

# **Vacuum**

## **“Beat down the right paths.”**

### **Matthew 12:43-45**

Rev. John H. Hice  
January 16, 2011  
First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

#### **Beaten Paths**

Sometime take a back road high in Blue Ridge Country, North Carolina. It's all two-lane, most of it. You travel lanes guarded by hardwoods and hemlocks that may all-at-once open to vast balds. Only grassland. The rolling hills are all high-mountain open range. You'd swear you're in Wyoming or Montana. Look closely at the steep slopes and you're certain to see herds of cattle grazing.

I used to tell the kids that the cattle always stand sideways on the slope: front and back legs on one side up-hill and the other legs down hill. Yet, they always stand straight up-and-down. I'd tell the kids that the cows did that because their legs on one side were shorter than the other; and that's how we get short ribs. They never believed me.

If you pull your car to the side of the road and get out to get a closer look at the cattle and the hills of pasture you'll get a good look at their cattle paths: definite, well-beaten paths worn rock-hard so neither grass nor thistle can grow on them. If you hop the fence and follow one you'll see how they lead from some corral and usually over the easiest and safest route, most free of obstacles, to the good grass for grazing and to the best watering holes for drinking.

You might even see the herd walking the paths in their single file parade taking the same route they've always taken – never veering far to the right or to the left where there could be holes in which to fall or nests of snakes that bite.

It's their pattern. The pattern keeps them safe. And the pattern repeated over-and-over gives life a predictability that comforts.

Who ever said only humans are creatures of habit?

Like a cattle-path, many of our habits are healthy and helpful. They provide shortcuts for living. Every night before I go to bed I follow the ritual: it starts with flossing. I don't have to remember the sign I saw from the dentist chair: YOU DON'T HAVE

TO FLOSS ALL YOUR TEETH; ONLY THE ONES YOU WANT TO KEEP. I just do it; no decision. Then brush my teeth and give my face a good wash. Good habits are disciplines helpful for hygiene and the on-going maintenance of finances, relationships, and even spirituality.

Habit-paths will be good, depending where habit-paths lead.

But what if you've taken a path that leads to something more destructive than good? It can happen. Chocolate is incredibly good. But an enjoyable mid-afternoon truffle made into a routine *can* lead to a repeat performance. Then a ritual of the three o'clock Cadbury's may lead you to a larger trouser size and arteries clogged with plaque. An evening's cigar puffed in a row boat for the chasing of mosquitoes *can* become a path you routinely take and become a three-pack-a-day habit. We all know it.

Not that every indulgence will become a habit. But repeated again and then again: they can. So 45% of us make New Years resolutions and lot's of them are promises made at least to self: "I'll quit smoking." "I'll avoid the chocolate." "I'll stop drinking, cold-turkey."

If it's a path that leads to destruction, perhaps it is a good idea to get off it. But what if that turns out to be a hard thing to master? What if you're able to quit what you want to quit and then pick it up again because the temptation is just...too...strong? Then you feel the defeat; and it makes you feel small and maybe ashamed until next January when you might try again. You've probably heard someone say, "It's easy to quit. I've done it lots of times."

### **Chasing Away the Demons**

I was talking to a friend once who told me about his struggle with smoking. He said that he started the way a lot of people get into it: curiosity and friends, mostly. It wasn't long before it was a pack-a-day habit that continued through college and graduate school.

Sometimes he tried to quit. Once he went a month without smoking to win a bet; then he started up again. Another time he had a scare when it looked like an x-ray showed a spot on his lung; but a re-test showed it was nothing and he got back on the path. It was getting so he hated the morning-time taste in his mouth and fits of coughing that sometimes didn't want to stop. But he just...couldn't... shake it.

Then something happened. He met a friend who talked about having faith in Christ in a way he hadn't considered before. It was about asking God to come in and take over even the little things in his life – *saving* him from the little things that were killing him. At first he didn't think about that having anything to do with habits.

But he made a shift in the way he connected to God. He allowed that loving God was more than just believing and signing up for Heaven. He asked God to take the lead in his life moment-by-moment, here and now. And something happened. He became aware of things that didn't line up with the kind of life he figured God wanted him to lead; in fact he became aware that he wanted things to change, himself. Eventually, smoking became an issue. So he set a date to leave the path. He said, "Smoking was a part of my life before, but from that date on it wouldn't. From then on, it simply wasn't an option." It was probably more than just will power. I think it had to do with people that supported him and the Spirit of God that encouraged him. That was years ago; he hasn't returned to that path yet.

I believe that belonging to Jesus can make a difference in your life. Real life. Now.

John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist Movement for practicing Christian faith. Mostly, he was interested in teaching that kind of practical Christianity. He said that coming to faith and saying you believe and belong to Jesus is just the first step of the Christian life. When you do that, your relationship with God changes. He called it a *relative change* in your life.

People start with a relative change that feels great. You're filled with a new awareness of love. But a lot of people have that and still live like nothing's changed at all – until it dawns on them that in ways they don't act much like God wants. They've been on paths that lead away from God until they turn around and take the paths that lead *toward* God instead.

This is what Wesley called, *conversion*. He said this is when you have a *real change*. From that time on, God works with you to examine the paths of your life and where they lead; and make the changes that help you to become more and more like Christ.

You get off the paths that destroy.

But if all you do is step off a path and there's no other path to take in its place, what happens? How many times does dieting fail when you just resolve not to eat certain foods or certain quantities? How many times does someone try to stop drinking "fall off the wagon"? Some habits are addictions tough to get over. Lots of other habits are still laden with strong temptations hard to resist.

Jesus knew that. In the twelfth chapter of Matthew Jesus' was talking with teachers who stubbornly refused to believe in him. He told them about a demon that was cast out of a man in whom he'd taken up residence. It wandered around looking for a new place to live and couldn't find one. So he went back to the guy he left and found the man's life so empty that the demon took up residence again – and with several friends! The man was worse off than he was before.

They say nature abhors a vacuum. If you clear a habit out of your life, you either put something else in the empty space or what you got rid of will probably come back...and maybe with a vengeance.

You need to replace a bad habit with something that's healthy and of God and strong enough to fend off old temptations when they come.

It's not just about old paths to leave. It's about the new paths to take.

A big chunk of chocolate could be replaced by a brisk afternoon walk. The urge to gossip again could be replaced by a prayer for someone in trouble. The impulse to buy another pair of shoes (or whatever) could be replaced by giving to missions or someone in need.

### **Spiritually Disciplined**

I once walked with a guide through lowland trails rising uphill to be lost among the rocks of a mountain slope. It was Alaska in the heart of the rugged Alaskan range. We climbed higher to the crest of first mountain ridge; scared up a pack of coyotes who ran off, offended. Then we sat and looked at the next valley below, a wild river running through it, and the steep rise to rugged mountains beyond it. This was where we were going; and there were no trails at all: only rocks and bear berries growing no higher than our boot toes, quickly turning red for early autumn.

Then he asked me: what route do you want to take? Where do you want to cross the stream? Which ridge do you want to take to get to the summit?

Complete freedom, we would create our own path; and we considered how it should run: we would set a course that had never before been taken. From the advantage of our elevation, and with a bit of reason and deliberation our way became clear.

And we took it.

May your connection with God give you that kind of freedom:

to consider the paths of your life and where they lead;

to 'see which habits help and which destroy;

to 'choose to keep the good ones;

and to help exchange the bad ones for new ones.

May Jesus be your constant guide.