

LIVING GODLY LIVES OF INTEGRITY

Luke 16:1-13

A man lived in a highland village in Scotland. He passed along a story about another man that he didn't care for. At the time, he thought the story to be true. When the story got around the village, it utterly destroyed the man. His family, his job and his integrity were all devastated by the rumor mill. He finally had to leave town – a ruined and defeated man. In time, the fellow who passed the story along discovered that the rumor was false. He had helped to destroy an innocent man with his tongue. He went to his pastor and said, “Pastor, I have destroyed a man with my words,” and he told the whole story. “Please,” he said, “I am sorry – can I be forgiven this sin?” The pastor told the man that this was not so simple and told him to take a bag of feathers and place one in the front yard of every house in the village. Although the fellow thought this to be a strange request for a pastor to make, he really wanted forgiveness, so he followed the instructions to the letter. At last he came back to the pastor and said, “I have done all that you asked, may I now be forgiven?” “Not yet, my son,” the pastor replied. “You must first retrace your steps and bring back to me every feather you placed in the village!” “But – I could never do that the wind has carried the feathers away!” “Yes,” the pastor said, “and in like manner have your careless words destroyed an innocent man!”

Integrity has been defined in the following ways: adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty. In addition, integrity is having values, being consistent with one's values or belief system, not wavering due to outside influences, standing strong in how one should live and believe. Perhaps the easiest definition for us to understand is the following: Integrity is ALWAYS DOING THE RIGHT THING EVEN WHEN YOU KNOW NO ONE ELSE IS LOOKING.

Integrity... an innocent enough word yet one that sums up the very character of a man or woman. Call me what you want, but please don't ever say I lack integrity. A person without integrity, is a person without honor, a person whose life is a big lie, a person who seeks to achieve his or her goal regardless of who may be in their way, a person who is unreliable, a person who cannot be trusted. Like I said: call me anything you want, but please don't ever say I have no integrity.

How interesting it is then, that the very designated “hero” of today's Gospel lesson from Luke is a person who has no integrity whatsoever. This perhaps one of the most confusing of all of Jesus' parables. Why would Jesus make an example for godly living out of such a dirty rotten scoundrel? This parable presents as the model for our faith someone whose life is the complete opposite of everything Christ ever taught. Jesus weaves a story in which the main character is a lazy, conniving, self-centered manager of someone else's treasure. He is out for personal gain – to save his own skin. When we hear this passage, we anticipate that he will get what is coming to him; after all, it is Jesus who is telling this story.

What happens shocks us because instead of being defeated this cheat triumphs. His plan succeeds. His former boss, the one whose estate he mismanaged, now praises him for being ingenious. And, we are left scratching our heads. I have tried to understand this passage for years trying to reconcile Jesus' use of such a dishonest person as a model for His followers to imitate. In my mind, Jesus simply cannot be telling me to follow a man or woman who has not one shred of integrity in his or her whole body! And this is where further study of the text becomes critical to our understanding of the message Jesus is really sending to us.

Verse 8, *“And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”* Dishonest or not, this manager understood how to use what was entrusted to him to serve a larger purpose. It is highly likely that what the steward deducted from the bill was the additional interest that the master had been charging. The master could not lay a charge against the steward without owning up to his own shady business practices.

With the end in mind, the manager redeemed whatever he could about his present situation. He understood that, in order to be where he wanted to be in the future, how he handled today mattered, and counted greatly. Wise old King Solomon wrote in his proverbs: *“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”* (Proverbs 29:18) The parable of the dishonest manager speaks especially to Christian communities who have lost the vision of the big picture: *“Who are the people of God? What have we been called to do?”* When we lose sight of who we are and whose we are, the treasures God entrusts to us are no longer treasures – they are simply ‘things,’ that no longer have any greater value except for my need for them.

Among those in the crowd to whom Jesus addresses are the Pharisees, whom Luke characterizes as “lovers of money” (verse 14). Leaders of the chosen people, keepers of the treasures of God - they were like the dishonest steward. They had lost their vision of who God had called them to be. They had traded their call to be God’s people and had become, instead, servants of the treasures of the present day: the Temple; the treasury; and their present culture. Controlled by wealth, money, even self-righteousness that they were not like “those people – the non-believers,” they had blended into the very society they condemned and lost their vision. Jesus’ response to their attitude? Verse 13: *You can either serve this present age and love its treasures, or you can love God and serve God in this present age. But you cannot do both. One leads to death. The other leads to life.”*

This parable has nothing to do with commending sharp business practices or personal finance. So, exactly what is the message of the parable of the dishonest manager? At first glance, it seems to be an invitation to “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth” (Luke 16:9). But a deeper examination reveals that this story is more about heavenly riches than it is about earthly wealth. Its focus is on preparing for the next world, not getting ahead in this one.

Where are we this morning? Have we lost God’s vision for our churches? Are we guilty of trying to serve both God and wealth, or as the good old King James would say, “God and mammon?” Somewhere along the middle of our journey of faith as the Body of Christ, have we stopped living for Jesus? In some ways, I think we have. In some ways, we stopped living our lives as if we no longer believe that Jesus died for us and was resurrected for us so that our lives would be made brand new. So that we, who claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior would be new creations. Change agents for the world – not preservers of tradition.

Somewhere along this path, it has become easier to serve all those pressing demands: of people, of schedule, of money. Somewhere along the way, the vision for God’s call became cloudy and we stopped hearing God’s voice and joined the crazy “survivor takes all,” mentality. Somewhere along the way, the challenges became overwhelming; so, we huddled. We circled the wagons in an effort to save whatever was left and forgot all about living for something far greater, and we buried our treasures.

When we are acting with Godly Integrity, we begin to exhibit the following characteristics of spiritual maturity:

Strength and courage: we are not easily swayed by others' opinions and are confident in our own relationship with God.

Kind and generous: we begin looking out more for the needs of others than our own, freely giving whatever, we have to give.

Aware of your own weaknesses: we become conscious of our own humanity and are now willing to allow God and others to bring correction when needed.

Flexible emotionally: we are able to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, able to express all human emotions when appropriate.

Response to trouble: we respond with honesty, willing to bring the big questions to God Himself, and to accept help from others.

Live with integrity: you do what you say and say what you do, without any hidden agenda.

We all have a lot of growing to do. It's only God's grace that makes it possible. And because of God's grace we abandon the practices of the dishonest steward. If you're not there yet, don't quit. Just determine to allow God to continue to grow you. Or as we heard last week...allow the Hound of Heaven to catch you and work in your life.

The Church universal must reclaim God's vision and that can only happen when we get our plans, our personal agendas, our view of who we are out of the way and let God take complete control. And this means... acting in obedience to all God commands. The late theologian R.C. Sproul said the following:

“We do not segment our lives, giving some time to God, some to our business or schooling, while keeping parts to ourselves. The idea is to live all of our lives in the presence of God, under the authority of God and for the honor and glory of God. That is what the Christian life is all about.”

One final thought from Tony Campolo. “While teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, I became good friends with a young Jewish student who eventually made a commitment to Christ. As I tried to mentor him and give him direction as to how to live the Christian life, I advised him to go to a particular church that was well known for its biblically based preaching, to help him get a better handle on what the Bible is all about.

When I met my friend several weeks later, he said to me, “You know, if you put together a committee and asked them to take the Beatitudes and create a religion that contradicted every one of them, you would come pretty close to what I am hearing down there at that church. Whereas Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor,” down there they make it clear that it is the rich who are blessed.

“Jesus said, “Blessed are they that mourn,’ but the people at that church have a religion that promises happiness with no crucifixions.

“Whereas Jesus talked about the meek being blessed, they talk as if they took assertiveness training course. Jesus may have talked about the merciful and peacemakers, but those people are the most enthusiastic supporters of American militarism and capital punishment I have ever met.

“Jesus may have lifted up those who endured persecution because they dared to embrace a radical gospel, but that church declares a gospel that espouses middle-class success and affirms a lifestyle marked by social prestige.”

As I listened to my friends accusing words about the church, I realized that it could just as well be aimed at me. Since that conversation, I have spent a lot of time reflecting on whether or not my lifestyle is truly Christian.

Where do you find yourselves this morning? Both the gospel lesson from Luke and these words from Tony are indeed worth pondering.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.