

BETHEL CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP
FAIR LAWN, NJ
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March 13, 2011

“The Real Problem With Legalism”
Colossians 2:20-23

Hopefully we all believe that physical discipline is necessary for the proper care of our bodies. If we eat too much, we become overweight; if we stay up too late, we become irritable and fatigued; if we don't get enough exercise, we get out of shape. But while there is a connection between physical discipline and health, there is no connection between disciplining our bodies and sanctifying our souls.

The false teachers at Colossae didn't quite see things that way. They were promoting a rigorous form of self-denial in order to enhance one's relationship with God. Their creed contained a number of specific taboos, which were not exactly sanctioned by Scripture: “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch . . .” (v. 21). This was a particularly insidious form of legalism, which was associated, among other things, with a “harsh treatment of the body” (v. 23). Based upon the translation of the ESV, its called “asceticism” (vv. 18, 23).

However, this word is usually translated “humility” when used elsewhere in the New Testament. But in this context, Paul is obviously using it in a negative sense. The NASB translates it “self-abasement,” meaning that these teachers were even willing to embrace a level of physical suffering in order to enhance their appearance of piety. It is, then, a “false humility” (translated this way by the NIV), for outward appearances can be deceiving.

As noted in last week's message, this is part of the Colossian heresy that Paul has begun to warn his readers about (vv. 16-19). In the verses before us this morning (vv. 20-23) he will continue to attack and condemn this approach to Christian living. He will do so without mercy, forcefully arguing why this teaching is so dangerously wrong. In so doing, the real problem with legalism will become self-evident.

I. Legalism Ignores The Accomplishments Of The Cross (vv. 20-22)

One of the central teachings of the Apostle Paul is that the cross was not only the Savior's cross; it was also the believer's cross. At the moment of conversion, the Spirit of God immerses us into a vital, spiritual union with Christ. We are, therefore, “in Christ,” which means among other things that when He died, we died. The application of this truth is foundational to living the Christian life. Because we died with Christ, we have died to the power of indwelling sin (Rom. 6:1-14) and to the bondage of the Mosaic Law (Rom. 7:1-6; 2 Corinthians. 3:14-18; Galatians 3:15-4:7). In these verses, Paul also explains that our union with Christ means that we died to the bondage of the world and its precepts, including its “man-made rules” (v. 22) and “self-made religion” (v. 23). In other words, the cross of Christ has closed the door upon that entire way of thinking.

The practical significance of these verses is far reaching. For the Ascetic of Paul's day, the mere avoidance of certain foods was the means of enhancing one's relationship with God and the pathway to holiness. But legalism, in whatever form it takes, is always a system of negatives. The taboos may vary from generation to generation and from culture to culture, but they will always pose a threat to our joy, and freedom, and life in Christ. No matter how we do the math, no amount of burdensome negatives will ever add up to a single, spiritual positive.

II. Legalism Is Powerless To Curb The Desires Of The Flesh (v. 23)

On the surface, this sort of self-denial may look spiritual. It may have the appearance of wisdom, leading us to think that by submitting to these practices we become a uniquely committed Christian. But they can do no such thing simply because they lack any value in "stopping the indulgence of the flesh" (ESV). "In fact," writes one of my former mentors, "the flesh just goes underground and expresses itself in a thinly disguised pride. The flesh cannot please God, and that is why God has dealt with it so radically in the cross." He then goes on to illustrate his point:

Many years ago the beloved H. A. Ironside, one of the great Bible teachers of the last generation, told the students at the Dallas Seminary of his struggle with pride. Finally he was advised by a friend, whom he sought out for help, to put signs upon his chest and back containing in large print Bible verses and then parade up and down in the city streets, calling out constantly the verses. This, he was advised, would eliminate his pride. Dr. Ironside said that he followed the advice and that, when he finished, his first thought was, 'There is not another person in this locality who is dedicated enough to do such a thing as I have done!'

(Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, "Studies in The Epistle to The Colossians," in Bibliotheca Sacra, July, 1963)

In light of this passage as a whole, the real problem with legalism should be obvious to all. Because of its emphasis upon the negative, legalism inevitably turns our attention away from the positive. Biblical holiness comes not from rigorous standards of self-restraint but from a mind that stays fixed and focused on the beauty of the risen Christ, and all that we are in Him. It is precisely this focus that Paul will go on to emphasize in the verses we shall be looking at next week: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on things that are on earth."