

Colossians 2:16-17 Legalism

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Introduction

Today, with social media, TV, and the internet, there is an onslaught of false teaching. The sufficiency of Jesus Christ is either openly or implicitly denied. The churches in the Lycus Valley also faced the danger of spiritual intimidation. False teachers were telling them that Jesus Christ was not sufficient, that they needed something more. These heretics attempted to draw Christians away from confidence in Christ alone.

In 2:8–23, Paul mounts a frontal attack on the Colossian heresy. He has already dealt with philosophy (2:8–10) and presented Christ's sufficiency (2:11–15). He continues his refutation of the Colossian heresy by dealing with legalism (2:16–17), mysticism (2:18–19), and asceticism (2:20–23).

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Colossians 2:16-17

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷ which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

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Legalism is the religion of human achievement. It argues that spirituality is based on Christ plus human works. It makes conformity to man-made rules the measure of spirituality. Believers, however, are complete in Christ, who has provided complete salvation, forgiveness, and victory. **So**, Paul tells the Colossians, **let no one judge you**. Do not sacrifice your freedom in Christ for a set of man-made rules. "For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). To become entangled again in a legalistic system is pointless and harmful. Paul reminded the Galatians, who were also beguiled by legalism, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

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Legalism is useless because it cannot restrain the flesh. It is also dangerously deceptive, because inwardly rebellious and disobedient Christians, or even non-Christians, can conform to a set of external performance standards or rituals. Legalism focuses on the outside of man, what he does, and what he professes. The outward "good and presentable" behavior cleverly disguises the corrupt condition of the heart.

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Paul was concerned that Christians would be intimidated by legalism. He commanded Titus not to pay attention to "Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth," because "to the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled" (Titus 1:14–15). Romans 14–15 and 1 Corinthians 8–10 also discuss Christian liberty and the only legitimate reason for restraining it: to protect a weaker Christian brother or sister.

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The false teachers were telling the Colossians that it was not enough to have Christ; they also needed to keep the Jewish ceremonial law. The false teachers' prohibitions about **food** and **drink** were probably based on the Old Testament dietary laws (cf. Lev. 11). Those laws were given to mark Israel as God's distinct people and to discourage them from intermingling with the surrounding nations.

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Because the Colossians were under the New Covenant, the dietary laws of the Old Covenant were no longer in force. Jesus made that clear in **Mark 7:14-19** When He had called all the multitude to *Himself*, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. ¹⁶ If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!" ¹⁷ When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. ¹⁸ So He said to them, "Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, *thus purifying all foods?*"

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Paul reminded the Romans that “for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). That the dietary laws are no longer in force was illustrated by Peter’s vision (Acts 10:9–16) and formally ratified by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:28–29).

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A **festival** was one of the annual Jewish celebrations, such as Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Lights (cf. Lev. 23). Sacrifices were also offered on the **new moon**, or first day of the month (Num. 28:11–14).

Contrary to the claims of some today, Christians are not required to worship on the **Sabbath day**. It, like the other Old Covenant holy days Paul mentions, is not binding under the New Covenant. There is convincing evidence for that in Scripture.

First, the Sabbath was the **sign to Israel of the Old Covenant** (Ex. 31:16–17; Neh. 9:14; Ezek. 20:12). Because we are now under the New Covenant (Heb. 8), we are no longer required to keep the sign of the Old Covenant.

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Second, the New Testament nowhere commands Christians to observe the Sabbath.

Third, in our only glimpse of an early church worship service in the New Testament, we find the church meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7).

Fourth, we find no hint in the Old Testament that God expected the Gentile nations to observe the Sabbath, nor are they ever condemned for failing to do so. That is certainly strange if He expected all peoples to observe the Sabbath.

Fifth, there is no evidence of anyone's keeping the Sabbath before the time of Moses, nor are there any commands to keep the Sabbath before the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.

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Sixth, the Jerusalem Council did not impose Sabbath keeping on the Gentile believers (Acts 15).

Seventh, Paul warned the Gentiles about many different sins in his epistles, but never about breaking the Sabbath.

Eighth, Paul rebuked the Galatians for thinking God expected them to observe special days (including the Sabbath) (Gal. 4:10–11).

Ninth, Paul taught that keeping the Sabbath was a matter of Christian liberty (Rom. 14:5).

Tenth, the early church Fathers, from Ignatius to Augustine, taught that the Old Testament Sabbath had been abolished and that the first day of the week (Sunday) was the day when Christians should meet for worship. That disproves the claim of some that Sunday worship was not instituted until the fourth century.

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The dietary laws, festivals, sacrifices, and Sabbath-day worship were all **a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ**. A shadow has no reality. It is the reality is what makes the shadow! Jesus Christ is the reality to which the shadows pointed. For example, regarding food regulations, He is “the bread that came down out of heaven” (John 6:41). There is no need for Christians to observe the Passover either, because “Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). What justification could there be for demanding that Gentiles observe the Sabbath when God has granted them eternal rest (Heb. 4:1–11)? Any preoccupation with the shadows once the reality has come is pointless.

Paul’s point is simple: true spirituality does not consist merely of keeping external rules, but of having an inner relationship with Jesus Christ.

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So What ...

Legalism comes in many forms today. How one worships, dresses, and even which version of the Bible one uses. It focus on the external and ritual and leaves the heart neglected. One ends up living their lives for the approval of others while judging those who do not live to their expectations. It all leaves one empty and exhausted. Here are some ideas to help break the trap of legalism:

1. **Remember how your relationship with God began.**
2. **Make your primary life’s goal to know and love God.**
3. **Obey God because you want to, not because you have to or you’re scared if you don’t.**
4. **Fall in the arms of your loving, heavenly Father when you mess up.**
5. **Have grace toward others when they make mistakes.**

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