



# Pastor Ken's Sermon

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**13TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
SEPTEMBER 3, 2022**

Our lectionary texts over the past couple of months have featured a series of antitheses or contrasting realities – lambs and wolves; the city of God and the city of man; Jesus came not to bring peace but a sword, over which all of humanity would be divided in two; heaven and hell.

Our texts for today are no exception, for they present us with “the two ways” – life and death. In fact, all of the other contrasting realities we’ve studied over the past couple of months can be summed up in this very dichotomy; what all of them boil down to is life and death.

Through his servant, Moses, the Lord declares to Israel, “See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil” (Deut. 30:15). YHWH then elaborates on these alternative paths, explaining that life is found in obedience to his commandment, whereas the intrinsic consequence of disobedience is death.

There’s something about this scenario that should sound very familiar to us. For this was the very situation with which the whole of human history began. God called Adam into being out of nothing, placed him in the garden of Eden, and issued a command and a warning. The commandment was, “do not eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” and the warning was, “if you do eat of its fruit, that very day you will die.” In essence, God was saying to Adam, “I set before you life and death,” each corresponding directly to obedience or disobedience to the word of the Lord.

We know, of course, that Adam and Eve gave in to the serpent’s lies and temptation and disobeyed God by eating of the tree. However, what becomes immediately apparent is that God’s warning about death was not ultimately a reference to bodily death, because Adam and Eve did *not* perish bodily after their rebellious act. No, what God meant by death was the gravest of all possible outcomes for human creatures, namely, to be cut off from God, the very source of life itself. And, true to God’s word, in the very day Adam and Eve ate of the tree, they were expelled from the garden and cut off from God’s tree of life.

And, so, through one man’s sin, the whole world fell under the power of death, resulting disastrously both in bodily death and in the loss of communion with God, the source of life. That is the true condition of fallen humanity.

The most shocking thing about our Old Testament lesson for today, then, is not that God puts the option of death on the table for Israel. For death is God’s just punishment for sin.

No, what is utterly stunning is that God puts the offer of *life* on the table. For this is totally undeserved, unearned, but is instead grace – the sheer, free gift of divine compassion and love.

Yet, life is not a given; there remain for Israel “the two ways,” and thus the possibility of death. So that his people might not get lost and wander off down the way of death, God marks out the path of life in the form of commandments, which express God’s supremely good and perfect will for human life. Obedience to his commandments, therefore, is the line between life and death.

Above all, Israel is commanded to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. For those familiar with the story of Israel, however, you know that the *entire* remainder of the Old Testament is about Israel’s struggles and, ultimately, failure to love God in covenantal faithfulness.

The problem, Moses tells us, is in the fallen human heart, and its unwillingness to listen to the word of God (Deut. 30:17). Prior to the Fall, there was only one form or pattern of words: the truth. In the serpent’s temptation of Eve, however, there was introduced a contrary form of words: lies. And the hearts of fallen humanity are inclined toward the latter.

Our psalmist today calls this false pattern of speech “the counsel of the wicked” (1:1), which stands in contrast and opposition to the counsel, or to the word, of God. It is crucial to note, however, that the counsel of the wicked may not sound perverse or wicked at all. On the contrary, because the fallen heart is inclined to prefer lies over truth, the counsel of the wicked very often sounds quite pleasing and alluring.

Consider some contemporary examples. Writing for the majority opinion in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, Justice Kennedy asserted in beautiful, flowing prose, “at the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” Doesn’t that just sound lovely? More than that, doesn’t it sound so enlightened and, above all, *freeing*? “No longer must I be bound by some archaic religious book to tell me who I am and how I am to live, I am free, FREE, to decide for myself!”

But was this not the very lie with which the serpent enticed Eve? “You will be as free as God, able to know and determine for yourself what is right or wrong.” We might also recall that Kennedy’s seductive opinion underwrote the death of tens of millions of children whom God was knitting together in the womb.

Singer-songwriter Sheryl Crow summarized the dominant counsel of our modern, secular age in her 1996 hit song, *If it Makes You Happy*. The chorus sings joyfully, “If it makes you happy, it can’t be that bad.” That doesn’t sound wicked at all. It sounds splendid and carefree: just follow your heart and do what makes you happy!

But the wisdom and counsel expressed in her song presupposes a general goodness in the human heart that is *nowhere* attested in the scriptures. On the contrary, says the Prophet Jeremiah, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt” (17:9).

What is the outcome, then, if one simply follows one’s own heart and trusts in happiness as a reliable guide? The writer of Proverbs puts it like this, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (14:12). In other words, the mortifying and calamitous truth about us sinners is that if we follow our own hearts, they will lead us all the way to hell.

There are two ways – life and death – and each corresponds to the counsel of two different speakers – the Living God of Israel and the world in bondage to Satan.

From the beginning, God has sought in humanity a faithful partner, whom God could bless with his own life and goodness in an endless covenant of mutual love. God did not find such a partner in Adam. Nor did he find such a partner in Israel. On the whole face of the earth, there was none who loved the Lord God with his whole heart and cleaved to him in trusting obedience.

So, then, who is the righteous man about whom our psalmist wrote? Psalm 1 is not about you or me; at least, not in the first instance. The man in Psalm 1 is Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God. He alone is righteous, for he did not walk according to the counsel of the wicked, but his delight was in the law of the LORD. And so, at last, in the Israelite Jesus, God had found in humanity a faithful covenant partner, who loved God, by surrendering his whole life in obedience to him.

Like the tree in the garden of Eden, like the commandments given through Moses, by sending his Son to dwell among us, God set before the world the very Source of life itself. Life was once again on the table for fallen humanity in the person of Jesus, and, in sheer invitation, God was posing the question to all, “do you want to live?” Alas, at Golgotha, the world answered chillingly, “absolutely not.”

Here, then, is the paradox of the incarnate life of the Son of God. As a true Israelite, there were set before Jesus the commandments of God, and so there were set before him life and death. Jesus walked the path of life, by loving God the Father with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. The paradox is that it is precisely *because* Jesus chose the path of life that the world rose up in hatred against him and put him to death.

For his life of love, and so his life of righteous innocence, stood in radical contrast to the ways of the world, and exposed the wickedness in the heart of man, and, so, exposed the world's deepest need: the forgiveness of God. And this was a bridge too far.

But there is another paradox, the great paradox of the gospel. Full of compassion and unfailing love, God used the act of greatest human wickedness as the occasion, and as the very means, to pour out his mercy and love over all the earth. For in the death and resurrection of the Son of God, death itself was defeated and emptied of all its power. The utterly startling truth of the gospel, then, is that death itself has become the door to life for all who believe and put their trust in the risen Lord.

Through Christ's empty tomb, God has flung open the gates to the new and eternal garden of Eden, at the center of which is the cross, the true Tree of Life. And all the world is invited to eat of its fruit.

This will entail for us, however, walking the same path as the incarnate Christ, and, so, the paradox that to live we must die. Indeed, Jesus says, "whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple." To bear one's own cross means putting to death the former sinful life and no longer walking in the counsel of the wicked.

Bearing one's cross will also mean, then, suffering persecution, for the world will hate us, and never more than when we speak those inconvenient truths from the word of God.

For ancient Israel, the line between life and death was observance of the prescriptions of the Torah. Post-resurrection, there remain "the two ways," but the line between is now the very person of Christ. Whoever will not repent and die with Christ in Baptism has excluded oneself from the company of disciples, and so from the Source of life. The *assurance* of Christ, however, is that all who by faith abide in him and die in him will be raised at the Last to eternal life.

And he has sealed our assurance with his shed blood. The Bible tells us two things about blood: 1) there is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood, and 2) the life of a creature is in its blood. In Christ's shed blood on the cross was his very life, poured out *for us*, for the forgiveness of sins. And risen, Christ lives to pour himself out for us eternally.

Indeed, he comes to us in his Supper that we have gathered to celebrate together today, in which the true blood of Christ, his very life, is poured out for you and for me. And so, the most stunning thing of all is that through the death of his Son, God has taken death off the table for all who believe in him, and God has set before you today only life!

Amen.