

This weekend officially kicks off the start of the NFL season. There will be 272 total games played this season, and every one of them will begin with the singing of the national anthem. A mid-level local artist will take the field, everyone will stand, and 70,000 people will sing the story of America. Our anthem crescendos with those memorable words, “*The land of the free, and the home of the brave.*” Ever since this country was founded, we have focused on and celebrated our freedoms. Although we are technically free, many Americans live with a kind of self-imposed bondage. Twenty million Americans are addicted to drugs. Thirty million Americans are addicted to alcohol. Forty million are addicted to pornography. And slightly over fifty million are addicted to tobacco. We live in a land where the government recognizes our freedoms, but a strong percentage of people are not exercising or enjoying those freedoms; rather they are in bondage, controlled by a force that has power over them and is severely limiting the quality of their lives.

What is true in America is very similar to what is true in the Christian life. Jesus Christ has broken the power of sin and Satan. He has given us our freedom. In John 8:36, Jesus himself said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” And Paul said in Galatians 5:13, “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.” Spiritual freedom is the base line foundational reality for every person who is in Christ, but sadly there are so many Christians who don’t tap into that reality. Instead of enjoying the freedom Christ has made available, their actual experience feels far more like bondage than liberation. They technically have freedom, but in their daily lives they are not enjoying it.

This lack of true freedom can take numerous different forms:

- The person who attends three Bible studies a week but always has a scowl on his face; there is no joy in his life.
- The person who is constantly conscious of what other people think about her and makes decisions for the acceptance and approval of others rather than simply to honor God.
- The person who evaluates his own righteousness based on the sins he avoids and the good deeds he does rather than on the finished work of Christ on his behalf.
- The person who expects others to give generously but has a miserly soul and is stingy with her own resources.
- The person who constantly feels shame over past decisions, minimizing the power and sufficiency of the blood of Christ to forgive his transgressions.
- The person who always projects strength and shares her accomplishments with others but is unwilling to vulnerably disclose her wounds or areas of weakness.
- The person who quotes his favorite preacher or author more than he quotes Jesus.
- The person who is thankful to receive forgiveness from God but is unwilling or unable to extend forgiveness to others.
- The person who cannot go an extended time without relying on alcohol, weed, tobacco, gambling, pornography or some other substance to distract, comfort, or soothe him.
- The person who dutifully shares her faith with every single one of her co-workers but has no real relationship with members of his own family.

In all of these scenarios, the person has faith in Jesus. They have claimed Jesus. They have technically been set free by Jesus. But they are not living in their freedom. This is not the abundant life Jesus came to make available. As we continue in our study of the book of Colossians, we’ll see Paul address this issue. There were some people in Colossae who had accepted Christ and had been set free by him, but who were not living into their freedom. Paul addresses that situation head on, and it speaks so relevantly into our situation in life today. As we work our way through today’s passage, we’ll see three forces that work

against our freedom in Christ: obsolete religious traditions, unhealthy religious leaders, and legalistic religious rules. We'll talk about each of them and how Christ himself provides a better way.

### **Obsolete Religious Traditions**

Listen to what Paul says in Colossians 2:16-17: "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. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." When Paul wrote this letter, there were religious traditions that people thought they needed to keep in order to have a right relationship with God. Paul emphasizes these specific traditions: what they eat or drink, religious festivals, new moon celebrations, and the Sabbath. Scholars debate this, but it appears that these religious traditions found their source in ancient Judaism.

- The Old Testament of the Bible, the source that shaped Jewish life and devotion, had very strict dietary laws, referred to commonly as "a kosher diet." The Jewish people had to avoid eating and drinking many things in order to be pure.
- In addition to those dietary regulations, the Jewish people had to observe certain religious festivals—several major holidays every year, three of which required a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and very specific participatory activities.
- The Jewish calendar was a lunar calendar, different from our solar calendar; they had new moon celebrations at the start of every month, as prescribed in Numbers 10.
- Finally, they also had their Sabbath day at the end of every week. According to the teachings of the Pharisees, there were 39 forbidden actions on the Sabbath. You couldn't travel more than  $\frac{3}{5}$  of a mile from home, you couldn't cook, or shop, or do anything that required physical exertion.

All these religious traditions were an important part of Judaism. Feast seven times a year, celebrate the new moon every month, observe the Sabbath every week, and abide by food laws every single day—all as a part of your religious commitment to Judaism. It appears some Jewish teachers infiltrated their way into the church and were telling Christians, "If you believe in a Jewish Messiah, you need to live like we Jews live. You need to embrace our religious traditions." It was an oppressive, extraneous weight. Paul says absolutely not, because those traditions were only a shadow of things that were to come. And because they were only a shadow pointing the way to Jesus, now that Jesus is here, we don't follow them any longer. We used to practice them. We do so no longer.

Obviously, this freedom can be used poorly! You might say, "I am no longer under the dietary regulations of the Old Testament, so now I can start my day with two dozen Krispy Kreme donuts!" Or, "I am no longer under the Sabbath regulations, so now I feel good skipping church and worshiping God from home while watching football or from a tree stand in the woods on Sundays." That was not God's intent in giving us freedom! In Christ, obsolete religious traditions are replaced by Spirit-led rhythms and practices. All of those religious traditions that the Jews participated in formed them to become certain kinds of people. Daily dietary laws, weekly Sabbath observance, monthly new moon celebrations, seven feasts a year—when you live in that rhythm, it shapes you to become a specific kind of person. God's vision was not that those traditions would simply go away, but rather that they would be replaced by Spirit-led rhythms that help us become more and more like Jesus.

We don't keep Sabbath the same way ancient Jews did. We can travel more than  $\frac{3}{5}$  of a mile on Saturday. Though the Sabbath regulation has gone away, the need to set aside time on a weekly basis for rest and renewal, relationships and worship has not. It's just as important as ever! Though we don't have the seven feasts of the Jewish calendar to form us, we have the Christian calendar that forms us. We observe Advent around Christmas time and remember how the darkness in our world was pierced with the light of Christ. We celebrate Easter and remember how Jesus was the ultimate Passover lamb who delivered us from

slavery and death. We come to church every Sunday to worship our creator, sustainer, deliverer, and sanctifier. We honor God, grow in his truth, receive the sacraments, love one another, and get sent out on mission. In Christ, obsolete religious traditions aren't simply done away with, they are replaced with Spirit-led rhythms and practices that help form the character of Jesus in us so that we can be set apart as God's people in the midst of a very ungodly world.

### **Unhealthy Religious Leaders**

Paul says in Colossians 2:18-19:

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. 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.

The background to this passage is very important. A preacher by the name of Epaphras, who was a faithful servant, a godly leader, and co-laborer alongside the apostle Paul, first shared the gospel with these people. This godly man, who had an established relationship with Jesus, helped nurture them in the faith. They were flourishing under this loving and wise pastor, but then other spiritual leaders rose to prominence and began influencing them in counterproductive ways. Paul describes what they are like in several ways.

He says they “delight in false humility.” They say things like, “All praise and honor to God,” but the truth of the matter is that under that facade, they want praise and honor for themselves. They delight in the “worship of angels.” This could mean either that they are worshiping angels or that they have gained whatever spiritual insights are necessary to be able to worship God in the same way the angels do. Brilliant people interpret this in different ways, but here's the key take away: these people are claiming to be spiritual elites. They are claiming to have secret knowledge and insights about heavenly realities to which normal Christians don't have access, which causes normal Christians to be perpetually dependent upon their upper-echelon knowledge—and because of that, Paul says, such a person “goes into detail about what they have seen.” Instead of pointing all the attention to Jesus, they spend their time talking about themselves, their insights, their experiences, their ideas. Paul says they are “puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.” This phrase, “unspiritual mind,” means a mind controlled by the flesh, a mind focused on worldly things rather than on the things of God and the things of his kingdom. Finally, Paul says in summary: “They have lost connection with the head.” At one time they had a close relationship with Jesus, but that relationship has been severed, and now instead of following God's agenda, they have their own agenda, and in the name of God they are illicitly trying to get as many people to follow them as possible, which almost always has personal financial gain as a primary goal.

Paul says Christians need to be on their guard against these unhealthy religious leaders, because like obsolete religious traditions, unhealthy religious leaders can inhibit or actually work against your growing in your faith in Christ. But just because there are bad religious leaders you need to be on your guard against doesn't mean that all religious leaders are bad. In fact, in order to thrive in our faith, we need the help and guidance of others. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 says, “Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.” Or listen to Hebrews 13:17: “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account.” The Bible is not advocating for a lack of spiritual leaders—we all need spiritual leaders. Paul wants to make sure we have the right kind of spiritual leaders; that's what will help us grow and flourish in the faith.

Even as someone who is looked to as a spiritual leader for others, I have to have leadership in my life. In the last month, there have been three different occasions when I didn't have a lot of clarity on how to handle a situation, and one of my spiritual leaders spoke boldly into my life and gave me the guidance I needed to make the most God-honoring decision possible. This man is humble, he reads the Scriptures and prays every day, he loves me, and I am a better husband, father, pastor, and friend because I have a spiritual leader like him in my life.

When I think about what sorts of conditions are required for people to grow in their faith, I can tell you from someone who has been working in a church for a while now, when people are relationally connected to a pastor who knows them, who loves them, who walks through life with them, who prays with them and for them, who counsels them on important decisions, they are exponentially more likely to be growing in their faith than someone who is not connected to and in a sense submitted to a spiritual leader. The way God designed it, we all need to be under spiritual leaders to thrive. We just have to make sure that the leaders we are under are godly, humble, and truly connected to Christ.

### **Legalistic Religious Rules**

Listen to how Paul continues:

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: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. 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. (Colossians 2:20-23)

The people Paul was writing to believed that there were spiritual forces in the world that had control over life on earth, deities that controlled the weather and the crops, finding a spouse and having children, traveling at sea, and winning wars. They literally believed these deities, these spiritual forces, controlled all of human life. In order to get these forces to work for you and not against you, you had to follow their rules. Paul says when they were baptized and joined Jesus in his death and burial, they died to whatever obligation they thought they had to those spiritual forces. They no longer had to believe in them, and they no longer had to follow their rules—do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. Almost every man-made religion requires some form of asceticism. The logic is basically the same in all of them: natural desires are not good; instead of being embraced, they need to be suppressed, so exert self-control and self-mastery and restrain those desires. At the surface, it seems to make a lot of sense. Paul even says, "Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom." You can look at someone who lives a very religious life and say, "Wow, that is commendable. Look at all that self-discipline." But Olympic athletes are really disciplined as well! Intense discipline and self-restraint don't necessarily do anything to change your heart. That's why Paul says, you can follow all the rules you want, but those rules "lack any value in restraining sensual indulgences." If you want a case study in this, look no further than the sex abuse scandals in the Catholic church. A Catholic priest has to practice a life of incredible discipline and self-control. He has to commit himself to celibacy in order to serve the church. On the outside it looks pious and admirable, but there is no power for restraining sensual indulgences. Sure, they weren't intimate with a wife, but their desires were raging like an inferno, and they took advantage of innocent children.

Now obviously that is a very extreme example, but the point is that a disciplined lifestyle that is driven by religious, legalistic rules doesn't necessarily make a person closer to Jesus. Rule following can actually keep you far away from him. This was the case for the Pharisees. Jesus said in Matthew 23:23, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness."

They would literally count out ten grains of salt, use nine and give one to the Lord. They honored the Lord down to the smallest detail of the legalistic rules, but they neglected justice, mercy and faithfulness! If we are not careful, that is what legalistic rule-following can do in our lives, as well. You could do all the right things on the outside, never say a four-letter word, never get drunk, never cheat on your taxes, never go a single mile per hour over the speed limit; you could follow every rule you've ever heard of. But if you did it for the wrong reasons, with every rule you kept, your heart could grow darker and darker and darker, you could be more consumed with yourself and your righteousness than with Christ and his righteousness.

Paul says it's not supposed to be that way! We are not supposed to grow in godliness through gritted teeth and white knuckles, but in grace and humility as Jesus changes our heart and desires from within. Man-made religion focuses on suppressing our base desires, but Christ-centered religion focuses on God actually changing our desires. Man-made religion focuses on controlling people through rules and regulations, Christ-centered religion awakens people's imagination and inspires them with a vision of what a life lived for God's glory and in God's strength could actually look like. It's not about avoiding sin but wholeheartedly pursuing righteousness!

It reminds me of a story from Homer. The ancient Greek author tells the story of Odysseus traveling across the sea with his men. As they neared an island with sirens on it, the sirens sang an intoxicating song, so intoxicating that it caused all the sailors to crash their boats on the shore. But Odysseus wanted to listen to the song without crashing, so he had his men put wax in their ears so they couldn't hear the song, then he, without any wax, was tied to the mast of the ship. As they approached the island, the men couldn't hear anything, but Odysseus could. He loved the songs. He was drawn to the songs, driven mad over the songs. He screamed and begged and bloodied himself trying to get free, but his shipmates refused to help him. Eventually they got beyond reach and he was released. That's one way of fighting the temptations of the flesh. It's fitful and strenuous, but of course it is better than being shipwrecked. But there is another way. Apollonius, who wrote about 400 years after Homer, told the story of a ship passing by the same famed island with sirens, but this time, instead of filling their ears with wax and tying the captain to the mast, they had a musician on the ship bring out a lyre and play an even more beautiful song that drowned out the seductive sounds of the sirens. That's the real religion. That's the beauty and the power of Christ. Most of the time it's not about fitfully fighting tooth and nail to keep all the rules; it's learning to listen to a better song, to be intoxicated with the goodness, love, and beauty of Jesus. When you have a great marriage, you don't have to be told not to cheat on your spouse. You love your spouse. You adore your spouse. The thought would never enter your mind. Faithfulness isn't about following the rules and regulations of marriage, it's about following your ultimate love. That's true freedom.

Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!" Let's live that! Let's experience that!