

Well, the first question we face at this point this morning is, “How am I going to preach a sermon on Colossians 2:16-23 that will keep your attention, just after I just informed you that God has called Nancy and I to serve in another ministry in another location four months from now?” Well, what we will see today is that by the providence of God, our text for today is the perfect text for understanding the divine foundational principle of what it means to be called into the ministry by God. Now this will be perfectly relevant for us all, because everyone who is a true, born-again follower of Jesus Christ is called by God. The call to Jesus is our ultimate call. The Biblical view of our call to Jesus is threefold.

1) We are all first called to *know* Jesus Christ. This is our *call to salvation* when we respond to God’s invitation to surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The apostle Paul spoke of those “*who are called to belong to Jesus Christ*” in Romans 1:6 and also in Romans 8:28 when said that “*we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*” In this calling we see the immeasurable canyon-sized depths of God’s grace in taking the divine initiative of saving us in spite of the immeasurable canyon-sized depths of our spiritual depravity. In Ephesians 1:4 we read that God “*chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*” In John 15:16: Jesus declared “*You did not choose me, but I chose you.*” In Ephesians 2:3-5 the apostle Paul writes that we “*were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved.*” John 1:12-13 says, “*to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*” Everyone God chooses is called by God to *know* Jesus by the grace of God.

2) After we respond to call to know Jesus Christ , we are all then called to follow Jesus Christ. This is our call to *sanctification* – to grow deeper our faith and our relationship with God and our fellowship with the Holy Spirit – seeking to grow to completion or maturity in Jesus Christ. In Luke 9:23-25 Jesus proclaimed: “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*” In Galatians 2:20 Paul declared : “*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*” In Philippians 1:6 he said: “*I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*” We have seen Paul speak of this call in Colossians:

*“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. . . . God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ”* (Col 9-12; 27-28). After we know Jesus we are called to follow Jesus.

3) God’s Word then tells us that after we know Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and then respond to the call of following Jesus – we are all called to serve Jesus. This call is grounded in Jesus’ Great Commission to, “*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:18-20). The foundation of the Great Commission to *serve Jesus* is the call to passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people - by preaching and teaching and sharing and living out the good news of the gospel of Jesus - Christ in you, the hope of glory!

These are the three calls of God to all who claim Christ – we are to know Jesus; we are to follow Jesus and we are to serve Jesus. This is our common calling for our lives, whoever we are, whatever we do, wherever we live, wherever we are – from the moment we come to faith, until we die or the Lord comes back. Now in the midst of these callings, God, in his divine wisdom, has seen fit to extend a separate call of the call to serve Jesus to some followers of Jesus – to the call of full-time vocational serving Jesus. Now this is not a human idea. From the Old Testament to the New, God frequently called people – set aside a people - to Himself, just to do His work.

In the Old Testament, the high priests were full-time servants. Abraham was called to leave his home and to travel to a place of promise. In Romans 1:1 Paul called himself “*a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.*” In Ephesians 4:11-12 Paul tells that God calls “*apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*” Today these are those who serve Jesus in full-time service as pastors, associate pastors, evangelists, missionaries, chaplains, Bible teachers (colleges/universities/seminaries) and chaplains - and others who serve in full-time ministry who are supported financially full-time.

In the Bible we see a reflection of this calling when Jesus walked along the shore of Galilee and called Peter and Andrew to follow Him. This is the call of God. They had to sacrificially give up their fishing nets (occupation) and follow Jesus full-time. In this we also see the place for academic education as the call to full-time Christian service includes the call to prepare. Those Jesus called sat at Jesus feet for three years learning how to be disciples. Peter and Andrew were called to follow Jesus - going where Jesus told them to go, doing what Jesus told them to do, serving where Jesus told them to serve.

This is the call that Nancy and I and our family have been responding to over the past three decades. In being called by God to full-time vocational service – it is a given that we are to *know* Jesus and *follow* Jesus and *serve* Jesus. God has called us to these things and He expects that we will do them – and we have humbly tried to do so, to the best of our ability. But the reality is, we have at times, stumbled in doing what God expects from us and stumbled at times in doing what the church expects from us. This is the truth that there are times when what God expects of us and what the church expects of us are polar opposites. Thus today we have conflict in churches and a shortage of pastors.

Why is it that those of us who claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior - struggle with God and struggle with each other – and stumble in responding to the three calls of God to know Jesus and to follow Jesus and to serve Jesus? One word: *Preeminence*. Three weeks ago, in Colossians 1:15-23, God’s Word declared to us that Jesus is to be supreme, dominant, preeminent over everything in our lives. “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*” (Col 1:15-20).

When Jesus is not preeminent over *everything* in our lives - our thoughts and behaviors and attitudes and beliefs and decisions and responses - will not be in line with the expectations of God’s callings. In his book “No Place for Truth” Dr. David Wells writes: “The capacity for ultimate knowledge that we are given by our Creator is a fearful thing when it is unhitched from the knowledge of our sin. This uncoupling gives rise to individuals who are unsuspecting about themselves, who infuse their own ideas with divine authority, who are oblivious to the inherent darkness of their human nature.” The spiritual decline we are currently experiencing within the evangelical community in North America is a result of the removal of the centrality of our created purpose to glorify God through Jesus Christ. The primary sense of our calling is not for self but for our divine call to pursue the glory of God-centeredness.

If Jesus is to be preeminent over *everything* in our lives – he should be the standard for everything we think, say and do. Brothers and sisters, we must acknowledge that we live in a predominantly secular culture and we are under constant pressure to conform to the views, beliefs and values of the world we live in. And because we also live in an age of individualism, entitlement and personal freedom - we make our assessments and we form our expectations through the lens of *self*. The truth is, that because we all still possess a fallen, sinful nature – we are *all* guilty of doing this. We tend to evaluate and judge others by our own personal standards and expectations regarding what is acceptable and what is not. And because that is true for all of us, we usually have very little tolerance for people who see things and say things and do things differently than we do - which is nothing more than just *legalism*.

By definition *legalism* is “a strict, literal, or excessive conformity to a religious or moral code.” Left unchecked the legalism of personal expectation ultimately leads to hard-heartedness, prejudice, bigotry, hatred, discrimination and racism. Legalism is also defined as “a strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law.” This kind of legalism, as it relates to our faith in God, is the belief that we can do something to gain favor with God. Spiritual legalism is *our* human attempt to gain *our* salvation or make progress in *our* walk with God by *our* outward conformity to *our* list of religious “do’s” and “don’ts.” This is the legalism that is often disguised in Christian terms and Christian behaviors. Paul addresses this issue in our text for today.

Remember Paul had written this letter to the Colossians because some in the church were believing and teaching false beliefs that were based on worldly values and human philosophies. Paul had been exhorting them to make Jesus preeminent in their lives, to pursue completeness in Jesus, to allow Jesus to be sufficient in all things, to live out “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” Legalism grows where something or someone other than Jesus is allowed to be preeminent or bring completeness or fulfill hope or be sufficient. Paul began to make his case against legalism in our text from last week when he argued that our greatest protection against deception is the complete sufficiency we have in Jesus. “*In Christ*” Paul said, none of us needs anything more than we already have already received “*in Christ.*”

Last week we saw that Jesus is sufficient because in Christ we have a complete salvation, complete forgiveness, and complete victory. The sufficiency Paul spoke of here was the sufficiency in our legal standing before God. What Paul was telling us that our greatest protection against spiritual deception is to remember the sufficiency we have in our legal standing before God in Jesus Christ. *In Christ* we have been spiritually circumcised. *In Christ*, we are buried with Him in baptism. *In Christ* we have been made alive together with Christ, forgiven of all our transgressions, as “*the record*” of our sin “*debt that stood against us with its legal demands*” was cancelled when Jesus nailed it all to the cross. *In Christ* we have a complete victory; we have been legally set free. We are saved by God’s grace, we grow in faith and power by God’s grace, and it is by God’s grace we are freed from the penalty of sin and death. Once we come to embrace the truth that by the mercy of God, Jesus has paid the price required for sin on our behalf, we’ll the come to fully experience God’s grace and live with the freedom that is ours in Christ. As Jesus said in John 8:36: “*If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*” The best protection against spiritual deception is to *remember* to live out the reality that we have been legally freed from sin and death through the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

Up to this point Paul has been telling us that *in Christ* we have been given freedom from sin and death. But what Paul is telling us in our text for this morning, is that *in Christ* we have also been given the *freedom to live for Jesus Christ*. But the freedom we have in Christ is not freedom as the world knows freedom. The freedom we have in Christ is the freedom to live not for ourselves but the freedom to live for God. But when we use the freedom we have in Christ to live our lives for ourselves, we then fall into *religious legalism*. In our text today, the Word of God tells us that the best protection we have against *religious legalism* is to *remember the freedom* we have in Christ and then *live out the freedom* we have in Jesus. Paul tells us that in order to live out the legal freedom we have in Christ; we must resist our natural human sinful leaning towards legalism - which we see in our lives and in the church in three different forms.

1) The first form of religious legalism we often see in our lives and in the church is ritualism: *“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”* (Colossians 2:16-17). Paul begins by saying *“therefore”* - because - Jesus is supremely sufficient in freeing us from the penalty for our sin, saving us from eternal death and freeing us to live for Christ – *we must not fall* victim to ritualism. Ritualism is defined as *excessive devotion to religious habits, customs or ceremonies*.

In the apostle Paul’s day the Jews were following food restrictions, special diets, observance of ceremonies and holy days that rose out of specific practices in the Old Testament. Over time the following of these restrictions, diets, observances and holy days was used to judge or discern one’s spirituality. These particular religious ceremonies were rituals concerning the year, the month and the week. The *“new moon”* was a monthly observance, the *“Sabbath”* came every week, and various *“festivals”* occurred throughout the year. We see the same thing in the church of today. For years Catholics could not eat meat on Fridays. Many Protestants fast during Lent, the forty-day period preceding Easter. Other religions require special clothing or certain practices during their holy days.

But Paul tells those of us who are following Jesus to beware of falling into such ritualism *because* such things are nothing more than *“a shadow of the things to come.”* Our hope is not in religious habits or customs or ceremonies because *“the substance belongs to Christ.”* Since Christ has now come, special diets and mandatory holy days are no longer necessary because every Old Testament feast looked forward to the coming of Jesus Christ. These things were just shadows of the reality that was fulfilled in Jesus. As Hebrews 10:1 tells us: *“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.”* Rituals, customs and ceremonies have their place: they remind us who God is and of what Jesus has done. That’s why we celebrate Christmas (God sent Christ into the world); and remember the Lord’s Supper each month (Jesus death on the cross ); and celebrate Easter (Jesus rose from the dead) and worship together every Sunday (Jesus rose from the dead on this day).

But these very same things can become nothing more than religious ritualism if we simply do them out of habit rather than out of our hearts. What does religious ritualism look like in the church? Well, on Sunday it would be anything we do that distracts us from worshipping God. Just singing songs without thinking of God. Looking around during prayer. Letting our minds wander during the sermon. Having discussions during the service. In the church we see the legalism of religious ritualism when it comes to our personal expectations regarding things like music, length of the service, length of the sermon, where you sit in the sanctuary, ministries, staffing, and business meetings, Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 15:8-9: *“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”* All rituals are just shadows; Jesus is the substance! Anything that takes the place of him is idolatry. Christ has set us free to live for him!

2) The second form of religious legalism we often see in our lives and in the church is mysticism: *“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”* (Colossians 2:18-19). Mysticism is the belief that *the knowledge of God, the truth of God and the reality of God can be attained through personal experiences with God*. Paul points out this problem when he talks of the *“worship of angels”* and of those who are *“puffed up without reason.”*

In context, Paul was addressing the false teaching in Colossae there was a teaching known as "gnosticism" (knowledge) which held that there is a hierarchy of angels between human beings and God which must be acknowledged and appeased - and that we could come to know God through the experience of acknowledging and appeasing these angels. We see the same today in the New Age Movement, which now has simply morphed into the modern common belief in "spirituality" - which is the belief that we are all part of the universe of created matter, and that we are united in Oneness with God. The argument here is that we will no longer be self-centered when we "center" ourselves on God - Who will then fill us with the fullness of the knowledge of the universe. Paul calls this being "*puffed up without reason*" by a "*sensuous mind*" because the focus of this is still centered on the "self" both in the process and in the end result - which then puts us on par with God. Whitney Houston sang, "To love yourself is the greatest love there is." Apparently our greatest potential is wrapped up in ourselves.

The problem with mysticism is that the focus is on the wrong person. Our focus should not be on angels or ourselves but on God, whom we can only see through Jesus Christ. In Isaiah 48:11 God said: "*My glory I will not give to another.*" Sadly we see often see angel worship and self-centered spirituality in those who claim Christ. Paul tells us those who believe such things, have become disconnected from Jesus, the "*Head*" of the church. They are "*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.*" When we hold to the mystic beliefs in angels and in experiential spirituality - we are cut off from the Head (Jesus) and the body (church) we will stop growing in our faith and in our walk with Jesus.

But the metaphor has an even deeper meaning. God's Word is warning us here that we must not seek to validate our knowing Jesus Christ by our own personal experiences - outside of the "*Head*" and the "*whole body*" of Christ - because, when a head is cut off a human body, all life ceases. Much of what is written today under the guise of Christian literature is based on self-perception, personal enlightenment, and experiential faith. Here is where we need to heed the call of the Reformation which was "*Sola Scriptura*" which means that the Bible, the Word of God alone, inspired by the Holy Spirit alone, is the objective standard and measurement for everything in life. Our experiences can only be validated when the Word of God and the Holy Spirit and the body of Christ affirm that experience. Christ has set us free to live from sin so we might focus on him and experience him by living for him!

3) The third form of religious legalism we often see in our lives and in the church is *asceticism*: "*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" (Colossians 2:20-23). Asceticism is defined as *the practice strict self-denial as a measure of personal discipline and spiritual growth*. The false teachers in Colossae saw asceticism as the way to curb their appetites. This all sounds good on the surface. We would all agree we need discipline in our lives. But they were teaching that asceticism *was necessary* for true fellowship with God.

According to church history, Anthony, the founder of Christian monastic movement, never changed his vest or washed his feet his entire life. He was outdone, however, by Simon Stylites, who spent the last 36 years of his life on top of a fifty-foot pillar. He mistakenly thought that if he withdrew from the world then he would be truly spiritual. The same thing is still happening today in Mexico as people climb long stairways on their bloody knees in order to pay homage to the Virgin of Guadalupe. The Word of God tells us that *in Christ* we don't belong to this world anymore - and we do not get to heaven by following a list of do's and don'ts - and so we should not live our lives for Christ that way either. Heaven is ours not because of what we do but because of what Christ did for us.

In Christ we are free; we don't *have to* and we *cannot* do anything to earn God's favor. All we can do is receive it. In Christ we are free; we no longer *have to do anything* for God – and so now in Christ we are now *free to do everything* for God. In Christ we should *want to do everything* for God – sacrificially, joyfully, passionately; powerfully with mercy, grace, and love, for His glory! Jesus has set us free from having to deny ourselves to earn his favor, so we might be free to deny ourselves and fully follow him!

Religious legalism is built on the foundation of our personal expectations – our expectations of God, of one another and of ourselves. But the problem is – though we may be forgiven and saved through the cross of Christ – we are still sinners. Which means, the standard of our personal expectations tends to be our fallen, sinful personal expectations; which become legalistic when it comes into our spiritual lives; which then confines us from truly becoming free in Christ. A bishop once said to the French King Louis, “Make an iron cage for all those who do not think as we do, an iron cage in which the captive can neither lie down nor stand straight up.” The king agreed and had it constructed. But a short time later, the bishop offended the King and he locked up the bishop in that cage for 14 years.

In Matthew 7:2 Jesus said: “*For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.*” Brothers and sisters, God has given us so much more in life that cannot be measured by our weak, selfish human expectations. The Bible tells us that God calls us to know Jesus and to follow Jesus and to serve Jesus - so that we might have the know, follow and serve Jesus for the rest of our lives with a Savior who loves us, with a Lord who guards us, with a Holy Spirit who guides us, and with a God who gives mercy and grace without measure because of our free and legal standing before Him. Christ has freed us from the expectations of people and the measure of this world, in order that we might be free to live according to the expectations and measure of God.

Over the years I have had the privilege of working with hundreds and hundreds of men in prison, and I have found the greatest struggle for most of them is this issue of freedom. Because they have broken the law, their freedom is taken away from them. They serve time in prison waiting to be freed. They measure each day according to the time when they might once again know freedom. Yet statistics reveal that over 85% of those in prison lose their freedom within two years of their release. Most end up back in prison because they use their freedom to fulfill their own expectations, instead of using their freedom to fulfill God's expectations, and therefore end up once again in a prison of their own making. In the same way many who claim to be born-again Christians sometimes do not quite comprehend the fact that they have been set free by Jesus. And they either continue to be imprisoned in a perpetual state of discouragement by issues of sin and abuse and anger and bitterness or they are incarcerated by the self-righteous hypocrisy of religious legalism of ritualism, mysticism and asceticism.

Brothers and sisters, we at Arrowsmith seek to passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people. Our hope rests in Jesus' work, not ours; his accomplishment, not ours; his strength, not ours; his victory, not ours. Jesus is “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” True Christianity is not a matter of what we do or what we don't do. True Christianity is a matter of what has been done for us. When Jesus died on the cross, He said, “*It is finished.*” (John 19:30). The price has been paid. The legal debt has been erased. In Christ we are complete. We are now alive to God. “*In Christ*” we don't need anything more than we already have already have “*in Christ.*” In Christ we not only have the victory over sin and death, we have the freedom to live out our lives for Jesus today - and forever! We have a common calling to know Jesus and follow Jesus and serve Jesus – whether we are attenders of this church or members of this church or lead pastor of this church, or a future interim pastor from this church who will serve numerous churches in numerous places. Amen? Amen!