

## Legalism

Colossians 2:16-23

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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. 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, 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.

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. 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.

Let's pray.

O Lord God Almighty, we come before You asking that You would open unto us the Word of God, that You would send the Holy Spirit to illuminate our understanding, to open the eyes of our understanding, to bring us into truth, to assure us of Your truth, and Father, to help us to examine our own hearts in light of Your truth. O Father, I pray that You would empower me by the Holy Spirit to speak Your Word to Your people in a way that would draw them closer to Christ, and I pray, Heavenly Father, that You would break down any barriers or hindrances to our fullness in Christ Jesus, that You would set Your people free from any form of legalism that will bring them under bondage. For freedom, Christ has set us free. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Well, Colossians chapter 2 is coming to a close this morning, and Paul's concern for the Colossians is evident right throughout chapter number 2. In chapter 2, verse 4, Paul says that I say this unto you, lest anyone should

deceive you with persuasive words. He's been concerned about the condition of the Colossian believers. He knows that they're walking orderly. He's not necessarily worried about maybe certain sin that they were living in, but he was concerned to warn them about people that come with persuasive words and that would lead them away from their completeness that is in Christ Jesus.

We've been looking at verses 8 as the first commandment of this epistle, and then verse number 16, where we're up to today, is the next commandment in the epistle. Now, between these two commandments is doctrine, and we looked at the doctrine over the last four weeks. We've been looking at the doctrine of our union with Christ. We've been looking at the doctrine of our resurrection with Christ, which is referring to our union, but we've been looking at the doctrine of this spiritual circumcision. We've been looking at the idea of the handwriting of requirements that was wiped out against us, our relationship to the law, and not only our relationship to the law, we've been looking at our forgiveness in Christ. And all this is to help us develop and understand what it means that we are complete in Him.

You see, Paul was anxious to make clear to the Colossians that they were complete in Christ, but he wasn't just satisfied with warning them. He wanted to indoctrinate them, if I could, about what Jesus has done for them and in them, that they might recognize and realize that they are complete in Him, not to be taken by philosophy, not to be taken by vain deceit, not to be taken by the traditions of men, but that they might rather hold fast to Christ.

You see, in our battle for sanctification, in our battle towards heaven, as it were, in our battle through the Christian life, we are met with many dangers, and all those dangers have one goal in mind, and that is to take us away from the sufficiency that is in Christ Jesus. And what Paul brings us to now in verses 16 through to verse 23 is a very clear understanding, if I could, or more particular understanding of what this legalistic, ascetic-type philosophy and legalism that was infiltrating or presenting a threat to the church at Colossians. And can I say that the threat is very real to us even today? And so we're going to deal with this subject of legalism, and this is exactly what Paul is addressing in this passage of scripture.

Now, legalism is a subtle cancer, and what I mean by that, it goes undetected and eats away at the spiritual life of believers. The reason why I say it goes undetected is because if anyone lives in a sort of gross sin, those things are obvious, not only to the person but maybe to even others that are looking on. But the issue with legalism is that it has the facade and subtlety of a self-righteousness, and therefore it's like an undetected cancer, as it were, and it's really hard to know unless you do some thorough

examination in your own heart and in your own life.

And so, what is legalism? Well, legalism is the belief that moral behavior is the ground for our acceptance before God, meaning that the way that I behave is the ground by which God accepts me. All right, that means that your relationship to God or your standing before God is determined by your good deeds, by your moral obedience. That's what legalism is. Now, that goes for both in salvation and also in sanctification, meaning our ground of our obedience is not our performance. The ground of our obedience is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Okay, that's a very important point to make.

It is a false gospel. Legalism is a false gospel that teaches that a man is right before God by what he does, which is, in fact, the false gospels of most religions in the world today. But Jesus Christ has come to give us, as Romans says, the gift of righteousness, meaning righteousness is a gift that is received. Okay, it's not our standing before God is a gift that is received. Our righteousness before God is a gift that is received. It is not a work that's performed that's tallied up, and God weighs the balances at the end. You don't want God to weigh the balances at the end for you, my friend. If God weighs the balances for you at the end, the Bible says whoever breaks one of the law is guilty of all; you will fall into the pits of hell immediately. But if the ground of your righteousness before God is Christ, when the books are open and the sins are seen, you will stand complete in Him, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ.

And so, it's very important to recognize that that's what legalism is. It's that belief that our moral behavior is a ground for acceptance before God. But Sam Storms adds to this, and he says this: it is the tendency to regard as divine law things that God neither required nor forbidden in scripture, and the corresponding inclination to look with suspicion on others for their failure or refusal to conform. You see, the Pharisees were going about trying to establish their own righteousness. Now, that was a works righteousness, and then what happened from that is that they started to, if I could say, add to scripture. They started to take the law of God and build on it. And they started to build on it in such a way that the law of God no longer became the law of God; it became the law of the Pharisees and the traditions of men.

You see, the Pharisees talked about what they referred to as hedges about the law, meaning they were very concerned for obedience to the law. And so, what they did was they said, well, God gave us the Ten Commandments, and God has given us His law. But you know, just in case people don't really understand what God meant by what He said, we need to really elaborate for them and make it extra clear for them. So, what we're going to do is we're going to, should I say, expand the law. And we're going to put hedges and fences about the law. You see, we're so concerned that people might

break God's law. So, what we want to do is we want to put a hedge about God's law so that people won't even get near to breaking it. That's exactly what happened with Adam and Eve, don't you remember? Has God said that you shall not touch the tree? No, God never said you can't touch it. He said you can't eat of it. You see, they were putting it, it was like a hedge about the law. It was almost like an addition and a hedge. And so, what ended up happening was there is a new law established, which is not God's law. It's the law of the hedge or the hedging about, the fencing about the law.

And so, the Pharisees were very big on this. All right. And so, this is kind of what legalism is. It's this seeking about to hedge God's law, which really undermines, as we look at, the sufficiency of God's word. That's essentially saying where God has drawn the line is not good enough. So we need to draw it somewhere else.

In fact, in front of where God has drawn it. And therefore we know better than God in regards to how we can safeguard people from sin. Wrong! That's error. Okay, and so this is what the Pharisees did. But beyond that, there's not only adding; it was also this ground of acceptance before God, which was our own righteousness.

And also, the Scriptures refer to legalism as being the means by which we seek to obey God. You see, we don't obey Him through faith; we don't obey Him through the Holy Spirit. Rather, we obey Him according to our own strength, our own righteousness, and our own ability, thinking that we are earning and doing these things not in dependence upon Him.

So that's what legalism is. And we'll look at the marks of it as we go through the passage, but I have to touch on what it is not. Because we're also living in a generation and culture where anything is labeled as legalistic. That's wrong. We need to balance this out and help us understand that.

Let me just say this: living by God's commandments and laws is not legalism. God has given laws, commandments, and instructions for us as His people. And we are expected by God to obey the Word of God. So much so that our disobedience to God's Word results in chastening. And so, for someone to preach and command God's people to obey the Word of God is not legalism. It is not legalism. That's antinomianism, or against law, to have this attitude that any commandment is impinging on my liberties. That's not true. We are free from sin, not free to sin. Our freedom is not to sin; our freedom is from sin, that we're not in bondage to it anymore and that we don't have to live under its rule and under its reign.

So let me just make that clear. Also, living a disciplined, godly life is not legalism. Just because someone has a disciplined schedule by which they like to come before God at certain seasons, at certain times – if you like to pray three times a day, that's not legalism. If you have certain disciplines that help you in terms of your set times to come before God, that is not legalism. We need to be careful. Just because you pray before every meal, it is not legalistic to pray before meals.

So I want to make that also clear. It's not legalistic to be a serious-minded Christian. A lot of people look upon Christians that are very serious-minded and concerned for God's glory and concerned for obedience to God's Word, and they look at those people and say, "These people are legalistic." That's not legalism at all whatsoever.

Legalism is also not being distinct from the world. The Bible teaches us that God's people are to be distinct from the world, that we are not to do the things that the world does in regards to sinful practices and in regards to ungodliness. Also, holding convictions and applying God's Word to our lives is not legalism.

Now, obviously, we could go through a list, but I want you to understand those things that are very important today. The last thing you want to do is go away stopping your spiritual disciplines with this thinking that I'm being legalistic by a certain form of consistency. So I hope I'm making myself clear.

We're going to look at the nature of legalism in this passage, and I want you to look at its marks with me. Look at verse number 16. We're just going to briefly go through this passage, not through it all in much detail, but just to show you the marks of legalism.

It says, "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths." And so here, we have that the legalism by which these people were presenting regarded days and diets. They were days and diets from the yearly festivals to the monthly festivals, to the weekly observances of the Sabbath. They regarded things like that: food, drink, and special days.

Also, in verse number 18, we are told that this legalism also involved extra-biblical forms of worship, which was the worship of angels. We're not sure exactly what that fully consisted of, but also it says here, "intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind." And so the marks of this legalism were not only days and this strict observance of days and diets and judging people for not keeping days and diets, but it was also this form of extra-biblical worship, whereby there was the

worship of angels, but also this puffed-up mind, this fleshly mind that, as the word here says, "intruding into those things which he has not seen."

Now, what does that mean? I think it's referring to the fact that there's this kind of mystic element to this, that there is this peering into the things which are not really revealed or things that he does not really see, this speculating and this wondering whether it came in the form of visions or whether it came in the form of something in regards to the angel worship or whatever it may be. It's the issue of peering into things that the Bible was not clear on or that God was not clear on and making much of those things, intruding into, delving into things that he has not really seen. I think it's like the prophets that prophesied, saying, "The Lord has said," when He has not said. It's almost like they were imagining things in their own hearts and peering into things which they don't really know, the things that they haven't really come to understand.

Also, what we see in verse 21 is that the legalism here is marked by regulations. In verse 20, it says, "Do not subject yourself to regulations: do not touch, do not taste, do not handle." And I use the word there; it's marked by external rules and regulations, marked by it. It is known for its externalism, this issue of "do not touch, do not taste, do not handle." This is what it looked like; this is what it was all about. It was marked by what people don't do rather than what they do and what they know, if I could say, in Christ.

Also, verse 23, it says, "These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and look at these words here, and neglect of the body, but of no value against the indulgence of the flesh." And this, the neglect of the body, refers to – could be also translated as asceticism, this idea of harsh punishment of the body. This is what it was known for, this kind of – now, whether it was Judaistic, which it seems to be in some respect but mixed with paganism, probably, we're not told exactly. But the issue was this legalism had its marks, and its marks went into externalism and even severity of the body to show that they are, as it were, right with God or have come into their fullness with Christ through these things.

Now, what was the manifestation of this legalism? Well, verse number 16 shows us that it was marked also by judgmentalism. Verse 16, "Let no one judge you in food or in drink, regarding a festival, new moon, or Sabbath; let no one judge you." It was marked by judgmentalism.

Also, verse 18 says, "Let no one cheat you of your reward." Now, the cheating of your reward also can be understood as "let no one disqualify you" or stand over you as an umpire. So, verse 16 and verse 18 are almost parallel;

they're really one warning and the same. What they're saying is, "Let no one exclude you and then disqualify you by standing over you in judgment as your umpire, telling you, 'Do not taste, do not touch, and do not handle.'" This is essentially what he's saying here; it's marked by judgmentalism.

Also, it was marked by false humility. Verses 18 and 23 talk about that, that this false humility – this word appears twice. And these false teachers were marked by false humility. See, their restraint and the severity of their body, from the standard of the world, would look at them like these monks and say, "Poor guys, you know, they're really humble," essentially would be the argument. That the humility was determined by the sadness of their countenance and by the severity of the discipline to their own body. It appeared humble, but the Bible teaches that this is a false humility.

In fact, it's actually been argued that the Pharisees were a very – you may not think this – pleasant people in one way, but, you know, they had this disposition about them. Obviously, when you disagreed with them, the fangs came out, but the issue was that they had this disposition about them. And that's exactly what legalism is like, mind you, because once you disagree with them, the fangs come out. And the fangs tell you what's really in the heart, as Jesus pointed out.

And so, not only was there this false humility, but there was this appearance of wisdom, you know, and that's a scary thing. So they appear to be humble, but they also appear to be wise. These were people who had it all worked out; every "i" was dotted, every "t" was crossed. If you had any questions about the law or any questions about its application to life, these guys knew exactly where to take you. There was no mystery, if I could say, to their understanding. They knew exactly; they were all wise, as it were, and they appeared to be wise. But what Paul teaches us here is that all this was really not true religion.

In verse 23, he talks about and uses these very strong words: it is self-imposed religion. What he argues is that what these people had was no religion at all, or no true religion at all. All it was is a self-imposed, a self-made, a will-worship, a worship, as it were, that resulted from their own will. This was their own religion that they had formulated by their own hedges that they secured about the law. And so, he says this is a self-imposed religion.

Look at verse 22: "Which all concern things which perish with the using, according to the commandments and doctrines of men." And that's just as clear as can be. This is a self-made religion that's based not on the Word of God but rather the commandments and the doctrines that come from the hearts of men, not from the heart of God.

And then, finally, in verse 23, he says that they neglected the body but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. What he's saying is that all this strict severity, all these rules and regulations, all this self-imposed religion, actually did nothing to deal with the flesh of man, the sin nature of man. All it dealt with was the body, but it did not deal with the body of sins.

You see, there are people who think that the body is evil. This body is evil. We sin in the body, but the body is not evil. Do you understand that? And so, treating your body severely does not change your disposition of heart. That's why salvation is by regeneration, where God gives us a new heart, not from the severity of our body to beat it into subjection.

Now, obviously, in understanding that, Paul talks about the discipline of the body because it's through the body that sin is carried out, and so we must restrain that. But just severity of the body, apart from a change of life, a change of heart, means nothing. And what I mean by severity, you don't whip yourself to be made right with God; you don't whip yourself to be made righteous or even to overcome sin. You starve the bodily passions, which will play out, obviously, in the body. So, I just want to make that clear also.

But how do people fall prey to this? Well, Paul points out three things in this passage before we look at the application of how people fall prey to this.

Firstly, the way that they fall prey to this is they don't understand the link, or should I say the difference, between shadow and substance. Look at what he says in verse 17: "Let no one judge you in these things, these days and diets, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ." And what he basically argues here is that these people don't understand that what was only a shadow, that was given for a purpose and a time in the history and the nation of Israel, has now found its fulfillment in Christ. And therefore, the shadows have served their purpose. And the issue that he's trying to say is, don't make much of the shadows; make much of the reality and the substance to which the shadows pointed.

Essentially, what he's saying is this: all these rules and regulations and these laws that God had given to the nation of Israel had this purpose in mind – to reveal Jesus Christ. And when Christ came, they would see Him as their ultimate rest; they would see Him in the sacrifices; they would see Him in the manna, even, which fell from heaven. It wasn't only in the law but even in typology. But the issue is that all these things – the festivals, the food laws, the Sabbaths – all these things were a shadow pointing to Christ, just like our shadow points to that which is real. The shadow is not the substantial. The thing that the shadow points to, whether it's a tree or



a person or whatever, is the real.

So, he's saying these people aren't understanding this; they're making much and living in the shadows and missing the substance, which is Christ. And that's something that they fail to understand.

You see, it's like – let me illustrate this – it's like a soldier, and you've probably heard this illustration before: a soldier that's gone away to battle for a long period of time and he misses his family. And so, he has in his jacket pocket a picture of his wife and of his children. And every time he gets a moment in the middle of the battle or before he puts his head to rest in his tent or on his pillow, he would take out the photo and look at his family, and he would see them and feel affection for them and be reminded of them. And that photo would remind him of his family, which really lived not on the battlefield but really lived, as it were, back home.

And it's like a soldier that has this picture that has served him so well in all his years of fighting and war and has served him so well in pointing him to his family. It's like this soldier survives the battle, comes back after years, and he walks into his house, and there he sees his family. And he goes into the room and sits down with the picture and looks at the picture and kisses the picture and is so in love with what he sees in the picture. When the reality, his family, is only just outside that room, waiting to greet him and to love him and that he may enjoy them, which he had apparently so been long waiting for.

And all that the Jews were waiting for, the revelation of the Messiah, He had come. Jesus had come, and He had come to fulfill all the types and the shadows, but they did not find their fulfillment in Him. They continued to hold on, as it were, to the pictures, to the shadows, to these things.

And so, what we have to understand is that the shadows aren't wrong, not necessarily are they wrong in any way or form, but not all of them – but I think some of them, now that Christ has come, have no place, like sacrifices, etc. But when we talk about things like Jews that used to keep things, circumcised other things like that, there wasn't wrong for them to keep doing that. The issue, he says here, is that no one stand in judgment over you and exclude you because you're not living in light of the shadows which they hold to. They're not understanding that the substance has come. So, they judge you in relationship to the shadows, not in relationship to the substance. And that was a problem that they were facing.

And I think there are some points of application for us to consider, is that there are many things in our lives that are symbolic and point to things. We must be careful not to judge too harshly the symbols but rather be careful

not to bring people under those symbols or those days or those festivals. I mean, today is Easter Sunday, and for many people, it's like if you don't do the whole Easter tradition thing, there's something wrong with your Christian life. How can you not do the Christmas and Easter thing? Or how can you not do this? How can you not do that? They don't understand, I guess, the reality to which all those things are meant to be pointing to and the actual substance behind it. They are focused on the externalism, but they're not really focused upon, I guess, the heart of what is taking place here.

And basically, this was really a mark of spiritual blindness that they couldn't see what God had intended by all those things. But let's move on.

The other thing here, in verse 19, people fell prey to it not only because they didn't understand the link between shadow and substance, but they also, in verse 19, it says here, very important words here: "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." And what he simply says is that these false teachers are the way they are because they do not hold fast to the head, which is Christ.

And what he does is he likens the church, this body that receives its sustenance and nutrients from the head, Christ. And what he's simply saying is they don't hold fast to the head, that is, to Christ, and therefore there's no real growth. The issue is here, he says in verse 19, is that the unity of the body and the nourishment of the body is all determined, and the growth of the body is all determined by its relationship to the head, which is Christ. And these people were not holding fast to Christ; rather, they were holding fast to their traditions, to their rules, to their regulations, to their hedges about the law. And what it would result in, in the church of Colossae, was a splintered church, a fractured church, a church that was not growing anymore in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And a church that would not be unified. And what Paul's simply trying to say is, people that fall prey to this are found to be holding on to other things rather than Christ and making their Christianity or their religion about other things rather than Christ. Legalists hold fast to the doctrines of men, not to the doctrines of Christ, and the church suffers for it. There may be an increase of regulations and rules, but there are not an increase of the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit of God and spiritual holiness in the lives of God's people.

And then, lastly, very quickly, it says here, why also, how also did they fall prey to it? Well, you would fall prey to it if you did not recognize that you have died to Christ, to legalism. Verse 20, "Therefore, if you died with

Christ from the basic principles of the world," that's referring to this externalism that we looked at in times past, it says, "why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations? Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle." And what he's saying to them, Paul's arguing, as it were, with them. He said, "What's wrong with you? Don't you realize that if you died to legalism, how is it that you are living as if you're under legalism and trying to be made complete with Christ and trying to be made acceptable before God by 'do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' and trying to submit yourself to the rules and regulations of men? These are doctrines and commandments of men. Don't you know that you have died with Jesus Christ?"

And there are things that we have to be mindful of as we go through this. But I guess the important question for us this morning is, how do I know if I am a legalist? That's the confronting question. How do I know if I've fallen prey to legalism? And I can say, well, do you hold fast to the head? You might say, yes, I do. You might say, well, do I do this? Do I understand the difference between shadow and substance? Yes, I do. You might say, yes, well, I know that I died to Christ, to legalism. That's great, theoretically, but my friends, how does that play out in your life? We've got to ask a bit more firm questions than that. How do I know if I am a legalist?

Well, we have to ask the question, the first question we have to ask is, what is the ground of your acceptance before God? Is it self-righteousness or is it Christ's righteousness? Are you someone who knows that you are right before God, not because of anything that you do or the absence of anything that you don't do, but simply because you are in Him, you've been saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus, by grace alone, faith alone, in Christ alone? Or do you think of yourself as guilty and condemned before God because you didn't do the right thing this week?

Or have you submitted yourself to the righteousness of God, which is in Christ, and have been saved by grace through faith alone? You see, as I mentioned before, righteousness is a gift, meaning if I have received the gift of righteousness, I am righteous in my standing before God. But the question that follows from this is, how do you feel when you don't live as well as you think you should live before God?

What about when you didn't manage to keep up to your discipline schedule, and this week you didn't spend every day doing your devotions? How do you feel before Him? I hope you feel like you miss Him and that you can't wait to spend some time with Him. I hope you don't feel condemned, guilty, as if you violated something like God's law. You see the difference? One is looking to Christ's righteousness and so enamored and loved with Christ's righteousness that all you want to do is get back to the place where you can

see Him again and see Him more clearly in the Word. But the other one is weighing up what I've done and what I've not done and allowing yourself to be completely condemned before God when you were never accepted before God apart from Christ anyway.

There's never been a day in my life where I've been accepted by God apart from being in Christ. And I mean that. When I prayed, and if I prayed for hours and hours and stayed up all night, or if I spent a little time with the Lord in the morning, my friends, my acceptance before God is unchanged. And the question that has to ask ourselves is, are we living under this condemnation? Are we living under this self-righteousness whereby we've made the ground of our acceptance before God our obedience? Can I just say this is an affront and an offense to the blood of Jesus Christ? To say that you, by your own righteousness, commend yourself to God is an attack on the sufficiency of the cross of Jesus Christ. It is to not understand that your sins were dealt with once and for all at Calvary. It is to not understand that you have been forgiven in Christ Jesus.

You know, some people think that because they sin today, they have to have a whole week of obedience to make up for it. You know that they balance it out so that God will accept them. My friend, if we had to do that, we would have to spend a lifetime of a lifetime of a lifetime of a lifetime to make up for all the sins that we had committed before our conversion. But the reality is this: that Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe. Sin had left the crimson stain; He washed it white as snow. And that goes not only for my salvation but it also goes for my sanctification, that I am not made complete by my obedience. I am complete in Him; no work of mine can take the Lord the place of thine.

And so let us remember and ask ourselves the questions, how do you feel, I guess, when you sin against God? You should feel that absence of His presence and desire to be back in communion and fellowship with Him, but you should not feel as if the ground of your acceptance has been violated. We should want to live lives pleasing to the Lord. The Bible teaches us to do that. There's a vast difference between trying to be accepted by God by your works and trying to live in a way which is pleasing to Him. A vast, vast difference between the two.

Secondly, what we have to ask ourselves is, what is the basis of your authority? Remember, the Bible teaches us very clearly that these were the commandments and the doctrines of men, meaning that the hedges about the law were elevated to the level of scripture. And I ask you this morning, what is the basis of your authority? Is it the Word or is it tradition? Is it scripture or is it the conservative group of Christians that you hang out with that make you feel good about the things you do or don't do? What

is the basis and the ground of your acceptance, but more than that, what is the authority by which you do the things that you do? Can you show clearly from the Word of God why it is the way that you do the things that you do and what you do and why you do? Or simply do you look at everyone else around you and think, well, everyone else does this, so that must be the righteous way, and so therefore I'm not going to do that.

You see, is it your Bible that guides you, or is it your upbringing? Are you making the Word of God of none effect by your tradition, like the Pharisees, or are you upholding God's truth? You see, my friends, it's either truth or tradition. It's either God's Word or the commandments of men. What do you hold on to? Do you hold on to the head, which is Christ, or on to your tradition?

Let me get more practical. Ephesians 5:18 says, "Do not be drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit." So the Bible forbids drunkenness very clearly in scripture. But you hear Christians say things like this: A waiter comes to the table and says, "Would you like any drinks?" And they might say, "We're Christian; we don't drink." Think about that for a moment. Is that a hedge about the law of God? Is that adding to scripture? Is that elevating tradition, truth, upbringing, maybe certain applications of things? Maybe you say, well, yes, we want to avoid drunkenness so much so that we are going to abstain entirely from alcohol, and that's good. That's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, I commend you for that if that's what you feel is best for you to do. But do not set up a fence around the law and then condemn others who drink alcohol and do not get drunk, and drink in a way that is pleasing to God, in a way that is honorable to God, that doesn't violate His word. And do not say they are violating the word of God; they are violating your hedge, they're not violating the word of God. There are churches today that you cannot be members of unless you abstain from alcohol. I'm getting specific here to help us think about our authority. Churches that say we hold to the authority of scripture in all matters of faith and practice. But when it comes to being a member of this church, we're teetotalers. Zero. And if you drink one drop, get ready for church discipline. Or if you drink one drop, you can sit and observe, but you can't commune with us at the Lord's table. I don't even think Jesus could be a member of that church, my friend.

And what I'm just simply trying to say is I'm not undermining people that want to hold to things, but know where to draw the line. Don't draw the line where God hasn't drawn the line and then say that's scripture. We need to be awfully careful about this. There are Christians that say we don't have a TV in our house. Listen, I don't have a TV in my house. I personally think it's a time waster and, you know, there's not much good on it at all. But I don't have the right to say that Christians shouldn't have televisions in

their house and they shouldn't watch them. I don't have scripture for that. I can ask you to consider how it's dealing with your time. I can make you think about how it may be affecting your life and you're redeeming the time and all these kinds of things. But I cannot set up a hedge and say because you have a TV, therefore there may be something wrong with your spiritual life. Listen, if you watch filth on the TV, there is something wrong with your spiritual life. But can I go beyond scripture? No, I cannot go beyond scripture.

The same goes for movies. The same goes for how people dress. The Bible is very clear on modesty, but I can tell you right now, honestly, it's not super clear on all the specifics of the applications of modesty. There are obvious things which women should be mindful of what they wear. They shouldn't be seductive and sensuous in their presentation. But my friends, because a woman's skirt doesn't fall below the knee, it doesn't mean that she's not right with God. Because some of her shoulder is showing, it doesn't mean that she's not right before God. Because she wears slacks or pants, it doesn't mean that she is not right before God. And I say this because there are many people today that have set a hedge up about the law of modesty and have then judged people in light of the hedges and have condemned a whole group of people that love Jesus Christ with all their heart, soul, and mind, and love their neighbor as themselves, and are living perfectly – not perfectly because no one does – but wonderfully in relationship to the law of God, but not your hedge, but not your hedge.

And I say this because I myself was guilty of teaching people these very things and believing them myself. Not walking into an RSL club to use the toilet in case someone thinks you're gambling. You know what this is? This is touch not, taste not, handle not. That's what that is. This is the doctrines and commandments of men that have been elevated to the point of scripture, that men now sit in judgment over others and with the whistle, disqualified. I saw him come out of the pub.

And can I just say this? Paul was concerned about the bondage that this would bring into the life of the church and the division that this would bring into the life of the church. And you know what this did? It severed people from the head, which was Christ. That they measured their lives up to the standard of the hedges. And they said, yes, we don't do this, and we don't do that, we don't taste, we don't touch, we don't handle, therefore we're accepted by God. When the religion had nothing to do with that, that God came to bring into the world.

You see, they become experts in what the Bible is silent upon. And they basically say, we'll just fill in the gaps where God missed out. You know, God has spoken, but hey, we've got to help God out here. We've got to help

God out and His people, and we have to set about hedges to make sure that nobody crosses the line. Because they're scared of what we call the slippery slope. Listen, it's reverse. Legalism is a slippery slope. Let me ask you this, when will it end? Every new thing that comes up, it's once again, oh no, this, that, this, that, this, that, this, that, this, that, and the laws and the list get longer and longer and longer and longer, and they don't have their authority in scripture. And it's a slippery slope down, down to a church that is divided, splintered, hurt, and a people that hold fast to tradition and not to the head, which is Christ. That's the slippery slope that we have to be careful of.

And my friend, if your Christianity is a system of perfect law works, you have a house of cards. You know what that means? You pull one out, they're all coming tumbling down. You're building your life on sand. I believe it is to the detriment of many Christian children that grow up in legalism, that they think God said something when He did not say. And when they get old enough to understand the Bible and they start to read the scripture for themselves. And when their parents didn't show them from scripture why we do what we do. And the parents didn't have the honesty to say, look, listen, listen, even though that's not in scripture, this is how we do things in our home. It's not in scripture, but this is how I'm deciding to lead the home. Okay, what's in scripture is submit to your father and mother. Okay. But you know, that's fine. That's fine. That's the jurisdiction. But they're not explaining to their children why the word of God says what it says and why they do what they do. The kids grow up thinking that the hedges are the truth of God. And then they come to their friends, they hear or they hear preaching online, which is good preaching, by the way, true preaching that points out what the word of God truly says about something. And they think, is this what my whole faith rested on?

The parents didn't teach them to hold fast to the head. What they taught them was, hey, son, hang on to this, and hang on to that, and hang on to that, and try and just try to hold it all together. And once one law was pulled out, they saw the whole thing, which is a thing. And you know what ends up happening to them is they give up Christ, they give up the gospel, and they give up the word of God as the final authority because they think the word of God said something when it doesn't say it. And they don't know who to believe anymore about anything. It's deadly.

And finally, by what rule do you live by? Faith or works? The rule of love or your own law? The rule of others or the law of Christ? My friends, do not seek the approval of others. Don't make this a competition of who prays the most, who fasts the most, who does the most outreach, who does the most Bible reading. They are not the true spiritual ones in the life of the church. Don't fall for it. There are people in the world today that are

going to burn in hell that pray more than you and I all combined together because the ground of their acceptance is not the righteousness of Christ.

And so, I leave you with this: Let no one judge you and let no one stand as umpire over you to disqualify you from the completeness and the fullness that is in Christ Jesus. You are, my friend, complete in Him. Let's pray.