

## *Faithful in a Very Little* – Luke 16:1-13

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In this text, the parable of the dishonest manager, we find a complicated story, frankly. It's hard to get your head around it because there seems to be more than one theme.

The rich man had a manager who behaved unscrupulously. Yet, the rich man seems to commend him for being shrewd, cutting deals with the rich man's debtors as a way to make a path forward for himself in light of his squandering of the rich man's property. So, there's a lesson here about how even people of faith need to be at least a bit shrewd in their dealings with the world.

There's also the final and simple proclamation Jesus makes at the end: You cannot serve God and wealth. So the easy thing to do this morning would be to just focus on that simple statement. It's straightforward...and who doesn't love another sermon about what to do with your money?!

I'll spare you that, however, today.

Instead, there's a phrase near the end of the text that Jesus utters that's going to be the focus of our attention today.

Before we get to that, though, have you ever heard somebody swear off church because of all the hypocrites they claim are within the church's bounds? It's not uncommon if you have heard that.

It's maybe the single biggest reason people say they don't go to church. In fact, according to *UnChristian*, a book based on surveys done by the Barna Research Group, among people with no religious affiliation in the 16- to 29-year-old bracket, 85 percent say one reason they don't go to church is because Christians are hypocritical.

Someone has suggested the best response might be, "There's always room for one more." That probably won't change anyone's mind, but, of course, there's a kind of truth to what they're claiming. If you're looking for a group of people who *always* live up to their highest values and who *never* say one thing and do another, you'll need to look elsewhere —

though we doubt you'll find a group of any sort totally free of inconsistency anywhere on the planet.

There are a few people who are intentionally hypocritical in their behavior, I would suppose. These are the people Jesus warned about, the ones who are playacting—intentionally trying to be somebody at church who differs from their lives outside of a faith community.

When we church people admit to being hypocrites, though, we aren't usually confessing to playacting. More often, we mean that we failed to follow through on our good intentions or that we can still see the gap between the people we feel called to be and the people we actually are. But we aren't trying to deceive anybody; we're seeing where we still need to work to bring our behavior up to the level of what we really believe.

Thus, one good reason to come to church is because it puts us in company with other people who also see that gap between their profession and practice, *and care enough to want to narrow it*. In church, we find people who aren't that different from ourselves and who are on faith journeys similar to ours.

We can't call the dishonest manager a hypocrite because he isn't playacting at anything, and he doesn't appear worried that he isn't living up to a call from God. He's simply looking out for his own hide, and he's quite straightforward about it. Still, his employer, whom the manager is cheating out of expected income, can't help but be impressed by the manager's resourcefulness. We can imagine the employer speaking to a friend about the incident, saying, "That guy cost me a bundle, but you've got to hand it to him for his shrewdness. If only he'd put that kind of effort into the work I hired him for." Yes, we can admire his cleverness, but we don't go to church hoping to find people like him as Christian models.

As Jesus draws out the implications of that parable, he says, "[W]hoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much." Clear enough. That fits the manager in the parable, so part of the point is "Don't be like him." But Jesus also states the application positively: "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much," and in those words is the description of most of the people we actually meet in church — people who are working hard at being consistent in their approach to both minor

and major matters. Sure, even the most sincere Christians don't always hit that mark. Nonetheless, it is good for our souls to be among people who keep striving to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Our focus then need not be the grand totality of our faithfulness. Instead, as Jesus said, being faithful in just a little will lead to grander things.

Speaking of little things, a pastor once told this story:

"I stopped at the local library one day to pick up a book I wanted. Afterward, as I was driving out of the parking lot, a filthy, scraggly man in ragged clothes pushing a shopping cart filled with what looked to be nothing but junk shambled across the lot exit. As I waited for him to complete his passage, the front wheels of his cart caught on a crack in the pavement and tipped over. I heard some glass shatter as the contents spilled out. This mishap occurred right in the middle of the exit, so there was no way I could get out of the lot until the man picked up his stuff and moved on. But clearly, that wasn't going to happen quickly because he seemed to be in a kind of daze and was moving as if he didn't quite know what to do. So I sat there in my car, drumming my fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, getting more annoyed by the second.

"Just then, however, the young woman who was in a car behind me got out and walked past my car to where the man was. In sharp contrast to him, she was nicely dressed, well-groomed and appeared to be in full command of her faculties. I wasn't close enough to tell, but I was pretty certain she smelled a whole lot better than he did, too.

"As I watched, she bent down and began helping this poor man put his items back into his cart, and she continued until everything was loaded. She then helped him get his cart past the crack in the pavement, and he resumed his shuffle down the street.

"I have to tell you that never in my life have I felt more like the Levite *and* the priest who passed by on the other side while the good Samaritan, in the form of this young woman, helped the downtrodden guy at the roadside. And here's the irony: The book I had come to the library to get was one I wanted to consult for a *sermon* I was working on. But in that parking lot, I saw a much better sermon played out in front of me."

We don't know if that young woman was a church person. But anyone seeing her being "faithful in a very little" could reasonably conclude she's someone who can be trusted to be "faithful also in much."

I know that when I come to church—on any day—I'm going to find people like this woman in the story. All of you do little things of faith. I see it in your giving, in your loving embrace of others who share or may not share similar likes, dislikes, or opinions on many matters, and in the kindness you show to strangers.

And for those who resist getting involved in church because they claim we are so hypocritical, well, it's not because of intent. We who are faithful in a little are trying to close the gap between where we are and where we want to be.

Here are three anecdotes that are examples of being "faithful in a little."

Leaving a store, I returned to my car only to find that I'd locked my keys and cell phone inside. A teenager riding his bike saw me kick a tire and say a few choice words. "What's wrong?" he asked. I explained my situation. "But even if I could call my wife," I said, "she can't bring me her car key, since this is our only car." He handed me his cell phone. "Call your wife and tell her I'm coming to get her key." "That's seven miles round trip." "Don't worry about it." An hour later, he returned with my key. I offered him some money, but he refused. "Let's just say I needed the exercise," he said. Then, like a cowboy in the movies, he rode off into the sunset. —*Clarence W. Stephens, Nicholasville, Kentucky*

A woman at our yard sale wore a perfume that smelled heavenly and familiar. "What are you wearing?" I asked. "White Shoulders," she said. Suddenly I was bowled over by a flood of memories. White Shoulders was the one gift I could count on at Christmas from my late mother. We chatted a while, and she bought some things and left. A few hours later, she returned holding a new bottle of White Shoulders. I don't recall which one of us started crying first. —*Media Stooksbury, Powell, Tennessee*

Children were playing at the recreation area of an IKEA store when my five-year-old granddaughter motioned for a small boy to stop. She knelt down before him and retied his flopping shoelaces—she had only just

learned to tie her own. No words were spoken, but after she finished, both smiled shyly, then turned to race off in different directions. — *Sheela Mayes, Olla, Louisiana.*

One who is faithful in a little can grow to be faithful in much. We're not perfect; we fail more than once in a while. But there's enough faith in us to believe it will grow into something we really want it to become. Our hearts are in the right place. We can't serve two masters; Jesus was right. But we're on our way to serving the right one.

Back in 1889, John Hunter, a Scottish Congregational pastor, penned a few lines about the gap between the Christian profession and practice, which he later published as a hymn. What's encouraging about his treatment of the subject, however, is that it isn't about a guilt trip but about continuing to follow the light of Jesus. His hymn is "Dear Jesus, in Whose Life I See":

*Dear Jesus, in whose life I see  
all that I would, but fail to be,  
let thy clear light forever shine,  
to shame and guide this life of mine.*

*Though what I dream and what I do  
in all my weak days are always two,  
help me, oppressed by things undone,  
O thou whose deeds and dreams were one!*

That's what Jesus does for us, and we come to church to keep our eyes on that light. But in church, we also find people much like ourselves, in whom we see glimmers of that light as we work together at being faithful in things both small and great. Sometimes the light of Jesus shows so strongly through their actions that it both shames and guides us.

Being faithful in a little can lead us to being faithful in much.