very real sort of way. We are like that guardian to our children, like the law is in the very early stages.

But there comes that place where we are no longer under the guardian, and that guardian has been replaced by the Spirit of Christ who now lives within us and is guiding and directing us. But you know, it's interesting about this whole thing about being led by the spirit. It's not as easy as being led by the law. Do you get that?

Do you know, I get people's disappointed responses when they ask me about something in their life. And I can tell what they're asking, they want a law. They'll say something or word the question in such a way as to say, I'm looking for a law. Now give me a rule to follow here. Is this dah, dah, dah.

And I'll say, well you need to be led by the spirit, and I can see the disappointment on their face because they were looking for a hard and fast law. And I'm saying, no, you've got to pray about it. You've got to be led by the Spirit. And I'm not talking — I'm talking about things that maybe the word doesn't cover specifically. Those gray areas, if you will, you've got to be led by the Spirit.

Oh, I don't want—it's hard work. I've got to wait on God. I've got to pray about things. Yeah, what a drag and listen for the voice of God. I want an answer, and I want it now. Well, that's why people often gravitate to rules. Rules are not what you and I are called to.

Guys, this is step one of what he's talking about: be careful of legalism. Be careful when people give you rules and say, you've got to live by rules. And the Bible even gives us some principles to live by, some biblical principles.

But even so, if your life is completely governed by principles, then you don't have a relationship with Jesus. Can you imagine a married couple that only related to one another based on principles, and they never really talked or discussed or whatever, but it's like, well, I have a principle here. And it's very, it's kind of cold.

We are to have an intimate relationship with our Father through Jesus Christ. And He wants to speak to your heart. He wants to talk to you about how you were to walk, the things you're to do, and the things you're to say. He wants to guide you and direct you by His Spirit. And we need to be willing to stop long enough to listen and not just wait for a rule.

Now, the second thing that he moves on from here, from legalism, is this whole idea of spirituality, or if you will, mysticism. And he says, if you look with me in verse 8 or I'm sorry, 18—beg your pardon, in your Bible. This time he says, “*Let no one disqualify you* (before it was, let no one condemn you. But now he says, let no one disqualify you), *insisting on asceticism...*” And by the way, if some of you need a refresher on the definition of asceticism, here it is:

as·cet·i·cism

noun

Definition: severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons.

And by the way, that's a non-biblical definition, but it's a correct one anyway.

He says, anyone who insists on asceticism, look at what else he mentions or the: “... *worship of angels* (or), *going into detail about visions...*” and these sorts of things. So he mentions things that could possibly draw people away. And he begins with asceticism, which is this idea of withholding things from yourself to feel like you're more acceptable or whatever to God.

And can I just tell you, and this could be like fasting, and by the way, there's nothing wrong with fasting. But the things that we do to withhold fleshly delights or something, it can easily become a misfocus.

And the reason that it is, is because asceticism puts all of the emphasis on your physical flesh and it ignores the source of sin. Okay? Or the source of where our flesh really derives its power, which is from the sinful nature, the nature that is in us by birth, right? That is contrary to God. We've all got one. I wish I didn't, but I do. And so do you. And it's a big fat bummer. And it's constantly trying to pull us off course. But asceticism isn't going to take care of that issue because asceticism only deals with exterior, external sorts of things. And it might look really holy.

I don't know if you've ever been fasting, but it can make you feel holy. Or other kinds of sorts of physical withholdings of certain things to withhold from them can just kind of make you feel like, yeah, but it's not true. It's not truly spiritual.

Here's what's interesting. Paul wrote to Timothy and said that in the last days, asceticism would be on the rise. Check this out. From 1 Timothy chapter 4, it says,

1 Timothy 4:1-4 (ESV)

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,

"Now the Spirit (and he's talking about the Holy Spirit) expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences (have been) are seared, who forbid marriage (there's, that's asceticism right there) and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving (and other forms of asceticism) by those who believe and know the truth. (He says, and then his conclusion.) For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving."

The thing you got to remember about this is, there is an allure to asceticism. The allure is it makes me feel more spiritual. It might even make me feel closer to God, and so forth, but it doesn't really do that. It's kind of almost like self-deception, right?

That's why Paul said, look with me again in your Bible in verse 20 of chapter 2. He says, *"If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world..."* And we came up against that phrase last time, and I told you I didn't really like the way the ESV translated it—'elemental spirits of the world' is really better translated 'the basic principles of the world,' and that means man-made rules or man-made principles.

He says, since you died to those man-made rules and principles, why, as if you're still alive in the world, are you submitting to all these regulations of man? Like: *"²¹ Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch."* Because he says those are things that religious people do, but they have no basis of true spirituality or holiness. And he says, all these things are going to perish anyway. All these things are going to end up. They're not, in other words, they're not eternal. There's nothing eternal about them, and they are according to human precepts and human teachings.

Look at verse 23. This is the kind of the kicker right here. Verse 23 says, *"These have indeed an appearance of wisdom (or holiness, or righteousness)..."*

Remember when Jesus said, when you're fasting, don't let anybody know that you're fasting by kind of looking weak. (Matthew 6:16-18) What's wrong with you? Oh, I'm fasting. It's kind of weak, but I'm fasting, right? And then people

go, he's holy. Jesus said, don't do that. If you're going to fast, he says, just look like you do on any other day, and don't draw attention to yourself because, you see, it might make you feel holy, but it's not. That's not what's going on, right? There are other reasons for fasting.

He again reiterates in verse 21 why human rules fail, and that is because they come from man and not from God. That's what he says in verse 21—they're according to human precepts and human teachings. Asceticism is a man-made system of rules, of denying myself, and so forth.

The other things he mentions here that could be misleading are the worship of angels. I don't know if you've ever gotten into angels, or if you've ever done a Google search of angels. There are people that are really majorly into angels. And I mean, not just interested in angels, but like worship of angels. It's still around.

And I understand the allure of that too. It's exciting, mysterious, and cool. I mean, you think about angels and what they can do, and they can behold the face of God. Yet we know that angels are around us. There's probably some in this room right now. I'm counting on it. But to focus on that and then to begin to give your attention to the point where it actually converts to worship and stuff, he says, that looks spiritual. But it's not.

He talks about also in verse 18, going on and on and on in great detail about visions that you've received. Every so often I'll get an email from somebody, and it's like pages long on this vision they supposedly had. And they want me to make sense of it for them. And I'm like, I don't know. But it still happens that people do this sort of thing. And I want you to notice that Paul exposes here at the end of verse 18 what's behind those things.

Look at the very latter part of verse 18. He says, what's really happening is they're puffed up without reason. And the words 'puffed up' mean inflated with pride. But there's no reason for them to be inflated with pride. They're just inflated. And it all comes from, at the very end of verse 18, he says that it is the sensuous mind, and that's not a super clear rendering. It just means the fleshly mind. It means the carnal mind. These things look spiritual, but they're carnal. They come from carnal thinking. Right?

And they only prove something about the people that get involved in this kind of spirituality. Look at verse 19 with me in your Bible. It proves that they're not holding fast to the Head, Paul says. And that's talking about Jesus. He's the head of the body. And then he talks about the fact that it is through Him, through Jesus, that the whole body is nourished, and we're knit together. But I understand how these things look spiritual.

I had a woman come up to me after a service a number of years ago, and I was talking about some of this same stuff. She really took issue with me, wanted me to know that I was dead wrong because she said, I consider myself a spiritual person. But I was making the point that being spiritual or spiritually minded is not the same thing as being Christ-like or godly, or anything like that. And she was really bothered by that, but I stand by that because what Paul is warning the church about here is this false, empty spirituality. It's all into angels and spiritual beings and visions, but there's no Jesus in it. Those people don't talk about Jesus, they talk about spirituality, but they don't talk about Jesus. He says, Jesus is the head.

And those people that are all into this spirituality, all they prove is that they've been disconnected from the head. The head is where we're nourished. It is through Him, Jesus Christ, the head of the church, that we're tied into Him . That's where true spirituality comes from. It's not keeping rules. The spiritual person is not the person who keeps rules. The spiritual person is not the one who talks about angels. The spiritual person is the individual who is connected to Jesus, walking in the spirit and bearing fruit by the power of the spirit.

Let me end with a passage from John chapter 15. I love this because Jesus is talking here about true spirituality. He says, "*Abide in me, and I in you. (And) As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself (he's talking there about spiritual fruit as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself), unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.*" (John 15:4)

True spiritual fruit, true spiritual maturity, comes not from rule-keeping or empty religiosity and spirituality, but it comes through Jesus Christ, knowing Him, learning about Him, being enveloped in His word, and listening for His voice through His spirit. Amen.

Let's stand together. We're going to get into Colossians chapter 3 next week, Lord willing. And Paul is going to begin to talk about how we walk out that relationship with Christ in the power of the Spirit to live the life that we're called to live. Here he's kind of giving us the do nots, and now we're going to get into the do's in the coming chapter, so stay tuned.