



“What Actually Works?”

My father was a smoker. I remember my brother and I being in the back seat of my father’s V8 Oldsmobile while he and my mother were up front. He would crack the window while he was driving so, he could smoke in the car. Of course, most of the smoke he tried to blow out of the window would drift to the back seat. We didn’t think much about it. During that time people were even allowed to smoke on planes. Smoking was a bad habit my father was never able to kick.

I never smoked, but my older brother, Daniel, did. He smoked a bit during High School and when he was in the Air Force stationed in, then West Berlin. He gradually smoked a bit more when he married and settled back in our hometown. But after the birth of his first child, Abigail, he began to struggle with his bad habit. Of course, he was nervous not to hurt his daughter and so he tried to be careful about where and when he smoked.

But eventually when Abigail smelled smoke on her father when he picked her up, he knew he had to stop. He decided then and there never to pick up a cigarette again. What had led him to stop his habit, a doctor who told him the dangers of smoking? No! The presence of a vulnerable child in his life, this treasured relationship led him to quit.

If this kind of change happens through relationships, even to atheists like my brother, imagine the change that can take place when others start relating with God? Henry Cloud, a Clinical Psychologist shared an example of this from his own life in his book, *The Power of the Other*. In this story he found himself very depressed while in college.

He went to a chapel on campus and said, “God if you’re there help me. I’m depressed. He thought God would “zap” him with power in the way he saw on Christian TV programming. People would come up to the front of the church and get “zapped” by God and be healed. Henry Cloud thought he would get “zapped” but nothing happened.

Confused and let down, he remembers saying to God as he left, “Well alright, call me.” He left the chapel and returned to his home and when he arrived, the phone rang. He thought to himself, “I better answer that!” He picked it up and a fraternity friend of his invited him to a Bible study.

His friend said, “I don’t know why I thought about you, but I just thought of you, and I wanted to invite you to our Bible study.” When he went to the study, he told his friend that he was depressed and that he asked God to “zap” him, but nothing happened. His friend said, “Well, sometimes God uses people to.” Shortly after attending these Bible studies with his friend, Henry Cloud was no longer depressed but filled with new hope and zeal for the Lord.

In our passage today, Paul, who himself was changed completely by Jesus, will tell the church in Colossae to rely on their relationship with Jesus for transformation. He will warn them not to rely on religious laws that may sound noble, but ultimately will not lead to change and transformation. Paul will say that these religious laws may point to a truth, but they are not the truth. Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through me.”

As a reminder of the context of today's account, we should remember that Paul is pleading with the church. He is not demanding obedience as he is motivated by God's grace and peace. As a sibling speaking to other siblings, Paul shares his joy in Jesus even through imprisonment reminding the church that this is normal for followers of Jesus. Paul then tried to reinforce the discipline of the church to live out the glory of Jesus within them. In today's account, Paul speaks more of the dangers that already lay within with midst.

1.) Religious Law: Shadow of Christ

¹⁶ **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. ¹⁷ **These are a shadow of the things that were to come**; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

In Colossians 2:16–17, Paul's first warning is for the church to not let anyone, even in their midst, judge them with regard to religious customs. This is significant when you consider how small of a church was probably gathered. Colossae was a small rural town not like the big and prosperous city of Ephesus from where Paul preached and served for years.

Ephesus would have been filled with Jews who had started to follow Jesus after a lifetime of following their own religious leaders. It is easy to imagine how Jewish believers whose culture was created out of God's word might have influenced such a small church community as that at Colossae.

What if someone were to come to the small church in Colossae who, as a religious Jew, had memorized large portions of the Old Covenant, had read the teachings of the Torah from famous Pharisees or Sadducees who were considered great teachers of God's word?

It is easy to imagine how a young Gentile Christian may have doubted their own ability to follow the words of Jesus and instead followed these new Jewish brothers and sisters of faith.

Imagine a Jewish brother or sister demanding that a new Gentile disciple adapt to cultural practices that were based on God's word in the Old Covenant? It would have been difficult not to obey since their traditions were built on God's word in the past.

But Paul says that these religious laws are only the shadows of Jesus who was to come. For example, the cleansing of the hands before eating a meal was a shadow of the real cleansing that God would do with His followers.

Jesus had taught his disciples this saying, "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them" (Matthew 15).

The religious law was a shadow of truth in that it showed people their need to be clean. Of course this cleansing, no matter how disciplined one was in performing it, didn't cleanse the heart from which sin emerged.

So, in this section, Paul is saying, "Don't be judged by shadows, but by the truth in Jesus alone."

2.) Unspiritual Mind: Uses Law for Self

¹⁸ **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. ¹⁹ **They have 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.

In Colossians 2:18–19, Paul warns the church about those that may appear very devout and religious but who demand in others obedience to religious practices that Jesus never gave. Paul says that the religious may appear very devout as they brag about their religious experiences, they want to destroy others so that they might be followed.

Paul had run into these religious people in the church in Galatia as well. He warned the church that these wolves in sheep's clothing were, "zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you. My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you" (Galatians 4).

Those who demand obedience to religious customs and not the words of Jesus may look and sound impressive. Others may be impressed by them as well, but then Christ would not be formed within his disciples.

By following the fads of religious customs the followers of Jesus would be cut off from the head of the church which is Christ. The church in Colossae is in danger of starting their lives as bound to the law, the shadows of what was coming, and then receiving Jesus, only to return back to religious laws which would not transform them. In his separate letter to the churches, Peter said that those who did this proved true the old proverb that, "a dog returns to its vomit" (2 Peter 2). Religious law in comparison to life in Christ is worthless. Paul calls it dung!

3.) Religious Law: Doesn't Restrain Indulgences

²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³ **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**.

In Colossians 2:20–23, Paul tells the church in Colossae that religious laws are that worthless once someone has found Jesus, because the religious law cannot restrain fleshly indulgences. Freedom in simply following Jesus can be unnerving for those who are used to being enslaved to sin. Being enslaved to sin, they used to rely on religious law to discipline their bodies so they might restrain at least sin.

This limited ability to restrain sin is what gives religious law the "appearance of wisdom." It certainly looks useful if law can prohibit some expressions of sin in our lives. So, when others grow uncomfortable in freely following Jesus by the power he provides through the Spirit, they may resort again and attempt to be religious on their own, in their own flesh.

It reminds of the account of Peter who is out in his boat as Jesus appears walking towards them on the water. Peter asks Jesus to prove that it is him by calling him out onto the water. Jesus calls Peter and he leaves the boat and begins walking toward Jesus on the water. This is real freedom in Christ! Peter is clearly relying only

on Jesus' power. But it is very difficult for those used to living life on our own, in our own understanding. Peter sees the water and the waves and reflects upon his own ability rather than Jesus' and he begins to sink.

Although religious laws look promising and appear wise, they cannot transform. Paul is attempting to help the church in Colossae hold onto the call and power of their Lord.

What's our application for today?

1.) Read Your Bible

I say this not as religious law, but as the Spirit's call on us to know Jesus more. We don't have to read the Bible to be considered good. We have the righteousness of Christ by faith and the Spirit desires us to live it out by knowing the words and deeds of Jesus.

I sometimes make the mistake of reading the Bible as a religious law. I think I must read the Bible as a Christian and so I read it through apparently with the hope that somehow God will "zap" me with His power. But there are times for all of us when we read the Bible because we sense God is calling us to trust Him.

Some time ago, Eileen Warth shared how God gave her a passage to share with her daughter-in-law. God was guiding his daughter, Eileen, to be a part of His call in her daughter-in-law's life. Eileen shared that word, and eventually her daughter-in-law heard the call of the God who spoke those words through Eileen. The Spirit of God calls us through the very words he helped to craft in God's children.

Let us read the Bible, not as religious practice but in submission to the Spirit's work in us to draw us closer to Jesus.

2.) Be Baptized

Be baptized! Don't do it as a religious law. We don't have to be baptized to be good. The Spirit unites us with Jesus who is good, and he calls us to know him more. He calls us to maturity in him. He calls us to follow him by being baptized so that we might testify to everyone that we belong completely to God. We are baptized into God's family.

In missiologist, Don Little, book I mentioned last week, he said baptism is one of the most significant stumbling blocks for Muslims who are considering Jesus. Jesus was sent into the world to show God and His kingdom. Jesus publicly taught and revealed the power of God. He calls us to follow in his public ministry of proclaiming God's call to have peace with Him through His Son.

3.) Repent (Fruits of Flesh)

Repent from a life of attempting to be religious on your own, in your flesh. Paul said that those who did will be obvious to all. Those who are living in the flesh will show "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, (and) factions." When we see this in ourselves, let us run to Jesus in repentance. Let us rely on his power and support through the Spirit he has provided so that we would exhibit his "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." In Jesus only there is the power for transformation.

Let us be known in Milford as a community who doesn't judge others according to religious rules that don't transform people's lives. Let's be known in Milford as a community who pleads with others to find freedom in the life of Jesus. Let's be known for following Jesus and his call to make disciples by teaching everyone what Jesus has said and did. May he be glorified in us.