

## Striking A Balance

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Imagine a road, but not just any road. This road has certain special features. This road is very narrow and strangely, it has only one lane. Our road is also a one-way street. There is no oncoming traffic, everything is going in one direction. Travelers have to go forward at all times. It is also as straight as an arrow and climbs relentlessly uphill. Another interesting feature is that on each side of the road is a ditch, a ditch to the right and a ditch to the left.

Now, some of you have probably already figured out that this is an analogy about the road that all Christians must travel. The road that leads to salvation. And we know that it says in Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

Man's way is definitely not God's way. God's way is the way to salvation. Man's way leads to death, God's way leads to life. But even in desperately trying to go God's way, we often find ourselves in those ditches to the right and to the left and it is these ditches that I would like to discuss briefly today because humanly, we have a tendency to go to extremes in our beliefs. We err to one side or the other rather than maintaining a straight and upward climb to the Kingdom of God.

The one ditch on the right is what I will call legalism. A Christian who is legalistic emphasizes the importance of abiding by every detail of law. And I want to stress here that it is not wrong to be law abiding. God wants us to be law abiding. But such a person, like the Pharisee as we see in the Scriptures, places so much emphasis on the details of the law that he forgets the more important tenets of our faith. He lives in constant fear of breaking the law. He sees sin in every action, in every thought.

So what he does is he builds legal walls around his life so that he cannot break any of the laws, so he cannot sin. That is what the Pharisees did, the Jews did around Christ's day. They had so many regulations, so many picky

points of law that they had come up with, like how many grains of barley you could carry around on the Sabbath day. And if anything weighed more than these grains of barley, then you could not carry it on the Sabbath day. And you could carry thread, but you could not carry a needle because thread was (I do not know exactly how they thought of it), but the needle was a tool in which someone could have employment. So to carry a tool, like a needle, was wrong. But to carry the thread, which was used with the needle, was okay.

Silly little rules and laws like that that really places a burden on one. They were trying to keep those little bits of what is called the ordinances of men (that is really what they are), rather than thinking about the true purpose of the law.

And much too often a person with legalism envelops his family and his friends into it. And what it does is it places unnecessary burdens on them too because you are expecting them to live by the legalistic rules that you are trying to live by and it gets very suffocating.

This is a major thing that Christ had to face when He confronted the Pharisees. This makes Christianity restrictive and binding and often a person who is legalistic forgets that the letter of the law kills, but the Spirit gives life. It is an important thing to remember.

Like I have been saying, the classic example of legalism is the Pharisees. Let us go to Matthew 23. This is Jesus Christ's denunciation of the way they were living their lives and making other people live just like them.

**Matthew 23:1-4** Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers."

Now, let us get down to a specific denunciation here.

**Matthew 23:23** "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone."

They were so busy hedging themselves and others in by their picky little ordinances that they forgot, that they really had no regard for the things that really matter to God. These things that really matter are part of our relationship with other men, which is very important, and things that are part of our relationship with God Himself: justice, mercy, and faith.

As a matter of fact, almost the entire book of Amos is concerned with this idea of justice. There was no justice in Israel at the time. They did not know how to get along with each other. And what does Christ do but call them hypocrites. They were saying that they lived one way and they were living another. They pretended to speak and to act for God but they were really, as it says in verse 25, self-indulgent and self-satisfied. It is really not a very good picture of Christianity.

I want to emphasize here that Christ does not diminish the need to be accurate in our tithing, to follow the law, but they should not have neglected the one or the other. Let us go down to verse 29.

**Matthew 23:29-30** "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.'"

This is where legalism leads to self-righteousness. They were saying, we are better than our fathers were. If these prophets had been in our midst, we would not have treated them that way because we are righteous. What somebody who is legalistic can get into is establishing his own righteousness or his own set of righteous acts and he will follow these before he follows God's righteousness. They come before what God has set down as righteous acts and then he becomes puffed up in his knowledge and he becomes puffed up in his accuracy in keeping the law. It becomes a matter of vanity to him.

It can even get to the point, and this happened with the Pharisees, that a person who is legalistic will begin to make a tally sheet with God. What I mean by this is, at the end of his life, he will reckon that because he did so many righteous deeds that it will cancel out and overreach the sins that he may have committed. So therefore, God is bound to accept it. One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me, two for me, one for you. And suddenly he is ahead and he is righteous. And this is where legalism leads to.

Enough about legalism. Let us go to the other ditch, the left ditch. I will just call this one liberalism. It is probably the best word for it. This way is the exact opposite, the antithesis of the legalist. The liberal so deemphasizes the law that it becomes negligible to him. It is of no effect. Sounds like modern day Protestantism almost. He loosens the requirements of righteousness, lowers the standards so that everyone becomes acceptable to God without qualification. All you have to do is believe and you will be saved.

The liberal may give lip service to the concept of sin. He may say, "Oh sure, these certain things are sin," but he does it with a grin. He does not really take it too seriously. Sin is not something that will affect him because he is right with God. He has always been accepted by God.

A liberal makes little or no effort to understand or follow certain binding laws like we saw there in Matthew 23 like tithing. Christ did not say you are not supposed to tithe. He did not say you are not even supposed to tithe your mint, anise, and cummin. He left it there, you should have been tithing your mint, anise, and cummin, but you should be doing these other things. But a liberal would look at that and say, He did away with tithing.

A liberal's own convenience and freedom are more important to him than obedience. He always assumes he is in good standing with God and so he will do whatever he wants because God does not care. That is basically what the attitude comes down to. Christ warned us of this in Matthew 7, verses 21 through 23. I was kind of surprised to find this. I did not think I would find Him denouncing liberalism, but He really does if you look at it this way.

**Matthew 7:21-23** "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My

Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesized in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

Iniquity. They did not care about the law. All they were doing, they want the power. They were probably lording it over people and they were doing away with the law in doing so. The Gnostics were known for this in the first century. They had come into the church, most of them probably sincerely came into the church, yet they were still full of the Greco-Roman intellectual concepts of piety and theology. And they soon began to mix these pagan ideas with the revealed truth of God's Word and what they produced has a form of Christianity, but it was stripped of its heart: the law, obedience, holiness, pleasing God, having a right relationship with Him. And you know what the end result of liberalism is? It is called licentiousness.

Let us go to Jude 3 and 4. Jude is writing this, I think it is sometime in the 80S AD. If I am not correct, I apologize for that. But Jude wrote later in the first century. And he says,

**Jude 3-4** Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is how far the Gnostics went. They told the people that it did not matter if you sinned. In fact, the more you sinned, the more God had to show you mercy and He had to show His grace and thus He was glorified before the world. What crazy thinking. The more you sin, the more God has to show His grace on you and thus He is more glorified. So go and sin and sin and sin. God will always forgive you because it is showing His great mercy and His grace. That is utter nonsense. The Bible does not say that at all. But this is the kind of thinking that led them to that over time.

Now both ditches, the right and the left, are equally dangerous. They both lead to disqualification. But on the other hand, it is very hard to stay on the road that leads to salvation. And I am not saying that I do this well or that anybody does this well. Christ said in Matthew 7:14, "Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to life, and there are few who find it." I mean, that is coming from Him. It is a hard thing. Going from ditch to ditch is a normal thing. And He understands that.

But God's way is the perfect blend of law and grace. It is the perfect balance of living by the law and living in the freedom of God's grace. It is the balance of no jot or tittle shall pass from this law and the truth shall make you free. It is a delicate and intensive process of seeking God's will and learning the requirements of His way of life. It is something we have got to do all the time. Every decision has to be run through this, and the ideas of law and the ideas of grace and freedom have to be factored in all the time.

It is called many things in the Bible. It is a constant theme. It is called the New Man, the image of God, a new and better way, the circumcision made without hands, living godly in this world, living by faith, being transformed, putting on Christ, having a heart of flesh, the New Covenant, becoming perfect, true worship and religion, and it goes on and on and on. Each one of the writers approached it from a different angle, slightly emphasizing different parts of it so that we can understand it in a fuller way.

Let us go to Colossians 3. We will end here in Colossians. We will just look at one of these terms, the New Man.

**Colossians 3:10-15** Put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, nor free, but Christ is all and in all. Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another, even as Christ forgave you, so you must also do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Paul here gives us a number of attitudes that we should have as followers of Christ. And notice particularly that almost all of these attitudes, if not all of them, have to do with the way we deal with each other. A major part of what God is teaching us here has to do with building and solidifying our relationships. And if you look down in verse 18, all the way through the rest of the chapter and into chapter 4, you will see that Paul goes on and talks about specific relationships that we have: a husband and wife relationship, parent/child relationships, employer/employee relationships. In a large measure, our judgment by our Savior hangs on what sort of relationships we have with each other.

Let us remember the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Remember what Christ said in there? "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." And then He goes on later and says, "Inasmuch as you did not do this to My brethren, you did not do it to Me."

This may seem like being a little bit of diversion or a little bit of a tangent, but in reality, it is not. Both of the ditches that we discussed are heavy on the abusive relationships with each other if you think about it. When you get down to it, both of them cause distrust and disunity. If someone is way over on the right and the other person is way over on the left, they could never get along very well. Their beliefs butt heads. They both distract us. Liberalism on the left and legalism on the right, they both distract us from our common purpose, our common goal.

So we have to be constantly vigilant about our position on the road. We have to know whether we have crashed into a ditch or not. We have got to be constantly looking at it. And as we come up to the Passover, this is a great time to do that. Remember what Paul said at the end of II Corinthians about evaluating ourselves and examining ourselves whether we are in the faith.

Let us go down to verse 16 and read that in closing. I think this is very important as a place where we can start.

**Colossians 3:16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your heart to the Lord.

I really want to emphasize the first part of this about letting the Word of Christ dwell in us richly in all wisdom because that, I think, is a major key in knowing where we are on the road. If we know the Word of God and have it dwelling richly in wisdom in us, and wisdom being how we put it into practice, then we are a long way along that road. But I think more than just generally having the Word of God in us, it is important at this juncture in the history of the church, in the history of the world, let us say, that we become masters of God's Word because that is what is going to keep us on the track.

I know that Pharisees had vaunted ideas of their own knowledge. It led them astray. But that was their own vanity. But we do need to be able to know what they knew *and* put to practice wisely into our lives.

The Word of God should live in us! It should not be just some head knowledge that makes us swell up, but it should live in us. It is what we do. And by its wisdom, as the verse goes on to say, we can help and encourage each other as we try together to walk up the narrow way that leads to life.