

*Colossians Part 3: Fullness and Freedom*

*Week 6: No Rules Just Righteous!*

Sunday, February 19<sup>th</sup> 2023

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✠ The consequence of hope!

- **Let me ask you what may sound like a ridiculous question. WHAT IS THE POINT of Christianity?**
- **Over the years I've come to believe- through some wonderful teachers in my own life- that one of the best answers is "TO GLORIFY GOD"... to reveal the GOODNESS AND GRACE of God to the creation of God, through our lives- both as individuals, and more importantly, through our lives collectively, as a community of the people of God, as the church.**
- **OK... but what is the point of Christianity in terms of what God has done FOR his creation. For humanity. For you and me?**
- **Many answers. Forgiveness. Even more, that through faith in Christ a person receives NEW LIFE, is restored into life and rightness with God. THIS IS TRUE... and one of the greatest expressions of that NEW LIFE is that RIGHT NOW, in THIS LIFE, we will be people of HOPE.**
- **In Romans 15 Paul looks back to Isaiah's prophecy of what the Christ would mean for the Gentiles- for all of humanity....**

**Romans 15:12-14** *Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

- **Paul's opening prayer for the church in Ephesus is that believers would know this HOPE that is theirs in Christ:**

**Ephesians 1:18** *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you...*

- **The writer of Hebrews, having already said much of the NEW HOPE that is ours through the NEW COVENANT Christ brought into being through his death and resurrection, the writer encourages the church not to lose sight of this great hope...**

**Hebrews 10:23** *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*

- **The point is that our HOPE has a consequence! Because we are people of HOPE, we see life through a different lens- a lens of FAITH in what is now TRUE OF US in Christ.**
- **This hope changes the way we see death. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul is speaking about our hope of resurrection when he says...**

**1 Cor 15:54-57** *Death has been swallowed up in victory. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

- **And church, OUR HOPE in Christ also changes the way we see and experience LIFE. In fact, a strong NT case can be made that the POINT OF BEING A CHRISTIAN has MORE to do with LIFE NOW than our future life in heaven. This is NOT to diminish the believer's hope of eternity, but to ELEVATE our hope of Christ's presence TODAY, in the midst of life as it really is.**

- **ONE OF THE GREAT expressions of our hope TODAY is the freedom we have received from what Paul viewed as one of the greatest THREATS to the believer's EXPERIENCE of God's goodness and Grace- this is the threat... in fact the HERESY... of LEGALISM.**
- **THIS BRINGS US TO OUR TEXT TODAY as we complete Colossians chapter 2.**
- **IF YOU MISSED last Sunday, you need to listen- or read my message notes- because our text today is an inseparable continuation of what we heard Paul say last week.**
- **We talked about the very human- and often very religious- temptation toward rules and regulations, and why this is... we heard Paul warn the church to NOT BE JUDGED, not to have the vitality and genuineness of their life in Christ damaged by those would judge them based upon their religious performance and whether their worship included elite, super emotional and mystical spiritual experiences.**
- **This was the text...**

<sup>16</sup>Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. <sup>17</sup>These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. <sup>18</sup>Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. <sup>19</sup>They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

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- **NOW we take the next step, as Paul demonstrates why legalism is not just ineffective, but dangerous. He reminds us because the OLD person we used to be DIED WITH CHRIST, we are now...**

#### ☩ Dead to being dead

**Colossians 2:20** *Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules:*

- **This concept that we DIED WITH CHRIST is absolutely essential to understanding our hope in Christ- and we are going to unpack that next week. FOR NOW, few important things here...**
- **The concept of 'dying with Christ' is the same we see in 2 Cor 5:17- that IN CHRIST we are a new creation, the OLD HAS GONE, and the New has come.**
- **Think of the image Paul paints- The OLD HAS GONE because when a person dies, they are released from their former status.**
  - **If a sick person dies, they are no longer bound to the disease**
  - **If an imprisoned person dies, the prison no longer holds them**
  - **If an indebted person dies, their debts have no meaning**
- **NOW- that's only good news for the dead person IF THEY DON'T STAY DEAD, which is why the Christian hope is that not only did we DIE to the old, we have been RAISED to what is NEW, our life in Christ.**
- **The point is that the systems of oppression that used to hold us captive DO SO NO LONGER, because when we died to that old life, we 'came out from under' the old principles and spiritual forces of the world.**

- **THE CEV rendering sounds like a line written for a Marvel movie... “YOU DIED WITH CHRIST, so the forces of the universe don’t have any power over you!”**
- **And then Paul exclaims “SO WHY, as though you still belonged to the world, as though you still were imprisoned, under the power of these forces, do you still submit to all their rules!”**
- **HERE PAUL gives a KEY insight! Religious rules, legalistic thinking, are NOT a tool used by God to bring change and transformation into our lives- RATHER, religious laws and legalism are a tool of the enemies of God, to distance us from God!**
- **As we continue you can almost hear Paul throwing his hands up in the air in exasperation. WHY DO YOU SUBMIT TO THEIR RULES...**

**Colossians 2:21** “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”?

- **OK- we need to clarify what Paul means by...**

**✠ No rules?**

- **Because we don’t want to make this text say something it doesn’t mean.**
- **First, YES, Paul, in strong language, is condemning rule based motivation and religious legalism. But when he says “DON’T SUBMIT TO THEIR RULES”, Paul- of course- isn’t suggesting that there is no such thing as right and wrong, or morality inherent to a life that is obedient to God’s nature and character.**
- **It would be a gross distortion of this text to say “Paul says don’t submit to rules, so I can do anything I want!”**
- **In contrast, the point here is twofold.**
- **First, the Paul is rejecting the notion of religious law as a STRATEGY, as an approach to being right with God, or experiencing true change and transformation. This is the strategy where I would say “The reason I don’t steal is because the law tells me not to steal- otherwise I would be a happy thief”... or, to flip that around, when we think we can change people’s behavior just by telling the rules- even if we add the incentives of punishment and reward. Over time the strategy of law simply doesn’t work- in fact it is counterproductive- and we see this demonstrated throughout scripture.**
- **Second, we see that WHEN we opt for the strategy of legalism, we inevitably will start to pile up every rule you possibly conceive, and the result is simply suffocating- it is bondage.**
- **In the case of the Colossians, Paul sums up the rules being pushed by these false teachers as “Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch!” These very likely refer back to the laws of the Mosaic Covenant, which over the centuries had been piled upon with layer and layer of more rules and regulations.**
- **What does it mean to not work on the Sabbath? Here’s a LONG LIST of do’s and don’ts to make sure to do it right. (Google ‘eruv’, or ‘eruv new york’)**
- **But before we get all self-righteous about our orthodox Jewish friends, we have plenty examples of this in Christian culture- to be as personal as possible, let’s look at Baptist/evangelical culture.**

- **In FIRST TRACKS I riffed on Jeff Foxworthy’s ‘you might be a redneck’...**
  - **If you're comfortable saying something in the church parking lot you wouldn't say in the church...**
  - **If happy people make you suspicious...**
  - **If you lack joy and tell yourself it's because you are holy...**
  - **KEY ONE: If you ELEVATE to the status of divine moral law something the Bible does not require (or prohibit)... How do we do this?**
  - **Don't dance. Leave room for the Holy Spirit!**
  - **In high school- don't listen to secular music! THAT didn't work!**
  - **Don't play cards. Don't get tattoo's....**
  - **Don't drink. For many people, it is WONDERFUL not to drink! Likewise, I may choose not to drink for health reasons, OR because of my relationships with other people! But the Bible does NOT prohibit the consumption of alcohol, and to look down upon people who do is exactly what Paul is writing against. (Ashley River... Mexican restaurant-deacon board decided you couldn't have any official church lunch meeting, even though every Sunday after church it was filled with people from the church, often including the deacons!)**
- **DEEP RABBIT HOLE... ONE OF THE MANY THINGS I love about our church is that we generally don't carry this kind of baggage! BUT SCRIPTURE WARNS, time and again... be on your guard! Be self-aware! Legalism is one of the greatest joy-killing, life-robbing temptations the church will face, so don't be taken in!**
- **NOW Paul lays out two big problems with the legalistic mindset. FIRST thing... all these religious rules are just...**

**✠ Short term solutions to temporary problems**

**Colossians 2:22** *These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.*

- **Here we see an important insight: a fundamental problem with rule-based living is that our rules almost always address temporary things. They reduce the power of the gospel down to behavior.**
- **NOW! Behavior matters! A life centered in Christ WILL reflect the character and nature of God- but ultimately everything of this life is short term, and so Paul proclaims- DON'T MISS OUT ON THE TRUE, LIFE CHANGING power of CHRIST'S PRESENCE because you are obsessing over things that just aren't that important!**
- **Paul goes on to say ‘these are based on MERE human commands and teaching.’ Much of what can divide the church, place us in legalistic bondage- isn't really the truth of scripture, it's rooted in the pride and fear of human thinking. CONSIDER A FEW EXAMPLES...**
- **Philippians 4:8 talk about our choice of the focus of our minds.**  
*Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*
- **Powerful passage: but human legalism says “that’s not quite clear enough. We need to spell out what is and isn’t acceptable for Christians to read, listen to, or think about. Here’s your banned book list.**

- **In 1 Timothy Paul speaks about women dressing modesty. There’s an important context with an important principle. But human legalism says “here’s the description of what is and isn’t acceptable for Christians to wear, and the list is different depending on if you are in church or not. AND THEN, in many cases, we build this list for women, but ignore it for men- AND, if a guy falls into lust, we tend to blame it on how the woman dressed, not on the heart of the man.**
- **One more- in several places scripture speaks about the great tragedy of divorce. This is again an important principle contained with important biblical contexts. HUMAN LEGALISM takes this and declares- if you’ve ever been divorced, doesn’t matter why, you are disqualified from ever serving in any role of spiritual leadership within the church. This isn’t a thing here at Trinity, but is common within many conservative evangelical denominations, including our own.**
- **Then, to make matters worse, human thinking- chiefly fueled by pride and fear- combined with religious legalism, takes these issues and uses them to distance and condemn.**
- **Many scholars think that when Paul wrote this words he had in mind the teaching of Jesus we see in Matthew 15. Jesus is being accosted by the ‘teachers of the law’ because his disciples were evidently playing fast and loose with the religious rules and traditions. SUMMING UP CONVERSATION, went like this...**

*The teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?”*

*Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.””*

*Later the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”*

*Jesus replied... Leave them; they are blind guides...*

- **WOW. Church! May we NEVER break the command of God- to LOVE- to be HIS people of goodness, kindness, compassion, patience- as we express to ALL PEOPLE the nature of God’s goodness and love as we are bearers of the HOPE OF CHRIST... may we never forsake God’s heart for people for the sake of our own tradition, scruples, or human rules.**
- **Paul concludes his point by revealing what we already know...**

✠ **Why legalism isn’t just ineffective, it is dangerous**

**Colossians 2:23** *Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.*

- **Bottom line... LEGALISM LIES.**
  - **A legalistic heart appears to seek God’s wisdom and guidance, while really following our own human ways of thinking.**
  - **A legalistic heart appears to care about worship, when really our own experience is more important than our hearts before God**

- *A legalistic heart appears to be humble in defending its faith, and yet our attitude toward people is based in fear and pride, not love and compassion.*
- *A legalistic heart creates rules restricting freedom, and yet internally ignores its own temptation and sin.*
  
- *That's Paul's final blow- all of these rules, when it comes down to it, they lack any power to actually change our heart.*
  
- *WORSE- and this might be legalisms greatest danger- rule based living keeps our eyes turned from the ONE THING THAT DOES HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE OUR HEART... and this is the stunning, revolutionary, countercultural, to some even offensive, AMAZING LOVE, GRACE, and MERCY OF JESUS CHRIST.*
  
- *Paul began this section by saying... SINCE YOU DIED WITH CHRIST... don't get sucked into these old obsolete ways of thinking....*
  
- *NOW, as we enter chapter three, Paul turns to the miraculous alternative by saying... SINCE THEN, you have been RAISED WITH CHRIST- LOOK TO HIM. HE IS YOUR SOURCE, HE IS YOUR LIFE, and HE IS GOOD.*
  
- *And we will go there, NEXT WEEK*