

Colossians 6 – Christ Above Legalism
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We are in a sermon series called Christ Above All and we are preaching verse by verse through the book of Colossians. So far, we've seen that Christ is above creation – above suffering – above the deceptions of the enemy – above the traditions and philosophies of man – and Christ is above worldliness.

Today I'm preaching on Colossians 2:11-17. The title of my sermon is Christ Above Legalism.

Legalism is the belief that you can be righteous with God by keeping the law. There seems to be something in the heart of man that wants to believe we can work our way into relationship with God. There is a strong tendency to be performance oriented.

But I want you to know right up front – you cannot make yourself righteous – or right with God. You can't be good enough. You can't do enough good works. You need something way beyond yourself. And that something is Someone named Jesus Christ!

In Paul's time there were legalists called Judaizers who taught that for Gentiles to be saved, they must essentially become Jewish: which meant getting circumcised and keeping the Law. Only then they could be a Christian.

The first Jerusalem council was convened to debate this very issue. Acts 15:5 says that the Judaizers were saying that when Gentiles got saved –

It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

There was much debate among church leaders and the outcome was the truth that Christian believers were not required to be circumcised or be under the law of Moses. We are not under the Law of Moses – but we are not lawless.

1 Corinthians 9:19-21 says:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.

There are many truths we can learn from the Old Covenant. But many people seem more interested in living under the old covenant rather than the new.

The old covenant was based on outward obedience to the Law.
The new covenant is based in an inner change of heart.

The old covenant was based on what man did.
The new covenant is based on what Jesus did.

The Jerusalem council decided that we are not under Jewish law. But there is a growing movement today of people who teach that Christians are still under the Old Testament law and we must keep the Jewish Sabbath and feasts and dietary laws in order to be righteous. We must resist any attempt to put Christians back under that law. Listen to how Paul addressed this in Galatians 2:14-16

How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Galatians 3:24-25 says:

The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Remember, Paul was addressing people in Colossae who were trying to add to Jesus Christ. The Gnostics were adding secret knowledge and mysteries. The Judaizers were adding law to Jesus. This is what Paul was addressing in Colossians 2:11-12

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

In this section, Paul addresses the Judaizers who were teaching that Christian believers had to be circumcised and keep the law.

The New Testament sign of covenant is water baptism which represents us dying with Christ, being buried with Christ and raised to new life. If you've never been water baptized – I urge you to sign up for our next baptism. In the Old Testament, circumcision was a sign of covenant with God. In Genesis 17:9-11:

God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is My covenant with you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between Me and you."

Physical circumcision is the cutting away of flesh and it is obviously done with physical hands. But Colossians 2:11 speaks of another circumcision, one done without hands, which means performed by God. It is spiritual, not physical. It is internal, not external. We know physical circumcision has no spiritual significance anymore. Galatians 5:6 says:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Paul is saying physical circumcision has no spiritual significance. What is important is a circumcision of the heart – a cutting away of the old man – the body of sin. This was prophesied in Deuteronomy 30:6 -

The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love Him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.

Paul also addressed this in Romans 2:28-29 -

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

When your heart has been circumcised, you will put no confidence in the flesh. Philippians 3:3 says:

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.

Having no confidence in the flesh means we give up hope of saving ourselves – changing ourselves – and we are putting all faith and hope in Christ because of what He has done for us.

And what has He done for us? Colossians 2:13 tells us:

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses,

When we place our faith in Christ and Christ alone – we go from death to life. We are spiritually dead outside of Christ. We are unable to do anything to help ourselves or save ourselves. We were spiritually bankrupt, unable to pay a dime of the debt we owed. So, Christ took care of it for us. Colossians 2:14-15 says:

...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

The debt we owed was nailed to the cross. In Bible times, when someone owed a debt – it was written out as an IOU - written contract, which remained in force against until the bond was cancelled. That was done in some places by blotting out the names, or by drawing lines through it, or, by driving a nail through it and affixing it to a post.

The laws we broke are represented here as such a contract, an IOU that binds us because it is more than we can ever pay. Jesus took that IOU – everything we ever did wrong - and nailed it to the cross. Our sin causes all of us to owe a debt we can never pay. But on the cross – Jesus paid a debt He did not owe. He took our debts – nailed them to the cross and paid them in full!

So, stop trying to add to the finished work of Christ. There’s nothing more you can do! Trying to do that is like having your car paid off – yet you want to keep making payments. The bank says, “It’s already paid in full” – but you want to pay more. None of us would do that. None of us would want to pay more on a paid off debt.

Yet many people are trying to do that spiritually. Christ has already paid for every sin you have ever or will ever commit. When Jesus died He said, “It is finished.” What was finished? The phrase “it is finished” means paid in full – the debt is cancelled. Jesus paid the price and the penalty for all our sins! So, stop trying to make yourself pay for what is already paid in full!

When we are born again, we are totally forgiven of any and all wrong we have ever done. Everything that is against us is wiped out, erased, taken away, nailed to the cross and no longer remembered! But wait! There’s more! Not only did Jesus pay our debt, but Colossians 2:15 says:

Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

Notice that Satan is defeated and disarmed. Not just defeated, but disarmed. Do you understand? We have an enemy with no weapons. All he has are words to accuse, condemn or deceive. He has been defeated, disarmed and made a public spectacle.

I want to take a quick look at what that meant historically. In ancient times, when a king defeated another king, he came back home to a city-wide victory parade and celebration of victory. This triumphal procession into the city not only included the victorious army, but the spoils of war, all the riches that they captured. The triumphal procession also included the defeated king walking behind the victorious king’s chariot. The victorious king was riding – but the defeated king was walking like a slave - disarmed and shackled in chains.

This is the picture of Christ’s triumphal entry when He defeated Satan, disarmed Satan and made a public spectacle of him. Ephesians 4:8 says:

When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive (He led a train of vanquished foes) and He bestowed gifts on men.

And guess what? We're in the victory parade! 2 Corinthians 2:14 says:

Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.

The Message Bible says:

In the Messiah, in Christ, God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade.

Beloved - we are not on the sidelines watching. We are part of the winning army. We're on the winning side. We are not slaves walking in defeat – but princes riding in victory!

Satan wants to try to steal this truth from us!
He wants us to live beneath our station in life.
He wants to keep us from God's pre-ordained destiny!

God has a destiny for you.
You were not created to live a life of constant defeat!
You were not created to slave through life trying to work for salvation.
You were created to rule and reign in life.
You were created to enforce the victory that Christ won for us!

At first glance – it seems like Colossians 2:16-17 should not follow this passage on Christ's victory at the cross.

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.

What Paul is saying is this:
Because of all that Christ has done for us
Since you are a new creation
Since you have a new heart and a new life
Since your debt has been paid at the cross
Since your enemy has been defeated and disarmed
Don't you dare submit to legalism – thinking you are made righteous by keeping laws, rule, regulations.
Don't be judged by what you eat or what day you go to church.
The Old Covenant was about rules.
The New Covenant is about relationship!

The Old Covenant was about outwardly conforming to the Law.
The New Covenant is about inward heart change.

Don't think that once you are in relationship with Christ through faith that you keep yourself there by keeping a list of rules. Galatians 3:1-3 says:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?

It's what we preached last week: since you received Christ by grace through faith – everything in the Christian life is by grace through faith.

We think that falling from grace means someone lost their salvation. But that's not what it means. Galatians 5:1-6 says:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

Falling from grace means leaving the truth of salvation by grace alone and turning back to trying to be righteous by your works! Remember Colossians 2:16-17 -

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.

When you turn from grace to law – you are choosing relationship with a shadow rather than the person of Christ.

You see everything in the Old Testament pointed to Christ. The laws, the sacrifices, the temple, the Sabbath, the feasts.

Listen closely – there are important truths in teachings about the Sabbath and the feasts and the Temple. I think it's great that some people want to celebrate the feasts. I think every believer should experience at least one Passover. But celebrating those events does not and cannot make us righteous. It earns us no points with God.

It's important to study and understand these Old Testament truths. But when you truly understand them - you will realize that they are all about Jesus! Instead of earning us points with God – they point us to God!

Hebrews 8 teaches that everything in the temple – including the High Priest was a shadow of Christ. Then Hebrews 8:6-7 teaches that Christ is better:

Jesus, our High Priest, has been given a ministry that is far superior to the old priesthood, for He is the one who mediates for us a far better covenant with God, based on better promises. If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need for a second covenant to replace it.

Hebrews 10:1 teaches that Old Testament sacrifices pointed to Christ.

The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship.

Every animal sacrifice in the Bible points to the sacrifice of the Jesus Christ on the cross – the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world!

Observing the Sabbath pointed to the spiritual rest we have in Christ.
Every feast points to Jesus Christ who is our Passover.

All these Old Testament truths are shadows – Christ is the reality!
All these Old Testament shadows are mysteries – Christ is the revelation!

Yet way too many people today are content having a relationship with a shadow. But think about it: you can't really have a relationship with a shadow! Can you imagine being outside with your spouse and seeing their shadow and saying, "Wow, I love your shadow. Don't go inside, I want to spend time with your shadow. I want to talk to your shadow – fellowship with your shadow – commune with your shadow – hug your shadow - love your shadow."

No way – you want the real thing, not the shadow. Christ is the real thing!
It's important to understand this – don't be satisfied with relating to the shadow of Christ when you can have a relationship with Christ Himself!
Don't choose shadow over substance!
Don't choose rules over relationship!
Don't choose law over life!
Don't choose works over grace!
Don't try to serve a shadow when you can serve the Living Lord!

Listen – some of you are afraid of your own shadow.
Or you feel like you're a shadow of your former self.
You might feel like you're living in someone else's shadow.
You might even be going through the valley of the shadow of death.
I'm here today to tell you it's time to come out of the shadows!

Stop chasing shadows and start seeking God!
Stop living in the shadows and come to the Light!
I can tell you - beyond a shadow of a doubt – that Jesus is real and He is alive
and He is able to save you, forgive you, give you a brand-new life!

A shadow can't save you – but Jesus Christ can!
A shadow can't forgive you – but Jesus Christ will!
A shadow can't love you – but Jesus Christ does!
A shadow can't give you new life – but Jesus Christ can!
A shadow can't set you free – but Jesus Christ can!
A shadow can't defeat Satan on your behalf – but Jesus Christ did!
A shadow can't disarm principalities and powers – but Jesus Christ did!
A shadow can't lead you in triumphant procession – but Jesus Christ can!
Don't settle for a shadow when you can have the real thing!