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Why I'm Not Religious
Colossians 2:16-23
June 18th, 2017, Jeff Germo

Our main job, as a church, is to reach out to our city with the love of Jesus. Many people think it's easier for me than others because I'm a pastor. However, my problem, *because* I'm a pastor, is that I don't have much opportunity to be with people who don't profess to be Christian, unless I am very purposeful about it. The people I spend most of my time with at work profess to be Christian. Pastor Adrian says he's a Christian. Ruth, at home, follows Jesus. Most of the people in my life are followers of Jesus. So, if I don't make an effort I may never have opportunities to interact with people outside the church at all, save the occasional trip to the grocery store.

Aside from interacting with our neighbours, what I do quite often is frequent a neighbourhood coffee shop a day or two a week to work on my sermon. I'm there to work, but I do keep my eyes open for opportunities to build relationships with people when the occasion arises.

Sometimes in those conversations, the question of what I do for a living comes up. Up until this point, the conversation is usually quite friendly and relaxed. When I tell them I am a pastor their demeanour changes very quickly. They usually don't quite know what to do with me when they discover that I am a "man of the cloth." In bygone days, perhaps 25 or 30 years ago, people generally had a fairly high view of pastors. Movies usually depicted pastors quite favourably. Not so much any more.

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There was a Gallup poll done in the U.S. in 2013 asking people to rate the trustworthiness of various professions. Nurses topped the list with 82% of participants believing them to be trustworthy, with pharmacists, grade school teachers, and military officers trailing them narrowly at about 70%.

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In 1985 pastors had a 67% approval rating. Since then, it's dropped down to 47%. That's more than half the people in the United States who believe that pastors are not to be trusted. I would think that it is much worse in Canada. I could try make myself feel better by comparing myself to politicians, who had an 8% approval rating, but I don't think I want to do that.

When people find out I'm a pastor I never really know what they are thinking, but I almost always sense a little bit of discomfort and awkwardness. There is often a pregnant, uncomfortable silence while I let the new information I have given them about my profession sink in. And then typically, the first thing they do is apologize for any bad language they had used earlier in the conversation.

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The next thing they usually say is, "Um, I'm not very religious." To which I reply, "Oh, that's good. Neither am I." And at this point they raise their eyebrows and cock their head to one side in a quizzical sort of way trying to reconcile the seeming incongruity of what I just said. I usually just let them brew on that one for a while, and I stare at them and smile without offering an explanation. And then, eventually, they might build up the courage to ask me what I mean, because surely I must be religious if I'm a pastor. That's what my job is, isn't it? I'm a religion salesman. I'm a religion agent. I am a religious freak. My job is religion. Right?

The Christian faith is not about religion. I know I've said that ad nauseam for the last four years. But, we need to remind ourselves of that continually. The Christian faith is about a relationship with the God who created us. It is about entering into life with a holy God, our heavenly Father who loves us with an infinite love, and expressed that love in the most extreme possible way by sending his one and only Son to die on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins so we could have a relationship with him.

That's what I want to talk about this morning. We're going to take a look at Colossians 2:16-23 where Paul talks about the difference between religion and the **reality** of Christ in the believer's life.

There are only four or five times in the New Testament where the word "religion" is even found, and most of the occurrences have don't have a very positive nuance to them. We are going to see that the word used in Colossians 2:23 is a slightly different derivative. It is the only time this particular word is found in the Bible so Paul likely coined the word which is translated, "self-imposed **worship**" in the NIV, or "self-imposed **religion**" in some other translations. In the NLT it is translated, "pious, self-denial." So, again it's not a positive slant on the concept of religion.

Probably the most well known occurrence of the word "religion" is in James 1:26 & 27 where James says that religion that does not move someone to action is worthless. If it stays in the head, it's just taking up space.

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James 2:17 (NLT)

17 So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

Now, remember what was happening in the Colossian church. There were some false teachers who were trying to impose a legalistic and mystical slant to their faith.

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They were saying that if their faith was real they would continue on with their Jewish rituals, such as the Sabbath days, the New Moon celebrations and other religious festivals. They would also, if their faith was real, and if they were really spiritual, receive some sort of secret knowledge from God.

Paul demolished that argument in the last section we studied.

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Colossians 2:10 (NLT)

10 So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.

We are completely complete because of our union with Christ. Nothing else is needed to make us right with God. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more and nothing we do will make him love us any less.

Just so we stay in context let's read the last three verses from our passage from last week.

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Colossians 2:13-15 (NLT)

¹³ You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. ¹⁴ He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.

So, the **bad news** was that we were dead because of sin. The **good news** is that we have been forgiven because Jesus paid the penalty for our sins by dying for us. He took all our sin, and the shame associated with it, nailed them to the cross, and canceled all the charges against us. And, although Satan would have us believe that we need to continually live in shame of our past, Paul said that it was actually Satan and his demons who were the ones who were publicly shamed. Shame does not belong to us. Jesus died for our shame.

That's how our last section ended. Most translations start the next section with, **"Therefore..."** The NLT uses the synonym, **"So..."** In other words, because of that amazingly Good News, here's what to do and not to do. There is more good news coming.

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Colossians 2:16-23 (NLT)

¹⁶ So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. ¹⁷ For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.

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¹⁸ Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud, ¹⁹ and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.

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²⁰ You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, ²¹ "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!"? ²² Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them.

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²³ These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.

Let's walk through the passage from the beginning.

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Colossians 2:16-23 (NLT)

¹⁶ So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths.

These super religious people had apparently thought they were so superior to the Colossian Christians that they had appointed themselves as judges over them. They set themselves up as the standard by which spiritual maturity should be measured. They saw themselves as arbiters who would decide who was inside and who was outside the group.

We do the same kinds of things today. It's actually a very common sociological tactic. In subtle ways, we do what happens in reality shows like *Survivor*. We vote people who we think don't fit, out of our group. As human beings, we are social creatures. We all want to be part of a group. We don't feel complete if we are alone. And every group or society has certain markers to distinguish themselves from those outside their group. In public schools you have skaters, jocks, geeks, emos (artsy), Goths, and preppies. The only reason I know this is because I Googled it. Apparently, everyone in the school knows who belongs to which group by the way they dress and act, because it's important, it's thought, to know who is in and who is out of which group so you know where you belong and where you don't.

And, unfortunately, we have done that in the church as well. We don't naturally look at the heart. We look at outward appearances and behaviours. How many of you grew up in the church and were subtly, or not so subtly, coerced into living by a code of ethics? And you could tell who was in the in-group and who was outside the group by how they dressed and whether or not they drank, or smoked, or danced, or went to movies. And so the more drab and austere you were, according to this outward code of behaviour, the more spiritual you were believed to be.

So, the focus was not on Christ's power to transform the heart of an individual into the likeness of Christ. Rather, it was on self effort in living according to certain superficial religious expressions, so that the evangelical Christian could be delineated from those outside their group.

Paul warns the Colossians that this was not God's intention. He said, ***"Don't let anyone condemn you [by externals]."*** That is the essence of religion. The Christian faith is not primarily about those kinds of things, it's about following Jesus and letting him change us.

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17 For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.

These religious rituals and the Old Testament Levitical law, Paul says, were not the main event. They pointed towards Christ. They were not the reality. They were simply a foreshadowing of what was to come. The reality, Paul says, is found in Christ. **He** is the fulfillment of all the Jewish sacrifices, laws and hopes.

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So Paul says that **focusing on these religious things is like trying to hug a shadow.** Have you ever seen a kid chase their shadow? It's quite hilarious to watch. I checked out some youtube videos of kids discovering their shadows for the first time. They reacted in different ways. Some of them were amused and tried to play with their shadows. Others were terrified and tried to escape. They seemed quite traumatized that there was no getting away.

Paul described self-made religious piety like chasing shadows. In essence, what Paul was saying was,...

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"Why live in the shadows when you can experience the reality of a relationship with the risen Christ?"

Last week in the previous passage we focused on what it means to live in the reality of Christ.

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In 2:9 & 10 Paul said,

⁹ For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. ¹⁰ So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.

All the fullness of God lives in Christ. In other words, he was and is completely God. He has supreme authority and power. And we have been given the fullness of Christ who is all-powerful. In other words, the same power that allowed Christ to calm the storm lives in us. The same power that fed five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of small fish dwells in us. The same power that healed the blind, the deaf and the lame lives in us. The same power that cleansed the lepers lives in us. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead resides in us. And this same power is at our disposal to transform our characters so **he** can live **his** life **through** us. It's not about self-effort, or self-actualization.

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Religion is powerless to change us. We cannot change ourselves. **We need an extreme makeover that only the power of Christ can affect in us.**

Paul continues.

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¹⁸ Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud,

These religious people were preoccupied with their own religious experiences. They went on and on about their visions and dreams, and their esoteric delusions, and their pious self-denial. The more they talked, the bigger their heads got, and the bigger their heads got, the more they talked.

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One commentator wrote that the focus on religion that Paul was talking about here is **"emotionally elating, ego inflating, and worst of all, brother berating."**¹

Paul says that this kind of religious person has his focus, not on Christ, but on externals, on himself, the result of which will puff up his mind. In his own mind this person is spiritually mature, but Paul said, the opposite is actually true.

I was working on my sermon in a coffee shop one day and a guy, as he was getting up to leave, asked me what I was working on. I told him it was a sermon that I was going to preach that Sunday. He gave me that look that people usually give me, like he wished he hadn't asked. Then he was brave enough to inquire what I was preaching on. I told him that it was basically going to be the difference between religion and and what it means to walk with Jesus. And that the Christian faith is not about religion, that it is a relationship with the living God who went to great lengths so we could have a relationship with him.

He then said something very profound. He said, **"That's the problem all over the world isn't it? Everyone wears their religion as a fashion statement and they walk around like it's all about them."**

¹ McLeod, *The Epistle to Colossians*, p. 205.

That's what was happening in the early church. These religious people had lost their way and thought it was about them. Paul goes on.

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19 and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.

A person who is focuses on religion, or self-effort, Paul said, has lost connection with the power of Christ. They have forgotten that it's not about them, but about Christ. This is the overriding message of Colossians. Twenty eight times in Colossians, the name of Christ is mentioned. Our lives, as followers of Jesus, should be all about him. Everything we do as a church should be about making his name famous. And it's by maintaining this focus that the power of the Holy Spirit can do a supernatural work in our hearts. Our spiritual growth is dependent on our close connection with the living Christ, the head of the Church. And, Paul said, it is God who causes the growth as we spend time with Christ, not our religious effort. Jesus said the same thing in John 15.

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John 15:5 (NLT)

5 "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.

If we remain in Christ and allow him to remain in us we will grow. If we attempt to live without him, by our religion, by our creeds, by our self-effort, there will be no growth. We cannot affect change in our character just by working harder at it without the power of Christ, or simply by knowing certain things about him.

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20 You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, 21 "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!"? 22 Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them.

When Ruthie and I were in Japan we taught evangelistic ESL classes in the church to build a bridge for people who would not normally darken the door of a church. After one of the classes, one lady, who happened to be a Christian, decided that she was going to evangelize a newcomer in the class. So, she commenced to excitedly tell her in Japanese all the things Christians don't do. "Christians don't do this. Christians don't that. Christians don't do that other thing." She went on and on about all the things that Christians don't do. This new lady, not surprisingly, never came back to the class. The Christian faith is not about these kinds of things, but we have a tendency, as human beings to want to build walls of rules around us to make us feel safe.

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, the main character, Ellis Redding had spent much of his life wasting away in prison because of a reckless act of violence he committed as a teenager. After 40 years of jail time, he was finally released to enjoy the freedom he had longed for.

Freedom was not as easy as he expected though. For example, he couldn't free himself from the habit of asking for permission each time he wanted to use the washroom. He had become "institutionalized." His newfound "freedom" terrified him because he had grown accustomed to the structure behind bars. It had become normal and safe for him. He didn't have to exercise his own

decision-making. Someone else did the thinking for him. On the outside, he faced a prospect more daunting and terrifying than incarceration – freedom.

He contemplated ways to get himself back to prison. He summed up his dilemma in one line: "It is a terrible thing to live in fear."

People caught up in legalism are no different than Ellis Redding. They are scared to death of the freedom grace brings. It's much easier to retreat to our cells of do's and don'ts, and black and white categories. But, the Christian faith is not about these things, and Paul says when we live this way we deny the power of Christ. And if we deny the power of Christ we are on our own trying to effect impossible change in our hearts. It's a frustrating and impossible way to live.

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²³ These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial [self made-religion], and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.

People who focus on externals look wise and spiritual, Paul says, but it's all a show. They are play actors on the stage of life putting on a performance in order to receive the applause of men. They are chasing shadows. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 that if we are doing good deeds or righteous acts to be honoured by men, we may get that applause we so desperately want from gullible onlookers, but that applause will be all the reward we will get.

Let's finish off here by summarizing the difference between religion and the life of faith in Christ.

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1) Religion is man-made.

[25a]

(1) Life in Christ is from God and begins with the finished work of Christ on the cross.

[25b]

2) Religion sets up a system for judging who is in and who is out.

[25c]

(2) Life in Christ invites others in to join us on our journey towards the heart of God.

[25d]

3) Religion is about self-effort.

[25e]

(3) Life in Christ is about surrendering our will to the Holy Spirit, and cooperating with him so he can effect change in us.

[26a]

4) Religion is about sin management.

[26b]

(4) Life in Christ is about relationship and transformation.

[26c]

5) Religion is about rules, systems, principles, philosophies, and appearances in order to appease God, or to receive applause from men.

[26d]

(5) Life in Christ is about a dynamic inward transformation of our character through continual dependence on the power of Jesus in us so he can live through us.

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Jesus calls us into life with him. He said in John 10:10 that he came to give us a a rich and satisfying life. He did not call us to practice religion.

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Galatians 5:1 (NLT)

¹ So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.

He has called us to be completely free. Freedom can be a scary thing. Our tendency is to retreat to the safety of our cells where we know where the boundaries are. Jesus has called us to something much more dynamic than that. He has called us to an exciting journey with him. He wants to use us to change the world through the creative power of his love.



Growing in Grace: Making Real What We Already Know

Why I'm Not Religious

Colossians 2:16-23

Week of June 18, 2017

Objective of this study: To understand the difference between religion and relationship and life with Jesus.

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us]

Worship (5 - 10 minutes)

1. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.
2. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
3. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read **Psalm 100** meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you. **Did anything jump out at you?**

Welcome

Shadows or sunlight?

[It's really important when doing this study that we each think about ourselves specifically and ways we need to grow, not how Christians in general need to grow. Do the hard work of letting the Holy Spirit speak to *your* heart.]

Word

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read Colossians 2:16-23.
 1. Find all the things this passage says about rules.
 2. Find all the things this passage says about Jesus.
 3. How do they differ?

Work

1. When you think about freedom what comes to mind? How does it make you feel?
2. When you think about religion and rules what comes to mind? How does it make you feel?
3. Why do you think some people are afraid of freedom?
4. What do you think freedom is like in regards to life with Jesus? Flesh it out a bit. Does it mean that you just do whatever you feel like doing? Think about John 15 and Jesus' parable of *The Vine and the Branches*. Freedom from what? Freedom to what?
5. What does all this have to do with relationship?