

Legalism Verses Freedom

Col. 2:16-17

All Stand and Read Scripture

Colossians 2:16-23 (NASB)

¹⁶ Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— ¹⁷ things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

Prayer

INTRODUCTION:

We read in Colossians 5:1 that Christ died on the cross to set us free from sin by forgiving us of our sins and restoring our soul by making us righteous in front of God.

Galatians 5:1 (NASB)

5 It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

This morning, I would like to consider how Christ has purchased our freedom by His blood and set us free from the "yoke of slavery" in Old Testament law.

A problem in the church at Colossae was that the **new Jewish** Christians were having a problem separating the Old Testament law, festivals, and rules that they had **grown up in** with the new found freedom in Christ. They wanted to add parts of the law to the Christian's life such as

- circumcision
- acceptable foods to eat or drink
- monthly feasts
- rest on the weekly Sabbath
- etc.

But, Christians are no longer under the Law.

Why? Because as verse 17 points out the Law was only a shadow of what was to come. That does not mean that the Law was done away with, because a most of it is still taught in the New Testament. The Law had taught them that they were sinners. But, they were hopelessly in sin because they could not keep the law and thus their souls were constantly separated from God. The sacrifices just pushed the sin forward and had to be done over and over.

Christ became the perfect sacrifice in order to free us from our sin once and for all. No more having to perform endless sacrifices to God for our sins.

The first thing I would like to consider this morning is...

BODY:

I. Legalism Verses Freedom.

One aspect of salvation that seems little emphasized today is the fact that a Christian is free from the bondage of sin and the "yoke" of the law. "**Christ set us free; ...do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery**". purchasing our freedom with His blood, but as it was in **Galatia and Colossae** in Paul's day, so it is today; there are still those who wish to take a Christian's liberty from him. **Our freedom must be jealously protected.** If not, someone will invariably try to take it from him. From the influence of some "well meaning brethren," the Galatians were considering attempting to keep the Old Testament law along with receiving the work of Christ on the cross. Their "**friends**" were convincing them God would be **more "pleased"** and they would be **more "acceptable"** if they kept His "**holy eternal law.**" Paul, however, rebukes them for such thinking and tells them only a "**fool**" would willingly trade freedom for bondage.

Paul puts it this way in Gal. 3:1-5.

Galatians 3:1-5 (NASB)

Faith Brings Righteousness

3 You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? ² This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴ Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

Paul exhorts them "**keep standing firm**".

So, let's look at **LEGALISM**.

The old ways of man die hard. Even though a Christian is free from the law and the law is to be abandoned, the tendency remains in him to **devise codes and laws** beyond the clear teaching of the Scriptures **for others to follow**. This practice is called "**extrabiblical standards**". The tendency of a "**legalist**" is to "**judge**" another's actions (or lack of them) by imposing one's own standards on others and imply holiness is obtained only when those standards are kept. This is what we call "**legalism**." Legalists love to be an "authority" or judge over others.

It is true that we must fight and stand up for commands that are expressed in the New Testament. But, where scripture is silent on a subject, we **MUST** not enforce practices on other Christians that are not biblically taught in the New Testament.

One who **teaches or implies his own rules and regulations are "biblical" and others must adhere to them to be "godly"** would be a "**Christian Legalist**".

Christ often referred to people who practiced legalism as a Pharisee. Typically a Pharisee is someone who is **more concerned with the outward "image" or the appearance they portray rather than true godliness and consecration of the heart.** Christ characterized them as "**hypocrites.**" Unfortunately, many of the traits of the Pharisees have endured the centuries and still exist among many believers today.

Now, let's define **FREEDOM.**

When we speak of "**freedom**" or "**Christian liberty,**" we are referring to the liberty or freedom every true Christian inherently has by being in Christ. "Christian liberty" refers to a **Christian's release and separation from sin, death (ultimately), hell, Satan, and the curse of the law by the redemption of the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Freedom FROM sin should not be twisted to mean freedom TO sin. Though with his liberty a believer **can choose** what he will do, **BUT**, unless he chooses within the realm of truth and righteousness, he places himself back into a form of bondage. True freedom is only found when one willingly places himself in subjection to God.

Liberty must be protected.

Since man's creation it has been his nature to seek what he perceives to be **freedom.** Eve, thinking her and Adam were in bondage by not having a "knowledge of good and evil," **exercised their "choice"** and ate of the forbidden tree. The Serpent represented the tree as the source of freedom from their restraints but in fact it was the source of their ultimate bondage. By exercising their freewill, but in the process disobeying God, they became joined to sin and death and placed themselves **under the subjection of the Serpent.** Therefore, **just having a freewill and the ability to choose is not the same as being free.** Adam's choices became greatly restricted once he disobeyed. **To truly be free one must have a source of freedom (God) and exercise their freewill within the parameters of that liberty (God's word and will).** It has often been said, "with freedom comes responsibility."

That is why Paul said in Galatians 5:1 Paul says, "**therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.**"

Paul wrote the book of Galatians to explain to the Galatians (and again, here to the Colossians) the preciousness of the liberty they have in Christ. There was a group of Jews ("**well meaning**", of course) who were insisting they must keep the law to become and remain a Christian. Paul spent six chapters in Galatians explaining to them how they are **free in Christ and cannot be perfected by the bondage of the Mosaic Law.**

Now that we understand the meaning of legalism and freedom, I would now like to look at

II. The Marks of a Legalistic Pharisee.

Many of the traits of the Pharisees can be found among professing believers today.

If modern terminology was used during the first century, the Pharisees could have easily been considered "**Bible believers.**"

- **they had the right "Bible,**
- **they believed their Bible was the very word of God and took it literally,**
- **they spent countless hours reading and studying it,**
- **they believed the promise of the coming Messiah,**
- **they believed in angels and the spirit world,**
- **and they believed the doctrine found in the Scriptures.**

To the Jewish public they were devout, dedicated, godly, and "orthodox," each a model or example for the common believer. Ironically, when the God they claimed to serve came to them in person they didn't recognize Him, and in less than four years they were so opposed to Him they directly caused His death! Their "godly" and "devout" appearance did not reflect the truth.

Even though they had a **reputation** of being extremely consecrated and devout, Christ reserved for them **His most searing remarks and criticism.** He sternly and publicly rebuked them for their pious attitude and hypocritical behavior while **He exercised kindness, grace, and compassion towards those who were publicly branded as "sinners."**

Where did the Pharisees go wrong? They had the right God, Bible, heritage, and "doctrines," but **what power or influence lead them astray?** What caused them to be so harshly castigated by their Creator?

The answer, of course, can only be found in the Scriptures. The Pharisee's besetting sin was a vice that originated long before man came on the scene, that is, **PRIDE.**

Nearly every sin a person can commit has its **roots in pride.** If one lies it's because **pride is afraid of the truth;** if one steals it's because **pride wants something;** if one curses it's because **pride says "I can say what I want";** if one exalts himself it's because **pride loves the attention;** if one is a religious hypocrite it's because **pride wants to appear "godly."**

The last area that I would like to cover this morning is...

III. Freedom's Limitations

The liberty Christ gives believers is not intended to be used as a means for **self gratification or personal excess.** Neither is it to be used as "stumbling block" to others. The same Paul who said in...

Galatians 5:1 (NASB)

5 It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm"

also said in...,

1 Corinthians 9:19 (NASB)

¹⁹ For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.

The difference between the statements is in Galatians Paul is dealing with the sufficiency of salvation in Christ alone apart from the bondage of works or the law, but in Corinthians he is speaking of a believers attitude and relationship with other believers. A Christian should **never concede or "give an inch"** to those who contend there is an **element of works or "law-keeping"** necessary for one to be saved or remain saved. When it comes to the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross, and that work alone, to secure a believers salvation for all eternity ("It is FINISHED"), **every believer should "stand fast" for the truth**; but when dealing with matters of **personal liberty**, every believer should be willing to concede his "rights".

MEATS: In New Testament times the issue of a Christian eating "**meats**" offered to idols was a "hot" issue. Believers that were "strong" in faith realized "**that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one**" and that meats offered to them were in no way tainted or unclean. They could eat the meats with a clear conscience.

However, there were other believers who for one reason or another could not eat the "meats" with a clear conscience. They were truly Christians like their "strong" brethren, but their conscience was "weak" and **would not allow them to eat the meats without feeling "defiled"**.

What does Paul do? Does he rebuke and berate the "weak" and tell them to "be strong" and go ahead and eat the meat, defiling themselves in their own eyes? Not at all. Instead he encourages the "strong" to "**bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please [themselves]**".

Romans 14:13-18 (NASB)

¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. ¹⁴ I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. ¹⁵ For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ For he who in this *way* serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Clearly, the "Christian thing to do" when a believer's liberty infringes on another believer's weakness is for the **strong to sacrifice their liberty** for the sake of his brother. This is what Christ did. **He did not have to die on the cross and suffer all He did.** He is the God of heaven. **He willingly humbled Himself** and became a man for the sake of man because man was weak and had a great need. So likewise should His followers do the same. If one truly loves his brother (as he is commanded to), **he will avoid doing anything that would harm him.**

"Meats" were only one example of differences in the positions of believers in the New Testament. Today, many believers esteem the Lord's Day (Sunday) as some sort of "**Christian Sabbath**" (Of course, the Bible knows nothing of a "Christian Sabbath," it only speaks of an Old Testament Sabbath given to Israel), but these believers treat Sunday as if it is the Sabbath. Christ died nearly 2000 years ago to free man from the law yet **remnants of it still linger.** However, the **Lord's day is NOT the Sabbath**, and as surprising as it may sound, **neither is it a "command" that Christians observe it.** Christians do

assemble, give, take the "Lord's Supper," etc., on the "first day of the week," but this is only by following the **EXAMPLE** of the Scriptures; it is **NOT a command!**

Although "meats" and "days" were the examples Paul used in his letters, there are many other issues that can fall into this category. **Dress, hair length, head covering (women), foot-washing, manner of communion, fasting, movies, television, radio, internet, etc., etc.,** are issues that can fit into the same category today.

The remedy for legalism or pharisaical behavior is simple in concept but hard for many in practice. Once you see your fault or sin for what it really is, **confess it to God, repent of it (turn from it, change your mind about it), and through the power of God and the strength of the Holy Spirit strive to overcome it.**

CONCLUSION:

To paraphrase a well known proverb, "**The road to legalism is paved with good intentions. Every Christian** has the tendency and ability to be legalistic. And we think it is safe to say every believer has at times spoken or acted toward a brother in a legalistic or pharisaical manner. **Pride and envy are enemies of us all,** but we must overcome them by the power of God. If we don't then we become a **hindrance to the gospel** rather than a friend. God help us all to have the sacrificial "**mind of Christ**" and give up our "rights" where they hinder other people, forsaking the evil attitude of darkness. When we do then we can truly enjoy the **precious liberty we have in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!**

If you have not accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior, do it today. Don't wait until you have cleaned up your life. **You don't clean yourself up to come to the Christ; you surrender yourself to Christ, to let Him clean you up!**

So we offer His invitation, realizing that there may be someone here who has never accepted Christ as their Savior. We plead with you. We appeal to you not to let this moment escape nor to let this window of opportunity pass you by.

If you do not know Christ as your personal Savior, then come now, confess that you believe in Him, be faithful to Him in Christian baptism, arise to walk in the newness of life. God's invitation is offered to you. Will you come as we stand and as we sing?

He Is Lord!

He is Lord, He is Lord. He has risen from the dead and He is Lord.
Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess, That Jesus Christ is Lord.