

The Two Ditches

...narrow is the road that leads to life... (Matthew 7:14)

Just how narrow is that road? John Bunyan, in his classic work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, gives an unforgettable picture of the path we are called to walk. Christian, the main character, is traveling through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. The road is narrow... and treacherous.

... there was on the right hand a very deep ditch; that ditch is it into which the blind have led the blind in all ages, and have both there miserably perished. Again, behold on the left hand there was a very dangerous quagmire into which, if even a good man falls he can find no bottom for his foot to stand on. Into that quagmire King David once did fall, and had no doubt therein been smothered, had not he that is able plucked him out. The pathway was here also exceeding narrow, and therefore good Christian was the more put to it; for when he sought in the dark to shun the ditch on the one hand, he was ready to tip over into the mire on the other.... (pp. 96f).

In classical theology these ditches are often described as the two perennial dangers that come to those who seek to follow Christ but have never come to a clear understanding of the place of the Law in their lives.

The ditch on the right is **legalism**. Those in this ditch have fallen from the path because they think they must obey God's law in order to be saved, or in order to maintain God's favor. These poor people never have that joyful assurance of their standing with God because they are constantly asking, "Have I done enough? Do I deserve it?" For them, Christianity is a system of do's and don'ts. They judge others by their outward behavior and constantly point out those who are in the faith and those who are not. Because it is impossible to truly measure up to God's standards, these hypocrites love to wear masks and pretend to be in theory what they fail to be in reality.

To the left of the pathway is the ditch of lawlessness, or **license**. Those who fall into this quagmire are quick to proclaim that Christ redeemed us from the law. Our sins (past, present and future) are all forgiven, and there is nothing we can add to what Christ has already done. We are now under grace, not law! These poor souls believe that because God loves them they are now free to do whatever they desire. Grace has been perverted into license. Professing to be free children of God, those in this ditch are in reality slaves to sin.

Can these ditches be avoided? Is it possible to stay on the narrow path and not "turn aside to the right hand or to the left" (Joshua 1:7)? Yes! Here are three simple guidelines for Christian pilgrims.

1. **BE ALERT.** Recognize the perils to the right and to the left. You are not immune to danger. This could happen to you!
2. **PRAY.** "Guide my steps, Lord, and keep me from falling."
3. **LEARN THE RIGHT USE OF THE LAW.** Perhaps no one stated this more succinctly than Augustine: *The law was given that grace might be sought; grace was given that the law might be fulfilled.*