A Path Forward for AI

By

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First Lesson | Proverbs 27:17

Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another.

Second Lesson | Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."

Sermon

Last week, we started a conversation here about Artificial Intelligence. In my sermon that morning, I spoke of the incredible tool AI has become in a relatively short period of time and some of the ways it strengthens life. At the same time, we drew from voices in the church and academia, business, and everyday life in identifying some of the gaps with AI. In particular, we focused on how, despite its human-like qualities, AI is still a machine and thus lacking attributes like compassion, love, generosity, and more that mark the ideals of our existence.

This morning, our focus is on the best path forward for AI, a topic that is being debated in all kinds of settings. While there has been no unanimity on

that matter from the beginning of AI's development, there is some new urgency on the subject recently from voices connected to the industry.

Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft, told a reporter last month that addressing the risks of AI should be the "world's top priority," adding, "In private, people who understand how good this stuff is, and how much better it's getting, they are very worried." Few tech executives were willing to publicly admit that reality, Gates said. "They're now saying to each other: 'Hey, man, don't say that. It's bad for us—the next trillion dollars we're trying to raise." (Weise, Karen, "Bill Gates Warns A.I. is More Dangerous Than Big Tech Will Admit," nytimes.com. 8/26/26).

The awareness of risks rose to public awareness when a 27-year-old researcher named Jacob Coxen resigned his job at Anthropic, a firm founded with the express goal of improving AI safety. Upon setting away on September 9, Coxen said in a social media post, "We're on track for a lot of the most aggressive of these models [toward self-improving machines] where by the end of next year things could be out of control already." Coxen added that "safety tradeoffs are inevitable when companies are competing against one another and Chinese upstarts." (Ramkumar, Amrith "Anthropic AI Researcher Quits: Mathematician leaves industry with warning of existential risks," wsj.com, 9/10/26)

His comments went viral and have led to other voices expressing concern. Three days later, Dario Amodei, the CEO of Anthropic, released a statement calling for a slowdown in the pace of development. Sam Altman, the head of OpenAI, told a group of officials at a recent summit, "I think some things are going to go very wrong with cybersecurity unless people act quite urgently." Elected officials in PA and Washington have begun to debate what regulations, if any, are needed by government. When added to troubling reports of times AI has moved past safeguards, the path forward is the question, both in our world and in this time of worship.

We aren't going to answer that query today. Such expertise is beyond my knowledge, of course, but once again Scripture can help us in this

conversation. To frame the Biblical lessons we read moments ago, let me name the two distinct paths in AI development to this point.

Prior to recent warnings, the general approach in AI enhancement fell into two camps: either a restricted or closed model where developers of AI-based products have to pay for access to the work of others or an open-source approach where developers can freely utilize the same basic code in building their own projects. I'm sure my characterization misses some nuance.

Still, those approaches recall for me how, when the first home computers came onto the market, consumers had to decide if they would purchase an Apple product or a PC. It wasn't a one-time choice, though, as software for one didn't work on the other. The tech companies using the closed approach include OpenAI, Anthropic, and Google. The other mindset reminds me of Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia maintained by volunteers who contribute and edit freely. Among the businesses that represent an open model are Nvidia, Meta, and AT&T.

My non-technical term for that difference is to speak of it as a competitive or cooperative model. Our two Scripture lessons point to that distinction in the life of faith, too.

The lone verse from Proverbs said, "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another." Among the possible interpretations of those words from Solomon is that competition can bring out the best. Other Biblical passages attest to that reality, too. The Apostle Paul, for instance, often used athletic imagery to speak of the life of faith, including the time he wrote to his friend Timothy and said, "I fought the good fight, I finished the race, I have kept the faith."

There is much about my life that values competition. I grew up as the third son in a family of five children and learned early on to eat quickly if I had any hope of seconds. I was an economics major in college with a history minor and came to appreciate how innovation over the centuries has often occurred when firms competed to improve their products and services. On Tuesday, the major league baseball playoffs begin, and while I hope the Phillies are part of it, even if they do,

childhood loyalties ensure my support will be for the host team. There are clear benefits to competition, but our lives and the Biblical narrative reveal it can go too far as well.

The story of the first two sons in Scripture--Cain and Abel—ended badly when, for reasons never explained, the offering of the younger was accepted by God, but not the sacrifice prepared by the eldest. The OT character Joseph openly wore evidence of his father's favoritism, provoking his ten older brothers, who sold him into slavery. Martha complained to Jesus when her sister wasn't helping with the task of preparing a meal for him, only to hear their friend say that Mary had chosen the better path. And then there is the case of James and John.

In most listings of the disciples, those brothers and Peter are listed first, showing the inner circle nature of their leadership. Shared primacy wasn't enough, though, as in our reading James and John take Jesus aside and say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." He does not fall for their trap, so after asking what they want, the men reply, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." They wanted the best seats in eternity. Competition among Christians? Yes, but Jesus tells them that isn't his decision to make.

When the ten learn of their request, they are furious, perhaps because they had not thought of it first. Maybe that moment is the reason that Jesus teasingly referred to James and John as the Sons of Thunder, too, as perhaps those two were frequently stirring the pot. We don't know, but here he tells them that rulers like to lord their authority over others. "It is not to be so among you," Jesus goes on, as "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant." There are many lessons to be drawn from that encounter, too, but for our purposes I offer it as an example of what can go wrong with competition.

So which path is the best one moving forward for AI?

Robert Roberts is a professor of Ethics at Baylor University and, in a book published nearly 30 years ago, recalled a day he observed young children playing a game called the Balloon Stomp. Each student had a balloon tied with a string to their ankle and was informed that the object of the game was to pop the

balloons of others while keeping their own balloon safe.

"The teacher gave the sign," Roberts wrote. "The children leaped ferociously on each other's balloons, doing their best, meanwhile, to protect themselves against the onslaught of others. All that is, except one or two who lack the spirit of competition; they were just dismayed by all the hullabaloo, and their balloons were predictably laid waste. In a few seconds all balloons were burst but one." [A few of the children began to cry]

"Then a troubling thing happened," Roberts went on. "[A special education class of children] was brought in and prepared to play the same game. Balloons were tied to their leg, and they were briefed on the rules of play. I got a sinking feeling in my midsection," Roberts said. "I wanted to spare these kids the pressure of a competitive brawl…After a few moments of confusion, the idea got across to [the students] that the balloons were supposed to be stomped…But as the game got underway, it was clear the kids had missed [an essential detail]. One girl carefully held her balloon in place so that a boy could pop it, and then he did the same for her. When all the balloons were gone, the entire class cheered in unison… In the original game," Roberts concluded, "you wouldn't be likely to learn love, but the play of these children seemed to foster generosity, trust, cooperation, gentleness and concern for one another." (Roberts, Robert "Taking the Word to Heart" Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993)

In my opinion, the best way forward for AI would include those same traits; something more likely to happen if companies, governments, and international agencies work together in finding the best and safest path forward. I may be wrong, and certainly you are free to disagree.

Still the question remains: where is this technology headed? I don't know. I've acknowledged from the outset that I have much to learn about this rapidly changing tool. I'm the same person who, while serving a church in NC three decades ago, learned that a local United Methodist Church was the first one in the region with a website. Upon reading that news in The Charlotte Observer, I thought to myself and probably said to others, "What would a church ever do with a website?' My inability to predict

the future is even more pronounced regarding AI. Yet in pondering the path forward and sharing my thinking, I close with three voices of hope.

Author David Brooks recently said, "Many people think that AI is going to gain consciousness and take over the world, but I've never been among them. That's mostly because I believe the human mind contains depths and complexities that AI and its engineers do not fathom and will never match. As neuroscientist Anil Seth said, 'The more you delve into the intricacies of the biological brain, the more you realize how rich and dynamic it is, compared to the dead sand of silicon.'" (Brooks, David "AI Is Already Making Us Less Human," The Atlantic, 9/6/26)

In a podcast two weeks ago, Jacob Coxon, the former Anthropic staff member who resigned and then expressed his concern, added, "I'm really worried about all those things [but] there is at least time to respond. It's not a game over situation…we have time as a collective to adapt to it and not let anything too bad happen. There's a lot of ways to ensure…everything's still fine." ("The A.I. Researcher Whose Rebellion is Changing Everything," The Daily, 9/14/26)

Lastly, I share a word from our faith tradition.

A document recently approved by the General Assembly of the PC(USA) offered this reminder: "Placing God and God's providential work squarely in the center of a theology of AI means that we are called neither to fear a future of increasingly complex machines nor to express optimism in the capacity of those machines to resolve our present crises and determine our future. Our hope, instead, is that nothing escapes God's providential work and that our responsibility is to discern what God is doing in the world and seek to align ourselves with God's work, using the tools we have created—even when those tools may be freighted with complex questions, deep concerns and enormous potential." (PCUSA, "The Algorithm and the Almighty: Navigating Artificial Intelligence Through a Reformed Lens," August 2026)

To which I would simply add, Amen.