



IT'S NOT ABOUT THE RULES

Colossians 2:16-23

February 15, 2009

Dr. Todd Wilson, Senior Pastor

INTRODUCTION

Colossians is about how we are to continue to live in Christ. This is what the theme verse is all about: "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (2:6-7).

Yet there is an immediate threat to the Colossians continuing on in Christ just as they began. Paul refers to it in 2:8 with this warning: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."

Paul then tries to help this early Christ-followers to not be "taken captive" by life strategies by reminding them, first of all, and positively speaking, that it's all about Jesus. That's what we learn in 2:9-15. We don't need to depend upon "human tradition and the basic principles of this world," (2:8) because, as verse 9 says, "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ." We have fullness in Christ! It's all about Christ!

But Paul is not content only to make the positive case. He wants to make the *negative* case as well. He not only wants to uphold Christ, he also wants to bring down the alternative. This he does in 2:16-23. And the point of this passage is this: It's not about the rules. So, on the one hand, it's all about Christ (2:9-15); on the other hand, it's not about the rules (2:16-23).

Let me invite you, then, to take out a pen or pencil and open your Calvary Family News and cross out the sermon title, "God Causes Growth," and write in its place, "It's Not About the Rules." For that's what today's passage is about.

In particular, I want us to see in this passage *why* it's not about the rules. That is, *why* is continuing on in the Christian life – which is what this whole letter is about, as we learned from the theme verse in 2:6-7 – is not about rules. Or, *why* is it that Christian growth is not ultimately promoted by rules? As we strive to live our lives as Christians, as we seek (in accordance with Paul's command) to "continue to live in him" (2:6), *why* should we not look to rules?

WHY IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT THE RULES

Paul addresses this question in this passage. And he offers in these verses, I believe, *five* answers to this question. Don't worry about trying to write all these down; they'll be posted this afternoon on my website (admittedly, I confess, not very creatively named but easily located): toddawilson.com. Or you can get a copy of the manuscript next Sunday. So don't perhaps distract yourself with writing; instead, listen and pray and, I trust, hear the voice of God speaking to you through His word.

First, rules aren't the point, they're only pointers (2:16-17)

This is where Paul begins in this passage. Rules aren't the point, they're only pointers. "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (2:16-17).

Because of the explicit reference to "religious festival" and "New Moon" and, particularly, "Sabbath day," we know that Judaism and the Jewish Law were somehow playing a part in the teaching of the false teachers. They're were evidently pointing to the rules of Judaism and the Jewish Law: in particular, they were apparently putting pressure on the Colossians to observe certain dietary regulations, as we see with the reference to "what you eat or drink," and certain sacred days, as we see with the reference to "a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day."

But Paul's point is that these observances, these regulations, these rules, are not the point – *they're only pointers*. So Paul calls them "shadows," which is a good metaphor to use. Because a shadow is, not only *not* the reality, but it points to the reality. And in this case, the reality to which the rules of the Old Testament point is Christ himself: "the reality is found in Christ," as Paul says (see Heb. 10:1).

There are two important lessons that emerge from Paul's use of the metaphor of shadows to describe rules and regulations. First, we should be cautious about leaning too heavily on rules and regulations. Because they're not the reality, they'll only disappoint if they're treated as though they were; that is, if they're leaned on too heavily. Second, we need to learn to let every rule or regulation we encounter, whether in our homes or in the Bible, serve as a pointer to lead our minds to the Reality only found in Christ. So, for example, we need to learn how to let "Thou shall not covet," serve to point us to the person and work of Christ, our great shepherd, and there rest content in the fact that "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Psalm 23).

Second, rules tend to cut off connection from the true source of growth (2:18-19)

The second reason why Christian growth and continuing in Christ isn't all about rules is because *rules tend to cut off connection from the true source of growth*. This is Paul's point in 2:18-19: "Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions." As a result, then, Paul says in the next verse: "He has *lost connection* with the Head" (2:19), the only true source of growth.

Here's the irony with those who thinks continuing in Christ is all about the rules. They feign humility, but it's false humility. What tends to be going on underneath the surface is what Paul calls a "puffed up" mind – pride or arrogance.

Victor Hugo's character, Javier, is a picture of how this works. You may have read the book *Les Miserables*, or seen the musical, or watched the movie. Inspector Javier embodies the life of law, a life lived in rigorous pursuit of the rules. At one level, you sympathize with his character as he describes his self-sacrifice and service of the law. Yet, as Hugo masterfully diagnoses and describes in the book, underneath the surface of self-sacrifice is a seething pride. Javier is the perfect picture of someone for whom the

rules are everything, and thus someone who is puffed up and cut off from the only true source of growth.

Third, rules don't cause growth, God does (2:19)

The third reason why it's not all about rules is perhaps the most straightforward and easy to understand. *Rules don't cause growth, God does.* Paul says just this very thing at the end of 2:19: "He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, *grows as God causes it to grow.*"

Did you hear that? "As God causes it to grow." Here we find an axiom or first principle of the Christian life and Christian living: *God causes growth!* Rules don't cause growth. Regulations don't cause growth. The Law doesn't cause growth.

Friends, only God causes growth. To be sure, God may choose to use rules or regulations or the Law to direct growth. But many of us also know from our own experience that *we can use* rules or regulations or the Law and still *not* see growth. We can erect boundaries and fences around our life, and yet not really be changed and thus not really grow. But why is that? Because only God – God's presence, God's Spirit – causes growth.

Because he had spent years planting churches, Paul, like a farmer, had become an expert in growth, spiritual growth. He had to because of his job. He would arrive in completely pagan cities, where the name of Christ had never before even been heard, much less believed, and there preach the Gospel and see people come to faith in Christ. And so Paul had ample opportunity to watch growth: how it happened, or didn't happen, as the case may be.

We see Paul's perspective on growth, I believe, in 1 Corinthians, where he is speaking to one of his churches about how his role as the church planter related to the role of the church's pastor and teacher, and guy named Apollos, and how both of their roles related to God's role. Here's what he says: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So," Paul then concludes, "neither he who plants [that's Paul] nor he who waters [that's Apollos] is *anything*, but only God, who makes things grow" (3:6-7).

Fourth, rules are for a world believers have left behind (2:20)

The fourth reason why continuing in Christ and growing as a Christian isn't all about rules is perhaps the most subtle, and yet the most profound. Listen carefully, then, to what Paul says in 2:20-22: "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!' These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings."

There are two phrases I'd like to draw your attention to. The first is right there at the beginning of verse 20: "Since you died." So, first of all, realize that you've died. If you're a follower of Christ, and if you've been born again by God's Holy Spirit, you have *died*, spiritually speaking. That is, there has been such a profound spiritual change that has taken place in your heart and soul, that you've, as it were, died to who you used to

be before you became a Christian. So, for all the Christians in the room, I've got "bad" news for you: You're all dead!

But dead to what? Well, that leads us to the second phrase of importance, which is in the middle of this same verse: "as though you still belonged to it." What's the "it" in this phrase? The "it" points back to the last word of the preceding phrase, the word "world." So, you see what Paul is driving at? Christian, you have died; you have died to the world, to "the basic principles of this world."

Several years ago Dunkin' Donuts launched a new add campaign: "America runs on Dunkin'." Well, perhaps. It would certainly be more accurate to say that America, along with every other country in this fallen world, runs on rules. The world runs on rules. Because that's the only way this fallen world can stay on course: with the help of rules and regulations and laws and oversight.

Consider, for example, the recent hubbub in Washington over this Stimulus Package. The vexing question, of course, is how to get the money to where it ought to get to without it being directed into someone's outrageous year-end bonus or squandered on stuff that actually has very little to do with creating jobs. So the battle-cry in D.C. these days is for "More regulation!" and "Stricter oversight!" – that is, for the imposition of rules. Because America runs, not on Dunkin', but on rules; and America runs off course without them.

But, friends, if you are a Christian, if you have been born again, you no longer live in that world, the world that runs on rules. And so, as Paul says, "why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!'" Christians don't direct their lives according to rules, but according to the Reality of the presence of God living within them.

Think of this. There will be no rules in the New Heavens and the New Earth, where the righteous dwells. You ever wondered what it's going to be like? I wonder if there are going to be billboards and signage. Perhaps there will be. But whatever it says, it's not going to say: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" There won't be any signage on the pearly gates saying: "Drive Slow, Children at Play." Or "No soliciting." Or "Do Not Trespass." There will be no rules in that world, because there will be an all consuming Reality that forever takes the place of all rules. There, in the New Heavens and the New Earth, there will be a Person, whose presence is so majestic and thus magnetic, that it will consume our every affection and quicken our absolute and utterly joyful obedience! No rules there! Only full-blown Reality!

And we, who are Christians, are called to live in *that* world while we yet *inhabit this* world. Not that this means we are to live rule-less or law-less lives. But we are to live such profoundly Christ-oriented lives that the rules and regulations are, as it were, a thing of the past. Besides, you see what Paul says in verse 22: all these rules and regulations that are based on human commands and teachings, they're all destined to perish. One day they'll all be gone, and the only thing left will be the reality of Christ and those who are found in Him.

Fifth, rules can't ultimately restrain an unruly heart (2:23)

Interestingly, Paul's fifth and final reason why it's not all about rules is the most blunt. It's interesting he'd save this reason for last, but perhaps the idea is that he wants

to end by saying to the Colossians: “Hey, this is the bottom-line; this is where the rubber meets the road!”

So here’s the straight stuff about rules: *rules can’t ultimately restrain an unruly heart*. It’s there in the final verse of this passage: “Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack *any value in restraining sensual indulgence*” (2:23).

Here Paul is shooting pretty straight. Yes, he is saying, a life lived on the basis of rules and regulations certainly looks like the right kind of life. For it has every appearance of “wisdom” and spiritual rigor. Yet, if you look a little closer you realize that all the self-imposed stuff, all the harsh ascetic treatment of the body, all that religious rigor, at the end of the day, lacks *any value* – Paul’s words, not mine – in restraining sensual indulgence. Why not? Because, as every parent will understand, rules ultimately cannot *touch* the heart.

Here my heart goes out to those of other religious faiths: Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, some of whom will go to great lengths in religious observance and ascetic rigor: praying, fasting, meditating, and on and on. Here I think, in particular, of the devout Muslim, who prays five times a day, and faithfully observes the month of Ramadan, and abstains from various foods and drinks; and, yet, underneath the weightiness of all that religious observance is undoubtedly a torrent of repressed desire: a swamp of lust and ambition and greed and desire that cannot be drained by all the religious rigors in the world – but only inflamed!

And, to be fair, this is not just the situation for Muslims, but for many other religious faiths, as well, including some varieties of Christianity. I’ve found this to be the case for many devout Catholics: faithful attendance at Mass, diligent in reciting the Rosary, scrupulous in observing Lent. But underneath all the religious observance there’s still an unruly heart. I’ve also found this to be the case for many devout Protestants, particularly of the fundamentalist variety: faithful attendance at any and every church service, diligent in reading your Bible, scrupulous in avoiding the wrong music and movies and recreations. But underneath all the religious observance, there’s still this unruly heart.

One of my favorite pictures of the fact that rules can’t restrain an unruly heart is from the movie *Chocolat* (2000). The story is of a young mother who arrives in a small, rather repressed village in rural France and there opens in the middle of town a chocolaterie, filled with the most delectable little chocolate goodies, which begin to change the lives of the towns people.

Yet the village Mayor, a rigorous, law-oriented, rule-following sort of fellow, will have none of it. He finds the store and everything about it both uncouth and immoral. So much so that the Mayor, in a fit of smug, self-righteous moral protest, decides secretly at night to break into the chocolaterie and ransack the place. Yet, as he’s making a wreck of the place and scattering the chocolate goodies here and there, a little bit lands on the corner of his lip. And he happens to let his tongue taste a bit of it. And, much to his surprise as a “never eat chocolate” sort of fellow, the chocolate actually tastes pretty good. In fact, more than pretty good – *really good!*

Pretty soon the Mayor, who all his life has tried to restrain his unruly heart by the rule of rules, is overtaken by his unruly heart and dives headlong, literally, into the display window and there devours nearly everyone of the chocolate goodies until he passes out in an overeating stupor, only to be found the next morning by the residents of the village, crashed-out in the display window with chocolate crumbs and chocolate goop running down his face and over his whole body! A deliciously ironic turn of events, to say the least!

Friends, rules can't ultimately restrain an unruly heart. Rules might work for a while, for a season, for a time. Rules might work in certain situations or with certain temptations. But, if rules is all you've got to restrain your unruly heart, sooner or later the rules will give out – and the heart, with all its lusts and ambitions – will come roaring out like a torrent stopped up behind the hard concrete of a dam.

This is why rules don't ultimately work. Because rules can't restrain the very thing they're intended to restrain: the wayward heart, filled as it is with lust and ambition and greed and sensuality. Only God's Holy Spirit can penetrate deep enough to make a lasting difference at the heart-level. This is why we can't continue on in the Christian life, much less grow in the Christian life, by merely or simply following rules. They're no match for our wayward hearts. Or, to quote Paul, rules and regulations, while they have an appearance of wisdom, lack "any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (2:23).

CONCLUSION

What, then, to do with rules? Avoiding two equal and opposite errors

For some of you, this is a liberating message: it's not about the rules. Because you've lived your entire life thinking "It's all about the rules!" You've been trying to do life, and the Christian life, and perhaps even your home life with the spouse and kids as though life were about the rules. Or at least you've inadvertently slipped into living that way. And, if you're honest, you've found it somewhat futile and frustrating and fatiguing.

For others of you, however, legalism isn't your problem, nor has it ever been. In fact, just the opposite. Your problem is not legalism but antinomianism. Antinomianism – that is, *anti* or "against" and *nomism* or "law": thus an attitude that is against law or against rules or against regulations. Your battle cry, then, is not "It's all about the rules!" like the legalists, but "Rules are ridiculous!" So you've been licking your chops at this message!

Both of these extremes are to be avoided because both extremes are unbiblical and unhelpful – and, in fact, positively harmful to your own life and those around, including this church.

The key, as is so often the case in life, is striking the right balance; avoiding the extremes of legalism, on the one hand, and antinomianism, on the other. The way to do that, I believe, is to understand that rules aren't bad, they're good; and they're good, as long as they're not turned into reality. When rules are turned into reality, however, they can become deadly! Rules, in short, are rails – guard rails, like we find on an interstate highway, designed to protect from bad driving or accidents, but not to promote good driving.

Living like it's not about the rules – in your life, your home, your church

So what does it mean as a Christian to live like it's not all about the rules? Well, it means to live like it's all about Christ—which it is!

But what does this look like in your life, in your home, in our church? In your life, it means relying upon the grace of God to affect the change you so desire rather than upon your own discipline and striving. In your home, it means pointing your spouse or your children to Christ and his authority, rather than to you and yours. In our church, it means being a place for the broken, not a place for the pious. It means checking the gavel and the umpire's uniform and the sergeant's whistle at the Information Desk in the Portico before you interact with anyone.

What, in short, does it mean to live a life that's not all about the rules, but all about Christ? It means, as we'll see in the weeks ahead, to live a life with your heart set on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God; it means to live a life with your mind set on things above, not on earthly things. "For you died," as Paul says, "and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (3:3).

Amen.