

WHEN THE UMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Colossians 2:16-23

The movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* was the second in the Pirates of the Caribbean movies that told stories about pirate Jack Sparrow and his friends, Will Turner and Elizabeth Swann. In one scene the two somewhat less than brilliant pirates Ragetti and Pintel are in a longboat having just escaped from jail. Ragetti is “reading” a Bible, which is actually upside down. The two have a discussion over whether it was divine providence that enabled them to escape. In the story they had previously been under a curse that meant they could never die. Now they are no longer under the curse and Ragetti has developed scruples about things like stealing ships. Pintel says, “Since when do you care?” Ragetti says, “Since we’re not immortal no more. We gotta take care of our immortal souls.” Seeing he is looking at the Bible Pintel says, “You know you can’t read.” Ragetti answers, “It’s the Bible. You get credit for trying.”

His thinking is as common as the belief that the sun comes up in the east. He was thinking the idea is that he had to earn credit before God, and he was looking for ways to earn some credit. That raises the question of what you get credit for. It is a crucial question because though he may not be very theologically astute Ragetti is right when he says we need to take care of our immortal souls. Most of us think that has to do with earning enough credit. Today we will look at a passage that takes on the question of credit head on. In so doing it also speaks directly to the matter of the care of our immortal souls. Let’s look at Colossians 2:16-23.

STAY AWAY FROM DO-IT-YOURSELF RELIGION

Notice the commands in this passage. In verse 16 Paul wrote, “Do not let anyone judge you.” What can we surmise from this? Someone was judging them. Paul didn’t need to write about it if it weren’t a concern. In verse 18 he told them not to let anyone “disqualify” them for the prize. The words “for the prize” were not in the original text of this verse. That whole phrase translates one word in Greek. It was an unusual word, not used much in the Bible.

Toby played baseball for several years in high school. Baseball was not his main sport. He was a football and hockey guy. One game he had gotten a hit and was on second base. The batter got a hit and Toby started running. He rounded third and headed for home. The throw came in from the outfield and the play was very close. The catcher caught the throw a split second before Toby got there, but he ran into the catcher and knocked him over. The catcher lost the ball, so Toby was safe. The umpire then called him out. I was astounded. The catcher didn’t even have the ball, how could Toby be out? It turned out that there is a rule in high school baseball that a runner can’t run over a catcher. The umpire said Toby had broken that rule so he was out. He ruled against Toby. The word used by Paul in that verse meant “to umpire” or to decide against.

The point of all that is that someone was umpiring against the Colossians, they were deciding against them. In some contexts this word could even be so strong as to mean “condemn.” They were deciding their faith wasn’t enough and telling them so, and the Colossians were being influenced by their condemning attitude.

Some people were looking down on the Colossians, telling them their faith wasn't sufficient. If they *really* wanted to know God, be saved, have full life, they needed something other than what they had. We all know how it affects us when people do that to us. We can wonder if maybe they're right and we need something else. Paul's message here was "don't let them do that to you. Don't pay attention to those people."

There is debate about what those umpires believed. I will give you my best effort at explaining what I think was going on, but there are other opinions. The exact nature of the other ideas is not as important as getting the main message of the passage. A big part of the umpires' belief system had to do with obedience to the Law of Moses, a constant problem that Paul dealt with back then.

Verse 16 says these people had a message that had to do with what we eat or drink. Read the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy and you will see extensive regulations regarding such things. Leviticus 11:3 says "you may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and chews the cud." So beef is fine because cows meet the standard. So is lamb. Since pigs have a divided hoof but don't chew the cud pork is out, so say goodbye to those baby back ribs. Birds that are not scavengers are okay and fish with scales and fins are good, so chicken is in and so is mahi mahi, but lobster and shrimp are out. Today's rabbis say that meat is not to be eaten with dairy, so say adios to your cheeseburger.

But it wasn't just food that was an issue. You have to observe the religious feasts, new moon observances and especially the Sabbath day. Numbers 28:11 commanded the Hebrews that on the day of the new moon they were supposed to blow a trumpet and offer some animals as burnt offerings. We know about the Sabbath being a day of rest. These things, of course, were Paul's shorthand for all of the rules of the Law of Moses. People were judging the Colossians because they did not keep those rules. The message was if you want God to accept you and you want to be a part of his kingdom, then you must obey these rules. That's how you earn credit with God according to the "umpires" of Colossae.

Here were Jewish people who had been scrupulous all their lives about keeping the Laws and they were encountering Gentiles who were chowing down on lobster bisque, bacon-wrapped filets that had come from the local pagan temple, and all manner of banned food, who worked overtime on the Sabbath and said, "Hey, it's great that your God has accepted us and welcomed us into his kingdom. How cool is that?" And the umpires said, "You're out! You dumb Gentiles are a bunch of theological nimrods. If you want the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to accept you then you had better straighten up fast, and stop eating that bacon!" While the problem wasn't at the level that it got to in Galatia these people were being swayed to some extent. Notice in verse 20 that he asked "why do you submit to these rules?" That means the Christians there were starting to listen and to do what those people told them.

Why did Paul care that people tried to keep the Law of Moses? Wasn't that a good thing? God gave all those laws. Paul himself admitted in Romans 7:12 "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good." Well if it's good and holy why would he be bothered if these people tried to live by it? Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-18, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." The Law is the eternal Word of God, so doesn't that mean it must apply today?

Many Christians struggle with this. Some insist that we have to keep the Sabbath. Of course, most don't really mean it because they sort of transfer the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday and want to apply it to us today. It is common that churches teach that we should tithe. After all, the law, part of the eternal word of God, commands it doesn't it? However, most Christians only choose parts of the Law to follow. The Law commanded that we make sacrifices, killing innocent animals. PETA would be apoplectic. No one seems anxious to obey that part of the law. The Law says after a woman gives birth to a son she is unclean a week, but after giving birth to a daughter she is unclean for 2 weeks. I don't even want to touch that one. Is anyone clamoring for us to obey that Law? The Law forbids wearing blended material. I'm doing that today, but no one cares, do they? The Law commands that every 50 years land is to be returned to its original owner. You don't hear anyone telling you to obey those laws, do you? Why pick some and not others?

Some say we should pay attention to the moral law but not the ceremonial law. I defy you to find any passage of scripture that divides the Law that way. You won't find it because it doesn't exist. Quite the opposite. James says if you break one part you've broken the whole thing. If you wear a wool blend suit you've broken the Law as much as if you worshiped an idol.

Jesus gave us the key for understanding this when he said he came to fulfill the Law. The word he used there can mean to bring it to completion or to fulfill its stipulations. Jesus has done all of that.

Notice that Paul said the Law is only a shadow, the outline. Christ is the reality. This is written by a guy whose whole life had been about keeping the Law. He had a bumper sticker on his chariot that read "I heart the Law." He said, "My keeping the Law is better than *everybody's*." Yet that guy now said he understood that the Law was only a picture of the real thing, and the real thing I Jesus.

First Jesus fulfilled it by living by all of its requirements. But he also fulfilled it in the sense that much of the Law was symbolic. It is full of pictures that were intended to communicate truth that was about Jesus. One of the most familiar and obvious examples of this is the Passover, one of the Law's most sacred rituals. In the Passover the blood of a lamb was to be painted on the doorposts of a Jewish home and that wherever that blood was found the Angel of Death would "pass over" the house's occupants. They would be safe. That taught that God would provide a

way for his people to be saved from the fearsome judgment to come, but that it required the death of an innocent lamb. Was that about a lamb dying and that by killing that lamb people were doing something righteous? No, it depicted God providing an innocent person, the Lamb of God, to die for us so that the judgment would pass us over. It pictured Jesus, so that after he died and rose from the dead, people should have gone, “Oh, so that’s what that meant!”

All of the sacrifices, and there were a ton, point us to Jesus. The Sabbath pointed to Jesus. It said what God supplies in Jesus is enough and that in him we can find rest. All the feasts pointed to Jesus and what he would do. Even the furniture in the Temple was intended to point us to the Lamb of God. It is everywhere in the Law of God. Jesus fulfilled all of it.

Jesus fulfilled the Law by undergoing its curse. The Law condemns us all. Jesus fulfilled it by taking our condemnation upon himself. The Law is still in effect in that its death sentence is still on us. We have a choice, we can either let Jesus take that sentence or have it fall on us.

Jesus fulfilled the Law by completing it. It was common for people to read the Law and think “I got this. I can do this.” In Philippians 3:6 Paul said of himself, “as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.” He thought when it came to the Law he nailed it. But Jesus clarified things when he said in Matthew 5 that people like Paul didn’t understand the Law. He said, “Here’s what it really means. When it says do not commit murder it means don’t even get mad at people. When it says don’t commit adultery it means don’t even lust for a woman who is not your wife. When it says we are to love it means we must love even enemies.” In other words, be totally pure not only in your actions but in your thoughts as well.

If the Law was just about not literally killing anyone, not stealing or lying, not cheating on your wife, I’d be in good shape. I’ve obeyed all those things and honestly I don’t think it has been all that hard. But Jesus said that’s not the point. The real meaning of the Law is to be as perfectly loving as God is, to never have an unholy thought, to never be angry at anyone, to be perfect. Oops. In so explaining the Law Jesus fulfilled its real purpose, which was not just to be a moral standard. You’ll see its purpose shortly.

Romans 6:14 says “you are not under the law but under grace.” In Galatians 5:18 Paul said, “if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the Law.” What does he mean when he says, “you are not under the Law”? Congress has tax laws that apply specifically to pastors. My brother, Jerry, was a pastor for 31 years, but he left that occupation two years ago. So now because he is not a pastor he is no longer under those laws. They no longer apply to him so he doesn’t think about them. He doesn’t have to deal with them at all. They are irrelevant for him. When Paul said we are not under the Law that’s what he meant. It no longer applies to you. You don’t have to think about it or live by its stipulations. **The point of this is that now because of Jesus the way you get credit with God is by grace, by what Jesus has done, not by earning credit through obeying the rules.**

I've known godly people who have a clear grasp of the gospel of Jesus Christ but who struggle with this reality. I recall one who had been a pastor for decades, and when it came to some aspects of the Law he just couldn't get it doesn't apply to him!

But didn't Jesus say that the Law wouldn't pass away? Yes, it is still in place. Though it is often missed the whole point of the Law is grace. It is about how God would make provision for us so that we could be forgiven and accepted. That is as true today as it was in the days of Moses and David and in the first century. It will never change. And the Law still stands if you want to earn God's acceptance, you can still try to live by the Law and it will still condemn you.

Well I have a problem. My Bible is 1950 pages long. Of that 1423 is the Old Testament. Only 527 of it is the New Testament. So 73% of it is the Old Testament and only 27% is New Testament. So is it true that 3 quarters of the Bible doesn't apply to us now? Why would God go to all that trouble to set up that elaborate system of religion, have it be in effect for 1500 years, then say, "Okay, never mind. Forget all that?"

First, we don't toss it out. The Old Testament is God's Word and there is much we can learn from it. We just need to interpret it correctly. Second, God tells us why he gave the Law in Galatians 3:24. In the New American Standard translation that says, "the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ so that we may be justified by faith." The Law was intended to get us ready for Jesus. That was its purpose. It always has been and always will be. It is still in effect doing that.

Verse 20 in our passage says "since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world." I like the older NIV translation of that better. It said, "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world." There is a basic principle that we all live by. It is so ingrained in us that we don't even notice it. It is as much a part of our world view as the fact that the sky is blue (except in Seattle) and the sun comes up in the east. ***One of the most basic principles of life is that you should get what you deserve.***

Do you remember when you were in your last year of high school and you applied to colleges? I had a friend who wanted to go to Stanford and he said I ought to apply there too. I didn't especially want to go there, but I got him to leave me alone about it by telling him I wasn't going to apply because it would be a waste of time. My grades and SAT scores were good, but they weren't good enough to get in to Stanford. I didn't qualify. He found out he didn't either because they turned him down. You have to earn it if you hope to get accepted to a good college. You have to measure up to their standards.

From our earliest memory our lives have been ruled by that principle. The child who is the cutest, who behaves the best, who performs the best gets the most approval and attention of parents. We even find that our friendships are ruled by this principle. If we behave in ways that don't earn approval we find we get rejection. I love the story Jeff Kemp tells. Jeff went to Dartmouth where he played quarterback on the football team. Dartmouth is not exactly a

football factory, so he was not a hot commodity for the NFL. He did get invited to a training camp and would go on to play 11 years in the league. But he recalls the first week of camp it was just rookies like him. A young boy who was watching the practices kind of latched onto him. After practice the boy would find him and talk to him. He asked if he could carry his helmet as he walked to the locker room, so Jeff let him. Toward the end of the week the boy said, “Can I ask you a question?” He thought, “He wants my autograph. He will be my first autograph seeker ever.” He said, “Sure.” Then the boy said, “When do the real players get to camp?” You’ve got to earn people wanting to get your autograph, and he hadn’t earned it.

How do I earn enough credit before God to qualify for the prize? Our minds automatically go down that road even in spiritual things. Do you want God to accept you? Do you want to get into his kingdom? Do you want him to love you? We automatically think we must earn it. We end up with *do-it-yourself religion*. It is up to you to get it right. No one can do it for you. This is so deeply embedded in us that God had to do something to break us out of that mindset.

When you look at the history of Israel do you see a long record of success? No, quite the contrary, what you see is epic fail on a consistent basis. It is hard to find a time where Israel was able to live by the Law. This is why in the prophets there is a steady drumbeat of judgment. It’s like God was saying, “Do you get the picture? You can’t do this! You don’t measure up, so pay attention to the real message of the Law that you need a provision for forgiveness.” God gave us that long history to break the grip of “do it yourself” religion on our brains.

Do it yourself. I hate those words. They mock me. A man ought to be able to “do it yourself.” Little maintenance problems crop up around the house and the world floods to Home Depot. Get the parts and fix it. Be a man. I have now a long history of epic fail when it comes to “do it yourself.” Yet even today as we have a plumbing issue I find myself thinking, “I should do that myself.” It is hard to accept that I can’t and just admit if someone else doesn’t do it for me it won’t get done. We have that same problem spiritually. It is natural, it is the default, to think, “do it yourself.” I need to do the right things and God will accept me. So God gave us thousands of years filled with epic fail so maybe, just maybe, we would finally admit, “if someone doesn’t do this for me it isn’t going to get done.”

This is why Paul made such a point out of opposing the umpires who loved the ancient Law. The Law is opposed to the gospel of Jesus. You either do it yourself, or you admit you can’t and trust Jesus to do it for you. You cannot do both. Author and thinker Harry Blamires wrote, “In the Christian life nothing, nothing at all, can be purchased at the do it yourself store.”

STAY AWAY FROM RABBIT TRAILS

Verse 18 is the one that gives rise to much discussion among Bible scholars. “Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.” Worship of angels? Great detail about what they have seen? What is that about?

History suggests around this time there was a great deal of fascination with angels among some Jews. They made a big deal out of the presence of angels when the Law was given to Moses. Paul reflects this in Galatians 3:19 when he says, “The Law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.” The same idea shows up in Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:53 where he said to his Jewish audience, “you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels.”

No Jewish person would condone worshiping angels, but, many back then had great interest in angels. In his commentary on Colossians and Philemon David Garland wrote (p. 197), “Speculation about angels in Israel burgeoned during the Exile and later foreign dominance, when many Jews felt abandoned by God.”

Paul might have been using a familiar tactic here. To strengthen his point he might have been drawing a caricature of the people causing problems in Colossae. They talked so much about angels that Paul said it is like they are worshiping them. I once was accused by some critics of worshiping my wife. They did not think I literally worshiped her. I’m just glad they never saw the altar I have for her at home where I offer up thank offerings to her. Oddly she seems to think the worship is entirely appropriate. They used the word “worship” as a powerful way of saying they thought she was too high a priority for me and I loved her too much. That’s what Paul was doing here.

They were giving way too much attention to angels. Angels are God’s servants, his messengers, but they are merely messengers. We like getting boxes from the UPS and Fed Ex trucks. But we don’t spend our days thanking and praising the drivers and speculating about them. They are just the messengers. I’m thankful for them, but that’s all. And that’s what angels are. They should not be the focal point of our attention. Jesus is the focus because he is the source of life and all that is good. He’s the one who gives the presents.

Paul was concerned about the guy who goes “into great detail about what he has seen.” Many scholars believe Paul is talking about supposed visions some people claimed to have had. They made that the main thing they dwelled on. It is also possible the “what they have seen” means something they claim to have understood in God’s Word. Some ancient rabbis used to pick names out of the genealogies in the Old Testament and weave great stories about them. They would then make those stories the basis of their lessons about what God tells us to be and do. The point is they claim to “see” something in the Bible that others don’t see. Of course others didn’t see it because it wasn’t there.

What we should learn from this is that there were people who had “lost connection with the Head.” They made angels or their visions or their bizarre interpretations of Scripture based on their own inventive stories the focus of their thinking and their theology. This still happens today. You can still see lots of people today who want to think about and talk about everything but Jesus as the center of their thinking and their faith.

When Toby was going into his senior year of high school his coaches took his football team on a backpack trip in the Sierras. They arrived at the trail head, gave all the players instructions for how to get to camp and sent them off down the trail. Quickly they separated into groups as they hiked. Toby's group misunderstood the instructions. There was a place where the trail went left but they followed a path to the right. Thus began an odyssey that could have ended very badly. They got hopelessly lost in the mountains. They were lost all day. Fortunately the coaches sent out some search parties, one of which found them. The problem was they took the wrong path, a rabbit trail and they got lost. When we focus on anything other than Jesus we are going on a rabbit trail. When we do that we will end up like Toby and friends. We will get lost.

IMPLICATIONS

DON'T GET DISTRACTED

There are a lot of distractions, or rabbit trails, luring Christians still today. Get excited about and totally caught up in the signs of the times and the latest theory about when Jesus is coming back. Remember Paul's words here. The key is staying on the path, meaning staying connected to Jesus. What did Jesus say? You won't know the day, so be ready every day. Yes, but what is your theory about Jesus' return? My theory is he is coming back and it could be any time, so be ready. End of story.

Another distraction is the health and wealth gospel. That's not about knowing and serving Jesus, it's about getting rich. It is a rabbit trail. Another rabbit trail is people claiming to have some vision given to them by God so they know something no one else does. Another is when a person camps out on one particular doctrine and rides that horse to death. That one idea becomes his or her focal point that interprets everything else. That's a rabbit trail. I had friends who were obsessed with political issues. They absorbed all their passion, their efforts, their attention. Here's the problem: politics are not the head, the source of life. Though some people will not like to hear this, they are a rabbit trail.

Another rabbit trail is the same as the one Paul mentioned. It is an obsession with angels. David Garland wrote (p. 197), "When we humans feel that God is removed from our world, we become more attracted to more accessible, more useful, and more user friendly emanations of deity." People turn to angels instead of to Christ for protection and help.

The late Nora Ephron, successful movie producer, was quoted in a *New York Times* article saying, "What people can't stand is, everyone wants to believe God notices you, that he notices the details...The horrible truth is that he probably doesn't notice. He's got more important things to do. But angels do notice. You know, they make the tow truck come when you have a flat tire." Interesting that she makes such definitive statements about what God will do and what angels will do.

One of the things that makes angels so attractive is in people's minds they don't make the kinds of moral demands on us that God might. They don't think of angels judging us the way God will, so the thinking is that angels will help with no moral demands.

Don't get distracted. Don't get caught up in the stuff that so many are lured by. I've seen Christians get caught up in the latest fad, the most recent sign, the exciting new plan. The tides come and go. Paul says, "Stop it. Make Jesus the focal point and the source of your life."

DON'T FALL INTO THE TRAP

The trap I refer to is do it yourself religion. That is religion that is about earning credit in order to be fully accepted. It will inevitably come out as some form of a Law. Unfortunately that idea is deeply embedded in us. After 35 years of proclaiming and teaching about the gospel of grace I still find that at times I feel burdened by my own shortcomings. I have to remind myself of God's grace and deliberately choose to live by it. And to add to the difficulty, wherever the gospel of grace goes, legalism will somehow show up. Human beings will try to sneak in their rules, their regulations, their rituals, their observances or their practices that they think will enhance their spiritual standing or earn them some kind of reward. In his book, *The Hope of Glory*, Sam Storms wrote, "Grace demands only one thing: that all glory and honor and credit be given to Jesus Christ for what he has done for us."

Paul says in verse 23 Laws that say "do not handle, do not taste, do not touch" have an appearance of wisdom, but they fail at critical points. The Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona has a problem. People are taking the petrified wood. There is a sign there that reads "Your heritage is being vandalized every day by theft. Losses of petrified wood of 14 tons a year, mostly a small piece at a time." Researcher Robert Cialdini did an experiment. He seeded some trails in the park with lots of loose pieces of petrified wood, perfect for stealing. On some trails they posted a sign warning visitors not to steal the wood. They left some of the trails without signs. Can you guess the result? The trails with warning signs had almost 3 times more theft than the trails without the signs.

David Garland says in his commentary on this book, "Rules...help us gauge whether we are making any headway in our religious quest or not. This is the rub. They lead us to regard our obligation to God as a checklist, which, when we have completed the duties, mislead us into thinking we have done all that God requires."

Paul says in verse 22 the rules of religion always focus on things "destined to perish with use." In other words, they are always about temporal, external things. Inevitably those who focus on laws will end up being all about things on the outside and not about love, compassion, grace, forgiveness and true holiness.

I remember as a kid going to church I got the message somehow that being a Christian meant you believe in Jesus for something, you went to church, a lot, and you didn't do sins, things like smoking and drinking alcohol and gambling and lots of other stuff. It was more about the going

to church and not doing sins than anything. It wasn't all that clear exactly how Jesus fit in. That system can produce people who do the right things and don't do the wrong things, but it did not produce people who were full of God's love. My grandfather was a pastor, and his children were all almost completely turned away from Jesus by watching how God's "holy" people who kept all the rules, treated their dad, a gentle, good and godly man. It was abominable. They kept the rules, but knew nothing of grace, love and goodness.

Rules, rituals and observances cannot make a heart loving, they cannot transform us and make us full of grace and goodness. In fact, they make us proud and judgmental for we think we keep the rules better than someone else. I will say this as plainly as I can, beware of the spiritual elitist. Legalism feeds pride, and causes us to feel like we are on a higher level than others. At that point we are like the guy who has an "unspiritual mind" that "puffs him up with idle notions."

There are two systems at work in our world. One is the system based on credit. Keep the rules, earn your way to the prize. The other is to admit you cannot do it yourself and that your only hope is the grace of God through Jesus Christ. If we live in that first system what will it produce? I knew a man once who was married to a woman who mostly lived by Law. She had a set of expectations for him. Essentially she had rules, things she expected him to do at a particular level in a particular way in order for her to keep loving him. How do you suppose that affected their marriage? Did it cause him to adore her, to love her passionately? No, for years he tried to meet the expectations, to live by the rules, but gradually love died. It became duty, obligation, resentment, until one day, he'd had enough. He decided he wanted no more, that in fact, he found he despised his wife. The marriage blew up.

What do you think God wants from you? Jesus said the greatest commandment was to love the Lord your God with all your heart. Can the credit system ever produce love, passion, for God? No, it will have the same effect it had on that husband. Love will die. It will become duty, obligation, and may sour into resentment.

The grace system produces incredible love and gratitude. That is what will transform the heart. That is what will put passion for God there. Never fall into the trap of the credit system. Don't let the umpires rule against you!