

HIS PATH OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

PSALM 23:3b

Pastor Duane Smets

I. The Straight Path

II. The Crooked Path

III. The Paradise Path

It really is good to be here together worshipping God. We believe it is part of the way God designed us as human beings...to be worshippers. We believe we are meant to worship God in all of life, every one of the days He gives us breath and to be together with other God worshippers on Sundays.

There is something special about gathering together with God's people each week and worshipping God together. There's a sense in it that this is right. That is what we are supposed to be doing. That this is good for us.

The sermon today is about God's path of righteousness. What we've already experienced thus far in the service and what we will continue to experience in the remainder of the service is something that is truly righteous. It is right and good that we are here. It is righteous.

Well, I'd like to welcome all of you today, especially if this is one of you're first times here. My name is Duane and I'm the preaching and vision pastor of our church. I serve alongside three other pastors and all of us collectively serve under our head pastor, Jesus.

During this year in this season in the life of our church we are slowly working through Psalm 23 in the Bible. We're really taking our time and dissecting each line in it in our attempt to really understand it and not just understand it but be impacted and changed by it.

The picture in Psalm 23 is of sheep and a shepherd. We are the sheep. God is the shepherd. And the goal is for us to learn how to walk through this life with God as our shepherd.

The sermon today is "His Path of Righteousness." We'll read it from the Bible together in a minute. But before we do let me set it up for us a bit. The scenario of the whole Psalm is one where life is conceived of as a journey. Each of us are conceived of as being on a journey through this thing we call life. That analogy is especially punctuated this week as we focus on this idea of a "path."

In 1957 Jack Kerouac wrote a book called "On The Road" which turned out to be an extremely influential book. It's ranked on multiple lists as being in the top 100 best books of the 20th century. In many ways it became a culture defining work epitomizing the feelings and mentality not only of a generation but really of the human soul and it's quest in life for meaning and truth.

If you haven't read it, it's a story about two guys named Sal and Dean who go on several road trips across America. In the beginning Sal's pretty disheartened after a divorce and Dean just wants freedom from the expected life of just working a job. So they hit the road. They end up in several places across the US, indulging in alcohol, drugs and women and having all kinds of crazy stuff go down. They go on three road trips and after each trip they settle back down into normal life for a bit until things go sour in life and they hit the road again. Searching once again.

What the book is really about is this question, "What's the right path?" Life is a journey. We are all on the road. What path are we supposed to take? What path will get us where we want to go?

And that's really the question before us today, whether or not God's path of righteousness will in fact get us where we want to go?

So let's go ahead, and read the first three verses of Psalm 23 today. We'll read 'em, declare them as God's Word, thank Him for it together and then pray and ask for His help.

Psalm 23:1-3b

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness.

- Pastoral Declaration: This is the Word of the Lord.
- Congregational Response: Thanks Be To God.
- Pastoral Prayer

A few weeks ago now the sermon was "He Leads Me" and we focused just on God's leadership. We're told twice in these first three verses He leads us, He leads us to still waters and leads us in paths of righteousness. What we learned then is that our lives are ones which are meant to be led by God, we're meant to follow Him.

One of things we talked about in that sermon is about sheep and how a good shepherd takes care of sheep. When a shepherd has a flock of sheep, he doesn't just keep them fenced in, standing all around in one place all the time. If a shepherd does that, the sheep will eat all the grass and even start eating the dirt, which can make them sick and it can kill a whole flock.

So what shepherds do is they take all the sheep on a trip. It lasts for several months and they journey together, the sheep and the shepherd. The shepherd plans out the journey and schedules in his mind different stops at places where he knows there are green pastures and still waters.

What the focus is this week is the paths the shepherd takes to get the sheep to where they are going. The paths of righteousness, or literally, the right paths.

To help us unpack this I've got three points for us to go through today: "The Straight Path", "The Crooked Path" and "The Paradise Path."

I. The Straight Path

Our first point today, "The Straight Path" is meant to draw out the meaning of this word "righteousness." Righteousness is actually one of the most important words in all of the Bible and is central to the Christian faith.

Righteousness simply defined is "what is right or just." So it's a word which has a moral quality to it. It's a word which points out there is a sense of "ought" which we as human beings experience. We have consciences which tell us certain things are either right or wrong.

It's one of the things which makes us as human beings different than animals. There is moral element in the nature of our beings which is part of what makes us human. The Bible calls this God's law and tells us He has written it on our hearts.

You know, things like what are in the 10 commandments. Don't murder. Don't steal. Don't cheat on your spouse. Don't lie. We don't need the Bible to tell us those things. We automatically know murder, stealing, cheating and lying are wrong.

And we can't get rid of this sense of ought, no matter how hard we may try. We can definitely violate it, we can break those rules but then we feel bad or feel we must justify ourselves to say why it was right or okay to break the rule. But once again, even in that we still move to saying why we are right.

We can't get away from it. We want to be in the right. We want to be right.

Now when the Bible talks about being right or being righteous, it's actually a much bigger thing, a much bigger deal than just right and wrong. Right and wrong are not just an inanimate list written on a piece of paper. Right and wrong are not just an impersonal force we find at work in the world.

What the Bible says and teaches is that right and wrong, righteousness, comes from God. And right and wrong doesn't just come from God as though He arbitrarily just came up with some list and then handed it down.

What the Bible teaches is that God is right, righteous in His very being...that He is the source of it...that God is the very essence of what is right...that He is composed of righteousness itself...He is pure, unfiltered righteousness.

So for example,

Psalms 48:10 - "Your right hand is filled with righteousness."

Isaiah 5:16 - "The Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness."

Here's why that's important. Here's why we must see and understand righteousness as flowing out of the very being of God: right and wrong, morality, ethics, whatever you want to call it, is not meant to be conceived of or understood apart from the being of God. We cannot find or figure out what is right on our own.

What happens when we divorce right and wrong from the being of God is we not only cheapen them, making them not that big of a deal, but we actually turn them into something else entirely. You see, what I'm getting at, what I'm trying to get at is that doing right, being right is meant to happen or occur out of being in relationship with God. Not apart from it.

In fact, when you try to do right and try to be a good person, apart from being in relationship with God you get into all kinds of trouble because then you start to think you are righteous, but you are really just self-righteous. It's a lie because you've basically stolen from God, trying to mimic His holy goodness and put His name on it by saying it's "right" but you don't even know Him, so whatever right you think you have is a fake right and it's fraud.

Here's why this is so important for us today. What we have in Psalm 23 is God's paths of righteousness. And notice, how you get in those paths of righteousness, how you get right? You have to be led by God...He has to lead you into them. You cannot find them on your own.

The sheep cannot come up with their own migration path. Sheep have no sense of direction. Sheep have to be led on a path in order to get to a place which will not kill them.

Here's how the Bible puts it in Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

Now you know where I got the straight path line. The straight path is the good path. It's the right path. And once again, how do we get on it? We have to acknowledge Him. We have to acknowledge that right and wrong come from God and that we will not get on the right path for my life apart from God.

This right path, the straight path is a righteous one. The Bible uses words like godliness and holiness to describe it. We not only need God to find out what is right, we need God to walk in righteousness.

One of the things I wanted to address today, one of things I think needs to be addressed in our church in our vision of become a mature church is us having a desire for righteousness. We should want to be holy. We should pursue holiness and desire to be and be seen as a godly people.

Kevin DeYoung in his book "The Hole In Our Holiness" says,

"There are a hundred good things you may be called to pursue as a Christian. According to the Bible, holiness, for every single Christian should be right at the top of that list. We need Christians who will say with Paul, 'Look carefully then how you walk (Ephesians 5:15).

Is it possible that with all the positive signs of spiritual life in your church or in your heart, there is still a sad disregard for your own personal holiness? When was the last time you took a verse like, “Let there no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving (Eph 5:4) and even begin to apply this to our conversation? What does it mean that there must not be even a hint of immorality among the saints (Ephesians 5:3)? It must mean something. We are called to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:13-16).”

Do you hear that? Do you feel that? The righteous path.

One of my favorite books is a book J.I. Packer wrote on the Puritans, a group of Christians in the 17th century who were known both for their theology and their holy living. He writes,

“The Puritans knew that Scripture is the unalterable rule of holiness, and never allowed themselves to forget it. Knowing also the dishonesty and deceitfulness of fallen human hearts, they cultivated humility and self-suspicion as abiding attitudes, and examined themselves regularly for spiritual blind spots and lurking inward evils.

They may not be called morbid or introspective on this account however; on the contrary, they found the discipline of self-examination by Scripture, followed by the discipline of confessing and forsaking sin and renewing one’s gratitude to Christ for his pardoning mercy, to be a source of great inner peace and joy.”

Oh man. I love the Puritans. Let me ask a few questions of us today.

How’s your holiness? Would you describe your life as a life of holiness? That that’s the path you’re walking?

Do you care about righteousness? Being righteous? Walking in righteousness?

Are you Godly? On this journey called life are you walking through it with God, in relationship with Him? Or are you just trying to make your own way? Trying to deal with what’s right and wrong for you on your own?

Church. Don’t lean on your own understanding. Acknowledge God. And He will put you on the straight path.

Okay, let’s move into our second point for today, “The Crooked Path.”

II. The Crooked Path

I’m a pretty big Bob Dylan fan. Have pretty much every album. Read his autobiography and have a couple of the documentaries that’ve been done on him. I saw him in concert here in San Diego a few years back, but I wish I could’ve seen him in the 60’s when his voice wasn’t shot. Now days he just sort of sounds like sandpaper if sandpaper could sing.

One of Dylan’s heroes was Woody Guthrie. He had a huge impact on Dylan’s life and music. So when Woody Guthrie died there was a book they put out about him and they asked Dylan to write a piece for it. If you’re a big enough Dylan fan to have the bootleg recordings like I do then on that volume there’s a piece on it where during a live show Bob Dylan reads the poem he wrote called, “Last Thoughts On Woody Guthrie”. To my knowledge, it’s the only time he ever just read a poem he wrote publicly but I could be wrong about that.

Anyway, I want to read a piece of that poem for us today. He says,

Where do you look for this hope that yer seekin’?
Where do you look for this lamp that’s a-burnin’?
Where do you look for this oil well gushin’?
Where do you look for this candle that’s glowin’?
Where do you look for this hope that you know is there
And out there somewhere

Your feet can only walk down two kinds of roads
Your eyes can only look through two kinds of windows
Your nose can only smell two kinds of hallways
You can touch and twist and turn two kinds of doorknobs
You can either go to the church of your choice
Or you can go to Brooklyn State Hospital
You'll find God in the church of your choice
You'll find Woody Guthrie in Brooklyn State Hospital

What I think Dylan rightly captures in those lines is that in life there are really only two kinds of roads you can go down. There's really only two paths.

And that's something Jesus actually said too. Here's how Jesus says it in Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

Once again here we have the picture of sheep. During the winter months, shepherds keep their flocks at home and set up a fence to have them protected close and warm near the house. Then, once the weather changes and it's time to go on the journey he opens a gate and the sheep follow him out.

Here in Matthew 7 Jesus takes that picture and says there are actually two gates the sheep can go out of the corral, a small narrow one and a big wide one. One gate leads to life and one gate leads to death.

Most Saturdays I'll end up finding myself in my garage tinkering around doing some little project and for some reason whenever I'm doing woodworking or yard work or something like that, I don't know why but I just love listening to AC/DC. I know, I have a pretty eclectic taste, Dylan and AC/DC. One of my favorite AC/DC songs is "Highway To Hell." "I'm on the highway to hell..." I sing it but in my heart I'm singing "I'm on the highway to heaven!"

I don't think Bon Scott and the rest of the band likes Jesus that much, but Jesus is where the idea for the song comes from. There is a road, a highway that leads to death and destruction and there is a road that leads to life and to salvation.

Now I know, highway to hell sounds pretty intense. Like you've got to be really really bad if you're on that road. But listen to how Proverbs 2 describes it, which by the way, the book of Proverbs is such a great book of the Bible to read. It's just full of all kinds of good practical wisdom for Godly living. There's 31 chapters, which is nice because you can just read one a day and then in a month you've read the whole book. If you've never done that, you should try it.

So listen to how a number of verses in Proverbs 2 describes this path.

"My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you... Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; 10 for wisdom will come into your heart, delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness... men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways."

Do you see it? The path? There's the righteous path like we talked about in our last point, that's one way but then there's another way, an evil path of darkness that is a crooked path. And like we learned last week from Psalm 1, those who go down that wicked way will perish.

The crooked path. There's clearly a straight path and a crooked path. The question to ask then is, "What makes a path crooked?" What is the crooked path and how do you make sure you don't go through that wide gate and get on it?

That's a hard question. David Roper in his book on Psalm 23 quotes G.K. Chesterton saying,

"No man is really any good until he knows how bad he is; till he's realized exactly how much right he has to all this snobbery, and sneering, and talking about 'criminals' as though they were apes in a forest ten thousand miles away; till he's got rid of all the dirty self-deception of talking about low types and deficient skulls."

What he's getting at is yeah, there's the extreme cases where it's obvious you're on the highway to hell, committing crimes that get you thrown in prison and what not, but for most the crooked path is much subtler and much more deceptive.

Roper goes on and says,

"Moral collapse is seldom a blowout. It's more like a slow leak, the result of a thousand small indulgences, the consequences of which are not immediately apparent. We justify our behavior to ourselves and others. Our actions are explained and made to look good. But our hearts know. There are moments when our wills soften and we long to set things right. If we do not listen there is a metallic hardening and then corruption."

So I think what he is saying is we don't look at the crooked path and say, "Oh, that looks nice! I think I'll just wander on down that road that will destroy my soul, corrupt me and lead me to ruin." I think what he's saying is there are things we want that are not God or of God. We are tempted and when we give in a little, we start giving in a little more and a little more and before we know it we have full on wandered off the right path and found ourselves on the crooked path plummeting down to imminent death.

I think what makes the path crooked is because it twists things. It takes good things, detaches them from God, which actually ends up making them bad things and the result is we get all messed up and before we know it we are lost and confused and on our way to hell.

You see what I'm getting at is what makes it crooked, what makes it not right, what makes it unrighteous is disconnecting it from God. That's why doing good things even just for the sake of doing good is actually bad for us.

One more section from Roper on this.

"Some people try too hard; they're upright, but they're uptight. Goodness for them is stern, demanding business. They're chaste, honest, sober, respectable, Bible-toting, church-going, psalm-singing people, but everything seems out of phase. They have an appearance of righteousness with its self-imposed worship, obvious humility, and harsh treatment of the body, but they lack the cordial love that springs from contact with God.

It takes too much energy to keep the rules. No matter how hard we try, we are unable to sustain the effort. Some unsightly, emotional display, some inappropriate reaction to a relational failure, some other humiliating behavior blows our cover. Our facade cracks and others see behind it. We have that horrible experience of being found out. Others come to know what we have known all along - that much of us is ugly and unacceptable. No self-effort doesn't work. It only makes things worse."

Confused yet? You kinda of should be. In our first point I made a strong call for holiness, that we should want and pursue the path of righteousness. Now we've learned there are really only two paths, the straight path of righteousness and the crooked path of unrighteousness BUT no self-effort can put us on the straight path, inevitably all of us end up on the crooked path.

The Bible actually makes this really clear for us. Both in Psalm 14 and Romans 3:10-12 say, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

Pretty clear huh? It may sound harsh. But the truth is none of us has gone down the righteous path, all of us have leaned on our own understating going down the crooked path. We take our God-given worth and value and exchange it for worthless things. And so often even our good efforts are corrupt.

Do you guys recognize that in yourselves today? You sensing any slow leaks where soul has been slipping away? Are you aware of ways you've actually hardened yourself toward God becoming jaded and closed off? Have you been deceiving yourself telling yourself you're a good person and you're alright when you know that's not really true?

It's a predicament. God made us for the life-giving righteous way but we can neither put ourselves on that path nor keep ourselves on it. And it's this predicament that actually brings us to the full meaning of this line in Psalm 23, that He leads us in paths of righteousness.

So let's transition now and talk about that in our last point for today, "The Paradise Path."

III. The Paradise Path

Let's go back and just re-read our line from Psalm 23:3. "He leads me in paths of righteousness." Okay. What then is the plain and most basic understanding of this sentence? If we ask the question, how do we get this righteousness, how do we get on the path of righteousness, what is the answer Psalm 23 gives to us?

He does. God does. God must give and lead us on the path of righteousness because we cannot do it ourselves.

This is actually the heart of the meaning behind this line and what it's intention is in Psalm 23. One Bible commentator put it this way,

"The right path is the one that gets you where you need to go. The sheep are not left to their own to figure it out. They are led by God the shepherd Himself to take them on the correct path."

So think about this with me then. What then is the goal? There's a journey. There's two paths. Where does the right one go that God leads His sheep on?

Paradise. This is the goal. The garden city paradise is where God leads us. Wide is the gate that leads to destruction, to hell. Narrow is the gate that leads to life, to heaven. The paradise city of eternal life in heaven is where God wants us to be. It's the place where there is no more conflict, no more sorrow, no more suffering, no more sin...everything good we have here without all the bad....life the way it is supposed to be.

Something you find out the more you read the Bible is that all of it has a future thrust to it. All of the Bible is looking forward in time. There's a longing and a push to get there.

There is an acknowledgement that things right now are not good, but they will be good and fully good for all of God's people in the end.

If that's true, then I think there's maybe one last question to bring up today and that's how do we get off the crooked path? We've all been on it or are on it...so how does God take us off that path and then put us on the path of righteousness?

I think there's two answers to that. The obvious answer is Jesus but how God does that is important.

One, crooked people cannot be on the straight path. So what God does in Jesus, is He comes to earth and walks down the right path. No one else was ever able to do it so He does it. Then for those who believe in and trust Him He gives them His righteous life. In the book of Romans God calls this justification...it's where He righteous-ifies people, He makes them right, so they can be on the right path which leads to heaven.

And two, here's the second thing, Jesus dies on the cross to put to death death itself.

Jesus dies on the cross to put to death death itself. On the cross Jesus dies for all of our crookedness. That's huge. He pays the price so we can have life and righteousness. Recognizing that and believing that is what enables us to be freed and forgiven from all our guilt and shame...all the crooked stuff.

And there's an aspect in this we don't talk about enough. Christians, especially sincere and serious Christians can sometimes get so hung up on sin and the forgiveness of sin that it's like this dark cloud constantly hanging over them.

So listen. Jesus died to put to death death itself. Yes, that includes the deeds of death. But it also includes and I think more importantly includes the reign of death. You see, the right way is the way of life. It's experiencing the life of God.

Here's how the Bible says it in Romans 14:17, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

So you see, it's a happy life. The kingdom of God is the rule and reign of God. And the life which is ahead for us in the paradise city, which He has prepared, speaks out to us now offers to us its joys to us here and now. Yes, it's still hard at times because there's death and darkness and crookedness about and around...but soon, soon and very soon it will all be no more for God's people.

Let me explain it this way. Two weeks ago was my middle daughter's birthday. She had been wanting and asking for a bunny for her birthday for months. My wife and I went back and forth on it and finally decided to give in and get her a pet bunny. We got her this little white dwarf bunny, which she named snowflake and just fell in love with.

Well, one week later, sadly snowflake died. We're not sure what happened but it's heart just stopped beating and it laid over on it's side and died. It was pretty traumatic. Gratefully it happened while the girls were taking a nap. I told Amy what happened and initially I was just going to take care of it and tell the girls when they woke up. But then I stopped and thought about it and thought, "No. Death is real and this is a good opportunity teach these girls about Jesus and why He came and what He did."

So when they woke up we went out in our backyard behind the fence, dug a hole, put snowflake in it, covered her up, put a little cross over the grave and then each of us prayed a prayer. It was seriously so sad. All the girls were crying.

Anyway, in the following days the girls started asking some pretty good questions. Ones like "Daddy, do animals go to heaven?" I said, "Well, the Bible only says that human beings get new bodies that go to either heaven or hell. But the Bible does say there will be animals in heaven. It says the lion will lay down with the lamb. It says kids will play by the snake's hole and not get bit. There's white horses and eagles...so they'll probably be bunnies too.

Then my oldest asked a really hard question. She said, "Daddy, how come only people who believe in Jesus get to go to heaven?" Here's how I answered her. I said,

"Well Adina, a big part of what Jesus came to do when He died on the cross was to put to death death itself. You see death is wrong. It is not what God means for us. God created us for life and means for us to live and to enjoy Him and to enjoy life. When God first made Adam and Eve, the first man and the first woman, there was never any death. Nothing died.

So Jesus came to really fix everything. To get rid of death and everything bad so we could have life again like we are supposed to. When Jesus rose, it proved He beat death! He got eternal life for us back. So it wouldn't make sense for anyone to get that life who didn't like Jesus and what He did to get that life. That would be wrong. So people who don't love Jesus get new bodies too, but they get bodies that can never die but only experience all the bad things of from death."

She asked me those questions while on the way to school. I couldn't stop thinking about our conversation all day. And I think this is a huge piece of the gospel we don't talk about enough. The life Jesus got for us by beating death. God means us for life. For life. Life is the purpose. Life is the point. The righteous life!

We are headed for life in the paradise garden city and God wants us to experience that as much as possible here and now. The kingdom of God is a matter of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It's a matter of life.

So here's what I'm saying. Come live and walk the path of life peace and joy in the Spirit with us as we walk to the garden city together. Let's be led by Jesus our shepherd and trust Him to get us there.

The path of righteousness is one where God brings the good to us. It's not our own efforts that do anything. It's when we're walking with God, being led by Him, that His Spirit feeds our souls and then they naturally begin to bear fruit.

For you guys who are trying to put together the theology here this is what I'm saying. The connection between justification and sanctification, is the presence of God. God has already granted to those who believe the status and position of perfect righteous Jesus, how we practically become righteous, the process of sanctification, is by experiencing the presence and power of God.

Presence. Walking with God. Enjoying life. That's the good life. It's the right life. Let's walk that way.

Conclusion

The band is going to play a few more songs so we can sing and worship and enjoy that together. During that time, if you're a Christian you are welcomed and encouraged to celebrate the life Jesus purchased for us by receiving the elements of holy communion.

I began the sermon by telling you about the book "On The Road" by Jack Kerouac. The book ends with Sal sitting on a pier looking out over the skies of New Jersey and it basically ends really sad where he reflects on all the roads he went down and all he experienced but in it never finding what he was searching for.

Friends. Family. Church. Don't go down that road. Go down the road where we find what we are searching for...life. And it is found in God and given to us through Jesus Christ.

What we are saying when we take a piece of bread as Jesus body and dip it in the wine or juice as His blood, what we are saying is Jesus you put to death death and give me life.

When you come to the table today, bring your real requests and real needs to God and hear His gracious answer and provision for you.

If you were sensing a need and desire for greater holiness when were talking about that? Tell God.

If you were sensing some areas of crookedness in you that you need to repent of? Tell God.

If you were sensing that your Christianity has been too dark and you need to experience more of the life and light of kingdom? Tell God.

For each and every one of our truest needs, God answer is yes. I give it to you in my son Jesus. Receive my peace and joy child of God. Let's pray.