

# *The Road to Heaven Is Paved with Good Intentions*

## **Mark 1:1-8**

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The Gospel of Mark begins with two mighty footprints. One is a footprint from the past, the prophets of the Old Testament. The other is a footprint of the present, the prophet we have come to know as John the Baptist. The footprints of John the Baptist invite us to look forward, for he comes preparing the way for the Lord. The footprints of the Old Testament prophets invite us to look back, to see the mark they left as they proclaimed the word of the Lord in the pages of the Old Testament. A footprint leaves an indentation. And I believe you will agree that the prophets, both the ones of the Old Testament and the man known as John the Baptist left big footprints, and indeed, big indentions. These footprints, these indentions, not only lead us to Jesus, they provide for us a framework for understanding what Jesus envisions when he proclaims, “The kingdom of God has come near.” Since the footprints of the prophets, the indentions of the prophets, lead to Jesus and the nearness of the kingdom of God, I have given this sermon a title that I hope serves to catch your intention. The title for this sermon about the prophets is, “The road to heaven is paved with good indentions.”

To explore this theme of God’s good intentions and the good indentions which are the footprints of the prophets, I want to begin with a very special celebration God gave to the people of Israel. It was truly a special celebration, because it did not take place on a daily or weekly basis, it wasn’t a quarterly or an annual celebration, not every other year, not even once a decade. This special celebration was called the Year of Jubilee, and it was to be celebrated once every fifty years. The year of Jubilee is described in Leviticus 25. Basically, Jubilee is a reset. Over the course of 50 years, things get out of whack, out of sorts, people fall on hard times, they become indebted, they are over-mortgaged, over-leveraged, in servitude, and so God says once every fifty years, let’s have a do over. Every debt will be forgiven. Those who have sold themselves into slavery or servitude will be set free. If you had some land and lost it, you get to back so you can start anew.

Jubilee reminded the people that God’s intention was for everyone to have a place where they belonged, a place where they could function, contribute, give and receive, be blessed and be a blessing to others, a place where there was peace and harmony, a place of right relationships, a place of safety and security, even a place with justice and righteousness. Jubilee had its roots in the creation story of Genesis one, where everything was good, where all humanity was created in the image of God, blessed by God, and given the

**opportunity to be fruitful and to multiply. But Jubilee also had its roots in the Exodus, for there had come a time when God's people were not treated as if they were created in the image of God. They had been enslaved, oppressed, beaten down, shamed, and treated as less than human. God saw their suffering, heard their cries, was deeply concerned, and came down to help them. God set them free...Moses, the plagues, the Passover, the Red Sea...all of that played directly into Leviticus 25 and the Year of Jubilee. If some people found themselves back in those daunting and oppressive situations, hardship and struggle instead of abundance and blessing, well, once every 50 years, let's get things right again. Let's hit the reset button. Let's have a do over. Let's have a new beginning, even a new creation.**

**Well, as you can imagine, that was asking a lot. A Year of Jubilee would not be just a tiny indentation, it would be a big, huge, massive indentation. But, once every fifty years...well, maybe. Friends, I can assure you once every fifty years was not God's intention when it came to indentions. Leviticus is one of the first five books of the Bible, and within those five books, God spells out his intentions with the Law, the Covenant that was made with Moses, which includes among other things the Ten Commandments. Those 10 Commandments teach us to honor and worship God and they teach us how to live in right relationship with others. In fact, it was commonly held that a good summary of the Ten Commandments, and indeed all God's commandments, was found in two simple statements. Love God. Love your neighbor. Believe it or not, Jesus was not breaking new religious ground when he said that these were the two greatest commands. That was a common understanding of God's intentions. And my guess is that the second command, the one about loving your neighbor, often led to the follow up question, "Who is my neighbor?"**

**The answer to that question gives us one of the most powerful parables in the New Testament, the one Jesus told about the man we have come to know as the Good Samaritan. But we could also imagine the answer to that question being explored in the book of Leviticus, the book about that great indentation known as the Year of Jubilee. In Leviticus we find we aren't meant to store up all our good intentions and pour them out once every fifty years. No, we put our good intentions into practices that make good indentions on a regular basis. Leviticus, that same book that gives us the Jubilee in chapter 25, also gives us the command to love our neighbor as ourselves, which is found in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> verse in Leviticus chapter 19. In Leviticus 19 we find numerous good indentions we can make on a regular basis, even a daily basis. Loving our neighbor is not something we do once every fifty years, and so neither are the good indentions God intends for his people to do. They are meant to be part of our regular life.**

**These small indentions are part of the way we treat others.**

- **Respect your mother and father. (v.3)**
- **Stand up in the presence of the aged and show respect to the elderly. (v.32)**

**They teach us to practice honesty and to have integrity in our personal relationships and in our dealings with one another.**

- **Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another. (v. 11)**
- **Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker. (v.13)**
- **Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales and honest weights....(v.35, 36)**

**They teach us to keep a constant eye out for the poor, the ones on the margin, the aliens among us.**

- **When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field...leave some of the gleanings for the poor and for the foreigner. (vs. 9-11)**
- **When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourselves. And here, with the command to treat foreigners the same as we treat those who are native-born, there is the reminder which is given to Israel over and over and over and over again. Do this remembering that you were foreigners in Egypt. Ah, and remember how poorly you were treated. That is not God's intention. And so the people of God were called to make good indentions by loving the foreigner as they loved the native-born. That sense of remembering that Israel once lived under terrible conditions and had now been set free really played a big part in the indentions they were called to make. They were called to create a community that was different, that did not marginalize, that did not oppress, and did not treat aliens as less than human.**

**None of the indentions described in Leviticus 19 are big, huge indentions. But each one of these is a small, practical action where God is teaching his children how to love their neighbor. It seems the big, huge indention of the Year of Jubilee is built on the foundation of loving your neighbor in real and tangible ways on a regular basis. The patterns and practices that are embedded in the first five books of the bible are really profound.**

- **The Jubilee is meant to be put into practice every 50 years.**
- **Deuteronomy 15 tells of a smaller indention that is to be implemented every seven years, and that also includes the forgiveness of debt.**
- **Deuteronomy 14:22 tells of the practice of setting one tenth of what you have produced in a given year and offering that to the Lord. The tithe is given annually. When we revisit the tithe later, in Deuteronomy 26, we discover the tithe is a wonderful opportunity to make a good indention. Along with giving the tithe to the religious leaders, the Levites, the children of God are told to give their tithe to the foreigner, to the fatherless, and to the widow. That's a pretty powerful indention that honors God's good intentions for all people.**

**Every fifty years, every seven years, every single year...and every week, keep the Sabbath. When you read about the Sabbath you realize it is a day when all the people rest, not just the rich and powerful, but all, and not just people, even the animals rest, and at another point even the land rests. Every fifty years, every seven years, every single year, every single week, and then we are taught in the story of the wandering in the wilderness, God's intentions are for goodness every single day. The people are given daily bread. How much are they given? Enough. There is enough for every single person. No one had too much, no one had too little, and if you tried to gather too much it spoiled and became rotten. Now it isn't just huge indentions like a Year of Jubilee, it is soft and subtle indentions like some manna floating to the ground and barely changing the surface, but the little indentions of daily bread are such a good thing, such a good thing when everyone has enough. Jesus understood that. His life made a huge indention. But he also gave people daily bread, and when 5,000 people gathered, he fed all 5,000. On the Sabbath he showed concern for others, even breaking the manmade laws so that people could find healing and wholeness, which is certainly God's good intention.**

**So it is that the prophets were steeped in God's good intentions. And when they saw the children of God straying from those good intentions, they called the people to account. Certainly they called the people to account when they were not faithful to God. But one of the clearest signs the people were not being faithful to God was when they were not being loving to others, to their neighbors, and particularly to the weak and vulnerable, those on the margins. The prophet Amos looked at how God's children were living and wrote, "They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and they deny justice to the oppressed." (2:7) "They turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground." (5:7) "There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice." (5:12) But Amos knew what God's intentions were, so he made a mighty indention when he said, "Let justice roll down like a mighty river, righteousness like a never**

ending stream.” (5:24) The prophet Micah answers his own question about what the Lord requires by saying, “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) The prophet that brings his word to us in Mark chapter one is Isaiah, and justice is mentioned 30 times in the book of Isaiah.

When Mark begins with a reference to the prophet Isaiah, he is directing our attention to the prophetic voices that made big indentions as they called Israel to return to the practices God gave of justice, righteousness, mercy, and compassion for all people, and for particular people like the poor, the widow, the fatherless, the stranger, and the alien. The Lord is coming, the Lord of justice and righteousness, so prepare the way. When he came, John the Baptist called the people to repent. The Lord is coming. When Jesus comes, just a few verses later in the gospel of Mark, he said, “The kingdom of heaven is near.” Jesus knew God’s good intentions. I can hardly wait for us to read and study and pray our way through the gospel of Mark, for every step of the way we will see God’s good indentions as we follow the footsteps of Jesus. Jesus will do nothing less than change the world. Jesus will do nothing less than bring the kingdom of heaven right down to this earth.

The Year of Jubilee that is found in Leviticus 25 holds a special place in my heart. When I did my doctoral studies, I focused on the Year of Jubilee. The church we were serving was approaching their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and I thought it would be a very positive thing to try to create our own Year of Jubilee in our 50<sup>th</sup> year. I put together a 50 Day spiritual journey where a group of 12 people met every week and kept journals every day and studied and prayed and practiced different things related to the Jubilee. Then I wrote the results and turned it in. I confess that with this big project, I wanted to make a big indention. I wanted it to make a difference. I wanted it to matter. So when I turned in the chapter with the results of the project, I made a big deal about what happened with our group. Here is how I described it to the professor who was grading my project:

“The culmination of the 50-day Jubilee journey was almost more than I could have imagined. Every Tuesday night for 7 weeks a group of 12 members of Pines Presbyterian Church met for a time of worship, study, reflection, and testimony. Now at our closing retreat we moved from our small classroom into the sanctuary of our church. We entered a sanctuary overflowing with praise.

We were greeted by the rhythmic sound of drums and clapping. A worshiping congregation of thousands had gathered to celebrate Jubilee. The sound swelled as guitars were added, along with a full complement of stringed instruments. Then came the sound of the horn, the traditional signal of

**Jubilee. It was as if Psalm 150 had leapt off the pages of the bible and come to life in our presence. Everything that had breath was praising the Lord.**

**As the congregation began to sing a song of Jubilee, bright and colorful banners were carried to the front. Soon flags representing every tribe and every nation were joined to the banners. The gentle swaying of the banners and flags seemed to announce the reign of one who would unite all people in the bond of love. With hands raised and voices lifted, the refrain settled on us like a shower of blessing.**

*Behold he comes, riding on the clouds, shining like the sun, at the trumpet call*

*So lift your voice, it's the year of Jubilee, and out of Zion's hill salvation comes.*

**Many in our group had tears in their eyes as we added our voices to this triumphant chorus of praise. We allowed ourselves to bask in the blessing of the year of the Lord's favor."**

**I described this huge gathering of thousands of people from many different cultures and colors, and when my professor sent the chapter back he wrote in large letters, "This didn't really happen!" He didn't believe my project would make an indention that touched thousands of people. He was right. If he had kept reading he would have noticed that what I did was show our group a video of a worship service that had thousands of people, and the banners, and the dancing, and the praise, and the people of all tribes and tongues. He was right. It was not our group. It was a video of someone else, who made a really big indention. I guess it is human nature to want to make a big indention. We didn't make an indention that touched thousands of people.**

**But then I think of the indentions that God did make through our project. The theme of the project was how every single person on God's earth has the inalienable right of belonging.**

- **A woman who grew up in the south, where whites and blacks were not treated equal, told of a childhood friend she had who was black. She wanted her friend to be like her so one day she took paint and painted the skin of her friend white, so her friend would be like her. With tears in her eyes she repented in our class, and said, "She didn't have to be white. God loves all people, of all colors." God made an indention in her life.**
- **A man who served in the South Pacific during WWII faced the prejudices he carried for more than 50 years against the Japanese. He**

repented of the hatred he had allowed to linger in his heart. Not long after that he volunteered to host some international students who needed a home over the holidays. His student was Japanese. Seeing them standing side by side in our church, it was so clear God had made a big indention.

- A woman pulled me aside at the end of our study and said, “We’re going to China. We are adopting a baby girl. She is going to come home and be part of our family.” She wanted a child born on the other side of the world to have a home, to know their life mattered, to have a place where they belonged. That’s a big indention in my book.

That same woman who was adopting a baby from China was in a racially mixed marriage. She was Anglo, her husband Hispanic. They had a daughter together and then they adopted an African-American child. She told our class something that was heartbreaking. She said sometimes she would be with her kids, each one obviously of a different race. With judgment in their hearts, some people would look at her and ask, “How many fathers do your kids have?” Ouch. But then she told us something that made a big indention. And it is something that reminds us of God’s good intentions. People would ask, “How many fathers do your kids have?” Her answer was poignant, and it was powerful, and it was prophetic. “How many fathers do your kids have?” She would say, “One.” Isn’t that God’s good intention, that we would come to see that we, that all of us, that every single one of us, we all have one Father. And when our one Father sends his Beloved Son, he tells us, “The kingdom of heaven is near.” The prophets prepare the way for the Lord. As we enter into this journey through the gospel of Mark, may our hearts be prepared to meet Jesus Christ, God’s Beloved Son, for surely, the road to heaven is paved with his good indentions.