

## **The Supremacy of the Gospel Opposition to the Gospel Colossians 2:16-23**

### **Introduction**

The letter to the Colossians is one of four epistles Paul wrote while imprisoned in Rome. In this letter, Paul makes some of the most incredible statements in the New Testament about the divinity and supremacy of Jesus Christ.

He states that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” and “by him, all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him, all things hold together!” (Col. 1: 15-17).

It is by the Word of His power that “all things hold together.” That means Christ’s divine power is still at work in all matter and all places in the universe at this very moment. Jesus literally holds the universe together!

Paul writes this letter in response to some pseudo-Christian teachers who advocated certain religious practices were necessary to gain spiritual maturity. Some religious practices can be hazardous to your spiritual health. Paul warns the Colossians against being taken captive by false teachers.

In verse 8, he writes, “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” (Col 2:8 NKJV)

In verses 16-23, Paul takes on these false teachers and their teachings that Jesus was a spiritual lightweight and that the Colossians needed to embrace their spiritual practices to be fully enlightened. Paul rejects these teachings and practices declaring them hazardous to the Colossian’s spiritual health because they side-track a person from spiritual maturity. It shouldn’t surprise us that these same kinds of religious practices are central to other world religions as well. It’s also stunning and even tragic that these practices have been commonplace in religious Christianity for 2000 years!

If you plan to mature spiritually, you must be able to identify false religious practices, resist those who advocate them and root them out of your own life. The first religious practice that Paul says is in opposition to the gospel is ritualism.

### **I. Ritualism Stands in Opposition to the Gospel**

Look at verse 16 “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”

(Col 2:16-17 NKJV)

Paul is referring to rituals observed by the Jews and given by God in the Old Testament. They were known as the Ceremonial Laws. The dietary laws and the Jewish calendar's holy days were how Israel learned to relate to God before Jesus came. Their rituals centered around the sacrifices that the priests offered with good reason. The promised Messiah would first come as the sacrificial lamb.

The Old Testament rituals were a rigorous set of practices that were to be observed by every Jew without deviation. They were designed to teach each generation of Israelis what God required and why we fall short of God's requirements.

The rituals also pictured how the Messiah would fulfill God's plan. The followers of Jesus realized that Jesus was the Messiah sent to fulfill the purpose that these rituals pictured. In time, the Christians began to abandon these ceremonial practices, realizing that Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Testament scriptures.

Since the Colossian Christians didn't practice these rituals, the false teachers judged them as unspiritual for not practicing them, and some of the believers were wavering. But Paul says, "Don't let these false teachers judge you." They have become enslaved to their ritualism, but Christ has set you free to develop a profound and enduring relationship with God.

Ritualism is not unique to Judaism. It is a key component of virtually every major world religion except for biblical Christianity. Of course, many so-called "Christian" denominations are incredibly ritualistic. The primary way they relate to God is through liturgical services, observance of a religious calendar, and in designated sacred spaces and practices. Ritualism makes people feel religious.

So why does Paul warn us about becoming ritualistic? We find the answer in the next verse. Look at verse 17, "which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ." (Col 2:17 NKJV)

The Old Testament rituals were "shadows" of the real substance of God's eternal plan. The Old Testament rituals were "shadows" of Christ. The Old Testament ritual system was like a divinely inspired multi-media presentation that communicated pictures of God's desire and plan to dwell in His people. Their sinfulness, however, prevented this from occurring.

Because of His holiness, God prevented the people from coming into His presence. So he established the barrier of the priests and the veil in the tabernacle. But His future provision of forgiveness through Christ's death would tear open the veil and make it possible for Him to dwell in us. Christ's death on the Cross made priests and the sacrificial system obsolete.

God's requirements have not changed, but they are now fulfilled through Jesus Christ, not through animal sacrifice. The ceremonial "shadows" were fulfilled by the "reality" of the Cross. And because of the Cross, we now can have a personal relationship with God through Christ. As Paul says, "it's "Christ in you, the hope of

glory." (1:27). Paul makes this same point in Gal. 4 when he writes, "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" (Gal 4:4-6 NKJV)

Through His death, Jesus provided complete forgiveness and adopted us into God's family. When we receive Jesus as our Savior, we are indwelt by His Spirit, and we come to know God as our "Abba, Father." The better you know Him, the more secure you are in His love. You can share your problems and joys with Him, ask Him for the help you need and thank Him for getting involved in your life.

The difference between rituals and habits is that rituals often interfere with your spiritual growth and development substituting routine for relationship. Spiritual habits promote and develop a healthy relationship with God. But even then, we must be careful that our spiritual habits and routines don't become rituals that take the place of developing a relationship with Christ.

In the Old Testament, there were hundreds of prescribed rituals the people were required to observe. But since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there are only two, and one of them – baptism – is observed only once. Because of their symbolic significance, there were detailed instructions on how to practice the Old Testament rituals, but there is very little instruction on how to practice baptism and communion. So little, in fact, that the church has tragically been fighting for centuries over how to practice them! No wonder Paul goes on to say that for Christians to revert to ritualism is not spiritual progress but rather spiritual regression.

Paul tells the Christians in Galatia, "But 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? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain." (Gal 4:9-11 NKJV)

Do you have pictures of special persons in your life on your smartphone? Why is that? Could it be that you treasure them and the pictures remind you of how special they are? But would you rather look at the pictures, or if that special person shows up, spend time with them?

Before Messiah came, Israel could only picture him through rituals and sacrifices. But since He came, we can spend time with him personally. Paul says we should avoid ritualism! Why? Because it profoundly misrepresents authentic Christianity and only impedes your spiritual maturity.

## **II. Mysticism Stands in Opposition to the Gospel**

Another religious practice that stands in opposition to the gospel is Mysticism.

Verse 18 says, "Let 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." (Col 2:18 NKJV)

Paul points out that these false teachers were pronouncing the Colossians to be "second class citizens" because they hadn't experienced their so-called higher spiritual levels. To achieve these "higher" levels, people had to deprive themselves of food or sleep or even beat themselves in "self-abasement" to induce an altered state of consciousness. During their so-called "visions," they boasted of worshipping angelic beings or witnessed angels worshipping God. Because of this, they claimed to have an "inside track" to God.

They were telling the Colossians that unless they had similar experiences, they couldn't attain spiritual superiority. But Mysticism is a distortion and counterfeit of an authentic personal relationship with God. Mysticism defines dramatic spiritual experiences as a crucial step to spiritual maturity.

By the way, Mysticism is the dominant form of spirituality in America today. Atheistic naturalism has created such a tremendous spiritual vacuum in people's hearts that many have turned to Eastern Mysticism and New Age teaching to fill the void. Our culture has succeeded in discrediting the Bible as the authoritative guide for knowing God.

Now all forms of spirituality are rushing in to fill that vacuum. Many of these pseudo-intellectuals will do anything they can to destroy the Bible and its teaching about God. All the while, they wholeheartedly embrace Native American vision quests; Transcendental Meditation; out-of-body experiences; New Age channeling and spirit-guides; Scientology, you name it. Mysticism will also use ritualistic and legalistic practices to induce dramatic spiritual experiences and control its followers.

"Christian" mysticism abounds in America. Many Christians flock from one teaching to another, one experience to another, one Christian group to another, searching for the next spiritual high. It's not that God is against or never provides spiritual experiences. He has, and He does!

Paul had seen the risen Christ at His conversion and several times since. He had been caught up in a vision to the presence of God and heard things impossible and impermissible to describe (2 Cor. 12:2-4). But the danger of Mysticism is that thirsting for them can lead you into spiritual deception.

Satan and demons can deliver powerful spiritual experiences. So if your goal is to have visions and mystical experiences, you become an easy mark and can be led astray. The Corinthian Christians had all kinds of dramatic spiritual experiences, yet Paul calls them immature because they lacked the proof of spiritual maturity – the serving love he outlines in 1Cor. 13.

So what's the antidote to Mysticism? Verse 19 says, "and 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." (Col 2:19 NKJV)

Not holding fast to Christ will be your downfall, but holding fast to Christ will be your salvation. "Holding fast to the Head" means to build your relationship with Christ through the Bible. Paul repeats this in Col.3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." (Col 3:16 NKJV)

And again in 2 Thess. 2:13 when he writes, "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2Th 2:13-14 NKJV)

Mysticism leads you away from God's Word, but Christ speaks to us personally through His Word. Jesus is the Living Word, and His Word provides us with the basis for discerning authentic spiritual experiences. When Paul says that we are held together by the joints and ligaments, he means that mature Christians regularly allow other Christians to communicate His Word and share God's love to them (see Eph.4:14-16).

Mysticism tells you that you are so close to God you don't need to listen to people, especially those who disagree with you and don't think like you. Biblical Christianity leads to listening to God and to His people as they bring God's Word to us. When you hold fast to Christ, you experience real spiritual growth in Christ – growth in your personal relationship with Him and growth in your ability to love others!

### **III. Legalism Stands in Opposition to the Gospel**

Legalism also stands in opposition to the gospel.

Verse 22 says, "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— "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? (Col 2:20-22 NKJV)

The Colossians were being told that it was wrong to eat certain foods because following these prohibitions was key to spirituality. This is called legalism. Legalism is an emphasis on man-made rules and regulations as a requirement for spirituality.

Christianity has a rich legacy of legalism, as does American fundamentalism. Many churches, disguising themselves as “a holiness church,” are proud to be the church of the “Thou Shalt Nots!” They don’t drink alcohol; they don’t watch secular movies; they don’t play cards; they don’t wear make-up; they don’t listen to secular music; they don’t dance – did I miss any?

Legalism has caused a great deal of harm and damaged the witness of many churches. The goal of those who promote legalism is generally noble. They want to protect against sin. The rationale is that if something is sinful, enacting a rule will protect you from being tempted. The legalist would say, “If drunkenness is sinful, then the church needs to prohibit people from going to places where people get drunk.” If sexual immorality is sinful, then the church needs to prohibit women from dressing in ways that might tempt men to lust sexually.”

So what’s wrong with that? Well, the truth is, you really can’t legislate genuine righteousness or holiness. Godly behavior is governed by relationship, not by regulation. You may coerce people to follow the rules through regulation, but that does not guarantee they agree or are committed to your goals.

Legalism distorts God’s laws and prevents spiritual maturity. It needlessly alienates believers from growing in Christ and often drives away non-believers from wanting to learn more about Christ. Legalism also misrepresents God’s nature, making Him a Cosmic Killjoy instead of the Giver of Abundant Life. Legalism implies that we have to clean ourselves up morally before we can come to Christ, instead of coming to Him as we are and allowing Him to change us from the inside out. It creates finger-pointers instead of people who never compromise on faith issues but still love lost people and become known as “a friend of sinners.” Legalism defines spiritual maturity negatively. I don’t mind you telling me what you can’t do, but please tell me what you can do!

Learn to serve out of love, not out of obligation. Don’t focus people on impersonal rule-keeping; help them meet mature believers and grow in Christ.

## **Conclusion**

A mature spiritual relationship with Christ gives you the freedom to enjoy God’s good gifts and still live in obedience. (1Cor.8-10). Mature believers can impose restrictions upon themselves and abstain from certain practices because the Holy Spirit reveals they are interfering with their spiritual growth and goals without feeling the need to make the rules apply to everyone else. You may be able to do things the Holy Spirit won’t let me do, and I may be able to do things the Holy Spirit won’t let you do. That’s the freedom we have in Christ.

Don’t make your faith a negative pursuit. Deepen your relationship with Jesus by listening to the Holy Spirit and following the teaching of the scriptures. Paul concludes chapter 2 by saying, “These 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. (Col 2:23 NKJV)

Rituals, Mysticism, or Legalism, may look outwardly impressive, but they are incapable of fixing the real problem of our self-centeredness. Sadly, you can become deeply involved in any one or all of these without loving anyone! Spiritual maturity leads us away from the things that promote self-righteous pride.

The gospel proclaims biblical spirituality that leads us into a deep and profound relationship with God that becomes more important to us than the worldly pleasures of this life. Biblical Christianity defines spiritual maturity relationally as growing in love rather than submitting to and keeping religious practices. God's work in us always to move toward spiritual maturity and freedom in Christ.