

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

The “Christ Plus Legalism” Compromise

Colossians 2:16–23

Let’s take our Bibles together and turn to the book of Colossians. Last time in this book, Paul went on an extended oration about how awesome Christ Jesus is in Colossians 2:9–15. And that was strategic. Paul has warned us already about “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition... and not according to Christ” (2:8). So Paul spoke in grandiose ways about the magnificence of Christ Jesus and what he’s done for us.¹

Now, in today’s passage, Colossians 2:16–23, Paul is going to expound a little more on what exactly the Colossians were dealing with that he labeled “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition... and not according to Christ.” Paul calls this form of deceit circulating in the Colossian church “judgmental.” He calls it “puffed up.” He calls it “fleshly.” And he calls it “self-made religion.”²

And I hope to extract from this passage a few application principles for us to protect against what I’m calling a “Christ plus Legalism.”³

I want to talk this morning about three things:

- 1) The **emptiness** of “Christ plus legalism” (2:16–17)
- 2) The **conceitedness** of “Christ plus legalism” (2:18–19)
- 3) The **ineffectiveness** of “Christ plus legalism” (2:20–23)⁴

That is your outline for today.⁵

Years ago, the Greek writer and moralist Aesop wrote a fable about a dog. And this particular dog had a bone in his mouth. And that dog was happy, as only a dog with a bone can be. But as that dog walked by a creek, he noticed another dog in the water. And that other dog had another bone. And the envy and the avarice of that dog got the best of him. So he did what only a dog could do in that situation.

¹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 216–7: “In v. 8, Paul brings his central concern in writing to the Colossians to clear expression: ‘See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.’ In vv. 9–15, he elaborates ‘on Christ,’ setting forth the alternative to the false teaching: the fullness of spiritual experience to be found ‘in Christ,’ in whom all of God’s fullness dwells. Now, in vv. 16–23, he turns to the false teaching itself, developing each of the points he made briefly in v. 8.”

² Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 217: “This paragraph gives us the only really specific explicit information about the false teaching in Colossae. Unfortunately, while explicit, the information Paul provides is not always clear. Interpreters differ significantly on the interpretation of some of the things that Paul says about the teachers and thereby reach quite different conclusions about the overall shape of the teaching”

³ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 116: “Legalism is the religion of human achievement. It argues that spirituality is based on Christ plus human works. It makes conformity to man-made rules the measure of spirituality. Believers, however, are complete in Christ, who has provided complete salvation, forgiveness, and victory.”

⁴ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 180: “Believers should not be judged concerning dietary customs and calendrical practices dictated by human tradition (vv. 16–17); (2) they should not be disqualified by those who insist on various types of visionary experiences (vv. 18–19); and (3) they should not submit to ascetic practices as dictated by human tradition (vv. 20–23).”

⁵ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 115–6: “Today, with advanced media capability, there is an onslaught of false teaching of unprecedented proportions. On every side, the sufficiency of Jesus Christ is either openly or implicitly denied. False philosophy has infiltrated the church in the guise of psychology, which is all too often viewed as a necessary supplement to God’s Word. Many lean toward mysticism, claiming to receive visions and extrabiblical revelations. Others are legalists, equating holiness with observing a list of cultural taboos. Still others urge the practice of asceticism, arguing that poverty or physical deprivation is the path to godliness. Pastors, elders, and other church leaders, who are responsible to warn the church against false teaching, are often the very ones proclaiming those errors.”

He dropped the bone in his mouth to snap for the bone in the mouth of the other dog. And as he did that, he dropped his own bone into the water never to be retrieved. So instead of having two bones, and instead of having one bone, he now had none.⁶ **Y'all heard that before?**

Now, imagine with me a Christian man (or woman) two thousand years ago in Colossae who is in Christ Jesus. And this Christian is happy. His sins are forgiven. He has everything he needs in Christ. But along comes a wicked and self-promoting “expert” in the Scriptures who says, “Christ is great. I believe in Christ too. But you are missing something. You need to add something else to your Christian faith. You need to upgrade to a better version of Christianity.” And sure enough that person is tricked into thinking that he (or she) is deficient in some way spiritually. And in chasing some other thing, some other additive to Christ, they lose sight of what they already have in Christ.

That’s the situation that Paul is addressing in this letter to the Colossians. That’s the hucksterism that was going on in Colossae that makes Paul’s blood boil. And yet Paul, very calmly and astutely, addresses these errors and warns the Colossians to watch out.⁷

Watch out for...

- 1) The **emptiness** of “Christ plus legalism” (2:16–17)
- 2) The **conceitedness** of “Christ plus legalism” (2:18–19)
- 3) The **ineffectiveness** of “Christ plus legalism” (2:20–23)⁸

Let’s deal with those in turn. First...

- 1) The **emptiness** of “Christ plus legalism” (2:16–17)

Here’s what Paul says in verse 16:

¹⁶ Therefore⁹ let no one¹⁰ pass judgment¹¹ on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.¹²

Last week we talked about circumcision and the presence of certain people in Colossae who were advocating for literal circumcision among the Gentile converts. That wasn’t the only thing that these false

⁶ Library of Congress. “The Dog & His Reflection.” *The Aesop for Children*. Accessed June 13, 2026.

<https://read.gov/aesop/026.html>. I’m indebted to Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 85 for the connection of this fable with the issues of the Colossian church.

⁷ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 87: “I have seen in my own life and the lives of those I have counseled that there is a tendency to move away from where we had our beginning: the Cross. All of our theology, all of our preaching, all of our singing hymns together, the disciplines of life experienced in family and relationships are meant to keep us right at the foot of the Cross—simply drinking long and deep from the Fountainhead, Jesus Christ.”

⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 242: “The false teachers were both imposing rules on others that they had no right to impose (vv. 16 and 18) and, more seriously, elevating their rules and practices and giving spiritual beings so much credit that they were, in effect, losing contact with Christ, the only source of spiritual power and growth (v. 19). It is for this reason that the ‘regulations’ of the false teachers could not accomplish the ‘subduing’ of the sinful nature that they were promising.”

⁹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 218: “The *therefore* at the beginning of v. 16 connects the theology about ‘fullness in Christ’ in vv. 10–15 with Paul’s exhortation to resist the false teachers in this verse and following. Because it is in Christ that you have spiritual fullness, Paul is saying, do not let anyone impose upon you a program of spiritual development that does not have Christ at its heart.”

¹⁰ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 171: “Τίς could be unspecific, as in 2:8. But with the present imperative here and the following more detailed indications of the issues over which the ‘someone’ was likely to level criticism (2:16, 18), the readers were probably being told ‘you know who.’ That is to say, reports to Paul from Colossae had given a clear enough idea of where the (likely) trouble was coming from.”

¹¹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 218–9: “*Judge*, like its Greek equivalent (*krinō*), can have a neutral —‘he judged that it was time to go’—or negative connotation—‘she judged him for his false conduct.’ The word here is clearly negative, paralleled by being ‘taken captive’ in v. 8 and being ‘disqualified’ in v. 18... This passage implies that some Christians were taking upon themselves the role of judge that only God can exercise.”

¹² Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 185: “‘Festival’ (ἑορτή), ‘new moon’ (νεομηνία), and ‘sabbaths’ (σαββάτων) point clearly to a Jewish context. These three terms appear together in a number of OT passages (e.g., 1 Chr 23:31; 2 Chr 2:4; 31:3; Ezek 45:17; cf. 2 Kgs 4:23; Neh 10:33; Isa 66:23; Ezek 46:1; Amos 8:5).”

teachers were advocating for.¹³ They were also advocating for food and drink laws. They were also advocating for festivals and new moon observance. They were also advocating for Sabbath observance.

And to all this, Paul says “let no one pass judgment on you.” In other words, don’t let anyone look down on you or despise you or impose on you a form of legalism that is not necessary for your Christian faith.¹⁴

In the OT, there are a number of food laws that the Israelites were given. And these laws were good. They meaningfully differentiated the Israelites as a people. There were laws concerning what kinds of food could be eaten (clean vs. unclean). There were laws concerning how an animal would be killed. There were laws concerning how the food was to be prepared.

But Jesus made clear that those food laws were fulfilled in Christ. According to **Mark 7:19**, Jesus declared all foods clean. This was reiterated in the book of **Acts** with Peter when a sheet full of clean and unclean animals was brought down from the sky and God said, “**Arise, Peter, kill and eat!**” (see **Acts 10:9–16**; see also **Acts 15:28–29**). The dietary laws of the Old Covenant are no longer in force. NT Christians are under the New Covenant now. Paul says clearly in **1 Corinthians 8:8**, “Food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”

Also in the OT, there were festivals that were observed by the Israelites—Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles (**Exod 12:1–28**; **Lev 23:4–8, 15–21, 33–43**; **Deut 16:1–16**; **Exod 34:22–23**; **Neh 8:13–18**). Sacrifices were offered on the new moon or the first day of the month (**Num 28:11–14**). And the temptation for the NT Christian in Colossae, especially when they came in contact with Jewish influencers, was to abide those OT regulations. What’s wrong with that? What harm can that cause?

Well, there’s no harm in that, just like there’s no harm in circumcision (no spiritual harm), unless there is the passing of judgment. “**Are you observing Passover? You should be. Are you celebrating the new moon and offering sacrifices? Oh, you aren’t! Why not? Don’t you know the OT requires that of you. You are the NT people of God, so you’ve got to obey the OT!**” Something like that was going on in Colossae. And the false piety of it was confusing the Colossians. And Paul says, “**let no one pass judgment on you based on this stuff.**”¹⁵

I think the Sabbath statement is especially tricky here. Are Christians required to observe the Sabbath? It’s in the Ten Commandments! The Ten Commandments are so important to us. They are the framework for a modern civilization!

Yes, but here’s the thing. Christ is the fulfillment of the OT Sabbath. The other nine commandments are applicable, and I would even say morally binding on a Christian. But we are not required to rest for worship on Saturdays. And we are not even mandated to rest and worship every Sunday, despite what our Sabbatarian friends have concluded about this passage.¹⁶

13 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 116: “The ‘something more’ that the false teachers offered was a syncretism of pagan philosophy, Jewish legalism, mysticism, and asceticism.”

14 CHRYSOSTOM: “Do you see how he depreciates what the Colossians think important? If you have obtained such things [i.e., grace and wisdom through Christ], Paul asks, why make yourself accountable for these petty matters? And he makes light of them.... Don’t put up with those who judge you in these trivial considerations.” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ACCS, 38.

15 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 172: “At the root of this concern were the important rules regarding clean and unclean food in Lev. 11:1–23 and Deut. 14:3–21. These had been given a much heightened significance by the Maccabean crisis, where resistance on this issue was one of the make-or-break points. ‘Many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die’ (1 Macc. 1:62–63). Thereafter observance of the food laws was counted a fundamental mark of loyalty to nation and religion, as we may see in popular Jewish tales of the time, in which the heroes or heroines are presented as models of piety acknowledged by God precisely in terms of their refusal to eat the food of Gentiles (Dan. 1:3–16; 10:3; Tob. 1:10–12; Jdt. 12:2, 19; Add. Est. 14:17; *Joseph and Asenath* 7:1; 8:5).”

16 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 118–9: “Contrary to the claims of some today, Christians are not required to worship on the Sabbath day. It, like the other Old Covenant holy days Paul mentions, is not binding under the New Covenant. There is convincing evidence for that in Scripture. First, the Sabbath was the sign to Israel of the Old Covenant (Ex. 31:16–17; Neh. 9:14; Ezek. 20:12). Because we are now under the New Covenant (Heb. 8), we are no longer required to keep the sign of the Old Covenant. Second, the

Is it good for us to rest once a week? Yes. Is there an abiding principle in the concept of six days man works, and on the seventh, he rests? Yes. Is that part of our New Covenant framework? Not really. It's more like circumcision than it is like the seventh commandment: "You shall not commit adultery!" (Exod 20:14).

Look, I can give you lots of NT passages that speak against adultery and fornication for the NT Christian (Matt 5:27–32; 19:3–9; Mark 10:11–12; Rom 13:9; 1 Cor 6:9–20; Eph 5:3–5; Heb 13:4). But there are no NT statements that speak of the Christian's duty to observe the Sabbath (Mark 2:27–28; Matt 12:1–12; Luke 13:10–17; John 5:1–18; Col 2:16–17; Rom 14:5–6; Heb 4:1–11). And that's because Christ himself is the fulfillment of Sabbath. He is our Sabbath rest!

Which leads to **verse 17**. Here's the crux of the issue with dietary laws, dates, and drink.

¹⁷ *These are a shadow of the things to come,*¹⁷ but the substance [literally: the "body"]¹⁸ belongs to Christ.¹⁹

Hebrews 10:1 says as follows, "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near."

The Old Covenant foreshadows the New Covenant.²⁰ And the New Covenant surpasses the Old Covenant. Why would we go back to the old? Christ is the true and better Sabbath. Christ is the true and better sacrifice. Christ is the true and better Passover (1 Cor 5:7). Christ is the true and better food from above. He is manna from heaven. He is the bread of life that came down from above (see John 6:22–71).

When we take communion, we remember Christ. We have metaphorically eaten from his flesh and drunk from his blood (John 6:35, 47–58; Matt 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Cor 11:23–26). And he makes us clean in a way that clean and unclean laws can't ultimately make us clean.

And it's hard to know exactly what the Colossian church was dealing with. But there must have been a group of people going around trying to convince the Colossian church to adopt OT rituals in keeping with the Old Covenant.²¹ And instead of seeing the New Covenant in Christ as superior to the Old Covenant... or instead

New Testament nowhere commands Christians to observe the Sabbath. Third, in our only glimpse of an early church worship service in the New Testament, we find the church meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). Fourth, we find no hint in the Old Testament that God expected the Gentile nations to observe the Sabbath, nor are they ever condemned for failing to do so. That is certainly strange if He expected all peoples to observe the Sabbath. Fifth, there is no evidence of anyone's keeping the Sabbath before the time of Moses, nor are there any commands to keep the Sabbath before the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. Sixth, the Jerusalem Council did not impose Sabbath keeping on the Gentile believers (Acts 15). Seventh, Paul warned the Gentiles about many different sins in his epistles, but never about breaking the Sabbath. Eighth, Paul rebuked the Galatians for thinking God expected them to observe special days (including the Sabbath) (Gal. 4:10–11). Ninth, Paul taught that keeping the Sabbath was a matter of Christian liberty (Rom. 14:5). Tenth, the early church Fathers, from Ignatius to Augustine, taught that the Old Testament Sabbath had been abolished and that the first day of the week (Sunday) was the day when Christians should meet for worship. That disproves the claim of some that Sunday worship was not instituted until the fourth century."

17 PHILIPP MELANCHTHON: "This is how I understand the law to be a *shadow of things to come*. The law as a whole signifies the promised righteousness through Christ... The law is a *shadow of things to come*. That is, the law as a whole was given, not that it should justify, but that it should signify the justification through Christ which had been promised. The ceremonies were not made for the purpose of justifying, but of bringing the promised justification to mind." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 200.

18 JOHN CALVIN: "*The body*, he says, *is of Christ*, that is, 'in Christ.' For the substance of those things that the ceremonies once prefigured is now presented before our eyes in Christ, since he contains in himself all the future things that they pointed to. Therefore, whoever revives the use of [these] ceremonies either hides Christ's revelation or robs Christ of his power, as if to make him useless." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 200.

19 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 82–3: "The dietary rules sensitized God's people to purity, the great feasts taught various aspects of Christ's work, and the Sabbath displayed something of the rest into which he leads his people. But they were just 'a shadow.' The real thing has come in Christ (cf. Luke 24:27)."

20 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 119: "A shadow has no reality; the reality is what makes the shadow. Jesus Christ is the reality to which the shadows pointed."

21 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 173: "Those who insist on a more restricted lifestyle for themselves do so because they think it an essential expression of their belief and identity as believers. They observe because they think God requires such observance. That conviction will inevitably result in them criticizing or even condemning those who claim the same fundamental faith loyalty but who practice a less restricted lifestyle."

of seeing the New Covenant as superseding the Old Covenant, they saw the New Covenant as incomplete and needing to be enhanced by the Old Covenant. And to that, Paul says, **“no bueno!”**

To use a word picture from Jesus, it's like new wine in old wineskins. That doesn't work.

But it's not just a form of OT law-abiding legalism that they were advocating. In the next section, Paul moves on to another expression of legalism. And this is more of a pseudo-spiritual mysticism mixed with asceticism that had crept into the church. And Paul doesn't just address the error of these false teachers and their theology; he also addresses their pride.

In the first section of this passage, we see the emptiness of Christ plus legalism. In verses 18 and 19, Paul exposes...

2) The **conceitedness** of “Christ plus legalism” (2:18–19)

Look at **verse 18** with me.

¹⁸ *Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism*

By the way, there are two imperatival commands in this passage. In **verse 16**, Paul says, “let no one pass judgment on you.” And in **verse 18**, “let no one disqualify you.”

And here's what's interesting grammatically. Not only are these negative prohibitions—“thou shalt not” if you will—they are also indirect commands. So Paul doesn't say, **“Don't do this.”** He says, **“Don't let other people do this to you.”** That's remarkable.

As a Christian you are morally responsible not only to *not do things*, but also to *not let other people do things to you*. If someone is forcing a “Christ plus legalism” on you, you have a moral responsibility to say, “No!” “I will not compromise Christ or the sufficiency of Christ by listening to you.”

That's the impact of what Paul is saying here. Don't let people judge you on the basis of legalism.²² And don't let people disqualify you on the basis of legalism. Stand up for yourself.

Paul says,

¹⁸ *Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up²³ without reason by his sensuous mind,²⁴*

Literally, “the mind of his flesh.” You might translate this as follows: “puffed up without reason by his carnal mind.” What Paul is saying here is that there's a kind of spirituality, there's a kind of legalism, that looks righteous and moral and holy... but it's actually carnal.

²² Despite what some Christians think, there are appropriate times to judge one another as Christians. When Jesus gave the command to “Judge not, lest you be judged” (Matt 7:1), he was not prohibiting judgy-ness in the Christian life, but hypocrisy. This is made clear in the following verses, “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.”³ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye” (Matthew 7:2–5). See Donny Mathis, “‘Judge Not’ Isn't the Ultimate Mic Drop,” *The Gospel Coalition*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/judge-not-ultimate-mic-drop/>. Also see “What Matthew 7:1–5 (Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged) Means,” *BibleProject*, October 7, 2024, <https://bibleproject.com/articles/what-matthew-7-1-5-judge-not-lest-ye-be-judged-means/>.

With that in mind, we do need to keep the instructions of James 4:11–12 in mind, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”

²³ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 224: “‘Puff up’ translates a verb that occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in 1 Corinthians (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4). Its basic meaning, ‘blow up, inflate’ (as one might blow up a bellows), suits it beautifully to express the idea of arrogance. The arrogance of the false teachers expressed itself in their arrogating to themselves the right to stand in judgment over others.”

²⁴ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 229: “To summarize this difficult verse, then, we find Paul to be asserting four things about the false teachers: (1) they put a great deal of stock in ascetic practices, perhaps to induce visions; (2) they are so concerned with calling on angels as a means of protection from evil forces that they are virtually worshipping them; (3) they focus on visions they have experienced, perhaps citing the content of those visions in their teaching; and (4) they display, perhaps because of their boasting about visions, an arrogance that reveals a worldly orientation.”

Those of you who are experienced Christians are not surprised about this. There is a kind of legalism and morality that is actually more sinful than helpful. It's prideful. And it's fleshly. It's *Christ-defying* discipline, not *Christ-obeying* discipline. It focuses more on moral *attainment* than Christ's *atonement*.

Now let me define some terms here and see if we can make sense of what was circulating in Colossae. First of all asceticism in **verse 18**. What is that? Well, here's the **definition** of an "ascetic" in English. An ascetic is one who practices strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline. It's someone who is austere in appearance, manner, or attitude.²⁵

The Greek word here translated "asceticism" is **ταπεινοφροσύνη** (*ta-pe-i-no-phro-sy-nē*).²⁶ Etymologically it means "low-minded" or "humble-minded." And it's one of those Greek words that can be used positively or negatively in the Scriptures. That's why context is so important to understanding meaning in the text. You *can't* just extrapolate meaning from a word in isolation.²⁷

For example, in **Philippians 2:3**, Paul writes, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility [**ταπεινοφροσύνη**] count others more significant than yourselves." That's a positive use of this word. Paul even uses this word positively later in **Colossians 3:12**. He says, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility [**ταπεινοφροσύνη**], meekness, and patience."

But in **Colossians 2:18** the usage is obviously negative. This is a "false humility" that the false teachers are exhibiting and insisting on, not godly humility.²⁸

The ESV translates this word "asceticism." The NIV translates it "false humility." The NASB95 translates it "self-abasement." I think "asceticism" is the right nuance for this word. What these false teachers were advocating for was some kind of physical self-denial and verbal self-denigration that was really just masking their self-destructive pride.²⁹

I had a conversation once with a young man while traveling from Longview, Texas to Ouachita, Arkansas, where this individual tried to convince me that he was the humblest person that I had ever met. And the extent to which he went on and on about his profound humility was almost convincing. Something like that was happening with these false teachers in Colossae.

But their pride and their self-denial was worse than that, because it was also Christ-denying. Look at **verse 19**.

¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head,³⁰

Capital-H "Head!" They are puffed up with pride and not holding fast to Christ.

25 Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1996), s.v. "ascetic," accessed via Logos Bible Software.

26 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 188: "'Self-humiliation' (**ταπεινοφροσύνη**) retains the ambiguity of the use of the Greek term in this context. In the NT, this term is almost always used in reference to the positive virtue of 'humility' (Acts 20:19; Eph 4:2; Phil 2:3; Col 3:12; 1 Pet 5:5), and this use appears later in this letter (Col 3:12). Here, however, Paul is clearly not endorsing the practices of the false teachers. This can therefore be labeled generally as 'wrongly directed' humility or even 'false humility.'"

27 Another word that is used positively and then negatively is the Greek **μεριμνάω** (*merimnaō*). In the same letter, Paul talks complementarily about Timothy who is "anxious" (**μεριμνάω**) for the church (Phil 2:20). But then he also tells the church to "not be anxious [**μεριμνάω**] about anything" (Phil 4:6). Obviously this word is being used to convey two different things in the same writing—one positive and one negative.

28 AUGUSTINE: "I wish to know what this humility is and this show of wisdom which he says is in their superstition, which comes from the doctrines of men... I think he is speaking of a pretended and useless abstinence such as heretics usually strive after ... because they put on the appearance of a holy work, but, as they do not practice it in the fold of truth, they gain neither honor nor the reward of glory." Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ACCS, 43.

29 JOHN DAVENANT: "As to the humility, then, or lowliness of mind, we must understand that it was not a true and laudable but a preposterous and superstitious humility, forced on the minds of Christians by those seducers." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 201.

30 MARTIN LUTHER: "They do not hold fast to the Head, who is Christ. For Christ and the doctrines of men cannot possibly agree. One must cancel the other. If the conscience finds comfort in Christ, the comfort derived from works and doctrines must fall; if it finds comfort in works, then Christ must fall. The heart cannot build upon a dual foundation. One of them must be abandoned." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 202.

¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth³¹ that is from God.³²

Their *self-denial* was really a form of *self-inflation*. And if that wasn't bad enough, it was also steering people away from the sufficiency of Christ. **How can you grow spiritually as the body if you are disconnected from the head? Without the head, the body is dead.**

Paul is probably having some fun here with these ascetics. They want to impose food laws and restrict the diets of the believers. Paul says, **“Forget about food. It is Christ who nourishes the body! You can eat the best food. You can purge your diet from anything ‘unclean’ and still be an emaciated, starving Christian. Why? Because Christ nourishes you. He gives the growth that is from God!”**

Now, let me deal with a couple things here before we move on to the third section of this passage. First of all, there's a curious statement here that deserves comment. Look again at **verse 18**.

¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels,

You might say, **“Worship of angels? Who would ever be duped into doing that?”**³³ You'd be surprised!³⁴ You'd be surprised what people can be duped into worshipping... or let me give you another word... venerating.³⁵

In Paul's day, there were people who were actually advocating for the worship (or veneration) of angels.³⁶ We see the same kind of error in the book of **Hebrews**. That's why the author of **Hebrews** went on an extended “Christ is greater than the angels” discussion at the beginning of his book (see **Heb 1:5–14**)!³⁷ He says that angels are nothing more than ministering spirits sent out to serve those who inherit salvation. Don't put them on par with Christ!

But probably the false teachers in Colossae were saying something like this: **“God is too lofty and too transcendent to worship. He's too aloof. That's why we worship and serve angels. Let's fixate on them.”**

31 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 232: “The ‘growth’ Paul has in view here is probably the growth in maturity of the existing ‘members’ of the body rather than the growth of the body by the addition of new members. For it is the matter of how individual believers find spiritual ‘fullness’ that is the precipitating issue in the letter.”

32 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 192–3: “The ‘growth’ of the body of Christ involves the spiritual growth of the individual members (3:5–8), the growth of the unity among these various members (3:9–14), and the outreach to those outside the body (4:5–6). Paul's emphasis on this growth is polemical in intent with each of these areas. The false teachers who focus on themselves instead of Christ fail to bring about spiritual growth in their followers. Their focus on individual visionary experiences destroys the community of God's people. Their obsession with their own superior knowledge and with their own exclusivist practices prevents them from bringing the gospel to the outsiders. For Paul, members of the body of Christ do not need to look beyond the gospel of Christ to find ultimate fullness and fulfillment.”

33 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 227: “A key concern of Colossians has been to accentuate the superiority of Christ over spiritual beings (1:16, 20; 2:10, 15). Such a concern to minimize the significance of the angels would make very good sense if, indeed, the false teachers were worshipping them.”

34 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 120: “The worship of angels was a heresy that was to plague the Phrygian region (where Colossae was located) for centuries. Commentator William Hendriksen notes that in A.D. 363 a church synod was held in Colossae's sister city of Laodicea. It declared, ‘It is not right for Christians to abandon the church of God and go away to invoke angels’ ... The early Church Father Theodoret, commenting on Colossians 2:18, wrote, ‘The disease which St. Paul denounces, continued for a long time in Phrygia and Pisidia.’ ... The archangel Michael was worshiped in Asia Minor as late as A.D. 739. He was also given credit for miraculous cures.”

35 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 183–4 sees this differently. He thinks the Colossians are being swayed to worship “with angels” in a particularly way. He still views this teaching as error, but a different kind of error. “When we add the echo of Josh. 19:49, 51 in Col. 1:12, the inference becomes strong that there was a prominent strand among the Colossian Jews who thought of heaven either (or both) as a promised land into which they should aspire even now to enter, or particularly as the temple of God into which they could now enter by means of appropriate spiritual disciplines in order to share the worship of the angels in heaven.”

36 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 189: “Angel veneration has been shown to have existed in Phrygian Judaism. Few would argue against a syncretism in the Judaism of first-century Asia Minor, and it is also possible that the Jewish angelology was influenced by the Hellenistic demonology.”

37 For more on this passage, see Tony Caffey, “Hebrews 1:5–14: Angels Inferior to Christ,” accessed June 14, 2026, <https://www.messiahbible.org/hebrews-1-5-14-angels-inferior-to-christ>

I read this last week about a famous movie that came out thirty years ago called “Michael.” Maybe some of y’all remember this. It was a movie about an angel. And John Travolta played the titular role of this angel who went around and made people fall in love like Cupid. That movie was, even by Hollywood standards, a profoundly stupid movie. What can I say... it was the 90s.

And when asked about that movie, the screenwriter **Nora Ephron** said the following: “What people can’t stand is, everyone wants to believe God notices you, that He notices the details.... The horrible truth is that He probably doesn’t notice. He’s got more important things to do. But angels do notice. You know, they make the tow truck come when you have a flat tire.”³⁸ **As if angels are fixing flat tires while God is too busy to notice.**

The problem with that line of reasoning is two-fold. First of all, when angels show up in the Bible they are more often than not killing people not changing tires or making humans fall in love. If you remember, John was tempted twice in the book of **Revelation** to worship an angel because he was so gobsmacked by the majesty of what the angel was showing him (**Rev 19:10; 22:8–9**). But the angel rebuked John twice and said, **“You must not do that. I’m a servant of God just like you. Worship God and God alone.”**

The second problem with that quote by Nora Ephron is that the great mediator between God and man is not an angel. No angel died for the sins of God’s people. Christ is our mediator. He notices all the details on earth. He’s aware of all of our sins. And he intercedes on our behalf before the Father.

So whatever these legalists or ascetics in Colossae were advocating for, Paul says, **“Don’t be persuaded by that. Don’t let them take your eyes off Christ! Don’t let them disqualify you!”**

In our day, we don’t have a lot of people advocating for the worship or the veneration of angels. But we do have people advocating for the veneration of saints. And we do have people advocating for the veneration of Mary as co-redemptrix or co-mediatrix. And I would say—not unlike what Paul is saying here—don’t let anyone disqualify you by taking your eyes off of Christ and putting them on someone else... even if that someone else is yourself.

And look again at **verse 18**, because there’s another curious statement that I want to deal with.

¹⁸ *Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions,*³⁹

What are these visions? I don’t know. And Paul doesn’t specify. **But I know people who go into churches all the time in our day saying, “I have a vision from God for you.” And I’ll just tell you, that’s the fastest way to be escorted out of this church.**

“Pastor Tony, I have a vision from God that you need to hear.”

“Oh, okay! Why don’t you go bother some other church with your vision.”⁴⁰

In Martin Luther’s day, he had to deal with a group of mystics and visionaries led by the radical Anabaptist Thomas Müntzer. Müntzer was all about extra-biblical revelation and experiences. And he would run around crying “The Spirit, The Spirit.” But Luther said of him, “I will not follow where [his] spirit leads.” When Müntzer came to visit Luther and tried to convince him about these visions, he said, “I slap your spirit on the snout!”⁴¹

Finally, here’s #3. We’ve looked at the emptiness of Christ plus legalism. We’ve looked at the conceitedness of Christ plus legalism. Now Paul addresses...

38 James Sterngold, “A Fellowship of Angels and America,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1997, quoted in David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 195.

39 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 121: “Like many heretics and cultists down through the ages, they claimed support for their aberrant teachings in visions they had supposedly seen. Some of the worst excesses in the modern-day charismatic movement are derived from such visions.”

40 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 121–2: “There is a tendency in human nature to move from objectivity to subjectivity—to shift the focus from Christ to experience. This has always intimidated weak believers and threatened the church. Today this brand of mysticism is most commonly seen in the charismatic movement—where Scripture is a distant second in importance to visions and revelations.”

41 Quoted in MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 122.

3) The **ineffectiveness** of “Christ plus legalism” (2:20–23)

Paul says in verse 20,

²⁰ If⁴² with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world,⁴³ do you submit⁴⁴ to regulations—²¹ “Do not handle,⁴⁵ Do not taste, Do not touch”⁴⁶

Verse 20 harks back to Paul’s statements earlier about burial and resurrection. You were buried with him in baptism (Spirit baptism!) and raised to new life through faith. You are dead to sin. You are dead to this world. You are dead to the elemental spirits of the world.

Paul’s statement here adds a rhetorical flourish—if! If you died! If you died, then why—as if you were still alive in the world—do you submit to these regulations?

The elemental spirits of the world are the forces in this world that empower legalism.⁴⁷ Every single religion in the world is built on a foundation of “do this” and “don’t do this.” Every single one except Christianity.

Christianity is not about what you have done, but what Christ has done. It’s not about works; it’s about faith in the finished work of Christ. Paul is asking here, **“If you’ve been saved by grace, why are you trying to supplement or replace that grace with legalism. It’s nonsensical.”**

Years ago, when C.S. Lewis was alive, there was a British conference on comparative religions. And experts from around the world got together to debate the following topic: Compared to the other religions of the world, what was unique to the Christian faith?

So they began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? No, other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, no! Other religions had accounts of people returning from death.

The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room and asked, “What’s the rumpus about Gentlemen?” And when he heard that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s

42 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 233: “Most English versions introduce the conditional clause with the normal conditional indicator, ‘if.’ The TNIV rendering, *since*, reflects the fact that conditional clauses in Greek often assume the reality of the condition. That is clearly the case here, but, from a rhetorical standpoint, it is nevertheless better to retain ‘if’ in translation.”

43 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 234: “Clearly Paul does not mean to imply that believers do not continue to live in ‘the world,’ whether we define ‘world’ as the physical universe or as the fallen and sin-prone state of existence. His point, rather, is that believers no longer count the world as their true home or as the place that dictates who they are or how they are to live. By dying with Christ, we have been set free from the elements of this world, and we no longer therefore ‘belong’ to the world over which they rule.”

44 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 194: “‘Submit to its regulations’ (δογματίζεσθε) translates a Greek verb that can be taken as a middle (‘submit to [its] regulations’) or a passive voice (‘allow yourselves to be controlled by [these] regulations’). In both cases, the regulations are imposed by an external force, and those who adopt them do so willingly (although with the middle sense the responsibility of the believers is more apparent).”

45 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 195: “Elsewhere ‘to handle’ often appears in cultic context (e.g., Exod 30:29; Lev 5:2, 3; 6:18, 27 [LXX 6:11, 20]; 11:24–39).”

46 CHRYSOSTOM: “You are not in the world, Paul says. How is it you are subject to its elements? And note how he pokes fun at them, ‘touch not, handle not, taste not,’ as though they were cowards and keeping themselves clear of some great matters, ‘all which things are to perish with the using.’ ... So that even though they appear to be wise, let us turn away from them. For one may seem to be a religious person, and modest, and to have a contempt for the body....” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ACCS, 41.

47 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 193: “As in v. 8, ‘the elemental spirits of the world’ (τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου) refer to evil spiritual forces that fight against God’s work through Christ. In this section that challenges the claims of the false teachers, this phrase becomes important as it qualifies the previous reference to the “worship of angels” (v. 18). While the false teachers may consider their visionary experience of the worship of benign spiritual beings as being allies of God, Paul is saying that they are actually submitting to the evil forces at enmity with God.”

unique contribution among the world religions, Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”⁴⁸ It’s unmerited favor.

So let me go back to the “if” statement of Paul in **verse 20**. If you have experienced God’s grace... if you have put your faith in Christ, his death and resurrection... if you have died with Christ... then why are you embracing the power of legalism over your life... “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch!”? You’re dead to the power of legalism. Why resurrect it?

It’s hard to identify specifically what the false teachers were telling the Colossians to “not handle.” Probably this has to do with clean and unclean laws of the OT again. Don’t handle unclean food. Don’t taste it. Don’t touch a dead body. Don’t eat with Gentiles. That kind of thing.

And there’s a kind of mocking refrain with Paul’s statements here: “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch.”⁴⁹ **This sounds like kids on the playground mocking some obnoxious tattletale—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch!”**⁵⁰

And because of the ambiguity of this taunt, it’s hard to know what Paul is talking about here. Don’t touch what? What were the false teachers telling the Colossians not to touch? What were they telling them not to taste? **“Spell it out for us, Paul!”**⁵¹ I don’t know.

But I’m actually glad that Paul didn’t explicitly say what it was that they were told to not handle, not touch, and not taste. Because these kinds of legalistic requirements can take on many different forms in the modern world. In other words, the human psyche has an endless reservoir of legalism to draw from. And I’m not just talking about OT laws. We make up our own laws sometimes.

Personally I am shocked how often Christians are duped into thinking that proper dieting and exercise are the key to spiritual maturity. I’m all for eating better and living healthier, but that is, at most, only tangentially connected to our spirituality. It’s quite easy for a Christian to be physically healthy and spiritually a mess. I see it all the time.

Look, you can eat the finest, healthiest foods... or you can fast from all kinds of foods out there... and you can *still* live a miserably, unhealthy, un-Christlike Christian life. I see it all the time.

And don’t get me wrong, the ideal is that we would be both physically and spiritually healthy. But Paul says quite helpfully that outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day (2 Cor 4:16). That’s the second law of thermodynamics at work. Your body is moving from order to disorder in this fallen world.

Look at **verse 22**.

²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?

This is all part of one big question in **verses 20–22**. Let me simplify—**“If you have died with Christ, why are you submitting to regulations according to human precepts and teachings?”** In other words, **“If you have died with Christ, you don’t have to listen to these people telling you that you need a legalistic, spiritual upgrade. Those people don’t know what they are talking about. ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch!’ Those things that you handle and taste and touch are perishable things. Why would they have any lasting spiritual value if you eat them or avoid them?”**

48 Taken and adapted from Phillip Yancey, *What’s so Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 49. See also his *Christianity Today* article entitled “What’s So Amazing About Grace? Part 1” October, 1997: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/1997/10/whats-so-amazing-about-grace-part-1/>

49 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 235: “It is most unlikely that he is quoting the rules as the false teachers themselves presented them. Rather, as the somewhat sarcastic tone of the staccato listing of those ‘rules’ suggests, Paul is giving us his own interpretive paraphrase of what those rules amounted to. As Augustine puts it, ‘Sure he used these words in mockery of those by whom he did not want his followers to be deceived and led astray.’”

50 AUGUSTINE: “Surely he used these words in mockery of those by whom he did not want his followers to be deceived and led astray.” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ACCS, 43.

51 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 219: “While Paul does not directly say so here, his reference to ‘rules’ such as ‘do not handle’ and ‘do not taste’ (vv. 20–21) make it clear that the false teachers were advocating abstinence from some kinds of food and drink.”

I think the key to understanding this whole section is the end of **verse 22** and the beginning of **verse 23**. Paul says, “according to human precepts and teachings.”⁵² In other words, this isn’t divine instruction. This isn’t proper interpretation of God’s Word. This isn’t apostolic doctrine. It’s human teaching. It’s worldly wisdom. It’s godless.

And then look at **verse 23**. Here’s a further indictment.

²³ These [i.e., “**these human precepts and teachings**”] have indeed an appearance⁵³ of wisdom in promoting self-made religion [yuck!]⁵⁴ and asceticism [ταπεινοφροσύνη] and severity to the body [yuck!], but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.⁵⁵

That’s fascinating. They may restrict your actual flesh. Your body mass might shrink because of the severity to your body.⁵⁶ But your flesh, that is your sin nature, won’t be curbed at all.⁵⁷ Why is that? How can that be?

Because as soon as you curb your sinful desires for gluttony or drunkenness or lust with asceticism, then you increase your pride in your accomplishments. Your self-made religion is ultimately ineffective. **As soon as you shrink your body, you increase your flesh.**⁵⁸ **You are a dog chasing his own tail. You’re a hamster on a wheel. You aren’t accomplishing anything.**

Why? Why is that the case? Because “self-made religion” has no ultimate value. It’s vanity.

Listen, Christian, if your self-discipline is more about self than Christ, it is hopelessly ineffective. If your self-discipline is devoid of Christ, then here’s what you are... you are a branch cut off from the tree trying to grow and produce fruit on your own. That doesn’t work! You know what that is? That’s firewood! That’s futility.⁵⁹

It has the...

appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion

But it is of...

*no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*⁶⁰

52 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 238: “Paul’s criticism of the false teachers’ rules for being *based on merely human commands (entalmata ... tōn anthrōpōn)* and *teachings (didaskalias)* sounds very much like Jesus’ characterization of the Pharisees’ traditions: “They worship me in vain; their teachings (*didaskalias*) are merely human rules (*entalmata anthrōpōn*).” You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions” (Mark 7:7–8). To be sure, Mark 7:7 is quoting Isaiah 29:13, so it could be that Jesus and Paul are independently using the same Old Testament text. But it is more likely that Paul, even if he has Isaiah in mind, is also alluding to Jesus’ teaching.”

53 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 198: “To translate λόγον as ‘appearance’ has been adopted by most versions although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact sense of this Greek word, which has a wide semantic range.”

54 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 86: “Sadly, church history is replete with stories of ascetic excess in the rejection of beautiful and good things in the pursuit of God: rejection of marriage, sex, parenthood, the beauty of God’s creation, even rejection of self. But this ‘self-made’ religion does not do any good. In fact, it can heighten fleshly temptation and along with it produce a joyless, defensive approach to life.”

55 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 236: “In vv. 22–23 Paul justifies his rejection of the false teachers’ rules by making three points: (1) the rules have to do with matters of this world; (2) the rules reflect human and not divine teaching; and (3) the rules cannot bring spiritual transformation.”

56 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 86: “Asceticism feeds the flesh by starving it.”

57 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 123–4: “The great nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Alexander McClaren wrote, ‘Any asceticism is a great deal more to men’s taste than abandoning self. They will rather stick hooks in their backs and do the ‘swinging poojah’ than give up their sins and yield up their wills.’”

58 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 123: “Asceticism might make a person appear spiritual, because of its emphasis on humility and poverty, but it serves only to gratify the flesh.”

59 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 83: “Legalism produces a *surface faith*, because its adherents emphasize the things which are not really important. Their ‘do not’s’ ignore deadly sins such as coveting, gossiping, slandering, bitterness, and hatred. Legalism limits one to shallow self-righteousness, and thus damns him.”

60 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 197–8: “Paul is affirming that the ascetic rules and regulations have no value in combating the desires of ‘the flesh.’ This reference to the failure of their practices recalls Paul’s critique of the false teachers as ‘conceited without reason by his carnal mind’ (v. 18). Paul’s rhetoric here points to his sustained attempt in this section to unmask the claims of the false teachers as their seemingly spiritual practices simply reflect their denial of the sufficiency of Christ.”

So what's the way forward? How do we avoid the trap of legalism and asceticism and self-made religion? Because it's not just false teachers that advocate for this stuff. There is an internal threat of legalism that is inside each one of us, and we've got to deal with that too. The human heart craves legalism.⁶¹ How do we combat that? What's the way forward?

Here it is: at the risk of being abstract, let me just say that everything you have in terms of salvation and your continuing sanctification is constantly anchored to Christ. And you've got to reckon in your mind constantly that my salvation and my sanctification is anchored to Christ. Christ Jesus is the source and the power for everything. To use Paul's language from earlier, we are "rooted and built up in him" (2:7).

So practically speaking, if you are more fired up about your discipleship plan than you are about Christ, I don't want to hear about it. If you are more verbose about your diet and your discipline than you are about Christ, I don't want to hear about it. Everything needs to *flow from and be dependent on Christ*. Paul said in **Romans 10:4, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."**

So let's get practical. You might ask, "Can I embrace a diet or an eating scheme for my personal health?" Yes. "Or for my Christian witness."⁶² Yes. "Can I regulate that within the church?" No! "Can I force that on other people?" No, you cannot!

"Can I institute certain ceremonies and holidays and festivals based on the OT in order to enrich my relationship with Christ?" Yes. "Can I regulate that in the church?" No. "Can I view that as an additive to my faith in Christ in terms of making me a better Christian than I already am?" No. Christ is sufficient.⁶³

"Can I force what I do on other people in order to super-duper charge their relationship with Christ?" No. No, you cannot. "Can I talk about that 'thing' more than I talk about Christ?" Please don't.⁶⁴ "Can I talk more about diet, days, and drink than I do about Christ?" No! Please don't do that.

Look, the greatest thing about Christianity, in comparison with all the other religions of the world is that Christianity views you as the worst of sinners, and at the same time absolutely sinless. Everybody hear me on this?

"What's the difference between Christianity and every other religion in the world?" Here it is: You are worse than you realize, and you're also, at the same time, better than you realize! *Simul Justus et Peccator*. That's how the reformers talked about it. You are simultaneously (right now) a sinner and at the same time justified before God.

61 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 242: "The lure of asceticism as a way of managing the sin problem and finding true spiritual enlightenment is seen in many religions throughout human history. It is a natural impulse."

62 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 173: "Of the devout Christian Jew James, the brother of Jesus, it was said that 'he drank no wine or strong drink, nor did he eat meat' (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.23.5). Hence Paul's expressed willingness neither to eat meat nor to drink wine if it would help the scrupulous Jewish brother to maintain his integrity (Rom. 14:21)."

63 AUGUSTINE: "A person is not to be judged 'in meat or drink or in respect of a festival day, or of the new moon or of the sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come.' On the other hand, he must receive, embrace and observe, without any reserve, those commandments in the law which help to form the character of the faithful ... [and] whatever progress he makes in them he must not attribute to himself but to 'the grace of God by Jesus Christ our Lord.'" Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ACCS, 39.

64 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 83: "Paul does not say, 'Forbid the faithful to keep special days and special diets.' Rather he says, 'Do not let anyone judge you' in these things. (v. 16) There is great liberty in what we Christians can do: we can keep days and diets, or forget them. But he rejects the right of anyone to judge and/or compel another to comply with his own preferences. We are not to judge others by these things, and we are not to allow others to judge us. This is a warning to take to heart, because time and time again as legalism has come into the Church, the Church has become judgmental, joyless, uniform, and shallow in faith."

You are a sinner before God. You are worse than you could possibly ever compensate for in your own actions. And at the same time, in Christ, you are perfectly righteous and justified before a holy God. That is what's unique to Christianity.

And when you add other junk to that, you make Christianity like all the other religions of the world. That's Christ plus. It's Christ in addition to some other thing. "I want to add some of my own stuff to Christ." Stop doing that.

And if someone in the church or in your life tries to get you to embrace a Christ plus legalism upgrade for your spiritual life, you tell that person to **"Hit the road, jack, and don't come back no more no more no more no more."**

And if we as elders see or hear of people doing that in the church, we'll do the same. We'll do like Paul does here. Because self-made religion is an abomination. Don't let anyone disqualify you and don't let anyone pass judgment on you because of their own self-made religion. Pray with me.