

# **BaptistWay Bible Series for November 30: Focus on the real, not spiritual gimmickry**

November 18, 2008

The very term “gimmick” raises suspicion. It is used to describe something meant to cheat, deceive or trick. A gimmick may be promoted or used as an “inventive strategy.” Victims see it as a misrepresentation and a “catch.” One expression we use for gimmickry is “bait and switch.” An adage we often hear is, “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”

Unfortunately, the general culture is not the only place where we find gimmicks being used. It happens in our spiritual lives as well. Contemporary Christians are susceptible to that with which our passage this week deals—the use of spiritual gimmicks.

We may take some comfort in that this vulnerability is nothing new. Every type of religion in Colossae had a gimmick. That is, they each had ways in which adherents could focus more on lists of do’s and don’ts rather than on changed lives.

Jews believed keeping the law with all its rules and required practices, worship and festivals was the way to righteousness. To be fair, this was based on their understanding of the Mosaic Law and their tradition (1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 2:4, 31:3; Nehemiah 10:33).

However, they had forgotten what God had told his people in Amos 5:21. The righteousness God wants is that which results from changed hearts that live out justice (Amos 5:24).

Likewise, Gentile religions had their own rituals, sacrifices and rules their

believers were expected to follow and keep. Both were types of spiritual gimmickry the model of which was that one could serve God (or a “god”) simply by following a prescribed set of rules.

Paul was concerned that Colossian Christians—whether Jew or Gentile—would not bring with them similar understandings. Rituals, regulations and cultural customs were no substitutes for the reality of life in Jesus.

A real relationship with Jesus is one that flows from the inside out. This is part of what Paul meant in verses 6-7 in telling the Colossians to live out of who they are. Being “rooted” and yet “walking” are not mutually exclusive. As people who belong to Jesus, Christians can dare to walk boldly on the solid footing of Jesus’ love, grace and power.

Therefore, in verse 8, Paul challenges his readers to not fall prey to the very things from which they had been freed: “human tradition and the basic principles of this world.” In verses 9-15, Paul paints a vivid picture of God’s authority, power and work in and through Jesus. Basic to this is that Jesus is fully God (v. 9) and, therefore, both trustworthy and “over every power and authority” (v. 10). Jesus’ work was to free us from our sinful nature (v. 11), give us new life (vv. 11-13), forgive and free us from sin (vv. 13-14), and win for us a victory over “the powers and authorities” of this world (v. 15).

Paul started with an image from a courtroom. There is the crime (our sin), then an indictment and conviction. It is important that Jesus has the authority to “prosecute” us for our sin. Jesus also has “cancelled the written code” by which we have been convicted and has nailed it to the cross (v. 14). In verse 15, the image shifts from the courtroom to that of a victory parade. That is, not only is our freedom provided by Jesus, it is not to be kept secret, but paraded before the world.

Since that freedom and victory are “public knowledge” and since God has forgiven us, anyone else’s judgment is moot (vv. 16-17). To be enslaved by rules and regulations devised by human minds and hearts is to deny the freedom we find in Jesus.

Rules are not bad in and of themselves. God does call us to holy living. The problem is when we make them the ultimate issues. Even the highest moral standards are no substitute for a real relationship with Jesus. This is why Paul cautions in verse 18 that we not let anyone take the prize from us. This happens when someone has finally “figured out” exactly what it means for a person to live and look like Jesus. Imposing that list becomes a game of “gotcha” or “holier than thou.”

We see this in ourselves as well as others. Our lists usually include things we already do/would not do. Further, as Paul writes in verse 23, we think our rules look like Jesus. Really they say more about us than about Jesus.

There is enough fakery in the world. We need not add more and give a false picture of Jesus. We can dare to be real with and about Jesus. The way to God is not through rule but relationship. To focus on a real relationship with Jesus and not spiritual gimmickry, our challenge is two-fold.

First, must never let any religious rule or practice take the place of a real relationship with Jesus. Second, we must take care—even as we seek to live holy lives that honor our Lord—that we not devise and impose spiritual gimmicks. That is, that we must not put rules and regulations we devise ahead of the relationship others have with Jesus.

### **Question to explore**

- *What spiritual gimmicks do we sometimes rely on when a genuine relationship with Jesus is what anyone needs?*