

Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, July 22, 2026 – First Baptist Church Buda
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study



COLOSSIANS: ROOTED IN CHRIST – PART 11

“Not Legalism But Christ”

Colossians 2:16-23

“¹⁶So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. ¹⁸Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. ²⁰Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— ²¹“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” ²²which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? ²³These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.” -Colossians 2:16-23 (NKJV)

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND FOR COLOSSIANS

The following is some of the general background information for the book of Colossians. Let's quickly review what we have previously said about the book of Colossians just to give us a bit of context...

Some General Background Information on Colossians:

- (1) **The author of Colossians = The Apostle Paul** - The Apostle Paul identifies himself as the author (1:1; 4:18)
- (2) **An important character in Colossians = Epaphras** - Epaphras likely planted the church by bringing the gospel he heard under Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19:10) back to his home city of Colossae (1:7; 4:12)
- (3) **Date, place and type of writing = A.D. 60-62, A prison epistle/letter written from Rome** - Paul writes this letter from a Roman prison around 60-62 AD (4:16)
- (4) **Important information about Colossae = Small but diverse city** - Colossae was a small but diverse city in Rome's Asia province, modern day Turkey
- (5) **2 key words to understand Colossae = Pluralism and syncretism** - They were immersed in an environment of pluralism and syncretism where most people simply borrowed from the religious and philosophical ideas of the day
- (6) **Identified false teaching/doctrine in Colossians = "The Colossian Heresy"** - Throughout the book Paul hints at a "Colossian heresy." However, he focuses on Christ-centered, correct teaching rather than the contents of the false teaching
- (7) **What we know about this false teaching/doctrine = It is "not according to Christ"** - Whatever this false teaching is, it is "not according to Christ" (2:8) and it undermines the sole supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus
- (8) **John Calvin's summary of Colossians = "This Epistle...to express it in one word, distinguishes the true Christ from a fictitious one."**
- (9) **Layout of the book = Half doctrinal, half practical** - Like other Pauline letters, the first half builds a rich theology that the second half exhorts us to then live out
- (10) **Relation to other N.T. books = Ephesians and Colossians are companion books** - These two books/letters were written around the same time, and they overlap greatly and can help explain one another

Our theme verse for this study is Colossians 2:6-7. This passage not only serves as a premise for this particular study, it also identifies a primary purpose for Paul's letter...

"⁶ As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, ⁷ rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving." -Colossians 2:6-7 (NKJV)

Are you a legalist (a legalistic Christian)?

Respond to each of the following statements by checking [] true or [] false for you. Answer as has honestly as you can and be as honest with your feeling as possible to determine how close to "legalism" you may be...

- (1) **Moral and ethical questions are usually black and white and only made fuzzy shades of gray by hand-wringing, bleeding -heart types.** [] true [] false

- (2) My sense of spiritual well-being is linked to a Christian leader or membership in my church rather than a personal relationship with God. ☐ true ☐ false
- (3) I will likely get into heaven, even though I'm far from perfect, because I have tried to be a basically good person and God will take that into account. ☐ true ☐ false
- (4) When I happen to miss a service or activity of my church I feel guilty. ☐ true ☐ false
- (5) I believe my church is God's true church and that most other Christians may be sincere, but are sincerely wrong. ☐ true ☐ false
- (6) I fall short because I don't have enough faith, or because I haven't prayed enough, or because I just need to be a better person. ☐ true ☐ false
- (7) Meeting the expectation of others, especially those in my congregation (church) or in position of authority, are paramount. ☐ true ☐ false
- (8) I sometimes worry that people might take advantage of grace if it's preached too much – people might think they can do anything they want. ☐ true ☐ false
- (9) After being around Christians for a while I feel drained – weary of putting up a false front. ☐ true ☐ false
- (10) I tell my children not to do something in church or around other Christian families that I allow in my home. ☐ true ☐ false
- (11) The exterior choices a person makes in what they wear, hairstyle, piercings, tattoos, etc. is a clear indication of that person's character. ☐ true ☐ false
- (12) God is predisposed to be angry with me because I am a sinner. My main goal in life is to try to gain God's favor by doing things that will impress him. ☐ true ☐ false
- (13) I try hard to obey God and it irritates me that others think they can get away with avoiding the same level of dedication. ☐ true ☐ false
- (14) God's love for me depends on what I do. ☐ true ☐ false

**The more "true" answers you gave the more likely percentage wise that you are legalistic in some ways*

The thing about legalism is that it's far easier and far more satisfying to spot in someone else's life than in your own. We are masterful at identifying it and calling it out in other people, but not nearly so good at doing so in our own lives. In **Pat Nemmers'** book ***Retractions*** he offers a list of 14 signs that you might be legalistic. It's far from the definitive word on the subject, but is perhaps a useful guide to considering whether you—yes you!—are legalistic...

14 Signs You Might Be Legalistic:

1. You read your Bible to get a check mark rather than to meet with God
2. Your spiritual disciplines define your spirituality
3. You refuse to forgive although you've been forgiven
4. You judge others before you listen to them

5. You justify yourself by comparing yourself to others
6. You feel the need to point out someone else's sin publicly
7. Your schedule is so tight it doesn't have room for "If the Lord wills" in it
8. You separate your spiritual life from your natural life
9. You spend time only with "saved" people
10. You love the praise of men more than the smile of God
11. You're more interested in conformity than conversion
12. You make little things big and big things little
13. You praise only other's outward deeds
14. You reject the truth tellers who come into your life

Legalism is dangerous because it distorts the gospel, fosters pride and judgment, steals joy, and divides communities of faith.

5 Initials Reasons Legalism is Dangerous:

- (1) **Distortion of the Gospel** - Legalism emphasizes strict adherence to rules or human-made systems over the transformative power of faith and grace. It can lead believers to believe that salvation or spiritual growth depends on their ability to follow laws rather than on God's grace, undermining the core message of the gospel (Galatians 1:6-7, Ephesians 2:8). This focus on external compliance often results in outward religiosity without inward heart change, leaving individuals spiritually stagnant despite appearances of righteousness .
- (2) **Pride and judgmental attitudes** - Legalism encourages self-righteousness, where individuals measure their spiritual worth by rule-keeping and compare themselves to others. This can foster judgmental attitudes, criticism, and a sense of superiority over those who do not meet the same standards (Luke 18:11, Romans 14:10) . Such behavior can alienate fellow believers and create a toxic environment within churches.
- (3) **Loss of joy and spiritual fulfillment** - By reducing faith to a checklist of rules, legalism robs believers of the joy and freedom found in a relationship with God. The Christian life becomes a burdensome effort to earn favor rather than a dynamic walk of love and obedience motivated by grace (Galatians 4:15, Ephesians 2:10) . Spiritual burnout and discouragement often follow when believers feel they can never measure up.
- (4) **Division and conflict in church communities** - Legalism can create division within churches and faith communities. Insistence on man-made rules or personal interpretations of Scripture can marginalize others, leading to disputes, exclusion, and even church splits (Galatians 5:13-15, Colossians 2:16-19). It prioritizes human rules over love, unity, and the gospel's central message, weakening the church's mission and witness.
- (5) **Misplaced focus and marginalization of Christ** - Legalism shifts attention from Christ to human effort, emphasizing what believers must do rather than what Christ has accomplished. This can obscure the role of the Holy Spirit in transforming hearts and diminish the relational aspect of faith (1 Samuel 16:7, Mark Ballenger)

The dangers of legalism are multifaceted: it **distorts the gospel, promotes pride and judgment, steals joy, divides communities, and shifts focus away from Christ**. Avoiding legalism requires emphasizing faith, grace, and love, allowing obedience to flow from a transformed heart rather than from fear or obligation. True spiritual growth comes from a balance of good deeds motivated by relational love for God, not rigid rule-keeping

What is wrong with the statement...

- *I can live any way I want to because I am saved by grace and not by what I do or do not do, and I can't lose it anyway? (How might this statement be tied to or linked with questions of legalism?)*
- *I'm not sure that a person who professes to be a Christian really is one if they don't live it by following what the Bible says... practicing the principles and standards found in the Bible?*
- *Are you really saved if you didn't pray the sinners prayer, make a public profession of faith, and then follow it by getting baptized?*

Application Questions

1. How can we discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7) and yet avoid legalism?
2. Discuss: Is grace the balance point between legalism and license (loose living), or is it altogether different? How?
3. Why do so many Christians tolerate legalism and even see it as almost a virtue rather than a sin?
4. Why is "attending church" not sufficient? How can we develop a greater sense of interdependence as the body of Christ?

Christians probably have tolerated no sin more than the sin of legalism...

- In fact, many Christians would probably be surprised to hear legalism labeled as sin.
- Legalists are viewed as being a bit overzealous or perhaps as super-spiritual.
- But they aren't thought of as sinning in the same sense as adulterers, thieves, and the like.
- To the contrary, legalism seems to promote holiness, a valid Christian concern.

In what way might legalism be called "sin?"

Reasons Legalism is Considered Sin:

- (1) **It prioritizes human rules over a genuine relationship with God** - Legalism refers to a strict adherence to laws or rules, often emphasizing external compliance rather than the spirit of the law or a heartfelt relationship with God .
- (2) **It stems from pride and self-righteousness** - In Christianity, it involves attempting to earn favor with God or impress others through rule-keeping, rather than relying on faith and grace.
- (3) **It obsesses with personal convictions, church traditions, or excessive focus on outward behavior while neglecting the condition of the heart** - The Bible frequently addresses legalism, particularly in the New Testament. Jesus confronted the Pharisees

for their legalistic practices, criticizing them for focusing on outward appearances while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23-24). The Apostle Paul also warned against legalism, emphasizing that salvation comes by grace through faith, not by works or adherence to human regulations (Ephesians 2:8-9; Galatians 5:1-4).

- (4) **It shifts the focus from God's grace to human effort, fostering pride, judgment, and a false sense of security** - Legalism is rooted in pride, as it assumes one can commend oneself to God through personal deeds.
- (5) **It denies human depravity and exalts human ability, placing trust in self rather than in Christ** - By emphasizing external compliance over inner transformation, legalism distorts the Gospel and can lead to fear, guilt, and spiritual bondage. Jesus' repeated confrontations with legalists demonstrate that God views this mindset as sinful and contrary to true faith.

The Apostle Paul taught that legalism is an aggressive evil that those who have been saved by grace must strongly oppose.

- Most of his Epistle to the Galatians is an attack on legalism.
- Many of his other letters contain strong warnings about the dangers of legalism.
- In 1 Timothy 4:1-3, he states that certain men who forbade marriage and advocated abstaining from foods were promoting the doctrines of demons.
- Clearly, legalism was no minor sin in Paul's mind!

In Colossians 2:16-23, Paul tells his readers that they must strongly resist the legalistic approach of the false teachers. There are two commands in verses 16-19 of our passage... notice these verses, *"¹⁶So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. ¹⁸Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God."*

2 Commands in Colossians 2:16-18:

- (1) **Let no one judge you (v.16)** - "Let no one act as your judge" in regard to certain matters (vs. 16)
- (2) **Let no one cheat you (v.18)** - "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize" (vs. 18), which might better be translated, "Let no one set themselves up as umpire to pass judgment against you."

Both commands are saying the same thing: We must strongly reject legalism as a way of Christian living.

When we discuss legalism, we need to be careful to define our terms. Some think that legalism means having any rules or commandments. I've been accused of being legalistic because I preach that we should obey the commandments of Scripture. But the New Testament is full of rules and commandments. Jesus said that if we love Him, we will obey His commandments (John 14:15). Some would counter that it's *manmade* rules or commandments which constitute legalism. Yet a moment's reflection will show that this is inadequate, since there are many areas not specifically mentioned in the Bible where we need some rules in order to function as a Christian family or church.

So what is legalism?

- The heart of legalism is an attitude of pride
- The legalist prides himself for keeping certain standards and judges others who do not keep those standards
- The legalist thinks that he is made acceptable to God, either for salvation or spirituality, by his conformity to certain rules that he picks and chooses
- Invariably, those rules are not things like loving the Lord with all your heart or loving your neighbor as yourself
- Rather, the legalist picks rules that he is able to keep and conveniently neglects or ignores the things he is not able to keep
- The legalist often focuses on external conformity while neglecting the heart righteousness God requires (Matt. 23:23-28)

Dr. Charles Ryrie defines legalism as "a fleshly attitude which conforms to a code for the purpose of exalting self."

"Therefore" (v.20) connects our text to the previous paragraph. Paul is telling these new believers, under attack from these false teachers, "The law was merely the shadow which pointed toward the reality, which is Christ. He fulfilled the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. We don't grow as Christians by keeping those laws, but by holding fast to Christ."

KEY THOUGHT: *We grow as Christians by rejecting legalism, and by holding fast to Christ as the head of His body, the church.*

External religion leads to pride; holding fast to Christ as the head leads to the growth of the body...

2 Important Truths for Believer in Colossians 2:16-23:

- (1) Christians must reject legalism as a way of Christian living**
- (2) Christians must hold to Christ as the head of His body, the church**

CHRISTIANS MUST REJECT LEGALISM AS A WAY OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

I use the word “reject” because we need to see legalism for what it is... **an aggressive evil which must be resisted.**

Some powerful statements to remember about legalism:

1. Legalists are not content to live as they see fit and leave others alone -
2. Legalists are recruiters who seek to bring everyone under their system of bondage (Matt. 23:15) -
3. Legalism is a subtle tool of Satan, because on the surface it seems to promote holiness -
4. Legalism is based on the flesh; it leads people away from vital dependence on Christ and into a system of pride and judging others which destroys the church -

I want to make three observations stemming from our text to help you understand legalism...

3 Important Observations Based on Colossians 2:16-23 Concerning Legalism:

- (1) **Legalism judges spirituality by external conformity to certain rules -** *“¹⁶So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. ¹⁸Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.”* Both **verse 16** and **verse 18** indicate that these false teachers had set themselves up as judges to proclaim that anyone who didn’t follow their rules was not spiritual. These rules apparently included some of the Old Testament dietary regulations as well as certain Jewish festivals. But probably these false teachers went beyond the injunctions of the law, perhaps making the Nazarite vow of avoiding all wine applicable to everyone. “Festival” refers to the annual Jewish feasts, such as Passover. “New moon” refers to monthly celebrations. “Sabbath day” refers to the weekly observance of the seventh day (1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 31:3). God ordained these special occasions to point forward to Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44; 1 Cor. 5:7). Paul calls them a “shadow of what is to come,” but then adds, “but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:17). He came to fulfill the Law (Matt. 5:17). Thus we are no longer obligated to keep these Jewish observances.

As you probably know, some Christians argue that Sunday (a few argue for Saturday) is now the Christian Sabbath, which we must keep in some manner. Some argue that we sin if we think or speak about anything secular or worldly on Sunday. Thus if you’re chatting with someone at church and mention last Sunday’s game, you’ve sinned! And you sinned even more if you watched the game on the Sabbath! Advocates of the Christian Sabbath usually go further than that, adding many prohibited activities which they say violate the Sabbath: You can’t stop by the grocery store on the way home from

church to pick up a gallon of milk. You can't eat out in a restaurant on Sunday, because it requires others to work. On and on it goes! If we are required to observe Sunday as a Christian Sabbath, then Paul certainly was confusing these mostly Gentile new believers by not clarifying that in our text. (See, also, Romans 14:5.) The New Testament commands us not to forsake assembling with other believers (Heb. 10:25). It indicates that the early church gathered on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). And it implies that Sunday is "the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10). Hebrews 4 teaches that by believing in Jesus we enter God's Sabbath rest. I think that we also can extrapolate a principle from God resting on the seventh day and from the Jewish Sabbath, namely, that it's for our good to cease from our normal activities once a week so that we can join with the Lord's people for worship and instruction (see my sermon, "God's Day of Rest," from Gen. 2:1-3). But beyond that, there are no direct Sabbath commands for us who are in Christ. But legalists like to set up extra-biblical rules by which they can judge those who do not keep them. It's an emphasis on the external, not on the heart before God. So a man secretly may be enslaved to pornography or greed, but if he keeps the rules that everyone can see, he's viewed as spiritual. Jesus indicted the Pharisees for this type of thing. They honored God with their lips and their rules, but their hearts were far from Him (Matt. 15:1-9).

Legalism in Christianity often manifests through strict adherence to rules and regulations, prioritizing them over faith and grace. Here are some common examples of legalistic practices.

What are some of the things that Christians can make legalistic rules?

1. **Membership requirements** - Some churches require potential members to attend classes and sign contracts that bind them to specific doctrines, tithing, and service commitments. This practice can create a legalistic environment where adherence to rules is emphasized over personal faith and relationship with God
2. **Dress Codes and appearance** - Certain congregations impose strict dress codes, insisting that members wear specific types of clothing or avoid certain styles, such as tattoos or piercings. This focus on outward appearance can overshadow the importance of inner faith and character
3. **Restrictions on activities** - Baptists in days past used to say things like, "We don't cuss, we don't chew, and we don't go with girls that do!" Most Baptists have been known for the "don'ts"... the things we "don't do!" Legalism can also be seen in churches that prohibit certain activities, such as drinking alcohol, dancing, card playing, mixed swimming, or even laughing within church premises. These restrictions are often based on personal convictions rather than biblical mandates, leading to a culture of judgment and exclusion
4. **Overemphasis on rules** - Legalistic attitudes may arise when individuals or groups create additional rules beyond what the Bible teaches. For example, some may insist that men and women cannot interact without their spouses present, believing this will

prevent temptation. Such rules can create unnecessary burdens and foster a judgmental atmosphere

5. **Salvation by works** - A fundamental aspect of legalism is the belief that one can earn God's favor through good works or strict adherence to laws. This mindset contradicts the core Christian belief that salvation is a gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not a result of human effort

Legalism can lead to a focus on rules rather than a genuine relationship with God, creating barriers to faith and community. Recognizing these examples can help individuals and churches foster a more grace-filled and loving environment.

- (2) **Legalists never keep the whole law, but pick certain laws to observe, by which they judge others** - These false teachers in Colossae were concerned about food and drink and certain Jewish festivals. They had commandments about what you could and could not handle, taste, and touch (Col. 2:21). But they were filled with pride and apparently were indulging in the deeds of the flesh (Col. 2:23; 3:5).

READ: Matthew 23:1ff

Jesus pointed out the same problem in His scorching denunciation of the Pharisees (Matt. 23:23), *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.”* They prided themselves on keeping the law of tithing, and made sure everyone saw how they tithed! But they neglected the more important parts of the law.

In many churches, legalists judge others because they smoke or drink or have tattoos or don't wear a suit to church or whatever. Some churches judge women for wearing makeup. When I was in seminary, a guy who sat next to me in chapel told me (after we had become friends) that at first he didn't think that I was a Christian because I had a mustache! I would have had a beard, but the seminary didn't allow that back then because (the seminary president told me) they would lose at least \$50,000 in support if they did. When my dad went to a well-known Bible Institute, a senior was not allowed to graduate because a supporter of the school complained when she saw him riding in the back of the school's bus with his arm around his fiancée! So legalists judge others over matters that they choose, but they don't judge themselves for their own sins of pride, gossip, racial prejudice, and many other things.

- (3) **Legalism always stems from and leads to pride** - Paul says (Col. 2:18), “Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind.” Some commentators say that verse 18 is the most difficult verse in Colossians to

interpret. The first difficulty is what Paul meant by, “Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize.”

- He was probably using an athletic metaphor, saying that these false teachers set themselves up as judges, making up their own rules.
- If you didn’t play by their rules, they disqualified you from the contest.
- They may have said that you were not saved, or at the very least, you lost your rewards in heaven.

The second problem is the phrase, “delighting in self-abasement.”

- “Self-abasement” is the word often used in a good sense for “humility” (Col. 3:12).
- But here Paul probably is being sarcastic, saying that these false teachers take pride in their humility!
- He may be referring to their ascetic practices of denying themselves certain things which the Bible does not forbid.
- They took pride in keeping their dietary rules and in their observance of these religious special days, and they judged others who did not comply.

The main interpretive difficulty is, what was their practice of worshiping angels?

- Without going into all the views, perhaps the most plausible view is that they were calling on angels as a means of warding off evil spirits to the extent that they were virtually worshiping them.
- Also, they may have used their false humility to say, “We are not spiritual enough to go into God’s presence, so we approach Him through the angels.”
- But in so doing, they set aside Christ’s sufficiency as our mediator.
- Paul adds that these false teachers (the singular pronoun, *his*, may refer to a main teacher, but more likely is a generic way of referring to them all) were “taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind.”
- Perhaps they based their worship of the angels on visions that they claimed to have seen. And they were inflated with pride over their visions.
- But Paul says that they were just boasting in the flesh.
- When Paul was caught up to heaven, he didn’t tell anyone about it for 14 years, and then only in sketchy terms (2 Cor. 12:1-10).
- He didn’t write a book about it and go on the talk show circuit, regaling everyone with his vision!
- Instead, God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble!

The point is, legalists don’t seek to exalt God; they exalt themselves. Legalists operate in the flesh, not the Spirit. Thus they take pride in external conformity which can be judged outwardly. The legalist is even proud about his own humility! By way of contrast, godly people become increasingly aware of their own propensity to sin. Thus they become more dependent on Christ, which is the mark of true humility. So Paul is saying, “Reject legalism as a way of Christian living.” But there’s another implication:

CHRISTIANS MUST HOLD TO CHRIST AS THE HEAD OF HIS BODY, THE CHURCH

I'm stating positively what Paul expresses negatively about the false teachers in Colossians 2:19, "¹⁹*And not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.*" Throughout Colossians, Paul has shown the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. He has already stated (Col. 1:18), "*He is also head of the body, the church.*" Holding fast to Christ as the head is the key to "growth which is from God." It implies four things..

4 Things Implied by Holding Fast to Christ:

- (1) **Holding fast to Christ as head means not being enamored with things other than Christ** - These false teachers were caught up with the shadow, but they were ignoring the reality! They were into all sorts of rules, but they weren't into Christ. It would be like admiring some famous person, but when you met him, instead of looking at him, you fell down on the sidewalk and said, "Oh, look at this shadow!" That's what these false teachers were doing. They were so caught up with the ceremonial aspects of the law that they missed the One to whom those ceremonies and laws pointed! They were hugging His shadow, but missing Christ Himself! But before we laugh at them, we need to recognize how easy it is to do the same thing. Our number one priority should be to worship God. And yet it's easy to slip into being worship-centered rather than God-centered. We hug the shadow of various styles of worship and forget that we're supposed to be exalting the Head of the church, who gave Himself for us on the cross. Or, I've seen Christians who get caught up with Bible knowledge, which is a good thing if used properly. But they get puffed up with pride over being right or understanding truths that others don't get. So they use the Scriptures to exalt themselves, but they've forgotten that the Scriptures exalt Jesus (John 5:39; Luke 24:27, 44). They're hugging the shadow, but not holding fast to the head! To grow as a Christian, hold fast in love to the Lord Jesus! Study the Scriptures, but not so that you can boast in your knowledge, but so that you grow in your love for the Savior. God didn't give us the Bible to fill our heads with information; He gave it so that we would come to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ and to eagerly wait for His coming as our Bridegroom. Don't get enamored with things other than Christ!
- (2) **Holding fast to Christ as head means beginning and then maintaining a living union with Him** - The members of the body are joined to the head in a living way. You can't tape on an arm to a person who is missing one and expect it to function. There must be that living, organic union or that limb will be useless. Becoming a Christian is more than attending church, going through the outward motions of Christianity, and keeping some religious rules. It means being joined to Jesus Christ in a living way, so that you're "in Him." You don't just join a church; you are joined to Christ Himself as a member of His body. But the implication here is that to continue with Christ requires some responsible action on our part: We must hold fast to Him. The Bible compares our relationship to Christ to marriage (Eph. 5:22-33). On my wedding day, I was legally married to Marla

and, as Scripture puts it, we became one flesh. But the exclusive relationship that we began that day has to be maintained. It doesn't grow on autopilot. Getting to know her more deeply requires time spent together. I have to learn what pleases her. I have to reject temptations to go after other women. I have to hold fast to her in love. The same is true in my relationship with Jesus Christ.

- (3) **Holding fast to Christ as head means submitting to Him as Lord** - This is implied in the idea of the head. The head controls the body. If your body isn't responsive to the direction of your head, you've got big problems. The fact that Jesus is the head of His body, the church, means that He is the Lord of the church. He gives the orders; we must submit to Him. There is a crazy idea in the evangelical church today that you can receive Jesus as your Savior, so that He becomes your fire insurance policy, protecting you from hell. But, submitting to Him as your Lord is optional for later on. So if you just want to be a nominal, occasional Sunday Christian who isn't subject to Jesus as Lord, don't worry! That decision that you made as a child in Sunday school or at church camp to invite Jesus into your heart cinched it up. You'll still go to heaven, even if you don't obey Jesus as Lord. But as we saw in Colossians 1:23, the evidence of truly being reconciled to Christ is that "you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel" Elsewhere (1 Cor. 6:9) Paul clearly warns us not to be deceived, because, "the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God" (see, also, Matt. 7:21-23; Mark 8:34-38; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-12; 2 Pet. 2:4-22). We're not holding fast to Christ as head if we live consistently in disobedience to Him. So, holding fast to Christ as head means not being enamored with things other than Christ; beginning and then maintaining a living union with Him; and, submitting to Him as Lord.
- (4) **Holding fast to Christ as head means being a part of His functioning, growing body, the church** - Verse 19 makes it clear that being a Christian is not an individual matter. Being a Christian means being a functioning member of Christ's body, and that body only grows when every member lives in dependence on the head and in interdependence with the other members. Our American culture militates against the biblical truth that as members of Christ's body, we are interdependent. We have a very independent view of life in general and of the Christian life. It's God and me, but not me and my brothers and sisters in the church. This is reflected in the attitude that you "attend church," much as you would attend a movie, but you aren't closely involved with the other attenders. You come, you greet a few people casually, watch the show, and then leave. But you aren't involved with any believers until you attend the next Sunday. But that's *not* New Testament Christianity! For the church to grow with a growth from God, we must hold fast to the head. But, also, we must be closely joined to other members of the body, just as the joints and ligaments hold our physical bodies together. It's no accident that Paul mentions the body in the context of these false teachers, because Satan usually preys on weak Christians who are not closely involved with other believers. Growing with a growth from God means being a functioning part of the body God has designed spiritual growth to take place in.

CONCLUSION

So, down with legalism, but up with Jesus Christ and His body, the church! If you sense that you're not growing as a Christian, it may be that either you're not rejecting legalism as a way of Christian living, or else you're not holding fast to Christ as the head of His body, the church.

Two concluding applications:

- (6) **Don't mistake liberty for license** - Rejecting legalism doesn't mean hang-loose, undisciplined living. Being free in Christ doesn't mean freedom to sin, but freedom from sin. It is not legalism to obey the Lord Jesus Christ. Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.
- (7) **Don't replace reality with rules** - Some advocate living the Christian life by vows and rules. They say you need to read your Bible and pray for so many minutes each day. While I highly recommend reading your Bible and praying every day, it's easy to follow all the rules and lose the reality of a love relationship with the Savior who died for you.

So please repeat after me: Reject legalism! Hold fast to Christ! Amen!