

Message: “Great Gifts, Great Responsibility”

There are moments when we hear things that have the power to change lives. Sometimes the statements are positive. Here are a few examples. See if you know who said this?

- “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind”
Neil Armstrong
- “You must be the change you wish to see in the world”
Mahatma Ghandi
- “Life is what happens when you’re busy making other plans”
John Lennon

Sometimes the statements we hear are negative.

See if you know who said this?

- “He that falls in love with himself will have no rivals”
Benjamin Franklin
- “My job is not to be easy on people. My job is to make them better”
Steve Jobs
- “Make the lie big, make it simple, keep saying it, and eventually they will believe it” Adolf Hitler

We all have the opportunity to encourage or discourage other people every day. And we’ve all heard life-giving and life-draining statements, encouraging or discouraging us. Two of the saddest statements I’ve ever heard from people are:

- “I wish I could have gotten over the pornography thing”
(A 75 year old man with a terminal illness)
- “I would rather die than quit drinking” (many people)

We may have heard or said similar statements. They stick with us. I believe that’s what a curse is. It’s something that sticks with us, a lie that we can’t shake. And so we give it power by our passive inaction. We’re like a person who has fallen and prefers to remain laying on the ground, rather than getting up and walking on our own.

There’s hope. We push back against the negative when we turn to Jesus. Rather than thinking we know best, we turn to God for answers. We spend time in Scripture, learning how other people experienced God in their lives. We spend time learning how other Christians and

Methodists think through classes, online and by asking questions. We're part of small groups, where we learn from other people, especially when we care for people outside the church. All of this equips us to make our own, healthy choices about life.

We can choose to turn to God and live as a member of the family.

Or, we can choose to turn away from God and live like someone who struggles to manage what they have, barely keeping up.

God gives us great gifts. With those gifts comes responsibility.

While that's a famous movie quote, its origin is in today's Scripture.

How we choose to use God's gifts is up to us.

Our Scripture, Luke 16:1-13, is difficult to understand. I have struggled with it for years and still do. The reason is verses 8-9. The owner praises the dishonest manager for being clever right after firing them (v8). In effect, the owner praises someone for stealing from them. Jesus then appears to say they will be welcomed into eternal tents (v9).

What's up with that? Is there really a reward for being bad?

As I reflected, I was struck by what Jesus said before and after this parable. Context is important. It gave me a few insights that I find helpful and may help you in your reflection and choices.

So I offer you the Tale of Two Households.

Right before telling the parable of the shrewd manager, Jesus tells one of his most famous stories, the parable of the prodigal child.

Are you familiar with it? *[pause]* I'll read it to jog our memory. *[read]*

We only have time to compare a few elements of the stories. So let's briefly look at three aspects: the problem, their response and the impact of what they did. Let's start with the problem.

What's wrong? Both of the stories appear to be about mismanaging money, though I don't believe that's really what's at stake. By the time we get to the end of this message, I think you'll see that as well.

The prodigal child asked for an early inheritance and then wasted it.

They were left broke with no means to live. They ended up taking the worst job, but it didn't even come with room and board. They were on the street, starving and scared.

The dishonest manager was taking advantage of the owner. The owner called them in for a review of the books and then fired them. This scared the person as they couldn't do manual labor and they were too proud to beg. The job of house manager included room and board. They're hoping for that.

Have you ever gotten yourself into a scary situation and you didn't know how to get out of it? If you've lost a job, had a major illness, lost your car or home, or been without, you know how both of these people are feeling. I know I do. I wasn't sure what was going to happen next. When our money, gifts and network of friends runs dry, what can we do? That leads us to their response because something happens.

What changes? Both people come to a realization and they make a choice. That choice changes their lives.

The prodigal child realizes they made a mistake. Even the workers at home had room and board. More important, the person realizes they broke their relationship with God and with their family. They decide to change, go home, ask for forgiveness and ask for a job.

The dishonest manager also realizes they need to take action. A big difference in this case is that the person doesn't see themselves as part of the household. They view their relationships as transactions, e.g. "what you do for me, I'll do for you and vice versa." They don't intend to ask for forgiveness or to change. In fact, the manager takes one, final, unethical set of actions to gain favor with local business people. We call it having "street smarts" – there's always an angle to work.

What do you do when you have an "ah ha" moment? You realize you made a mistake with life-altering consequences.

You have a choice. You can continue on the way you always have, hoping things will turn out in the long run. But the most dangerous lies are the ones we tell ourselves. Or you can realize that you have neglected God and family. You need forgiveness. You can decide to change and do so with humility. Whatever you decide, there will be consequences.

What's the impact? The lives of those involved are changed.

The prodigal child returns home to a mixed greeting. The parents celebrate, forgive and restore the child. The household throws a party. The child is reminded they were always part of the family. All they had to do was change and turn to God. Both the younger and older children are reminded that the relationship never changed. Their recognition, acceptance and affirmation of the relationship changed. That was their choice. A household that is a family, regardless of how it came to be or who is there, is a place where relationships matter, even when we disagree. We find hope, love and acceptance when we embrace our family and God. God's children are always welcome and celebrated in Jesus' house.

The dishonest manager gets a final comment and is shown the door. There's no reason for them to stay in the household since there was no relationship. We don't know what happens to the person, but breaking trust will make life difficult. Anyone who lives that way needs to have street smarts to get by. That's survival of the fittest. What I think Jesus is really telling us in verses 8-9 is the repercussions. Jesus says this choice leads to acceptance by others, so long as we are highly involved with them. That's here and now. The promise we are working for is the trophy homes, nice cars and the riches of this generation, or ... room and board. There is little future: what you see is what you get.

What does this mean to us? Do you ever feel like you have to choose between career and family? Or do you choose between spending time with your friends and other activities? Or how about this: do we engage in meaningful conversation with our loved ones, being there for them, rather than listening with one ear while we text our friends, watch TV, or play an online game? Are we really present and there for others? Every day we make choices about how we treat others.

We are given gifts: family, friends, work and more. What we do with them is up to us. The greatest gift is God's love. God reaches out to us, inviting us to be part of the divine family. It's our responsibility to make wise choices about how we live. We can see everyone and everything as a commodity, bargaining our way through life. Or we can embrace the relationships we have, trusting God and others to love us and forgive us. When we do that, we're investing ourselves in others. We're receiving

what they have to share with us. We're willing to share our life with them because there's a connection, a spiritual bond.

Both lifestyles require us to choose. It's very hard to tell how someone has chosen to live from their outward appearance. After all, they may be lying to themselves as well.

I believe that's why Jesus made this concluding statement, "You are masters at making yourselves look good in front of others, but God knows what's behind the appearance" (v15). God knows what's in your heart, the thoughts in your mind and the condition of your soul.

Why are you here today (or reading this manuscript)? I hope it's to know more about God's love. But, no matter what your answer is, you are welcome. God's love for us doesn't depend on whether we return that love or not (Romans 5:8). That's because God loves us first. And God is patient, kind, steadfast and eternal. We can't get away from that kind of love. We can't hide from that kind of love.

We can try to ignore it.

At the end of the day, we're left with one, real choice: accept it – or not! I urge you to accept God's love. Your life will be better. Turn to Jesus; he forgives. Trust God. You'll be glad you did.

Let us pray ... Lord, great gift-giver, we come to you with grateful hearts. You have given us so much. Even before we knew who you were, you were caring for us and giving us all that we needed. Forgive us when we do not share or return your generosity, choosing to ignore you and walk our own path. Help us to become those who share what we have – our time, skills, money and love, with those who are in need. Call us to the less traveled path, where we walk alongside you each day. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Luke 16:1-13 (CEB)

Jesus also said to the disciples, “A certain rich man heard that his household manager was wasting his estate. He called the manager in and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give me a report of your administration because you can no longer serve as my manager.’”

The household manager said to himself, “What will I do now that my master is firing me as his manager? I’m not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg. I know what I’ll do so that, when I am removed from my management position, people will welcome me into their houses.”

One by one, the manager sent for each person who owed his master money. He said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil.’ The manager said to him, ‘Take your contract, sit down quickly, and write four hundred fifty gallons.’ Then the manager said to another, ‘How much do you owe?’ He said, ‘One thousand bushels of wheat.’ He said, ‘Take your contract and write eight hundred.’”

The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted cleverly. People who belong to this world are more clever in dealing with their peers than are people who belong to the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves so that when it’s gone, you will be welcomed into the eternal homes.

Whoever is faithful with little is also faithful with much, and the one who is dishonest with little is also dishonest with much. If you haven’t been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? If you haven’t been faithful with someone else’s property, who will give you your own? No household servant can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Luke 15:11-32 (Message)

Then he said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’”

So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’”

But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here - given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

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