

PROLOGUE

My dear Friend,

We were talking about the deep wisdom of the Bible and why it may not be perceived as such; specifically of potential differences between religion and “the way”—religion, in this sense, meaning something exterior, something presented to the world, while “the way” is a mode of being and therefore very much unseen.

I suppose the most obvious thing we can say about this is that religion tends to get in the way of “the way” when we use it to make ourselves seem religious. The Pharisee who stands out on the street corner proclaiming his religiosity to the world is in the way, not on the way. He is using religion as a means of obtaining honor in the world, while the way is a means of obtaining life. And yet he *appears* to be on the way. Hence his vanity may obscure the way and the deep wisdom of the text.

The way of the Pharisee—his method of obtaining happiness—was to attempt to use certain outward signs to make himself seem holier than the publican. Unfortunately those signs cannot be holy in themselves. The only sacred value identified by the Bible is life, the “light of men.”¹ God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life; this makes life a sacred value. Men themselves are mortal, however, as are all of their signs of power. The Pharisee cannot make himself holy by comparing himself with the publican because he cannot give himself life.

It is our consciousness of the value of life that causes us to want to compare ourselves with others. “All striving comes from envy of one’s neighbor”—but why do we envy him? Why does his success or good fortune seem important when in reality it has nothing to do with us? Because deep down we hate our nothingness, our mortality. We want to appear to be something more than the ephemeral beings that we are, and this desire drives us to compete with our neighbor in an attempt to justify our existence.

¹ See Appendix for Scripture citations.

Now if life is indeed the light of men, then all appearances of power in the mortal realm are meaningless. We are drawn to them because we think they can make us happy, but they do not signify life, the thing we desire most. At best they are shadows of life and their power an illusion. “What can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” This is the deep wisdom of the Bible. It is life that we desire, but the vanity seen in the Pharisee cannot satisfy our thirst for life. Only God can give life. The way to obtain happiness, then, is to mortify our natural desire to compare ourselves with others and remain humble and gentle, putting our faith in God and the power of his love.

The deep wisdom of the Bible begins with a clear picture of our limitations. “All men are like the grass.” The Pharisee believes he can obtain a desirable identity by comparing himself with his fellow beings, but the grave is the great leveler of us all. Weighed on the scales of eternity, there is no difference between the high-born and low-born man; they are both “but a breath.” To pretend we are great when we are food for worms is vanity; hence the identity the Pharisee obtains by boasting about himself is shallow.

A deeper identity can be seen in those who choose meekness and humility. First, these behaviors are based on a realistic view of the human condition and a sense of perspective about oneself and one’s possibilities. In other words, they exhibit wisdom. They also reflect a principled resistance to the world and its vanity. Think of the meekness of the cross. It appeared to be foolish to many onlookers—certainly the soldiers and Jewish leaders were full of mockery—but this seeming foolishness concealed a great love.

It is the concealing that adds depth to identity. Christ had the power to call down a legion of angels and destroy his enemies, but the meaning of the cross is that love is greater than the will to dominate. Christ concealed his power for the sake of love—for the sake of the very people who were tormenting him, so that they could have life. This self-sacrificing love makes his identity deep. He was not what he seemed to be to reporters on the ground. He was not powerless or worthy of ridicule; he gained the power and identity of love by setting aside his power to dominate.

This same depth is seen in anyone who chooses humility and gentleness as his or her outward signs. It is not that they lack the power to hurt, as the world loves to hurt. Anyone can hurt who has a tongue. Instead, they choose not to hurt because they value life

and sincere love. The world may not see the depth of their identity, any more than the mockers saw the glory of the cross, but they put their hope in something more enduring than the world.

The deep wisdom of the Bible can be seen from many vantage points. There is wisdom in simply being able to identify our highest good—what human beings desire most. This is the first and most important step in any roadmap to happiness, since it is impossible to know how to make ourselves happy unless we know *what* makes us happy. The Bible is the only book that identifies this value as life. The philosophers claimed it was intellect, but they were not able to agree on what makes intellect “good.” Intellect, after all, is divided between itself and sense.

There are many good reasons to put our stock in the Bible’s valuation. First, life came directly from God, which would make it the highest value known to man. This has been contended but never disproven. For the past hundred years or so our materialists have been trying to disprove it by convincing us that life came from matter. The more we learn about life, however, the less likely this seems. Microbiology is in the process of overturning our materialism by showing us the glorious complexity of life and restoring its lost luster.

Second, the Biblical valuation accords with experience. It is a simple fact of human existence that we love to compare ourselves with others. Even the philosophers contended with each other and tried to make their rivals seem foolish. What is the source of this relentless spirit of emulation? The Bible has a sensible explanation: “God has put eternity into the hearts of men.” As living beings, we are conscious of the value of life, and this great value makes us want to cover up our mortality.

We contend with each other because we are trying to obtain life or status in our own minds and in the minds of our fellow beings. Thus the universal spirit of emulation indicates that life is our highest value. We may not desire life consciously, in the sense that we desire, say, a nice Audi or a steak; but it is our unconscious desire for life that causes us to glorify ourselves and to fall in love with outward signs of power, even when those signs are mortal and powerless to satisfy our thirst.

If this valuation is correct, then the Bible is the only place where we can find deep wisdom about the way—because it is the only book that offers life. Many ways have been proposed for

finding happiness, but those ways cannot help us unless they are based on an accurate assessment of our predicament. If the Bible is correct, and it is life that we desire, then Christ is the only true physician, since only he can give life.

First and most importantly he gives it on the cross. Without the cross it is impossible to have life. But he also gives life through his teaching. He shows us a *way* to live in which there is “abundant life.” To follow his example—to strive to imitate the “visible image of the invisible God”—is to have more life, more joy, more peace.

The Bible is remarkably consistent with regard to the value of life. As mentioned, life was breathed into man by the Spirit of God. The fall of man is described as being cut off from the tree of life. The law that Moses relayed to the Israelites said, “Keep my decrees and statues; by doing this you shall live.” The serpent that was raised up in the desert brought life to those who were perishing. It was also a figure of the cross: “When I am lifted up, I will draw all men unto me.”

It is the high value assigned to life that leads to the sobering reflection that “all men are like the grass.” We are all mortal. This is not as obvious as it seems. We tend to be oblivious to the fleeting nature of mortal life. The Pharisee is one of the wise men of the world—educated, moves in the best circles, a leader and teacher among men—and yet he does not show any awareness that all men are like the grass. Otherwise he would never dream of comparing himself with his fellow mortals.

This is true of humanity in general. We are inclined to invest our lives with unusual significance, as seen, for instance, in our enthusiasm for the regional sports team. It is natural for us to assume that “our” team is somehow better or more worthy of victory than a team from some other region. We feel exhilarated when they win and deflated and depressed when they lose, never considering that the fans of the rival team have very much the same feelings as ourselves.

We invest significance in the local team that goes far beyond its actual value, and this overvaluation is linked to identity and thus to a deeper thirst that the sign cannot satisfy. The same thing is true of many or most of the signs of value in our lives; or at least any sign we use to make comparisons, conscious or otherwise. The sign to which the Pharisee was clinging was the outward appearance of holiness. He wanted to be seen praying.

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The Bible is the original debunker of such signs—“Stop judging by mere appearances.” It is not what is seen on the outside that is real and significant but what is in the heart. The Pharisee wants to seem holy, but in fact he has a very unholy desire to glorify himself at the expense of the publican. Viewed in this way, the sign has the opposite significance from what was intended. It reveals that he is small and self-serving.

The Bible’s resistance to the seeming-power of signs is based on the difference between sincere love and vanity. Sincere love cannot be seen. It cannot be glorified in the world because the world has no way of knowing whether any outward sign is sincere. Vanity seeks to bring attention to itself, but sincere love hides from the world, knowing the natural weakness of men and recoiling from any counterfeit of true affection. The Pharisee stands out on the street corner while true love goes into a closet to pray.

This difference is directly linked to the value of life. Sincere love builds up life while vanity destroys it. All of the law and the prophets are based on love and can be summed in the “royal law of Scripture,” which is to do no harm to one’s neighbor. The vanity seen in the Pharisee, however, is highly destructive to others. He attempts to build himself up in the world by tearing down the publican. Vanity feeds on others in order to give itself life.

The Bible states that “God is love,” an essence statement not found in any other major religious or philosophical text. To be like God, then, is to love as God loves. It is also very specific about the nature of this love: “Love must be sincere.” The most important sign of love is the cross, which shows us “what love truly is.” This love is not self-seeking. It denies any selfish desires for the sake of building up life.

“The way,” then, is very simple. It is the way of the cross. “If any man would come after me, let him take up his cross, deny himself, and follow me.” To be on the way is to imitate Christ and his self-sacrificing love: “Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

“The way” is a very fetching metaphor because it indicates a roadmap one can follow to obtain happiness. The Eastern religions make free use of this metaphor to attract adherents, but we do not

hear much about it in our churches. This is unfortunate, since the Bible has a great deal to say about the way, and what it says is full of deep wisdom.

Now I know you are a little squeamish, my friend, about my use of the word *happiness*. It is true that Adam and Eve thought they were pursuing happiness when they tried to make themselves like God. Likewise the philosophers equated happiness with raising themselves up to God through the power of intellect. The fault is with them, however, not with the word itself. They did not know what true happiness is, which is why their methods of obtaining it led to unhappy results.

By happiness we mean nothing other than “righteousness, peace and joy”—the kingdom of heaven. Righteousness means to be right with God and to have life, the thing we desire most. Righteousness is a state of being in which the damage of sin has been undone and life has been restored; and the happy fruits of this restoration are joy and peace, or what people generally have in mind when they use the word *happiness*.

But in one sense you are right—the happiness we have in mind is nothing like the world. It does not boast, like the philosophers. It begins with the cross and in sorrow, repentance and pain. It is happiness in the sense that it is a state of blessing; but it is nothing like the happiness dreamed of in the popular imagination, where the sorrows of mortal life are somehow transcended.

The happiness we have in mind has two levels, just as the statement “I am the way” has two very different meanings. In one sense, Christ is the way because his sacrifice broke down the wall between God and men. We were separated from the tree of life by our own sinfulness, but the new tree gives us new life by atoning for our sins and reconciling us to God. The way to obtain life, then, is literally through Christ; he carries us on his back.

This happiness is far more valuable than anything promised by other “ways” because it does not depend upon us or our goodness. We can have it in spite of our limitations, as expressed beautifully in the psalm that begins, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.” It seems the psalmist was consumed by guilt—and to guilt we may add such familiar torments of the mind as shame, fear, a sense of inadequacy, and nothingness. But strangely, he ends by saying, “Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, ye righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart.”

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Why this change and outburst of joy? Because “blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sins have been covered.” The righteousness referred to is not found in ourselves but in a gracious God. The monks had a wonderful phrase for this—*felix culpa*: “O happy fault that merited such and so great a Redeemer!” It is impossible to earn happiness if we cannot earn life, but happiness becomes possible when we divest ourselves of the false hope of saving ourselves and place our trust in God.

You are perfectly correct when you say this is the difference between Christianity and other religions and philosophies. They expect us to save ourselves. Their “way” involves something we must do to obtain happiness, placing the burden squarely on us. But Christ took our burden on the cross. It is his sacrifice that makes Christianity unique. He offers a new and wonderful way to obtain happiness—through faith in him and his love.

And yet, without discounting this very good news, it is also true that Christ is “the way” in another sense as well. He *shows* us the way. He lived the way we should live if we want happiness and a more abundant life. The cross does not negate the old wisdom seen in Proverbs and elsewhere about how to live well. Christ did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He was the “word made flesh”; he embodied the way, and we can increase our happiness by imitating him and paying close attention to his teachings.

We will go a step further. “The way” is not just a poetic metaphor but is encoded directly into being. The Bible states that God is the creator of the heavens and earth, in which case all of being is patterned after him in some way and reflects his eternal qualities. At the same time, God is said to be sovereign in human affairs, casting down proud rulers from their thrones and raising up the humble and the meek. Not only is being patterned after him, but he intervenes directly in being. The way is a literal path in being, and God supports us along the way.

On the first note, if “God is love,” and God is the creator, then being is somehow patterned after divine love. This notion is not theoretical but completely practical. Proverbs is full of teachings about how to follow the way, and most of them are based on the great commandments of loving God and loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Following the path of humility and kindness and upright behavior leads to increased happiness and a productive, useful life, while following the path of selfishness leads to destruction.

With regard to sovereignty, recall Paul's statement that "all things work together for good to them that love God." This is one of the most important statements in the Bible for those who are interested in the way. It indicates that God takes a hands-on approach to his creation, arranging and disposing things according to his own inscrutable plan. And in that case, to follow Christ is to align our lives with supernatural forces.

Following the way leads to happiness by both natural and supernatural means. Love is the spiritual law that governs being, and God's love is also sovereign in being. The way to find happiness, then, is to "live a life of love." It is true that the only way to obtain life is through faith in Christ, but there is something we ourselves can do to have a more abundant life. We are not merely passive spectators in our own story. The way is real and has great value for our lives.

Living a life of love has a double benefit, because it is also the way to obtain knowledge of God: "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." This is another statement that we do not take seriously enough in our churches. We cannot obtain knowledge of God by simply thinking about God if "my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." This precious knowledge can be obtained through the act of love, however, which discloses the reality and power of God.

Philosophers thought the way to obtain knowledge was through intellect. They thought intellect was the essence of God, which is why it seemed possible to them to use it to obtain knowledge of God and what is good. But they were sharply divided in their understanding of what is "good," or what provides happiness. Some thought the good was pure intellect, while others tried to describe it as some sort of coming-together of intellect and sense.

Since they were sharply divided in their value judgments, and continue to be divided to this day, we can safely conclude that they did not succeed in the attempt to use intellect to obtain knowledge of the good. And unfortunately many theologians followed the same path. It was not the creeds that divided them; they agreed on the fundamentals of the Christian faith. They were divided by their doctrines about the nature of God and man, and those doctrines are the product of intellect.

Any attempt to use intellect to obtain knowledge of God leads to divided results, first because intellect is a dividing power, but

also because different people have different intellectual pleasures and psychological needs. Some philosophers were attracted to the idea of pure intellect because they themselves were in love with simple judgments, which can only be obtained by negating sense. Others were in love with nature and attempted to overcome intellect's negative power by grounding it in sense.

There is another way to obtain knowledge of what is good, however, by denying our selfish desires for the sake of love and of the value of life. Paul told the church to stop clinging to judgment; stop arguing over “disputable matters” and seek enlightenment in a Christ-like love: “I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.”

One way this love provides knowledge is through the sweetness of unity in the body of Christ—i.e., the church. At one time there was perfect harmony between Adam and Eve. They were unified in the sole purpose of loving God and each other and enjoying the garden he created. This happy unity was shattered when they chose to glorify themselves. At first they tried to make themselves “like God”; but soon they stooped to the level of comparing themselves with their fellow beings, thus increasing their dividedness and unhappiness.

This account indicates that we are unhappy because we cling to the dividing power of judgment, which deprives us of the sweet and pleasant unity seen in the Garden. Since judgment has the power to raise us up in the world, we deceive ourselves into thinking it can make us happy. We try to cover our nakedness by comparing ourselves with others, but comparisons between mortals are meaningless if the thing they desire most is life.

There is another way to find happiness, however—in the “unity of the Spirit.” Think of the powerful hold that such words as *team* and *family* have over the imagination. They are valued because we recognize the joy and meaningfulness of unity, which is the product of self-sacrifice. But family cannot satisfy our thirst for unity, since it is built on nothing more than blood, and teams cannot satisfy it by reaching worldly goals, since success in the world is fleeting.

A higher goal can be found in a spiritual family—the body of Christ, united in the purpose of serving one another and reflecting the graciousness of God. The goal of this body is to obtain life by building up life. Just as teams obtain success through teamwork, so

in the body of Christ we must be willing to lay down all selfish desires as Christ himself did. The sacrifice is great, but so is the reward: deep inner joy and peace, rounded with knowledge of the power and goodness of God.

There has been a great deal of discussion of what it means to be made in the image of God. No serious writer believes the term *image* is to be taken literally—that we actually look like God. After all, “God is a spirit.” Some believe it refers to intellect, and there can be no doubt that intellect is a dividing line between men and brute creatures. “God is love,” and therefore it may also refer to our ability to love.

But it may refer to our ability to dominate. Immediately after God said “let us make man in our image,” he also said “and let him rule over all the creatures of the earth.” We were made to dominate and to enjoy the pleasure of domination. Unfortunately this great pleasure became warped into the will to power through our fall from grace. We fallen creatures are no longer content to dominate nature; we believe it is possible to become godlike by dominating our fellow beings.

The modern philosophers were frank about this. They openly claimed that the way to find happiness was through the will to dominate. But if life is the light of men, then we can never obtain what we desire by dominating others. The will to power increases our anxiety by exposing our nothingness. Is it joy and peace that we desire? Then the advice of the Bible is to stop clinging to this mortal life and its illusions of power and invest our identity in the love seen on the cross.

The happiness obtained by following the way is incremental, not the totality promised in philosophy. The way makes us happier than we otherwise would have been. No one can obtain life by trying to follow the ten commandments because it is impossible to follow them perfectly; and yet at the same time our lives are better and happier *to the extent* that we keep ourselves on the narrow way.

These are the general outlines of our little discussion of “the way.” We do not write as if we ourselves were masters of the way; no, we are no better than the publican—perhaps a good deal worse. We write because we have a burden to express our views on this matter. With any luck our meandering ruminations will provide a starting point for more useful conversations on this topic.

One last word before we begin. We said religion gets in the way

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of “the way” when we use it to make ourselves seem religious. We are not, however, in any sense antipathetic to religion. The Bible endorses religion in its own distinctive fashion: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” True religion is the same thing as the way.