

BodyLife Past Article Archive

The Third Road

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My father woke us up at 5:30 in the morning. We crawled out of our sleeping bags into the cold mountain air, ready for a fishing trip of a lifetime. Someone had told us that if we hiked out of the Dinky Creek campground up Rodman's road for four or five miles, we would come to a creek where large rainbow trout lurked in every pool, ours for the taking. It would be the most incredible fishing experience we had ever known.

I don't know how far we hiked that morning. We didn't have a map, just the word of a friend. We trudged on for hours looking for any sign of a creek. At times we thought we could hear one in the distance spilling over the rocks and our pace would quicken in anticipation of finding it around the next bend.

As the hours passed, however, we didn't even cross so much as a creek bed. When some spoke of giving up, others would encourage them on. We'd come so far. We'd hate to find out later we'd missed it simply because we hadn't gone another few hundred yards.

Finally, however, our spirits lagged. Our candy bars were gone and our canteens were more than half empty. The sun was getting hotter and all we could think about was the long walk home. Somewhere past 11:00 we gave up and returned to camp in the middle of the afternoon, our fishing poles never having even touched a drop of water.

No one in our group was at fault. We were all awed by the incredible hope of this fishing hole. We'd all done our best and stuck together even when the going got rough. The fact was we were just on the wrong road. It didn't matter how pure our motives, how passionate our expectations or how hard we tried. That road could not take us where we wanted to go.

Hiking to Nowhere

Bogus fishing expeditions are not the only frustrating hikes I've been on. For most of my spiritual journey, I've chased the greatest promises of Scripture only to have many of them melt away just at the moment I thought I was closest to them.

I've worked hard to seek God's approval by my diligence, only to see my greatest efforts succumb yet again to attitudes and appetites that diminish my passion and distract my energies. I've sought to trust God in every circumstance, only to see circumstances I did not understand rob me of that trust. I've tasted of incredible fellowship, only to have it stolen by those who sought to control it.

Only in recent years have I come to see why. What I thought was the road to righteousness didn't lead where it had promised. A long time ago, I had shunned the values of the world and chosen to live my life after God's ways. I wanted to live in his righteousness and thought I knew how that could happen. It was a well-worn path that others have walked for centuries.

I had no idea the righteousness it promised was only an illusion. Rather than lead me to life and joy and freedom, it only detoured into a swamp of my own best efforts, woefully short of his promise. I used to blame myself at times for not trying hard enough and God at other times for not being fair to my efforts, never considering that I might actually be on the wrong road. No matter how far I followed it, it was never going to lead me to that which I desired most.

Only in the last decade have I come to realize the folly of the road I was on. I have since found a different road that actually fulfills the promise of Scripture. On its pathway I have found joy greater than I ever thought I could contain, healing from appetites and desires that only grows greater with the passing of time, a reality to God's presence as real as I always hoped it could be, fellowship that runs deep and true without stagnating or collapsing into personal agendas, and transformation that even has unbelievers asking me what guides my life.

The Righteousness You Don't Want

If I could offer you a box full of righteousness, would you take it?

Most believers would answer yes because we all know we're supposed to be righteous. But you might want to be careful here. Paul might have answered, "It depends! What kind of righteousness do you have in there?"

There was a righteousness that Paul clearly did not want. He said he wanted to be found in Christ, "not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law." (Phil 3:9) Can you believe there was a righteousness that Paul rejected? He didn't want to be found anywhere near it. No matter how much better it made him look on the outside it still pulled him further away from the true joy and life of God. He had been on that road most of his life, subscribing to the best rule-keeping system ever devised, and knew it did not lead to the fullness of life in God.

I used to think we had only two roads to choose between - the paths of wickedness or righteousness. The road to wickedness we all know well. Through rebellion, indulgence, independence and selfishness we can live only to please ourselves. Though that road provides momentary pleasures, it leads to death and destruction.

The only other road I knew about was the road to righteousness. I had to learn how to change my life so that it was pleasing to God. It was lined with rules and principles to observe, and laced with routines to

follow. Accountability and commitment drove that journey in the unending quest of trying to earn God's approval. When I fell short (and I always fell short) I resorted to comparing myself to others, hoping that God would grade on the curve. If I couldn't be perfect I would at least be better than 90% of the other believers I knew.

Because that path could not transform me, it only made me more proficient at pretending to be righteous. It could never draw me into right relationship with the Father and free me to enjoy his life. Regardless of how passionate my pursuit was, it would on its best days only lead me to smug self-righteousness and on its worst days to the despair of unresolved guilt. No matter how much effort or expectation I brought to it, I always ended up frustrated and disappointed. Like our mountain hike to the phantom fishing hole, it was an imposter trail that led to greater bondage, not freedom.

The Righteousness that Comes from Faith

That's why Paul spoke of a third road. This one doesn't just aim at righteousness it actually gets there. In the same breath that he distanced himself from the righteousness produced by human effort, he declared his all-out passion for a different kind of righteousness - "that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." (Phil 3:9) Sharing his life with Jesus, the joys and the troubles, had transformed the way he thought about everything, and yes, his actions right along with it.

Though I've had tastes of this kind of righteousness in various seasons of my life, it is only in the last decade that I've really come to understand its power. All the appetites, attitudes and anxieties that held sway in my life all resulted from the fact that I did not trust that Jesus was big enough to watch over my life and lead me into his fullness. Because I couldn't trust him to do it without me, I always found myself wandering back to the trail of self-effort.

The work Jesus has done in my heart over the past few years was to convince me that his love was great enough to contain every event in my life and provide for me all that he wants. He didn't need me trying to produce it, only to draw close to him and discover how incredibly rich and powerful his love is. His presence would set me free enough from self so that I could live in him.

No, I do not consider myself perfect, far from it. But the more his love wins me over, the easier it is to entrust increasing bits of my life to him. The more I trust him the freer I become from the anxiety, appetites and attitudes that used to rule my life. I am just beginning to feast on the righteousness that relationship with him produces, and I've got to tell you, there is nothing sweeter. I notice it in the smallest things, the lack of frustration and anger if things don't work out the way I'd hoped; less expectations of others and less hurt when they fail to live up to them; greater clarity about God's purpose in the unfolding events of my life; and being able to recognize when others seek to manipulate me and the freedom to step away from it.

The only thing that needs to concern me on this road is drawing ever closer to him with an honest and sincere heart. No matter the joy, struggle or failure, he is there to love me in the middle of it and to lead me through it to greater life in him. The more he affirms his love for me, the easier it is for me to trust him and the freer I find myself to live out his life with people around me. This is the road that Paul discovered and the one he refused to get off of, even when others demanded it of him.

Rebellion, Religion, Relationship

Thus there are three roads that confront us daily. Let's label the first road 'Rebellion', because it substitutes our own will for what God wants to accomplish in us. The second I'll label 'Religion' because it is our attempts to produce God's life by human effort. Like that fateful fishing expedition, it is a road that will never lead us to Godly fulfillment. The third road is the one Jesus paved for us. Let's call it 'Relationship', because out of relationship with him he will transform us to live in his righteousness and freedom.

If you've been persistently disappointed by your spiritual aspirations, perhaps you, too, have been on the wrong road. Unfortunately many believers have tried to live on the very road that Paul repudiated. You don't have to be a Christian long to run into the religious mindset that says we have to try harder to please God. Many of our religious institutions are built on that premise, because institutions demand conformity and conformity is a human process.

All of the early churches that Paul planted on the road to relationship ended up on the road of human effort. The reason we have most of the New Testament is because believers in Corinth, Galatia and Colossae, had gotten on the wrong road. They were convinced by those who claimed to be leaders that their success hinged on conforming to their demands. They all traded away the freedom of journeying in God for the empty works of human effort.

Paul wrote to point them back to the only way we can discover God's righteousness - the road to relationship. He does not conform us by obligation, but transforms us by sharing his love with us and showing us how we can trust him.

Fellowshipping on the Second Road

We all know the camaraderie of indulgent living. Those who live to their own ambitions either want others to come along so they won't feel alone, or they destroy people who get in their way. In this world relationships are either boom or bust depending on how we serve their interests.

Fellowshipping on the second road, can be as destructive, but is far subtler. People captured by religion are often well intentioned. They want what God wants for them, but because they are confused about how God accomplishes his purpose in them, they can be destructive without even realizing it.

Religious structures wire their relationships with accountability and control in the futile attempt to help people try to be more pleasing to God. Often their standards have nothing to do with what it means to walk with Jesus. One TV pastor summed it up this way: "Going to church, giving tithes and offerings, and keeping the sabbath are the basic doctrines of Christianity. We live the Christian life by practicing these basic doctrines of Christianity." Of course these are practices not doctrines, but he does sum up the attitude of those mired in religion. And isn't it interesting that the actions demanded do more to sustain the institution than draw people closer to Jesus and help them participate in his life?

If you go along, you are rewarded with approval and promises of expanding influence. When you cease to go along, you are cast out as a dangerous influence. Because our fallen nature craves approval by others, religious environments easily manipulate us by fear, guilt and shame. There is no middle ground here, because those on this journey know how easy it is to slip off that road back into the world. They regard their spirituality as fragile and it must be protected at all costs.

However, human effort cannot embrace the righteousness of God. People who follow it only end up pretending to be more righteous. Pecking orders develop quickly as people who seem to conform to the standards are exalted over those who struggle with them.

It has always bothered me that so many people who sincerely love God at the outset of their journey end up mired in manipulative relationships and, in the end, become far more hurtful than helpful to the kingdom. Now I understand. If we don't get on the only road to righteousness that works, we have to keep going as we did most of the morning on our ill-fated fishing expedition. We've got too much invested now, to simply admit that we might have been led astray and look for a better option.

Fellowship on this road is painful at best, and seems to be based on the notion that misery loves company. People don't talk of enjoying the camaraderie of the journey, but needing to "go to church" unless they fall into some grievous error. Often they have few true relationships with other believers, because they spend so much energy pretending to be what they know they are not.

Fellowship on the Third Road

Since I've discovered life on the road of ever growing trust in Jesus' love for me and his purpose in my life, I have found a new depth of fellowship I never thought possible. Sharing life with people on this road fulfills all that Scriptures says about real body life.

Instead of pretending to be what we're not, we encourage each other to be authentic. It's OK to question what we need to question, ask what we need to ask and struggle where we struggle. People are not rewarded for pretending to be better than they are, but are loved through the ups and downs, hurts and joys, and doubts as well as triumphs.

Instead of exploiting people's shame or need for approval to try and make them better Christians, we help people be released from shame so that they can experience God's love.

Instead of loading each other up with a list of 'shoulds', we help each other listen to God and follow what he puts on their heart even if that means they make a mistake doing so.

Instead of trying to change each other we just encourage each other closer to Jesus, because it is so much fun (and far more effective) watching him change them.

Instead of manipulating each other to do what we think would most benefit the group, we learn together how to trust Jesus for what we need and find the simple sharing of that life together is the best of body life.

Since our eyes are fixed on Jesus and we simply get to enjoy each other, we have found that this kind of righteousness and body life is not nearly as fragile as we had been taught. I had learned that if I hung out with the wrong people, or missed a meeting or two, I would suddenly be swallowed back into the world's temptation or be seduced into some grievous heresy. While that may be true of works-righteousness, it is not true of the righteousness that faith produces. He is able to keep us from falling. He is able to link us up with other brothers and sisters exactly as he desires. He is able to teach us how to live deeply in him and know the awesome freedom from our own expectations and the demands we put on others.

The righteousness that flows from trust is incredibly resilient. Once you've tasted of it, everything else loses its appeal. Though I am often with people walking down Religion Road, I am not even tempted to join them on that road again. I don't mind loving them, telling stories of a better road that will really take them to the fullness of God's life, but I have no desire to trade the power of God's transformation for the illusion of human effort.

This is the best fellowship in the world, and I hope you are finding it too. Notice that it does not come from finding the 'right group' or meeting in the right way. You can seek those forever and never find them. This fellowship flows naturally among people who are walking on the road of ever-deepening relationship with God. I meet people like that everywhere.

If you find yourself today on the road to religion, why don't you recognize it for what it is and ask the Father to free you from it and show you the road to increasing relationship. As you grow in doing so you will find yourself connecting to an ever-expanding group of folks who have found that trusting a Father's love and depending on him is the only way to walk.

Believe me, you'll never want to go back to mere religion again!

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