

When Religiosity Weakens Spirituality
Colossians 2:6-23 (focus on vv. 9-23 – 1984 NIV)

Introduction

One Sunday, I was at a downtown food-court having a drink as I was a little early for my preaching engagement in a church. I took the time to run through my sermon in my mind.

Then, a young Filipino man came to where I was seated and introduced himself. He said, “I saw you afar and you seem to be deep in thought. Is there something troubling you?”

I said, “Oh, it is because I am thinking through the sermon that I am to preach in a church soon.”

“Are you a pastor?” he asked.

“Yes, you can say that,” and I went on to briefly introduce myself and my ministry.

He replied, “We have a church service too later at Stamford Hotel in one of the function rooms. But I guess you won’t be free to attend. Anyway, here is a brochure that tells you something about our church,” and then took his leave.

I read the brochure and came to know that it was supposedly a worldwide Christian movement with its HQ in Manila. Also, three statements in its confession of faith struck me: i) Only the Father is truly God. ii) Jesus is made Lord by the Father, but he is only man in his state of being. iii) Faith alone is not enough for salvation; good works and membership in the one, true church are necessary to be completely saved.

The brochure also claims that this movement has congregations in more than 100 countries and territories with millions of members worldwide.

And you know what this means? This means massive numbers of people around the world (including some in Singapore) are taught to: i) Deny the Trinity. ii) Deny the deity of Jesus. iii) Deny salvation by faith alone.

But really, this is nothing new. It’s as old as New Testament times. In fact, some false teachings in the New Testament city of Colossae had undermined the supremacy of Christ and the standard for Christian living. These teachings had corrupted that of Scripture with a kind of philosophy that’s based on human tradition and erroneous principles (Col. 2:6-8).

As a result, the believers in Colossae were in danger of being spiritually “kidnapped” by these false teachings. They were not looking to Christ for their

spiritual growth. In fact, their spiritual growth was in danger of being choked by legalism. Legalism here is the human attempt to prove our spirituality by outward conformity to a man-made list of religious do's and don'ts.

That's exactly what was starting to happen in the church at Colossae. In our text today, Paul argues that if we want to pull out the weeds of legalism, we must live out two truths.

I. Rest in Our Legal Standing in Christ (vv. 9-15).

At conversion, God issues four decrees:

1. We are given fullness in Christ (vv. 9-10). "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority."

We are given fullness in Christ when we receive Him into our lives. The fullness in Christ we have is the full person of the Holy Spirit in us. We don't have to perform religiously to have more of the Holy Spirit. But we do have to act in obedient faith so that the Holy Spirit can use more of us.

2. We are alive with Christ (vv. 11-13a). Verses 11-13a draw some parallels between circumcision and our new life with Christ. "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ."

God initiated circumcision in the Old Testament in order to set the Hebrew people apart and identify them as His people. In the church at Colossae, the false teachers were suggesting that obedience to Old Testament regulations (e.g. circumcision) would make the believers more spiritual before God.

However, when we place our faith in Christ, He spiritually circumcises, or cuts away, our sinful nature. We then become alive with Him and no longer dead in our sins.

Paul next uses the illustration of baptism. Water baptism is a wonderful picture of an inner reality. When we go under the water, we are symbolizing our death and burial with Christ. When we come up out of the water in baptism, we symbolize that just as Christ was raised from the dead, so too, we are raised to resurrection life.

3. We are forgiven (vv. 13b-14). “He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.”

Notice that Jesus forgave ALL of our sins. That means every single one, even those that you have a hard time forgiving yourself for. What a wonderful truth! Paul sees all our sins as “nailed to the cross”, so they no longer can condemn us.

4. We are victorious (v. 15). Our legal standing involves one more thing—we have victory. Verse 15 is a wonderful picture of Christ’s triumph over evil: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

Christ has disarmed satanic powers and authorities. The only power Satan has is what we give him when we allow him to deceive us and create fear in our lives.

When the Romans returned home after winning a war, they would bind their vanquished foes and march them back to Rome. At the front of the parade would be the conquering general. Following him would be his soldiers. And then at the rear of the procession would be all those who had been conquered. As they marched past the crowds, the people would jeer at these POWs.

In the same way, the Colossians had participated in such a victory, and so have we. Jesus is the victor and He has triumphed over Satan at the cross.

During World War II, a US marine was separated from his unit on a Pacific island. The fighting had been intense. In the smoke and crossfire, he lost touch with his comrades.

Alone in the jungle, he could hear enemy soldiers coming in his direction. Scrambling for cover, he found his way up a high ridge to several small caves in the rock. Quickly he crawled inside one of the caves. Although safe for the moment, he realized that once the enemy soldiers swept up the ridge, they would search all the caves, and he would eventually be found and then killed. As he waited, he prayed, “Lord, if it be your will, please protect me. Amen.”

After praying, he lay quietly listening to the enemy soldiers as they drew close. He thought, “Well, I guess the Lord isn’t going to help me out of this one.”

Then he saw a spider beginning to build a web over the entrance of his cave. As he watched, the spider layered strand after strand of web across the opening of the cave.

“Hah!” he thought, “What I need is a brick wall and what the Lord has sent me is a spider web.”

As the enemy drew closer, he watched from the darkness of his hideout and could see them searching one cave after another. As they came to his, he got ready to make his last stand. To his amazement, however, after glancing in the direction of his cave, they moved on.

Suddenly, he realized that with the spider web over the entrance, his cave looked as if no one had entered it for quite a while. “Lord, forgive me,” prayed the marine. “I had forgotten that in you a spider web is stronger than a brick wall.”

(<http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-stories-deliverer-godcares-protection-62594.asp>)

When we face times of desperation, distraction or deception, Paul reminds us not to forget that we have: the power of the Holy Spirit; the possibilities of a Spirit-led life; the privilege of forgiveness in the Lord; the position of victors with Christ. So, we don't have to behave like forsaken and hopeless people because the Lord is working in our situations even in very surprising ways.

The second truth to live out if we want to pull out the weeds of legalism is ...

II. Resist the Practices of Legalism in Faith Life (vv. 16-23).

First, allow me to make some observations about legalism:

1. Legalism is in all of us. We tend to think others are legalistic and we're not. The fact is that we're all legalistic in some ways. We tend to judge others by our own standards of what is acceptable and what isn't.
2. Legalism can undermine a vibrant faith. It can destroy enthusiasm, dampen joy, and diminish spirituality. Instead of finding freedom in Christ, many believers feel burdened by their faith and even the church.
3. Legalism produces self-righteousness. It urges its followers to evaluate their relationship with God on the basis of doing and duties, and expects others to do the same.
4. Legalism makes us divisive. The legalist insists that everyone lives up to the standard he has adopted. In other words, everyone needs to

be like ME. When we think this way, we miss the delight of diversity in the church.

We can fall into legalism without being intentional about it. A very common kind of legalism today is when a Christian does certain religious actions and regards other Christians who do not do the same with contempt. E.g. I may find kneeling spiritually helpful. So I practice kneeling when I pray. When I come to church, I notice that I am the only one kneeling in prayer. I feel smugly superior because I am the only one doing what everyone else should be doing. Kneeling to pray is a good thing, but it can mistakenly become the standard by which I judge other people's spirituality.

Now, Christians do have a responsibility to judge in areas where the Bible clearly speaks against—e.g. adultery and murder. But in the “debatable” areas, we need to be more careful. E.g. one person may watch movies where another would not; one person may worship on a particular day where another would not.

It is good for us to recall the famous words of St. Augustine of Hippo at this point: “Unity in necessary things; liberty in doubtful things; charity in all things.”

Colossians 2:16-23 gives us three warnings so that we can avoid being “foolish” on the matter of mere outward observances:

1. Refuse to judge absolutely by externals (vv. 16-17). “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”

Food restrictions, observances of special festivals and days arose out of Jewish practices. The problem then was that people were performing these rituals mechanically, simply going through the motions. Paul says that can harm the vitality of faith.

But somebody is bound to say, “Wait a minute. Aren't these restrictions and observances given by God?” Paul answers that objection in verse 17. These rituals, he declares, are a mere “shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” Once the reality has been realized, shadows are of no value anymore. Shadows are like pictures, given in advance, designed to prepare us for something. But if you have found Christ, you do not need the shadows anymore.

E.g. I carry with me a picture of my wife and children. I take it along in order to be ready to show my family to others. I value the picture and look at it occasionally when I am away from home. But what would you think if I am talking to the images of my family members in the picture when I am at home with them in real persons? You must think that

there is something seriously wrong with me! I'm more connected with the images of my family members in the picture than with the real persons of my family members in my home.

That is what Paul says is wrong with shadows. If you still place primary value on a shadow after the reality has come, you diminish the value of that reality. Now the reality here is Christ. To lose Him is to lose the source of vitality in our faith life. That is the danger in observing shadows.

Be aware that ritualism, while helpful, can ruin our faith life. In fact, I can do it right here in church on a Sunday morning. E.g. if I merely mouth the words of the hymns when I sing, I am doing this very thing. I may be singing with my mouth, "I love you, Lord." But my mind has strayed so far away from Him, distracted by the many cares and concerns of this materialistic world.

Honestly, we all find our attention straying from time to time. But do not let ourselves get into the habit of doing this because it is really empty ritualism. Paul calls it worshipping shadows and not Christ.

Question: "Do you have any idea of what you lose by this kind of make-believe spirituality?"

The thing that first becomes apparent is that your participation in worship suffers. You find yourself wanting to leave but you feel you have to stay because your family or others expect you to stay, or you want to protect your own reputation for being pious. A church worship is where we ought to find ourselves stimulated afresh, awakened to new vigour in our relationship with Christ. But all that begins to dissipate when we become mechanical worshippers. And more than that, Christ becomes distant. Faith devotion comes first from the heart, not from some external KPIs. Otherwise, our so-called faith actions can weaken our faith devotion.

2. Reject false authority (vv. 18-19). "Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow."

The word "disqualify" means "to declare unworthy of a prize". It's the idea of an umpire showing you the "red card" because you have not obeyed the rules of the game. Paul describes people so disqualified in four ways:

- They have false humility. They present themselves as humble and holy, but in reality they are filled with spiritual pride and superiority.
- They worship angels. Their focus is on other spiritual beings rather than on Christ. In Colossae there was an ancient teaching (later called “Gnosticism”, meaning “knowledge”) which held that there is a hierarchy of angels between human beings and God which must be contacted. And one’s knowledge, which began in ignorance, increased with such angelic contacts until finally one entered into the fullness of divine revelation.
- They have seen visions. They love to tell people their “latest experiences in the Spirit”.
- They are puffed up with idle notions. Their “inner secrets” give them big heads but not burning hearts. They hold many “degrees” in theology, but have little “temperature” for Christ.

As a result, they had actually become disconnected from the Head who’s Christ in spite of their spiritual knowledge and experiences.

3. Repudiate man-made rules with godly discernment (vv. 20-23). Finally, if we are not to be enslaved by outward observances, we must repudiate man-made rules. “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

The false teachers focused on personal denial as the way to curb their appetites. This sounds good on the surface because we all agree that we need discipline in our lives. Discipline is a proper part of the Christian life. But you must do what God wants you to do simply because you love Him. That is the proper motive for it. However, you can make a god out of discipline. We can even make ungodly idols out of the so-called spiritual disciplines in our Christian life.

Paul lists out some negative approaches: “Do not handle!” “Do not taste!” “Do not touch!”

Some contemporary examples would include: “Do not eat meat on Friday.” “Do not shop on Sunday.” “Do not watch magic show on Children’s Day.”

All the “Do not” and “Cannot” make Christianity sound like a very negative faith. But the Golden Rule of Jesus Christ in Luke 6:31 is positively stated this way: “Do to others as you would have them do to

you.” This is how the Christian faith is to be positively lived out and demonstrated.

A legalist looks at life and says, “We must have nothing to do with anything that the Bible does not say is right.” That reduces life to a very narrow range of activities. Some things are wrong—they are sinful, harmful and dangerous. But there is so much that is left open to us—God’s will for us is not always an exact dot, but very often a wide circle of choices that are within His will.

We don’t get to heaven by following a list of do’s and don’ts. And we don’t live the Christian life that way either. We cannot earn God’s favour. All we can do is receive it. Charles Spurgeon puts it this way: “I have found, in my own spiritual life, that the more rules I lay down for myself, the more sins I commit” (*Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers*, p. 235).

Verse 23 states very clearly that man-made rules, though they may look and sound good, “lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence”. We can’t force sin out of our lives through devotion to man-made rules. We need God’s power working within us to effect real life change.

But observing man-made rules is not the same as observing God-affirmed boundaries. We need healthy boundaries to define mutual expectations and to show mutual respect. Biblically speaking, boundaries are related to self-control as we submit to Christ. The Bible commands us to control ourselves under the Lordship of Christ, whereas our human nature desires to control others under us.

The way to know if boundaries are used in a healthy way is to examine the motive. Are you protecting yourself or someone weaker from potential harm? If so, then you are setting healthy and needful boundaries. However, if you are maintaining distance because you desire to exclude someone whom you view as inferior, then that is unhelpful.

God gives us freedom to choose to live within His boundaries or outside of them. Living inside God’s boundaries brings blessing, and living outside of them brings harm to us and even to others. Adam and Eve had one boundary in the Garden of Eden—abstain from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But they chose to overstep that boundary and fell into sin.

Boundaries also give people an identity. Without an identity, a person “vanishes” into the crowd and behaves no different from other people. But healthy boundaries teach us to accept one another as different yet still worthy of God’s love, grace and mercy.

Conclusion

When Christ died on the cross, He said, "It is finished." The price has been paid. The debt has been erased. You are complete in Christ. You are alive. Your sins are forgiven. And you have the victory! The victorious power of the Christian faith is not in what we do, but in what Christ has done.

What man-made rules are still in your books?

Nail these to the Cross, and live devotedly as a lover after God's heart, and not merely a keeper of man's rules.