

It is love, not law, that drives us to holiness

Colossians 2:16-23

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Gustavo had been a foster child since he was a little boy. He had been abandoned by his parents when he was young. He had been moved to so many different foster homes, and every time it ended in problems. They were demanding and abusive. He would try his best for as long as he could, but eventually he would become rebellious and disobedient. He was not able to live with anyone . . . until he met the Andersons. They were different. They were strong, but kind. They were firm, but fair. They treated him with dignity and as if he mattered. They seemed to love him like their own son. In response, he began to change. His attitude, his behavior, his schoolwork, his heart. He was now living the way that all those other homes had demanded, but now it was because of love, not because of rules.

In the words of Josh McDowell, *“Rules without relationship bring rebellion”*.

This story highlights the difference between love and law in the life of a Christian. We are all called to holiness, and this will only be accomplished through a love relationship with Christ. Guilt, fear and strict rule keeping will never change our hearts and our behaviors. God’s law does help us recognize holiness, but will never empower us to take hold of it. Romans 13:8-14 describes it as “Fulfilling the law through love”. It is love that moves us to holiness.

Let’s now look to Colossians 2:16-23 as Paul speaks once again to the new believers in Colossae, who were being confronted by false teachers:

¹⁶Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Colossians 2:16-23 starts with the word “therefore”. That would be like saying, “because of this”. Whenever we read the word “therefore” in scripture, it should take us back to the previous paragraph or chapter to see what the writer is referring to.

In the previous verses, Paul had just reminded his readers that they had been spiritually dead in their sin. They had been completely separated from God.

But now, because of their faith in Christ, who had paid for their sins by dying on the cross, they were now forgiven and reconciled to God.

They now had an intimate, eternal, love relationship with God that had been made possible not through good works or religious rituals, not because of anything they had done, but through Christ. He had paid for their sin and now they stood forgiven and righteous, united with God.

God's law had been their enforcer, corrector, motivator and slave master, and the weight of it all was unbearable. Because of their hardness of heart and sinful nature, there was no way they would ever have been able to please God and obey all of His law. But then, out of God's great love, He sent Jesus to die in their place and set them free. Jesus took their sin and they received His righteousness. Now they were the children of God. They were invited in. They were totally forgiven. They had been made new. They had traded in the unbearable weight of their guilt and had received His yoke that was easy and His burden that was light. They now possessed all that they needed in Christ Jesus. They had all of Christ's Spirit and the maximum amount of love that God had to give. Nothing more was required.

That is the idea that Paul had just presented to the Colossians as he prepared to warn them about the false teaching that they were facing. With their glorious salvation in mind, Paul continued:

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

From one perspective it is not possible to stop someone else from judging you in their mind or even with their words. This verse is not a call to confront, fight, and completely control another's judgmental thoughts or actions. A more helpful way that this same phrase could be translated is, *"In light of everything that you have now in Christ, do not take to heart someone else's legalistic judgments of you."* Those who were in Christ were to recognize these false judgments for what they were and disregard them. Paul then continues to explain why these judgments are false.

We must remember that many of the false teachings that Paul is refuting in this letter were aimed at Jewish legalism. Some of the false teachers came from a Jewish background and believed that for someone to be a true Christian, they first had to become a Jew and follow all the Jewish rules and rituals.

In response, Paul is declaring that salvation cannot be earned through good works such as religious rituals. The religious rituals and requirements were given by God to point them to Christ, to be *"a shadow of the things to come"*. Now the Colossians had Christ. The religious rituals were no longer necessary to live the Christian life.

The Jews observed annual festivals, monthly new moons, and weekly sabbaths. The **Passover meal** (Leviticus 23:4-8) remembered God's deliverance in Egypt thousands of years before. The people had put the blood of a lamb over their doorposts so that death would pass over and not strike their homes. This symbolism pointed the Jews towards the day when Jesus of Nazareth would come as *"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the World!"* (John 1:29). They now had Jesus. They could observe Passover if they wanted, to remember what God had done in the past, but there was no longer an obligation to observe it.

The **feast of First Fruits** is to thank and honor God for the harvest and His provision. The symbolism is quite striking. The Passover lambs were sacrificed on the 14th day of the month of Nisan. The first day of Passover was the 15th. The festival of the First Fruits was celebrated on the third day, the 16th of Nisan, which was the very same day of Jesus' resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15:20 Paul describes Jesus as *"the firstfruits of the dead."*

The **feast of Unleavened Bread** symbolized the Hebrews coming out of sin. This is only made possible through Christ who has cleansed us of our sin and stated clearly that He now is our Bread of Life (John 6:35).

The **Day of Atonement** was an annual event where the Jews were to set their hearts right with God. In the temple many animals would be sacrificed. A goat was then selected as the "scapegoat". It would be burdened with the sins of the people and sent out into the wilderness. Jesus, too, took our sins upon Himself and was sacrificed so that we could be forgiven.

The **new moon celebrations** were a special time. They would begin with the messengers who were tasked with watching for the first sliver of the new moon. As soon as they saw it, it was announced throughout the land by the blowing of trumpets and signal fires from the mountaintops. Animal sacrifices, grain offerings and drink offerings were given. A goat was then sacrificed to the Lord as a sin offering. It consecrated the new month. All labor and trade was suspended and there were family and social feasts. It was to be a monthly reminder of one's commitment to the Lord. These events had served their purpose, but now that the perfect sacrifice had come and died for their sins they could walk continually in the presence of the Lord and not depend on the monthly sacrifice and rituals.

The observance of **the Sabbath** was also intended to point people towards Christ. To really feel what Paul was saying here we first need to understand strict Judaism of their day.

The Jewish religion was a life of endless rules. A Jew lived his life constantly surrounded by an ocean of regulations which dictated every part of his life. There were laws concerning washing your hands, how to honor the Sabbath, how to plow your fields, how to plant your seed, what offerings to give to the temple, what kind of food to eat, how to prepare it, what you do when you wake up in the morning, what you can and cannot eat, what you can and cannot wear, how to groom yourself, how to conduct business, who you can marry, how to observe the holidays, how to pray, how to know God's word, how to speak to others, and even how to discipline others who broke these laws.

Trying to be near God was a grueling exercise that no one could perfectly obey. Those who most desired God were often driven to exhaustion and legalism in the midst of their pursuit. It was a godless exercise of trying to be good enough so that one could be made right with God. These people truly needed a Sabbath, a rest.

In Genesis, during the creation account, we see the first mention of Sabbath. On the seventh day, on the Sabbath, God rested. In Hebrew the word "*Sabat*" means "to rest or stop or cease from work". But these Jewish false teachers did not know this rest. In Christ all are free from the endless work. They no longer need to obey the law out of fear. Because of Jesus we have a salvation that is complete. We can now rest in Him every day, not because of what we do, but because of what He

has done. In Him we find the rest that our souls need. We no longer are motivated by fear and the law. We now can freely live out of love. Christ is our Sabbath rest.

The Sabbath day was given originally to whet our appetite for the One who would come and bring eternal rest. Now that the Colossians had found Jesus, they could put off the strict legalism of the Sabbath and just enjoy the rest found in Christ.

The false teachers were demanding all of these observances that were originally given to help us look forward to the coming of the Messiah. Now that the Messiah dwelt in these believers, the observances no longer held their significance. They no longer were obligatory. Christ was now to be their full focus, not the rituals. What the false teachers were demanding was baseless now that Christ had come.

¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

Once again, we see Paul exhorting the believers to not take to heart the words of those who threatened to exclude them from the faith, or possibly from the church, if the believers did not obey their legalistic standards.

These false teachers insisted on **asceticism**. Asceticism is defined as a “severe self-discipline and avoiding of all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons.”

One example of asceticism was the lives of many the monks in centuries past. They separated themselves from the society, moved into the desert, fasted, went without sleep, even beat themselves to supposedly die to their fleshly desires and become more holy.

The false teachers were supporting a similar idea. They were judging the new Christians because they were not denying themselves or living simply enough. It was just one more way to make them live under the law and have to earn their right standing with God. It was as if Christ’s death on the cross was not enough to reconcile us to God. As if we still needed to do more to earn God’s love. It, once again, was a motivation and manipulation from the law and not from love.

The false teachers were also insisting on **angel worship** as a way to draw near to God. This was normal for the Gnostics and at times even for the Jews. It was believed that they did not deserve to come into the presence of God, so they first needed to reach out to the angels as intermediaries. The problem with this teaching is that Jesus Christ is the One and only intermediary. No one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Also, because we have been forgiven of our sin, we now can come before His throne with confidence in time of need and receive grace and mercy (Hebrews 4:16). Through Christ we now have been given a permanent, eternal invitation to come before God, our King.

This must have meant even more to those in the church who were familiar with the Old Testament story of Esther. If you remember, Esther was the Jewish wife of the Persian King. A law had been written that allowed all the Jews in the Persian empire to be killed and their possessions taken on a certain day. The King was unaware of the law and had no idea that his queen was Jewish. To save

her people, Esther had to go before the King and expose the plot against the Jews. The only problem was that the penalty of coming before the King, uninvited, was death . . . unless the King, in that moment, extended his scepter and granted you mercy. Thankfully, she was granted mercy.

God, our King, has permanently extended his scepter over us, granting us His mercy and inviting us to come into His presence with confidence in our time of need to receive grace and mercy. We should not be able to come into the presence of a holy God, but yet through Christ, we can.

The false teachers were threatening to disqualify the believers, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, and going on about the need for one to experience visions. Their supposed piety was not resulting in greater humility, but instead was feeding their pride. In scripture, pride is the root of many sins. It turns a person from their dependence on God and grows their desire to glorify themselves. It also reveals their lack of intimacy with God, the Father. The closer one draws to God, the more he or she will see their weakness, their sin and their need for Him. God will increase and they will decrease. Humility will characterize their lives. In this situation the supposed piety of the false teachers was resulting in legalism and pride. Undeserved love drives us to humility, but law drives us either to pride or a sense of failure.

The believers were also supposed to disregard the criticism of the false teachers because the teachers were not holding to the Head, Christ, through whom the Body, the church, grows with a growth which is from God. Paul was declaring that to grow spiritually while following these teachers was as impossible as a body growing without being connected to the head.

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 —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.

The believers in Colossae were now out from under the reign of the law, and now some were going back and beginning to submit to these legalistic laws again, as if they still were their slave masters?

The false teachers surely sounded like they wanted to be close to God, but it was all based on human effort. Legalism, based on human standards, may appear to be in pursuit of holiness, but in the end it will not be enough to stop a person from giving into sinful temptations of the flesh. As we read in James 1:14-15, each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Sin comes from the desires of our hearts. Obeying strict rules does not have the power to change the desires of the heart.

The Christian life is more than just strictly obeying religious rules because of the fear of the law. Holiness is fueled by a love relationship with Christ. It is a love relationship that overflows into a life of holiness and obedience. Don't take to heart those who criticize your relationship with Christ, when all they are doing is judging you for not living up to their manmade religious rules.

Our lives of holiness are not motivated by law, but by love. So, seek to know all of Christ that you can. As you come to know His great love for you, He will grow in you a great love for Him, and from that will come overflowing devotion and obedience. Holiness is birthed out of love, not law.

Discussion questions:

1. What did you find interesting in this sermon?
2. How was the opening story about Gustavo, the orphan, a picture of our lives before and after salvation?
3. Josh McDowell said, "Rules without a relationship bring rebellion." How would you explain that in your own words? How would that relate to people, God and sin?
4. Have you ever felt that you were judged too harshly by someone else? Why do you think we, as people, tend to judge others? How did you respond?
5. When someone's opinion of you differs from God's opinion of you, which opinion do you find more easily to believe? Why do you think that is?
6. What was Paul's reason for telling them not listen to those who were judging them?
7. Do you think most Christians desire to live holy lives because of their love for Christ, or because of fear and guilt? Why?
8. What do you think God wants you to do in response to this sermon?
9. How can we help you?
10. How can we pray for you?