

Title: *Why Live Like a Dead Person?*

Text: Colossians 2:20-23

One of the quirks of my personality is that I have very little tolerance for rules that don't make sense. In that sense, God gave me a wife who keeps me in balance on those kinds of things. I can fuss and fume and say, "That is really a stupid rule." My wife will remind me, "Yes but those are the rules and we need to obey them."

There is a certain comfort in conformity to rules. Maybe you've seen movies or read stories about someone who was in jail and about to be released and had great anxiety about how they would handle their newfound freedom.

In the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, Ellis "Red" Redding has spent his prime wasting away in prison because of a reckless act of violence he committed as a teenager. After 40 years of incarceration, Red finally receives his release to enjoy the freedom for which he's longed.

However, he can't free himself from the habit of asking for permission each time he wishes to use the men's room. He's become "institutionalized." This newfound life scares him, because he's grown accustomed to the structure behind bars. Imprisonment had become safe for Red. He didn't have to exercise his own decision-making. Someone else did the thinking for him, and now, on the outside, he faces a prospect more daunting and terrifying than incarceration: freedom.

Red confesses that he contemplates various ways to break his parole and return to the security of his prison cell. He sums up his dilemma in one line: "It is a terrible thing to live in fear."

People caught up in legalism are no different than Red—scared to death of the freedom grace brings. It's much easier to retreat to our cells of dos and don'ts, of black and white categories. But we can't protect people by erecting legalistic walls. Instead we have to let people understand what it means to be a free, new creature in Christ. When you come to Christ, you die to some things and you become alive to other things. Paul lets the Colossians know that they have fullness in Christ. He said in Colossians 2:13-15, ¹³ "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

In Ephesians, Paul says, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved."

So he talks about us being spiritually dead until something happens to make us spiritually alive – that something is the grace of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. While we've been made alive to certain things, we've also been "made dead" to certain things. In Romans 6, Paul has been laying out the amazing story of God's grace and takes on the challenge that some people may presume upon God's grace. He anticipates the question, shall we continue in sin so that grace may abound? He says, ² "By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

The new life that Christ offers us is a life of freedom and victory over sin which is infinitely greater than just a bunch of rules. It's a life of freedom and service. So often, we'll feel

good about someone's character and morality because they don't drink, smoke or do drugs. We may even say, if we're not sure, "He might be a Christian. He doesn't drink." It is so easy for us to make false assumptions because aren't clear on what the gospel really is.

What the gospel really is is dependent upon who Jesus Christ really is. Paul clarifies who Jesus Christ is in this Colossian letter. He is the image of the invisible God. He is the first-born over all creation. The firstborn from among the dead. The essence of the Gospel is that God created this world, declared it good, placed the first man and the first woman in the perfect environment but they rebelled against him. Because of that our human race and our world are both fallen. That rebellion just highlighted the tendency we all have to go our own way. We never thought of touching that park bench until we saw the sign on it, "Wet Paint: Do Not Touch". That rebellion, though is a sin against a holy and a loving God. Because God is holy, he has to punish sin. Because he is loving, he took that judgment and punishment upon himself. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

The bible says, "For by grace are you saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, not of works so that no one can boast." In Romans, Paul writes, "⁹ That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ¹¹ As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." ¹² For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³ for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

Nowhere in the Bible are we told that we are saved by not drinking, smoking or doing drugs. Nowhere are we told that salvation is dependent upon belonging to the right political party. We're not told that we're saved or not saved because of what we do and don't eat. We're not even told that salvation is dependent upon coming to church. Salvation, being restored to a right relationship with God comes when we acknowledge our own sinfulness, turn to God in repentance – That's a big biblical word that means we're really sorry for what we've done and that we really want to change – and then, inviting Jesus Christ to come into your life and change your heart and forgive your sin and make you a new person.

The people in Colossae were being led astray and into confusion by a heresy that taught that the spirit was good and that all matter was evil. Therefore, God was so good and the earth was so evil that God couldn't have created this earth. It must have been some distant spiritual emanation of the true God. In a similar way, because matter is evil, Jesus Christ couldn't really be God because God wouldn't come down and contaminate himself with the evil of this world.

So, if you've got concerns about ridding yourself of the evil matter of this world and you want to rise above it all, what do you do? You make rules. You make explicit, detailed rules to make sure that you don't come anywhere close to violating any of them. Some people become what we call ascetics. That is they live lives of self-denial. They are afraid to enjoy anything because that would be sinful or bad. The watchword is denial.

Some folks establish traditional taboos that are based more on the culture than on the demands of Scripture. God wants us to live holy, moral lives that are pleasing to him in every way, but if you look through the New Testament at the teaching of Jesus and the writings of Paul, you won't find a long list of rules. You will find principles to live by. There will be some

expectations of what a holy, spirit-filled life looks like, but as we've already stated rules don't make you righteous. They can make you a righteous pain-in-the-neck sometimes.

A news article about the religious history of the Chicago area began with this paragraph about Zion, a small town north of the city: "Rev. John Alexander Dowie left little to chance a century ago, when the charismatic preacher founded the city of Zion as a carefully ordered religious utopia: He immediately outlawed sin."

It was both a great idea and a foolish presumption. God had already outlawed sin from the beginning, of course, thereby proving that pure legalism can't produce godly people. Rev. Dowie should have known that the "law" only confirms our sinnerhood.

We should make laws, but laws don't change hearts. Only Christ can change hearts and form "law-abiding" spiritual citizens.

Paul talks about Christ's death. In Romans 6, he says, "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him."⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Paul says in 3:3, the next passage we look at, he says, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God."² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

In 2:20, he talks about dying with Christ to the basic principles of this world. The New Living Translation states, "You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world." The basic spiritual powers of this world have set themselves up against Christ. They are the powers that try to convince you that the key to pleasing God is to keep all of the rules and if you've broken too many of the rules, then you've gone too far and there's no turning back, it's too late for you.

When you come to Christ, you realize that the basic principles of the world are wrong. Something that once had such a powerful attraction over you loses its appeal. Maybe you had an addiction to alcohol, or to drugs or some other self-destructive lifestyle and habit. You've come to Christ and now he's set you free and it's like that part of you is dead. You died to that addiction and it is now powerless over you. What was it that set you free from that addiction? Was it some kind of a rule? Was it looking at a rule that said, "Don't do that," that unleashed God's power in your life? Or was it an encounter with the risen Christ who said, "You should be dead to that. I can give you new life. Let's try a better way."

In verse 22, he says, "These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings." The destined to perish with use part is a bit confusing to me. It partly has to do with making rules about food and things that when you use them they disappear. The New Living Translation puts it, "Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them." How can something that deteriorates as we use it play a part in shaping or determining our eternity. Jesus said, "¹⁸ 'Are you so dull?' he asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? ¹⁹ For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.'" (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")²⁰ He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.'²¹ For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,²² greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.²³ All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'" If rules could have made us holy, we would have been holy

and we wouldn't have needed the atoning work of Jesus Christ or the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

To me, the important part of verse 22 is the part that says, "They are based on human commands and teachings." Sometimes we have practices and policies that sound so holy and so right and so spiritual, but the only problem is, they are our thoughts and not God's. We can come up with good sounding rules and we can sound so spiritual and even sincere in trying to keep them, but at the end of the day, they're our rules and not God's.

Paul says, "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."

When we're back in Colossians, which won't be until January, we'll look at what Paul says about putting on the new self. Following a bunch of man-made rules is the worst of religion. One of the most common ways in which this issue comes up is in the area of the use of alcohol. Most Baptist church covenants say, "We engage . . . to abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating liquors as a beverage." We usually say, "The Bible doesn't say, 'Don't drink.' It says, 'Don't be drunk.'" The force of the church covenant is to say that if you want to be a member of this church, you can't drink. I heard about a church that said we want to amend our church covenant so that it is more in line with what the Bible actually says. Their amendment read, "We engage . . . to seek God's help in abstaining from all drugs, food, drink, and practices which bring unwarranted harm to the body or jeopardize our own or another's faith."

I'm not agitating for an amendment to our church constitution. I'm just saying that Jesus didn't die to make us rule-keepers.

Preached at Salem Avenue. November 13, 2011 a.m.