



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Weeds: Hindrances to Spiritual Vitality

Preeminent. Christ's Place in the World | Part 9

Tim Badal | February 15, 2015 | Colossians 2:11-23



This week, we are continuing our series entitled, "Preeminent," which looks at how Jesus is first in all things. He is the greatest. He is the most glorious. We need to allow that fact to influence every decision, every plan and every step we take. Jesus must be the centerpiece of all that we do. All that we do during these services — and in our lives as Christians — must point back to Jesus. He must receive the glory, honor and praise.

We've been studying the book of Colossians. It is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church at Colossae, which lies in what is now modern day Turkey. As we study this book, we will learn the importance of understanding Christ's place in our lives. Our passage for this week is Colossians 2:11-23. This will be the largest passage of Scripture that we will study in our series. We will come back and look at this passage again next week. This week we will look at the problem that the Colossian church was facing and next week we will look at the solution. We will start in verse nine and go through verse 23:

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

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

If you've been with us before, you know that we've been investigating the Colossians' situation. Epaphras, the elder of the Colossian church, has seen that the church is struggling so he sought help and wisdom from his mentor, the Apostle Paul. Paul is in prison, so Epaphras visits Paul in Rome. Epaphras wants to learn how to help the church in Colossae grow and keep it from falling into disrepair. This letter contains Paul's response to the issues in Colossae. Paul loves this church, even though he hasn't met any of the people in it. He longs for them to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, making Christ number one in everything that they do.

Paul uses a phrase that will help us understand what it means to make Christ preeminent, what it means to have a vital walk with Him. Paul says that we must be "rooted and built up in him." Paul gets this phrase from Jesus, Who spoke about our need to be rooted in Him. Jesus said (John 15:1-17) that we are branches and we will not accomplish anything of value when we are not connected, when we are not rooted, to the vine. If we are going to do anything of value for Christ and His Kingdom, we must be

attached to the vine. Christ cannot just be something we tack on to the end; He must be above all things, in all things, and through all things. Whether in our interactions with believers or unbelievers, Christ must be first.

The problem is there is an enemy who wants nothing more than to steal your joy and rob your peace. He does this by putting obstacles in the way. Imagine that your life is a garden. The devil uses weeds to accomplish this task. Weeds steal nutrients and sunlight that plants need in order to grow. Jesus says in Matthew 13:24-28 that the devil is the one who puts these weeds into our gardens in order to take away that vitality. The text says:

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.'"

Right now, we're experiencing a wind chill advisory in the midst of another Chicago winter. However, I want to talk about gardens today. In your spiritual life, you are a garden — a garden that needs to grow and be nourished. Apart from Christ, you will never bear good fruit. The church is a garden as well — a place where nurturing and growth take place. The question you have to ask today is: "Are there weeds that are stealing the vitality that Christ has for me?"

Imagine a well-groomed garden with lots of vegetation and trees that are heavy with ripe fruit. Everything has its place; everything has its order. Crops are all harvested in their time. This is what God wants for your spiritual life. This is what He wants for His church. He wants us to bear fruit and produce a harvest of righteousness for Him. However, one of the ways the enemy keeps us from doing this is by planting weeds in our lives. It might start with one, but as it grows it will multiply.

Some of you might have weeds in your life that keep you from bearing fruit. It's not that you're not trying; it isn't because you're not willing to do the important things, but it is because you have allowed the devil to plant weeds in your midst that sap you of your joy and remove your opportunity for growth. Paul is talking to a church that looks like a garden filled with weeds. He wants the church to do some gardening so that they might be healthy and bear fruit.

How will he accomplish this? In the church of Colossae there were three weeds that infested the church so they could not reach their full maturity in Christ. In our text we get a glimpse into what the Colossian heresy is. Paul has alluded to this many times so far. In our previous study, we've tried not to delve too much into this heresy because Paul addresses it now. In Colossians 2:11-23, we gain insight into what weeds were affecting the spiritual vitality of the Colossian church. Those same weeds creep up and affect our church as well.

This will be a two-part message so I will give you a thesis for where we're going. The first premise we will address today is: "Spiritual vitality is not found in an empty religion, but in an extensive relationship with Christ and His church." That is our premise. We cannot find spiritual vitality in a set of things that we do within the framework of "religion." If religion isn't connected with Jesus, it is empty; there is no value to it whatsoever. Remember Paul's warning in Colossians 2:8, "*See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.*" Colossians 1:8 is our definition of what empty religion looks like. You cannot find spiritual vitality by just going through the motions; it has to involve Christ and His church.

Paul wants to address the difference between religion and a vibrant relationship with Christ. He makes the contrast between:

1. Circumcision and the circumcision of the heart. One involved a small piece of flesh; the other changed your entire being.
2. Being alive or being dead. In Colossians 2:17, Paul says that empty religion is filled with shadows, but the relationship with Christ is the substance. It is the real deal.

Throughout this section, Paul calls the church to discern the difference between the real deal in Christ and the forgery of making yourself number one. What are the weeds that need to be plucked? The weeds of empty religion are:

1. Ritualism

Some of the same things that were done in the church 2,000 years ago are being done today. Notice the words for ritual in the text:

- Human traditions
- Circumcision

- Baptism
- Festivals
- Sabbaths

I want you to be aware that these rituals aren't bad in and of themselves. They can have value and are ways for truth to be illustrated. These people weren't creating new rituals that weren't connected to the Bible. These activities occur throughout Scripture, many of them saturating the Old Testament.

However, notice what was happening in the church:

- Colossians 2:16, *"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath."*
- Colossians 2:18, *"Let no one disqualify you..."*

People were creating man-made standards, elevating themselves by those standards, and passing judgment on others. They would look at external activities and compete against one another. They measured others by the things that they participated in and how they engaged with their human rituals. These external factors judged whether or not they were in the faith.

What did this ritualism look like? This form of religion says that vitality is found in the traditions that you keep. Our world is full of traditions. They are in our families. They are in our schools and communities. We also have them in the church. Traditions are good as long as they are kept in proper balance. Paul says that traditions are not spiritual vitality.

Let me give you an illustration. Yesterday, you may have celebrated Valentine's Day. That is a tradition. You can ask the question whether it's a Hallmark holiday or not, but it is a day that we dedicate to the celebration of love. It's a tradition. If you are a married individual, do you use Valentine's Day as the key marker for the health of your relationship with your spouse? Hopefully, if your spouse has been faithfully loving you the other 364 days this year and misses Valentine's Day, you don't say, "Hey! You missed it on Valentine's Day, so we're done. Everything is over." What the Colossian heretics were saying is that if you missed these man-made traditions, everything else was off. You had blown it. They thought there were certain moments that were so important for the Christian that if you weren't practicing them, your relationship with Christ lacked vitality. No. We need to remember what traditions are.

Traditions are activities with deep meaning

Traditions aren't simply things we do; they have deep and profound reasons behind them. On December 25, a date which is merely tradition, we celebrate the birth of Christ. We don't know for sure when Jesus was born; some people think it was in the month of August. In that celebration there are traditions that are involved: We sing different kinds of music. We buy gifts for friends and loved ones. We gather around tables in our homes and celebrate this holy day as a day that is not only dedicated to Christ, but also to the love for family. We decorate our houses. We put up pine trees. We hang things in the windows. All of these things are traditions. They are meaningful. Your family traditions aren't something that someone came up with yesterday; they have spanned the test of time. They are affirmed as important. They are activities with deep meaning. We don't celebrate these things casually. We prepare for them. We look forward to them. We make sure they are done with excellence.

Traditions are important to people. However, they can never be the measuring stick for someone's spiritual wellbeing. To do otherwise would be like measuring Christmas by the way someone wrapped the gifts, the kind of bow on top of the tree or the amount of decorations around the house. It is okay to have traditions. Having them is human. I can't imagine living in a family with no traditions. However, we must be careful not to put the burden of our own traditions on others. I cannot shove what I do at Christmas onto someone else and say, "If you don't do these things, you're not really a Christian." This is what was happening in Colossae.

The Colossians used the following traditions to measure holiness:

- Circumcision
- Baptism
- Things we eat
- Things we drink
- Festivals
- New Moons

- The Sabbath

The Old Testament describes these things as good and holy.

Traditions can easily distract us from the main focus

When traditions overreach their boundaries, the main things blur out of focus. What were the traditions that the Colossians were elevating? They centered on two things:

1. Diets
2. Days

Let's examine the diets for a moment. The text tells us that we are not to pass judgment regarding food or drink. That smacks of Old Testament Judaism. It smacks of the Israelites in the wilderness. It smacks of the dietary restrictions found in the Torah describing things as clean and unclean. Why would God declare certain foods clean or unclean? If God is the Creator of all good things and food is good, why would God say, "There are things that are good and clean and things that are unclean"? By giving all of those dietary laws, God was reminding His people of a couple things:

1. They serve as an object lesson for purity and impurity.
2. God is the One Who has established the rules and regulations.

In the garden God said, "Adam and Eve, there is so much for you to eat in the garden, but there is one tree that you cannot eat from. I don't want you to eat that fruit." When God said that, it wasn't that the tree was bad; in fact the text tells us that it was pleasing to the eye. It was in the center of the garden. It had incredible value. When God said, "Don't," He was reminding us that He is in charge and we are not. God gave dietary restrictions to show the Israelites that He is God and that He determines what is pure and impure.

As the New Testament opens, we see that the dietary laws are fulfilled in Christ. Over and over again, the New Testament speaks to this. In fact, this was a hard issue for the disciples and the early church to wrap their heads around. Peter, a man who walked and talked with Jesus and had seen the risen Christ, struggled with this. He lived as a New Testament Jew by the laws of the Torah. When he began evangelizing, Peter was given a vision concerning the Gentiles (Acts 10:9-16). The vision is of a great white sheet filled with unclean animals and food. A voice from heaven says, "Take. Kill and eat." The Bible makes it clear that what Peter thought was unclean is now — because of the fulfillment in Jesus Christ — clean.

The Apostle Paul also addresses this issue. First Corinthians 8:8 says, "*Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.*" Whether we eat something or abstain from it does not bring us closer to God. Abstaining may be good for you, but God is not using that as a measuring stick for your holiness.

The Sabbath day was another tradition that caused division in the Colossian church. The Sabbath day was the day of the week that was supposed to be kept holy. It was to be set apart for the Lord. No work was to take place. Some people in the Colossian church would say, "You can't do anything during this time." When they saw other Colossians working on the Sabbath they would call them sinners for doing that. They would see others engage in activities and pass judgment on them. They were missing the point.

The Sabbath wasn't the only day that caused division. Colossians 2:16 shows us that it included festivals. These religious festivals filled the calendars of the Jewish family. This included Pentecost, Succoth and other holy days which were tools for remembering to pursue God. However, these things have been set aside with the advent of Christ. Christ is now the fulfillment. They were shadows of what we now have in Christ. Paul isn't saying, "Abstaining from certain things is a sin. Dedicating to certain days is a sin." What he's saying is, "Don't use these things as a litmus test for a person's spirituality."

You might say, "Tim, I don't judge people based on circumcision. I don't judge people based on what they eat. I don't judge people based on what festivals they practice. This doesn't apply to me." However, ritualism is alive and well in our church today. What traditions do you practice? Some of you may think that the church is slipping because the young people don't dress in their Sunday best like you were taught. You may think the reason the world is struggling with sin is because we don't get dressed up for church. I remember with great affection putting on my Sunday suit and the women wearing dresses. That was "the good ole days" and the "golden age" of church. What's going on now? Kids are wearing sweat pants to church — the sinners! I get it. We judge because they don't look like us.

How about the way we worship? "I can't worship with that kind of music. It's not the music that God wants me to listen to." I'm not just addressing the older people in our church; I'm addressing both young and old. A hymn gets played and the young people say, "Oh, that's an old song. It makes no sense to me. We can't worship to that. We need the drums." Then the older generations say, "Oh, we need the old hymns, the deep hymns, the wonderful hymns that bring us closer to God! I can't worship if I don't have that tradition in my life. The church isn't worshipping right if it's not singing those songs."

Brothers and sisters, we've got all kinds of traditions and we tend to determine whether someone has a vital walk with Christ based on these things. Paul says, "Don't be led astray by them." Don't think for a moment that you can determine the extent of what's going on in someone's life by simply looking at the outside. Don't judge a book by its cover.

I want to be careful with this because there are some things that we can judge. However, when you judge, do so on the criteria of Scripture, not your man-made traditions. Some traditions are so old and so tightly knit into the fabric of church that you think you can find them in Scripture. Are you surprised when you don't? These things are called "folk theology" — theology that has been passed down from one generation to another so that it has become folklore. You think that certain traditions are in the Bible, but they're not.

The Jewish people were saying, "You want to be a good Christian? You won't be accepted unless you are circumcised. You won't be accepted unless you celebrate the Sabbath. You won't be accepted if you don't participate in these festivals." Each of these things had their place. Circumcision had its place. Sabbath rest had its place. Dietary laws had their place. However, God has now given us Jesus Christ. In the text it says, "*These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ*" (Colossians 2:17).

This week I will travel down to Dallas and be gone until Thursday. I get homesick quickly, so at some point I will pull up a picture of my family on my phone. I will remember what a great family I have and the joy they give me. That picture helps pacify my homesickness. When we miss people, we pull up something that reminds us of them. However, when I get home, I don't keep looking at the picture — I embrace the real deal. Circumcision, Sabbaths, dietary restrictions and special days are a picture — Christ is the substance. Traditions are now secondary.

If you want to hold to your traditions, it would be no different than if I came home from Dallas and kissed the picture of my wife instead of kissing Amanda who is standing right in front of me. Some of us are taking the picture that represents part of our faith and kissing that instead of the real deal. That's what tradition does.

2. Mysticism

Colossians 2:18-19 addresses this issue:

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

What's mysticism? First of all, the word mysticism isn't a bad word. Properly defined in the dictionary it means, "a religious practice through which spiritual truth can be gained through contemplation, prayer and deep thinking on the Word of God." That's not bad. You can gain spiritual truth from thinking through, praying through and deeply thinking through the Scriptures. What Paul addresses here is another definition of the word which is, "a self-delusional and dreamy confusion of thought." The New Testament Judaizers in Colossae were bringing their old things back from the Torah and the New Testament converts from among the Gentiles were taking Greek thought and philosophy and applying it to New Testament Christianity. This mysticism was derived from the imagination of the Gnostics.

What did the Gnostics say? They thought spiritual vitality was found in the experiences that you have. The Gnostics were great pretenders. They began to fool the Colossian church. They had conjured up the persona of humility. Colossians 2:8 says that they were filled with empty deceit. Later in the text it says they insisted on asceticism. They insisted on humility yet they became puffed up. They also talked about the worship of angels. How did they start? They would say in their Colossian Bible study, "I cannot have a relationship with God. I am sinful. God is holy. So there is no way that I can approach God, therefore I will approach an angel and talk to him. The angel appears to me because God is too holy and I'm too sinful. The angel communicates truth to me." The Gnostics would go on in great detail about the visions that they had with angels in them.

Gnostics believed that you were continually climbing the ladder, moving from one angel to another angel. Then the conversation would be espoused in the Colossians' small group: "What angel are you following?" "Well, I'm talking with Angel #4." "Well, I've moved on to Angel #7. He's told me some great things and you're not there yet."

It reminds me of what I used to hear in the car from my oldest son. He would hear something and his younger brother would say, "Noah, tell me about it." Noah, like a good older brother, would say, "It's only for 10-year-olds to know. You're not old enough." The Gnostics would puff themselves up and say, "I'm talking with an angel of higher caliber. I wish I could tell you all that he tells me, but you're not spiritual enough to hear it." They would do this to the point of believing they had a secret knowledge of God. They claimed that they were so holy — so set apart in their minds — that they were speaking with God Himself.

Colossians 2:18 says, "*Let no one disqualify you.*" Literally it means, "Let no one set up a VIP room in Christianity." Don't let someone say to you that because you've experienced things, you get to go behind the red-velvet rope to a place where others cannot go. We have one Mediator between God and man and that is the Man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). There is nothing that separates us from that. I don't have any special luxury. I don't get to go into the VIP lounge while you have to hang out elsewhere. Christ tore that curtain on the day of His crucifixion (Matthew 27:51). Now we can enter the most holy of holies because of the finished work of Jesus Christ. There isn't a knowledge that is only known privately and another knowledge for public consumption.

How does this apply to us? There are some people who say they talk to angels. We live in a world where experiences in the Christian life are held in high regard. How so? I can't tell you how many times we've had testimony night at a small group where someone says, "Gee whiz, guys. I wish that I had a more amazing testimony. I grew up in a Christian home. I had a great mom and dad. They shared the good news with me at a young age. I accepted Christ. He has filled me and sanctified me. While it hasn't been perfect, it hasn't been bumpy. I feel kind of dumb that my testimony is boring compared to you former drug users and immoral people who have been to prison. I don't have those experiences."

Mysticism is found when you think your faith is of less value than that of others. Isn't it enough that you who were blind can now see? Isn't it enough that you were dead and now you are alive? We don't need good stories to add to it. I'm not saying that those experiences are bad, but you don't have to think that your faith is boring because you haven't had those experiences.

Have you ever wished that you lived in a different time so that you could experience greater revelation? "I would walk with God a whole lot closer if I had the same experience as the disciples. If I saw what they saw, I would be on fire! It would be amazing to see Lazarus coming out from the cave." As a caterer it would be amazing to see five thousand people fed without a Fox River truck out back. That would really grow my faith! We say, "Jesus, You are important, but show me more! Give me just a little more. Give me that extra pick-me-up that allows the hair on the back of my neck to rise."

We long for the ecstatic, for the extraordinary, for the miraculous. That's why a book about a little boy going to heaven and coming back to tell the story is a best seller among Christians. We want to experience that in order to feel closer to God. That mysticism, that dreamy thought, says, "Jesus isn't enough for us. We need a little kid to tell us about it." If you don't think this type of thinking applies to you, think about end-times speculations.

I received a four-and-a-half page email from a Christian outside of this congregation. The letter said things like, "I'm so happy that Jesus is coming. The new atheistic president of Greece is the anti-Christ. Isn't it amazing? Isn't it awesome that we can see the words of Revelation coming out in our lifetime? Doesn't it give you goose-bumps?" Let me tell you what gives me goose bumps. I was dead, blind and held captive by the enemy and Jesus Christ made me alive by His blood on the cross. That's it. When you get into newspaper theology, you're saying, "Jesus, You're not enough. I need something more that tantalizes me and makes me feel better about being a Christian."

What do we do with this? Let me remind you of two things:

Uncommon experiences do happen

My job is not to judge the uncommon experiences that you have. That's one of the great questions that pastors get. "Pastor, can I tell you about something that happened to me?" They want me to give my stamp of approval, confirming that it was from God. I think some things are probably not from God. However, there are spiritual moments — those feelings that people have and those experiences that you can't explain. I've had them. I don't always know what to do with them.

I've shared this story before. Right around the time that Noah was born, I got really sick. My liver was starting to fail me and I had a fever over 106 degrees. I was in the emergency room, convulsing, taking ice baths trying to get the fever down. I was an ugly mess. That night I experienced the most horrific pain that I had ever had. I was by myself, crying out in pain. It hurt so badly. I remember at the peak of the pain, the person sitting beside my bed said, "I know you're hurting. Let me help get your mind off of it. Tell me something about yourself. ." So I'm telling him things while I'm crying through the pain. We talked about baseball and all kinds of things. At some point I went to sleep.

When I woke up the next morning, there was no one in the room. I asked the nurse, "Where's the guy who was in the room last night? He was a young guy. He was about my age. Where is he? I want to thank him. I couldn't have gotten through the night without him. Where is he?" She said, "What are you talking about? There was no one else in your room." I don't know what to do with that, but I know what I experienced. That has never happened to me again. I was also never on those types of drugs before. I never had that high of a fever before.

But I'm not writing a book about it and we are not going to make you affirm my vision in your membership commitments. There are a lot of things I need to filter that uncommon experience through. I had better say that man wasn't Jesus. It was an uncommon experience. It was one of those things that you put in your notebook of questions to ask Jesus when you get to heaven.

Uncommon experiences should never define you

Don't let these uncommon experiences, whether you've had them or not, define you. Don't let them be the basis of your faith. I can't tell you how many times I've been grieved by hearing about someone who had an experience and it changed his or her life. The Apostle Paul had an amazing, uncommon experience. He doesn't talk about it in the book of Colossians. He doesn't tell them to go walk the road to Damascus and have a vigil, because that's where he met Jesus. How many overpasses with water stains of Jesus or Mary have we shut down expressways to see? That's mysticism. It makes us feel good. We love stories like the flesh of a tomato that looks like the Lord's Supper or the places in Europe where the Virgin Mother has supposedly appeared. Millions flock there. Those are shadows of the substance of Jesus Christ. Don't fall prey to them. Don't allow those experiences to define you. Have the discernment to push away experiences that you know are not from God. Push away experiences where you know that there is no Scriptural way that it can happen. Don't allow things into your life that can influence you in that way. Acknowledge the circumstances that could cause your experiences. It might not be from Jesus Who only desires to help grow your faith.

Colossians 2:19 says that we need to be connected to the Head. The people who have had these experiences and think that we should have them too are puffed up without reason by their sensual mind. What we need to do is hold fast to Jesus, for Whom the whole body is being knit together and nourished, growing with a growth that comes from God (Ephesians 4:16). Experiences don't grow you; God does. Don't go looking for experiences thinking that they will grow your faith. Don't think you can grow from hearing the story of someone who thinks they have gone to heaven. Let the Word of God dwell in you richly.

3. Legalism

Colossians 2:20-22 says:

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

The final weed that Paul wants us to pull is legalism and asceticism, which is a faith reduced to a list of dos and don'ts. This form of religion says that vitality is found in the sacrifices that you make.

Throughout church history we read horror stories of people who got this wrong. They would beat their bodies to bring them into submission. They thought that if they whipped their body enough, they would be holy. One church father struggled with lust. In order to address the issue of the body he castrated himself. Later he learned that lust doesn't begin under the belt, it begins in the heart. How sad is it when we think external things will address the issues that plague us? Only God can provide a way out.

The Colossian church struggled with this. They started forbidding things. "Do not handle. Do not taste. Do not touch" (Colossians 2:21). They said that marriage was bad; sexual union between spouses was bad; the idea of creation itself was bad. They told people not to be involved in the material world or with unbelievers. They were told to keep themselves away from all the entrapments of the physical world and the lives of sinners. They separated themselves, living life in a bubble. They did this not

on the basis of what the Bible said, but because of man-made inventions. They invented fasts. They beat their bodies in gruesome ways just to show the world how holy they were.

You might think, "Well, I don't do that. I don't beat my body. I don't go on long fasts." The Christian life can be filled with dos and don'ts. If others are doing something that we don't think is right, we judge them. We assume they are not devoted to Christ because they do certain things. While Christianity has a code of obedience, the life of a Christian is not about "dos and don'ts" but about "done." Sadly, in our world today we define Christianity by what we eat or drink. You might go to Chili's later today and see Brother So-and-so as you walk by. You might think, "Oh my goodness, did I see a beer at his table? That guy's drinking beer! I thought he was a good Christian. He's drinking beer on a Sunday, too! After church. Oh..." We do what the Pharisees did. They loved legalism. They created boundaries around the boundaries around the Old Testament commandments.

For example, let's talk about alcohol. "*And do not get drunk with wine...*" (Ephesians 5:18) does not say, "Do not drink wine." That is an area where you can agree to abstain or to partake. We can't pass judgment on that one. We can't create fences that the Bible hasn't created. The Pharisees say, "We want to make sure that no one crosses this fence, so we'll build another fence just to give them a warning sign." Pretty soon there were warnings for warnings for warnings and no one remembers what the original warning was all about. Be careful not to give credibility to someone's faith based on what they eat or drink.

Another example is how we educate our children. This issue can ruin churches. "We're holy because we homeschool." "We're holy because we're out in the world and we're letting our kids endure persecution." "We're holy because we have our children in a Christian school." People can come up with a whole lot of reasons. Your kids are not going to be in heaven because they attended public school, private school or homeschool, but because of the blood of Jesus Christ. Be careful not to pass judgment over one another because of these things.

Don't judge people on how they go on vacation. "Oh, you're going to spend \$1,000 to go on vacation? I'm going to go on a mission trip. I'm going to do something holy with my time. There is something very unholy about sitting on the beach." Do you see what happens? "*Do not touch.*" "Don't go on the beach. That's not good. You could use your time in so many better ways! You could be reaching orphans and widows in their distress." Is it good to reach orphans and widows? Yes. Does that mean you can't go on vacation? No. Be careful that legalism doesn't crop up in your life with questions like:

- Do they have a TV in their house?
- How do they spend their money?
- How much service do they do in the church?
- How do they use their time?

These types of questions tell us that there is a legalistic heart within us. We need to be careful. While we need to ask ourselves these questions on an individual basis, we must be careful not to pass judgment on others for them. That means we need to understand that God is at work in the lives of others. God is allowing the Spirit to do His work. Paul addresses this over and over again in the Scriptures. There is a lot of freedom in Christ. Don't start putting chains around what God has set free in Christ.

Remember that:

Sacrifices in life can produce some good

This does not mean that discipline is bad. It is good for us to be disciplined. There may be a reason that you abstain from something that someone else does not. I have no problem with drinking even though I don't drink myself. I don't need any other reasons to joke around more than I do when I'm sober. I have a hard enough time guarding my tongue when I'm sober, let alone with a couple drinks in me. That may not be your issue. Praise God for that! But I can't judge you and you cannot judge me, because it is something that God has left to our freedom in Christ.

If you want to use your time on vacation to go and lie on a beach, praise God. If you want to use it to go on a mission trip, praise God. Let's not judge one another. Sacrifice is good, but we cannot pass judgment.

Sacrifice alone as a means to godliness falls short

Our activities apart from Christ, no matter how noble they are, will never get us to God. They will never produce holiness. If you see external things as proof of somehow being better than someone else, you are a legalist. You are not following Christ in humility. The sacrifices that you make will become a noose around your neck. Jesus wants you in a relationship, not in a

competition with others. The church must be a place where people worship God, not a place to demonstrate our own perceived greatness.

Paul has sounded the alarm against ritualism, mysticism and legalism. He tells us to keep our eyes open and be aware of it. What should our response be? Here are **three action steps**:

1. Plant good seed into good soil. We will learn next week that our vitality is found in the finished work of Jesus Christ. That's where our hope is. That is where we must plant ourselves. Don't plant yourself in activities but in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. When you find yourself veering off of that course, get back on track by looking at the cross. Focus on Christ, the Author and Perfector of your faith (Hebrews 12:2). When you think ritual is important, look to Jesus. When that legalistic bent comes out of you, look to Jesus. When that experience that you want so badly tempts you, look to Jesus. Plant good seed into the soil.
2. Pull the weeds before it's too late. What areas in your life need pulling? Don't allow them to get tangled up. Don't allow them to sap the needed nutrients from your faith. Get rid of them. Get rid of them now. Don't try to explain them away. Don't try to say, "Well, I'm just trying to keep the church pure." Ask yourself these questions regarding ritualism, mysticism and legalism:
 - a. Does my Christianity have a judgmental streak?
 - b. Do I find myself evaluating others instead of myself?
 - c. Do I demand that everyone else's Christianity looks like mine?
 - d. Do I only care about what I see on the outside to the dismissal of what's happening on the inside?
 - e. Is my Christianity a joyless set of rules or things to be done?
3. Praise Jesus when the garden grows. When God grows you, when He uses you in amazing ways, when He shows you amazing things, when He allows you to experience amazing things, don't boast in yourself. Boast in the Lord. Blaise Pascal put it this way: "Jesus Christ is the center of everything and the object of everything. He who does not know Him knows nothing of the order of the world and nothing of himself." You and I will know nothing about the world or ourselves if Christ is not number one.

True, vital Christianity is not found in the rituals in which we partake, the experiences that we have, or the sacrifices that we make. Rather, it is found in the finished work of Jesus Christ.