

Flesh Tank and Peashooter Regulations

by John Piper

The proposed amendment to the church covenant is designed to drive us to biblical, spiritual self-examination and to avoid the dangers of legalism, which is a more deadly disease than alcoholism.

Duration: 46:50

Scripture: Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:14-20

Topics: "Legalism"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Colossians 2:16-23 and the implications of living as new creatures in Christ. He emphasizes that the consumption of food and drink should not be used as a basis for judging someone's standing with God. The speaker warns against using regulations and rules to resist the temptations of the flesh, as they will ultimately lead to defeat. Instead, the only defense is to be rooted and built up in Christ, holding fast to Him and relying on His power and wisdom.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at www.DesiringGod.org Identical to the one we have now, except that it had no sentence concerning abstinence from alcohol in it. From 1871 to 1946, Bethlehem had no church constitution or covenant at all.

From 1945 to 1965, we had a church covenant which was identical to the one we have now, except that it had no sentence concerning abstinence from alcohol in it. Then in 1965, the church amended that covenant so that it included the sentence, we engage to abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating liquors as a beverage. The constitutional effect of that change was to make total abstinence a prerequisite for church membership.

The amendment before the church this Thursday is to replace that sentence with a sentence which will not explicitly rule people out who are not total abstainers. It is a broader statement calling for a heart-searching and a biblical self-examination. It will read as follows, 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.

And I wish that I could help everyone this morning see that the reason I am so strongly in favor of this amendment is not to encourage any evil, but to discourage several great evils. Alcohol abuse is a great evil in our land today. I tried my best to preach that and unmask that on October 4th in my sermon

concerning alcohol, and nobody can reasonably construe the proposed amendment to countenance that great evil.

Not only that, I regard total abstinence as generally a wise and preferable way to live in our land. It's the way I live, it's the way I will teach my sons to live. The proposed amendment is not designed to encourage any evil.

Rather, it is designed to drive us to biblical, spiritual self-examination in view of the stupendous fact that we are the holy temple of God and we are called to love, that is, to build faith wherever we can. The requirement for total abstinence, on the other hand, is heeded by millions of unbelievers and by thousands of worldly church attenders. It is a regulation that requires no inner love to God or love to the church.

The proposed amendment, however, drives us to God because it makes us ask, why abstain? It forces us to pose the very deep and crucial question, are we simply following a tradition or do we love holiness and do we long to build up other people in faith? What's more, the proposed amendment will give tremendous support to those of us who believe that alcoholic beverages is harmful and who choose to make total abstinence our lifestyle. It supports the choice of abstinence not by explicitly ruling people out of the church who may not agree with that, but rather it supports it by giving the deeper spiritual mandate of purity and love which leads to abstinence for those of us who believe that drinking is dangerous and harmful. The proposed amendment does not, therefore, come off as weak on alcohol.

If we believe that alcohol is harmful, the proposed amendment says don't drink as clearly as it could possibly say it. But the amendment will help us avoid some evils which the other one, the present sentence, doesn't. First of all, let me mention this.

It draws our attention to other evils besides drinking, which also threaten the purity of life and jeopardize the faith of our fellow man. The sentence says that we will 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. All drugs, all food, all drink, and all practices must pass through the sieve of the biblical judgment.

Do they harm the body? Do they jeopardize faith? That is a strong statement, a very wide and all-inclusive statement. Among other things, it is a strong statement against the use of mood-altering drugs other than alcohol because nobody experiments with mood-altering drugs in order to make their bodies more holy, increase their love and faith in God, and advance the faith of other people. And therefore it is a strong statement against the abuse of such drugs.

The amendment is broad and sinks its root into those biblical mandates and principles of purity and love, and therefore it is flexible and able to confront every new threat to holiness and love which comes along from year to year. But the main reason that I am so strongly in favor of the proposed amendment is that it helps us to avoid an unbiblical legalism and exclusivism. And I want to try to define for you what I mean by legalism because that word doesn't occur in the New Testament.

There is no Greek word for legalism. Paul had to invent phrases to get it across, like works of the law. Therefore it's bandied about today in a very careless fashion, and so I don't want to use it carelessly.

I'll try to define it precisely so that you can see that it is an evil and that it is dealt with in the New Testament. The first definition, I have two definitions for legalism, and they both have a common root problem. The first definition is this.

Treating biblical standards of conduct so that we try to obey them in our own power and thus earn favor with God. That's biblical legalism. In other words, legalism will be present wherever people are trying to be ethical without relying on the Holy Spirit to enable them to be ethical.

Simply put, moral behavior which does not spring from lively faith in the risen Christ is legalism. Legalists are always moral people. In fact, the majority of moral people are legalists because their so-called Judeo-Christian ethic does not spring out of a humble, contrite reliance on the mercy of God to enable them to do what is right.

On the contrary, for the legalist, morality serves the very same function that immorality does for the antinomian, the libertine, the freethinker, the progressive. The reason that the Pharisees, some Pharisees, tithed and fasted is the same reason that some German university students take off their clothes and lie around in the parks in Munich naked. Namely, in order to assert their own self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

The moral legalist is always the elder brother of the prodigal. In God's eyes, they are blood brothers and both guilty of a grave sin. They have this in common, the moralist and the libertine.

They do not rely on the mercy of God to make them righteous. But instead, one uses morality, the other uses immorality to assert themselves, their self-reliance, their self-sufficiency. And it is clear from the New Testament that both will experience final perdition.

So the first meaning of legalism, then, is the treatment of biblical standards of conduct such that we try to obey them in our own strength and thus earn favor with God. It's a danger every believer must guard against every day. It's the danger I face and you face every day.

Now, the second meaning of legalism that I believe is exposed in our text today and has more bearing on the problem at hand is this. Legalism is present where people erect standards of conduct which go beyond the teaching of Scripture and which they make adherence to the means by which people are qualified for full participation in the family of God, the Church. Erecting standards of conduct that go beyond what the New Testament erects and making the adherence to them the criterion by which one qualifies for full participation in the family of God here, the Church.

That's where unbiblical exclusivism arises. Now, of course, the Church is an exclusivist organization. We assume that membership means a person is submitting himself to the Lordship of Christ.

And if we do not have a credible profession of faith, we do not let a person join. So I'm not saying there are no criteria for membership. There are.

But we must take oh so seriously excluding people from the family of God in this place. It is a serious matter to turn people away from the Church, very serious. Schools, clubs, societies may set up any human rule they please to keep some people out and others in and create any atmosphere within they like.

The Church is not a human institution, and the entrance requirements for the Church will be given by the head of the Church and no one else. Lest we sin and therefore we dare not go beyond the New Testament in who we exclude from the Church. This is a very, very serious matter.

Now, as our Church covenant presently stands, we are compelled in principle to say, and I am concerned with principle, not ways to finagle and get around. We are compelled in principle to say, brother or sister,

though you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, though you aim with all your heart to follow him as Lord, though you have been duly baptized according to the ordinance of the New Testament, though you agree heartily with our affirmation of faith, you can't be a part of us because you don't square with our view of one. I am persuaded in my mind and in my heart that position falls under the New Testament judgment of legalism.

And I'll try to show why in just a minute from Colossians chapter 2. But first, let me show you how these two views of legalism are really one and what the common root is. The first definition, you'll recall, was treating biblical standards of morality in such a way that we try to keep them on our own strength and earn favor with God. The second definition was erecting standards of behavior that go beyond what the New Testament erects and making those the means by which people qualify for full participation in the family of God, the Church.

Now, here's what they have in common. The first, in the first case, we use our own power to make ourselves moral. In the second case, we use our own power to make the Church moral.

In the first case, we fail to rely on the power of God for our own sanctification. In the second place, we fail to rely on the power of the God through the Holy Spirit to sanctify other people and purify the Church. And therefore, what unites the two views of legalism at root is unbelief.

Unbelief in regard to ourselves because we do not believe that it is God who works in us to will and to do his good pleasure. Unbelief in regard to others because we do not believe it is by the power of the Spirit that a person will be begotten anew and the law written on his heart and cause to walk in the statutes of the Lord. We do not believe what Paul said in Philippians 3.15. We are not able to have this much confidence with him.

Namely, Paul said, let those who are mature be thus minded. We might add, be total abstainers. And if in anything you Philippians are otherwise minded, the Lord will bring that to your mind.

And he dropped it. Total confidence that God would change the Philippians if they disagreed. Wherever happy, dynamic confidence in the sovereignty of God to sanctify ourselves and purify the Church is missing, legalism will creep in to take its place.

For we inevitably try to compensate for waning faith by adding more resolve for ourselves and more regulations for the institution. Which means that the very morality we hoped would save ourselves or the very regulations we hoped would keep our Church pure fall victim to the power of the flesh and are made its instruments of self-assertion and self-reliance. Brothers and sisters, these are not the words of somebody who is soft on evil.

I hate evil. With the Apostle Paul who said, abhor what is evil, cleave to what is good. I hate the evil in me, the remnants in my own heart that are enough to break the neck of my pride every day.

I loathe evil. But this I know beyond the shadow of a doubt. God hates legalism more than he hates alcohol, because it's a more dangerous disease.

If any of you still wonders, how can the pastor go on supporting this amendment when he's been told all these tragic stories about how lives have been ruined through alcohol? Here's my answer. When I go home at night and I close my eyes, an eternity rises in my imagination. I see ten million more people in hell because of legalism than because of alcoholism.

And that is a literal understatement. Satan is so sly. Oh, he is clever.

Paul says, he clothes himself with the garments of life like an angel. He keeps his deadliest disease most sanitary. He clothes his captains in religious garments and stores his weapons in temples.

But I want Bethlehem to be a place that Satan is afraid of, because he gets exposed. I want him to be like the emperor in the emperor's new clothes. And we're going to be the children.

Not in thinking, but in evil. We will be the babes, and we will say, look, he doesn't have any clothes on. He thinks he's clothed in white, but he's naked and he's ugly.

Get out of here! Satan, I want him to be afraid of Bethlehem Baptist Church. And I think he is. I want to expose one of his ploys right now.

His devices are very clever. And what he has kept so many from seeing is that legalism is a more deadly disease than alcoholism, because it doesn't look like a disease. Alcoholism makes men fail.

Legalism helps them succeed. Alcoholism makes men depend on the bottle. Legalism helps them not depend on anybody.

Alcoholism destroys moral resolve. Legalism strengthens moral resolve. Alcoholism isn't welcome in the Church.

They don't feel comfortable. Legalists love to come to Church and hear their morality exposed. Therefore, what we need at Bethlehem is not front-end regulations in order to keep this Church pure.

We need to preach and pray and believe that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision neither teetotalism nor social drinking neither legalism nor alcoholism is of any avail but a new creation, a new heart full of faith and joy in God. That's the only hope the enemy is sending against us every day, the Sherman tank of the flesh. And if we try to resist it with pea-shooter regulations, we will lose and be defeated even while we are apparently keeping ourselves pure.

The only defense, the only defense of the purity of the Church is what Paul says namely, to be rooted and built up, established in Christ filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding strengthened with all power according to his glorious might holding to the head from whom the whole body nourished and knit together grows with a growth that is from God and not from ourselves or our regulations. Now I want to focus your attention on the text in conclusion. Just five brief observations that I think are very, very relevant.

Colossians chapter 2, verses 16 to 23. I'll just sum them up. In the preceding paragraph, Paul said, when we were baptized, we died.

And we came alive, a new person. Now all our sins are forgiven. Now that warrant that was out for our arrest that the law had issued is torn up, thrown away.

The enemies are defeated and he has triumphed over them in the cross. And the question remains, how then shall we live as new people with the law written on our hearts filled with the Holy Spirit, with the mind of Christ? How should we live? Verse 16, point number one. Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink.

The consumption of food or drink is no basis for judging anybody. Now, to be sure, Paul dealt with the abuses of food and drink. He had to deal with meat offered to idols.

He had to deal with drunkenness. And he hit them square on. But he never, he never dealt with those problems by formulating a regulation that required total abstinence from food or drink.

Never. He enunciated a principle. I ban you from destroying anybody.

I insist you love. And then he stopped. And he let the Holy Spirit, through the word and the preaching, unfold the application for every new situation in the churches.

And that's what the new amendment is aimed to do. Point number two, verse 18. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement in the worship of angels, etc.

The false teaching at Colossae had two prongs. One prong said, worship angels. The other prong said, you must obese yourself and use certain kinds of ascetic practices like the avoidance of certain foods and drinks.

Paul attacked both of these regulations that were formulated as qualifications for church membership. He said, do not worship angels. In Christ is all the fullness of deity.

And he said, do not submit yourself to those regulations, because number one, they are only a shadow of things to come and they lead to being puffed up. Point number three, verse 19. The only hope Colossians and Bethlehemites for a pure church, growing and filled with the Holy Spirit and making progress toward the harvest in 1982 is this.

Hold fast to the head, from whom the whole body, knit together in its ligaments and joints, grows with a growth that is from God, from God, from God it comes. Point number four, verses 20 and 21. If with Christ you die to the elemental spirit of the universe, why do you live as if you still belong to the world? Why do you submit to regulations? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish when used according to the precepts and doctrines of men.

The implication, and it's a tough implication for this church, I think, the implication of those verses is that when a church erects regulations regarding food and drink that are used to then judge and qualify people for membership or not, that church does not know yet what it means to die with Jesus and come alive in newness of life. It seems to me that's what I said earlier when I said where authentic, joyful confidence in God is waning, regulations will always be brought in to buttress the status quo, to keep things from slipping. If you erect enough regulations and you have a big enough endowment, a church can live for decades when the spirit is gone.

Fifth and final point, verse 23, those regulations which can preserve the church for decades, though they have an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, nevertheless are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh. Brothers and sisters, we can put the rules and the bars at the front door, and that will secure for us that we have a group of people who all think the same about alcohol. They will not do us one iota of good in making this church pure, not one.

They are of no value in containing the mighty power of the tank of the flesh, which loves to use morality just as much as immorality to make its demonic point. On the contrary, that sentence in our church covenant, by imposing a restriction which the New Testament nowhere imposes on church membership,

brings us into a situation of legalism which has as its root unbelief. It is a sign of the fated glory and joy and heart righteousness that once was Bethlehem, and God helping us will be again.

Supporting this amendment after hearing all the tragic stories of how lives are ruined by alcohol, here's the reason. When I go home at night and I close my eyes and eternity rises before me, I see 10 million more people in hell because of legalism than because of alcohol. And that is a literal understatement.

Satan is so sly. Satan is so sly. He disguises himself as an angel of light, and he keeps his most deadly diseases most sanitary.

He clothes his captains in religious garments, and he houses his biggest weapons in temples. Oh, don't you want Bethlehem to be a place where he is exposed, where all his machinations and plots are uncovered, and he is on the run? I want Bethlehem to be a place that Satan is afraid of, that he shudders to come near because he is exposed so completely. I want him to be like the king in the emperor's new clothes, and we'll be the babes, not in thinking, but in morality.

Look, he doesn't have on any clothes. He thinks he's clothed in white, and he's naked, and he's ugly. Get out of here, Satan.

I want Bethlehem to be a church that is not deceived. And listen to this now. I'm going to uncover one of his plots.

He is so clever, but I have caught him, and you catch him too. Legalism is more dangerous to the church than alcoholism, because it doesn't look like a disease. Alcoholism makes men fail.

Legalism helps them succeed. Alcoholism makes them depend on the bottle. Legalism helps them not depend on anybody.

Alcoholism destroys moral resolve. Legalism improves moral resolve. Alcoholics are afraid to come to church.

They don't feel at home. Legalists love to hear their morality extolled in church. They're all over the place.

Therefore, what we need at Bethlehem Baptist Church is not front-end regulations that try to keep us pure. We need to preach, pray, and believe that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, neither legalism nor libertinism, neither alcoholism nor legalism is of any avail with God but only one thing, a new creation, a new heart of joy and faith. Before God, the enemy is sending against us every day the tank, the Sherman tank of the flesh.

And if we try to oppose that with pea-shooter regulations, we will be defeated. The only defense is, as Paul says, be rooted and built up in Christ, strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, with endurance and patience, with joy, holding fast to the head from whom the whole body, knit together and nourished, grows with a growth that is from God and not from man, from God and not from ourselves. And now let me draw your attention to the text in conclusion, the seedbed of all my thoughts for the past two months, Colossians chapter 2, verses 16 to 23.

And all I want to do here is very briefly draw out five observations. I think they will be plain and need not have long explanation. In the preceding paragraph, just before verse 16, Paul has said that for those of us who are baptized as an act of faith have died with Christ and we have come alive in Him, that all our sins

have been wiped out, that the warrant for our arrest that was issued by the law has been ripped up, that's the meaning of verse 14, and that now Satan and all his hosts have been triumphed over in the cross.

And he asks then, how then shall we live as new creatures? And he answers in verses 16 to 23. Implication number one, verse 16. Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink.

Now, that means, I think, that the consumption of food and drink is in itself no basis for judging a person standing with God or standing in God's family. And woe to us if we make it one. Now, to be sure, Paul had to deal with the abuse of food and the abuse of drink, meat offered to idols and drunkenness.

But he never dealt with those two problems by forbidding food or forbidding drink. Never did Paul take that approach. He always forbade destruction of God's temple and the harming of faith or the lack of love.

And he left up to the churches to determine the application of that principle in the nitty-gritty of food and drink. And so should we. That's the point of the proposed amendment.

Second, verse 18. Let no one disqualify you insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, etc. The false teaching at Colossae had two prongs.

A theological one which said, worship angels. A moral one which said, use ascetic practices, certain abstinences from food and drink in order to kindle certain kinds of visionary experiences that could lift you into the ethereal area where these angelic beings are so that you can worship them. He came back against that false teaching by saying it is Christ in whom the fullness of deity dwells.

Don't worship angels. And these regulations of yours and these ascetic practices are just a shadow of reality and all they can do is produce puffed up people. And therefore, do not let them disqualify you insisting on such self-abasement and worship of angels.

Third, verse 19. The only hope for the church is to hold fast to the head Christ from whom the whole body nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments grows with the growth that is from God. Does that not mean that the only hope for purity, growth, beauty, life, health at Bethlehem Baptist Church is personal cleaving, cleaving to the head which is not secured in the least by regulations.

Fourth, verses 20 and 21. If with Christ you have died to the elemental spirits of the universe, those angelic beings and the rules that they command, why do you live as if you still belong to the world? Why 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 doctrines.

Now, I think the implication of those verses is that a church which erects regulations about food and drink, do not handle, do not touch, as a means of judging or qualifying or disqualifying members does not yet know what it means to die with Christ and rise to freedom from the powers of the world. It seems to me that this is exactly what I said earlier. Wherever authentic, joyful confidence in Christ diminishes, regulations will increase to preserve what once the power of Christ had created.

If you erect enough regulations and have a big enough endowment, you can preserve the life of an institution for decades after the spirit and power have long gone. But, and this is the fifth and final point, verse 23, those regulations that are preserving the institution and keeping people out, though they have an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body,

nevertheless are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh. The existence of an entrance requirement of total abstinence that our church may secure for us a group of people who have a common attitude towards wine, but they are of no help whatsoever in making us pure or holy or pleasing to the Lord.

On the contrary, by imposing a restriction which the New Testament never imposes on church membership, that regulation involves us in a legalism whose root is unbelief. It is a sign of the faded power and joy and heart righteousness that once was Bethlehem and God helping us will be again. And the best summary I thought that I could give is to read you a letter that my dad wrote me November 10th, and with this I close.

My father is an evangelist, works in the IFCA churches, Independent Fundamental Churches of America. I love my dad with all my heart and respect his judgment tremendously, and I wrote him. What do you think, dad? What do you think about what we've proposed? And here's what he wrote back.

Your previous letter raised the question of alcoholic beverages in relation to church membership. This is a real toughie. Most of the churches in which I minister have it directly in their constitutions and bylaws that no member will buy, sell, or use such beverages.

I think my attitude and thought is this. The church should take a strong stand against such an evil and such an enormous destructive force, but should not include this or any such evil in its bylaws. My reason for this is first that you cannot legislate righteousness or make people more holy by... Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper, pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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