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*On Taking the Wrong Road*  
Matthew 7:12-14

Not long after moving to Newport News three years ago, I made my first trip alone to the presbytery office in Portsmouth. Following a GPS map, the directions had me exiting the Western Freeway over the Elizabeth River at a point where an exit didn't exist. Taking the first opportunity to go "right," once on dry land, I found myself on dead-end streets among the docks and warehouses. After fifteen minutes of rambling southward, I finally came upon a street that carried me on toward my destination.

Nothing is more common in life than having good intentions and worthy goals, often after much time and effort to find ourselves in some place other than where we intended. We can argue with ourselves that we took the right turns and made the right decisions, but ultimately we have to concede to the fact that we are not where we planned to be. We took the wrong road!

The prodigal son did not start out for a swine pasture. His plans called for happiness, freedom, independence, adventure, and worthy goals that he could justify to himself, his family, and his friends. But, the path he took toward those goals landed him somewhere else altogether. I've never married a couple whose plans at the outset were anything other than happiness, success, and a long life together. The national news this week has certainly accented this issue. One of the most popular and talented young entertainers whose life took many unexpected and unhealthy turns, ending in a premature death., and two governors who found themselves in a position that was never planned nor anticipated at the beginning.

This truth that the destination we reach depends not on our ideals alone but on the road we take is critical. Despite all the shortcomings, lacking an admirable destination is not one of them. Everyone I know wants happiness, a respectable character, and wants to arrive at the end of their life no regrets. Our ideals are usually worthy. But, often we let it go at that—being content with our

ideals. Are we on the right road that leads to where we want to go...now, this morning, in our current practices, habits, and choices?

In one of his most familiar sayings, Jesus summed up this matter. Often Jesus presented the high ideals that we are to strive for, but he never forgot the practical side of arriving at our desired destinations.

*...the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:14)*

When we read his words, “I have come that you might have life in all of it fullness,” we quickly affirm that that is what we want—the abundant life—but are we willing to take the road that leads to it?

We live in world of natural laws—of cause and effect. It is one thing to have a great goal. It is quite another to fulfill the conditions of reaching that goal...and the conditions must be fulfilled. With all our scientific, medical, and educational knowledge, by no trick or magic can we reach the right place if we are on the wrong road—not in this life. I find it disheartening to see so many people hold up the Way of Christ as the ideal, but who do not choose the disciplines, the habits, nor the focus of attitude that make such an empowered life possible. What is the use of having the ideals if we have little intention of taking the right road to get there?

A guest lecturer’s plane arrived late at an airport. He immediately went to the taxi stand, jumped in the car, and said to the driver: “Step on it, drive fast.” The driver did just that. After fifteen minutes of speeding through the streets and skidding around corners, the lecturer said, “Aren’t we about there?”

“I don’t know, sir,” the driver replied. “You never told me where we were to go.”

The world is full of people racing to get to fulfill their dreams with little regard to the direction in which they are going. Such people don’t need to confront their goals as much they need to take stock of their lifestyle—the road they are on. There are a thousand ways to fail at accomplishing your goals. There is usually just one way to achieve them—one set of conditions to be fulfilled in order to arrive at your desired destination.

*...Wide is the gate and easy is the road that leads to destruction...narrow is the gate and the road is hard that leads to life...*

Not only is observing natural laws and disciplines important to fulfill our desired goals, the level of our sincerity is also an important factor. It is one thing, and comparatively easy too, to desire something ideal and right; it is another thing to be willing to pay the price. We all want healthy minds and healthy bodies, but too few of us are serious enough about such goals. If you want your eyes opened about healthy food rent the documentary films “Super Size Me” and “King Corn.” For people wanting to be healthy physically, emotionally, and spiritually, I don’t know of a better place to start than by eating healthy food (and eating appropriate portions), exercising, and having some quiet time for healthy thinking and meditation. Becoming proficient in any field requires discipline and strong motive.

A couple of years ago, I stopped by Don Olson’s apartment at the Hidenwood. (Don is close to having the distinction as our oldest member, but you would never know it.) On that day, Don apologized for having several magazines opened and scattered about. When I asked what he had been doing, he told me he been studying the stock market and managing his portfolio over the internet from his computer. Several months later, Don’s picture appeared in the “Daily Press” regarding his swimming and exercise. Staying healthy physically and mentally requires a discipline supporting our ideals.

Accenture Business, a business-consulting firm, has had Tiger Woods as an endorser for several years now. My favorite ad was the one that had Woods sizing up his putt with that classic Tiger Woods look of concentration. The caption underneath said: “90% focus; 10% luck.”

This matter of arriving at our desired destination requires having discipline, being sincere in our desire to obtain our goals, and supporting them with integrity. Personal integrity is everything that involves honesty, honor, good character, principles, morals, and basically doing what is right. Integrity is what you do when no one is looking.

Israel’s greatest king, David, ruled over Judah for almost seven years and over the combined territory of Judah and Israel for thirty-three more years. He never lacked the disciplines necessary for physical and intellectual greatness. He was a person full of heart and passion—devoted to paying the price and devoted

to hard work. Those narrow roads that lead to success he never had a problem with. It was in the area of personal morals and the discipline to honor the truth that caused him the greatest difficulty as a leader. His dishonor with Bathsheba and his dishonesty about their relationship led to an attempted cover-up that just got worse. David's shortcoming with integrity finally ending in the death of Bathsheba's husband, who was sent to the front lines of battle. But, David did possess the ability to admit his mistakes and failures and search for the right path to follow. His public prayer is one of the most poignant in scripture: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. (Psalm 51:10)

Obviously, we are dealing with one of the most common causes of regret in life—taking the wrong road. Without question, the starting point is having ideals and goals. Ultimate happiness, success, and peace are usually incorporated in these desires. But, our willpower cannot deal with ideals. Our willpower cannot be directed toward desires. Our willpower must always be focused on the road that takes us to the fulfillment of these goals. Good intentions will never get us there. The Good News is that there is a right way offered to us in Christ. It does require concentration, decision-making, self-discipline, and loyalty, as everything most worthwhile in life does. But, it leads to life.

*...Wide is the gate and easy is the road that leads to destruction...[but] narrow is the gate and the road is hard that leads to life...*

On this 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, the words of one president are appropriate: "Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction." (John Kennedy) It all comes down to choosing the road we will take. One leads to life in all its fullness. Which road will we take?

### **Prayer**

*Create in us a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within us. Show us the way. Give us the strength and courage to follow. Amen*

**Matthew 7:12-14**

<sup>12</sup>"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. <sup>13</sup>"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. <sup>14</sup>For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

**2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10**

1Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, "Look, we are your bone and flesh. 2For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." 3So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. 4David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for forty years. 5At Hebron he reigned over Judah for seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah for thirty-three years.

9David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inwards. 10And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him.