



Sermon – May 2, 2021
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Verses Covered This Week

Colossians 2:20 – 23

Mark 7:6 - 8

Well, we invite you to open your Bibles with me. We're going to be in Colossians 2, verse 20 this morning. Colossians 2:20. If you're a guest with us, welcome home. We're so excited to have our college band up here leading us today. Will y'all let them know how much you enjoyed that? We saw last week that Paul is getting into the heart of what's happening with the false teachers in the midst of the Colossian church. And we saw the way that false teaching and true Christianity are at odds with one another. And this week, what we're going to find is that this true Christianity Paul is calling us to pursue frees us from the false teaching of legalism. And it's fitting that we're going to turn our attention this morning to legalism as we step into this month of May and focus our hearts on prayer as a church. If you remember, we've been putting out the challenge to you over the last few weeks that as individuals, as families, as a congregation we want to devote ourselves in a special way during this month to have hearts of prayer. And the danger is as we step into this time, we can step into it with legalistic intentions or legalistic hearts. That you could move through the day and just check prayer off as a box so you can move onto something else. And for your kids to have that packet that they got in our Kids and Preschool space and it's got those checkboxes and you can just do it over and over again. To check the box because that's what you're supposed to do. But the reality is, this spirit of legalism and the spirit of prayer couldn't be further apart.

One of them separates us from God. One of them forces us into dependence on God. And the reason why we want to focus our hearts on prayer during this season is not to daily check a box, but to daily build a rhythm of dependence on Christ. The kind of rhythm that Paul is calling us to here beginning in Colossians 2. Let's look down at verse 20 and follow along with me to the end of the chapter.

²⁰If 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 all the things that are destined to perish with use)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³These 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.

Let's pray together.

Father, as we turn our hearts towards Your word, we are crying out to You, God. That in this moment, You will strip away the distractions, the cares of this world, the divisions that so often gnaw at us. But instead unite us in one heart and mind so that You might make us more like Jesus. And we ask these things in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, this week I took a flight to Atlanta. It was my first flight for work since the pandemic happened. And I wasn't sure I was going to make it back, to be honest with you. And it wasn't because I was worried I was going to miss a connection or my travelling skills were a little rusty and that was going to cause a problem. No. What happened was, I had an experience in the airport in Atlanta I had never had in all my years of flying. So I'd just gone through security and I was waiting for my friend to come through as well. And as I waited for him, I heard this loud yell. And when I say loud, you're thinking somewhat loud. I'm saying imagine the loudest person you've ever heard at Kyle Field. And it was louder than that. It was this loud yell and it was one word. He yelled the word, "breach". BREACH! And everyone froze. I had no idea what was happening. There was total alarm. And as soon as he said that word, I realized, I looked up, it was one of the TSA officers. And I thought, "It's about to go down." And immediately they spin into motion. Hey, no one move. Stop right where you are. No one touch anything you're doing. And I'm sitting around, head on a swivel trying to see if there's any threat or risk. And this carries on for several seconds. They're very intensely giving people instructions, mandating action, but nothing else is occurring. And then in a much more calm voice, a different TSA officer starts to read from his phone, "Thank you for participating in this safety drill for the TSA." And I'm like, "You can't do that to us." And yeah, I walked away in the moment and my primary sense of relief was one of relief. But then as I got to thinking about it as I headed to my gate, my relief pretty quickly turned to alarm. Because if there was in fact a breach, if there was an enemy, if there was a danger, if there was a threat, and the best solution that they have is no one move and don't touch your roller bag, we've got a problem, don't we? Because in a moment when there is a threat, when there's a danger, simple rules about do not handle, do not touch are not enough. And what's true at the airport, Paul is going to show us is true in our own spiritual lives. He says, there are these false teachers in the Colossian church who are going to say that the way to live for God is through rules. And it's going to appear wise. It's going to seem like it makes sense. But what we're going to find this morning is that there is no value in these practices apart from Christ. Now think about what's going on. We've seen these false teachers show up over and over in this book. And what Paul is showing us is that they tell us that Jesus is essential, but He's not enough. That there has to be more. And the more they offer to us this morning is what we recognize as legalism. To add to the gospel through the keeping of rules.

And what we're going to notice this morning as we work our way through this text is that Paul shows us the way the gospel frees us from the false promises of legalism. Now notice what's happening back here in verse 20. Paul has already given us a picture last week of what true Christianity looks like. And now he's going to give us the implications of what that true Christianity means when we are confronted by the pull of legalism.

So where does legalism show up in this passage? Well, look back at verse 21. See the instructions there? Do not handle. Do not taste. Do not touch. This is possibly a direct quotation Paul is giving from the false teachers. It's a summation of the Old Testament dietary law. They are placing these restrictions upon the people in expectation that their rule-keeping will bring them to God. So when we talk about legalism, what is it? It's when we seek to earn God's favor, extend God's rule, and evaluate God's people apart from Christ. And so there are these twin dangers with legalism. That we seek to earn our way to God through our own works and then to evaluate everybody else by our own standards. Paul says that's what the false teachers are doing here. And what happens with legalism as it becomes more concerned about the "what" of Christianity than the "why". It focuses more on the, our performance for Christ than the person of Christ. It pulls us away from God instead of drawing us to Him. And why is it that century after century, whether it's in the Colossian church back then or right here in our community today, that legalism has been appealing to humans throughout history. Well, it's because legalism is a pathway full of promises. It makes promises to you, though Paul is going to show us that it can't fulfill. That it cannot keep. And we're going to see several of those play out in this passage. So notice back in verse 20, we see first that legalism promises life, but instead it leads to death. So he says there, if with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world. Now we know from reading this book up until now, Paul has already explained to us and reminded us that we have died with Christ. If you look at verse 11, he tells us we've been crucified with Him. Verse 12, we've been buried with Him. And he's saying, if you have died, it ought to change the way you live. That His substitutionary death, He has died on our behalf. And when He died, we died with Him. We have already been through hell on the cross with Jesus Christ and we are now set free from the judgment of God that He took in our place. And that has everything to do with how we fight against legalism. Because these elemental spirits, as we learned earlier, these spiritual forces that set themselves up against us promise life through legalism. They say, legalism is the way to lasting life. But Paul turns things on his head and he shows us, legalism promises life but leads to death. Instead, true Christianity promises death in Christ that leads to life. That's the transformation of the promise that Paul shows us. And he goes on there following that to help us see a second reality that legalism promises freedom, but instead it leads to slavery.

So look at how he goes on in verse 20 there. Why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations. You see, legalism is a slave-trader masquerading as a freedom fighter. It promises you deliverance, but keeps you in bondage. It holds you captive. It promises freedom from the cares of this world, but what it does is it delivers you over to slavery to the regulations of this world. That's what Paul is speaking of there. It makes us slaves to the world. And that makes no sense for those of us who are following Christ. He's saying, if we have died it should change the way we live. In the same way, it would make no sense that a senior in the Corp. would still live like a fish. It makes no sense that someone who was once in prison and is now out on parole, still lives like he is in jail. He's saying, your lifestyle should match your identity. And our identity is one as those who have been delivered by the blood of Christ so that we are no longer in submission to the things of this world but to the things of the heavenly world. And that has everything to do with what's going to happen here in just a few minutes after the message when we have over 20 college graduates stand up here in front of you. As we pray for them and commission them out we are going to remind each one of them, and in fact, each one of us that every day of our lives we're faced with a choice. Will we submit to the ways of the world and

slavery or will we submit to the ways of God and freedom? Paul flips the promise of legalism. He shows that it cannot provide the freedom that it claims to provide. But he goes on here now to help us see an additional promise down in verse 22 that legalism can't fulfil. You'll see the way that he shows us third that legalism promises eternity, but instead leads to frailty.

So look at the way he talks about this frailty in verse 22. Referring to things that all perish as they are used. So what are these rules referring to? Those things that won't last. They're perishable. They see corruption. They are being destroyed even as they are in use. And for all you men and children in the room, this is your friendly reminder that next Sunday is Mother's Day. You've got a week to get out ahead and get that gift and I don't know what you're going to buy that mom in your life. But I can tell you one thing you're not going to give her. You're not going to go up into the attic of your home and pull out last year's flowers from Mother's Day and give them to her again, right? Because if you try to do that, they'd probably be destroyed. They're corrupted, they've already perished, they'd be of no value because they don't last. You see, what happens with flowers is the moment that you pick them, they begin to perish. The moment that you use them, they become useless. And the danger is, you can see the beauty, you can see the vitality, you can see the life in the moment and assume that it will last forever, but it never will. Why? Because in order to give those flowers, they have been cut off from the root. They've been separated from the source. And even though it seems as if they would last for an eternity, their life is frail. They will not go on forever. And Paul is giving us the warning that we must recognize that legalism is a cut flower faith. It has all the appearance of vitality, of health, that everything is good, but it is cut off from the root that is Jesus. It seems as if it will last forever, but it is frail. It seems as if it will bring deliverance for us, but it will not. It seems as if it will purify us, but instead, it's built around things that will perish. It can't keep that promise of eternity that it allures us with. But notice how he goes on.

Next, we're going to see that fourth, legalism promises God's presence, but instead leads to man's precepts. That's how he speaks about it in verse 22 there. According to human precepts and teachings. In other words, legalism claims to be a window to God, but in reality it is a mirror to ourselves. In our effort to see God, we actually look at our own reflection at these manmade teachings and precepts. And Paul is picking up on language from the Old Testament that Jesus used back in Mark 7. You'll see these verses on the screen here. They pick up the same passage from Isaiah. I want you to hear the way that Jesus speaks about it in Mark 7, verses 6 through 8. Here's what he says:

⁶And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' ⁸You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

So what's Jesus saying here? He's saying that legalism and hypocrisy are two sides of the same coin. They are the twin children of their father, the devil. And the danger is that we might extend God's rules beyond God's design to hold people to a standard that we ourselves don't even meet. And that's what Paul is warning us back in Colossians 2. That in our effort to seek God's presence, we instead cling to man's precepts. We don't even live out the things we claim to believe. I came across a heartbreaking story a few weeks ago in the news. There was the son of one of America's most well-known pastors and the article was speaking about how this son had

now eclipsed his father in prominence on social media and influence around. And it's not because he was extending and carrying on the ministry of his father; but instead, he was rejecting it. He had built his entire following around making fun of and mocking the church experience of his upbringing. And he's not alone. There are many young people in our culture who are rejecting the faith of their fathers. It's a deconstructing of the faith. That's why you can see in recent data that's come out, for the first time in recent memory, less than half of Americans are members of a church. Now what's going on with that? Why is that happening? Well, in the past, what was most common, when I or someone like me were to leave the faith, I would walk away from the church when I realized I didn't believe what the church believed. The problem now is that for many people I walk away from the church because it doesn't seem like the church actually believes what it says it believes. There is this legalism, this hypocrisy, this dependence on man's precepts instead of a dependence on God, the exact thing that Paul is speaking of here in this moment. He promises with these false teachers, they promise this experience of God's presence, but they cannot fulfil it. Instead, it shows up in a legalism that overflows in hypocrisy which pulls us right into verse 23. And another promise that legalism can't fulfil.

Where we see, fifth, that legalism promises God's wisdom, but instead leads to man's ways. That's why he says there, these have indeed an appearance of wisdom. You see, legalism has an allure to it. It seems on the face of it as if it is wise. But that's a promise it can't deliver. It's like an expired gift card. It's like a hollow tree. Or maybe like what my friends out in West Texas, it's like a person who's all hat and no cattle. It, the reality doesn't match the reputation. The appearance doesn't match the actuality. You see, it promises God's wisdom, but instead it turns inward in man's ways. And Paul shows us here that this appears in several different ways. That you can see the false wisdom of legalism by its fruit. What's that fruit? Look back at verse 23. In promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity of the body. In other words, the fruit of legalism is not the wisdom of God; but the way of man. And legalism embraces the way of man, Paul shows us, through false beliefs. That's why he speaks there of self-made religion. This is the only time this word is used in the New Testament. And it talks about a do-it-yourself religion where you pick and choose your favorite parts. You put them together and you make it your own. That's one of my big prayers for Jon and Laura and their family as they go to Oaxaca. As I understand it, these mountain communities where they are seeking to reach, that's exactly what they do. It's a do-it-yourself religion. You grab some of this practice from this religion and that practice from another religion. You fuse them together and you worship a god of your own creation. Now that might look one way in the mountains of Mexico, but the same reality is a danger to each one of us today right here in the Brazos Valley. Legalism tempts us towards a self-made religion built on self-made rules carried out by self-made willpower in order to achieve a self-made salvation. Paul shows us that this way of man is built on false beliefs, but it also shows up, he says here in verse 23, in false behaviors. That's why he goes on to say, an asceticism and severity of the body. Now we saw the way Paul spoke about this last week. This discipline of the body, this harshness, this pull towards duty in your spiritual life. And it's the way that one scholar put it, if you add up enough physical negatives, it will eventually turn into a spiritual positive. That's the pull of legalism. That's the promise that it's making. That we can have God's wisdom through man's ways, but it never can fulfil that promise. You see, legalism and true Christianity both call us to obedience. When you hear me condemning legalism, when you see Paul speaking against it here, he is not speaking against obedience itself. He is speaking about why it is we obey God. You see, legalism is built around duty. True Christianity is built around delight. Legalism is built around independence; true Christianity is built around

dependence. Legalism is exhausting; true Christianity is refreshing. Legalism is focused on self-improvement; true Christianity is focused on self-denial. Paul gives us this warning. If we want to seek the wisdom of God, it will never come through the ways of man.

And he closes this passage out with the final promise that legalism can't fulfil. When we see at the end of verse 23 the way that legalism, number six, promises spiritual riches, but instead leads to spiritual bankruptcy. That's why he says there at the end of the verse, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgences of the flesh. In other words, legalism is powerless to stop the satisfaction of our sinful desires. And why is that the case? Why can't it help us to stop the indulgences, the longing, the desire of the flesh to fill itself with sinful pleasure. It's because it is of no value. It's like fool's gold. It's cubic zirconia. It promises spiritual riches, but it can only pay it with counterfeit bills. That's what legalism offers. It offers riches, but results in rags. There is a spiritual bankruptcy that comes from this. And we need to recognize the way that this same pull can show up even in the lives of our own homes when we're seeking to raise our children. So rather than start your kids at a young age with very specific regulations, boundaries, rules in your home, and over time loosen those as they begin to demonstrate more maturity, what can often happen in our parenting is we start with wide boundaries. They're just a toddler, aren't they so cute when they sin? We have that type of perspective of them where we start with wide boundaries. And what we try to do is we take wide boundaries and we begin to narrow them. We begin to add to them and restrict them as we see rebellion increase. And the danger when we take that approach is we can be tempted to think that if we can fix their behavior we can fix their hearts. Now those of you that have raised children in your home, does that work? Why? It's because even if you change the outside, there's no guarantee it will change the inside. Of course, we want to raise our children well. Yes. Do we want to raise them with expectations and consistent practices in our home? Yes. But if we believe that behavior modification is the pathway to Christlikeness, we are the same false teachers that Paul is speaking about in this passage. That same heart of legalism that he speaks of here is a pull for each one of us. And the danger could be that as you listen to this, you're nodding along and saying, "That's right. Those legalists need to check their heart." And not even realizing the way that it might show up for you in hidden ways that you would never even recognize. I'm thinking about, for example, the stay at home mom for whom this pandemic year was tough. Your kids were at home more, your rhythms were thrown off, things feel out of control. And when things feel out of control for you the way that you feel right with God, the way that you feel back on track is by proving your value for the way that you serve your family. Or maybe it's the high school student or college student that's sitting with us in the room today who doesn't feel like you fit in. And so you know if you can lean into the places you perform well, if you can prove your value to others through your academics, or your accolades or your sports successes, then you can earn favor with others. Or perhaps it's the retired person that's sitting here whose life still feels listless. Even all this time after you walked away from work. Because for decades you found your identity by what you could produce and now you don't know how to find it in any place but your own work. See, that same pull towards legalism can show up in each one of our hearts. See, legalism tells you that you find your identity in what you have done, but true Christianity tells us that we find our identity in what Christ has already done for us. I have a friend of mine that worked for years as a lineman for AT&T. You know the poles that you see running along the side of the road with the power lines, the communication lines that were there. So he's hang those. He was telling me the story not long ago about how he was out one day helping to clear trees. When the branches and the limbs would grow over the lines, they'd have to clear them off

to make sure there's a clear thoroughfare. And he was out there with a guy who was, let's say he had had a little too much fun the night before, and he really wasn't up to the job he was about to do. And they were having to take these tall, over 20' ladders, and rest them against the trees that they would then climb up to trim down. And so as my friend was up on one tree trimming the limbs on that one, he watched the other man climb up it. And as he went up, he would go and each step he would trim a little bit more. He would get those branches and as his ladder rested against it, he kept climbing and kept cutting. He kept climbing and kept cutting. And right as he was almost finished, it was time to cut one final branch before he came down. And he began to use that chainsaw and trim all the way through it until right as he cut it loose from the tree he came to realize it was actually the branch that his ladder was resting on. And so that huge ladder, with him on it, collapsed to the ground. Now thankfully, this man survived. I bet he didn't make that mistake again. But think about it. This same action that helped him climb, was the same action that caused him to crash. And that's what Paul is trying to show us about legalism. That in all our efforts and all our striving and all our seeking to earn our way to God, we may climb our way near the top, but eventually will cut the legs out from under us. And there will be a great and mighty crash. That's why there is this well-known phrase in Christian history attributed to John Bunyan who says, "Run, John, run, the law commands. But gives us neither feet nor hands. Far better news the gospel brings. It bids us fly and gives us wings." The root issue, the fundamental thing that Paul is driving at this morning is the simple question, where will we put our trust? Will we put it in the unfinished work of legalism or in the finished work of Christ? Where will we put our hope? Will we put it in our ability to climb our way to God or in God sending His Son down to us? That's why it's so fitting that we come to the Lord's Supper as we prepare our hearts to close out our time this morning. Because Paul is speaking here of these man-made religions, these self-made religions and their practices. But now together, we respond to this message, not coming to the table as something man-made, but as a gift that God has given to us. A feast that we are called to enjoy. You see, once a month we gather around the table. We don't just hear the gospel proclaimed, we taste it. We taste and see that God is good. And so after we pray here in just a minute, I want to invite you to come to these tables and grab the elements. If you are following Jesus as a baptized believer, this is a family meal for you. And after our response song, we are going to turn our hearts away from ourselves, away from looking inward and instead look upward to God through the partaking of this supper. As we prepare to do just that, let me read to you this passage from 1 Corinthians 11 as you examine your hearts. 1 Corinthians 11:27 and 28 says this:

²⁷Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Let a person examine himself then and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

Let's pray together.

Father, we long for the freedom that we can only find in Jesus. So many of us have chased after freedom from this world in the ways of this world. We constantly feel this pull towards legalism ripping our hearts even now as we seek to follow Jesus. And I pray that if there are those in the room that are in bondage to earning their way to You, that You would welcome them into Your family this morning. That they would respond to You in submissions. And there are those of us who are finding our identity in our performance, our achievement, our work instead of what Christ has done for us, we're asking now that as we take this bread, as we drink this cup, that

You will remind us of all that You have done for us so that we might find our identity in Christ alone in whose name we pray. Amen.