

**Colossians 2:9-23**  
**September 8, 2024**

**Open with Prayer**

**HOOK:**

Q: What are examples of legalism that is still happening in the church today? What comes to mind? [Let people engage]

**Transition:** Legalism is the view that salvation is either earned or maintained through obedience to certain commandments, rather than through faith alone. Legalism turns my opinion you're your obligation! Some examples of legalism in the church include:

- Judging others for their personal choices, like drinking alcohol, clothes they wear, movies they choose to watch; and I grew up with “no dancing!”
- Some Christians turn their matter of taste in music into a spiritual issue;
- Focusing on rules or rituals instead of staying connected to Jesus. For example, when it comes to divorce and remarriage, some Christians hold everyone to a stricter standard like whether they can be a leader in the church.

Many people have been turned off by the church because of man-made regulations. Paul was acutely aware of legalism and how it could derail the church in Colossae. He will keep them and us focused on Jesus, whom we have the fullness of Christ. Let's begin.

**BOOK:**

***Freedom From Human Regulations Through Life With Christ***

<sup>9</sup> For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, <sup>10</sup> and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. <sup>11</sup> In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature (or the flesh), not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, <sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature (or your flesh), God made you (some manuscripts “us”) alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, <sup>14</sup> having canceled 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. <sup>15</sup> And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (or them in him).

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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: <sup>21</sup> “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? <sup>22</sup> These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. <sup>23</sup> 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.

**Process Observations/Questions:**

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

**LOOK:**

You and I share in His victory over the devil. We need not worry about the elemental forces that govern the planets and try to influence men's lives. The satanic armies of principalities and powers are defeated and disgraced! As we claim the victory of Christ, use the equipment He has provided for us (Eph. 6:10ff), and trust Him, we are free from the influence of the devil. What a wonderful position and provision we have in Christ! Are we living up to it by faith?

**Close in Prayer**

**Commentaries for Today's Lesson:**

***Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 2, pp. 125-132). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.***

**Watch Out for Spiritual Perils (Col. 2:8–10)**

Paul continued the military image with this warning: “Beware lest any man carry you off as a captive” (literal translation). The false teachers did not go out and win the lost, no more than the cultists do today. They “kidnapped” converts from churches! Most of the people I have talked with who are members of antichristian cults were at one time associated with a Christian church of one denomination or another.

How is it possible for false teachers to capture people? The answer is simple: These “captives” are ignorant of the truths of the Word of God. They become fascinated by the

philosophy and empty delusion of the false teachers. (This is not to say that *all* philosophy is wrong, because there is a Christian philosophy of life. The word simply means “to love wisdom.”) When a person does not know the doctrines of the Christian faith, he can easily be captured by false religions.

This philosophy of the false teachers is “hollow and deceptive” (Col. 2:8, NIV) for several reasons. To begin with, it is the tradition of men and not the truth of God’s Word. The word *tradition* means “that which is handed down”; and there is a true Christian tradition (1 Cor. 15:3ff; 2 Thes. 2:15; 3:6; 2 Tim. 2:2). The important thing about any teaching is its origin: Did it come from God or from man? The religious leaders in our Lord’s day had their traditions and were very zealous to obey them and protect them (Matt. 15:1–20). Even the Apostle Paul, before he met the Lord, was “exceedingly zealous of the traditions” (Gal. 1:14).

If a new Christian from a distant mission field were to visit many of our churches, he would probably be astounded at the ideas and practices we have that cannot be supported by God’s Word. Our man-made traditions are usually more important to us than the God-given doctrines of the Scriptures! While it is not wrong to have church traditions that remind us of our godly heritage, we must be careful not to make these traditions equal to the Word of God.

The false teachers’ traditions were “hollow and deceptive” for another reason: they involved “the rudiments of the world.” The Greek word translated “rudiments” basically means “one of a row or series.” It had several meanings attached to it: (1) the elementary sounds or letters, the ABCs; (2) the basic elements of the universe, as in 2 Peter 3:10–12; (3) the basic elements of knowledge, the ABCs of some system, as in Hebrews 5:12. But in ancient Greece, this word also meant “the elemental spirits of the universe, the angels that influenced the heavenly bodies.” It was one of the words in the vocabulary of the religious astrology of that day.

The gnostics believed that the angels and the heavenly bodies influenced people’s lives. Paul’s warnings to the Colossians about “new moon” and other religious practices determined by the calendar (Col. 2:16) may be related to this gnostic teaching, though the Jewish people also watched the calendar (Gal. 4:10). One thing is certain: such teachings about demons and angels were not a part of true Christian doctrine. If anything, such teachings were satanic.

The fact that this teaching is not after Christ is sufficient to warn us against horoscopes, astral charts, Ouija boards, and other spiritist practices. The whole zodiac system is contrary to the teaching of the Word of God. The Christian who dabbles in mysticism and the occult is only asking for trouble.

Why follow empty philosophy when we have all fullness in Christ? This is like turning away from the satisfying river to drink at the dirty cisterns of the world (Jer. 2:13). Of course, the false teachers in Colossae did not ask the believers to forsake Christ. They asked them to make Christ a *part* of the new system. But this would only remove Him from His rightful place of preeminence.

So Paul gave the true and lasting antidote to all false teaching: “All fullness is in Christ, and you have been made full in Him. *Why, then, would you need anything else?*” (see Col. 2:9–10)

We have seen the word “fullness” (*pleroma*) before (Col. 1:19). It means “the sum total of all that God is, all of His being and attributes.” This word was used by the gnostics, but they did not give it the same meaning as did Paul. To them, the *pleroma* was the source of all the “emanations” through which men could come to God. The highest point in gnostic religious experience was to share in the *pleroma*.

Of course, there are no emanations from God. The gulf between heaven and earth was bridged in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He is declared to be “Emmanuel, God with us” (Matt.

1:23). Jesus Christ is the fullness of God, and that fullness dwells continually and permanently in Him *bodily*. Once again, Paul refuted the gnostic doctrine that matter was evil and that Jesus did not have a human body.

When Jesus Christ ascended to heaven, He went in a human body. It was a glorified body, to be sure, but it was real. After His resurrection, our Lord was careful to assure His disciples that He was the same Person in the same body; He was not a ghost or a spirit (see John 20:19–29). There is a glorified Man in heaven! The God-Man, Jesus Christ, embodies the fullness of God!

Now, the remarkable thing is this: *every believer shares that fullness!* “And you are complete in Him” (Col. 2:10). The tense of the Greek verb indicates that this fullness is a permanent experience. Dr. Kenneth Wuest’s very literal *Expanded Translation* reads, “And you are in Him, having been completely filled full with the present result that you are in a state of fullness.”

When a person is born again into the family of God, he is born complete in Christ. His spiritual growth is not by *addition*, but by *nutrition*. He grows from the inside out. Nothing needs to be added to Christ because He already is the very fullness of God. As the believer draws on Christ’s fullness, he is “filled unto all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19). What more does he need?

Indeed, there are spiritual perils that the Christian faces. The fundamental test of any religious teaching is, “Where does it put Jesus Christ—His person and His work?” Does it rob Him of His fullness? Does it deny either His deity or His humanity? Does it affirm that the believer must have some “new experience” to supplement his experience with Christ? If so, that teaching is wrong and dangerous.

### **Draw on Your Spiritual Provisions (Col. 2:11–15)**

Remember that the false teaching that threatened the Colossian church was made up of several elements: Oriental mysticism, astrology, philosophy, and Jewish legalism. It is the latter element that Paul dealt with in this section of his letter. Apparently, the false teachers insisted that their converts submit to circumcision and obey the Old Testament Law.

Gnostic legalism was not quite the same as the brand of legalism practiced by the Judaizers whom Paul refuted in his Epistle to the Galatians. The Jewish teachers that Paul attacked in Galatians insisted that circumcision and obedience to the Law were necessary for salvation. (See Acts 15 for some background on this problem.) Gnostic legalism said that the Jewish Law would help the believers become more spiritual. If they were circumcised, and if they watched their diets and observed the holy days, then they would become part of the “spiritual elite” in the church. Unfortunately, we have people with similar ideas in our churches today.

Paul made it clear that the Christian is not subject in any way to the Old Testament legal system, *nor can it do him any good spiritually*. Jesus Christ *alone* is sufficient for our every spiritual need, for all of God’s fullness is in Him. We are identified with Jesus Christ because He is the Head of the body (Col. 1:18) and we are the members of the body (1 Cor. 12:12–13). Paul explained our fourfold identification with Jesus Christ that makes it not only unnecessary, but sinful for us to get involved in any kind of legalism.

***Circumcised in Him (v. 11)***. Circumcision was a sign of God’s covenant with the Jewish people (Gen. 17:9–14). Though it was a physical operation, it had a spiritual significance. The trouble was that the Jewish people depended on the physical and not the spiritual. A mere physical operation could never convey spiritual grace (Rom. 2:25–29). Often in the Old Testament, God warned His people to turn from their sins and experience a *spiritual* circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; Ezek. 44:7). People make the same

mistake today when they depend on some religious ritual to save them—such as baptism or the Lord’s Supper.

It is not necessary for the believer to submit to circumcision, because he has already experienced a spiritual circumcision through his identification with Jesus Christ. But there is a contrast here between Jewish circumcision and the believer’s spiritual circumcision in Christ:

<i>Jews</i>	<i>Believers</i>
external surgery	internal—the heart
only part of the body	the whole “body of sins”
done by hands	done without hands
no spiritual help in conquering sin	enables them to overcome sin

When Jesus Christ died and rose again, He won a complete and final victory over sin. He not only died *for* our sins (salvation), but He “died *unto* sin” (sanctification; see Rom. 6:10ff). What the Law could not do, Jesus Christ accomplished for us. The old nature (“the body of the sins of the flesh”) was put off—rendered inoperative—so that we need no longer be enslaved to its desires. The old sinful nature is not eradicated, for we can still sin (1 John 1:5–2:6). But the power has been broken as we yield to Christ and walk in the power of the Spirit.

***Alive in Him (vv. 12–13).*** Here Paul used the illustration of baptism. Keep in mind that in the New Testament, the word *baptize* has both a literal and a figurative meaning. The literal meaning is “to dip, to immerse.” The figurative meaning is “to be identified with.” For example, the Jewish nation was “baptized unto Moses” when it went through the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:1–2). There was no water involved in this baptism, because they went over on dry land. In this experience, the nation was identified with Moses.

Paul used the word *baptism* in a figurative sense in this section of his letter—for no amount of material water could bury a person with Christ or make him alive in Christ. Water baptism by immersion is a picture of this spiritual experience. When a person is saved, he is immediately baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–13) and identified with the Head, Jesus Christ. This identification means that *whatever happened to Christ also happened to us*. When He died, we died with Him. When He was buried, we were buried. When He arose again, we arose with Him—and we left the graveclothes of the old life behind (Col. 3:1–14).

All of this took place “through the faith of the operation of God” (Col. 2:12). It was the power of God that changed us, not the power of water. The Spirit of God identified us with Jesus Christ, and we were buried with Him, raised with Him, and made alive with Him! (The Greek verbs are very expressive: co-buried, co-raised, and co-made alive.) Because God raised His Son from the dead, we have eternal life.

The practical application is clear: since we are identified with Christ, and He is the fullness of God, *what more do we need?* We have experienced the energy of God through faith in Christ, so why turn to the deadness of the Law? God has forgiven us all our trespasses (Col. 2:13b) so that we have a perfect standing before Him.

***Free from the Law in Him (v. 14).*** Jesus not only took our sins to the cross (1 Peter 2:24), but He also took the Law to the cross and nailed it there, forever out of the way. The Law was

certainly against us, because it was impossible for us to meet its holy demands. Even though God never gave the Ten Commandments to the Gentiles, the righteous demands of the Law—God’s holy standards—were “written in their hearts” (Rom. 2:12–16).

When He shed His blood for sinners, Jesus Christ canceled the huge debt that was against sinners because of their disobedience to God’s holy Law. In Bible days, financial records were often kept on parchment, and the writing could be washed off. This is the picture Paul painted.

How could the holy God be just in canceling a debt? In this way His Son paid the full debt when He died on the cross. If a judge sets a man free who is guilty of a crime, the judge cheapens the law and leaves the injured party without restitution. God paid sin’s debt when He gave His Son on the cross, and He upheld the holiness of His own Law.

But Jesus Christ did even more than cancel the debt: He took the Law that condemned us and set it aside so that we are no longer under its dominion. We are “delivered from the Law” (Rom. 7:6). We “are not under the Law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). This does not mean that we are lawless, because the righteousness of the Law is fulfilled in us as we walk in the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:4). Our relationship with Jesus Christ enables us to obey God out of love, not out of slavish fear.

***Victorious in Him (v. 15).*** Jesus not only dealt with sin and the Law on the cross, but He also dealt with Satan. Speaking about His crucifixion, Jesus said, “Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out” (John 12:31). The death of Christ on the cross looked like a great victory for Satan, but it turned out to be a great defeat from which Satan cannot recover.

Jesus had three great victories on the cross. First, He “disarmed the powers and authorities” (Col. 2:15, NIV), stripping Satan and his army of whatever weapons they held. Satan cannot harm the believer who will not harm himself. It is when we cease to watch and pray (as did Peter) that Satan can use his weapons against us.

Second, Jesus “made a public spectacle” (Col. 2:15, NIV) of the enemy, exposing Satan’s deceit and vileness. In His death, resurrection, and ascension, Christ vindicated God and vanquished the devil.

His third victory is found in the word *triumph*. Whenever a Roman general won a great victory on foreign soil, took many captives and much loot, and gained new territory for Rome, he was honored by an official parade known as “the Roman triumph.” Paul alluded to this practice in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (see 2 Cor. 2:14). Jesus Christ won a complete victory, and He returned to glory in a great triumphal procession (Eph. 4:8ff). In this, He disgraced and defeated Satan.

You and I share in His victory over the devil. We need not worry about the elemental forces that govern the planets and try to influence men’s lives. The satanic armies of principalities and powers are defeated and disgraced! As we claim the victory of Christ, use the equipment He has provided for us (Eph. 6:10ff), and trust Him, we are free from the influence of the devil.

What a wonderful position and provision we have in Christ! Are we living up to it by faith?

*Colossians 2:16–23*

From the flashing red signals at a railroad crossing to the skull and crossbones on a bottle of rubbing alcohol, warnings are a part of daily life. Children must be taught to heed warnings, and adults must be reminded not to get too accustomed to them. Warnings are a matter of life or death.

The spiritual life also has its dangers and its warnings. Moses warned the Israelites to beware of forgetting the Lord once they got settled in the Promised Land (Deut. 6:12). The Lord Jesus often used the word *beware* (Matt. 7:15; Mark 12:38; Luke 12:15).

Paul had already warned about the false teachers (Col. 2:8). In this section of his letter, Paul gave three warnings for us to heed if we are to enjoy our fullness in Jesus Christ.

### **“Let No One Judge You” (Col. 2:16–17)**

This warning exposes the danger of the *legalism* of the gnostic teachers in Colossae. Their doctrines were a strange mixture of Oriental mysticism, Jewish legalism, and a smattering of philosophy and Christian teaching. Apparently, the Jewish legalism played a very important role. This is no surprise, because human nature thrives in “religious duties.” The flesh is weak when it comes to doing spiritual things (Matt. 26:41), but it is very strong when it comes to practicing religious rules and regulations. Somehow, adhering to the religious routine inflates the ego and makes a person content in his self-righteousness. In discussing this problem, Paul presented three important truths.

***The basis for our freedom (v. 16a).*** It is found in the word *therefore*, which relates this discussion to the previous verses. The basis for our freedom is the person and work of Jesus Christ. All the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Him (Col. 2:9). On the cross, He canceled the debt and the dominion of the Law (Col. 2:14). As believers, we are under grace as a rule of life and not under Law (Rom. 6:14ff).

The believing Gentiles in Colossae never were under the Law of Moses since that Law was given only to Israel (Rom. 9:4). It seems strange that, now that they were Christians, they would want to submit themselves to Jewish legalism! Paul had the same problem with the Gentiles in the churches of Galatia, and he refuted Jewish legalism in his letter to the Galatian believers (Gal. 3:1ff).

The person who judges a believer because that believer is not living under Jewish laws is really judging Jesus Christ. He is saying that Christ did not finish the work of salvation on the cross, and that we must add something to it. He is also saying that Jesus Christ is not sufficient for all the spiritual needs of the Christian. The false teachers in Colossae were claiming a “deeper spiritual life” for all who would practice the Law. Outwardly, their practices seemed to be spiritual; but in actual fact, these practices accomplished nothing spiritual.

***The bondage of legalism (v. 16).*** Let no one tell you otherwise: legalism *is* bondage! Peter called it a “yoke upon the neck” (Acts 15:10). Paul used the same image when he warned the Galatians: “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1).

These legalistic regulations had to do with foods and with eating and drinking (partaking or abstaining). Under the Old Testament system, certain foods were classified as “clean” or “unclean” (see Lev. 11). But Jesus made it clear that, of *itself*, food was neutral. It was what came out of the heart that made a person spiritual or unspiritual (Matt. 15:1–20). Peter was reminded of this lesson again when he was on the housetop in Joppa (Acts 10:9ff) and when he was rebuked in Antioch by Paul (Gal. 2:11ff). “But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do” (1 Cor. 8:8, NIV).

It is likely that God’s instructions about foods given through Moses had *physical* reasons behind them as well as spiritual. This point that Paul brings up is a different matter. If a man feels he is healthier for abstaining from certain foods, then he should abstain and care for his

body. But he should not judge others who can eat that food, nor should he make it a test of spiritual living. Romans 14–15 is the key passage on this subject.

But the legalistic system not only involved diet; it also involved *days*. Once again, this was borrowed from the laws given through Moses. The Old Testament Jew was commanded to keep the weekly Sabbath, which was the seventh day of the week (Ex. 20:9–11). It is wrong to call Sunday “the Christian Sabbath” because it is not so designated in the New Testament. It is “the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10), the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), the day that commemorates the victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (John 20:1, 19, 26).

The Jews also had their feast days (Lev. 25) and their special “new-moon” celebrations (see Isa. 1:13). Their religion was tied to the calendar. Now, all of this had its proper function under the old dispensation; but it was not meant to be a permanent part of the faith under the new dispensation (see John 1:17). The Law was a schoolmaster that helped to train and discipline Israel in the childhood of the nation, preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah. Now that Jesus had come, the schoolmaster was no longer needed to perform the same functions (Gal. 3:24–4:11).

Does this mean that the Old Testament Law has no ministry to New Testament Christians? Of course not! The Law still reveals the holiness of God, and in the Law Jesus Christ can be seen (Luke 24:27). “We know that the Law is good if a man uses it properly” (1 Tim. 1:8, NIV). The Law reveals sin and warns of the consequences of sin—but it has no power to prevent sin or redeem the sinner. Only grace can do that.

***The blessing of grace (v. 17).*** The Law is but a shadow; but in Christ we have the reality, the substance. “The Law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming” (Heb. 10:1, NIV). Why go back into shadows when we have the reality in Jesus Christ? This is like trying to hug a shadow when the reality is at hand!

People who religiously observe diets and days give an outward semblance of spirituality, but these practices cannot change their hearts. Legalism is a popular thing because you can “measure” your spiritual life—and even brag about it! But this is a far cry from measuring up to Christ! (Eph. 4:13)

### **“Let No Man Beguile You of Your Reward” (Col. 2:18–19)**

The word translated *beguile* in the *King James Version* means “to declare unworthy of a prize.” It is an athletic term: the umpire disqualifies the contestant because he has not obeyed the rules. The contestant does not cease to be a citizen of the land, but he forfeits the honor of winning a prize. A Christian who fails to obey God’s directions does not lose his salvation. But he does lose the approval of the Lord and the rewards He has promised to those who are faithful (1 Cor. 3:8).

It is a gracious act of God that He has promised rewards to those who serve Him. Certainly He does not owe us anything! We ought to be so grateful that He has saved us from judgment that we would serve Him whether or not we received a reward. Most of God’s servants probably obey Him out of love and devotion and never think about rewards. Just as there are degrees of punishment in hell (Matt. 23:14), so there will be degrees of glory in heaven—even though all believers will be like Christ in their glorified bodies. The old Puritan Thomas Watson said it perfectly: “Though every vessel of mercy shall be full [in heaven], yet one may hold more than another.”

There is, then, the danger that our lives today will rob us of reward and glory tomorrow. The peril Paul had in mind here was Oriental *mysticism*, the belief that a person can have an



immediate experience with the spiritual world, completely apart from the Word of God or the Holy Spirit. The false teachers in Colossae had visions and made contact with angels. In bypassing the Word of God and the Spirit of God, they were opening themselves to all kinds of demonic activity—because Satan knows how to give counterfeit experiences to people (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

The word translated “intruding” was a technical term used by the mystical religions of that day. It meant “to set foot in the inner shrine, to be fully initiated into the mysteries of the religion.” No Christian has to go through any initiation ceremony to get into the presence of God. We may have “boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus” (Heb. 10:19). We may “come boldly unto the throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16). And as for worshiping angels, *they are our servants!* The angels are “all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation” (Heb. 1:14).

Of course, all of this mystical ceremony was wrapped up in a false humility that was actually an expression of pride. “I am not good enough to come directly to God,” the gnostic would say, “so I will start with one of the angels.”

Trying to reach God the Father through anyone or anything other than His Son, Jesus Christ, is idolatry. Jesus Christ is the one and only Mediator between God and man (John 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:5). The person who worships through angels or saints now in heaven does not prove his humility, for he is not submitting to the authority of God’s Word. Actually, he reveals a subtle kind of pride that substitutes man-made traditions for the Word of God. “His unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions” (Col. 2:18, NIV).

True worship always humbles a person. The *mind* is awed by the greatness of God; the *heart* is filled with love for God; and the *will* is submitted to the purpose God has for the life. The Gnostics, however, were interested primarily in “deeper spiritual knowledge,” and they ignored God’s truth. Their “inner secrets” gave them big heads, but not burning hearts or submissive wills. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1, NIV).

It is worth noting that a true spiritual experience with God leads to submission and service. When Job met the Lord he said, “I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5–6). Peter fell down before his Lord and said, “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). Isaiah saw the Lord and confessed how sinful he was (Isa. 6); and when John saw the risen Christ, he fell at His feet like a dead man (Rev. 1:17).

The cheap familiarity with which some people approach God in prayer, or talk about Him in testimony or conversation sometimes borders on blasphemy. The saintly Bishop Westcott of Great Britain, author of many scholarly commentaries on various books of the Bible, once wrote: “Every year makes me tremble at the daring with which people speak of spiritual things.”

Tragically, this “vain religion of the puffed-up fleshly mind” is but a mere substitute for true spiritual nourishment from Jesus Christ, the Head of the body, His church. This is one of several passages in the New Testament that pictures the church as the body of Christ (see Rom. 12:4ff; 1 Cor. 12–14; Eph. 4:4–16; Col. 1:18, 24). All of us, as believers, are members of the spiritual body, the church, because of the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12–13). As Christians, we minister to one another in the body just as the various parts of the human body minister to each other (1 Cor. 12:14ff).

But if a believer does not draw on the spiritual nourishment that comes from Christ and other Christians, he becomes weak. The false teachers were not holding to the Head, and therefore they

were spiritually undernourished; but *they* thought they were spiritual experts. Imagine thinking yourself a giant when in reality you are a pygmy!

The false teachers were anxious to win converts to their cause; but the spiritual body grows by *nutrition*, not by *addition*. Every member of Christ's body, including the "ligaments and sinews" (joints and bands), is important to the health and growth of the body. No matter what your spiritual gift may be, you are important to the church. In fact, some people who may not have spectacular public ministries are probably just as important behind the scenes as those out in public.

It is through worship, prayer, and the Word that we draw on the spiritual resources of Christ. All of us must be part of a local church where we can exercise our own spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:11–17). "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7, NIV). The New Testament says nothing of "isolated saints" outside of the local church.

But it is possible to be *in* a local church and not draw on the Head and the nourishment of the spiritual body. The false teachers in Colossae sought to introduce their teachings into the local assembly; and if they succeeded, they would have caused the spiritual nourishment to *decrease* instead of *increase*. Unless the members of the local assembly abide in Christ, yield to the Spirit, and obey the Word, they cannot experience the life of the Head, Jesus Christ.

There is a fascination with "religious mysticism" that attracts people. Learning mysteries, being initiated into the inner secrets, and having contact with the spirit world all seem exciting.

But these practices are soundly condemned by God. The true Christian glories in Christ, not in his own experience. He follows the Word, led by the Holy Spirit; and as he abides in Christ, he experiences blessing and fruitfulness. He seeks no other experience than that which relates him to the Head, Jesus Christ.

### **"Let No One Enslave You!" (Col. 2:20–23)**

Paul condemned legalism and mysticism; next he attacked and condemned *asceticism*. An ascetic practices rigorous self-denial and even self-mortification in order to become more spiritual. Ascetic practices were popular during the Middle Ages: wearing hair shirts next to the skin, sleeping on hard beds, whipping oneself, not speaking for days (maybe years), going without food or sleep, etc.

There is a definite relationship between legalism and asceticism, for the ascetic often subjects himself to rules and regulations: "Touch not, taste not, handle not" (Col. 2:21). Certain foods or practices are unholy and must be avoided. Other practices are holy and must never be neglected. The ascetic's entire life is wrapped up in a system of rules.

As Christians, we admit that physical discipline is needed in our lives. Some of us eat too much and are overweight. Some of us drink too much coffee or cola drinks and are nervous and upset. We believe that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19–20), yet sometimes we do not care for our bodies as we should. "Physical training is of some value," Paul wrote (1 Tim. 4:8, NIV). Paul disciplined his own body and kept it under control (1 Cor. 9:27). So there is a place in our Christian lives for proper care of our bodies.

But the ascetic hopes to sanctify the soul by his discipline of the body, and it is this heresy that Paul attacked. Just as days and diets have no sanctifying value, neither does fleshly discipline. In this section Paul gave several arguments to warn the Christian against carnal religious asceticism.

***The Christian's spiritual position (v. 20).*** Asceticism has to do with the rudiments of the world and not the riches of the kingdom. Earlier we saw the word *rudiments* and learned that it

meant “the fundamentals or ABCs of something” (Col. 2:8). In this case, “the rudiments of the world” refers to rules and regulations about foods. As Christians, we are dead to all of this because of our union with Jesus Christ in death, burial, and resurrection (see Rom. 6; Col. 2:12–15). Though we are *in* the world physically, we are not *of* the world spiritually (John 17:15–16). We have been transferred into God’s kingdom (Col. 1:13), and therefore we govern our lives by His laws and not the rules of men.

This is not to suggest that Christians are lawless. A student in a Christian school once told me it was “unspiritual” for him to obey the rules! I reminded him that Christians always respect the authority of those over them (1 Peter 2:11ff), and that he knew the rules before he arrived on campus. If he did not like them, he should have stayed home! Paul was not counseling us to be rebels, but he was warning us not to think we are spiritual because we obey certain rules and regulations that pertain to the body.

***The futility of ascetic rules (vv. 21–22).*** To begin with, these rules did not come from God; they were the inventions of men. God “giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). Foods have been “created to be received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:3). But the “commandments and doctrines” of the false teachers replaced the inspired Word of God (see Mark 7:6–9). The doctrines were what the false teachers believed; the commandments were the regulations they gave in applying their doctrines to practical daily life.

God gave foods to be used, and they “perish with the using” (Col. 2:22). Jesus explained that food went into the stomach, not the heart (Mark 7:18ff). The man who refuses certain foods because they will defile him does not understand what either Jesus or Paul taught: “I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself” (Rom. 14:14).

Many of us are quick to criticize the ancient monks, the Oriental mystics, and the Hindu or Muslim fakirs; but we fail to see this same error in our own churches. While there are automatic connections between physical discipline and health, there is no connection between such discipline and holiness. If we deliberately abstain from some food or drink to keep from hurting a weaker Christian (Rom. 14:13ff), that is one thing. But we must not say that our abstinence makes us more spiritual than another brother who partakes of that food and gives thanks to God (Rom. 14:6).

***The deception of asceticism (v. 23).*** The people who practice asceticism have a “reputation” for spirituality, but the product does not live up to the promotion. I am amazed at the way educated people in America flock to see and hear gurus and other Eastern spiritual leaders whose teachings cannot change the human heart. This “self-imposed worship” is not the true worship of God, which must be “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). Their humility is false, and their harsh disciplines accomplish nothing for the inner man.

While it is certainly better to exercise self-control than to yield to the physical appetites of the body, we must not think that such self-control is necessarily *spiritually* motivated. The ascetics of many non-Christian religions give evidence of remarkable self-control. The stoics and their ascetic philosophy were well known in Paul’s day. Their adherents could duplicate any discipline that the gnostic teachers cared to present.

The power of Christ in the life of the believer does more than merely restrain the desires of the flesh: *it puts new desires within him*. Nature determines appetite. The Christian has the very nature of God within (2 Peter 1:4), and this means he has godly ambitions and desires. He does not need *law* on the outside to control his appetites because he has *life* on the inside! The harsh rules of the ascetics “lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (Col. 2:23, NIV). If anything, they eventually bring out the worst instead of the best. In the closing two chapters of

this letter, Paul explained how the new life functions in the believer to give him purity and victory.

This section closes the second chapter of Colossians in which the emphasis was on *danger*. Paul defended the preeminence of Jesus Christ, and he refuted the false doctrines of legalism, mysticism, and asceticism. It now remains for us to believe what he wrote and practice these spiritual principles.

The answer to legalism is the spiritual reality we have in Christ. The answer to mysticism is the spiritual union with Christ, the Head of the church. The answer to asceticism is our position in Christ in death, burial, and resurrection.

We put all of this into daily practice as we fellowship with Christ through worship, the Word, and prayer. As we yield to the indwelling Spirit, we receive the power we need for daily living. It is in our fellowship with other believers that we contribute spiritually to the growth of the body, the church, and the other members of the body contribute to us. What a wonderful way to live!

Is Christ preeminent in your life? Are you drawing on His spiritual power, or depending on some man-made “religious” substitute?

**Lightner, R. P. (1985). *Colossians*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 677-679) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books**

## II. Polemical: Higher Life in Christ (2:8–23)

After exhorting believers to continue in Christ (2:6–7)—in whom is the fullness of God and who brought complete redemption—Paul then condemned the Colossian heresy that was diverting them from Christ.

### A. “Gnosticism” is wrong: deity is in Christ (2:8–10).

2:8. Paul was concerned that no false teacher take the Colossian believers **captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy** (cf. v. 4). He wrote here not against all philosophy but against *false* philosophy, as the Bible also speaks against false religion (James 1:26). The particular false philosophy at Colosse was “hollow” (*kenēs*, “empty”), “deceptive,” and based **on human tradition ... rather than on Christ**. True Christian philosophy “take[s] captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Philosophy is the love of wisdom, but if one loves wisdom that is not Christ (the Sum of all wisdom, Col. 2:3), he loves an empty idol. Such a one will be “always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7). This kind of philosophy is based on the world’s **basic principles** (*stoicheia*, “elementary principles” or “elemental spirits” [RSV]; cf. Col. 2:20; Gal. 4:3, 9). This may refer to the evil spirits who inspire such heresy and over whom Christ triumphed (cf. 2 Cor. 4:3–4; Eph. 6:11–12). Such a philosophy is demonic and worldly, not godly or Christlike. Unless believers are careful, such philosophy may ensnare them, taking them “captive.”

2:9. There is no “fullness” (*plērōma*) in philosophy based on vain human reasoning. **For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives**. Hence only in Christ can one have fullness. Apart from Him is emptiness. As philosopher Jean Paul Sartre put it, “Life is an empty bubble on the sea of nothingness” (cf. Ecc. 1:14–18). The word for “Deity” is *theotētos*, a strong word (used only here in the NT) for Christ’s essence as God. The full deity of Christ is nonetheless **in bodily form**—a full humanity (cf. Col. 1:22). Both Christ’s deity and humanity were challenged by this

early Gnostic-like heresy. Those heretics diminished Christ to an angel whose “body” was only apparent, not real. Paul affirmed here that Christ is both fully God and truly man (cf. 1 John 4:1–6).

2:10. Not only is all the “fullness” (*plērōma*) of God in Christ (v. 9), but also believers **have been given fullness in Christ**. Their fullness of life comes from Christ’s fullness. They partake of the divine nature through Christ (2 Peter 1:4), for “from the fullness of his grace we have all received” (John 1:16). This, of course, does not mean believers *become* God but simply share in Him. They *have* or share in the goodness of the nature which He *is*. They share in the body of Him **who is the Head** (cf. Col. 1:18) **over every power** (*archēs*, “ruler”) **and authority** (*exousias*, “ruling power”) (cf. 1:16; 2:15), including those who would talk the Colossians into living according to the world instead of according to Christ.

#### *B. Legalism is wrong: reality is in Christ (2:11–17).*

2:11–12. Paul turned from the theological errors of the false teachers to their practical errors—from “Gnosticism” to legalism. The Gentile Christians in Colosse had no need to conform to Jewish rules and regulations, such as **circumcision**. For in Christ they had been **circumcised**. This spiritual “circumcision” was **done by Christ**, not by man. It was in fact a crucifixion or putting off of the body, a circumcision of the heart (cf. Rom. 2:29; Eph. 2:11). Their **sinful nature** (lit., “the body of the flesh”; cf., lit., “the mind of the flesh,” Col. 2:18) was decisively put off by Christ’s death and resurrection. What people were in Adam—sinful, fallen, and corrupt—was destroyed by Christ. Now “in Christ” a believer is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). And having a new Head a believer has a new authority for his life—not the Law of Moses but the life of Christ.

The words **putting off** are from the noun *apekdysei* (“total breaking away from”), which occurs only here in the New Testament. This putting off of the old life occurs at the moment of salvation, when a believer is **buried with Christ in baptism** by the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13) **and is raised with Him** to new life. This co-burial and co-resurrection is pictured in baptism. In water baptism, immersion portrays burial with Christ, and coming out of the water depicts the resurrection by **the power of God** to “live a new life” (Rom. 6:4).

2:13–14. Before a person is liberated to this new life in Christ, he is **dead in his sins and in his sinful nature** (cf. comments on the “earthly nature” in 3:5 and the “old self” in 3:9). Death means separation, not annihilation. Even the unsaved still bear the image of God (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9), but they are separated from God. Cut off from spiritual life, they still have human life. But now **God made you alive with Christ** (cf. Eph. 2:1–6). The same “power” (*energeias*; cf. “energy” in Col. 1:29) that raised Christ from the dead (2:12) resurrects believing sinners to spiritual life (v. 13).

This new life came when God **forgave us all our sins** for He **canceled the written code**. Before God’s written Law, His “written code,” people **stood** condemned (cf. Rom. 3:19), so it worked **against** them and **opposed** them. But in Christ the Law is fulfilled (Rom. 8:2) and done away with (Gal. 3:25; Heb. 7:12). Legalism is wrong because believers are dead to the Law in Christ. He fulfilled its demands in His life and by His death, and Christians are *in* Him.

This written code, the Law, was like a handwritten “certificate of debt” (NASB). Since people cannot keep the Law, it is like a bill of indebtedness. So people, unable to pay the debt, are criminals. But Jesus **took ... away** this criminal charge, this certificate of indebtedness, by His death. It is as if He were **nailing it to the cross** with Him, showing He paid the debt. He

wiped the slate clean. As Krishna Ral put it: “Jesus for thee a body takes, thy guilt assumes, thy fetter breaks, discharging all thy dreadful debt; and canst thou then such love forget?”

2:15–17. By fulfilling the demands of the Law, Christ **disarmed the demonic powers and authorities** (cf. 1:16; 2:10), **triumphing over them** (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14). As a result believers are delivered from these evil powers which inspire legalistic rules about foods and festivals. No one should **judge you by what you eat or drink** because Christians are free from the Law’s legalistic requirements (such as those in Lev. 11; 17; Deut. 14). God does not condemn those who eat everything (Rom. 14:1–4). In fact, God says that all foods may be eaten since they were “created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth” (1 Tim. 4:3). The teaching that forbids this, Paul wrote, is “taught by demons” (1 Tim. 4:1) whom Christ has disarmed (Col. 2:15). This liberation of believers pertains also to festivals such as a **New Moon celebration or a Sabbath Day** (cf. Gal. 4:10). Those who would bring Christians under the bondage of the Law make artificial distinctions between the “ceremonial” and “moral” law, and so they say the Sabbath has not passed away. That this is false can be seen from the following: (1) The Sabbath command is the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated in the New Testament. (2) The early believers, following Christ’s resurrection and appearance on Sunday (Mark 16:1; John 20:1), met on Sundays (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). (3) The Bible nowhere distinguishes between the so-called “moral” and “ceremonial” laws (this distinction was not made before the 13th century A.D.) (4) This Colossian passage explicitly condemns those who command Sabbath obedience. (5) As Paul put it, the Old Testament Law (including the Sabbath) was only a **shadow of the things that were to come. The reality** or “substance” (*sōma*, lit., “body”), **however, is to be found in Christ** (cf. Heb. 8:5; 10:1). What the Old Testament foreshadowed, Christ fulfilled (cf. Matt. 5:17; Rom. 8:3–4). A “shadow” (*skia*) is only an image cast by an object which represents its form. Once one finds Christ, he no longer needs to follow the old shadow.

### C. *Mysticism is wrong: headship is in Christ (2:18–19).*

2:18. Those who turn believers from the reality in Christ to the shadow of the Law **disqualify** them **for the prize**. That is, they rob (*katabrabeuetō*, “to decide against”; cf. *brabeuetō* in 3:15) believers of their spiritual rewards. As a judge disqualifies those who turn the wrong way in a race, so believers who turn from faithfully following Christ will be “robbed” of their rewards from Him (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10–15). Some heretics who turn believers away from faithful service have a **false humility**, which is only “a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5) that is in Christ (Rom. 8:3–4). This artificial godliness of legalists was connected with **the worship of angels** which Scripture forbids (Ex. 20:3–4; cf. Rev. 22:8–9). In fact, legalism is a teaching inspired by fallen angels (1 Tim. 4:1) who as “elemental spirits” (Gal. 4:3, RSV) would bring men into slavery by their mystical meditations. These legalistic mystics dwell on **what** they have **seen** (in visions), which Paul called **idle notions** (*eikē*, “vain, to no avail”; cf. Gal. 3:4). This phrase may have occasioned the variant (but less preferable) translation “which he hath *not* seen” (KJV). Far from being humble, such a person’s **unspiritual mind** (lit., “the mind of the flesh”; cf., lit., “the body of the flesh,” v. 19) is puffed with pride in his visions.

2:19. While believing that his mysticism brings him in touch with some “higher” reality, a legal mystic **has** actually **lost connection with the Head** (Christ) who alone supplies life for it to grow **as God causes it to grow** (cf. John 15:1–5). True spirituality does not come by compliance with laws (which are only a shadow) but by connection with the Life (who is the reality). Without a vital connection to its Head, the body of Christ cannot grow. Using a parallel image,

Jesus said, “I am the Vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in Him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

#### *D. Asceticism is wrong: immunity is in Christ (2:20–23).*

2:20–21. A concomitant of legalism and mysticism is asceticism. It is the pseudo-spiritual position that revels in rules of physical self-denial. **Do not handle!** Do not taste! Do not touch! These prohibitions increase from not handling to not even touching. This same legalism was manifest in Eve’s carnal exaggeration, “You must not touch it, or you will die” (Gen. 3:3; cf. Gen. 2:16–17). Asceticism arises out of guilt. But Christ has taken away all human guilt by His death (Col. 2:13–14). So since believers **died with Christ to the basic principles** (*stoicheia*; cf. comments on v. 8) **of this world**, they are no longer obligated (by fleshly inclinations) to obey them. Only those alive to sin (Rom. 6:2–7) need obey it as master. Worldliness is living by the world’s rules, including those that have a show of humility and some alleged “angelic” source. Spirituality is living by the power of the Spirit in union with Christ by whom the believer has died to sin. “For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless” (Rom. 6:6).

2:22–23. Asceticism is a man-made system of rules (often taken out of context from God’s Law) **based on human commands and teachings**. The persistent example of legalism in the New Testament was the Old Testament command of circumcision which God intended for the Jews as a *sign* of faith (Rom. 4:11) but which the legalists wanted to make a *condition* of grace (Gal. 2:21). Living by **such regulations** or self-made religion has a certain **appearance of wisdom** (*sophias*; cf. Col. 1:9; 2:3, 4:5), but it has absolutely no **value in restraining sensual indulgence**. “Sensual indulgence” is literally “the flesh” (*sarkos*; cf. 2:11, 18). For denying the body its desires merely arouses them, as is well known by many who have tried to lose weight by sticking to rigid diets. Neglecting the body, Paul argued, does not nourish the spirit.

***Dockery, D. S. (1998). The Pauline Letters In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (p. 591). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.***

#### **CHRIST IS DIVINE (2:6–15)**

Paul wanted to make sure the Colossians did not follow those who set forth Christ as merely an important visionary or religious leader. Christ is uniquely divine and preeminent. This is the foundation for true spirituality. The exhortation to live in him [Christ] is surrounded by themes that are clearly a response to the false teaching that threatened them. The context emphasizes “as you received Christ Jesus” and “as you were taught.” Paul obviously considered the false teachers a real threat to the church. He warned, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy”.

The right antidote for false teaching is right teaching about Christ, in whom “all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form.” In Christ believers have received all they have and all they need. Christians are not subject to any forms of legalism, nor does legalism do them any good spiritually. Jesus Christ alone is sufficient for our every spiritual need, for all of God’s fullness is in Him. The believers’ covenant relation, their lives, their freedom, and their victory are all in Him.

#### **CAPTIVE TO CHRIST (2:16–3:4)**

The spiritual life has its dangers and its warnings. Paul warned the church against those who would make the Christian life just a set of rules. The basis for resisting legalism involves focusing on the believer's relationship with Christ. Believers no longer are captive to religious tradition or human bondage. Instead, they are captive to Christ. In view of this privileged identification with Christ, the church must realize its great responsibility: "Set your minds on things above".

The life in Christ is a profound reality (see Gal. 2:20). It is a life that draws its existence from the very center of all reality, Jesus Christ Himself. The admonitions that follow are controlled by the thought of the full life that belongs to all who are in Christ (see Rom. 6:4-5).

***Fields, W. C. (1972). Colossians. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher's Bible Commentary (p. 755). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.***

### **Warnings Against False Teachings (Col. 2:8-3:4)**

This is the main section dealing with incorrect doctrine. The so-called philosophy which was being thrust upon them was seemingly intellectual. Actually it was empty, he says. Don't go back to the "rudiments of the world," the elementary, ruling evil spirits! (2:8, 20). "Fulness" was probably another of the Gnostic bywords. Paul uses it to indicate (v. 9) the essence of his entire letter, namely that Christ made the fact of deity complete. Don't turn from fulness to emptiness!

Some confusion at Colossae on the matter of circumcision leads Paul to make a positive rather than a negative statement about it. False teachers seem to have been trying to require circumcision as one more condition of salvation, as happened in the Galatian churches. In 2:11 Paul indicates the symbolic nature of this rite and declares that Christ makes circumcision unnecessary. In this instance, and in his references to baptism, and to other ritualistic regulations regarding food, drink, and feast days, he declares that these observances were the shadows whereas Christ is the substance (vv. 10-17). Don't confuse the symbols with the real thing! He warns also that asceticism (severe abstinence) alone is sterile (vv. 20-23).

In 3:1-4 Paul is making a transition from the earlier section on warnings against false teachings. He is about to give some practical illustrations of how the true spirit of Christ expresses itself. In the transition, however, he emphasizes the fact that the Christian life is a continual quest and that Christ is the example to follow and the goal to pursue. The new life in Christ requires a completely new mental orientation.

*Special point*—Paul makes a passing reference to the second coming of Christ (3:4). It is a part of his argument. He has been stressing the close identification of the believer with Christ. The believer shares Christ's life here. He will share his glory when he comes again.

***The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). Colossians 2:9-23. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.***