Two Roads

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Luke 6:43-45

Sermon Series:
Life is Messy

Sometimes people seem to confuse what is good and what is evil.

We are studying Jesus’ very famous Sermon on the Mount, looking for ways the teachings of Jesus may breathe life and hope into our messy lives. Jesus speaks a great deal about good and evil and, of course, matters of good and evil are constantly on our minds. They fill our news reports. They are the subject of our movies and our fiction and dominate our personal lives. Sometimes people seem to confuse what is good and what is evil. A small child, when asked to quote a Bible verse, tried to quote Psalm 146:1, God...is a very present help in time of trouble, but what the child said was, “A lie is an abomination to the Lord and a very present help time of trouble!” Things can be confusing!

However, there are matters that are evil, destructive, lead to unhappiness, despair and even death. There are matters that are good—very good—leading to love, dignity, respect, joy and hope. In speaking about good and evil, Jesus uses a variety of paired images to get his point across. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount recorded by Matthew, Jesus speaks of the two gates, two roads. Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

In our text for today, we read about two trees, two kinds of fruit: No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush (Luke 6:43-44). A good tree bears good fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns. I grew up without ever eating a fig and, while I enjoyed Fig Newton cookies, I had no idea what a fig even looked like much less tasted like. All that changed when my parents moved to their home in New Orleans and their neighbor’s huge fig tree hung over the fence. My Dad picked a ripe purple fig one afternoon and said to me, “Try this,” and from that moment on I was in love! Our son and daughter-in-law have a fig tree in their backyard in California and, as far as I am concerned, happiness is lying on the ground underneath it and just waiting for a ripe fig to fall. So the idea of good fruit and
bad fruit is very easy for me, and for you, to understand.

So we see the two gates, the two trees, two kinds of fruit all telling us of two kinds of hearts leading to two roads, a good road, the road of life, that breathes life into all who walk it, and an evil road, the road of death, that drains life from all who spend time on it. Last summer, we enjoyed a series of sermons on the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Lively Virtues, which are a perfect illustration of the two roads—the two gates, the two kinds of trees, two fruits, the two hearts. Seven Deadly Sins: pride, lust, envy, sloth, anger, greed and gluttony. Seven Lively Virtues: humility, chastity, kindness, diligence, patience, charity, self-control.

If you are honest with yourself, you know your own inclination toward both sets of behaviors resides deeply within you. The life that wins is the life that figures out that while there are two roads, only one leads to life. Don’t let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good (Romans 12:21-The Message). The key point Jesus is making may be framed as a question. Where do these behaviors come from—the evil of the deadly sins and the goodness of the lively virtues? Jesus’ answer is very direct: your heart. The Hebrews thought of the heart not as the center of our feelings as it is thought of today but rather as the seat of the mind and the will. It’s where you think of what you may do and where you decide what you will do. So Jesus says, The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil (Luke 6:45a).

The heart of this text is about heart! Jesus is speaking about the most inside center of you as a person, your heart, the seat of your mind and your will. His point is rather straightforward. The nature of your heart determines your behavior. Years ago, I attended a Walk Through the Bible seminar where they taught a simple way to remember the first three kings of the nation of Israel—Saul, David, and Solomon. They described the first king, Saul, as simply having no heart, no inner desire whatsoever to know God or do what God wanted him to do. King David is described as having a whole heart. David’s heart was open to God’s love and God’s commands and even when he messed up, his heart came back to his Lord seeking forgiveness. Solomon was the king with a half heart. Solomon followed God with half his heart, but the other half of his heart turned to following pagan gods and idols. The whole heart bears good fruit. The half heart bears a mix of good and bad fruit, good and evil and the fruit of the person with no heart will only diminish and destroy life.

We had a car some years ago whose engine started to
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It.vibrate oddly and the car moved in a jerky fashion. So I dropped it off at the service station. When I picked it up the next day, I drove it down a quiet, two-lane road and accelerated to forty miles an hour. It’s what we call a road test—a check of a car’s operating capability and performance under actual driving conditions. Every day our hearts face a road test—a test that will show if our hearts are aligned with the God of life or if we are aligned with practices that diminish and destroy relationships and well-being. Life is messy and our actions have the capacity to address the mess and suppress the mess. Or, with the practice of the seven deadly sins, we add distress to the mess as we demean, devalue and destroy our own relationships and the lives of many people.

This week, I have been musing over a funeral I conducted for someone years ago. I don’t recall who it was or whether it was a man or a woman. What I do remember is standing in the front of a tiny chapel with four or five family members on the front pew on one side of the chapel and four or five more sitting on the front pew of the other side. It seemed normal to me—people wanting to sit near the front while I talked about their loved one and spoke about the resurrection of Jesus and the real hope of life after death offered to anyone who embraces and follows Jesus by faith.

It was only after the service, as people were milling around and getting ready to leave, that one of the family members pulled me aside and said, “You may have noticed we sat on the two sides of the chapel. There has been a bitter split in our family for many years and while they were willing to attend the memorial service for a family member they are not willing to associate with each other nor speak to each other even today!” How very sad. Sometimes we say things that are incredibly hurtful. This is why what Jesus says to us after speaking about two kinds of hearts is so significant. For it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45b). Jesus connects the nature of your heart with what comes out of your mouth! What kind of heart do you want? I pray you want a heart made new by the power of Jesus when you embrace and follow him. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh, said Ezekiel the prophet (Ezekiel 3:26).

If you wonder what the nature of your own heart is, give your heart a road test. Just think about your own speech, because Jesus said, For it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. Do the
Perhaps you are a little bit of all of these things, the up-builder and the tear-downer with your words. The words you speak show you to be a believer, a blesser, a builder upper, encourager, teacher, counselor, consoler and friend? Or are your words condemning, critical, disparaging, disapproving, nit-picking, fault-finding words that drain the life out of people? Perhaps you are a little bit of all of these things, the up-builder and the tear-downer with your words. So James wrote, With it [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so (James 3:9-10). As the Book of Proverbs wonderfully puts it, A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver (Proverbs 25:11).

Perhaps you saw or heard of the feat of Nik Wallenda last Sunday evening. Nik is of the family of the famous Flying Wallendas, known for over a hundred years for their adventures on the high wire without safety nets underneath them. Nik’s own grandfather, Karl Wallenda, was killed when a gust of wind blew him off a wire he was walking between two ten-story hotels. Nik has walked across Niagara Falls and a variety of places on the high wire but this time was to be different. He was going to walk across Little Colorado River Gorge in the area of the Grand Canyon, some fifteen hundred feet above the bottom of the gorge with no safety wire connecting him to the cable.

Someone asked, “Why in the world would he do that?” It’s quite simple. He believes it is his calling. He cannot not do it.

I was sitting in our family room with a small can of Pringles left over from a hotel room and noticed an advertisement saying this high wire walk was to be broadcast live. So I switched to the Discovery Channel and watched as Nik slowly walked the fourteen hundred feet from one side of the canyon to the other with no safety harness connecting him to the wire upon which he walked. While the danger he was in and the beauty of the scenery stunned me, I was captured by the quiet voices of Nik and his Dad. As Nik took step by measured step on the cable he was saying over and over, “Thank you Jesus. Praise you Jesus. Lord, help this cable to calm down. How I love you.” His Dad was saying, “You’re handling it well, Nik. Slow your steps down. That’s good.” It dawned on me this Christian brother was in harm’s way right then, live, praising his Lord and praying for help. It wasn’t a time to sit back and eat a few Pringles while watching a daredevil. It was time to pray for him every step of the way.

You can see it on Youtube if you want to see a replay, but as I have replayed it over and over in my mind, I keep thinking while there were two roads for
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Nick—the high wire and off the wire, there was only one good path, only one road to health and life and good fruit, and every alternative was going to be rather difficult. I realized how much that was a picture of the Christian life. There are so many moments in your home life, your work life, your very personal inside-your-head life, and mine, where you and I walk a tightrope, and there are forces without and within us that would pull us off the wire. Yet, the consequences of falling off the one road that leads to life are very difficult. So as we walk we also are praying, “Praise you Jesus. Lord, how I love you. Thank you Jesus.” If the road is difficult, such as when Nik said of the cable and the wind, “I’m not liking it,” and he prayed, “Help this cable to calm down,” so we pray about the issues we face in staying on our own road of life.

What happens if you fail the road test, if you fall off the wire, if you move from the seven lively virtues to one the seven deadly sins? Nik Wallenda said if he fell he would hold onto the wire until help came. So when we fall, we hold on to the Lord who loves us and is our rescuer. The apostle Paul knew this is a huge issue for all of us. He spoke about it wonderfully when he said, For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self [the good heart loving the good Lord], but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind [the false self, the sinful self], making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:22-25). No wonder Nik Wallenda kept praying, “Thank you Jesus. Praise you Jesus.” The road to life is about Jesus. The only way to walk the high wire of your life, to pass the road test, is in utter dependence on the Lord who loves you.

When we fall off the wire, we get off the road of life, we are invited to remember that Jesus already took the impact of your guilt for you, dying the death on the cross that you and I deserve to die for our sins, so that God might freely offer you and me forgiveness and a new life. Which means you may confess your sin, know that our Lord has never stopped loving you and has forgiven you so you may freely get back on the road to life. And if there is a rupture in your relationships with others because of hurtful words that have been said by them or by you, insofar as it is possible, make a new peace and do it now.

If you are walking a difficult, challenging road right now, what are the words you’d like to hear from our Lord, the way Nik was hearing words from his father? You’d love to hear our Lord say, I am with
Indeed our Lord is looking you in the eye and saying these things to you right now!

I am with you! He said, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20*).

I will help you! He said, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper" (John 14:16).

Take courage! He said, "But take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

And, when you have faced and finished a difficult road, what words would you like to hear? Well Done! "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21). These are also the very words you may use to encourage another person struggling to stay on the good road. I am with you. I will help you. Take courage. Well done!