

Your Rules Won't Work

Good morning! Please turn with me in your bibles to Colossians 2, we'll be in 20-23 this morning. If you're new here, let me extend my welcome to you. My name is Mike and I'm one of the pastors here. We're currently in the middle of a series through the book of Colossians. So please turn with me there as we prepare to study God's Word together.

As you're turning there I want to say a couple things: First of all, thank you to Pastor David for preaching in my absence last week. My younger brother Sonson graduated from High School on Sunday, and we were glad to be able to attend. So thanks Pastor David for preaching the Word and reminding us not to miss the point. That the point of the law is to point us to Christ, and the point of worship is to unite us as the body to Christ.

Second, it's our seventh wedding anniversary today. I am a lucky man to be married to such an incredible wife and mother to our son.

Third, it's been a busy weekend here at Rock Prairie. I was grateful to be part of the multi-church worship service on Friday evening. It was great to see the body of Christ coming together in this community in unity and solidarity for the gospel. I think it's a shame how in the church we can often think of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ as competition rather than co-laborers, and I look forward to more times of coming together in the future.

Also, Marilyn's rummage sale was a success in raising money to send Operation Christmas Child boxes this year. Through the rummage sale, we raised over \$2,500 for Operation Christmas Child. Awesome job everyone. I know it was a ton of work, so thank you to Marilyn and everyone else who was involved in donating and working at the rummage sale.

Finally, yesterday was the car show to raise money for missions...So thank you to Rich and everyone involved in that. I love the spirit of our church to use our building and our talents and resources to impact the kingdom, and we want to continue to come up with ways to do things to be wise stewards of what the Lord has given us to reach our community and the nations for the gospel.

With that said, hopefully you've made your way to Colossians 2:20. We'll read to the end of the chapter.

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Let's pray.

Father, we come to you this morning humbly, asking that you would open up our hearts to greater love for you. That by your Spirit we would be able to rightly understand and apply this text, and that you would do a mighty work in us as a church body. Father, we admit that we are prone to wander, we are prone to desire lesser things, and our fire for you sometimes feels more like a few smoldering coals. And so we ask right now that you would meet us in this place, that you would grip us with your majesty, and reignite our passion to follow you. In Jesus' name, amen.

I know you can't tell by looking at me, but I'm not someone who spends a lot of time lifting weights in the gym. Surprising, I know. While I have no excuse for not going to the gym, part of the reason is that on the few occasions I do find myself lifting weights, I'm always intimidated by the mega bodybuilders that are always in there.

There was a gym in Iowa that I would go to on occasion, and every time I walked in, I felt like I was the only person in the entire place wearing sleeves.

All these guys (and girls) would walk around with giant protein shakes in one hand, a huge jug of water in the other, and would do these crazy exercises to work out muscles that I'm pretty sure I don't even have, and then I'd overhear them in the locker room talking about their bmi, body fat percentage, bench press numbers, and who knows what else.

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And I'd always leave discouraged, thinking "if that's what I have to do to be in shape and healthy, I have no chance." There's no way I can do all of those things, even if I was physically able, I don't have the time!

Now, there's obviously nothing wrong with getting in shape, but the problem is when you think your way is the only way to be healthy. When you think that you have the secret code that everyone needs to do to get in shape.

Physically it's one thing. But this happens spiritually all the time, doesn't it? We think our preferences, our traditions, our rules are what everyone needs to follow to get spiritually healthy.

We say "yeah believe in Jesus, but if you *really* want to get into "spiritual shape", you'll read *this* translation of scripture," or "you'll sing this kind of music on Sundays" or "you'll obey *these* rules (whatever they are) that aren't in the bible, but everyone knows you need to do this to be a good Christian."

There's a term for that. That term is "legalism."

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The definition of legalism is twofold. **First, Legalism is believing that God's love is conditional, based on our obedience.**

It's believing that there's something extra we can do that can make God love us more, and if we don't do that thing he will love us less.

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Second, it is imposing our traditions and preferences on others as an act of spiritual superiority.

Any time we take something that isn't in the Bible and elevate it to say "super spiritual people do x y and z", that's legalism.

That's exactly what was happening to the Colossians. David hinted at it last week, and now we're going to dive in to why, exactly, legalism doesn't work.

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This passage gives us three reasons. First,

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Legalism is an identity problem

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"

Paul says, "You died to the elemental spirits of the world," or "elemental forces." In Paul's day, many people lived in fear of these elemental spirits. They believed that these spirits controlled the heavenly realm and gave people access to God. Only by placating these elemental spirits or forces could people gain access to the presence of God.

The question they were asking was, "how can I live in harmony with these elemental spirits? How can I manipulate them to get access to God. Several weeks ago we talked about worldview. Well this was their worldview: How can I get the Spirits to give me access to God?

Well, along come the false teachers, and you know what they said?

"I've got just the solution for you! I know just how you can placate these elemental spirits; I know just how you can get access to God. You know what you need? Asceticism." David talked about this last week.

"If you follow these strict rules, if you abstain from different foods, if you deny your body what it needs, if you fast on these days for this amount of time, the elemental forces will be pleased with you, and you will gain access to God."

That's what Paul is dealing with here. That's the worldview that Paul is writing to. The church is hearing this, and troublingly, some people are believing it.

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Put yourself in Paul's shoes. If you heard that one of the churches you planted was starting to believe this kind of teaching, what would you say?

Think about it. Over the course of Paul's life he'll be persecuted, jailed, shipwrecked, and eventually killed with the sole purpose of preaching the message that salvation is found in faith in Christ alone.

And now one of his precious churches is believing this lie from this false teacher that says you need to do all these extra things to gain salvation. What would you say?

What Paul says is brilliant. He reminds them of their identity in Christ. He says, "You died to the elemental spirits of the world." IOW, when you were buried with Christ in his baptism and were raised with him through faith, you died to anything having any power over you. You no longer have to fear any of that. You died to it, and you're alive in Christ. So why are you living like you're alive in the world?

There are only two positions: You're either dead to the world or alive in Christ, or dead to Christ and alive to the world. That's it. If you're in this position, if this is your identity, don't live like you're over here!

The same is true for us. Legalism is an identity problem. It applies the rules of the world to those who are in Christ.

I read a really sad article this week about some of these television preachers who prey on people by saying things like "I know God wants to bless you, all you need to do is sow a faith seed to our ministry of \$253 dollars and you will be blessed."

This is sad for a number of reasons—many people have lost everything-their homes, their families, their livelihood-because they believed these lies. And to manipulate the gospel for personal financial gain is despicable, I can't imagine what some of these so called preachers are going to face in eternity.

But it's also a perfect mirror of the same kind of legalism the Colossians were facing.

Here's my problem: I'm in a tough spot in life financially and I don't know if God is going to provide. Here's their solution: You need

Jesus, *and* you need to sow a \$333 'faith seed', and God will surely provide.

That's not the gospel, folks. So just to get really practical, please know that these people are false teachers. Don't give to their ministries, don't listen to their teaching, and don't believe that you need to add anything to your salvation.

But while that's an extreme example of legalism being an identity problem, it's far from the only one. Any time we think that God's favor rests on how well we're fulfilling our own ideas of what a good Christian does, we're struggling with legalism.

To be honest, this is something that I've struggled with my whole life.

Some people say that legalism is thinking that our good works will save us. That we need to earn our salvation with what we do. But it's so much deeper than that.

I don't struggle to believe that God saved me by his grace alone, but time and time again I've tried to earn his favor, earn his ongoing love, make him happy with me.

I think that's probably true for many of us. We have a tendency to think of God like a cosmic Father we can never please. But that's not who our God is. That's not the gospel.

Legalism is an identity problem because we live like our identity is in our own person and work when the truth is our identity is found in the person and work of Christ.

Legalism doesn't work because it mistakes who we are in Christ. You've died. Live like it!

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Second, Legalism doesn't work because

Legalism is based on man's rules, not God's

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(Submitting to regulations) ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)— according to human precepts and teachings?

Paul goes into more detail about the rules of the ascetics. He kind of sums up their teaching, saying “these people say don’t handle something, don’t taste it, and don’t even touch it!”

And then he goes on to say, “referring to things that all perish as they are used according to human precepts and teachings.”

What Paul is essentially saying here is that the rules are only concerned with perishable things, and they’re the result of human invention. They’re man’s rules, not God’s.

Jesus said something similar to the Pharisees in Mark 7, which is probably what Paul’s referring to. He said, and I like how the NIV words it,

‘They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions. “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!”

The Colossian false teachers are promoting the same thing that the Pharisees were: Outward holiness based on an extra set of rules.

They were promoting outward holiness based on manmade rules, rather than inward holiness based on God’s rules.

This is why it’s so important for you to know the Word of God. Because if you don’t, you’ll mistake things that make you look holy on the outside, with things that actually make you holy on the inside.

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it many more times, the only preaching that has any authority is preaching based on the Word of God.

It would be really easy for me to get up here and say, “alright Rock Prairie, here’s what we’re going to do. Everyone in this church needs to wake up at 5 am and read their bible for an hour, from 5-6 am. And on Wednesdays, we’re going to fast. If we do those things, read our bibles for an hour at 5 am and fast every Wednesday, we’ll be in a good place.”

Now, are either of those things bad? No, we’re called to read, study and memorize God’s Word, and fasting is an important Spiritual discipline. So what’s wrong with what I just said?

I just created manmade rules around good things of God. And if I did that, it would immediately put everyone in this church into one of three categories:

1. Some of the most disciplined among us would do that every week without fail, and become puffed up with pride at how well they’re keeping the rules.
2. Others would try, and fail, and feel condemned for not living up to the law that they think they’re supposed to live up to.
3. And the rest would say, “forget you, Pastor Mike, I’m not following anything you say, and you can forget all of this God stuff too” confusing extra biblical laws with the character of God.

All three of these responses couldn’t be further from the gospel. And worse, what I’m essentially saying when I make those rules is that God didn’t go far enough, and he needed my help in giving commands.

Yet I fear that we too often relate to God like this—either puffed up with pride, discouraged by our failure, or disregarding his actual commands because we’re fed up with the extra-biblical expectations we’ve either placed on ourselves or had placed on us by others.

Man made rules don’t work. God calls us to live up to his biblical standard, yes. But the way we get there is by the holy spirit working in our hearts and changing us from the inside, not by adhering to man made rules that we think will make us look godly on the outside. All that does is bring us further from the gospel.

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Finally, legalism doesn't work because

Legalism can't stop the flesh

²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Paul is saying here what we just said, "Man made rules can look wise, it can look Godly, it can look like you really love the Lord if you submit to all these extra biblical rules, but the truth is that they have no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."

Keep a finger in Colossians and turn with me all the way back to Genesis chapter 3.

Maybe at this point you're thinking, "I can see that the Bible clearly says not to add manmade rules to scripture, but the title of your sermon is "Your Rules Won't Work, and I'm still not convinced. Why not? What's wrong with adding rules and regulations if it helps me in my walk with Christ?"

There's a very specific reason why it won't work. It's because this is the oldest trick in the enemy's book. This is exactly what happened in the Garden of Eden. Look at Genesis 3 verse 1:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.
He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

Stop right there. Read carefully. Did God say that? What was God's commandment to Adam and Eve? That there was *one* tree that they couldn't eat from. But Satan twists it, asking, "Did God say you can't eat from *any* tree?"

He's attacking God's character. He's saying, "Boy that God of yours must not love you if he put you in the garden and didn't let you eat anything."

"What kind of God would do that? What kind of God would deny you pleasure and demand you obey him?"

That's what legalism says about God.

And look at Eve's response.

² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, (True so far)

³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, (Also true)

neither shall you touch it, lest you die. (Wait right there).

Did God say they couldn't touch the tree? No. He said they couldn't eat of it. Yet here's Eve, adding her own manmade rule to the commandment of God. And Satan exploits it, and look what happens in verse 6.

⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

So back to Colossians, why don't man made rules work? Because they can't stop the indulgence of the flesh.

Again, to be open with you guys, this is something I've always struggled with.

"You didn't read your Bible today? God must not be happy with you."

"You only read it for 15 minutes? Yikes"

"You read for 30 minutes but you didn't spend any time in prayer? Uh oh."

"You read for 30 minutes and spent time in prayer but didn't pray with your wife?"

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"You read for 30 minutes, spent time in prayer, and prayed with your wife but you haven't fasted in 6 months?"

"You read for 30 minutes, prayed, led family devotions, and fasted? How much money are you giving to missionaries? How many people did you counsel today? How many shut ins did you visit?"

And so on and so forth until the enemy can get me to a place where I'm exhausted and questioning God's goodness like Eve in the garden. And when that happens, I start to think, "You know what, what God expects of me is totally unfair. I think that fruit is looking pretty good. I think I'm going to take and eat."

Legalism has no power to stop the indulgence of the flesh. If anything, it eventually causes it.

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Guess what, Rock Prairie? Our God's yoke is easy and his burden is light, amen? And the things he does call you to do, while sometimes difficult, are for your own benefit. Stop assuming God's commandments mean he is unwilling to bless us, either because they're too strict or not strict enough in your opinion.

Your rules can't change your heart. The only thing that *can* is the gospel, lived out every day, governing every decision you make.

When you're living out the gospel, his commands aren't burdens anymore, they're blessings.

When you're living out the gospel, you won't submit to manmade rules.

When you're living out the gospel, you're satisfied to be called his son, his daughter, and to seek what he's calling you to do.

When you're living out the gospel, you're not going to see God as a disappointed Father who you can never please. You'll see him as a Father who loved you so much to send his Son to die so that he could adopt you into his family, share in his inheritance, and bless you with every spiritual blessing.

Rock Prairie, your rules won't work. But thankfully they don't have to. Our God has redeemed us by the blood of the lamb, and he has given us everything we need for life and Godliness.

Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for the gospel. Thank you that we don't have to make up rules to please you, but that we can know that in Christ you are pleased with us. You call us sons and daughters. What a mind-blowing truth. We praise you for that this morning. You didn't have to save anyone, but by your grace you made a way for all who believe in your Son to be saved. We confess the ways we try to do it on our own, we confess that at the root, we can all tend toward legalism in one way or another. Forgive us, Father, and help us cling to the freedom we have in the gospel. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

First Service

We have a special announcement this morning. Marilyn, would you come down to the front?

Marilyn has no idea what's going on here. A few months ago, some people from our church found out about the Golden Hoosier award, and nominated Marilyn. On Friday, in the middle of the rummage sale, we received this email.

*Dear Marilyn,
It is our honor to inform you that you have been nominated and selected to receive the 2019 Indiana Golden Hoosier Award.*

This award is the highest honor bestowed upon a senior citizen by the State of Indiana. The Golden Hoosier Award is a collaboration between the office of the Lt. Governor, Suzanne Crouch, and the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration's Division of Aging to acknowledge seniors for their lifetime of service. It is not just one act of community service, but rather a lifetime of service and commitment to serving others, that we honor with this award.

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We invite you and up to 3 guests to the Awards Ceremony on Monday, June 24, 2019 at the Eugene and Marilyn Glick Indiana History Center in downtown Indianapolis, at 2:00 p.m. (ET).

Soon, you will receive an information packet in the mail with details about this special event. Additionally, one of the Lt. Governor's staff will be calling you to discuss details, including RSVP information, directions, parking and to answer any questions you may have. Congratulations! We look forward to seeing you soon.

Congratulations Marilyn. We're so proud of you. What an incredible honor.

Make sure you congratulate Marilyn. I'm sure she'll be willing to take a selfie or sign an autograph if you ask nicely.

Quickly, as we close our summer activities start this Tuesday with lunch and games for the kids here at the church starting at 11:30.

As always, if you'd like to pray with someone, there will be people up front who would love to pray with you about anything that is going on.

It's been a privilege to worship our great God together this morning. I love you Rock Prairie. You're dismissed.