

# **COLOSSIANS: THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST**

Part 5: “Gospel Versus Religion”

Colossians 2:16-23

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Sunday, May 16, 2021 (Sunday After the Ascension)

## **Scripture Reading**

*“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).*

## **Introduction**

The Apostle Paul is in prison when he receives a visitor, a man named Epaphras. Epaphras met Paul in Ephesus, which was the metropolitan hub of western Asia Minor in the first century [show [1Map Location of Colossae](#)]. Within the church Paul planted in Ephesus, Paul disciplined Epaphras and sent him to plant a church in the town of Colossae (cf. Col 1:7).

Epaphras has come to comfort and encourage his old mentor, as well as give him a report of how things are going in the new church. The good news is that the church is growing. The congregation is abounding in faith, love, and hope (Col 1:4-5). However, this young congregation is beginning to experience pressure from the outside culture that could tempt them toward compromise. In response to this situation, the Apostle Paul decides to write a letter to this church, and that letter is what we call the book of Colossians.

Now, we don’t know the exact specifics about the pressures that are trying to pull the Colossians away from faithfully following Jesus. But we can deduce hints about the nature of the Colossians’ *problems* by looking at Paul’s *solutions*. In biblical studies, we call this “*mirror reading*.” And the passage that we are exploring today gives us perhaps the clearest picture of the situation at Colossae.

Though the *problems* that Paul is addressing might be particular to the first century, the *principles* that Paul will unfold are just as relevant for Christians living in the twenty-first century. We know that, in Colossae, there are external forces and doctrines and ideologies that are seeking to distort and co-opt the Christian gospel and turn it into something else. We know that there is pressure to warp and twist the Christian gospel into what verse 23 describes as “*self-made religion*” (ἐθελοθρησκία).

So, for the rest of our time today, we’re going to explore how the gospel is gloriously different from self-made religion. The title of today’s sermon is “*Gospel Versus Religion*.” And we’re going to take a closer look at two forms of cultural and spiritual pressure that would seek to twist the gospel into self-made religion: *1.) The Pressure of Legalism and 2.) The Pressure of Paganism*.

## **Exposition**

### **1.) The Pressure of Legalism**

Legalism is a mindset that says, “*I have a list of rules. Good people are people who obey my rules. Bad people are people who break my rules.*”

And rules are not inherently bad things. In fact, God puts lots of rules in his revealed Scripture. The Ten Commandments are good rules to live by (Ex 20:1-17). The problem is that it is often very tempting to reduce our relationship with God to following a list of rules. And that type of legalism is a *sub-biblical* vision of what it means to walk with God.

Part of the problem in Colossae was that, apparently, there was great social pressure to conform to a type of *Jewish* legalism. There were some ethnically Jewish people that lived dispersed across the region of Asian Minor. However, most of the Christians in churches like the one in Colossae would have come from a gentile (or non-Jewish) background.

It seems, however, that false teachers began to convey the idea that in order to be truly saved, gentile Christians needed to adhere to a strict observance of all the ceremonial laws and regulations of the Old Testament and Rabbinic teaching.<sup>1</sup> This meant that there was a teaching going around that said, “*You can believe in Jesus as the Messiah. But if you really want to be part of God’s people, you are going to need to observe our dietary laws. You’re also going to need to obey our rules for what you can and can’t do on the Sabbath day. Basically, you’re going to need to adopt our cultural norms if you want to be accepted by God.*”

Against this mentality, Paul says to the Colossians, “*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*” (Col 2:16).

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<sup>1</sup> This is similar to the problem Paul is addressing in the letter to the Galatians.

For Paul, legalism represents nothing less than a spiritual attack against the church and a twisting of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul wants Christians to know that we are not made righteous by following a list of rules – we are made righteous by Christ alone. Paul wants Christians to know our primary identity is rooted in Christ – not in our nationality, not in our ethnicity, not in our culture.

But we might ask, “Is Paul saying that the Old Testament laws were bad?” Not at all. For centuries those laws and commandments helped God’s people preserve their existence as a nation, their moral values, and their worship of God even through division, exile, and conquest. The dietary laws, the codes about cleanliness, the festivals, and the Sabbath observances were good things. They just weren’t intended to be *ultimate* things.

The best way to understand the laws and ceremonies of the Old Testament is that they were given by God to help his people form language and categories that would help them and the world understand his ultimate plan of redemption. They were signposts pointing to the greater reality of Jesus. As Paul says, “*These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ*” (Col 2:17).

Paul is saying, “*The law is good. But Christ is the completion of the law. The holiness codes are good. But it is Christ who makes us clean. Festivals like the Passover are good. But Christ is our Passover Lamb. Sabbath regulations are good. But trusting in the completed work of Christ is our truest Sabbath rest.*”

Now, I actually have heard of some teachers out there that still try to compel gentile Christians to observe ceremonial aspects of the Jewish law. However, it is a mistake to think that the Jewish type of legalism mentioned here in Colossians 2 is the only type of legalism that exists.

Legalism exists anytime we look to any list of beliefs and behaviors and say, “*If I follow this list, then I am good.*” This can certainly be as simple as a religious to-do list. But you can be completely secular and still be a legalist.

Secular legalism might look like a mindset that say, “I’m a good person because I champion the right causes, I make socially acceptable virtue signals, or I support the correct political team and agenda.” The point is that you can do lots of things you view as good as either a religious or irreligious person, yet still have a loveless heart that is completely far from God.

And, again, please don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying all rules are bad. I am not saying that all religious practices are bad. Spiritual rhythms and moral rules can help us prioritize God and navigate life. Spiritual disciplines and serving others can often function as paths that lead us to a closer personal relationship with Jesus.

But we must understand in no uncertain terms: *we are not saved by our perfect behavior; we are saved by our perfect savior.*

And the distinction between those two mindsets is the distinction between self-made religion and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The question is, *which one are you operating in on a daily basis?* A great way to know whether we are living in the gospel or in the self-made religion of legalism is to examine our inner dialogue. So, *how do you speak to yourself on a regular basis?*

Do you motivate yourself by shaming your failures? Do you motivate yourself by self-condemning words of hatred and cruelty? Do you measure your worth as a person in terms of whether or not you have completed your daily task-list? Do you accept or condemn yourself on the basis of what you have eaten or how hard you have worked on a given day? Do you think grace and love are things you have to earn?

That type of mindset is not the gospel! It is *legalism*.

Paul begins this passage by saying, *“Let no one pass judgment on you”* (Col 2:16a). That includes you! Stop trying to motivate yourself through legalism. It doesn’t work.

When we focus on behavior modification instead of heart transformation, we fail to understand what is so special and supernatural about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The self-made religion of legalism begets self-righteous pride and self-condemning insecurity. The gospel begets humility and the assurance that comes from being fully known and fully loved.

The self-made religion of legalism says, *“I obey; therefore, I am accepted.”* But the gospel says, *“I am accepted in Christ Jesus; therefore, I obey.”*

The self-made religion of legalism is a prescribed system of works that man can do to come to God. But the gospel is an announcement of God’s work to come to man.

## **2.) The Pressure of Paganism**

Greco-Roman society was a predominantly polytheistic society. That means instead of worshipping one God, people worshipped *many* gods and goddesses simultaneously. These gods and goddesses would often be envisioned as the persona of an aspect of nature or a concept within human society. So, for example, *Poseidon* was the god of the sea and maritime commerce. *Aphrodite* was the goddess of love and romance. From a Christian perspective, *paganism is what happens when we take some aspect of God’s creation and worship that thing or concept as if it was God* (cf. Rom 1:23).

Paul teaches the Colossian Christians that they must stay away from paganism and pagan practices: *“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”* (Col 2:18–19).

Dr. Clinton E. Arnold is a New Testament scholar at Talbot School of Theology, who has done a tremendous amount of research to understand the religious practices of western Asia Minor in the first century. His research is really helpful in understanding the spiritual context of books like Colossians and Ephesians.

Arnold shows that, in this society, people worshipped *Artemis* [show 2Ephesian Artemis], who was a mother goddess and the patron deity of the city of Ephesus. In fact, there was a whole economic industry in Ephesus built around making idols for the worship of Artemis (Acts 19:23-27). People would worship Artemis by making a vow to the goddess so that she would grant him or her some short-term goal like wealth, health, or a romantic relationship. If you scratched Artemis's back with devotion and prayer and asceticism, she would scratch your back with blessing. It was basically prosperity gospel minus Jesus.

*Bacchus (or Dionysus)* was another pagan god that was worshipped in this culture [show 3Dionysius]. He was the god of wine, revelry, and pleasure. The religious festivals associated with Bacchus were associated with drunkenness and sexual immorality. Often times in such intoxicated states, people would have visions of angels or the divine.

Another major religion in Asia Minor was the *Roman Imperial Cult*. In the ancient Roman Empire, after a popular emperor died, the Roman Senate often passed a resolution of *apotheosis*, which in effect meant that the newly deceased emperor was to be acknowledged as a deity and worshipped throughout the empire [show 4Caesar Augustus as Jupiter]. Temples were built across the empire, including in Asia Minor, where you could offer sacrifices of worship to Julius Caesar, Augustus, or another emperor. To participate in the Imperial Cult was one way to show your patriotism and loyalty as a Roman. For this reason, later on, participation in the Imperial Cult became mandatory,<sup>2</sup> and as a result, many Christians who refused to participate in this political religion were persecuted and martyred.

This was the religious milieu of the Colossians to whom Paul was writing. These Colossians experienced *strong cultural pressures* to go along with these practices. And to abstain from these pagan practices often meant experiencing *suspicion* and *rejection* from the surrounding community.

Now, when we hear about the beliefs and practices of ancient paganism, we might be tempted to think, "Well, we live in a much more enlightened age. We would never engage in such silliness." I want to challenge that mindset and suggest that *modern paganism is not all that different from the ancient variety*.

We might not worship Artemis as a means of acquiring the blessings of health and wealth. But many in our society functionally worship what we might call the "*American Dream*." Every day people in our society willingly sacrifice their marriages, families, and

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. the Edict of Emperor Decius in A.D. 250.

integrity to get ahead in their career and make an extra buck. Is this so different from ancient idolatry?

We may not worship Bacchus, but does not our culture worship *pleasure*? Our society celebrates indulging our desire for substance and sexual immorality. And to suggest that we should not indulge our desires is treated by some as heresy.

We may not offer sacrifices to dead Caesars, but who could deny that our culture worships *political power*? We treat political talking points like doctrine. We treat politicians like idols. We view pundits as preachers. We proselytize and evangelize our political opinions as if they were the good news.

We are not as immune to the pressures of paganism as it might seem.

So how can we discern paganism? *Pagan religion happens whenever we place something other than God as the object of devotion and something other than Christ as the means of our salvation.*

But all false gods are doomed to fail us. They never grant freedom. They always produce death. Thus, Paul says that the people of God must view ourselves as alive to Christ and dead to such idolatry: *“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” (Col 2:20–23).*

Self-made religion may modify our behavior and achieve temporary blessings. But only the gospel can transform our hearts and give us true and enduring joy.

Against the pressure to worship money, we must see our inheritance in Christ as our *truest wealth* (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). Against the pressure to worship pleasure, we must see Christ as our *truest comfort and rest* (cf. Mt 11:28-29). Against the temptation to worship power, we must *set our hope in the kingdom of Christ that is unshakeable and will know no end* (cf. Heb 12:28).

## **Conclusion**

The pressures and powers of legalism and paganism are real. They press and pull us every day. But if you are in Christ, you no longer have to be bound to them or defined by them.

The message of Colossian is that Jesus is better. Against all the pressures and powers of this world, Jesus is supreme, and Jesus is sufficient.

In Christian theology, one doctrine that emphasizes the supremacy of Christ is the *ascension*. The ascension refers to the truth that forty days after his resurrection, Jesus



ascended to the right hand of God the Father in heaven. From there, he will return to judge the living and the dead.

But the significance of the ascension is not just that it happened, but also what it means. It means that right now, in heaven, Christ is interceding for and advocating for you and me. It means that as Christ is blessed in the heavenly places, so too we are blessed because we have been united with him (cf. Eph 1:3).

But when you look at what the New Testament has to say about the ascension, it also is a statement that the risen Christ has been exalted and enthroned against all power and rivals that would seek to rule over his people.

That's why in the book of Ephesians that Paul prays that Christians would know, "*... the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come*" (Eph 1:19–21).

As it would happen, on the Christian calendar, today is the "Sunday After the Ascension." So today, Redeemer Christian Church, as we acknowledge the pressures of legalism and paganism that would try to cast judgment upon us and disqualify us, let us look to Christ the ascended Lord! Let us remember that his work alone has accomplished our redemption. Let us celebrate that in his presence is fullness of joy and life forever more (Ps 16:11)! *AMEN*.

### **Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities**

1. Read Colossians 2:16-23. Do your best to briefly summarize this passage in your own words.
2. Legalism is a mindset that says, "I have a list of rules. Good people are people who obey my rules. Bad people are people who break my rules." In what ways does it seem the Colossians were tempted with the pressure of legalism? In what ways are you tempted by the pressure of legalism today?
3. Pagan religion happens whenever we place something other than God as the object of devotion and something other than Christ as the means of our salvation. While the forms of paganism have changed since the first century, where do you see paganism alive in our own culture today?
4. Why is Jesus better than both modern legalism and modern paganism? What truths do we need to tell our hearts so that we may cling to the gospel and reject the pressure of "self-made religion" (Col 2:23)?