

The world would love to pigeonhole Christianity into a few rules, a few traditions, a few holy days and very little more. In an extreme case someone might even have some kind of mystical experience – but that would also be safely irrelevant. The problem is that’s not at all what the Christian faith is about. The Colossian church, however, was beginning to move in the direction of religious rules and rituals. Paul warns them hoping to stop them in their tracks before it’s too late. The point of this passage is:

Jesus Christ is the ultimate reality. Don’t get distracted by things that simply look or sound religious.

**¹⁶So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths,
¹⁷which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.**

All of the things Paul mentions here were part of OT Judaism. So the error taking root in Colossae included OT customs and rituals. In the book of Acts we see how God revealed to the church step-by-step that they didn’t have to pay attention to these sections of the Law as more and more non-Jews came to faith in Christ. They would only be a burden to new believers.

Those things were **shadows of things to come**. They were like signs that all pointed to Christ – the substance, the ultimate reality. What the OT once promised, Christ has now fulfilled.

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¹⁸Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

2:18 ***intruding into those things which he has not seen*** Translators give various alternatives:

*going on in detail about visions (ESV),
Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen. (NIV)*

It now seems conclusive that this is describing the higher stage of Greek mystery cult initiation that involved “entering” the innermost sanctuary of the pagan temple.

The leading false teacher in Colossae may be basing part of his teaching on spiritual experiences he gained in a pagan ritual initiation. If so, then he’s combining these pagan practices that seem to have also involved some kind of visions with the standard Christian doctrines taught in the Colossian church.

A little Judaism, a little paganism; before you know it the risen Lord Jesus Christ is getting lost.

taking delight in false humility ... vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind The minute people get involved in things that look and sound really spiritual, their heads begin to swell. This is especially true if you can throw in a really heavy dose of self-denial or “false humility.”

Example: “Well, I’d like to go lunch with you, but I’ve got this 40 day fast going on (sigh). It’s been so awesome. God’s been just showing me so much. It’s like this intense spiritual warfare against the demonic realm. Do you know what I mean?”

Possible Response: “Wow, uh, no I don’t. But have you considered a vow of silence? I’d really recommend that for you – where you just *shut up*, I mean, don’t say anything for a really long time. Or maybe you should go out into the desert and *get lost*, I mean...”

Principle: There is nothing that feeds the ego like the appearance of humility.

not holding fast to the Head The trap they were falling into in Colossae was that Christ was no longer central to their faith. The extra practices of rigorous religion, both Jewish and pagan, had taken His place. On top of that, **look back to verse 16**. This group had become judgmental against those who didn’t practice all the extra junk that they were now practicing. You can just see their heads getting bigger all the time thinking, “We are the spiritual elite.”

Self-denial can be good. God knows we live in a world of self-indulgence. But when we give things up for Christ, we don’t want the spiritual elitist attitude. We won’t think much of ourselves at all. We’ll even begin thinking more highly of others. Jonathan Edwards on this:

“The humble Christian is more apt to find fault with his own pride than with other men’s. He is apt to put the best construction on others’ words and behavior, and to think that none are so proud as himself. But the proud hypocrite is quick to discern the mote in his brother’s eye, in this respect; while he sees nothing of the beam in his own. He is very often much in crying out of others’ pride, finding fault with others’ apparel, and way of living; and is affected ten times as much with his neighbor’s ring or ribband, as with all the filthiness of his own heart.” (Jonathan Edwards, A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections 3.VI.5) [Rings and ribbands were evidently a big deal in colonial times.]

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²⁰**Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—** ²¹**“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,”** ²²**which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? ²³These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.**

2:20 **you died with Christ** This means we died to the sinful practices of the world. They no longer have any control over us. We don’t impose rules on dead people. Or as Paul put it in Romans:

Rom 6:11 NKJV *Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Two huge problems with the false teachings in Colossae:

1. All of these rules they had put themselves under concerned things that are gone as soon as they are used. Think of what Christ said:

Matt 15:10-11, 17 NKJV *When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, “Hear and understand: ¹¹Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.” ... ¹⁷Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated?*

2. These are manmade regulations. God never asked them to do this. This is not the church Christ is building, the body that is growing because of Him. This is not what the apostles envisioned.
 - Christ wants us to cultivate holy lives, focused on the reality of Him, filled with the Holy Spirit and producing spiritual fruit. The practices taking root in Colossae would only lead to another form of bondage. Paul had a similar criticism for the Galatians:

Galatians 4:8-11 NKJV ⁸*But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. ⁹But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? ¹⁰You observe days and months and seasons and years. ¹¹I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.*

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Conclusions:

Legalism is attractive, but destructive. To the Colossians, the discipline demanded by the false teachers looked and sounded spiritual. Following a long list of religious rules is difficult and can make a person appear holy, but rigid religiosity cannot change a person's heart. Only the Holy Spirit can do that.

Does that mean all self-denial is bad? Certainly not: Our devotion to God actually needs some measure of self-denial, simply done with a right heart. Listen to Jesus on this:

Mark 8:34-37 NKJV ³⁴*When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ³⁵For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? ³⁷Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*

So where is the balance? We should gladly reject some of the norms and values of our secular American culture. It's good not to be self-centered. It's OK if we never get rich. We can happily embrace a simpler lifestyle than the world might pressure us into. But if we do so for Christ's sake we will be able to do so joyfully and certainly without getting all judgmental over those who do not follow us down that path. Our focus stays on Christ throughout the whole process.

Now here is a tricky one

What about traditional church feasts and fasts, like Lent or Advent? They are not in the Bible. How do these fit in and what are we supposed to do about them?

This passage should make clear to us that such things are not necessary and might even be destructive. But there are some other related issues that come into play:

For those in more traditional churches What if you are in a church that practices all these things – and maybe you were even born into that kind of tradition? It’s a liturgical type of church that has holy days and special seasons and so on – what do you do? I grew up in this kind of environment and many of you did too. Others come to Christ through such churches – what about them?

1. **Understand first of all that these things don’t matter.** These manmade rules are quite meaningless, so you need to keep that straight. You may not even know why you are in that kind of church, but if the doctrine and practice of the church are otherwise solidly biblical, then maybe the Lord has put you there for a reason. Some churches are more liturgical or ritualistic, but can still have a very effective ministry.

For our part, we’re not going to write them nasty letters or call them names, we just happen not to agree and it would seem that the Bible is clearly on our side in the discussion.

2. **If it gets to the point that you can’t stand it anymore, just leave quietly.** It’s not going to help if you get all nasty about it on the way out. Everyone else will simply be glad you left. They’ll just keep going with their rituals assuming that you became some kind of kook. And don’t get all proud of the fact that you have rejected these traditions – that’s another kind of problem!

For those in less traditional churches Passages like these keep churches like ours from getting all excited about holy days and rituals and so on. But we do need to make sure we understand that God wants us to live a holy life. There are plenty of Christians who never fast; rarely pray and for whom it has been a very long time since they denied themselves any pleasant thing for the sake of Jesus. If that’s you, you need to learn to take up the cross, but in a very authentic, non-self-focused way.

For evangelicals in less traditional churches that are attracted to tradition In recent years there is a movement by those who were raised in less traditional environments toward holy days and special seasons (like lent) and practices – like the use of candles and icons in worship.

- This is not the unpardonable sin, but the big question I have about this is **Why?** Paul makes it clear that this stuff doesn’t do any good. He warns the Galatians, the Colossians, and there is plenty of other material in the NT to reinforce those warnings. This isn’t strictly neutral ground.
- We can understand the person who simply grew up with the tradition and never left it. I was once there myself. The same goes for someone that came to Christ by means of such a church.
- What’s more difficult is excusing the person who grew up without the tradition, but who is not content with the simple reality of Christ. I suspect that they just think rules and rituals are cool. Burn some incense, a little chanting, a candle or two; it looks really spiritual – but it’s hard for me to avoid the conclusion that Paul is warning us about exactly such things as that.
- One argument says this stuff is needed because this generation is more visual. It makes their faith more relevant. They need more than the Bible’s version of Jesus.
- My response is that it was obviously very relevant in Paul’s time too, and he condemned it. The Jews loved their OT practices and wanted others to love them too. The Greeks loved their good old fashioned paganism and were hesitant to give it up. Along come Paul and the other apostles and they tell everyone this stuff is not only useless, but potentially harmful. That is not an easy way to make friends, but it does clear the road of manmade obstacles to the real Jesus.

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