

The Life That Counts in the End

Luke 16:10-18

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 24, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹⁰“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. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

¹⁴The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. ¹⁵So he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

¹⁶“The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force. ¹⁷But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.

¹⁸“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.” (Luke 16:10-18, NRSV)

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I have a good friend who played college football at a school back east. Years ago I was with him on that campus and we took a side tour in the athletic facilities so he could show me the trophy case where his name was inscribed on a plaque honoring him as the “Most Inspirational Player” his senior year on the team. It was a high honor because it acknowledged both his athleticism and his character. As he talked about that plaque it became clear to me how much it meant to him that his name would be etched in bronze in that trophy case for generations to come. I would have felt the same way had it been my name on that plaque.

Well, I happened to be with this same friend a few weeks ago and he told me that he’d recently been back on campus. Of course, he made sure to pay a visit to the trophy case to admire his legacy. However, he was shocked to learn that while the plaque was still

displayed, the names inscribed there were now completely obstructed behind a more recent trophy. His accomplishments had been eclipsed by the women’s volleyball team and their recent league championship. I could hear the disappointment in his voice as he told me the story. And I knew that if the trophy case had been left unlocked that day, there is no doubt in my mind that a few of its contents would have been discreetly rearranged.

Such is life. Isn’t there something in all of us that wants to be remembered, to be acknowledged, to be honored? Don’t you want to leave some sort of legacy in the end? Don’t we all want our life to count for something? When all is said and done, is your life going to count? Don’t you ask yourself that question? I do.

Recently I Googled myself. That sounds painful, doesn’t it? It was. Here’s why. I was nowhere to be found. There was Jeff Chapman the bass singer for some group called the Kingdom Heirs. Some Canadian urban explorer – whatever that is – shares my name. There’s Jeff Chapman the Georgia state senator and Jeff Chapman the Australian rules footballer. Granted, I don’t have the most unusual name, but still I was hoping to find myself somewhere on Google. I gave up looking for myself after about 30 pages.

How much do you know about your great, great grandfather? I don’t know anything. It’s sobering to realize that in relatively no time at all most of us will be largely forgotten. Last week I reminded you that you never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer. When your life here is over, all the things of this life are left behind. Of course, that includes your money and possessions, which never really belonged to you in the first place, but it also includes your career, your achievements, your titles and degrees, your to-do lists, your future plans, your family and friends, even your good works. We don’t pack any of those things with us to the grave. Job’s words apply to all of us, “**Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart.**”¹ And yet, each of us still wants our life to count for something in the end.

So what does Jesus have to say about all this? You might have missed it the first time through, but there is a great deal of relevant truth in the first line of our passage today. Again, Jesus declares, “**Whoever is**

¹ Job 1:21 (NIV)

faithful in very little is faithful also in much.”

Here’s my interpretation. Your name may end up obscured behind the women’s volleyball trophy. You may Google yourself and never find yourself. You may work your whole life and wonder what, if anything, you have to show for it in the end. Nobody may seem to notice your efforts. The good you do today is forgotten tomorrow. What takes a lifetime to build may be destroyed overnight. None of what you do or possess now will be hauled with you to the grave. In other words, it’s all ‘little’ in the end. And yet, Jesus says to be faithful it is nonetheless. Be faithful in the very little, because if you are then someday, you will find yourself faithful in much.²

Think with me a minute about that word ‘faithful’. The root of the word ‘faithful’ is ‘faith’, which implies trust. In other words, if you are faithful to something or someone it means that you have faith and trust in that thing or person. Think about something as trivial as a sports team. Consider Chicago Cubs fans. This is a team that went 108 years without winning a World Series. Along the way, however, there were plenty of Cubs faithful. These were the diehard fans that trusted that there would come a year that their team would finally win, that all those years of cheering on their pitiful team would count for something in the end. 2016 turned out to be their year.

You see, to be faithful in life means to have faith, to place your trust in something you believe will ultimately deliver and count for something in the end. Every single one of us is doing this in life. *Everybody* is a person of faith. There is some thing or someone you have made the object of your faith, the thing or person you believe will make your life count in the end. Jesus talks a lot about money and possessions here and elsewhere because he knows that lots and lots of people put their faith in material wealth. The idea is that someday you’ll have *enough* money to make your life count for something. It will bring you the satisfaction and joy and security in life you imagine it has the potential to bring. If you make it financially, your life will mean something to yourself and to others. Now if you believe this, if your faith is in money, then you will make the pursuit of financial wealth the primary pursuit of your life, and as the imagined source of ultimate identity, security and meaning, you will consider it worthy of that pursuit.

You see, one of the very logical points Jesus makes here in this passage is that you can’t have this sort of faith in two things at the same time. In his words, **“No one can serve two masters.”** When I was a kid my younger brother and I used to do this competition with our little

dog, Shadow. We’d put Shadow in the middle of the room and then we’d each be on opposite ends of the room calling for her to come to us. We’d use every persuasive trick in the book of dog calling. The test, of course, was to determine Shadow’s loyalty. She could obey me and she could obey my brother, but she could not obey us both *at the same time*. She also, unfortunately, could not go to doggie therapy which I’m sure would have benefitted her after these cruel experiments we put her through.

At the end of the day there is one thing or person in your life who is the object of your ultimate trust, one thing or person in which you have faith to make your life count in the end, one voice you listen to above all other voices. So what is it for you? Who is it for you? It’s a question of loyalty and trust. What or who are you banking on to make your life count for something in the end?

Now, right off the bat some of you think it’s a stupid question. “Duh, Jeff. It’s obvious who I trust. It’s Sunday morning and I’m sitting in church. God is the one I trust above all else. Why else would I be here?” And that may be true. I hope it’s true. But one word of caution here. Being in church is not always the best indicator of ultimate faith. Just because a person is sitting in church on Sunday mornings does not *necessarily* mean that he or she has faith that it is God, *above all else*, who will make life count. Remember that Jesus is speaking here to the Pharisees, to these ultra-religious men of his day. And the truth is that none of us in this room are likely to ever be as faithfully religious as these people were. They never missed church. They knew the Bible by heart and tried to follow everything in it, plus a bunch of religious stuff that added to it. Their whole lives were dedicated to their religion. And yet it is to them that Jesus gives these warnings.

So how can you identify the object of your faith? How does a person name what it is they are hoping will make life count in the end? The master of your life is that which directs you, the one to whom you listen, the one you obey. You come to a fork in the road and it is your master who tells you whether to go left or right. If it’s wealth, the direction you choose always has to do with which way will make you the most money. So who is your master?

If your master ends up to be something other than God, the Bible calls that master an idol. It’s taken the place of God. And idols can be good things, they’re just good things that you have made into ultimate things, and they will overturn and overrun every other allegiance. You can’t serve two masters. An idol is something you can’t live without. Idols absorb your imagination and

² I’m inspired in part here by Kent M. Keith, *Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments* (Berkley Books, 2001).

affection, becoming the subject of your daydreams. They also become the subject of your nightmares because they are the thing you most dread losing. If you really want to identify your idol, ask yourself what thing it is in life which, if lost, would leave you devastated. It's natural, of course, to grieve the loss of things or people which are close to us. But if you lose an idol, you don't just experience sorrow, you experience despair, hopelessness. Which makes sense. If the very source of your identity, security and meaning is gone, there is nothing left to live for.

Money and possessions, of course, aren't the only idols. Your reputation or image can be an idol. Family or children become idols for many people. Success, achievement, career, all of these can become our masters. Health and beauty, productivity, youth, even religion itself, these are all popular idols. And remember, all these are good things, but good things which people have made into ultimate things, believing that it is through this thing or this person that my life will ultimately count for something in the end.³

I'm willing to bet, however, that even after my explanation, there are likely still some of you who think my question is a stupid one. Generally, religious people don't like to have suggested to them that they might actually be serving another master besides God. That's what's happening here in this text. Jesus is suggesting to the religious people of his day that because they were serving money and possessions, they couldn't also simultaneously be serving God. And how did they respond to his suggestion? "Thank you so much, Jesus, for pointing this out." No! They ridiculed him. The word here literally means 'to wrinkle one's nose.'⁴ But the truth is still that religious people have a long history of deceiving themselves when it comes to idolatry. It's why we should not wrinkle our noses at Jesus' words here. We are wise if we take his teaching here as an opportunity to examine the true object of our faith.

But here's the problem. It's always the problem. In verse 15 we read, "**So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.'**" Let me paraphrase. Jesus is saying, "You think that you can hook a U-Haul trailer to your hearse some day to transport with you something that will make your life count in the end. Maybe it's money. Maybe it's your religion, your good works. Maybe it's something else. Maybe you haven't even admitted to

yourself what it is. But God sees it. He knows your heart. He isn't just aware of what is in your heart but he is intensely and intimately knowledgeable about *everything* that is in your heart. He knows the identity of your true master."

Not only does God see the other masters we obey, but Jesus says our obedience to those other masters is an abomination in his sight. The Hebrew translation of this word 'abomination' is the strongest word in that language when it comes to describing something that is absolutely detestable or abhorrent. Interestingly, like the word used to describe the reaction of the Pharisees, the origins of this word also have to do with one's nose. Jesus is literally saying here that this trust in other masters to make like count is a stench that greatly offends God's nostrils.

Here's a way to understand this. Imagine you are a parent who has an adult child who is become addicted to drugs that are destroying her life. Worse, she refuses to believe she is addicted even though the drugs are stripping her of every good thing in her life, her career, her friends, her mind, her health, her very future. As a parent, those drugs are an abomination in your sight, a stench in your nostrils. You despise the idea that one you love so desperately is giving her life to something that will never deliver in the end. And such is the place God finds himself as he watches those he desperately loves give themselves to masters which can never make life count in the end.

Enter the Gospel. Here is the good news. Jesus puts it this way in verses 16-17:

The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.

These are not easy verses, so pay careful attention. In the Old Testament, summed up here by Jesus with the law and the prophets, God gave the old covenant. Now the old covenant went like this: If a person followed the law of God as laid out clearly in the scriptures, that person's life would count in the end. To use biblical language, they would be justified before God in heaven. The problem was, of course, that nobody could follow the law. Read the Old Testament. Look around you today. Examine your own life. Who can follow the law of God, even the two most important laws which are to love God with all heart, mind, soul and body, and to love every other person in this world as much as you love yourself? *Literally nobody could keep the old covenant*

³ I'm relying heavily here on the writings of Timothy Keller in *Counterfeit Gods* (Riverhead Books, 2009).

⁴ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Eerdmans, 2015), 460.

and, on their own power or goodness or effort, make their life count in the end!

Jesus says here, however, that the good news of the Kingdom of God has now come! The Kingdom of Heaven has come near, as Jesus says elsewhere. Because the God of creation has not left us in our stench but has come, himself, into the world and, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, suffered and died and been raised to life, there is now a *new covenant*. The old covenant was the way of law: Obey the law and put God in your debt and he will reward you in the end. The new covenant is the way of grace: Though you cannot justify yourself by your good works, your religion, or anything else, yet out of his undying love for us all Christ has justified us, made us right with God. At the cross we were forgiven. At the resurrection, the way was opened for us to come and share in life God has always wanted for us, abundant and eternal. All that is needed – listen carefully to me here – is faith. We just have to trust that it is Christ, and Christ alone, who can make life count in the end.

Jesus says a very strange thing here about all this, however. What does he mean by saying that, **“everybody tries to enter [the good news of the kingdom of God] by force”**? Biblical scholars have debated this phrase forever and are split on the interpretation. In the end, I side with the half that translates the verb here in the passive voice, rather than the middle voice we find in this translation. Read instead, **“the kingdom of God is being proclaimed, and all are being compelled to come into it.”**⁵ We can’t force our way into the kingdom. It is God, rather, who compels us to come in.

Think of the host of the great banquet in Luke 15 who goes to great lengths to compel every person he can find to come to his feast. Think of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to scour the countryside for the one last lamb, or the woman who turns her house upside-down to find that one lost coin. And of course, we can’t forget the father who welcomes his younger lost son home with a party and then practically begs his older son to come in and join the celebration. The heart of God is to share the grace and love and life of Christ with all who would come to receive it. He wants every life to count in the end, but knows it is only through faith in Christ that this is possible.

By the way, don’t think this means that the law from the old covenant is now irrelevant. Jesus is clear here, as he is clear elsewhere, that none of the law shall be dropped or ignored in the Kingdom. Divorce is just one of many examples he could have used here. No, God’s

commandments still are to be honored and kept, but no longer as a means for justifying ourselves. Now, as we trust in Christ and receive his grace, we also receive his help in doing what on our own before was impossible, actually beginning to live lives that honor God in the way we handle marriage, or money, or work, or friendship, or parenting, or sex, or our words – all of it! Our obedience becomes a response to God’s favor, not a means to earn it!

So here’s the question. If you’ve dozed off, wake up! This is where it all comes to a head. Do you believe this? Again, don’t assume that because you are sitting in church that you do. Don’t assume that because I’m up here preaching that I do. Jesus doesn’t make either assumption. Do you believe that the only way for your life to count in the end is if you place your trust in Christ, and that apart from Christ there is no other master that can deliver the goods? Do you really believe that when all is said and done you will be as naked as the day you were born, nothing left to justify you except, if you have trusted it, the grace of God in Christ? Do you believe this?

If you believe this, then Jesus tells us here exactly how to go forward in life starting today. Be faithful in very little. That’s what he says, For, in his words, **“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.”**⁶ I can’t help think of the ending of Jesus’ parable of the talents a few chapters later in Luke. In that parable the master say to his servant in the end, **“Well done, good servant! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities.”**⁷ In all this I want you to see here both the simple command and the bold promise Jesus gives us.

The simple command is that we are to be faithful in the little things of life. Most of us this week will not christen a ship, write a best-selling novel, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with royalty, cure a disease, have our name etched in a trophy cabinet, or find ourselves coming up on the first page after a Google search.⁸ What we *will* have a chance to do this week are the little things. Give a meal to somebody who is hungry. Tutor a kid who is struggling in math. Hold the elevator door. Return your shopping cart. Listen to somebody who just needs to talk. Visit someone in the hospital. Let somebody in ahead of you at the check-out

⁶ This is what’s called an ‘argument a fortiori’ (literally, ‘from the stronger’). It’s an argument from the lesser to the greater. It goes like this: If this is true, then this must certainly be true. If my wife loves it when I clean up the kitchen, she will certainly love it if I clean up the whole house. Moses and David were faithful shepherds with actual sheep; they will then be faithful as shepherds over the sheep of God’s people.

⁷ Luke 19:17

⁸ Fred B. Craddock, *The Interpretation Series: Luke* (John Knox, 1990), 192.

⁵ See James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 463.

counter or in traffic. Teach Sunday school. Pick up litter. Feed the neighbor's cat. Go to choir practice. Plant something in the ground. Show kindness to a cashier trying to learn her job. Fast for 30 hours to learn about hunger. Treat our spouse to a special evening. Write a letter to a local politician. Forgive somebody who has hurt you. Pray with somebody who needs healing. Listen to somebody who is alone.

Maybe you can't solve the hunger crisis in Africa, but you can sponsor a child in Ethiopia or collect cans and bottles to help buy chickens for a community in Kenya. Maybe you can't solve the desperate political divide in our nation, but you can sit over a cup of coffee with somebody on the other side of the political spectrum and listen hard enough to find at least understanding and maybe even common ground. You can't convert the whole city of Sacramento to faith in Christ, but you can share your faith with one person when God gives you the opportunity to do so this week.

None of these things, of course, will justify your life. Don't make that mistake. God will not love you more, or even like you more, if you do these things. He loves you no matter what. You are even forgiven when you fail to do them. Furthermore, in time none of these things will be remembered, and many of them may not even be noticed in the moment you do them. You cannot save the world. You don't need to. It's already been saved. The Kingdom has come. The way is open through Christ. We are compelled to enter. All we need to do is trust that it is Christ who makes all things count in the end. That makes it then possible to hold on loosely to everything else in life. And that, in turn, leads to joy in hardship, peace that transcends circumstance, generosity that exceeds logic, love that doesn't expect anything in return, and faithfulness in the little things.

That's the simple command. Here's the bold promise. It's bold because, from our perspective, we may not see how it possibly can be kept. Here it is nonetheless, straight from the mouth of Christ. As we trust in God above all and are then in turn faithful in the little things – and they're all little things from the perspective of eternity – as we do this then one day we will find that through Christ we will end up faithful in much. In Christ, life *will* count in the end. And because life counts in the end, life also counts now.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 16:10-18. What do you notice here?
2. Jesus says that those who are faithful in a very little will also be faithful in much. What do you think he means by this?
3. Are you somebody who is faithful in a very little? Why or why not?
4. How has the coming of the Kingdom of God changed the way we now view the law of God?
5. What masters scream at you for allegiance now? How do you deal with those voices in light of your commitment to Christ?
6. What will make your life count for something when all is said and done? Are you certain of this?
7. Consider this quote from the Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila: "Remember that you only have one soul; that you have only one death to die; that you have only one life, which is short and has to be lived by you alone; and that there is only one glory, which is eternal. If you can do this, there will be many things about which you care nothing." What is she getting at here? What sort of things might we end up caring nothing about?
8. What is one of the very little things you can be faithful in today? Be specific.

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why would somebody love money more than they love God? Why would somebody love anything more than they love God?