



When Rules Are Deadly

[2:16-23]

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“Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

“If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (2:16-23).

An important feature of any society is its rules. Without them anarchy and confusion in day-to-day life reign. From running the government to playing a child’s game, rules are needed.

Rules are likewise important to Christianity. Paul once told Timothy, “We know that the law is good if one uses it properly” (1 Timothy 1:8; NIV). Laws teach us what is good and what is

not. Laws restrain evil and promote what is right in a society.

Laws and rules, however, can be perverted. Improperly handled, they can destroy our walk with God. That is why Paul told Timothy “the law is good *if one uses it properly.*” Rules can be deadly.

Everywhere he traveled establishing churches, Paul found that he had to combat the work of false teachers who attempted to lead novice Christians out of the liberty of grace back into the bondage of legalism. What is “legalism”? Legalism is an improper use of rules and laws in one’s Christian life. Legalism is a spiritual tragedy as threatening to the church on the threshold of the twenty-first century as it was in the first century.

The heart of Christianity is Christ: He is sufficient. He is God. He is our Savior. He is our Redeemer. He is everything we need. Jesus won a decisive victory over all powers and authorities at the cross (2:13-15). He secured our victory finally and fully for us at Calvary. No need exists for us to be held in the grip of fear that failure to keep somebody else’s pious-sounding rules will exclude us from eternal glory.

In the quest for spirituality, many Christians pursue false substitutes. Without realizing it, these substitutes become destructive forces that defeat the Christian’s objective. Paul identified three erroneous avenues to personal spirituality and warned the Colossian brethren against them.

DO NOT SUBMIT TO EMPTY RITUALS TO BE SPIRITUAL (2:16, 17)

Paul's first warning was to not submit to empty rituals as the mark of authentic spirituality: "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ" (2:16, 17).

The exact nature of the heresy troubling the church at Colossae is not known (no documents were left for us), but it is not hard to discern some of what they were teaching. Evidently they were saying, "You must complete what Jesus started if you are going to make it to heaven. It is not enough to know Jesus; authentic spirituality comes in knowing Jesus *and* in keeping our laws."

These false teachers were telling these Christians to eat certain foods and avoid others, to keep the Passover feast, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the weekly Sabbath. Thus, external rituals were made the mark of one's spirituality.

In Matthew 6 Jesus told how the Pharisees used to stand out on the street corners and pray aloud so people could see them and be impressed with how spiritual they were. Other Pharisees fasted and went around bedraggled so people would know that they were fasting and say, "My, isn't he dedicated to the Lord!" Some will always want to evaluate how spiritual others are by such external acts.

Paul said, "Don't let anyone put you down and convince you that you are not spiritual because you do not conform to their list of rituals."

DO NOT SUBSTITUTE FALSE RIGOR AND REVERENCE FOR FAITH (2:18, 19)

Paul's second warning was to not substitute rigorous self-abasement and false reverence for faith in Jesus.

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God (2:18, 19).

When Paul said, "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize. . . .", he was using an

athletic image, which he loved to do. "Defraud" literally means to act as an umpire and call someone out. That is what these false teachers at Colossae were doing. They came into the church at Colossae and began checking up on these believers' spirituality. "Do you worship the angels? Which ones do you worship? Have you had heavenly visions? Have you gone without food? Have you made yourself suffer?" By claiming to have had these experiences, these false teachers were professing to have achieved a superior level of spirituality.

Paul said, "Do not let these fellows convince you that you are spiritually lost because you have not had the experiences they name." The false teachers had lost connection with Jesus, the head of the body, His church. They had substituted a claim of a religious experience for faith in Jesus as the basis of their spirituality.

Does that go on today?

Years ago a man used to come by my office whenever he was passing through town. He was anxious to find out if I had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit yet. He had prayed and prayed for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and one day something hit him and knocked him back about three rows in the church building where he was praying. Since that time he has claimed he has been living on a higher spiritual plane. He was curious to know if I had ever reached that higher level. His confidence was not in Jesus but in an experience he thought that he had undergone.

Other people have told me that if I do not speak in tongues, I have not arrived yet as a Christian. To them, a claim of speaking in tongues was the mark of authentic spirituality.

Paul was warning against substituting claims of personal experiences as the mark of authentic spirituality. Paul said to not ever let someone disqualify you, telling you that you are not a Christian because you have not had some experience he claims to have had.

DO NOT SUBSCRIBE TO WORLDLY RULES (2:20-23)

The third warning was this: Do not subscribe to worldly rules as the way to spirituality.

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!"

(which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teaching of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence (2:20-23).

Paul was talking about worldly rules being made the source of salvation, but let us make a secondary application. I grew up on a form of Christianity that emphasized “do’s and don’ts,” mostly the “don’ts”—don’t dance, don’t dress immodestly, don’t drink, don’t smoke, etc. Perhaps we think if we can get enough rules laid down about what to avoid and what not to do, we will be holy. That is not the way to holiness. I have a cocker spaniel that does not dance, drink, or smoke, but I would hardly call her spiritual! Telling people what they cannot do is not the way to create authentic spirituality. Why? Such rules are good, but they have limited value in restraining sensual, ungodly activities.

Romans 7 contains Paul’s autobiography of his struggle with law as a means to personal spirituality. Verse 7 says, “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”

Paul said that the law of Moses was not bad. It was good. It taught the Jewish people about what was evil and would displease God. But listen to what Paul said happened to him when he learned about this rule against coveting.

But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me (Romans 7:8-11).

Instead of Paul avoiding evil and becoming more and more godly, he actually resisted the law and broke it.

When I was about five years old, the lamp in our living room burned out. My mother took out the old bulb and, as she was going to the kitchen to get a new light bulb, she said to me, “Chris,

stay away from that lamp while I’m gone.” I had not even been *thinking* about that lamp, but now that my mother laid down the rule to stay away, you know what happened. I *had* to check it out. I crawled up on the arm of the sofa and looked into the socket of the lamp. Since I could not see anything, I did the natural thing—I stuck my finger in the socket . . . and got zapped! The command my mother gave me which was meant for my safety actually awakened a curiosity in me. Paul said that is the way it is with rules.

This is not to say that rules have no place in our lives as Christians. Rules do have a place. Paul told Timothy, “We know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully” (1 Timothy 1:8). But we are never to use a list of “do’s and don’ts” as the sole means to becoming spiritual. Using rules to create spirituality has never fully empowered people to do what is right.

If we begin with rules and rituals as our guide to being spiritual, our whole emphasis will be on our own performance. Am I obedient enough? Have I kept all the rules? Am I doing better than you are at keeping the rules?

CONCLUSION

What is the answer? How do you promote genuine spirituality in your life? Paul said the answer is to remain connected to your spiritual head, Jesus Christ. Let Him fill your heart. Rules attempt to restrain the corrupt desires of the flesh, but when Jesus fills your heart, He gives you new desires.

We are to focus on things above and fill our minds with thoughts of Jesus, our spiritual guide. Paul said, “. . . keep seeking the things above, . . . Set your mind on the things above, . . .” (3:1-3). What will please Him? What would He want us to do in this situation?

Paul was more explicit when he wrote the church at Philippi: “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things” (Philippians 4:8). We must study the Word of God and stay intimately related to Jesus. We can discover how He acts, thinks, and speaks. Then we can set our minds on being like Him. A deeper, authentic spirituality will become a way of life.