

Colossians: On Things Above Part 2

Colossians 2:16-23

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on July 23, 2023

The Trumpeter of St. Mary's Church

Throughout history, there have been some impressive warnings of pending attacks. Of course, Americans learned about Paul Revere's midnight ride and one if by land, two if by sea. It was a lantern system warning against the British invasion. From the old television series, *Lost in Space*, the Robot would warn Will Robinson of danger. He would say, "Danger, Will Robinson, danger." And flail his strange accordion drier vent arms around. Across the great plains' states, many communities have tornado sirens that fire up when a tornado warning is in effect. They can be heard outdoors across communities when weather turns bad.

But perhaps the most intriguing warning story I have ever heard comes from Krakow, Poland. In 1241, the city of Krakow was facing imminent attack from the Tatar invasion. The trumpeter in the bell tower of the St. Mary's Church saw the army advancing and went to sound the trumpet to alert the Krakovian army in their garrison. The warning succeeded and they were able to defend the city. Sadly, before the trumpeter could finish, a Tatar arrow killed him.

To this day, every hour on the hour, for over seven hundred years, a trumpeter climbs the stairs into the bell tower of St. Mary's Church and plays a few notes from four windows in each direction. The song ends abruptly, in honor of the trumpeter who gave his life. It is played four times on the hour, every hour throughout the day to remind the people that those who are supposed to keep alert to warn of danger are awake and at their posts, not asleep or distracted. And every performance ends with an abrupt, muffled note. The people of Krakow will never forget this heroic warning.

The Apostle Paul delivers an ancient warning for the Church today in Colossians 2. This almost two-thousand-year-old warning deals with a sophisticated and deadly foe that attacks very subtly within the walls of churches everywhere. This enemy robs believers of the fullness of God that they can experience in Christ. I invite you to Colossians 2:16-23 as we look closer at Paul's warning.

A Warning Against Legalism

Paul's warning included two areas: days and diet. Concerning what they ate, evidently there were those saying that the way to God and spiritual fullness would be enhanced if the Colossian believers returned to the dietary restrictions found in the Old Testament. As you may know, the Old Testament categorized certain foods as clean and unclean¹. The distinctions existed between the foods to familiarize God's people with the fact of purity and impurity. This would then stimulate the conscience in everyday life. But when Jesus came, those dietary restrictions and laws were abolished.

When the Pharisees expressed offense by the Lord's liberated eating habits, his response startled them: "The are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from the outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled.' (Thus he declared all foods clean.)" (Mark 7:18-20; Matthew 15:1-20)

Peter's vision settled it for him, as he saw a sheet lowered from Heaven, loaded with clean and unclean animals. Peter was bothered by this. "And a voice came to him: 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' And the voice came to him a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven" (Acts 10:13-16).

Paul made this conclusion in 1 Corinthians 8:8 – "Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do." From Jesus, to Peter, and finally to Paul, the New Testament is unified in its teaching on all food and drink being lawful. While dietary principles are a good idea, dietary disciplines are not a sign of spirituality. We are not to judge others, or allow anyone to pass religious judgment on us, in regard to food and drink.

And about the Days

The same applies to days. The Jews had special feast days² and their "New Moon" celebrations³ and their Sabbaths⁴. When Christ came, he fulfilled them all!

¹ See Leviticus 11:2-20.

² Leviticus 25

³ Isaiah 1:13

⁴ Exodus 20:9-11

We no longer celebrate the Sabbath because we now worship on “the Lord’s day,”⁵ the first day of the week⁶, the day that commemorates the resurrection⁷. Paul says in v. 17 that these things are “a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ.”

The dietary rules made God’s people sensitive to purity, the great feasts taught various aspects of God’s work, and the Sabbaths revealed something about the rest that God leads his people into. But they were just a “shadow.” The real thing has come in Christ.

Sadly, the idea that spirituality can be qualified provides an unfortunate basis for pride and judgementalism. We refer to this as legalism. And legalism “is the ism dismalist of all” the isms. There is an authentic lure to legalism. People love religious rules and regulations. But legalism spawns judgmentalism. And judgmentalism is miserable. It is miserable for those who are judged and the judging itself is miserable because it dries up the soul of the judgmental.

The New Testament never uses the word “legalism.” So we need some definition here to clarify what exactly we are being warned about here. And legalism is thrown around a lot with not much clarity. “Legalism” is used in two senses. Both of these senses have a common problem at their core. First, legalism means treating biblical standards of conduct as regulations to be kept by our own power in order to earn God’s favor. In other words, these are the things that we do to make God like us more.

This form of legalism is present any time a person tries to be ethical or moral on their own strength, apart from the indwelling merciful power of the Holy Spirit. Moral behavior, moral acts that are not grounded in and stemming from faith in Christ are legalistic. So many moralistic people are legalistic because their morality does not grow out of a humble, contrite reliance on the merciful enabling of God.

For example, as a junior high student, I received a terrible tongue lashing from an older person in the church I attended when that person found out I was one of about a hundred students who went to the Presbyterian church on Friday nights after home football games for a fifth quarter.

⁵ Revelation 1:10

⁶ 1 Corinthians 16:2; Acts 20:7

⁷ John 20

There were pizzas, sodas and dodge ball. But that was not what scandalized this woman. She was bothered by what happened after the dodge ball. They would turn on the fancy lights, wind up the disco ball, lower the room lights and then have a dance. A genuine scandal in the Oklahoma Panhandle!

She remarked how the Bible teaches against dancing. For her dancing was one of the Big Five NO Nos: Dancing, drinking, smoking, gambling, and going to the movies. I bet I heard more sermons against those five things growing up than I heard against gossip, covetousness, a hateful spirit, etc. So at the ripe old theologically advanced age of fourteen, I simply asked her where. Where did it say not to dance? Now, for transparency's sake, after an hour of sweating through dodge ball, few of the boys were dancing. In that regard, for all five of the home games my eight-grade year, I was not on any young lady's dance card. But her reply to my question about where in inspired Scripture we were compelled to not dance, she simply replied, "I don't know but its in there. Probably in the first part." There was a generational morality passed down to her against dancing in that specific church's tradition. That was my first brush with legalism.

For legalists like that lady, morality serves the same function that immorality does for the progressive freethinkers of the world. They are expressions of self-reliance and self-assertion. Pharisees tithed and fasted for the same reasons that European college students protest in the nude. It is proof of their self-reliance. The moral legalist is always the older brother of the immoral prodigal. Both reject the mercy of God's fullness in Christ as the means to a person's righteousness. They reject God's fullness in Christ as their way to righteousness and use both morality and immorality as a way to express their independence. The first sense of legalism is this terrible mistake a person can make in treating these biblical standards of conduct as rules and regulations that we must keep in our own power to earn God's love.

The second sense is establishing specific requirements of conduct and living beyond the teaching of Scripture. And then you force people to adhere to these codes of conduct before that person can fully participate in the local family of God. This is seen in all of the ridiculous extra-biblical hoops we make people jump through, commit to, and sign away in order to be "a part of the Body of Christ." This is unbiblical exclusivism, and it is legalistic in nature.

We cannot get around the fact that the Church does exclude people from membership. The Church does not include everyone.

People are rightly excluded because entrance into the Body of Christ implies commitment to the Lord and Savior Jesus. People should believe in Christ's salvation and then surrender to His lordship as the Head of the Church. Exclusion from the church is not to be taken lightly. It is serious business.

Schools, clubs, and organizations can make up any sort of regulations that they want in order to keep certain types of people out. But the church is not man's institution. It belongs to Christ. He is the head of the body, and He alone gets to set the entrance requirements. But there are gatekeepers who love to hold onto the keys. They exist in every church and their legalism limits who gets to serve, who gets to lead, who gets to be a part.

Had that lady back in my junior high years excluded me from serving in the church or joining the church because I attended five dances at the Presbyterian church, which would be an example of this type of legalism. However, she didn't have to do that because as a fourteen-year-old, I was not allowed to serve that church in any meaningful way because I was too young. They stowed us away down at the west end and didn't let us out until they needed centurion soldiers to fall over in the wet grass for the Easter Sunrise service's re-enactment of the resurrection. But that sense of gatekeeping legalism exists. "Sorry brother or sister. Even though you trust Jesus as your Savior and commit to live for Jesus as Lord in the best way that you know how with all of your heart, and despite that fact that you have been duly baptized according to His ordinance and gave a powerful testimony affirming your faith, you cannot be a full participant in the family of God here because your age or your dancing or your use of wine does not square up with our regulations."

Legalism is joyless. It demands uniformity instead of seeking unity. Whenever you see legalism, you see people dressing the same way and using the same speech and code words, posture and manners, often even the same facial expressions. "Do nots" produce a gross uniformity.

Legalism produces a surface faith. It is surface level only because legalism emphasizes things that are not really important. I bet some of you know someone who was scandalized over drums on the platform this morning.

Understand this. Any rule against drums in church is extra-biblical, legalistic, and deeply tied to an age that has passed behind us. I offer you this advice to share with anyone who thinks this is an affront to some unspoken or unwritten rule or regulation. Ask the Lord if this rule or regulation that says “Do not have drums” is biblical or not. If it is not a biblical restriction, than ask the Lord to change your thinking about these sorts of “do nots.” Because these “do nots” ignore deadly sins such as covetousness, gossip, slander, bitterness, and hatred. Legalism limits a person to shallow self-righteousness, this damning that person.

Paul does not say, “Allow the faithful person to keep special days and special diets.” Instead, he says, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you” in these things. We have great, amazing liberty and freedom in what we can do as believers. We can keep days and diets, or we can forget them. But Paul clearly rejects the right that any person has to judge and/or compel another to comply with his own preferences. We are not to judge others by these types of things, and we are not to allow others to judge us by them either.

We need to take this warning to heart, because time and time again as legalism has come into the Church, the Church has become judgmental, joyless, uniform, and shallow in faith. And as bad as legalism is, there is another danger equally harmful.

Let No One Disqualify You

The Gnostic teachers were delusional and fooled not only themselves but others. They elevated this distorted and delusional form of mysticism as a way to limit access to the church and to disqualify all who didn't go along with it.

Paul outlines their deceptive approach in verse 18. They used bogus humility by insisting on ascetic practices and the worship of angels. They were teaching that they were not good enough to go to God directly so instead they went to angels who would then elevate their requests to God through some invisible angelic hierarchy.

Further these Gnostics claimed to have special revelations, “claiming access to a visionary realm.” They claimed insider status. They claimed to be spiritual, theological gatekeepers. This is more akin to what the younglings called a “humble brag” a few years ago.

While advertising humility, they were instead filled with conceit. It was all sham and vanity. However, learning the secrets of the spiritual realms is enticing. It is why people still go in for tarot cards and Ouija boards. Their aesthetic design is meant to exude mystery. The same thing with the signs of the zodiac.

These are inner circle teachings, a level of wisdom that is kept locked away, guarded and protected by gatekeepers in some back room somewhere. These false teachers then and now have no part in the true Body of Christ. They do not hold fast to Christ, the Head, from whom the entire Body is knit together and taken care of and grown. Then and now, that is the best response to any sort of legalistic rule or regulation. Does that rule or regulation or expectation line up with Jesus being the Head or should we let go of it as we are to cling tightly to Jesus?

Let No One Enslave You

Paul concludes with a warning about extreme asceticism. Throughout church history, people have rejected beautiful and good things in pursuit of God. Some have rejected marriage, parenthood, community, speech and more. This is still a strange self-made religion.

We see this type of asceticism in Eastern religions in particular today. People who seek out some guru who abstains from community, wears weird robes, chants weird mantras, all in the discipline of getting to God. However, we can see this for what it really is: legalistically expressing their own independence from God saying, "I'm going to get to God on my own terms through my own strength." It is trying to feed spirituality by starving it.

Paul's answer? Our death in Christ has freed us from the demonic powers of this world that promote and thrive on human asceticism. Because we died with Christ, they have no power over us. Instead we are to live in the full joy of God's creation, enjoying Him and His people.

Paul sounded a clear warning, calling believers to look at things as they really are. Our reality was stated earlier in Colossians 2. In Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily," and in Him "we have been made full." (2:9-10). However, legalism can help us easily lose those blessings and benefits. We instead focus on our self-righteousness, joylessness, and judgmentalism.

We can surrender to some strange mysticism and develop a proud and elitist spirit that does not add one iota to true worship. We can embrace ascetic practices, thinking wrongly that they make us more holy, when it only feeds the flesh and not the spirit.

The answer is to daily realize the grace of Christ. We must understand how profoundly and powerfully we are related to Christ.

We are to know that we have died, been buried, and are resurrected with Christ. We find our answer where it all began for us: at the foot of the cross. We have this sinful tendency to move away from the grace that we find at the cross and veer into some works-based understanding of living in our own power.

All of our beliefs and teaching and preaching, all of our singing together and the disciplines of life experienced in family and relationships are meant to keep us right at the foot of the cross. We do these things to continually keep us drinking deeply from the Living Water of Jesus.

We do expect believers to abstain from habits and lifestyles that fail to honor Christ. We also expect believers to seek to perfect holiness in the fear of God doing everything in speech and actions to His honor and glory. But let's stop adding extra-biblical "entrance requirements" that involve us in a form of legalism that has its roots in unbelief.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Wednesday Bible Study is taking a break for July.

Childrens Ministry Trip to Sky Zone in Hagerstown: July 24th. 1-3PM. Cost is \$10. We will meet AT Sky Zone at 12:45PM. Register and pay with Pastor Craig. This is for all children ages 4 through completed 5th grade.

Men's Ministry Trip to The Ballpark in Loudon: August 19th, 11AM-1PM. The cost is \$25 per person. The Ballpark is a unique batting cage experience that allows a batter, through the wonders of technology, to hit in any ballpark they choose! Enjoy a great time!

The Quarterly Business Meeting that was scheduled for Monday June 24th HAS BEEN CANCELLED. The next business meeting will be the annual meeting in October.