

## **Is the Sabbath for Today?**

Scripture: Colossians 2

Code: BQ052913

**Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (2:16–17)**

Legalism is the religion of human achievement. It argues that spirituality is based on Christ plus human works. It makes conformity to manmade rules the measure of spirituality. Believers, however, are complete in Christ, who has provided complete salvation, forgiveness, and victory. **Therefore**, Paul tells the Colossians, **let no one act as your judge**. Do not sacrifice your freedom in Christ for a set of manmade rules. Inasmuch as “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4), to become entangled again in a legalistic system is pointless and harmful. Paul reminded the Galatians, who were also beguiled by legalism, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).

Legalism is useless because it cannot restrain the flesh. It is also dangerously deceptive, because inwardly rebellious and disobedient Christians, or even nonChristians, can conform to a set of external performance standards or rituals. The nineteenth-century American pastor Gardiner Spring warned,

A merely moral man may be very scrupulous of duties he owes to his fellowmen, while the infinitely important duties he owes to God are kept entirely out of sight. Of loving and serving God, he knows nothing. Whatever he does or whatever he leaves undone, he does nothing for God. He is honest in his dealings with all except God, he robs none but God, he is thankless and faithless to none but God, he feels contemptuously, and speaks reproachfully of none but God. A just perception of the relations he sustains to God constitutes no part of his principles, and the duties which result from those relations constitute no part of his piety. He may not only disbelieve the Scriptures, but may never read them; may not only disregard the divine authority, but every form of divine worship, and live and die as though he had no concern with God and God had not concern with him. The character of the young man in the Gospel presents a painful and affecting view of the deficiencies of external morality (See Mt. 19:16–22). He was not dishonest, nor untrue; he was not impure nor malignant; and not a few of the divine commands he had externally observed. Nay, he says, “All these have I kept.” Nor was his a mere sporadic goodness, but steady and uniform. He had performed these services “from his youth up.” Nor was this all. He professed a willingness to become acquainted with his whole duty. “What lack I yet?” And yet when brought to the test, this poor youth saw that, with all his

boasted morality, he could not deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Christ. (*The Distinguishing Traits of Christian Character* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presby. & Ref., n.d.], pp. 7–8)

That Christians not be intimidated by such legalism was Paul's constant concern. He commanded Titus not to pay attention to "Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth," because "to the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled" (Titus 1:14–15). Romans 14–15 and 1 Corinthians 8–10 also discuss Christian liberty and the only legitimate reason for restraining it: to protect a weaker Christian brother or sister.

The false teachers were telling the Colossians that it was not enough to have Christ; they also needed to keep the Jewish ceremonial law. The false teachers' prohibitions about **food** and **drink** were probably based on the Old Testament dietary laws (cf. Lev. 11). Those laws were given to mark Israel as God's distinct people and to discourage them from intermingling with the surrounding nations.

Because the Colossians were under the New Covenant, the dietary laws of the Old Covenant were no longer in force. Jesus made that clear in Mark 7:

After He called the multitude to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. If any man has ears to hear, let him hear." And when leaving the multitude, He had entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) (vv. 14–19)

Paul reminded the Romans that "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). That the dietary laws are no longer in force was illustrated by Peter's vision (Acts 10:9–16) and formally ratified by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:28–29).

A **festival** was one of the annual Jewish celebrations, such as Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Lights (cf. Lev. 23). Sacrifices were also offered on the **new moon**, or first day of the month (Num. 28:11–14).

Contrary to the claims of some today, Christians are not required to worship on the **Sabbath day**. It, like the other Old Covenant holy days Paul mentions, is not binding under the New Covenant. There is convincing evidence for that in Scripture. First, the Sabbath was the sign to Israel of the Old Covenant (Ex. 31:16–17; Neh. 9:14; Ezek. 20:12). Because we are now under the New Covenant

(Heb. 8), we are no longer required to keep the sign of the Old Covenant.

Second, the New Testament nowhere commands Christians to observe the Sabbath.

Third, in our only glimpse of an early church worship service in the New Testament, we find the church meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7).

Fourth, we find no hint in the Old Testament that God expected the Gentile nations to observe the Sabbath, nor are they ever condemned for failing to do so. That is certainly strange if He expected all peoples to observe the Sabbath.

Fifth, there is no evidence of anyone's keeping the Sabbath before the time of Moses, nor are there any commands to keep the Sabbath before the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.

Sixth, the Jerusalem Council did not impose Sabbath keeping on the Gentile believers (Acts 15).

Seventh, Paul warned the Gentiles about many different sins in his epistles, but never about breaking the Sabbath.

Eighth, Paul rebuked the Galatians for thinking God expected them to observe special days (Including the Sabbath) (Gal. 4:10–11).

Ninth, Paul taught that keeping the Sabbath was a matter of Christian liberty (Rom. 14:5).

Tenth, the early church Fathers, from Ignitions to Augustine, taught that the Old Testament Sabbath had been abolished and that the first day of the week (Sunday) was the day when Christians should meet for worship. That disproves the claim of some that Sunday worship was not instituted until the fourth century.

The dietary laws, festivals, sacrifices, and Sabbath day worship were all **things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ**. A shadow has no reality; the reality is what makes the shadow. Jesus Christ is the reality to which the shadows pointed. For example, regarding food regulations, He is “the bread that came down out of heaven” (John 6:41). There is no need for Christians to observe the Passover either, because “Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). What justification could there be for demanding that Gentiles observe the Sabbath when God has granted them eternal rest (Heb. 4:1–11)? Any continuing preoccupation with the shadows once the reality has come is pointless.

Paul's point is simple: true spirituality does not consist merely of keeping external rules, but of having an inner relationship with Jesus Christ.

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