

Goodbye, Legalism! — Colossians 2:13–23
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Last week, in **Colossians 2:6–12**, we saw Paul start to attack the message of the false teachers who had come to Colossae. In this morning's passage he continues to press his attack.

i What God has done

v13 says that, though the Colossians had been spiritually dead, God had stepped in and given them spiritual life in Christ. **v14–15** give us two images to help us understand that.

The first image is in **v14**. Where Paul talks about how God has “**cancelled the written code**”, he uses an unusual Greek word which came to be used of an IOU note. We are sinners, people who break God's rules. Every time we sin, we put ourselves in debt to him. We add another item to the IOU which records our debt. We end up with a colossal debt before God. But Paul is saying that God has forgiven us Christians for our sin. And he hasn't just forgiven us. He's taken the IOU and he's cancelled it. God forgives our sin and then he obliterates every record of it. We should praise him for that.

How, then, did God forgive our sin and cancel our IOU? Paul says, “**He took it [the IOU] away, nailing it to the cross.**” In other words, the notice nailed to the cross to state the charges against Christ was... my IOU, the record of my sin. God punished his Son for the sins of his people. That's really breathtaking!

The second image is in **v15**. An imaginary triumphal procession is going on. There's the conquering general. There are his defeated enemies, trailing along behind. It's apparent to all that victory has been won and that victory is complete. The conquering general is God. And the defeated enemies are the “**powers and authorities**”, the spiritual forces opposed to him and who hold the world in deep spiritual blindness and death. God has won a complete victory over them. And the victory, ironically, was won the moment Jesus Christ died on the cross.

Christian, rejoice in what God has done. And if you're not a Christian, realise that you cannot make yourself spiritually alive or cancel out your own sin or free yourself from the powers of darkness. Only God can do it, through Christ. So come to him by faith today. And be free!

ii What we do not have to do

What God has done has consequences for us (**v16** starts with the word, “**Therefore**”). Because of what God has done, there are certain things which we do not have to do. But those things are the very things which the false teachers at Colossae were commanding the people to do.

1 What the false teachers were teaching

Their message seems to have been an adulterated version of Christianity. It was the Christian message, but mixed up with three extra elements.

*α' Legalism (see **v16** and **v20–21**).* Legalism is the belief that you need to top up your faith in Christ with obedience to certain rules and regulations if you want to be saved. It's wrong, but it still appears in churches when people feel that they have to do certain things (eg reading the Bible every day, not going to the cinema) in order to become or to stay as a Christian. There are rules for Christians to obey; for example, we're commanded to love. But we obey out of love for the Lord who gave himself for us, not so as to earn Brownie points with God.

*β' Asceticism (see **v18** and **v23**).* Ascetics believe that harsh treatment of the body (e.g. beating or isolating yourself) is useful for advancing in Christianity. It's not. You still find this attitude in evangelical churches when people think that it's holy constantly to wear themselves out doing church work instead of resting. There is a right sort of self-denial. But according to

1 Timothy 4:3–4, we're meant to enjoy God's creation to the full. We don't promote holiness by sacrificing things which he has legitimately given to us to bless us.

γ' Mysticism (see v18). The false teachers were into worshipping angels and entering into visions. Mysticism is on the rise in the West, and it's easy to buy books such as, "How to Hear Your Angels". You find mysticism in the church whenever people regard themselves as super-spiritual because they've had some extraordinary vision or experience. Such things are not necessary for people to be true Christians.

The false teachers, then paid lip-service to faith in Christ, but then they added legalism, asceticism and mysticism. The end result is most certainly not Bible-based Christianity!

2 Why were they so wrong?

The false teachers were wrong for five reasons.

α' The reality is Christ (see v17). Paul says that the laws of the Old Testament which dealt with food and special days (referred to in **v16**) were like shadows pointing forward to the great reality, Christ. Therefore to go for legalism, even legalism which hangs on the laws of the Old Testament, is a backward step.

β' The important thing is connection to Christ (see v19). The false teachers had no connection with the head of the church, Christ. Therefore they had no spiritual life; it's when you're connected to Christ that you're alive and that you grow. The Colossians must not listen to spiritually dead false teachers who wanted to draw them away from Christ.

γ' The Colossians belong to a new realm (see v20). The Colossians died with Christ to this age; now they belong to the age to come. Therefore, they don't need the legalistic rules of this world; they need the rules of Christ which apply to all those in His kingdom.

δ' Legalistic rules come and go (see v22). Legalistic rules, made up as they are by men and women, come and go out of fashion. That's exactly what happened with the message of the false teachers at Colossae!

ε' Legalism, asceticism and mysticism do not work (see v23). You might expect strong rules and bodily deprivation and wonderful spiritual experiences to make you a strong follower of the Lord. But they don't. An inward problem requires more than outward rules. It takes an inward transformation to deal with it. It takes nothing less than a work of the Spirit of Christ within.

And that takes us back to the start. God has done everything necessary for you. You do not need to impose legalistic, ascetic and mystical rules upon yourself. Instead, trust in Jesus Christ, and keep in step with his Spirit. May God help us to do that.