

15. SAY “NO” TO LEGALISM

Colossians 2v16-23

Among our core beliefs and values in Newfrontiers churches is a biblical emphasis on the Grace of God. If you haven't read Terry Virgo's "Enjoying God's Grace" I encourage you to do so.

Many people's perception of Christianity is very different. It is a set of Do's and Don'ts. Mostly Don'ts! This was a major reason for my delay in coming to Christ. I was turned off by what I saw to be a religion of rules. On Sundays, as a youngster, there were back-to-back church meetings; there was no radio, no Sunday papers or ball games; and on my bedroom wall was a list of the Ten Commandments. I thought I was being turned off by Jesus, but it wasn't Jesus who was the turn-off.

Paul writes to a Colossian church under threat from false teachers. It seems there was a real danger of this young church being robbed of its freedom in Christ. And one familiar culprit plaguing them was legalism, a religion of rules. This usually says: God only accepts you on the basis of how you perform therefore observing rules is all-important. This is still a great enemy. A religion of rules robs believers of their freedom. It puts us in a prison and deprives us of our fullness of life in Christ. So Paul tells them to say NO to legalism. Different people need to hear this for different reasons.

1. Some have never seen clearly the distinction between grace and legalism in Christian living. They are clear about salvation by grace but not *living* in the grace of God. In fact many start the Christian life assuming that they are simply embracing a new set of rules.

2. Others resist the thought of release from legalism. To some this *is* orthodoxy and to be defended at all costs. In my first pastorate in Sheffield I expounded Galatians with its aggressive attack on legalism. After one message someone approached me and said: *"Don't you think that what you are saying will lead to everyone doing what they like?"* Significantly, the man who asked me was a Policeman. Law versus Grace! Actually I was delighted at his question. I recalled Dr. D. M. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' comment on Romans 6v1. He maintained that we have not fully preached the gospel of grace until people ask this very question. *"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?"*

3. Some have tasted the freedom that is theirs in Christ but keep slipping back into rules. Why? Many are just so accustomed to it. Others feel safer, because freedom brings risks. Some feel the pressure of disapproval from strong people.

So, in our text this morning, Paul sets out to show how ineffective, inferior and dangerous legalism is. We see Paul "reasoning" with the Colossians using different arguments.

1. Legalism embraces a shadow and ignores the reality

v16,17: 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. A shadow has no substance of its own; it has no permanent reality apart from the body that projects it. Just so with a religion of rules – it has no spiritual substance. To embrace legalism is to embrace a shadow and ignore the reality not far away from it. Can you imagine how ridiculous it would be to embrace the shadow of a loved one when he/she is present?

Paul mentions **religious festivals**. He says they are shadows but Jesus is the substance. In the Jewish year there are some wonderfully rich festivals. Each of them foreshadow Christ in some way. For example at the Passover Festival, the lamb was a foreshadowing of Jesus, the Lamb of God; *“Christ our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”* (1 Corinthians 5v7) We have our special days too: Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. Christians often get hot under the collar about these occasions being taken over by commercialism, but maybe Paul would get more annoyed with Christians who make a religious meal of them! We can end up making more of special days and traditions than Jesus Himself! And we can celebrate His coming and His death and resurrection every day and every week of the year.

Paul also makes mention of the **Sabbath**. This more than anything has been used as a legalistic stick with which to beat people. Some Christians treat Sunday like a Christian Sabbath and tell you not to do this and that on this special day. I have a friend who was brought up in Guernsey. On Sunday outings with his parents at the sea front he could walk on the promenade but not on the sand. Yes, it makes sense to build rest and recreation into your week and set aside time to gather with other believers - but not to become a prisoner of the day. *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”* (Matthew 11v28) Jesus was inviting people to leave the heavy burdens laid on them by the legalists and come to Him for rest.

2. Legalism encourages false spirituality

v18,19: Do not let anyone who delights in false humility (another way of saying – these people are full of pride) **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.** This is a description of false spirituality; those who parade what they do, or what they know or what they have experienced – who make a show of being more spiritual than others. Have you met people like this? They make you feel second-class. Truly spiritual people don't do that. They don't need to.

Sometimes false spirituality can be more subtle and catch any of us out. You might recall the amazing things that were happening in the early 1990's. I believe we witnessed a genuine move of the Holy Spirit then, but there were spurious things as well. And when everyone around you was going down as

“the anointed man” prayed for them – what a pressure just to go down when he prayed for you so as not to appear less spiritual.

The Pharisees sought to impress others with their spirituality. It was a performance for an audience. But Jesus exposed their hypocrisy. “*You do all these deeds to be seen by men*”. Paul says people like this have **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**. In other words, this is artificial spirituality - like an artificial leg, not part of a living, growing knowledge of Christ.

3. Legalism reintroduces you to slavery

v20,21: 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!"? This is the language of a domineering slave master. But you are not a slave any longer. In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Some like to say that he “*freed slaves with the stroke of a pen*”. But it took more than a pen. It took the shedding of precious blood. The American Civil War (1861-1865) claimed the lives of 620,000 soldiers as well as countless civilian casualties. That’s what it cost. And your freedom and mine is the result of the shedding of precious blood. It cost Jesus His life on the cross.

In the aftermath of the American Civil war slaves were legally free but many still lived as if they were slaves. Their years of bondage meant they still had a slave mentality. Some Christians are the same! But you are free! You are *legally* free – that is what justification means, and *effectively* free. Paul wrote elsewhere: “*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.*” (Galatians 5v1) You have been set free from slavery to sin and fear and condemnation. Jesus laid down his life to achieve this. Don’t let legalism reintroduce you to slavery.

What legalism might you be prone to? Very often our issues are related to something good – like attendance at Sunday worship, Bible reading, prayer or financial giving. But God wants our hearts not grim routine or dutiful tithing to the last penny.

4. Legalism builds nothing of lasting worth.

v22,23: 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. Over the centuries there have been rigorous, ascetic groups and individuals who have treated their bodies harshly to subdue “the flesh”! Self-flagellation is still practised in some parts of the world by Roman Catholics at religious festivals. The Scripture says that on the surface this gives an appearance of devotion but it is totally lacking in power to deal with sin or to produce genuine spiritual life.

Nonconformists may sneer, yet some don't think they have heard a good sermon unless it makes them feel wretched. The preacher gives them a lashing and tells them what they are not doing and what they should be doing - and they take this as the mark of powerful preaching. But the effect rarely lasts more than a few hours; it makes no positive difference to their lives. Instead it nourishes guilt and condemnation. It encourages some to pretend they are something that they are not and confirms for others what they feel already about themselves - they are a failure.

The grace of God is much more powerful. Titus 2v11: *"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age."*

Heaping more and more demands on yourself and rigorous self-denial are all to no avail. This only has a temporary effect at best. God's answer is a new heart. He has written His law on our hearts, within us. This frees you for radical obedience, for inward desire not outward conformity.

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On my first trip to Israel with a part of Christians in 1981 Liz and I visited the Dead Sea to swim. In the changing room I pulled back just in time as I began to enter the beach through a door that faced me. The sign on the door read: *"For Religious Men Only"*. It was reserved for strictly Orthodox Jewish men who did not want to rub shoulders with lesser mortals who didn't keep Jewish law. When we got on the beach we found a fence separating our section from the religious men's section. I looked over and there was one solitary gentleman of ample proportions wading in splendid isolation. On our side of the barrier there was a crowd of believers enjoying being with one another on the beach and in the water. I knew which side I wanted to be on.

So, come on over from a religion of rules. It is possible to have wonderful time knowing Jesus, enjoying the grace of God. And if you have rejected a religion of rules in the past and thought you were rejecting the Christian faith - then we have some very good news for you!

John Wilthew. July. 2009

MESSAGE SUMMARY

SAY “NO” TO LEGALISM

Colossians 2v16-23

Among values in Newfrontiers churches is a biblical emphasis on the Grace of God. But many people’s perception of Christianity is very different. It is a set of Do’s and Don’ts. Mostly Don’ts! One familiar culprit plaguing the Colossian church was legalism, a religion of rules. This says: God only accepts you on the basis of how you perform therefore observing rules is all-important. So Paul tells them to say NO to legalism. Different people still need to hear this for different reasons.

- Some are clear about salvation by grace but not *living* in the grace of God.
- Others resist the thought of release from legalism. To some this *is* orthodoxy and to be defended at all costs.
- Some have tasted the freedom that is theirs in Christ but keep slipping back into rules.

Paul sets out to show how ineffective, inferior and dangerous legalism is. We see Paul “reasoning” with the Colossians using different arguments.

1. Legalism embraces a shadow and ignores the reality: (v16,17)

A shadow has no substance of its own; it has no permanent reality apart from the body that projects it. Just so with a religion of rules – it has no spiritual substance. Paul mentions religious festivals. He says they are shadows but Jesus is the substance. Christians often get hot under the collar about their “special days” being taken over by commercialism, but maybe Paul would get more annoyed with Christians who make a religious meal of them! Paul also makes mention of the Sabbath. Some Christians treat Sunday like a Christian Sabbath and tell you not to do this and that on this special day. Jesus said *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”* (Matthew 11v28) Jesus invited people to leave the heavy burdens laid on them by the legalists and come to Him for rest.

2. Legalism encourages false spirituality; (v18,19)

This is a description of people who parade what they do, or what they know or what they have experienced – who make a show of being more spiritual than others. The Pharisees sought to impress others with their spirituality. It was a performance for an audience. But Jesus exposed their hypocrisy. *“You do all these deeds to be seen by men”*. Paul says this is artificial spirituality - like an artificial leg, not part of a living, growing knowledge of Christ.

3. Legalism reintroduces you to slavery; (v20,21)

You are not a slave any longer. Our freedom cost Jesus His life on the cross. We are free! *Legally* free – that is what justification means, and *effectively* free. *“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.”* (Galatians 5v1)

4. Legalism builds nothing of lasting worth. (v22,23)

Over the centuries there have been rigorous, ascetic groups and individuals who have treated their bodies harshly to subdue “the flesh”! The grace of God is much more powerful. See Titus 2v11: Heaping demands on yourself and rigorous self-denial has only a temporary effect. God’s answer is a new heart.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Please read the Bible passage and the message summary first

Is there anything from Sunday's message you would like to pick up on straight away?

Have you read Terry Virgo's book 'Enjoying God's Grace' or heard his messages on 'Grace'? If so, did you find them helpful? Are there other books on this theme you might recommend?

What do you understand by the term "legalistic"? Why do you think some Christians are like this?

Have you been part of a church or been affected by Christians who are legalistic?

What is a healthy Christian attitude to days like Good Friday, Easter Sunday and Christmas Day? And what about our attitude to Sundays?

Were you ever made to feel a second-class Christian because you hadn't experienced what others around you had?

What kind of legalism might you be vulnerable to slipping into?

Why is the grace of God more powerful than legalism? (See Titus 2v11)