

## The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

“Why Man-Made Rules Don’t Work”

Colossians 2:20-23

Mark Vroegop

---

20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 21 "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" 22 (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using) — in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? 23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence (Col 2:20-23).

Imagine feeling the call of God to go to the mission field, raising your support, learning a new language, starting your work on the mission field, but after a few years you are so discouraged you end up coming home. And when you are asked, “What happened?” Your answer is: peanut butter.

Chuck Swindoll, in his book The Grace Awakening, tells the story of missionaries who were torpedoed by peanut butter:

“The particular place they were sent to serve the Lord did not have access to peanut butter. This particular family happened to enjoy peanut butter a great deal. Rather creatively, they made arrangements with some of their friends in the States to send them peanut butter every now and then so they could enjoy it with their meals. The problem is they didn’t know until they started receiving the supply of peanut butter that the other missionaries considered it a mark of spirituality that you *not* have peanut butter with your meals. I suppose the line went like this: “We believe since we can’t get peanut butter here, we should give it up for the cause of Christ,” or some such nonsense. A basis of spirituality was “bearing the cross” of living without peanut butter.

The young family didn’t buy into that line of thinking. Their family kept getting regular shipments of peanut butter. They didn’t flaunt it; they just enjoyed it in the privacy of their own home. Pressure began to intensify. You would expect adult missionaries to be big enough to let others eat what they pleased, right? Wrong. The legalism was so petty, the pressure got so intense and the exclusive treatment became so unfair, it finished them off spiritually.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Chuck Swindoll. The Grace Awakening. Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1990. p. 93-94.

That is the power of legalism. It has a deceptive and destructive power, and our passage today (Colossians 2:23) is one of the most important in the New Testament regarding this subject. Christ-centered thinking requires that we realize that man made rules don't work.

### **What Do I Mean By Legalism?**

It was weird two weeks ago to see about fifty percent of the congregation really understand what I was talking about when I took up the subject of legalism. Yet, I received some of the most gracious, joyous, and passionate emails to date because of that message. One person even said, "I think that some of the threads of the straight-jacket of legalism are starting to unwind." Some of you who know what I'm talking about because you experienced it, but there are others who, by God's grace, were spared the emotional and spiritual shrapnel caused by legalism; for you it is little more challenging to get your mind around.

Let me give you a two-fold explanation<sup>2</sup>. First, legalism is treating certain standards as regulations which are kept by your own power in order to gain favor with God. The goal is a better standing with God; the trust is in yourself (not in faith in Christ); and the means is standards of behavior. So the legalist is a very moral person. But rather than a humble trust in Christ's work and living a life dependent upon him, the legalist is self-dependent and self-focused. He uses his own power to make himself moral.

And in that way the legalist is no different than the licentious man. In fact, I've known licentious people to become legalists—swinging from wild and sinful behavior to a rigid, standards oriented view of life. Why does that happen? It happens because the root cause of licentiousness and legalism are the same: self-worship. The licentious man uses risky and sinful behavior to worship himself, and the legalist uses rules and regulations to worship himself.

The second definition of legalism is the creation of certain codes of conduct that go beyond the teaching of the Bible and making conformity to these codes critical to being a "real Christian" or part of the group. The issue here is not so much about favor with God as it is favor with man. The poison of this element of legalism is that it creates an exclusivity based upon standards that are not from God. Certain people are in; others are out. And the boundaries are not created by the Bible.

The problem with the first definition is that we might try, in our own power to be moral, the second definition is problematic because it is an attempt, in our own power, to make the church pure. Both are failures to trust God and his power. And the result is a very warped view of life such that you are not able to distinguish the spiritual forest for the spiritual trees.

---

<sup>2</sup> I am deeply indebted to John Piper's message [Flesh Tanks and Peashooter Regulations](http://www.desiringgod.org) ([www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org) – January 17, 1982) for the definitions and explanation of legalism. While his message dealt specific with the legalistic prohibition of alcohol in a church covenant, his explanation of legalism and its roots is the best I've seen to date.

## **Five Reasons Why Legalism Doesn't Work**

So with that as a background on the subject of legalism, let me distill Colossians 2:20-23 into five reasons why man-made rules are ineffective.

### **1. You are complete in Christ**

Verse 20 begins by yet another positional statement. The text says "if with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world." The word "died" refers to every believer's participation in the death of Christ whereby one has been delivered from the power of earthly and worldly things. The tense indicates that it is a completed event. In other words, you are dead to anything other than Christ. To put it positively, you are complete in Christ.

Over and over the Bible points us back to the beautiful truth of our union with Jesus. Central to that union is an identification not only in the death of Christ but also in his life. In other words, Jesus' death and life creates a death and life in the believer. Like a death of master frees the slave (Rom 6:16-23), like the way death severs the bond between a husband and wife (Rom 7:1-6), so the believer is freed from the dominion of anyone other than Christ.

Those who are "in Christ" have been given the powerful and personal presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit so that "the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4). If you have received Christ as your Savior, then you died to everything else that promises to make you complete. You died with Christ and you've been filled with the Spirit. Paul's pointed question here is why are you trying to make yourself more complete? You are in danger of going back to the very thing from which you were set free.

### **2. It is all about don't's that never last**

The second reason that man-made rules don't work is because the rules and regulations keep changing. Verse 21 indicates the tone of what the Colossians were being told: "Do not handle. Do not taste. Do not touch." There seems to be a progression of the three words into greater intensity – "Don't handle or taste this stuff...in fact don't even touch it."

But it is what Paul says in verse in verse 22 that is the key – "referring to things that all perish as they are used." The rules and regulations were governing things that were perishable objects of the world that passed away by their very use. Paul's argument here seems to be that it was pointless for them to regulate things that, in the end, didn't last. The "don't list" was a worthless list governing meaningless issues.

So when I say don't's never last I mean two things: First, I mean that merely negative rules do nothing to create new life within.<sup>3</sup> So these rules do not produce a lasting Christlikeness. They

---

<sup>3</sup> F.F. Bruce. The Epistle to the Colossians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1985. p. 126.

produce death, not life. Secondly, the clearest evidence that they don't last is the fact that the regulations change. The lists changes! It is not consistent from generation to generation, church to church, or even year to year.

### **3. It is man-made**

Central to the reason why the "don't list" doesn't last is the fact the reality of its source. God didn't make these rules, man did. The list is a product of human invention. Paul says that these rules are "in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men."

Now what is very interesting here is that the word for commandments is used three times in the New Testament (Matt 15:9, Mark 7:7, and Col 2:22). Each time that the word is used it refers to the spiritually worthless commands created by man. Let's look at Mark 7:6-13.

6 And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." 9 And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! 10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 11 But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God) — 12 then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

Man-made rules like this are ridiculous! They create hypocrisy, and the worse indictment of all is that they use external obedience to God as a smoke screen for what is really going on. Man-made rules actually abandon the commandment of God; they create disobedience in their claim of spiritual obedience.

This is why you must know the Word of God. Listen nothing that I say has any power – real, lasting power – unless it springs from and conforms to the Word of God.

12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12).

That is why I love expositional preaching. Do you know what I mean by that term? Some of you equate it with going verse by verse through a book (like Colossians). That can be expositional preaching and often it is. But that is not what expositional preaching is entirely. Verse by verse is the form. Expositional is a philosophy. And the philosophy is the belief that power of change flows from the text not my ideas about the text. You've got to know the text because real power comes from the Word.

However let me show the balance between something that is helpful and how it could become a man-made rule. I want you to be careful that you not think that expositional preaching is the only accurate way to teach the Bible. There have been people greatly used by God who did not preach expositionally (like Spurgeon), and there are other very solid churches in our area who use a different approach. So we must not become legalistic even with a good thing like expositional preaching even though it seems to me the most helpful way to unleash the power of the text. We would get into problems if we said, "real churches preach expositionally."

#### 4. It looks spiritual but isn't

The fourth reason that man-made rules don't work is that while they seem to be spiritual or appear to be spiritual, they really are not. I'll explain why this is the case in our final point, but I simply want you to see the warning that is here.

Paul uses the following words to describe the appearance of man-made rules:

- the appearance of **wisdom** – the rule seems to have some level of validity; it seems to make sense.
- The appearance of being **religious** – although the text says "self-made" don't miss the fact that the rules seem to promote a deeper spirituality. The self-made nature of it is less obvious that you would think.
- **Asceticism** – some rules seem to promote a personal humility.
- **Severity** to the body – the promotion of a rigorous discipline

Here's the problem: wisdom, being religious, humility, and discipline are not bad things! The problem becomes with their purpose. So don't hear me saying that all personal standards in life are bad. Many could be good and helpful.<sup>4</sup> The problem becomes when we start to define spirituality by our man-made rules and not by the clear teaching of Scripture.

Legalistic man-made rules do not work because they really aren't spiritual, even though they seem like it.

#### 5. It doesn't stop the flesh

The final point is probably the most important. Verse 23 ends with a startling statement: "but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh." NIV says, "they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence." NLT says, "they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires."

Why do man-made rules not stop the flesh?

---

<sup>4</sup> I think that helpful personal standards should pass three tests: 1) Is it based upon Biblical principle? 2) Can I keep it from becoming an instrument of judgment on others, allowing the Spirit to guide their consciences? and 3) Does it tend to lead me to trust Christ more, not less?

The answer lies in what I said in the beginning about the roots of legalism and the nature of mankind's rebellion against God. The chief element and problem of the flesh is a proud, self-reliant spirit. Self-worship is the raw reality of every sin. And man-made rules create more pride, more self-reliance, and more self-worship. These rules don't stop the flesh; they pander to it in a frightening way.

Here's how: man-made rules create spiritual self-deception. And that is why I want you to see how dangerous it is.

Listen to this quotation comparing an addiction to alcohol to legalism:

"Legalism is a more dangerous disease than alcoholism because it doesn't look like one. Alcohol makes men fail; legalism helps them succeed in the world. Alcoholism makes men depend on the bottle; legalism makes them self-sufficient, depending on no one. Alcoholism destroys moral resolve; legalism gives it strength. Alcoholics don't feel welcome in church; legalists love to hear their morality extolled in church."<sup>5</sup>

Do you see the problem? Do you see why this is so important? Legalism is deadly. In fact I am convinced that there may be more people in Hell because of this issue than any other. The enemy doesn't care if he can destroy you with Godless sensuality or Godless spirituality. All he cares about is that it is Godless. But the problem – the frightening problem – with Godless spirituality is that those guilty of it feel spiritual. A sensual man feels guilty. A spiritually proud man feels religious.

So do you see why Paul spent so much time extolling and drawing our hearts to the person of Christ? Do you see how important it is to have a good understanding of the doctrine of Christ? Do you see the beautiful power of Jesus changing your heart and filling you with the Holy Spirit?

Some of you need to see that your proud, self-reliant, self-justifying heart is horribly dangerous – you just don't see it. Or maybe you do now.

And if, God by his Spirit, is opening your eyes to the reality of your heart – don't resist his gentle wooing. Run to Jesus.

Because I have to tell you: Man-made rules do not work. But Jesus does!

© College Park Church

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. [www.yourchurch.com](http://www.yourchurch.com)

---

<sup>5</sup> John Piper. *Flesh Tank and Peashooter Regulations*. [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org); January 17, 1982. p. 6-7