

March 19, 2023

The Gospel of Luke
LV. Faithful in Little, Faithful in Much
Luke 16:10-18

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

Jesus began back at the start of chapter 15 with this very long series of teachings which continue on this morning in our reading from Luke 16. Back at the start, in the three parables of Luke 15 – the often named “Gospel within the Gospel” – we learned of the extraordinary grace of our God towards us. We learned that like a shepherd searching until he has found his lost sheep; like a woman searching until she has found her lost coin; and like a father searching until he has found his two lost sons – so our God is actively searching for us, to find us and to show mercy to us and to reconcile us to Himself forever. Not to punish, but to forgive. Not to condemn, but to make us whole again. Grace. Amazing grace.

And then, last week, with the start of Luke 16, Jesus told us the parable of the dishonest manager to show us how to respond to His pursuing grace. That the single shrewdest, smartest thing we can do in these lives of ours is to bet it all on His grace. Bet it all, not on what we possess, but upon the grace He longs to give to us. Bet it all, not on our own accomplishments, but upon what He has done for us in the cross of Jesus. Bet it all, our very lives – bet it all on the grace which we find in the heart of our God, as expressed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Savior.

And now, this morning, Jesus speaks to us in a series of small teachings that seem, at first hearing, to be not only disconnected from everything He has said so far in Luke 15 & 16, but also disconnected from one another. We leap quickly from money and mammon to the Law and the Prophets to marriage and divorce. But these three teachings are indeed connected to all that Jesus has said so far in chapters 15 & 16. If last week Jesus told us to bet it all (chap. 16) on God’s grace (chap. 15) – then this week He is helping us to understand a little bit better what that means – what it looks like in practice. And these three sayings are also closely connected to one another – for each one, in its own way, centers upon the theme of faithfulness. That, in response to God’s grace (Luke 15), we are to bet our whole lives upon His grace (Luke 16) – and, specifically, what this looks like in practice is to allow the faithfulness of God towards us create in us an answering practice of faithfulness in our daily living – faithfulness towards God and towards one another.

In fact, the moral of all three sayings is summed up by what Jesus says at the very start of our reading: *“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and the one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.”* In response to God’s grace, we are to bet our very lives upon that grace. And, to bet our lives upon that grace of God means not only to accept it (Justification), but also to put that grace into practice in our daily living (Sanctification). We

honor the faithfulness of God towards us by practicing faithfulness in the ordinary stuff of our daily living – and so building up muscles of faithfulness which will enable us to prove faithful to God’s grace in the bigger moments and issues of our lives. In fact, each of these three sayings moves along these lines – here is a little thing to practice faithfulness on, which will then open the door to being able to practice faithfulness in reference to this bigger thing of God.

So, little thing number one – money. Right away Jesus is challenging us – for, to us, money is never a little thing. Whether we have it or not, money to us is a big thing. So, before we even hear what He has to say about faithfulness with our money in response to God’s grace, Jesus is already dethroning money from its idolatrous status in our culture. Money is a little thing, says Jesus. And says Jesus: *“If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth [the little thing], who will entrust to you the true riches? [the big things of God]”* If we can’t prove faithful in the way we handle our money before God, then we won’t be able to receive the true riches that enter our lives through His grace – love, peace, joy, etc., all those riches of the Spirit. Remember, for example, when Jesus approaches Levi the tax collector, sitting at his counting table, piling up the coins by cheating his own people on behalf of Rome? Jesus says to Levi, *“Come, follow me.”* Which means, “Levi, is this really what you want from life – this piling up of coins until you die? Come, follow me – and I will make you rich in the things which really make for a life worth living. And it ain’t money.”¹

“If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” So, what does it mean, then, to be faithful with our money, in response to God’s gift to us of grace? It means, first and as we have said, to dethrone money and its power over our hearts and aspirations. *“You cannot serve God and money,”* says Jesus. We can only have one master. But not just to dethrone money; also we are to use our money in Kingdom ways – the ways God tells us to use it. We are, for example, to tithe ten percent of our income to God – straight off the top, first-fruits giving. And if we cannot tithe, we ought at least to be seeking to move closer toward that ten percent goal each year. I heard a Baptist preacher complaining that his people kept asking him whether they had to tithe on their gross income or only on their net income. To him, it was as if they were asking him what’s the least they could give without upsetting God. I held my tongue because I didn’t want to have to confess to him that I couldn’t remember the last time a Presbyterian had asked me about tithing!

But what tithing does – this faithfulness in the little thing of our money – is establish in us practices of faithfulness in our attitudes toward money which will carry over into all the other ways we use our money. Not to mention that tithing loosens the death grip we tend to keep upon our money (or is it the death grip our money keeps upon us?!) well enough for us to room in our hands and in our hearts for that greater gift God can give to us when we prove faithful in our giving to Him:

Mammon says, “Worry about your wealth, hover over the investment portfolio . . .” [Jesus] says, “Loosen your grip. Let go of it all, and get in step behind me.”

Mammon says, “Keep what you can to maintain your life. Grip it tight and don’t let it go.” [Jesus] says, “I will keep you.”

*Mammon says, "Do not rest for a minute. Keep looking over your shoulder." [Jesus] says, "I brought you out of slavery. I have set you free."*²

So, with regard to our money: *"One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much."*

Little faithfulness leading to big faithfulness number two: the way we attend to the daily and weekly practices of our faith. The scribes and the Pharisees were not only lovers of money, but also lovers of obedience to the Law, down to the last jot and tittle. Jesus commends their daily faithfulness to the Law, but says to them that their daily religious practices, however faithful on the surface, are in fact only pulling them farther and father away from the true purpose of the Law – which is to turn their hearts deeper and daily more faithfully towards the One who gives the Law, and the Gospel for which Christ has come.

In other words, while externally they are very faithful in coming to church weekly, participating in Sunday School, studying their Bible at home, maintaining an active prayer life, and so on – the baseline of ordinary acts of daily and weekly faithfulness to God – nonetheless, says Jesus, it's all superficial. They are faithfully doing all those things, but in a self-serving, self-righteous manner. They are doing it to build themselves up in the eyes of others, and not to let God rebuild them in His own image and likeness. As Jesus Himself said, quoting the prophet: they are a people who honor God with their lips while their hearts are far from Him. Real faithfulness in our daily and weekly practices of faith before God builds up in us a greater faithfulness towards God Himself, as well as in all the other areas of our daily living.

So what about us? To begin with, are we at least as faithful in our daily and weekly habits of devotion to God as the scribes and Pharisees? I mean, that is the bare minimum, according to Jesus. And there simply is no excuse, in Jesus' eyes, for treating our daily and weekly religious practices as optional or occasional. Because faithfulness in the daily and weekly practices of God's grace is how we build up the greater faithfulness of our hearts being reborn, and our lives being re-formed, in the image of God's own great heart for us.

Here's an example, from something I was reading just the other day. Just over sixty years have passed since six-year-old Ruby Bridges walked into the William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. Ruby was black. All the other students were white. Her daily walk into that school, guarded by federal marshals, surrounded by a hostile and angry mob, was later immortalized in Norman Rockwell's famous painting, *The Problem We All Live With*. This is the story: Robert Coles, at that time a prominent psychiatrist who was studying children in the desegregating south of the 1960's, took an interest in Ruby – especially after one of Ruby's teachers mentioned to him that she had noticed Ruby moving her lips as she was walking into school through that hostile crowd. So Coles asked her, *"Who were you talking to, Ruby?"* She answered, *"I was talking to God and praying for the people in the street."* Six-year-old girl.

"Why were you doing that, Ruby?" "Well, because I wanted to pray for them. Don't you think they need praying for?" Coles responded affirmatively but pushed further. "Where did you learn

that?” “From my mommy and daddy and from the minister at church. I pray every morning [when I come to school] and every afternoon when I go home.” Coles continues, “But Ruby, those people are so mean to you. You must have some other feelings besides just wanting to pray for them.” “No,” she said, “I just keep praying for them and hope God will be good to them . . . I always pray the same thing, ‘Please, dear God, forgive them, because they don’t know what they’re doing.’”³

So where did that sort of faithfulness, that sort of heart after God’s own heart faithfulness come from in six-year-old Ruby? Turns out, it came from out of a family that prayed and recited Scripture together at home every day. Out of a family and a church family which gathered every Sunday without fail to worship God, and to learn of God’s ways, and to be blessed and healed and reshaped by God according to His faithfulness and mercy. That beautiful, six-year-old, heart after God’s own heart faithfulness was born out of her family’s faithful commitment to the daily and weekly practices of faith – pursued from out of a simple desire to see God more clearly, to love God more dearly, to follow God more nearly, day by day. Sunday by Sunday, Monday by Monday. Do we not want that heart after God’s own heart beauty of faithfulness for ourselves, and for our children, and for our children’s children? Well then, when it comes to the daily and weekly practices of our faith: *“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.”*

Last little faithfulness leading to the big faithfulness by which we answer the gift of God’s grace: *“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”* Whew! That’s a rough one, isn’t? But that is not the only thing the Bible says about divorce and remarriage – and, since I don’t have time to preach a whole sermon about the Bible and divorce here at the end of this sermon I’m already preaching, let me just say this so we can get to the real issue in Jesus’ words. The bigger picture is this: divorce is never what God wants for our marriages – but His grace, that same grace outlined for us in the parables of Luke 15, can find us even in the midst of all the pain of divorce and forgive us, heal us, even enable us to love again in the future in a new marriage. That’s the short version.

But let’s hear what Jesus is really getting at with these words. The little faithfulness in our marriages leading to the big faithfulness before God is the way we learn to live out love daily in our relationship as husband and wife. And we can extend that out to all of our relationships: parents and children, family and friends, colleagues and strangers. Practicing faithfulness in our daily relationships with one another builds up in us the head and heart muscles needed to live more faithfully day by day in our relationship with God. Marriage, in fact, Biblically speaking, is a school of discipleship, in which we learn (or not) how to love another in all circumstances – in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live. And the same is so, in varying degrees, with all our human relationships – a school of love, through which we learn how to be faithful in our love for one another, leading to greater faithfulness in the love we live in our relationship with God. The growing capacity for faithfulness in our love for one another becomes a growing capacity for faithfulness in our love for God, in response to God’s ever-faithful love towards us.

I love the way Chris Erdman, a contemporary Christian writer on marriage, comes at this same truth from a slightly different angle, and with a somewhat different image:

*A stream polishes and rounds rough stones, but it takes years, years of tumbling and bouncing and buffeting by the current. In the end, all the rough, sharp edges are smoothed. No stone's left unturned, untouched, unchanged, no matter its size. Over the course of time, the river transforms the rock. So with marriage. I know of no better way for God to break our selfishness, pride, and independence than through marriage. Marriage polishes us.*⁴

So, faithfulness in all our daily dealings as husband and wife, children and parents, church and family and friends and neighbors builds in us that greater faithfulness of being able to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength – which is nothing less than the power of God's own love finding a place to reside in our hearts.

Or, as Jesus puts it: *“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.”* This is what it means to bet our lives on God's grace – it means to build our lives daily upon God's grace, in response to God's daily giving of grace. Or, as one theologian sums all this up: *“To the extent that we are turned toward [God], like a sunflower [turning to track the rays of the Sun], we receive the rays of goodness and life . . . [and so] we will have being, life, and goodness to the fullest extent possible for a creature.”*⁵ Betting our lives upon God's grace, and building our daily lives upon God's grace – this is the path to everything that really matters.

¹ Luke 5:27-28.

² William G. Carter, “Marvelous Mammon,” in *Speaking of Stewardship* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998), p. 84.

³ Peter W. Marty, “A child leads,” *Christian Century*, Vol. 134, No. 7 (March 29, 2017), p. 3.

⁴ Chris William Erdman, *Beyond Chaos* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 81.

⁵ Michael Horton, “When We Become Beautiful,” *Modern Reformation*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (March/April 2023), p. 39.