

Colossians 2:16-23/Prayer

LAST WEEK

Last week we saw Paul attack the false teaching at Colossae. We are not sure what it was, but verse 23 sums it up well, “*These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion . . .*” So whatever this was, it was self-made, man-centered, self-focused religion.

Now **James 1:28** refers to a “*pure religion.*”

BUT THIS WAS NOT PURE

This was man-centered, human focused, effort driven, rule based, and graceless religion. The message was, “*You must add to Christ to please God.*” It sidelines the Cross and what Christ did for us there, and centers on your performance, your works, your rule keeping, and your effort.

SO THE MORE YOU DO

the more God is pleased and accepts you. That is religion. Its human attempts to merit and deserve and earn and work for God’s love and grace and blessings. And the human heart loves it. It feels spiritual and natural, and it puts you in control. All of us are guilty of this.

TAKE YOUR BEST DAY

Think of your best day possible. Imagine your most spiritual day. You:
wake up early,
read Psalm 23 or Romans 8,
pray for everyone,
drive patiently,
resist most temptation,
you work hard, you’re efficient,
you’re kind to everyone,
you sing praise songs,
you invite someone to church,
go to your small group,
and end the day with prayer.

Don’t you feel God’s love in those days? Aren’t you more worthy? Isn’t He proud to have you?

BAD DAYS

Now imagine the bad days, the stressful and selfish and sinful and anxious and hurried and snappy and road-rage and unraveled days. Don’t you feel condemned? Unworthy? Unloved by God? I do.

THAT IS RELIGION

That is religion pulsing through your spiritual veins. When your heart’s fingers grab that, it is addicting. God is never pleased with you. He is always on edge. All of your life is influenced by it. How you pray, when you pray, how you give, how you suffer, how you handle criticism, is all influenced by religion.

SUFFERING

For example, when you suffer a bit, religion always asks,

“What have I done wrong?”

“How have I sinned?”

“Why is God angry at me?”

“What is God teaching me?” (which *can* mean, “If I learn quicker, He’ll let up.”)

So *you* are always the focus. Religion does this to us. It only sees Gods physical blessings. It only thanks God for family, health, money in the bank, weather, golf, and physical blessings. But it never sees the hidden, inner, deeper work God is doing to your soul in suffering.

CRITICISM

Then there is criticism. If you’re security and worth is in your performance, whether spiritual, financial, marital, parental, etc. You can’t take criticism or push back. It stings too much; its too close to home.

That is why Jesus, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah railed against religion. Here Paul shows how weak and useless self-made religion is. He shows how:

it's incomplete (vv.16-17),

it's unconnected (vv.18-19),

it's insufficient (vv.20-23)

But the Gospel towers over it. The Gospel is radically different from religion.

#1 Religion Is Incomplete

Look at verse 16: *“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you . . .”* The judgment in mind here is where they stand with God, their salvation. They were in affect saying, *“If you’re really saved, you’ll do as we say.”* And their judgment is based on *“questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath”* (v.16). So this system, whatever it was, had Old Testament roots. Certain days or weeks were holy, and certain foods were unholy.

NOW GODS LAW IS GOOD

Psalm 119 is song to God’s Law. It is a love song . . . to Leviticus! Then Christ came. He fulfilled the Law, for us, in our place. Now its like we obeyed all of it. So every time you sinned or sin, *legally* (in God’s sight) you obeyed. Now you can *actually* obey.

THERE ARE DEBATES

about which Old Testament laws are binding on Christians, mainly the tithe and the Sabbath. That is not Paul’s debate here. The issue is not which laws are binding, its which laws will save you. They are banking God’s love and acceptance and grace to save them, on these laws. Paul says, ***“Let no one do that! That is religion talking.”***

Religion says, “If I obey, get life right, keep my nose clean, then God will love me and bless me.”

But God already loves you.

VERSE 17

“These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” A shadow imitates what is real. My shadow is not me, it resembles me. These laws of food and drink and Sabbath and festival were just

imperfect shadows that Christ fulfilled. He is the real stuff. He is the True Sabbath, the True Festival, the True Bread, the True Water.

BUT RELIGION BRINGS DOUBT

You doubt Christ's sufficiency, you doubt God's love and you doubt your salvation. I think all Christians, at some point, question being saved. Do you know why? You broke God's law. You lied, you stole, you coveted, you lusted, you gossiped, you slandered. You broke a law and you judged yourself.

Religion whispered to you:

"Christians don't do this.

How can God love you?

You must not be saved."

And you hooked your faith into it, and doubted.

BUT THERE IS A REMEDY

See, your salvation isn't yours. Christ saved you, you didn't save you. He owns you. He paid for you. He redeemed you. He chose you. He adopted you. He reconciled to you. He saved you.

Psalm 51:12: *Restore to me the joy of your salvation.*"

Jonah 2:9, "*Salvation belongs to the LORD!*"

WE SKIPPED A HUGE WORD

Look back at **verse 16**: "*Therefore . . .*" What is that there for? It calls back to our mind verses 9-15 where he said that you were dead in your sins, but God:

made you alive,

He forgave all your sins,

He cancelled all your debt,

He condemned His Son,

He brought you in despite your sin.

that is humanly unthinkable!

IMAGINE YOU'RE A JUDGE

Imagine that you are a judge with one son, and some young reckless punk kills him. But you arrange for his pardon. Then you adopt that young reckless punk to be your son, and you love him like your first son. That is unthinkable. Actually, that is the Gospel. God now sees you as He sees Christ.

IF I DID THAT, YOU'D FIRE ME

If I saw you the way I see Cross and Ryse, you would fire me. I'd be kissing you, callings you weird names in weird voices, tackling you. You would fire me. God sees you that way. Religion robs that. You are His, nothing can change that!

IN 1988

In 1988 there was a concert in London, at Wembley Stadium. The goal was to raise awareness for Nelson Mandela's imprisonment. The concert featured: Dire Straits, Sting, George Michael, Guns and Roses, Natalie Cole, Joe Cocker, Simple Minds, Tracy Chapman, Bee Gees, Salt-N-Peppa, and Jessye Norman. For 12 hours these pop and rock artists played to 70,000 fans, many of whom were drunk and high. But the last act was

Jessye Norman, an opera singer. She took the stage with no band, no backup singers, just her. She began to sing *Amazing Grace* and the whole place fell silent. By the second verse, 70,000 people were standing and singing with her.

Philip Yancey says, “The world thirsts for grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it.” (Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, 282.)

His grace saved you. Grace taught your heart to fear, grace relieved your fears, grace keeps you safe, and grace will bring you home. But religion cannot do that. It bases everything on you. It is incomplete.

#2 Religion Is Unconnected

Verse 18 presents some knocks to untangle. What Paul said here is hard to translate. So who has the ESV translation? NIV? KJV? NKJV? NLT? NASB? GREEK? Translations differ fairly strongly here. So let's pick through this and see what Paul meant. Look at **verse 18**:

“*Let no one disqualify you . . .*” So **verse 16** he said, “*Let no one judge you.*” That was a courtroom analogy. Now he uses an athletic analogy. So there is a race, a grace race, that you must run. There is a prize. But religion sidelines you, you foul out.

He goes on, “*insisting on asceticism . . .*” You might have “*delighting in false humility.*” They delight themselves in looking humble and appearing spiritual and disciplined and together.

In addition there is “*worship of angels . . .*” Now don't scoff at this. Angels are glorious. If you saw one, you might worship it. They aren't naked toddlers. Now we are not clear what this means. It could mean:
they call on angels for protection and security.
It could mean that they discuss angels too much.
Or they really adore and revere angels.

Galatians 3:19 says, “*The Law was put in place by angels.*”

So angels were important. Whatever this means, they are gazing upon angels, not Jesus. Let's keep going.

They are “*going on in detail about visions . . .*” NT Wright, a NT scholar, says they are *trying* to see a vision or *induce* a vision. The focus is a deep, mystical experience with God. Now I think we can experience God. You can feel close to Him. He is zooms in on us. But God does that, we can't cause that.

Then he says they are “*puffed up [proud] without reason [its just hot air] by his sensuous mind [lit: mind of flesh, sinful nature].*” So these teachers are very disciplined, very strict, outwardly humble and spiritual, very experienced based, into angels, mystical and highly self-important.

BUT THERE IS A HUGE PROBLEM

Look at verse 19: “*not holding fast to the Head [Christ], from whom the whole body [the church], nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.*” So these false teachers, are cut off from Christ. And because of that, they cannot grow.

THE WAY TO GROW

The way to grow as a Christian is to gaze upon Christ and what He has done for you. You have to hold fast to Him and walk with Him and do life with Him and talk with Him and think on Him. Let me show you this.

TITUS 2

Verses 11-13 says, “*11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age . . .*” The grace of God in v.11 is the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He appeared and through Him, we received grace. That grace, that appearing, now teaches us and trains us to live godly, holy, and self-controlled lives. But how? By us gazing on it. Beholding it. Looking at it. Rehearsing it. Preaching it to ourselves. That is how we grow. That's how you defeat sin.

TAKE JEALOUSY

You see someone else and want what they have. You want their lifestyle, looks, body, car, house, talent or ministry. And that begins to consume you and make you angry and you pity yourself. What is happening there? You are self-justifying. You are trying to make yourself someone. Your hope is based on it. But it will fail. It will never be enough.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

Look at the Cross, the Gospel. He justified you. He died for you!! No possession, no looks, no power, no status can compete with that. He eternally redefined you. Who cares what car you drive, what house you own, how slim you are. You have everything in Him. Let Him define you. Gaze on Him to grow and mature and be controlled and godly.

ARE YOU HOLDING FAST TO HIM?

You cannot grow apart from Jesus. Religion cannot grow you. It puffs you up, leaves you unsatisfied, and it sidelines you. You gaze at you and what you do and who you are and turn from Him. We'll get to what you do. It's coming.

#3 Religion Is Insufficient

In verse 20 Paul says that we died with Christ to those elemental spirits, those semi-demonic forces behind physical things. What he means I think, is that the pagans tried to appease the gods of weather, fertility, etc., and receive blessings from them. So these false teachers thought that certain food and drink and Sabbath laws would save them.

Then he says, “*why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’*” To be clear, there are laws and rules that we must obey as Christians. There are things that you cannot touch and taste and handle. There are laws. You can't say, “***Im free in Christ!***” then knock off a bank.

GOOD WORKS MATTER

Good works matter. Good works are important. That is not the issue. You should strive and labor and work to do good. The issue is thinking and believing that *only* and *after* you've done good, is God pleased with you. Martin Luther called that “***setting up self as a false god***” (Martin Luther, *Treatise On Good Works*, Kindle Location 340.).

BUT THESE ARE EXTRA LAWS

They aren't biblical. They are man-made laws. Look at **verse 22**: They are "*according to human precepts and teachings?* They are man-focused, **which assumes human goodness**. When you make the law it assumes that you are good. But I have great news for you: You aren't as bad as you think, you are worse! So cheer up. Christ came to redeem you! He had to die. That's how bad you were. But He willingly died, that's how good He is.

VERSE 23

Verse 23: "*These have indeed an appearance of wisdom . . .*" So it sounds good to say, "Be good, work hard, don't watch that, don't drink that, don't go there, don't read that!" The problem is you become a checklist Christian. Then you suffer and say, "***But I was good! I didn't cuss. I didn't get angry.***" And you hold up your goodness before God and go, "***You owe me.***"

Your heart collects all that good stuff and righteousness and hardens toward Jesus. You avoid Him, not because sin, but because of righteousness.

DONALD BARNHOUSE

Donald Barnhouse was a preacher in Philadelphia. On his radio broadcast he once asked, "*What if Satan had his way?*" He proposed that all the bars would be closed, all pornography banned, all the kids would say "Yes Ma'am" and "Yes Sir", crime would cease, and all the churches filled . . . where Christ was not preached.

AS LONG AS YOU ARE

trusting in your works and your extra laws and your rules and your goodness and not Christ, the Enemy is happy. Then he mentions "*asceticism and severity to the body . . .*" So the goal is holiness by subtraction. The message is, "***Stay away, you'll be holy.***" It's saying No. But holiness is saying Yes and No.

But there is a problem and **verse 23** shows us. He says, "*but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*" You can make all the extra laws you want. You can:

cut your cable and internet,

you can watch no movies,

read no magazines,

leave your boyfriend or girlfriend,

drink only water,

budget perfectly,

dress very modestly,

never miss church,

and spend hours praying and reading and worshipping, and maybe you should do some of that,

but your heart will still crave sinful things.

SO HAVE CONVICTION

So you should have convictions, boundaries, accountability, defenses, and rules in your life. But you can't trust them. They can't change your heart and they can't, by themselves, merit God's pleasure. But the Gospel can!

VERSE 20

You died with Christ verse 20 says. Do you know what that means? It means that deep down we all know that we should be punished. We know what's right and we haven't always done it. We deserve punishment and judgment. When Christ died, you got it. You were beaten and mocked and spit on and killed and punished with Him, in God's mind. You died with Him.

That is why God accepts you, and that's why you can now do good.

Religion says, “If I obey, God will love me.”

The Gospel says, “God loves me in Christ, therefore I will passionately seek to obey Him.”