

Sermon 22 September 2019 Honesty

Luke 16:1-13

It is difficult to know where to start with this passage and there are a variety of opinions as to just what it means. At first glance, it appears to be an affirmation of someone who is something of a rogue. *'The rich man had to admire the dishonest rascal for being so shrewd.'* Verse 8. The first point to make is that this is a parable, not a discourse on how we should manage money.

Interestingly, how we deal with money says a lot about the sort of people we are. Are we generous or a little stingy? Are we frugal and sensible or extravagant? Are we honest or perhaps a tad untrustworthy?

There is the story of a modern biographer who explained why he was adding yet another biography to the many biographies written about the Duke of Wellington. He said, 'I had an advantage over earlier biographers. I found an old account ledger that showed how the Duke spent his money. It was a far better clue to what he thought was important than the reading of his letters or speeches.'

So this passage has a comment to make about our priorities. Do we focus on the material things of life or do we invest time and energy in our spiritual life? How many of us can put our hands on our heart and say that we spend as much time in prayer and reading the Bible as we do following sport, watching TV, gardening or other pursuits, reading a good book? Not that the Bible isn't a good book, but you know what I mean.

I can safely say this, if we did, then our lives would undoubtedly be more harmonious and more productive.

Verse 9 (*'Use your worldly resources to benefit others....your generosity stores up a reward for you in heaven.'*) has a distinct echo of what Jesus says in Matthew 6:19-21. *'Don't store up treasures here on earth....Store your treasures in heaven... Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be.'*

We have talked about investing in our spiritual life. These verses make the point very clearly that focusing on the spiritual rather than the material is undoubtedly an investment in the divine. Again, what are our priorities? Let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time, there was a wealthy lord who lived in the Scottish highlands. He was more than richly endowed with this world's goods. But there was a basic emptiness in his life. He had no religious belief, he lived alone and was certainly not prone to charitable sharing of his wealth.

Living at the entrance to his estate in small cottage was John, his herdsman. John was a man of simple faith and deep religious commitment, a regular church-goer. One morning the lord was gazing over his estate, feeling very proud of all that he owned. The doorbell rang. It was John, his herdsman.

'What's the matter, John? Is everything alright with the animals?' John looked a little embarrassed. 'Yes, sir. The animals are fine. It's just that I had a dream last night and I really felt I needed to share it with you.' 'Do go on,' said the Lord. 'Well, you see, I dreamt that the richest man in the valley would die tonight, and I just could not tell you.'

'Tut, tut,' said the lord, 'I don't believe in dreams. Go back to your work and forget about it.' John still looked uneasy but took his leave. The lord found it difficult to get John's words out of his head and finally got into his car and drove to the local doctor for a check-up. The doctor examined him, pronounced him as fit as a fiddle and assured him he had many years to live.

Much relieved, the lord returned home. That night, having enjoyed a sumptuous meal, he retired to bed. He was on the verge of going to sleep at about midnight when he heard the doorbell ring. Going downstairs, he opened the door to find a grief-stricken girl standing there. He recognised her as John's teenage daughter. 'Sir,' she said in a shaking voice, 'Mummy sent me to tell you that Daddy has just died.'

The lord froze. It was suddenly very clear to him just who was the richest man in the valley.'

Finally, there is a very clear message about honesty. I quote from verses 10 and 12. *'Unless you are faithful in small matters, you won't be faithful in large ones. If you cheat a little, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are not faithful with other people's money, why should you be trusted with money of your own?'* I think honesty has got to be the most important value in terms of determining and defining character. There is a proverb that says, *'The first step towards greatness is to be honest.'* Life is all about relationships, and if you don't have trust, you don't have a relationship. What lies at the heart of trust? Purely and simply honesty. It is one of the most important things we can drum into our children. If we learn honesty at a very young age, it should remain with us through into adult life.

William Shakespeare said, *'No legacy is so rich as honesty.'* It is so true, and the point that is made in this passage is that it all begins with the small things. A little lie is a reflection of a larger malaise. Dishonesty is dishonesty is dishonesty, no matter the scale or gravity. You

might remember the story I told in a newsletter last year.

The local vicar saw a group of boys sitting in a circle with a small dog in the middle. He asked them what they were doing. One boy said, 'We're just telling lies, and the one who tells the biggest one gets to keep the dog.' The vicar said, 'Shame on you. When I was a boy, I never even thought of telling a lie.' The boy said, 'Give him the dog. He's the winner!'

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