

Legalism is a Dud

Colossians 2:16-23 - NCBC, Sept 13, 2015

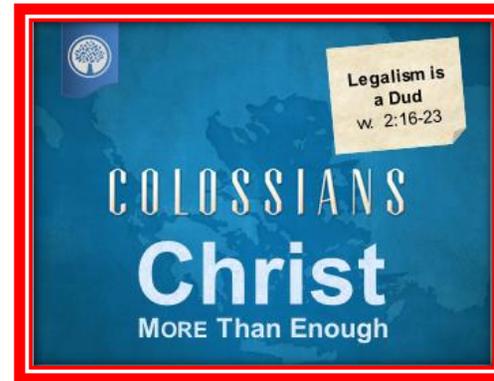
Main Point: **True spirituality is not grown by keeping external rules.**

- Legalism is deceptive
- Legalism is subjective
- Legalism is useless

Application: **Grow with a growth that is from God!**

Gal 6:14 *But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

Opening Announcement: *Ivory Coast Team Commissioning & Prayer*



Let's now continue our worship by reading from God's Word. Please open your Bible to **Colossians chapter 2**, where we are continuing our study on the supreme sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

While you're preparing to read, let me remind us of what we've already learned from Colossians. We started in chapter 1 learning that Jesus Christ deserves first place in everything – He's the image of the invisible God, and the firstborn of all creation. Then we were encouraged that because of Christ, our faith is firm. Though all of us are sorely tempted at times to shift our hope from the Gospel, Christ has reconciled us and made us holy before Him. Therefore we grow spiritually by moving deeper into Christ alone – not through "ear tickling" teaching or philosophy of men. In Christ is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. So we walk or live in Christ by faith – just as we received Him by faith. And then 2 weeks ago, we looked at verses 11-15 of Colossians 2 and learned that our freedom is found in

Christ alone. We who were dead have been made alive together with Christ! Our sins and guilt have been forgiven and cancelled to bring us complete freedom!

So it's with joyful freedom this morning that we return to our study in Colossians, and consider seriously this counterfeit spirituality called "legalism." Please stand with me now in honor of God's Word as I read our text for us from Colossians 2:16-23, reading from the **English Standard Version**:

Colossians 2:16-23 *Therefore 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. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let 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, ¹⁹ and 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.*

²⁰ *If 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? ²³ These 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.*

This is freeing truth from God to us. You may be seated.

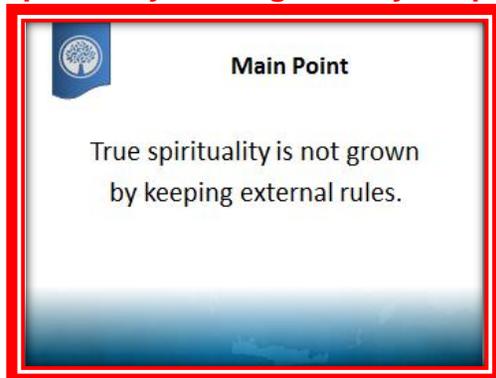
Let's Pray.

As a young boy and teenager, I wanted to be an inventor. I was always trying to figure out better ways to do things. My parents were very patient with me as often this meant I would procrastinate from simply doing the assigned chores by trying to invent a way to make it easier for everyone in the whole wide world!

For example – weeding the garden. There had to be a better way to get rid of those weeds than the back-breaking work of actually pulling them all by hand! So one day I got the bright idea of making a garden harrow. I took an old sheet of plywood, and a box of 16 penny nails...and proceeded to fill the piece of plywood with nails. I don't know how long I pounded nails into that plywood that day – but being an inventor is hard work, and that was work I was willing to do! Finally I was ready for the trial run. I used some old wire to hook the board up to our riding lawn mower...gathered my siblings to watch my genius at work, only to discover that the board just bounced along the top of the ground. It didn't work...but no worries. Every good inventor knows that it's rare to have success on the very first try. So I convinced by brothers to help me pile a bunch of concrete blocks on the top of my harrow – to give it the weight it needed. But ... as soon as I lurched forward with the little garden tractor – every 16 penny nail bent over and my harrow was no more! Another one of my inventions was a complete dud!!

As I was studying this passage this week, I kept thinking, “Legalism is a dud.” It’s a bust. It doesn’t deliver. It uses up a lot of energy and zeal, but when we try to establish our own righteousness by what we do or don’t do, we are rejecting God’s righteousness that is provided freely for us!¹ It’s like trying to open up a can of beans with your teeth all the while you’re sitting at the Golden Corral with a gift certificate!

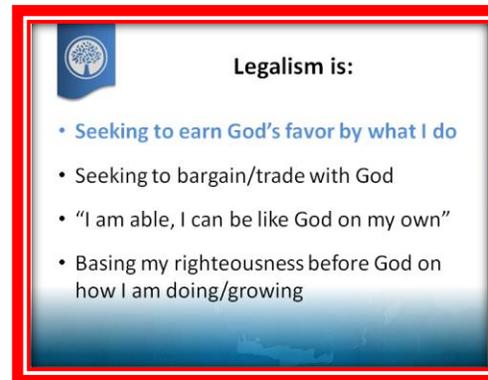
This morning we learn from God’s Word that **True spirituality is not grown by keeping external rules.**



Our freedom is in Christ and Christ’s finished work on our behalf. The shadows of law-keeping cannot add any value to our spiritual life. Christ alone is the source of our life, and the source of all spiritual growth.

But legalism can be sneaky, right? So before we consider God’s warnings for us in regards to legalism, let’s first define what legalism is.

¹ Romans 11:2-3



Legalism is simply **seeking to earn God’s favor by what I do.** It’s performance-based Christianity. Legalism is nothing more than a self-salvation project – seeking to bargain or trade with God value for value – either to get salvation, or to grow spiritually. Legalism focused most upon what we must do, rather than on what Christ has already done on our behalf.

You see, legalism is not whether or not you seek to obey God’s commands in Scripture. No...legalism is not the same as holiness. True holiness is an obedience that is brought about by faith in Christ in response to all that Christ has accomplished for us. But legalism is any attempted obedience brought about by my flesh in order to earn God’s favor towards me in some way. So any obedience that is not produced by faith in Christ is... legalism.

In other words, legalism is measuring our spirituality by conformity to man-made rules. But keeping rules is not enough. The substance belongs to Christ. Legalism is a

fraud – a real dud. **True spirituality cannot be brought about by keeping external rules.** True spirituality is found in Christ alone.

This is why Colossians 2:6-7 urges us,

...As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught...

We must not let our spiritual life become spell-bound by legalism. For certainly **Legalism is deceptive**, as we see in verses 16-17 of our text this morning:



Therefore [since you have been made alive together with Christ, and your sins have been forgiven, and Christ Himself has disarmed all the powers of wickedness] let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a [annual] festival or a [monthly] new moon or a [weekly] Sabbath.

Ok, let's paint the picture clearly here. False teachers were seeking to influence these believers in Colossae – trying to convince them that they needed to pay attention to these religious food laws and holy days for their spiritual benefit. These legalists were judging and criticizing anyone who failed to keep these holy days and dietary practices.

But loved ones... legalism is a deceptive cheap substitutes for true spirituality. Note verse 17,

¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

We all know the difference between a shadow and reality, right? Would you rather be struck by the shadow of a truck, or the real truck itself? That's right! The shadow itself has no reality – but as it is connected to a coming reality, it points to and informs about that reality.

And such was the purpose for the ceremonial laws found in the Old Testament. Dietary laws pointing the way for Jesus – the bread of life (Jn 6:41). Festivals pointing the way for Jesus – our Passover Lamb (1 Cor 5:7). A weekly Sabbath pointing the way to Jesus – who provides eternal rest on our behalf (Heb 4:1-11).

But now that Jesus – the substance of reality is here – why return to the shadows for the essence of your spiritual life? That would be as fraudulent as loving a photograph of your loved one more than the loved one themselves while they are present with you?!

But yet many of us today succumb even unknowingly to legalism. So we must be reminded this morning that, **Legalism is only skin deep.**



In **Matthew 23:27-28**, Jesus rebuked the religious elite saying,

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

You see, outward law-keeping has no power over inward lawlessness. Legalism has no power to transform our hearts, or free us from the power of sin.

Legalism emphasizes the trivial and the external, while ignoring the matters of the heart. If we are left to ourselves to try to grow spiritually, all our efforts at "getting better" will start with the fruit, instead of the

root...but such external morality is gravely deficient for true spirituality.

Let me illustrate. When our family lived in California, we had some orange trees in our backyard. Now suppose one of those trees was sickly, and not growing...and I announce to Jody that I'm going to fix that tree.

First I pick all the old rotten fruit and throw it away. Then I go to Ralph's Grocery Store, and purchase several large boxes of Florida-Grown Oranges...and I return home with my air-compressor, ladder, and nail-gun, and Bam! Bam! begin nailing this beautiful fruit onto our tree. Hours later I return inside and tell Jody... Honey, I fixed the tree! It's never looked better in its life – it's loaded with huge beautiful fruit!

It sounds so silly when we talk about this with fruit trees...doesn't it? Why then are we so deceived that we can effectively "Fruit-nail" true spirituality onto our lives if we only just fix a few external behaviors and habits?

Legalism is very deceptive – because inwardly rebellious and disobedient souls can conform to a set of external standards or rituals, and thereby appear to be spiritual.

But church – our spiritual problems are not merely external, behavioral problems – but in reality it is an internal problem of our heart. The reason I sin is because Jesus doesn't have first place in my heart. I sin everytime my heart finds its "home" outside of Christ and His abundant provisions.

The difference between true obedience and legalism is this – that **true righteousness always comes from the heart, and not from externals**. “Seeking to earn God’s favor by my performance” is only skin deep. And it is **based on lies**.

Legalism lies and says that sin is largely a behavior problem that can be externally managed. The blindness of legalism sees that the greatest problems are ones of outward appearance...and as long as the outside conforms to the culturally defined standards of righteousness, sin is properly being managed.

But Jesus’ timeless warning to the Pharisees must be heard today (**Matt 23:25-26**),

²⁵ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

True spirituality is knowing Christ and walking in Him by faith! Our deliverance has come from above – as a undeserved and unmerited gift of God’s grace. **Do you know the rescue of Christ?** Have you stopped trying to become good enough for God, and surrendered to receiving the perfect righteousness of God by faith on your behalf?

Lest you are not yet convinced that legalistic practices are a dud, consider verses 18-19, where we learn that,



Legalism is subjective (v. 18-19)

¹⁸ Let 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, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, ...

Paul does not want the Colossian believers to be misled by those who are wanting to condemn them. They were being told that their way of worshipping God (by faith in Jesus Christ alone) was not good enough. If they were really spiritual they would practice great self-denial and humility which would enable them to receive heavenly visions. You see, the false teachers were teaching that worshipping the angels was an act of humility, as one did not approach God directly. But this denies the clear teaching of **1 Tim 2:5** that there is one mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus!

Notice the “**proud humility**” of the legalists in these verses.



“puffed up [or inflated] without reason by his sensous [or fleshy] mind”

Legalism often employs tactics like extreme self-denial and visible expressions of a self-conscious humility – but when humility is advertised it is certainly not humility.² Their outward shows of piety and religiosity only toot their own horn. Legalism sacrifices what it does ultimately to be seen by others,³ and therefore it is ever-changing and subjective to the whims of other people. Legalism always seeks the praise of men more than the praise of God.

When you stop and think about it, it makes sense that legalism is proud, doesn't it? For in its proud self-reliance, legalism rejects the free gift of God's grace that offers complete righteousness, welcome, and acceptance.

² FF Bruce, NIC

³ Matthew 23:5-7

You see, these false teachers were delighting in their exalted spiritual experiences and visions, as if they had superior knowledge to others. But their personal experiences had just become a law unto themselves by which they judged others. And that's what legalism does. **Legalism is conformity to experience.**

Legalism sets attainable standards for personal performance, and then compares my performance with the performance of others according to these self-made standards. In other words, the authority for what is truly spiritual or not ...is rooted in personal experience – not the Scriptures! Legalism defines absolute standards for spiritual living that are not clearly taught in the Scripture, or at times rigidly applies Scripture in ways that it was never intended.

This is why legalism wrongly defines unity as “uniformity.” Legalists seek to have everyone conform to the same set of experiences, spiritual methods, and outward appearances. Legalism ignores individuality within the community of faith. But this is not true spirituality at all. Ephesians 4 teaches clearly that the church's unity is in the diversity of every member submitting to one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all.⁴ Christian unity is not in our experiences, but in all of us holding fast together to our common Head – which is Jesus Christ! That's the lethal miscalculation of the legalist – whenever you turn to your own performance to measure your spirituality, you are no longer “*holding fast to the Head.*”

⁴ Ephesians 4:5-6

The point of verse 19 in our text is that the source and power of all spiritual life is in Christ – our Head. If we are to be nourished and unified and grown more in our faith – it will be through our connection to Christ – our objective Head – not some subjective or mystical experience.

Legalism is a big dud. In fact, according to our text this morning, **Legalism is completely useless (v. 20-23)**



Notice the rebuke of the apostle’s rhetorical question,

²⁰ If 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?

Now that you are united to Christ by faith –the world has been crucified to you, and you have been crucified to the world.⁵ Worldly systems of religion have nothing to offer to God’s complete rescue of grace, mercy, and love!! But

⁵ Gal 6:14

the question is worth asking ourselves this morning... is there any way that we are seeking to find satisfaction, identity, rest, fulfillment, or welcome and acceptance from our own achievements or religious accomplishments?

You see the human precepts and teachings that we are trying to live by can be as ‘dangerously tame’ as our own personal goals and expectations for ourselves.

For example, in order for me to be satisfied with my spirituality this week, I need to ... [fill in the blank]. What part of your performance, or lack thereof, discomforts your rest in Christ?

Once united to Christ by faith, the power of sin and the world has been broken in our lives. In Christ we’ve been made unresponsive to the world, and the world to us. So for us to voluntarily place ourselves under the legal tyranny of a performance-oriented relationship – would be as foolish as a rebellious who walks away from a loving home only to live by himself on the streets.

Dear adopted child of God – seeking to earn God’s favor with your own performance is spiritually useless.

Legalism is just a self-made religion.



If you take off all its fancy dressing, it's nothing more than self-reliance and self-salvation, remember? Voluntarily trying to do more than God requires, because I'm hoping that my behavior will earn greater merit with Him.

Loved ones – God is more holy than we can even fathom. There is no possible way to lower God's holy standards to a place where we can meet them. Cast off all self-reliance this morning.

Verse 23 makes it clear – if you just look at the outside of a person's life – legalism has an appearance of wisdom – it can look pretty spiritual on the outside. But it's a farce. Trying to use our obedience to merit God's favor is just like drinking formaldehyde... you may as well start the funeral music because it will only suck the life right out of those who are living by external rules.

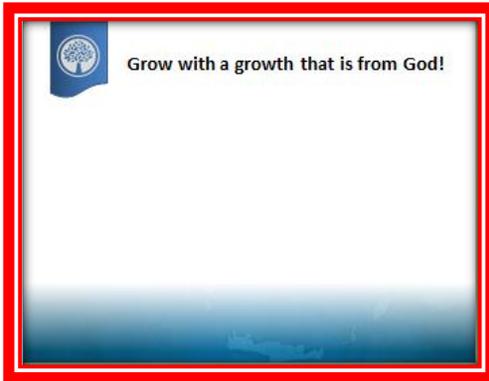
These shows of false humility and self-denial are of *"no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."*

In fact, **Legalism is food to our sin nature**. Instead of moving us deeper into Christ, all performance-oriented righteousness moves us deeper into ourselves.

Dear friends, we must come to realize the full extent of our sin problem. We don't have just a little bit of sin in us... as if I baked you a plate of chocolate cookies and had one drop on the dirty floor before giving them to you. Your own careful behavior could possibly manage such a contamination, and still bring enjoyment and satisfaction from your consuming of the cookies.

But to follow the analogy, if our lives represent the dirty cookies, then they are a batch of cookies where poisonous cyanide was mixed in with all the dough before they were baked. You can't manage such a corruption! Every part of your life is corrupted by sin. Our feeble attempts to manage our sin are useless – absolutely ineffective and of no help. You can't manage sin! You need rescue from sin!! And that is why Paul is so committed to preaching God's Gospel! For the Gospel is the power of God – and it is powerfully bearing fruit and growing among the Colossians for the sake of everyone becoming more mature in Christ (Col 1:5-6, 28).

So now that we've exposed legalism as the fraudulent deceiver that it is, we all must seek to



Grow with a growth that is from God!

I love this little phrase that is tucked in at the end of verse 19 of our text today. There is real hope for us this morning – no matter who we are.

Though our sin is as scarlet, God is able to make them white as snow, and remove our guilt stains as well. Do you remember the promises from verses 13-14?

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Dear friend – you can get off the performance treadmill. Take off your peacock uniform of self-improvement and self-reliance...and humble yourself today in genuine repentance. It's the message that Jesus brought when He said,

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel. (Mark 1:15)

Repent means to change your mind about what you are trusting to save you. Stop looking for your home in this world, and in the works of your own hands – and turn – believe in the Gospel!

You are far more sinful than you know...but God set His love upon you – and sent Jesus Christ Himself to pay for your sin on the cross – so that you might be given true righteousness! It's all yours by faith in Christ. It's a gift. You didn't earn it, or deserve, and never will... just believe my friend. And you will find true rest.

It's because of the finished work of Jesus Christ dying our death, and raising again to new life for us – that every one of us here today may truly **Cease from striving...and rest in Christ.**



Because if you are united with Christ by faith – then **You are not a fixer-upper...You are a New Creation!**

According to God's Word - God's Spirit is inside everyone who is united by faith to Jesus Christ as Head! And God's Spirit gives us a brand new heart. No more of that poisonous cookie dough ... O we still sin for sure. Our old habits die hard. But we no longer *have* to sin. The power of sin has been broken in our lives, and now our obedience is fueled by God's Spirit as an expression of our faith. Faith working through love.

So what does it mean to walk in Christ by faith? Certainly it doesn't mean to conform to men's traditions and commandments as a measure of our spirituality. No we don't need to invent our own self-righteous ways of doing Christianity better. Legalism is a dud.

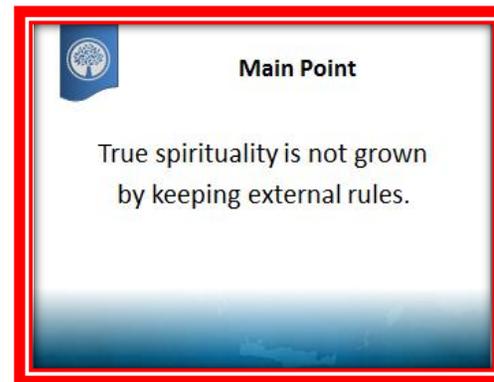
But in God's powerful gospel, God's Spirit helps us fight the lies of legalism's deception, swallow our pride and repent of our self-reliance...so that we can admit our ongoing need for God's grace and mercy in our lives. Brothers and sisters – we never outgrow our need for God's grace. Rather, our entire Christian life is a joyful deepening of repentance and faith – confessing our neediness, and abandoning our idols.

So this morning if you're struggling with legalism... don't fight it with more do's and don'ts. You won't defeat legalism by quitting your quiet times, or stopping all the good and right expressions of love, joy, and grace.

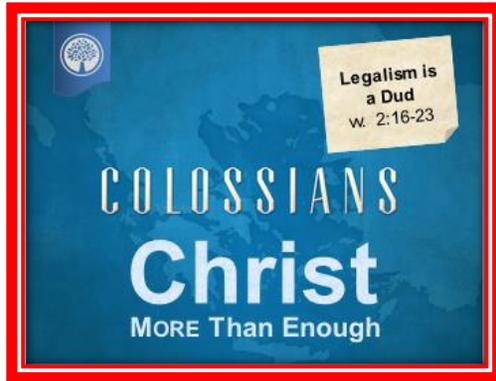
No ... the only way to defeat the grip of legalism in your life is to move deeper into the glories of God's Gospel love for you.

Pursue God by battling your sin...and battle your sin by remembering what Jesus has done, and what He promises to do for you! The power to overcome sin is to overwhelm it with superior love and satisfaction in Christ! Such a thankful soul will not be easily tempted.

So clearly, **True spirituality is not grown by keeping external rules.**



No. Rather true spirituality is nourished as we hold fast to our Head – Jesus Christ – for He is more than enough for us!



Well next week we will begin our study of Colossians chapter 3 – one of the most loved chapters in all of Scripture! So I'd encourage you to read through Colossians again this week. Perhaps use a different translation, or even use an app to listen to it outloud. But I'm praying that God's word would continue to have its way with all of us together this week as we live out our gratitude to Him!

Let's pray.

Closing prayer.

Closing Song

Explain benediction Jude 24-25 Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, 25 to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.