

## Colossians 2:20-23

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

### Introduction

Today we’re going to talk about rules. Earlier in Colossians we heard that we shouldn’t follow human traditions that are not in agreement with Christ. Then Paul warns us not to let others judge you about food and drink or special days. In our passage today, the focus is on not putting our trust in man-made rules no matter how good they look.

Who here likes making rules for others? Based on the passage we just read this might be difficult to admit to, but some people are good at making rules that are a blessing to others. Good rules bring order and even fun. My wife, Linda, is one of these people. She made rules that were good and fun for our kids growing up. Rules like, if all of you finish your chores in fifteen minutes you can go swimming in your pajamas. I have no idea why kids would want to swim in their pajamas, but whatever. Or sometimes we’d be playing a family game and she’d make up a new, one-time rule that would make the game more exciting and interesting. When our kids were in college we agreed to pay for their classes, but we made the rule that we wouldn’t pay for anything lower than a “B.” One of our kids tested this rule and found out the hard way that we were actually very serious! Linda is really good at making rules that give our family identity and enjoyment.

Who here likes following rules? Some people are amazing at following the rules, and as a parent or a school teacher or a boss, you love these people. People that like following the rules can be such an encouragement and even a protection for those around them. And who’s like me and doesn’t like making or following rules? I think rules are fine; rules are good. My problem is that I often just don’t agree with them.

There are all kinds of rules in our lives, right? For simplicity, we could break this down into man-made rules and God-given rules. From Psalm 19 we see that all God-given rules are pure, right and perfect. And His rules are not just to be obeyed but loved and enjoyed. Psalm 119 says, “for I find my *delight* in your commandments, which I

love. I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes.”

So, all God-given rules are good, and many man-made rules are good too. They help us understand our surroundings and create a predictable order. Things like driving and shopping and playing baseball wouldn't be possible without well defined rules. Can you imagine how impossible driving would be without stoplights or speed limits or lanes on the roads or any rules about where a car could go? It would be complete chaos.

Several years ago I made my first visit to The Netherlands to meet our future son-in-law. One day we went for a bike ride, because that's what everyone does in The Netherlands, and when we stopped for lunch I needed to use the restroom. I went to the back of the cafe and down some stairs, and I saw two doors. One with a "D" on it and one with an "H." I didn't know the rules of this country and had no idea which one to use, so I went back upstairs and asked, "Am I a D or an H?"

Rules are part of life, both God-given and man-made. God makes rules to instruct us, to protect us and ultimately to show us our need for a Savior. God has made rules from the beginning. In fact, the very first thing recorded that God spoke to people was a rule. After God made Adam and placed him in the garden in Genesis 2, He said, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." The very first thing God said to Adam was a rule. In the book of Exodus, there are over 200 times when God says, "you shall" or "you shall not." Rules given by God are good and for our good, and many man-made rules are good too. In Romans we are instructed to submit to the governing authorities, basically follow the man-made rules of your government.

So, what's so bad about the regulations that Paul is referring to? The problem with the rules that Paul is warning us about is that they are "according to human precepts and teachings" and they promote "self-made religion." These rules pretend to be from God and claim to deliver spiritual reward, but as we'll see, they are worthless.

Paul's main point in most of chapter two of Colossians is that the people there were minimizing Jesus. Up to this point we've seen Jesus as

- the image of the invisible God
- He is the creator of all things
- He is the head of the church
- in Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell
- He made peace by the blood of His cross

- He made us holy and blameless and above reproach before Him
- He is the riches of glory
- in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge
- He is the head of all rule and authority
- and the whole body is nourished and knit together in Jesus

And some people wanted to trade all that for some worthless, man-made regulations. They were making Jesus not enough. The Colossians were getting caught up in self-made religion. They struggled with the flesh, just like we all do, and some had listened to simplistic rules that actually made their problem worse. Because the rules do nothing for the actual spiritual problem, but instead puff up the pride in the appearance of wisdom and making big sacrifices. When we submit to this kind of human regulation we end up further from God, not closer to Him.

It's exactly like the man in the parable Jesus gives in Luke 18.

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus:

‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Pharisee was saying, “I’m better than other people because I keep the rules.” Where in God’s rules does it even say to fast twice a week? It doesn’t. It was self-made religion. Someone at some point in time made up a rule that if you deny yourself food for two days a week, you’ll be more holy. When in reality you’ll likely just be more proud of yourself, more self-righteous. Like Jesus said, “apart from Me, you can do nothing, and If you love Me you will keep My commandments.” Loving Jesus produces obedience, but obedience to self-made rules produces white washed tombs.

So, as Paul asks, why do we all do this? Why do we all, at times, replace the grace and truth of Jesus in our lives with ineffective, self-made religion? First let’s take a look at the whole passage here at the end of Colossians 2.

## Dying and Living

Verse 20. [“If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world do you submit to regulations?”](#)

When a person becomes a believer in Jesus, they are crucified with Christ. It's a spiritual death, a separation from a former way of life. This is why when we talk about baptism, we mention that it's a symbol. Baptism is a symbol of dying to the flesh, going under the water, and being resurrected in the Spirit when we come back up. When the early Jews translated the Old Testament to Greek, they used the same exact word for die from this verse to describe God's words to Adam that we read earlier. When God said, “you shall surely die” He was describing the separation that would happen. Adam ate of the tree, but didn't physically die. He definitely died spiritually though. This is why Paul uses some pretty direct language. If you have died to the flesh, why are you trying to live as if you didn't. It's the same question he asked the Galatians, [“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”](#)

This is serious stuff because we who have believed are fools to settle for something less than Jesus. Paul calls these rules and precepts “elemental spirits of the world.” They are basic, elementary rules that do nothing to get us approval from God or control our sinful flesh. If you step back and think about it, it makes no biblical sense why anyone would follow rules like this. I did a lot of research on what exactly the Colossians were practicing that related to Paul's examples here of do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. I can tell you with complete confidence, no one knows. But it was most likely something similar to what we see in Galatians when even Peter was caught up in a group of people that returned to Jewish laws and held themselves aloof from the Gentiles.

What if I said, “Since your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and you want to make your temple as welcoming as possible, and we all know we should buffet our bodies. Therefore to be godly you should be strictly vegan and arise at 3:30am every day and exercise vigorously for three hours. And don't even touch meat or dairy ever. And then your temple will be cleansed and you will enjoy greater fellowship with the Holy Spirit.” Would anyone fall for that? I hope not, but that's pretty much what was happening in Colossae. The rules became the religion.

## Human precepts and teachings

So what is it that makes this type of rule so bad and yet look so wise? Verse 23, [“These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and](#)

asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”

We all make rules for others. I have a rule that no one should let their shopping cart block the aisle at Costco while they contemplate the differences between the five choices for an air fryer. I have a rule that if you're walking through an airport, you must get out of the way if you want to stop and look at your phone. I had a rule for my kids growing up that they couldn't make noises while I was driving. I don't think these rules come from a great place in my heart, but they're not the type of rules here.

The type of rules mentioned in verse 23 are bad because they diminish the worth of Christ's grace and replace it with human effort to keep hard rules. From my experience rules like this tend to take on a narrow focus. Things like how to raise your kids or how to manage your money or like here with things that perish with use.

If you've been in some denominations or lived through different phases of the Church in America you know that playing cards or using dice have been viewed as sin. Because cards and dice are used in gambling and gambling promotes greed and greed is idolatry, therefore don't even touch cards or dice. In my parents' generation the phrase was, “we don't drink, smoke or chew or go with girls who do.”

Lots of people like rules for the gray areas of life. It makes things simpler. We like binary positions. It's either on or off; you're either right or wrong, good or bad. It's so much simpler than justice and mercy and faithfulness. These rules start off with the appearance of wisdom. If they didn't, very few people would follow them. They look good and godly at the start.

Just like when Jesus called out the Pharisees, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law.” You can probably see how they got there. God said to tithe, so to be more righteous let's tithe on every little thing. Let's make it really hard on ourselves and calculate what we will sacrifice for God, and then call ourselves good for doing what God didn't ask us to do. This is a human problem; it's not just in the Church. People want a system of rules so that they can be right and feel good about themselves. We love that as people.

Several years ago my kids and I took a tour of Boyden Cave which is at the bottom of Kings Canyon in the Sierras. Before the tour the park service ranger gave us the explanation of the geology and the history of exploring the cave. Caves are super interesting. One point in his talk was a request not to touch the walls because the oils on our hands could damage the ecology of the cave. As we were coming up out of the

depths of the cave, an elderly woman a few people ahead of me lost her balance and touched the wall to steady herself. It took about two seconds for the person immediately behind her to loudly scold her for breaking the rule. Here's an older woman, who simply stumbled in a dark, damp cave with an uneven walking surface and the person behind her cared more about keeping the rules than for another person who needed some mercy instead. Without even realizing it, rules can become a moral divide. Just like the Pharisee in Luke 18, we start to think ourselves good because we keep the rules, and look down on those who don't.

How many of you would be on board if the rules for "do not eat" applied to broccoli and Brussel sprouts? And do not even touch lima beans. Lima beans are the worst. Kids, don't try this at home, but when I was a kid my parents had a rule that I couldn't leave the table until my plate was clean. So I'd stuff the things I didn't want to eat in my pockets when they weren't looking. Their rule did nothing for my rebellious heart.

Rules and regulations and precepts can be useful tools, but they are of no value in stopping the sinful heart. A heart that wants to sin will find a way around the rules.

When our son Andy was three years old, he lost a game of Candyland to his older sister, Jen. We had a rule that when you lose a game, you congratulate the winner. When we tried to enforce this rule, he obeyed and said, "Congratulations, boo-boo-face!" He obeyed the rule, but his heart was unchanged.

Rules come and go because people get weary and frustrated and feel like failures, and because the rules don't deliver on their promises.

For a quick review: all of God's rules are good and we should love them, many man-made rules are good and helpful, but there are some man-made rules that diminish Jesus's works and His desire for our heart in all things. Just as the Law cannot save, rules cannot sanctify.

Remember the example of the Pharisee in Luke 18. He congratulated himself and looked down on the tax collector. We all do this. I get good grades, I use money wisely, I pay my bills on time, I take care of myself, I recycle. Whatever it is, we make up rules in our own mind or we follow someone else's and then we feel good about ourselves. And really all it comes down to is, we pick rules that line up with our God-given strengths, and then take credit for being good at what God made us good at, and then look down on others because they don't have the same strengths. When this happens everything about Jesus in Colossians is diminished.

Rules are a necessary part of life. But sometimes they go too far. They become the standard of being right and righteous. I've heard of churches that have strict rules for dress code. I have a friend that was a candidate to be a pastor, and everything was going great until he preached in the church without wearing a tie. That was literally the feedback they gave him when they declined his being their pastor; he didn't wear a tie in the pulpit. I'd guess they started off years before with good motives to provide guidance for appropriate dress, but over time they become legalistic. Christianity still has our fair share of self-made religion. We all fall prey to the lie that doing more, working harder, being better is the answer. But it's not.

William Barclay said, "The person who is meticulous in observance of special days, who keeps all the food laws and who practices ascetic abstinence is in very grave danger of thinking they're specially good and of looking down on other people."

Christian freedom comes not from restraining desires by rules and regulations, but from the death of evil desires and the springing to life of good desires."

### **Why do we do this**

Why do we fall prey to man-made religion? I think we all understand how these simple rules can take hold. And yet, they are a false hope for righteousness. They have no value in spiritual maturity. So, why do we let man-made religion become our satisfaction instead of Jesus?

"Why" is one of the best questions in the world. It's one of the things that sets us apart from other creatures. We are always asking, why. When a human tragedy happens, we ask why. When a person with a good life does something to ruin it all, we ask why. When a child is about three years old they start asking why a lot. This is good! It shows that we want to understand our world and how things work. We want to understand cause and effect. But as adults we have a surprisingly difficult time answering the why questions when they are directed at our own heart.

Why did you get angry? Why did you get sarcastic and curt with that person? Why do you hide things from your spouse? Asking "Why" can help us get to the heart, to what motivates us. If you want to grow in Christ, then you need to get good at answering the "why" questions in your own life. We're great at answering why someone else did something! But growth in Christ happens when we answer the why questions about ourselves.

For example, maybe one question is, "Why do you put off doing hard things?" You know you should have that conversation with your teenager, but you put it off. Why? You think you should do something kind for that person that crossed your mind, but

you talk yourself out of it. Why? If you are serious about growing in Christ, don't stop at the easy answer to the why question. Keep pressing in. Because most of the time the answer to the deeper "why" question will reveal a reward you are pursuing or a pain you are avoiding. Asking ourselves why we want what we want is an important part of growing in Christ, and that's what Paul is doing for the Colossians. There are always reasons why we do what we do. The people in Colossae didn't want to follow regulations that were difficult for no reason. So Paul asks them why they submit to regulations that have no value in moving them toward Jesus.

Verse 20, "why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to ... human precepts and teachings?"

Why, since we have the mind of Christ, would we submit to human precepts? Hopefully you already know this, but we're not very wise or good. We are emotional, irrational and sinful people who are not wise enough or godly enough to consistently tell the difference between something that is actually wise and something that only has the appearance of wisdom. We are easily influenced by those around us and even by circumstances that play on our preferences and confirm our biases. We think we're better than we are, smarter than we are, right more often than we are. We do something bad and then lie to ourselves that we did it for a good reason, as if that matters.

Matthew 15:5-9 "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'

But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.

You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

These traditions looked wise on the surface. In these people's minds, they were making sacrifices to give their money to God. And isn't God more important than parents? Why do we do this? Because people love keeping rules if it makes them feel good about themselves.

Remember the Prodigal Son's brother? This was him to a tee. His main complaint was, "I kept the rules and he didn't. I deserve the reward and he doesn't." We do this too. We make rules for how to manage money, how to parent, how to honor the Sabbath,



how to do church and then we look down on others who don't keep our man-made rules.

Why do we do this? Because we want an easier way to be good than humbling ourselves at the feet of Jesus. Because rules are easier than justice, mercy and humility. Because keeping the rules can make us look good to others and feel good about ourselves. Because we want to believe that we did it. We worked hard, we followed the rules and we get the credit. Because we don't want to face our failings and sin and accept the mercy of a loving Savior. Bottom line, because we are self-righteous. This is what rules and regulations and self-made religion do. They make us self-righteous.

That's why these rules are worthless, and are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. Because they have no spiritual power over the human heart. Making sacrifices to keep self-made rules cannot save us nor can it sanctify us.

## Conclusion

What do we do about this? I think the Colossians were on the right track. They wanted to stop the indulgence of the flesh.

But *no one* can do that with rules, traditions and self-made religion. That will only lead to how Jesus described some of the religious leaders, "You look clean on the outside, but the inside is full of greed and self-indulgence."

Randy Alcorn put it this way, "[Behavior modification that's not empowered by God's heart-changing grace is self-righteousness, as repugnant to God as the worst sins people gossip about.](#)"

The problem comes when we make spiritual rules about things that aren't spiritual. When we make a rule for something that God doesn't and imply or even promise that it will get us status, we are swerving from true righteousness. The rule sounds wise because it feels spiritually motivated and may even be biblically based. It gives the impression that the goal is holiness, obedience or dying to self. But in the end it's just about keeping the rules.

There's a lot of applications we could derive from this passage, but let me suggest just one. This week try to catch yourself making rules for other people. And then think about how it makes you feel about that person when they break your rules. Then answer the "why do I do this" question. This should give some good insights into areas where this passage applies to you and where your self-righteousness wants to rule over you.

How do we truly stop the indulgence of the flesh? Don't miss the upcoming messages from Colossians 3!

God speaking through Ezekiel says,

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and I will cleanse you from all your idols.

And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

God is the only One capable of causing the heart change that we desperately need.