

# ***Guard Your Freedom!***

*Colossians 2: 16-23*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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Is Jesus enough, or do we need more? Is putting my trust in Christ enough or do I need to add certain practices and disciplines? Are the means of grace that Jesus gave us sufficient, or do I need new, more interesting, more fashionable means of growing spiritually? When I received Christ, did I get all of his Spirit or do I need to strive to get a little more? These are the kinds of questions the little church in Colossae faced when Paul wrote to them. They encountered some serious challenges from teachers who had the latest sure way to spiritual health. The latest plan for *true* worship. Now a couple weeks ago, we looked at how those false teachers tempted the church with the promise of “secret knowledge” that would make them really know and experience God. Today, we are looking at how these false teachers sold “special practices” as the way to really have spiritual fulfillment.

Not much changes through the centuries. People like fads. We like to jump into something new as the next big thing. Christians have their own version of this. Something that starts off as good but becomes something that is an obligation. A mark of whether or not you are a true believer. Something you can't do without. For a while, we all had to wear WWJD bracelets. It was the time when we asked What Would Jesus Do? If you didn't wear the bracelet, you weren't asking the question which meant you weren't really very spiritual. There was a time when millions of Christians had to pray the Prayer of Jabez, asking God to expand our territory. If you weren't praying like Jabez, you didn't really want all that God has for you and you weren't very spiritual. Then a few years ago, the movie *Fireproof* came out and in the film a couple's marriage was saved when the husband took the Love Dare and followed 30 days of special tasks for his wife. It's the only way to fireproof your marriage, don't you know? There are teachers who come out with definitions of what true worship is, what it means to really, *really* know God and if you're not doing that you're not serving him.

[And so, not to miss out, our church is launching a new foolproof path to spiritual growth. Watch and see. Show *Porpoise Driven Life* video].

Now, is there necessarily anything wrong with those plans and programs? No, as guides, they might be helpful. But as markers of who is truly spiritual and

who is not, it can be pretty dangerous. For we are readily prone to fads followed by legalism in its many forms.

In particular, Paul was concerned with the teachers that were demanding severe physical disciplines as the path to spiritual superiority. He urges the Colossians not to submit to these plans where gurus tell you “Do not handle, do not taste do not touch!” He is referring to strict dietary practices as the obligatory means to spiritual acceptance and grace. Each generation has its own form of such asceticism, such denial for spiritual reasons. Years ago, it was “Don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t dance, don’t play cards and don’t go to the movies on a Sunday.” We laugh about such fussiness today. But all we’ve done is substitute other rules.

In particular, these days we get obsessed about our diets and exercise. What’s the latest, greatest way to stay fit? Is it spinning? Or Zumba? No, that was yesterday. Real athletes do Cross Fit. 10 times a week. Do I need to do PX90 or just be an Iron Man? And what’s the best diet to make me trim? It used to be Atkins. Or Sugar Busters. Then it was Gluten free. But all that’s too easy. Try Ideal Protein. The cost alone makes you believe it has to be worth it. Or try Whole 30 if you want to feel the struggle. But that only had us thinking about food most of the time. How about a Ketogenic diet? Think about all of it all the time. Weigh your food. Know what’s in it. It has to work if I’m obsessed, right?

Now am I saying it’s wrong to exercise and eat right? Of course not. Those are good disciplines. The problem is when disciplines become religious. They take on an importance that affects our very sense of self. And even our sense of how God feels about us. If you pray to God for forgiveness because you ate a brownie, you might be missing out on what the Bible actually instructs us to do. If you hate yourself because you skipped your work out, this clearly has too much power in your life. If you’d rather think about food content than the content of the Gospel, your priorities might be off.

One of the best days of last year was when my Fit Bit broke. Earlier, I willingly put my Fit Bit on. And it became a slave master. I judged the worth of a day by the number of steps I took. It took on spiritual significance. This is just what a culture that has forgotten the gospel tends to do. And there are marketers who are crushing it with encouraging our obsessions.

The recent commercial for the Apple Watch 4 illustrates this perfectly. [Show Clip]. A guy sits on his couch. Across from him is his double. His other self. The only difference is that one of them has on an Apple Watch. Suddenly it

reminds him to stand up. He obeys immediately. So his double has to get up—he can't fall behind. Then, the watch tells him to get moving. They are joined by other doubles. The watch tells them to go from walking to jogging to running along a rugged path. They stop at the edge of the ocean for a breather, when another one of them comes sprinting through and leaps into the sea for an ocean swim. They all must follow. The message appears: there's a better you in you.

*There's a better you in you. If you work harder. If you do what your watch tells you to do. Because if you don't you will feel guilty and you will be a lesser you. Your watch and your identity have synced up. You feel less without that Apple watch and worse if you have it and disobey it. Am I saying an Apple Watch is evil? Or that you shouldn't have one? Of course not. Just think. Just realize this can easily be a symptom of identity based on physical disciplines with spiritual, religious implications. You can always tell the power of a practice or a gadget by the level of guilt it can produce or sense of right-ness it conveys.*

Are you a better Christian if you get in 15,000 steps? Does it feel like God likes you more if you make it through Whole 30? Are you less saved if you don't read every single day of this year's Lent guide? These are diagnostic questions by which we judge all our practices. Paul wants the Colossians to realize, "These indeed have the appearance of wisdom...but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh" (2: 23). You can keep all your disciplines rigorously, making your body submit to your goals. But that does not stop your sinful nature. In fact, it could make it worse. The guilt. The pride. The judgment of others. And the obsession that takes our focus off the gospel. Missing the news of Christ's great love for us in raising us from spiritual death into life, to which we contributed *zero*.

There's actually *not* a better me inside me. Without Christ, there's only the old sinful spiritually dead me. There's only the old man who cannot help but sin. I don't need a better me. *I need Christ in me to make me better.* The 17<sup>th</sup> century Oxford scholar John Owen wrote so eloquently, "There is nothing I can do to make God love me more. And there is not one thing I can do to make God love me less." He already knows. He already loves. He has already conferred all of his love upon me in giving me Jesus Christ who lives in me by the Holy Spirit. He has already taken me into his body, his people, his bride the church. Now he is the Head and I am a member of him. I am united to Jesus by the Holy Spirit through simple trust in him. There is no more Jesus to get, only more participation in who he is. There is no more Holy Spirit to have, only a relationship to grow into more and more as

we focus on Jesus. As Paul says, “we hold fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together, grows with a growth that is from Christ.”

Have you ever been through a season of legalism? A time, or a lifetime, of feeling under the binding obligation of law? Legalism is characterized by words such as, “I should. I ought. I must.” I spent a number of years bound by legalism as a young Christian. It was torture. Had I confessed all of my sins at the end of the day or had I forgotten some? Had I really prayed during my quiet time or was I just going through the motions? Did I offend anyone? Should I apologize to someone? I ought to pick up that piece of trash. I ought to give a 4 Spiritual Laws pamphlet to that guy walking his dog. What if that’s the only way he’ll ever hear the gospel. Why I even figured out how to put a 4 Spiritual Laws inside a napkin holder at Burger King so that when you pulled out a napkin the pamphlet would fly up and land at your place. I felt guilty if I watched a show that had too much violence or a song that implied too much romance. I introspected over everything. Terrible.

I contemplated just quitting being a Christian. Giving it up. But a wise counsellor led me back to grace. First she said, “I’m not sure you even are a Christian.” I, who wanted to quit Christianity, was outraged to think I wasn’t actually a Christian at all. Look, I am Mr. Westminster Christian School. I’ve got the plaque to prove it! And then I was terrified. Would I be going to hell? Had I missed salvation in spite of all my striving? An intense month of spiritual wrestling followed. A new surrender needed to occur. Where I gave up the righteousness I was enacting for Christ’s record given to me. Counted my law keeping as but rags. And depended on Christ alone for my righteousness. Not just once, but every day. On the last day of March that year, release occurred. I surrendered my goodness as well as my sinfulness and the weight lifted. I entered the freedom of Christ alone, the hope of glory. He is my rightness, my wholeness, and my acceptance.

You can’t talk your way out of legalism. You can’t reason your way out. After all, it’s a good thing to confess sins, pray sincerely, share the gospel, pick up trash and apologize to people you offend. It’s a good thing to walk 15,000 steps, stand up during the day and eat healthy. It’s a good thing to enact spiritual disciplines and read Christian books. You can’t reason your way out of legalism because it is made up of good things. It’s just that those good things can become chains that bind. What’s good practice for one becomes chains of guilt to another. These good practices can become obsessive. They can become the basis for evaluation instead of the only thing that matters: are you in Christ, trusting in him alone for your salvation?

Paul urged the Colossians to guard their freedom. And in that way guard the unity of the body of Christ. He urged them to draw nourishment from the Head, from Jesus, who holds us together like interconnected parts of one body. He has given us the means for staying nourished with the freedom of the gospel. This morning we will celebrate the sacrament of communion at all 3 of our services. This is the means Jesus himself gave us to stay connected to him and one another. This is the way we enter the freedom of drawing from Christ alone to make us right and whole.

The father of our Presbyterianism, John Calvin, loved to talk about communion in terms of the Head nourishing and directing the body. The head sends impulses through our physical bodies that keep us breathing, our hearts pumping, our eyes blinking. The Head also directs our intentional movements so we can work, eat, speak, touch and love. The Head of the body is Christ Jesus. Our Head is in heaven. But at communion, he sends his Spirit to his body on earth. He nourishes us with the power of his endless life. He binds us together in our shared eating and drinking. He gives us himself. This is my body, given for you. We draw ever more deeply from Jesus as we partake. We get connected more and more to each other. The table is the joyful freedom from legalism and judgmentalism. Here we celebrate that Jesus alone is enough, and we belong to him. We belong to each other. Let's make ready to come and partake!