

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 1 of 12

In our last message we began focusing on the second of Satan's triple threats to the church that we find in Colossians chapter two, and that is the snare and the sin of legalism. As we continue focusing on this evil of legalism today I want to call your attention once more to the passage that is before us, in which the Apostle Paul condemns this evil. Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eleven. Paul writes this:

In Him [that is, in Jesus Christ] you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it [that is, in the cross]. So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 2 of 12

This section of chapter two is vitally important, because legalism is a constant threat. Legalism threatens individual Christians. Legalism threatens churches and denominations. Legalism seeks to place believers who are free in Christ under the bondage of Satan once again. We must be prepared to recognize legalism when it makes its way into our thinking. We need to recognize legalizers when they come into the church. We need to be prepared to confront legalism in all of its forms, from Scripture. We must be equipped to say, "Thus says the Lord." And that is the purpose of this part of our series in Colossians chapter two.

Legalistic Influences in the Time of the Colossians

Now, in order to understand how this section of the book of Colossians applies to our present situation as Christians, we need to understand what was happening in Colosse and the surrounding regions at the time Paul wrote this epistle. So this leads us to a question. Clearly, Paul is confronting the threat of legalism in the life of the individual Christian, and in the Christian home, and in the church as a body, for a reason. Clearly, Paul is addressing something that is a real and present danger to these people. So, what was that danger? What forms of legalism were prevalent in the time of the Colossians? As we look at the New Testament record, as well as other historical records of the early church, we find that there were two kinds of legalism threatening the early church.

First, there were the Judaizers. In the region where Galatia and Colosse were located, there were Jewish legalizers who professed to believe in Jesus Christ, but

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 3 of 12

they said that you had to add the keeping of the Jewish law to the Gospel in order to be saved. These people were the descendants of Jews who had been taken captive to Babylon many centuries before this time, but in later centuries one of the kings of Babylon ordered these Jews to be resettled in the region where Colosse was located. So the stage had actually been set for this eventual problem in the church, centuries before.

Consider how ironic this is. These Jews were living in the region of Colosse and Galatia because their ancestors had refused to obey God's ceremonial law while it was still in effect, before it had been fulfilled and done away with by the coming of Christ into the world. And now their descendants wanted to re-impose that law, which has been done away with in Christ, on the Colossian believers.

These people were saying that you had to keep the Jewish feasts, and you had to keep the Jewish dietary regulations, and you had to be circumcised if you were a male, in order to be saved and stay saved.

And so Paul answers these Jewish legalizers here in Colossians chapter two in the strongest terms. He condemns what they are teaching as heresy. He tells the Colossians to beware of being cheated out of the riches that are theirs by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. Here he says, "So let no one judge you" in any of these things that were shadows of the things that were fulfilled in Christ. And at the beginning of Galatians chapter five he says the same thing in a

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 4 of 12

different way: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage."

So the first kind of legalism that was threatening the church at Colosse came from those who wanted to place Christian believers back under the Jewish law.

The second kind of legalism that was threatening the church at Colosse came from those who wanted to set up man-made rules and regulations, and require all men to follow them. One of the groups that was representative of this kind of legalism was the Stoics. We find in Acts chapter seventeen that the Stoics were one of the main groups that Paul was confronting when he delivered his great address to the men at Mars Hill in Athens.

The Stoics were the followers of the teachings of a man named Zeno, who had lived in Athens in the third century B.C. Zeno derived much of his way of thinking from the earlier philosopher Socrates.

The Stoics didn't believe in a personal God, only in a creative force. The Stoics were naturalistic. They believed that all being was corporeal or physical, and they rejected the Biblical idea of a spiritual realm of principalities and powers, and they rejected the idea of the Biblical God. Therefore they did not believe that Jesus Christ was both God and man, two natures in one body. The Stoics believed that this life is all there is, that there is no life after death. The Stoics were also determinists. They believed that everything that happened was based on the law of fate.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 5 of 12

The Stoics were consummate legalists. Their lives were governed by man-made laws and regulations of conduct that were in keeping with their philosophy. In many ways, these rules and regulations were a direct counterpart of the kinds of rules and regulations that the unbelieving Jewish religious leaders had placed over top of the Old Testament law. In Luke chapter eleven, Jesus condemned these Jewish "experts in the law" as they called themselves. The Stoics were men of the same sort. The leaders of the Stoics encouraged their followers to practice rituals that helped to instill and ingrain a legalistic way of thinking about life and the world.

Two Things We Must Understand

So legalism was a great problem for the early Christians. The Judaizers were trying to place the Christians back under the Jewish law. The Stoics and others were trying to place Christians under various forms of pagan legalism. Now, I have made the statement that legalism is a great problem in the church in our time. Some of you may be wondering what I mean by that. Well in this message I want to begin that explanation. And for that purpose, it is important for us to have two things clearly in mind.

First, we need to understand the nature of the law of God. We need to understand that in the Old Testament there are three parts to the law of God, and we need to understand that only one of them – the moral law of God expressed in the Ten Commandments – is still in force today. So that is the first thing we need to have clearly in our minds.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 6 of 12

And then secondly, with this understanding of the nature of the law of God clearly in our minds, we need to survey the position of the church in our time. We need to identify the major movements that are exerting a legalistic influence on the church in our time. And, of course, we need to know how to answer these legalists.

God's Law: Its Proper Use, and Abuse

So, let's take up the first question. We need to make sure that we understand the nature of the law of God. We need to understand that Scripture instructs us regarding both the use and the abuse of God's law. Now let me explain what I mean by that. We need to understand that there is one element of God's law that is eternal. That is the moral law of God. But we also need to understand that there are two other elements of God's law that were temporary, and that if we attempt to bring either one of them back into force in any sense, we have gone into the realm of legalism.

There is, for the Christian, the thing we are to pursue, and that is the proper use of God's moral law. But there is also, for the Christian, the thing we are to avoid like the plague, and that is the abuse or misuse of the two aspects of God's law that are no longer in force.

The Threefold Law of God in the Old Testament

There were three parts of the law of God as they were given in the first five books of the Old Testament.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 7 of 12

The first is the moral law of God. We find that moral law stated for us as the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter twenty. But we also find the same moral standards stated for us from the very beginning of Genesis. God states that the Sabbath is to be holy long before we find it in the Ten Commandments. God states that idolatry is a sin long before we find it in the Ten Commandments. God states that murder, and covetousness, and disobedience to parents, and all the rest, are violations of His holiness long before we find them in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are the great summary of God's moral law, but that moral law has its roots in God's eternal holiness.

And as we come to the New Testament, in the Sermon on the Mount in the book of Matthew chapter five, we find Jesus making it clear that the moral law of God is not simply a matter of do's and don'ts. The moral law of God is not a matter of mere outward obedience. The moral law of God has to do with the issues of the heart. Jesus says that if a man has looked upon a woman with lust in his heart, he has already committed adultery. Jesus says that if you are angry with your brother without a cause, you have already committed murder in your heart. And as we read in James chapter two, verse ten, God's standard is perfection, and nothing less. If you keep the whole law, and yet stumble in only one point, you are guilty of violation of the entire moral law of God.

And so no human being can keep the moral law of God perfectly. So what is the great primary purpose of God's moral law? Paul tells us in Galatians chapter three, that this law was designed to show us our need of Christ, to show us that we cannot

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 8 of 12

keep God's standard, to show us that we cannot have a righteousness of our own, and to show us that in order to be reconciled to the holy God of the universe we need the imputed righteousness of the only One who has kept God's law perfectly, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So the moral law of God is the first part of God's law in the Old Testament. And that law is an eternal law. It is still in force. It applies to all men in all times and in all situations. The Stoics and others like them in the time of the Colossians were attempting to erect a man-made moral standard in place of God's moral standard. And in the same way, many legalists in our day are attempting to erect man-made rules and regulations in place of, or in addition to, God's commandments in Scripture.

This brings us to the second part of the Old Testament law, and this was the civil law that God gave exclusively to the nation of Israel.

God's moral law was the foundation of the Jewish civil law. The Jewish civil law was God's moral law put into practice in a specific place and a specific situation. And God's moral law is to be the foundation for the laws of all nations in all times and situations.

But the civil law that God established for ancient Israel was unique. God designed it with two things in mind. First, the people of ancient Israel had a special status among all nations. Ancient Israel was a theocracy under the direct government of God. Secondly, the land of ancient Israel had a special status among all lands. The land that God gave to Israel was to be a land devoted to God. God

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 9 of 12

said that He would dwell among them and walk among them, as long as they obeyed His laws.

So the civil law of ancient Israel was designed to maintain a standard of righteousness within this land in which God Himself was living among them. And this land, the Promised Land, was at the crossroads of the world. All of the surrounding nations, as people traveled from one part of the world to another, as they conducted commerce and trade – they all had to pass through the land of Israel. And so the Jewish civil law, based on God's moral law, was designed to be Israel's testimony of God's standard of righteousness to the rest of the world.

But here is the main point we need to understand as we study the issue of legalism: The Old Testament civil law ceased to be in force when the unique situation of ancient Israel ceased to exist. The Jewish civil law ceased to be in force when Israel ceased to exist as a theocracy, when God no longer dwelt among His people, and the people of Israel were dispersed among the Gentile nations in the first century A.D. The Jewish Old Testament civil law is not, nor was it intended to be, the rule of law for any other nation. It was unique to a time and a place.

This is very important for us to understand, because as we move further on in this study, we are going to see that there are those in our time, within the visible church, who want to reinstitute the civil law of ancient Israel in America and other nations of the world in the present day. Christian Reconstructionism and Dominion Theology are two of the schools of thought that hold this belief. But as we are going

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 10 of 12

to see, they have no right to do this, they have no Biblical basis on which to teach this. It is, in fact, a very strong form of legalism.

And so we have the first two parts of the law – the moral law of God, and the civil law of ancient Israel.

And then we have the third part of the law of God as we find it in the first five books of the Old Testament, and that is the ceremonial law, which included the sacrificial system.

The Old Testament sacrificial system was designed to provide atonement for transgressions of the moral law of God. The entire system – the priesthood, the tabernacle, the sacrifices, the offerings, the feast days throughout the year, the solemn assembly of all adult males in Israel three times every year – all of these things pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord of glory and the One who would make the final sacrifice for sins, the sacrifice of His own blood, once and for all.

The book of Hebrews is the Holy Spirit's great New Testament commentary on that Old Testament system. And Hebrews tells us that this part of the law, like the civil law of ancient Israel, was temporary. But it was temporary for a different reason. It was temporary because it would all be fulfilled in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way, Hebrews chapter seven, beginning at verse twenty-six:

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 11 of 12

For such a High Priest [Jesus Christ] was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those [old] high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected [or consecrated] forever. (Hebrews 7:26-28)

The Apostle Paul states it this way, in Romans chapter ten, beginning at verse four:

Christ is the end of the law [that is, the termination of the law] for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall live by them." But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way:...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:4-13)

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "God's Law: Its Use and Abuse" (Colossians 2:11-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/19/2011

Page 12 of 12

Our Next Message

And so, with this understanding of the nature of the law of God clearly in our minds, in our next message we are going to move on to this question. What are the major movements that are exerting a legalistic influence, a destructive influence, on the church in our time? And, how can we answer these legalists? We are going to see that in our day, we face the same two kinds of legalism that the Colossian believers were facing nearly two thousand years ago.

About the Broadcast

The Scripture-Driven Church airs each week across the United States and around the world. Our goal is to preach the Gospel to the lost, and to equip believers to stand upon and live by the sole authority of God's Word, to the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The prayers of our listeners and supporters are vital to this ministry. Thank you for praying for us.

The broadcast is supported entirely by the gifts of God's people. If the Lord leads you to help us, you can do so in any of these ways:

- Call us toll-free at 888-804-9655 to give a gift using your credit card
- Give a gift by credit card at our secure website, www.teachingtheword.org
- Mail your contribution to TTW, Box 2533, Westminster, Maryland 21158

TeachingtheWord Ministries is recognized as a tax-exempt religious organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the U. S. Internal Revenue Code. Your gifts are fully tax deductible.

**May the Lord richly bless your personal study
of His inspired, infallible, inerrant Word.**