

Colossians 2:16-23 — Where You Beat Up By A Church Bully?

November 12, 2017

Good morning. Great to have you at CrossWinds. Let's begin with a question. When you grew up, were any of you bullied in school? Did someone ever try to intimidate you or manipulate you? If that was you, put up your hand.

Bullying is more common than most of us realize. Even though schools have initiatives to stop bullying, not much has changed. Kids are bullied today, just like they were 20 years ago. What makes life more difficult for kids today is they face a new type of bullying. It is called cyber bullying. That is when kids post nasty things about others they don't like on social media. Sometimes they are so direct they text message other kids intimidating words or photos. Even when a young man or woman is in the privacy of his or her own bedroom he or she can be beat up through his or her cell phone. Some kids have even taken their own lives because of cyberbullying. Most of us didn't know a cell phone in a kid's hand could be a deadly weapon.

One government study tells us one in three middle school students are bullied. The same study claims one in four high school students are bullied.¹ Another study claims 160,000 kids stay home from school each day to avoid a bully.² Bullying is not a problem limited to our schools and the teenage years. Bullying can take place in the church. Some people try to spiritually intimidate

¹ <https://www.stopbullying.gov/media/facts/index.html>

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/10/160-000-kids-stay-home-from-school-each-day-to-avoid-being-bullied/280201/>

others so they can push people way from Jesus. Today we are going to study three types of church bullies and learn how they work.

At CrossWinds, we are studying the book of Colossians. This New Testament book is all about Jesus. It is about how good God has been to us through Jesus. Paul wants us to understand who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. Jesus created the world. Jesus took a body to be one of us so he could die for us and save us from our sin. The same God who created the universe poured all of himself into a body, and when we become a Christian he pours himself into us. That is a mind-blowing thought.

Since every good thing we have comes from Jesus, Satan's plans are to take us away from Jesus. Last week, we looked at how Satan does that through cultural pressure outside the church. Today, we will see how Satan tries to push us away from Jesus through bullies inside the church. Let me introduce you to the first church bully. Maybe you will recognize him.

Legalistic Larry: The church bully that wants me to follow his rules instead of Jesus.

Legalistic Larry takes Jesus and the Bible then he adds his own rules to what he thinks makes a good Christian, like homeschooling, no cable TV and avoiding any movie not done with cartoon characters by Disney.



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 (ESV)

Paul told us not to let anyone pass judgment on us in questions of food and drink. What it means when Paul said, “Don’t let anyone pass judgment on you” is don’t take people seriously if they are upset about what you eat or drink. Paul said the Christian life is not about what we eat or what we drink. It is about Jesus.

In the church of Colossae, there were Legalistic Larrys. What they were sticking their noses in the air over was not cable TV or homeschooling. They were upset over what people were eating and drinking. The context of Colossians tells us there were Jewish Christians in the Colossae church. We also know there were new gentile Christians. I imagine the church had a potluck and some Gentile Christians thought they would bring the best food in the church. I can see them bringing bacon-wrapped lobster and shrimp. They thought they were encouraging everyone but the Jewish legalistic Larrys in the church freaked out! They were upset that bacon and shrimp were served at church. What was their issue?

Let me give you some background. If we turn to the Old Testament, we find the Jews were told to classify foods as either clean or unclean. If it was unclean, they were to avoid it. A good place to see these classifications is in Leviticus 11:2-20. When we check the Old Testament, we find pork is unclean. Shrimp and lobster are shellfish. That makes them unclean. They may be tasty foods, but Jewish Christians came from a background where you avoided those meats like they were the plague.

Why did God declare some foods clean and others not clean? Some people point out there are good health reasons for calling some foods unclean, such as avoiding pork meant you avoided triganosis. God called foods clean and unclean for more than health reasons. There was a teaching element to this in the Old Testament. The teaching element is that in our everyday lives, God's people were to set ourselves apart for God and live a separate holy life. What better way to remind yourself that you are set apart for God than to reminder yourself that at every meal? Clean and unclean foods served as a powerful reminder to God's people that they were to be different from the rest of the world.

Here is what the news Jewish Christians missed: The Old Testament dietary laws were a shadow. They were designed to point people to Christ. Once Christ came, they do not matter.

If I am working around the house, and I lose track of my wife because she slipped around the corner, one way I can see if she slipped around the corner is I can look at the yard and see her shadow cascading across the lawn. The shadow points me to her. When I get to her, I don't care about the shadow anymore. I am not worried about stepping on the shadow. I don't talk to her shadow. I don't take a picture of her shadow and put it on my desk. All the shadow does is point me to her. Once I have her, I don't need the shadow anymore. In the same way, these Old Testament food laws pointed us to God's people being set apart. Once Jesus came, the shadow of the food laws don't matter. We can eat what we want. Jesus and Paul teach this.

And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters

not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him.” Mark 7:18–20 (ESV)

And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. Acts 10:13–16 (ESV)

Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 1 Corinthians 8:8 (ESV)

Jesus eliminated the Old Testament diet regulation.

Not only did Jesus eliminate the Old Testament diet regulations but he eliminated the requirement of observing the special holidays on the Jewish calendar. They were also just a shadow pointing to Christ. Now that Jesus has arrived, people don't need to observe the special holidays in the Jewish calendar.

Paul specifically mentioned Jewish festivals, new moon celebrations and Sabbaths. You can learn more about these in Leviticus 25, Isaiah 1:12, Exodus 20:9-11. A good example of the Jewish holidays Jesus eliminated would be Passover. Passover was an annual reminder that the angel of death passed over God's people through the sacrifice of a perfect lamb. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist sees Jesus and says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Passover was a shadow pointing to Jesus, who is the perfect lamb that takes away the sin of the world so that all who trust in him have death pass over them. Jesus is the substance of Passover, observing the holiday of Passover was just the shadow pointing to him.

The same thing applies to observing the Old Testament Sabbath. As many of you know, the Old Testament Sabbath was on Saturday, the last day of the

week. We worship on Sunday, the first day of the week. How did this change? Jesus rose on the first day of the week so Christians started worshipping on the first day of the week. They called Sunday worship the Lord's Day because it pointed to Jesus. Sunday worship is not the Old Testament Passover simply moved to a different day of the week. Why did the early church let go of observing the Old Testament Sabbath? The Old Testament Sabbath day was a day of rest from work. It was God's people trusting for God to provide for them instead of them working to provide for themselves. The sabbath day of rest was the shadow pointing to Jesus is who the substance. Jesus is true rest for all our work. Jesus saves us not by working to please God but by simply resting from our work to please God and trusting in God to provide salvation for us through Jesus. That is why the early church let the observance of the Saturday Sabbath go when Jesus Christ came. It was a day of rest simply pointing to the one who came to give us true rest. Here are a few more thoughts.

All of the Ten Commandments are reinforced in the New Testament except the fourth commandment, which is the command to keep the Sabbath. The one place the Sabbath is talked about is here in Colossians. It tells us to ignore people that try to force us to observe the Sabbath, now that we have Jesus. Paul warned the Gentiles about many different sins in his letters but never once did he warn them about breaking the Saturday Sabbath. In Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council gave its rules for new Gentile Christians, and it didn't include keeping the Sabbath. All the early church fathers taught the Old Testament Sabbath was abolished and now the first day of the week, was the day of Christian worship.

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. Hebrews 10:1 (ESV)

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1 (ESV)

What happened in Colossae is Jewish Christians were telling the Gentile Christians they needed to follow a bunch of Old Testament rules in addition to Jesus. They wanted everybody to dress, act and be just like them. In doing so, they were church bullies, Legalist Larrys that pushed people away from Jesus.

How can we become Legalistic Larrys today? I texted a friend of mine who came from a church that had a legalistic bend to ask him what legalism looked like for him. He told me that if he missed church on Wednesday night, people shunned him. Is it good to make Wednesday night church? Yes. I hope every kid comes Wednesday night. Wednesday night church may be a personal rule in my house, but we have no right to force it on other people. When we do, we become Legalistic Larrys.

Let me give you a few other examples. When I grew up, in church you needed to wear a suit. If you didn't wear a suit, people looked down on you. There is nothing wrong with wearing a suit. Wearing a suit may be your preference at church. That is fine. Wearing a suit may be the right clothing for you, but don't impose what you think is right to wear in church on everybody else. Don't turn your preference into a rule not found in the Bible.

Years ago I remember talking with people who insisted songs were sung at church with the organ and out of a hymnal. I like the organ. I like the hymnal. That may be a preference for some of us but we don't have a right to insist

everyone else worships with an organ and the hymnal. There is nothing wrong with making our own rules to help us in our walk with Jesus but we become Legalistic Larrys when we impose our personal rules on others.

Here is what makes this tricky. Paul didn't say it was wrong for a Jew to observe Jewish holidays and food laws if he saw them as part of his culture and as pointing to Jesus. That was fine. It was wrong for Jews to pressure other Christians into observing those holidays.

Another example would be homeschooling. It is not wrong to homeschool your kids or to send them to Christian school. That may be your conviction. It is wrong to pressure other Christians into thinking that all true Christians must homeschool their kids.

All that matters is Jesus and if you are in him. When we start forcing our extra-biblical preferences on others, we have turned into Legalistic Larrys that push people way from Jesus.

Mystical Martha: The church bully that wants to be the center of attention instead of Jesus.

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 (ESV)

This time Paul warns us to watch out for people that want to disqualify us. Disqualify may not be the best English translation of this Greek work. The word literally means to tell somebody they are inadequate, to tell him he



is a failure. That is harsh. How could one Christian tell another Christian he or she failed in his or her faith? Let's find out.

The first way this happens is through people that insist on asceticism. Other translations rephrase the words "insisting on asceticism." They call it false humility or taking pleasure in humility. Have you ever met a Christian how is into fake humility? He pretends to be humble but after a while, you realize he is all about himself. These are Christians who like to talk about themselves and all the wonderful things God has done in their lives so they can be the center of attention. Their stories usually start out with how they started with a terrible life before Christ. They were hopeless. They were broke. Their marriages were on the rocks. Jesus came to their rescue. Jesus changed their lives. Jesus saved their marriages. Jesus made their businesses succeed. There is nothing wrong with this kind of story. The problem is these people are not really telling their stories with humility. They love to tell their stories again and again because it makes them the center of attention instead of Jesus. That is false humility. Has anyone met someone at church like this? They are church bullies because they make themselves the center of attention.

The other things these people did, at least in Colossae, is they took pleasure in the worship of angels. Angel worship isn't something that is common today. It was a common practice in that area of the world and in that time. In A.D. 363 in Colossae's sister city of Laodicea, people held a special church council to declare that it is not right for Christians to abandon the worship of God for the worship of angels. In fact, the archangel Michael was worshiped in that part of

the world until A.D. 739. Archaeology even discovered amulets people wore around their necks that pictured an angel. They thought this angel amulet helped ward off demons. Jesus was very clear that we are not supposed to worship angels.



Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” Matthew 4:10 (ESV)

What was happening is these people with false humility claimed they were too humble to go directly to God so they decided to worship angels instead, believing the angels would serve as intermediaries between them and God. When they became involved in angel worship, they claimed to experience extraordinary supernatural events such as dreams and visions. Where were these supernatural visions and dreams coming from that began when they worshipped angels instead of Jesus? This is my opinion — the Bible tells us Satan masquerades as angels of light. Demons are more than happy to keep people entertained with counterfeit spiritual experiences to keep their eyes off Jesus.

These Mystical Marthas were going around the church talking about the dreams and visions they received when they worshipped angels instead of Jesus. What happened is ordinary believers, like you and me, felt like Christian failures because they didn’t have special dreams and visions when they worshipped Jesus.

Here is what Paul said this about these people — they were puffed up without reason. They thought they were something special but it was all in their

own heads. Their egos were puffed up like marshmallows in the microwave. Paul said their arrogance was coming from their sensuous minds, that is their fallen minds.

The people with false humility who were always talking about themselves wanted to be the center of attention. They were claiming supernatural experiences of visions and dreams when they worshipped angels instead of Jesus, so made themselves the center of attention. They were church bullies trying to make ordinary people with ordinary faith who were simply trusting in Jesus feel like spiritual failures. In so doing, they pushed people away from Jesus.

How do these Mystical Marthas show up today? One of my friends in college asked me if I had undergone a second baptism of the Spirit. I told him I didn't see a second baptism of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. I don't have a problem with Christians going through large steps of growth later in life. That is normal. When someone says, "You need to seek and pray for a second baptism of the spirit, so you can be like me," it creates a two-tier system in the church. If you haven't received that second baptism — whatever that may be), it leaves you feeling like a Christian failure.

Another example is speaking in tongues. I haven't spoken in tongues. I personally think many of the people who speak in tongues are bogus, but God can give that gift if he wants. It is his gift. Some people say you need to speak in tongues to really know God. That isn't true. It is not like the tongue speakers in the church are varsity and the rest of us who haven't spoken in tongue are JV.

God will probably not give that gift to most of us. That is OK. The Mystical Marthas run around telling people about their supposed supernatural, spiritual experiences to make other people feel inferior and make themselves the center of attention. That is being a church bully that pushes people away from Jesus by taking the attention off of Jesus and putting it onto yourself.

Folks, speaking in tongues is nothing compared to having the God of the universe living in us and making us into new people.

The result of all Mystical Marthas in a church is never church unity;, it is always division because Mystical Marthas have lost their connection with Jesus.

Self-Denial Sam: The church bully that wants me starve my body to feed my soul.

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 (ESV)



Paul said we died to the elemental spirits of the world. Who are the elemental spirits of the world? We learned last week they are powerful fallen demons in this world that influence culture. When Paul said, “since we died to them,” he meant since Christ conquered all the fallen spiritual powers in the universe and since Christ is in us we have no fear of demons and their influence over us through things in this world. Why, as if we are still needed to fear demons, do we run from things in this world to avoid possible demonic influence? Do not handle;, do not taste; do not touch.

We don't know exactly what new Christians were told to avoid but whatever it was they were told not to touch it, taste it or hold; and if they did, they believed they opened themselves up to the influence of the demonic world. While Paul wasn't specific on what it was they felt they couldn't touch, taste or hold, we are given a little idea of what these things were because he said these things were destined to perish as they were used. The word perish means to decompose. It is what bananas do when we leave them on the counter for a week.

Apparently there was some kind of food they thought they needed to avoid because they believed coming in contact with that food opened them up to demonic influence. Here were Paul's words of advice: First, "It is just food. It is not going to hurt you." Second, "the one who conquered all the demonic powers in the universe lives in you. You don't need to be worried about what you think is a demonically influenced banana!"

Paul said, "Depriving yourself of these foods has the appearance of wisdom but it is actually self-made religion as you go through self-denial and severely treatment of your body." Apparently there was a lot of food in Colossae that these Self-Denying Sam Christians considered tainted by evil spiritual powers. Rather than eat the food, they denied themselves of feed, even starved themselves to avoid what they considered demonic influence through what they ate.

At first, these people appear super spiritual. They were starving themselves because they didn't want to even touch food that would compromise

them spiritually. Paul said it wasn't as spiritual as it looked. It was just food. It rots over time. Jesus conquered all the fallen demonic powers in the universe, and he lives in you. You can eat meat offered to idols that is sold in the meat market and not worry about being overrun by demonic powers.

Here is what these Christians were doing. Rather than having their identity be Christ, their identity became their self denial. For Self-Denying Sam, he was not known for the Jesus he enjoyed but for the pleasures he avoided. Self-Denying Sams are people who find their identity in spiritual subtraction rather than Jesus addition.

Paul said we are to be known for our identity in Jesus, not what we won't do because we are Christians.

In addition, Paul said all this severe self-denial because you are afraid of being spiritually contaminated actually has no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

When it comes to battling our fleshly desires, like food, denying ourselves of these desires doesn't make them go away. They only get worse. For example, if you decide to avoid food for two days, what are you constantly thinking about after two days? Food! In the end, it results in you pigging out!

How does Self-Denying Sam show up today? There is a strand of Christendom known as poverty theology. It is the idea that we can live on less so we can give away more for the kingdom. In one sense, this is good. It is a desire to not be so caught up in the world that we lose our focus on Christ. In another way, this isn't good. Some people take this too far. They try to live on nothing.

Their poverty is their new identity instead of Jesus. They live in a tiny house or a small apartment. They drive an old car or just ride a bicycle. When they have children, their children are faced with the minimum of clothes in an empty apartment. I have a friend of mine who began following this practice. He even gave away his bed so he could sleep on the floor. Sleeping on the floor worked until he met his future wife who told him he took his poverty theology too far. The problem with Self-Denying Sam is people become known for what they don't do rather than the Jesus that lives inside of them.

Maybe another example is the Amish. Don't take this wrong. Many of the Amish love Jesus. I know that. In Pennsylvania, where I came from, the Amish are known for not using electricity. They are known for using only buttons, not zippers. They are known for driving horses and buggies instead of cars. When they farm, they use horses instead of tractors. People come from around Pennsylvania so they can watch the Amish work in the field like they are watching monkeys at the zoo. For most people, the Amish are entertainment, because they are known for their rigorous self-denial of pleasure more than their love for Jesus. Self-Denying Sam can be a Christian bully. He wants you to think the real Christians are known by what they give up for Jesus, not what they gain because of Jesus.

Conclusion

Have you been pushed around by Christian bullies like Legalistic Larry who added a bunch of rules to God's Word, making everyone follow his preferences and his word?

Where you ever pushed around by a Mystical Martha who wanted herself to be the center of attention rather than Jesus? She had false humility and spoke about supplementary spiritual experiences like dreams, visions, and tongues making you feel inferior because you just had Jesus?

Where you ever pushed around by a spiritual bully know as Self-Denying Sam who wanted you to think the Christian life was more about what you give up for Jesus not what we gain because of Jesus?.

Maybe even the most convicting thought of all is the realization that from time to time, each of us have been one of these spiritual bullies and unwittingly pushed people away from Jesus. Thankfully, when we confess our sin, Jesus forgives our sin. As we close, if God has convicted you of the sin of being a church bully, confess and repent and let him make you new. Keep him as the center.



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