

All the goodness in the world

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

November 5, 2015

We are bargain hunters, all of us. We make bargains with God, with reality or the cosmos or karma or whatever. We are convinced someone or something out there is keeping score, and that our lives are like a bet we are daily making that the things we do are somehow a reliable indicator of the things we will get.

We do this in countless ways. I'll cut back on the sugar, I'll eat leafy things that taste gross, I won't smoke or shoot things into my veins, I won't drink (much), I'll bundle all of this healthy goodness up with a bit of exercise, and in return I will be spared the antiseptic barrenness of hospital rooms and terrible food and visiting hours and long hours with falling-apart people.

I'll go to church and pray and give my money to worthy causes, and in return God will see fit to bless my efforts, or at least spare me some of the awfulness that I see all around me.

I'll give myself to my kids and do my best to love them with everything I have, and in return they'll become well-groomed upstanding citizens with good jobs and decent morals. Or, at the very least, they won't hurt me with the choices they make.

I'll honor my marriage vows and try to be a faithful spouse, and in return I will receive a long and happy life with someone who more or less resembles the person that I started the journey with. Or, at the every least, I'll have a life of comfortable, predictable companionship.

I'll work hard to cultivate the gifts that I've been given, and in return I will receive meaningful, well-remunerated employment that fulfills me and provides me with material security.

I'll generally be a decent human being because what goes around comes around. Goodness is the coin I will put into the slot of the vending machine, and for all of my pragmatic virtue I shall receive goodness in return.

Except we don't always or even *often* get the bargains we seek.

Healthy lives oozing wholesome vitality meet tragic ends just as lives given over to mindless sloth and grinding decay do.

Lives of upright religious piety crash on the shores of inexplicable tragedy, and lives of cynicism and contempt for the holy march cheerily on.

The kid who came from the good home descends into the abyss of addiction and crime, while the one whose parents barely gave her a second thought winds up a super-achiever.

Two people who ventured out into marriages with the best of intentions and all kinds of commitment and desire, drift, inevitably, apart.

Jobs lack fulfillment, gifts go un- or under-fulfilled, and we settle in to lives of dreary monotony.

All the goodness in the world doesn't always result in much of anything good. And yet, despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite all the evidence in our own biographical orbits, we persist in our stubborn insistence that good inputs ought consistently to lead to good outcomes.

I read an article called "[How to Live a Lie](#)" in the *New York Times* this week. It talked about how life is about tricking ourselves into thinking that things like morality, freedom, God are real—that even though we know these things have no objective reality, we need them to be true. We need these things that the writer called "fictionalist accounts" of reality to keep going, to keep upright, to keep sane.

How interesting, I thought, that the things that matter most to us in life are the very things that we must trick ourselves into believing are true.

And how interesting that, once convinced of the merits of these "fictions," lives that are given over to their reality so inconsistently end up the way we think they ought to.

Jesus gives us mixed messages about the whys and the whens and the what-fors of our goodness. "Don't do your good deeds to be seen," he says. Which I take to mean something like, *If your goodness is always dragging along a healthy dose of self-interest behind it, then it's not really very good at all.* But he also says, "Your father

who is in heaven will see your good deeds and reward you.” Which sorta, kinda makes it sound like good inputs lead to good outcomes. So these mixed messages aren’t very helpful, on the whole. Which is it, Jesus? Is all the goodness in the world supposed to be this thing that is detached from our selfish selves or the kind of thing we’re betting eternity on?

Jesus is frustrating sometimes. So many mixed messages. And yet, so often these mixed messages seem to do an end around and lead back to love. Love, love, love. God is love, love is divine, love God, love your neighbor, this is how they will know that you are mine if you love, the greatest of these is love, greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life ...

Etc, etc.

Jesus is always going on about love.

Maybe at least part of the reason that so many Jesus-y roads end up at love is simply because love is not the sort of thing you bargain with. Love, if it is genuine, is not something you can give while holding back and waiting to see what happens. Love is wild and it is wholehearted. It is no insurance policy against pain, no guarantee of happy outcomes. Sometimes, love opens you up to a world of hurt. It can leave you vulnerable, raw and bleeding. It can wring you out and make you sick with longing. No, love is not the sort of thing that is carefully measured out in proportion to its just rewards. That’s not how things work.

A life given over to love might be a truly terrible bet. It might lead to being taken advantage of and stomped on, used up abused, and spit out on the side of the road. Or, it might be the truest fiction we could ever live ourselves into. Truer than all the goodness we could ever imagine bargaining with, truer than all the goodness in the world.

*Originally posted at [Rumblings](#)*