***DEAL HONESTLY!***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

August 22, 2021

Texts: Psalm 15 and Luke 3:7-18

Six weeks ago when we began this sermon series on Psalm 15 we heard the psalmist asking: *Who is worthy to dwell with the Lord?* Or as Eugene Peterson phrased it: *God, who gets invited to dinner at your place? How do we get on your guest list?* For the psalmist it is not a simple answer like: *those who eat all their kale and never burp at the table*. The answer is far more expansive, embracing our words and actions, our relationships with friends and neighbors, discerning right from wrong and then doing the right, remaining true to our words even when it hurts us, and in all things trying to walk blamelessly and do the right thing. But before he finishes the psalm with a repeated affirmation of the blessing of those who manage to walk this faithful path – *those who do these things shall never be moved* – the psalmist speaks to how we conduct our business. For, faithfulness is not just about our personal conduct or religious practices; it is about the totality of our lives and that includes how we do business!

In 1888 a Norwegian businessman opened his morning newspaper and found, to his great surprise, that he had died. To quote Mark Twain, “the reports of his death were greatly exaggerated.” In fact, it was the man’s brother who had died, but the newspaper (no doubt a forerunner of the Daily News-Leader) had printed his obituary instead of that of his deceased brother. The man began to read how the world viewed his life, and he didn’t like what he read. The facts were accurate, listing his impressive achievements and discoveries, focusing on the wealth and fame that he had amassed, but there was no mention of his high principles or most cherished commitments. The man had invented dynamite, but Alfred Nobel did not want to be remembered for his contribution to violence and war. He wanted to be remembered for more, so he decided to begin living for those things he held most dear. He gave away his money and established the Nobel prizes that honor those who make significant contributions to humanity and to peace. The name Nobel now brings to mind important achievements that benefit the world. In effect, Alfred Nobel rewrote his own obituary.

Very few of us have that opportunity, but we do have the opportunity to make the kind of changes that Nobel made. We can follow his example and heed the call of John the Baptist to repent of what we’ve been doing and follow a new way of life. That is what John said to those whose hearts were moved by his words. When they wanted to know what to do, he told them: *If you have two coats, share with anyone who has none. If you have food, share with the hungry. In your work, act fairly, seeking no more than that to which you are entitled and treating others honestly and respectfully.* There was a word there for everyone –

for pious Jews who needed to share and

for outcast tax collectors who needed to change their greedy ways and

for gentile soldiers who took advantage of their positions over weaker

neighbors.

There is a word for us as well, regardless of our status or position or wealth, and it can be summed up in these words: repent, deal honestly, share, and play fair! It sounds a little like lessons we should have learned in kindergarten, along with *clean up your mess* and *don’t bite*, but obviously not all of us have taken such lessons to heart, so the psalmist and John try to teach them to us once more.

The psalmist offers two specific instances of honest dealing, but I suspect that is more for illustrative purposes than it is to say that these alone are the bad acts to be avoided. The first has to do with lending money at interest. It is always interesting to me that folks who want to take the Bible literally and beat others over the head with their literal interpretations of certain Scripture passages have no problem ignoring a literal reading of this passage in order to take out a mortgage to purchase a home or get a car loan or accept a job at a bank where loans at interest are made daily. Understood in its context, the psalmist’s message is not intended to be so literal; it is focused upon unfair dealing by those charging usurious interest rates, the kind of rates we often see from payday lenders who prey upon the poor. As scholar Hans-Joachim Kraus describes it:

*The lending of money according to OT law is understood exclusively as a service of assistance…From ancient Near Eastern traffic in money we know of monstrously high interest rates. In Babylonia 33.3% was demanded, in Assyria even up to 50%. Such unjust enrichment is not to be possible in the community constitution of Israel.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

What the psalmist is addressing here is not new banking regulations, but the responsibility to deal honestly with others – especially with those who are most vulnerable or desperate or disadvantaged. It is a responsibility placed not on the one seeking assistance, but upon the one offering it – whether that be a loan or a job or your services. We are all too familiar with gross violations of this admonition – those charging exorbitant interest rates to desperate borrowers, or enticing investors with shady Ponzi schemes, or profiteering from shortages of toilet paper or gasoline, or charging outrageous prices for life-saving drugs. Some folks claim that is just capitalism at work – charging whatever price or interest rate the market will bear to a willing purchaser. But the psalmist calls it dishonest dealing, recognizing that not all people are equally situated, and those who are vulnerable or poor or desperate are owed a higher duty of care by the rest of us – a duty grounded in honest dealing.

Remember Zacchaeus, the wee little man in the sycamore tree? He was a tax collector whose job was to collect taxes from his Jewish neighbors for the Roman government; the reward for his despised status as an agent of Rome was that he could charge whatever additional amount he could collect. Tax collectors were often rich because they had the backing of the Roman Empire to aid in extorting payment from their neighbors. That was Zacchaeus’ business, until Jesus called him down from the tree and ate at his table and changed his life. As a sign of the change, Zacchaeus promised to return four times the money he had taken from his neighbors in exorbitant taxes! “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you,” said John to the tax collectors who came seeking baptism in repentance for their sins. Deal fairly with your neighbors and forego enriching yourself at their expense. That is what righteousness demands!

Such honest dealing extends to honest decision-making. The psalmist casts it in terms of refusing a bribe, but such bribes come in a host of guises. When I worked for the PA Attorney General’s office in the division of pubic corruption and organized crime, bribes were a problem among politicians of all stripes. The temptation to profit from their political position was too great for some to resist; on the flip side, many individuals and businesses were not hesitant to purchase a vote or a favorable ruling or a permit’s approval with a well-placed contribution – occasionally in small unmarked bills. Those are the overt cases, but there are a host of instances where the bribe is more subtle but the influence no less toxic.

For the psalmist and for John the issue of dishonest business practices is moral more than legal. To be righteous in God’s eyes demands more of us than the law requires. It demands consideration of the impact of economic policies and practices on the poor and desperate; it demands fairness in politics and economics. Those who think that life can somehow be segmented into a religious sphere and an economic sphere are misreading Scripture or failing to read the very Scriptures they claim to follow. For giving up the pursuit of wealth, dealing honestly in business, and responding justly to the needs of the poor are entwined with faithful living.

When young people are asked why they have left the church, one of the leading responses is – *I can’t stand the hypocrisy*. What they see is folks who piously pray in the pews on Sunday mornings and deal dishonestly or ruthlessly the rest of the week. It makes worship seem like an exercise in public posturing rather than life-changing faith and faithfulness. Is that what they see when they see you sitting in the pew on Sunday morning – a hypocrite! Or do they see someone else – the same faithful person they met in the street last Monday? Are you the same person here on Sunday morning as you are the rest of the week – on the street, at your work, in your business? Are you as gracious, loving, and faithful in your work and business dealings on Tuesday as you are in praying the Lord’s Prayer on Sunday morning – *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*? For if that is not the case, says the psalmist, then there may be no place for you on the divine guest list for the heavenly banquet! Jesus Christ invites us to that banquet despite our shortcomings, but he also calls us to that righteous life which the psalmist describes in Psalm 15.

For Alfred Nobel it took a misprinted obituary to change his life. What might it take to change yours – a misprinted obituary, a sudden tragedy, the voice of God in the dark of night? Why wait for the wake-up call? Why procrastinate and wait for some cosmic sign to move you to action? Let this be the day you assess the way you go about your business, repent of any practices that draw you away from God, and commit to deal honestly, share, and play fair! Let this be the day you commit to doing the right thing in God’s eyes even if it costs you! Let this be the day that you embrace the words of this 15th psalm in its entirety and do the right thing again and again and again, for those who do these things shall never be moved – says the psalmist, says the Lord! Amen

1. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59:A Commentary*, Augsburg Publishing House:1988, p.230 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)