

SERMON: The Best Policy

TEXT: Luke 16:1-13

Here is a true story about an eleven-year-old boy who was fishing for sunfish and perch with his father the night before the bass opener. Tired of fishing with worms, the boy tied on a small silver lure so he could practice casting. On one of the boy's casts, something huge doubled over his pole. With help from his father, the boy brought up the largest fish he had ever seen. It was a bass. The father looked at his watch. It was just two hours until bass season opened. The boy pleaded to keep the trophy fish. "Nobody will know!" he reasoned. But his father insisted that the fish be put back into the water.

On the one hand you might be thinking, "Poor kid. Catching a fish like that doesn't happen every day. It was awfully strict of his father to be splitting hairs like that. Two hours – they were so close to the opening – what difference would two hours make?"

On the other hand – two hours or two minutes – how close or how far is not the point. The point is whether or not they were willing to break the rules when no one was looking.

These are the two ends of the spectrum: the idea that *rules were made to be broken*, and the idea that *honesty is the best policy*. Oh, and let's not forget, *it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission*. Of course, today the whole problem could be solved by taking a quick photo with a cell phone and then throwing the fish back in the water. However, before cell phones, what would that boy have learned from **you** that day?

Perhaps the more important question is, what did Jesus teach us about this? For the answer, let's consider our gospel lesson for today, known as the parable of the dishonest manager or the dishonest steward. A steward is someone who is hired to take care of someone else's money or property. But the steward in this parable hasn't done his job well. Instead of taking care of his boss' property, he has squandered it, wasted it. Soon, the boss finds out, and he fires the manager.

Quite understandably, the manager is now concerned about his future. How will he make his living? After sitting at a desk all his life, he's in no shape to do any sort of manual labor. He's too proud to beg on a street corner, or to go to work at McDonald's. And he knows he'll never get an accounting job again. So he comes up with a plan.

He calls in all those who owe debts to his boss, and he proposes to give them a discount if they can pay right away. Instead of one hundred jugs of oil owed, he fixes the bill to read “fifty.” Instead of one hundred bushels of wheat, he says, “make it eighty.” Sounds like a good deal for everybody: the boss looks like a good guy to his clients, the debtors have gotten off easy, and the manager has made friends with all of them – friends who might take care of him in his unemployment.

Clearly, the manager has cheated. He’s been dishonest. But now everybody’s happy – so what difference does it make? Doesn’t the end justify the means?

Jesus’ answer is “no.” It does not matter if everything turns out all right in the end. Jesus says, “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?”

Now, I tend to get distracted with the part about dishonest wealth. In a Bible Study a few years ago, I got on my soapbox about what a sinful amount of money many athletes and entertainers make. I'd recently heard a football announcer comment that some player in the NFL was *worth every penny* of the 67 million dollar contract he had. Well, in my opinion, no human being on God's green earth is "worth" 67 million dollars! It makes me ill when any one individual makes that much money when we've got so many problems in our country that could be solved with just a fraction of that amount!

Giving more thought to the parable, however, I realized that it's really not about how rich or how poor we are. It's about whether we are honest and responsible in how we use our money. It's easy for me to point my finger and shame the multi-millionaires, but I probably should look at my own spending as well. Do I really *need* all the stuff I have? Maybe if I were more faithful with my small bank account, I could do more to help others less fortunate. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much."

According to Jesus, honesty is THE BEST POLICY. The world certainly doesn't always work that way, and there are times when we are punished rather than rewarded for our honesty.

When this happens, we are tempted to think that lying is a better choice. But while lying might delay the punishment for the moment, it is never a good long-term strategy.

When my children were growing up, we used to enjoy watching Veggie Tales together. These were Bible Stories and moral character lessons done by animated vegetables. I know it sounds strange, but they were very well done and very popular in the 1990's with both children and adults.

One Veggie Tales story was called "The Big Fib." The fib was a very small monster-like creature from outer space. One day, Junior Asparagus was playing with a friend and accidentally broke one of his father's prized possessions. Just at that moment when panic was setting in, the fib appeared and encouraged Junior to make up a story about what happened so he wouldn't get into trouble. Junior Asparagus took the fib's advice, blaming

his friend, Laura, for breaking the item. But Laura found out and confronted Junior. So, Junior told another lie and blamed it on someone else. With every lie, the fib monster grew larger and larger, until it took Junior captive and threatened to destroy him. The only thing that saved Junior was his confession of the truth. As the truth was revealed, the fib shrunk down to nothing, and Junior was set free.

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.”

It seems awfully basic, doesn't it? We all learned these lessons a long time ago, and we share them for our children and grandchildren to learn. On the other hand, adults need to be reminded, too. We are living in a world where truth is hard to come by. Dishonesty – as long as it shows loyalty – seems to be the accepted practice.

We have forgotten also, the other lesson this parable teaches; that whether we are rich or poor, nothing that we have belongs to us. Let me say that again. **NOTHING** that we have belongs to us. I know you may want to

stop me right here. “Wait a second, I worked hard to get where I am, and I earned everything I have.”

But every Sunday we take up an offering. And you may think that offering is to fund the church budget, so that our building stays warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and so that we can pay for all the other things that keep the church operating.

Or, you may realize that our offering is an expression of charity, to remember that God wants us to be generous in serving others less fortunate than we.

But the offering is also an act of worship, an opportunity to affirm our belief that all we have is a gift from God. The offering is a ritual symbolizing our devotion to God by returning a portion of that which God has generously given to us.

The offering reminds us that we are not owners, but simply stewards of God’s creation. We are the managers of God’s property. And we are called to use all our resources in ways that would be pleasing to God. In

return, we trust that God will care for us and provide for our needs. If we have been given a lot, we're asked to share what we have with others who don't have as much. If we've only been given a little, we must be careful not to squander it on things we don't need.

Being good stewards and good managers of God's riches means being *honest with ourselves* that our lives are not our own. If the *truth* be told, we belong to God, and we are to follow God's will in ALL that we do – in our work and in our play, in our words and in our deeds, even in the way we spend our money, our time, and our talents.

May we always remember that all our best policies begin and end with glory to God!

AMEN.