

## *The Impotence of Rule-based Christian Living*

I grew up among solid, Bible-believing, evangelical Baptists. We embraced salvation by grace alone through faith alone with deep conviction. No one could earn their way to heaven by being good. When it came to the gospel, we were unerringly orthodox.

When it came to living as a believer after getting saved, we acknowledged grace, but pretty much acted as if we were on our own to maintain our walk with God. We had carefully proscribed the Christian life with both written and unwritten lists of rules and principles and disciplines and woe be to the believer who didn't follow them.

Many of the rules came into being out of a genuine desire to live in obedience to Jesus. For instance, we understood the biblical command against getting drunk. In order to make sure we never got drunk, we built fences around the command—an impulse at least as old as the Jewish scribes and Pharisees. Never drink at all and you'll never get drunk. Avoid places that sell alcohol and people who use it and you'll never be tempted to take the first drink.

The Bible warns about sexual immorality so we had rules about things like dancing and movies designed to keep us from activities and images that might arouse our sexual passions. A few decades back we witnessed the emergence of the “purity culture” which had as its goal preserving sexual purity for marriage. It fostered shame in those who fell short, and oversold purity with the promise of greater marital bliss and fidelity. Grace and forgiveness for failure was missing. Also missing was instruction about moral purity that honors God's holiness and glory. It camped on abstinence in place of chastity. For all its good and worthy intentions, the purity culture came with its own fence-builders.

In time, the fences became as significant as the command, sometimes more so! If not drinking at all kept one from getting drunk, we crafted a quasi-biblical justification for total abstinence and avoiding the merest suggestion of tolerance for alcohol. This led to abuses of Scripture, but we all knew and pretty much observed the rule.

Further, as good Baptists we looked down our noses at other brothers and sisters who didn't keep the rules, like some of our Christian Reformed brethren, because they not only drank, they also smoked, and we all knew that smoking defiled the temple of the body—another rule.

Our submission to rules was fertile ground for spiritual *arrogance* and fostered a culture of suspicion in which we who kept the rules felt qualified, even obligated to judge other believers who didn't observe our cluster of boundaries (we called them 'Christian standards'). Because we weren't living by grace through faith, we had little grace or patience for those 'lesser souls' still struggling to measure up.

And if we didn't submit to the rules or couldn't, we either ignored the call to holiness as altogether impractical, or floundered in despair.

We were quite simply legalists. Legalists emphasize strict adherence to *man made* rules and standards insisted on as necessary to stay separated from evil and grow spiritually. Legalism is often referred to as performance-based Christianity: my acceptance and worth as a believer is determined by my performance of specified duties and obligations.

Legalism goes far beyond the Spirit-filled obedience of faith God desires by confusing submission to rules with submission to Christ, and adopting austere, spiritual disciplines as evidence of the self-control which is a fruit of God's Spirit. Legalism binds us and creates an atmosphere of suspicion, guilt and fear.

Clinton mentioned a previous church he attended in which it seemed every sermon started with "Don't!" He heard a deacon and his wife stand up in church to confess a sin. They had been taking square dancing lessons—at which revelation he heard audible gasps of dismay.

We must acknowledge that many of these dear saints were genuine believers who truly wanted to love and serve Christ. The men and women with whom I went to church during my adolescence were the real deal and I have great admiration and respect for them, even though we were enmeshed in and nurtured a culture of rule-keeping. They did so sincerely, with the best of intentions, believing they were pleasing God.

We were part of a larger conservative Christian culture that simply got sidetracked in how to live as a Christian.

Legalists have not wholly disappeared. Nor were they unique to their time.

There were people in Colossae who had taken legalism to exquisite heights. They mashed together a collection of beliefs and practices that expressed itself in a rigidly disciplined lifestyle obsessed with what you could and couldn't do as a believer. They also injected a hyper-spiritualism fueled by ecstatic visions and even the worship of angels.

But in so doing they diminished Christ and marginalized *ordinary* believers. Fancying themselves as the conduct police in the church, they showed contempt for those who didn't measure up to their exacting standards of self-defined spirituality. And they practiced a syncretistic blend of philosophy, visionary mysticism and angel veneration that significantly departed from apostolic Christianity.

Throughout the first two chapters of Paul's letter he built his case against these false teachers by emphasizing the pre-eminence and sufficiency of Jesus. Now, at the end of chapter two, Paul gives straight-up commands to the church about how to respond to this bogus system: "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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. *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, 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.

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—'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 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" (Colossians 2:16-23 ESV).

Paul gives the believers in Colossae three liberating directives in these verses. Two are straightforward imperatives. The third is a rhetorical question with an implied imperative. Look at v. 16-17: “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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”

No one in the church has the right to make moral judgments on others in those areas in which Christ-followers have freedom. Paul is not suggesting there are no moral boundaries for Christians. He will be explicit in chapter three about putting away from us those things that violate God’s perpetually binding moral commands. It’s thoroughly biblical to insist on moral obedience. It’s quite another to assume the authority to legislate human rules about how to be morally obedient, or how to protect yourself from disobedience.

The false teachers had added to God’s revelation their own opinions about things that should or shouldn’t be done, and other things that must be done. Among the ‘ought not’s’ were dietary restrictions: what spiritual people ought not eat or drink.

Do we have any rules about diet? Anything *real* Christians should or shouldn’t eat? Gluten-Free, Dairy-Free, Paleo, Raw, Unpasteurized, Vegan, Organic? I ran across a blogger who, having recently backed away from a gluten-free diet, observed: “With the rise of food-u-cation...food has been catapulted to redeemer status. It has become a savior to many” (theunlikelyhomeschool.com).

I once received an invitation to a seminar by a well-known Bible teacher promising to show us how making bread the biblical way leads to a healthier, more godly lifestyle.

Anything good Christians shouldn’t drink? I once heard an evangelist rail against caffeinated coffee. Another counseled against decaffeinated coffee.

Listen: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who...*require* abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”

“For *everything* created by God is good, and *nothing* is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:1-5 ESV).

Are Christians bound by rules about what is or is not acceptable on Sunday? What about Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter? Should we observe a liturgical calendar?

There was a time in the history of God’s dealing with people when the Law demanded dietary restrictions and observances of days and seasons. Paul calls them shadows of things to come, imperfect pointers and indicators of life in another age. That other age has come. The sum and substance is found in Jesus. Through faith in him we have stepped out of the shadows and into the light. The old ceremonial rules no longer apply.

Paul’s second command is in verse 18-19: “*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, 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.”

Legalists love to act as the moral umpires and guardians of spirituality. The false teachers in Colossae certainly did. They strictly observed austere spiritual disciplines and loved to talk about their private, extra-sensory spiritual experiences. They would have achieved guest star status with many religious broadcasters today.

It’s easy for people like that to assume a moral superiority that makes them *legends in their own minds*. Paul says they are unreasonably puffed up in their sensuous minds, more enamored with their religious practices and extraordinary experiences than they are with Jesus. And they are dismissive of the Body of Christ, the role of fellow-believers in using their gifts in love to help us grow.

To allow someone like that to act as a moral or spiritual umpire in the church does nothing to enhance the growth of the church. *Spiritual nurture comes from Jesus through the entire Body of Christ.*

Don't give away moral authority to anyone who makes their own spiritual preferences and practices the standard by which they judge all other believers.

Look at v. 20-22: "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—"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?"

Paul asks a question, but the question is rhetorical. It's designed to communicate a strong negative prohibition: "Don't submit to man-made rules for living the Christian life." Most of them boil down to this: "Good Christians don't \_\_\_\_\_!" The default posture is "No!"

When we put our faith in Jesus to save us, God inseparably joined us to Jesus. His death became our death. His resurrection to life became our entrance into new life now. Jesus is God's emphatic "Yes!" to all the good promises of God.

We died to all the old ways of getting along in the world, all the human intuitions and regulations about how religious people must act if they are going to be acceptable to God. "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.*"

Simply put, rule keeping doesn't work! Legalism is spiritually impotent.

Well, we get this, don't we? We have recognized that most of the old taboos are human inventions. However well-intentioned, defining Christianity by keeping man-made standards doesn't work.

Except we don't get it—not entirely.

A few years ago I read a book entitled *The Post-Church Christian*. It's a father-son interaction by two men, both pastors, talking about why Millennials, the generation born between 1984 and 2000, are walking away from the church. The son and co-author, Carson Nyquist, a Millennial himself, cites legalism as one of the reasons.

Carson says he felt like walking away from the church because: “People choose morality rather than faith as the distinguishing mark of what makes them Christian.”

He adds: “Our problem comes when the church substitutes lesser, moralistic or cultural preferences for...biblical distinctives.”

And again: “Sometimes I wonder if the drinking and tattoos of today are the dancing and movie theaters of our grandparents day.”

While vestiges of prohibition remain, the evangelical church by and large has made an uneasy peace with alcohol. We’d never serve real wine during communion or bring a nice table red to a pot-luck, but we’re willing to allow individuals to drink wine in the privacy of their own homes. We’re really uncomfortable, though, when our twenty-something young adults post Facebook photos with their friends in a bar.

I had a frantic couple come into my office one day in acute distress because their daughter got a tattoo. They even pointed to this verse: “You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:27-28 ESV).

I tried to show them that this prohibition was directed against idolatrous pagan practices unique to the Jewish context three and one-half millennia ago. It is not a moral invective against tattoos any more than it prohibits trimming your beard.

By the way, remember when beards were also *ungodly*? My father once told me that if I ever let my facial hair grow, I needn’t come home.

We still have man-made rules and we’re still subject to the temptation of thinking that our personal morality, as expressed by our disciplines and standards, is more significant than living joyously by faith in Jesus. By that much we show ourselves to be legalists and focus too much on exactly the wrong thing. If we give all our attention to not sinning, then sin will consume all our attention.

Paul has something else, something better in mind for those of us who follow Christ. And that’s what we’ll talk about next week.

Let me offer a couple of caveats here.

First, there is *wisdom* for any individual believer to acknowledge before God any gateway that might lead them to disobedience. The most obvious, of course, is a recovering alcoholic for whom even one drink can unleash their addiction. For them, total abstinence is wisdom.

You may choose to limit what movies you see, what music you listen to, what pastry shops you choose to avoid, etc., if those things or those places have become gateways for indulging your sinful natures.

That self limitation, wisdom for you, becomes problematic when we expect others to adopt our personal limits. Romans 14-15 has sound counsel for us in such cases.

Second, freedom in Christ is not freedom from biblical obedience, or freedom to do whatever feels good to us. "...you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh [*the sinful nature that still clings to us*], but through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13 ESV).

Our choice is not binary, either keeping rules or abandoning rules altogether. For instance, a young mom once told me: "I'm free in Christ and that means I can do anything I want!" She did and it blew up her walk with Christ, her marriage, and her family.

We are not bound by man-made rules nor are we free to do as we wish. We walk the middle path of faithful obedience and submit to the law of love for God and others. Jesus said God's law was a summary statement of how we love God and others. We have been raised to new life in Jesus and he has given us his Spirit who empowers us to do that.

What matters is where we truly believe life is found. And that is the burden of next week.

*Benediction:*

"May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:20-21 ESV).