

The Road Less Traveled

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Imagine a road, but not just any old road—one that has a variety of special features not ordinarily found in most places. Such a road probably does not exist anywhere on earth.

Straight as an arrow and nearly as narrow, our road has only one lane, which climbs relentlessly uphill. Because it is a one-way street, travelers are compelled to move forward at all times, and oncoming traffic never occurs. Plenty of intersecting roads crisscross it, however, and signs along the way point out other destinations. To either side are numerous things for the traveler to see and do.

Perhaps the road's most peculiar features are really not part of the road at all. To each side of it is a ditch, one to the right and another to the left. In fact, these ditches are the hardest part of the road to miss!

Obviously, this road is an analogy of the path that all Christians must travel—the road that leads to salvation! We know that man's way, though it seems right to him, ultimately leads to death (Proverbs 14:12), but God's way leads to life (John 5:24-29). But even in desperately trying to live God's way, we often find we have crashed into one of these ditches.

Humanly, we tend to go to extremes in our beliefs, erring to one side or the other rather than maintaining a straight, steady and upward climb to the Kingdom of God. So true is Jesus' statement in Matthew 7:14: "Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it"!

Legalism

The ditch on the right is *legalism*. A legalistic Christian overemphasizes the importance of abiding by every detail of law. Though it is not wrong to be law-abiding, such a person, like the Pharisees, places so much weight of the details of the law that he forgets more important tenets of the faith.

He lives in fear of breaking the law, seeing sin in every action, word and thought. So that he will not or cannot break a law, he builds legal walls around his life. For example, because David writes in Psalm 55:17 that he prayed three times a day, a legalist would *require* himself to do so also, although this is never commanded by God.

Too often, this Christian's legalism envelops his family and friends, placing unnecessary burdens on them in their worship of God. His Christianity is restrictive and binding, and he forgets that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Corinthians 3:6). His religion is so stifling at times that it will drive his loved ones away.

The Pharisees, classic legalists, were so busy hedging themselves and others in by their picayune ordinances that they forgot and disregarded the things that really matter to God (Matthew 23:1-4, 23). Justice, mercy and faith are principles that affect our relationship with God and other men. Here

Christ does not diminish the need to be accurate in our tithing, but the larger issues should never be neglected to satisfy the letter of the law. He "desire[s] mercy and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 12:7).

The trap the legalist falls into is self-righteousness (Matthew 23:29-30), establishing a personal set of righteous acts which he will follow before he follows God's righteousness. The legalist becomes puffed-up in his knowledge and accuracy in keeping the law. Ultimately, he keeps tabs of all his righteous acts and tries to use them to "bribe" God into accepting him (*cf.* Isaiah 64:6).

Liberalism

The ditch on the left side of the road is *liberalism*, just the opposite of legalism. A liberal Christian so de-emphasizes the law that it eventually becomes negligible and of no effect in his life. He loosens the requirements of righteousness and lowers the standards so that everyone becomes acceptable to God without qualification.

Though he may give lip-service to the concept of sin, the liberal does not take it seriously. He makes little or no effort to understand or follow the binding laws of God's way of life like tithing and keeping the Sabbath. To him, his own convenience and freedom are more important than obedience, and he just assumes he is in good standing with God.

The liberal would merit Christ's scathing rebuke of Matthew 7:21-23. In the final analysis, liberals are lawless like the Gnostics of the first century. Gnostic "Christians" came into the church—undoubtedly sincerely—full of the Greco-Roman intellectual ideas of piety and theology. Mixing these pagan ideas with the revealed truth of God's Word, they produced a form of Christianity stripped of its heart: law, obedience, holiness, pleasing God and having a right and close relationship with Him and His people.

Liberalism eventually results in licentiousness (Jude 3-4). The Gnostics went to the extreme of telling the people that sinning ultimately glorified God! They reasoned that the more one sinned, the more God had to exercise His mercy and grace, and He was thus glorified before the world! What utter nonsense! But one can imagine where this line of thinking led them.

The Road Itself

Both ditches of legalism and liberalism are equally dangerous. Both lead to disqualification. But what about the road, the way that leads to salvation? What are its hallmarks?

God's way is the perfect blend of law and grace, the perfect balance of living within the strictures of the law and living in the freedom of God's grace. It balances "one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law" (Matthew 5:18) and "the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). It is a delicate and intensive process of seeking God's will and learning the requirements of His way of life.

The writers of the Bible called this way many things: the new man, the image of God, a new and better way, the circumcision made without hands, living godly, living by faith, being transformed, becoming converted, putting on Christ, having a heart of flesh, the new covenant, becoming perfect, true worship, pure religion, etc.

When Paul speaks of putting on the new man in Colossians 3:10-15, he gives us several attitudes we need to emulate as followers of Christ. Most of them involve the way we deal with each other because a major part of what God is teaching us has to do with building and solidifying our relationships. As we see in the next few verses, he comments specifically on the husband-wife, parent-child and employer-employee relationships.

Why? Largely, our judgment by our Savior hangs on the quality of our relationships. We should never forget the principle found in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats: "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40, 45).

Both of the ditches along the road to salvation abuse the relationships we have with each other and with God. They cause distrust and division. They distract us from our common purpose and goal. It becomes vitally important to be constantly vigilant about our position on the road to avoid plunging into the ditches.

In this section of Colossians 3, Paul advises us about our course of action: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another" (verse 16). It is so crucial at this juncture in the history of the church—maybe even the history of the world!—that we become masters of the Word of God. It should *live* in us! And in using its wisdom, we can help and encourage each other as we struggle up the narrow way that leads to life.