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SERMON TITLE**End with Jesus****SERIES****DATE**

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KEY SCRIPTURE**Colossians 2:16-23****SYNOPSIS**

Don't trade the reality of Christ for the shadow of religion or a system of rules and regulations when you've been set free in Christ.

HIGHLIGHTS



☞ End with Jesus

Good morning, everyone! We began this year with *A Fresh Start* and continued with *After the Fresh Start*, when it gets hard and messy; then, about *Digging Deeper*. We looked at *Starting with Jesus* in everything because He's supreme over all. And last week, we talked about *Staying with Jesus* and not being pulled away by hollow philosophies and false teachings.

But here's the question today: How do we finish? Because it's one thing to start well. It's another thing to stay the course. But the real test is how you end. And unfortunately, a lot of people who start with Jesus don't end with Jesus. They start in grace and end in religion. They start with a relationship and end with a rulebook.

So today we're asking: How do we finish the race anchored in Christ, not tangled up in religious performance? How do we end with Jesus?

☞ **Colossians 2:16-23** gives us a critical warning: **"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. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. 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. 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. 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: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?' These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. 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."**

Paul is warning the Colossians: Don't trade the reality of Christ for the shadow of religion or a system of rules and regulations when you've been set free in Christ. Don't end with empty religion when you started with Jesus. So, how do you make sure to end with Jesus?

☞ Don't Trade Freedom for Rules

The Colossian Christians were being pressured to follow certain dietary laws, observe specific religious holidays, and keep the Sabbath in particular ways. And if they didn't, they were being judged and condemned. Told they weren't spiritual enough.

Sound familiar? We might not argue about New Moon celebrations, but we have our own Christian subculture rules, don't we? Some churches judge you if you don't dress a certain way.



Some judge you if you listen to the wrong kind of music. Some judge you if you don't homeschool your kids or if you do homeschool your kids.

It's like we've created this invisible checklist of what "good Christians" do and don't do. And if you don't check all the boxes, you're somehow less spiritual. You're not measuring up. You're being judged. Romans 14 warns us about this. Some matters *are* clearly outlined in Scripture, but some things *aren't* and must be a matter of conscience. Don't judge someone else on your personal matter of conscience.

And here's the thing: the people doing the judging often think they're helping. They think they're protecting the faith and maintaining holiness. But what they're actually doing is replacing a relationship with a rulebook. They're trading grace for guilt and substituting Christ with compliance.

Paul says these things—the laws and regulations—"are a shadow of the things that were to come." A shadow. It's not the real thing. It's just an outline. An indication that something substantial is nearby. And now that Christ has come, now that the reality is here, why would you ~~go back to the shadow?~~ **It's not about keeping rules; it's about a relationship with Christ.**

It's like watching a movie trailer over and over instead of watching the actual movie. The trailer gives you a glimpse, a preview, but it's not the whole story. Once you've seen the film, you don't sit there rewinding the trailer. Yet that's what we do when we focus on rules and regulations instead of Christ. We're choosing the preview over the feature film.

When you start your Christian life, you don't come to Jesus because you've mastered a set of rules. You come because you're broken, you're lost, you need a Savior. You come by grace through faith. You don't earn it. You don't deserve it. You just receive it. And then, somewhere along the way, the enemy whispers, "Okay, now that you're saved, here's what you need to do to stay saved. Here's how you prove you're really a Christian. Here's the checklist." It's been that way since the very beginning. Adam and Eve chose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (a list of right and wrong), rather than continue in a relationship with God.

And we still fall for it. We trade the freedom of relationship for the burden of religion. We start measuring our spiritual temperature by how well we're keeping the rules instead of how deeply we're abiding in Christ. And before we know it, we've lost the joy. We've lost the freedom. We've lost connection with Jesus Himself. **Galatians 5:1** says, "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*" You were set free. Don't go back into bondage. Don't let rules replace relationship.

~~Don't Trade Reality for Religion~~



Paul continues by talking about false humility. That's when someone acts super spiritual, talking about their visions, their experiences, their deep spiritual insights. They make you feel like you're missing out on some secret level of Christianity that only they have access to. And it sounds so impressive. It has the appearance of wisdom.

But Paul says they're "puffed up with idle notions by their *unspiritual* mind." In other words, it's all hot air. It looks good on the outside, but there's nothing of substance on the inside. It's performance, not transformation.

Or sometimes it's not about supernatural experiences, but it's the person who says, "I would never watch that. I would never go there. I would never do that." And underneath all the religious performance is a heart that's far from God. It's just pride dressed up in religious language.

Then Paul says, "They have lost connection with the head." This is the key. When you get caught up in religious performance—whether it's rule-keeping, spiritual experiences, or false humility—you lose connection with Christ. **You're so focused on the system that you forget about the Savior. Have real faith, not fake religion.**

Jesus said it clearly in Matthew 23:27-28 when He confronted the Pharisees: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

Religion has an appearance of wisdom. It looks good. It sounds spiritual. It makes you feel like you're doing something. But it lacks power. It lacks life. It lacks connection to the Head, which is Christ. **1 Corinthians 13:1-3** drives this home: even if you have impressive spiritual gifts and practices, without love—without genuine connection to Christ—you have nothing.

So here's the test: Is what you're doing drawing you closer to Jesus, or is it just making you feel religious? Is it producing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc., or is it producing judgment, pride, and exhaustion? Because if it's the latter, it's not from Christ. It's just religion. Don't trade the reality of relationship for the rules of religion.

☛Don't Trade Grace for Performance

Now Paul gets to the heart of the issue in verse 20, saying: When you put your faith in Jesus, you died to the old way of doing things. You stopped trying to earn God's favor through performance. You died to the world's value system. You died to the power of sin and the law. You were set free. So why are you going back? Why are you living like you're still under the old system when Christ has set you free?



It's like someone who's been released from prison but keeps going back to visit their cell. "I know I'm free, but I just feel more comfortable with these bars around me. At least I know the routine. At least I know what's expected." That's insane. You're free! Why would you go back to bondage?

But we do this all the time. We start our Christian life in the freedom of grace, and then we slowly drift back into a performance-based relationship with God. We start thinking, "Okay, I'm saved by grace, but now I need to maintain my salvation through effort. I need to pray enough, read my Bible enough, serve enough, give enough, avoid enough sins. And if I do all that, God will finally be pleased with me." That's not the gospel. That's legalism. And it will kill your soul. **Galatians 3:3** calls this out: "*Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?*"

Paul continues in verses 21-23, saying these are man-made rules. They look impressive. They sound wise. "Don't do this, don't do that, punish your body." And people think, "Wow, that person is really holy. Look at their discipline. Look at their sacrifice." But Paul says it lacks any value. It doesn't actually change you. It doesn't produce real holiness. It just produces pride and exhaustion.

☞ **Real transformation doesn't come from trying harder. It comes from abiding deeper.** It doesn't come from external rules. It comes from internal renewal by the Holy Spirit. And when you forget that—when you drift back into performance mode—you lose the joy of your salvation. You lose the freedom you had when you first met Jesus.

Remember where you started. You came to Jesus empty-handed. You didn't bring anything to the table. You just received His grace. And that's how you continue. That's how you finish. Not by adding rules and regulations, but by staying connected to Him.

☞ **Don't Trade Christ for Legalism**

So ultimately, how do we make sure we end with Jesus and not with empty religion?

☞ **First, guard your freedom.** When someone tries to add requirements to the gospel—"Jesus plus...," "Jesus plus this rule," "Jesus plus this experience"—reject it. The gospel is all about Jesus. You are saved by grace through faith, and you continue by grace through faith. Don't let anyone steal your freedom.

☞ **Second, stay connected to the Head.** Paul says those caught up in religion have lost connection with Christ. Don't let that be you. Your relationship with Jesus is what matters. Not your performance. Not your reputation. Not how many boxes you check. Stay connected. Abide in Him. Let everything else flow from that.



☞ Third, **focus on the heart, not just the behavior**. External rules can modify behavior for a while, but they can't change the heart. Only the Spirit can do that. So instead of creating a list of dos and don'ts, ask the Spirit to transform you from the inside out. Ask Him to produce His fruit in you. Ask Him to make you more like Jesus.

Now, I know some of you are thinking, "wait a minute, the rules do matter; there is still right and wrong." That is true... some of the "rules and regulations" are actually ok, but not as a *means* to righteousness, but rather as a *response* to the Lord's leading. For example: "I'm giving up smoking because that will make me a better Christian." No, it won't. But... "I feel like the Lord is asking me quit smoking with his help." Yes! That's responding to his lead.

☞ And fourth, **remember the goal**. The goal isn't to be a good rule-follower. The goal is **to become like Christ**. To know Him. To love Him. To be conformed to His image. And that happens through relationship, not regulation. **Philippians 3:10** captures the goal: "*I want to know Christ...*"

I get it. Rules feel safe. They're clear. They're measurable. You can check them off and feel like you're making progress. Religion gives you a sense of control. But Jesus doesn't want your control. He wants your heart. He doesn't want your performance. He wants your love. He doesn't want you to end tangled up in legalism. He just wants you with him. And the more you hang out with him, the more the "rules" will simply be something you want rather than a checklist you're trying so hard to do.

Here's what really matters: **The Christian life begins with Jesus, continues with Jesus, and must end with Jesus**. Not Jesus plus religion. Not Jesus plus performance. Just Jesus.

When you stand before God one day, He's not going to ask you how many rules you kept. He's going to ask, "Did you know My Son? Did you love Him? Did you trust Him? Did you abide in Him?" And if the answer is yes—if you started with Jesus, stayed with Jesus, and ended with Jesus—that's all that matters. Everything else is just shadows. He is the reality.

Maybe it's time to confess that you've drifted into performance mode and you need to return to grace. Maybe you need to ask the Spirit to show you where religion has replaced relationship in your life.

☞ **The Christian life is not about being a perfect rule-follower. It's about being a beloved child of God who walks in freedom, grows in grace, and finishes strong. Start with Jesus. Stay with Jesus. End with Jesus.** That's the race. That's the goal.

None but Jesus