

BON AIR BAPTIST CHURCH
Rev. James Pardue, Pastor

October 18, 1998

Scripture Reading: Luke 16:10-13

Message: *Steps Toward Maturity*

All of us are aware there is an evil force in our world that is always tempting us to do that which is wrong. There is an unusual passage in one of the last books of the Old Testament that could well be the autobiography of most of us here. It says, "*And Joshua stood before the angel of the Lord and Satan stood by his side.*" All of us, as we have tried to do that which is right for God, have always felt some force that is pulling us back, making us want to turn away from Him. But the Bible says that just as Satan is present to try to tempt us to do that which is evil, God is always present to give us challenges and opportunities so we can do that which is right. And the Bible says that God is always providing us with tests that we can pass, so we can develop and grow in our Christian life. You can always tell the difference. The temptation is from the devil, who is trying to get you to do what is wrong. Its purpose is to diminish you. A test from God is always to help you do what is right, and always to develop you. The Bible says that God is in the business of always presenting challenges to your life to help you become deeper and better and stronger than you ever could be before. What you need to understand is that every day of your life, God is going to provide these tests to enable you to become an even stronger believer in Him.

When you turn through the Bible, you begin to see that this is the pattern of God. Back over in the Old Testament, you recall, the children of Israel left Egypt and wandered through the Sinai Peninsula in the wilderness and then went to the Promised Land. Listen to what he said: "*Remember the Lord, your God, led you all the way in the desert those forty years to humble you and to test you in order that He would know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.*" So why did God lead them through the wilderness? Because it was a test. He had to make them stronger before they made it to their Promised Land because they were going to face difficulties and challenges that they could not meet unless they were stronger people.

Over in the New Testament there is a strange incident. The people had been following Jesus around for a while. Finally they ran out of food. He turned to his disciples and he said, "*What do you think we ought to do?*" Then there is a strange little parenthesis that says this: "*He knew what He was going to do, but He did it to test them.*" So what God is always about in your life is to present challenges to you so that you can become stronger and better. What we are going to do this morning is read a passage of Scripture that outlines for you some of the tests that God gives you. What you need to ask yourself is; do I understand these? How are they working out in my life? Am I making a passing or failing grade?

Look at this passage of Scripture in Luke, chapter 16, verse 10: *“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whosoever is dishonest with very little will be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.”* Sneer--the word is actually to lift up your lips and to squint your eyes like you are out of your gourd. You hear the boos from the peanut gallery. *“He said to them, ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.’”* In this passage of Scripture He gives you the test; you can know what He is putting in front of you so you can know how He is trying to work in your life to make you stronger and better.

First is the test of the small to the great. He said, “I am going to give you the small, see how you handle that, then I will give you the more.” *This is the principle of responsibility.* Don Schula is one of the most famous names in professional football. He was for many years the coach of the Miami Dolphins. Ken Blanchard is one of the best known names in American management. They have written a book. It is entitled *Everyone Is A Coach*. In the book Don Schula said that in 1970, when he became coach of the Miami Dolphins, the media kept asking him, “What is your three to five year plan?” Listen to what Schula said: “My plan is day by day. I am called to prepare people to perform to the best of their ability, but you must do that one day at a time. Setting goals is important, but often manipulated. What we need to do to reach goals is to give attention to details and to do the small things.” Hey, pretty good! Sixteen and zero after two years, and won the Super Bowl. What is the key? Do the small things.

Everyone of you who is a parent knows that's the way you raise your children. You tell them the small things. You trust them with little responsibility, and as they learn responsibility and how to manage it, then you give them bigger things. And as they continue to learn, soon you are willing to trust them with everything that you have. It is the whole principle of education. This past week Congress passed an education bill to put more and more teachers in grades 1-3. Now why do that? The reason is because educational principals tell us that the key to everyone's education is what he learns before he is ten years old. You will hear some wonderful stories of late bloomers, but for most people, if they don't learn it by the time they are 10, they don't make it. Why is that true? Because if you don't learn that “2 x 2”, you don't learn “pi” or “square.” You have to learn the small. You build on that, and then you know the big. Now our problem is we don't believe that. We somehow believe that there ought to be some short cuts to life and some short cuts to success and some short cuts to being an adult. And somehow we want to reach out and take the big things without ever learning the small things. The problem is that if one takes the short cuts, he is going to find that the big things will crush him instead of make him.

If you want a good illustration of that in the Bible, read again the story of the prodigal son. Here was a young boy who has the syndrome that most of us have. It is called *if only*. If only I was somewhere else; if only I had money; if only I had new friends; if only, if only, if only.... And his father got so sick and tired of having him around the house, one day he said, "Here, here is a pile of money. Go live in your fantasy world." What happened to the boy? When he got his hands on money, it destroyed him. Why? Because he had never learned responsibility. He had never learned to deal with reality. He had never learned to deal with a situation, and having money destroyed him. I know person after person who has tried to short cut in life; they have gotten the big responsibilities, and the big responsibilities have crushed them.

I am reminded of a story of President Lincoln when he was elected. So many people were trying to get a position in the government. A lady asked for an opportunity to speak with him, and said to him, "I would like for my husband to be in the Cabinet." The President looked at her and said, "Well, my dear, Cabinet officers ought to be important people." Without hesitation she said, "If you would appoint him to be a Cabinet officer, he would be an important person."

Most of us think *if only*...if only I could do this, if only, then I would achieve in life. What Jesus is saying to you is that God is going to try to develop you in your life; he is He is going to give you small things, teach you responsibility, see how well you handle them, and then He will pass on to you greater opportunities and challenges. Now the question you need to ask yourself is not why you don't have what you would like, the question you ought to ask yourself is what you are doing with what you have. Maybe a good way to answer that question is to take yourself out of your life, look back at all the challenges and privileges that you have, and ask yourself the question: if somebody really took my life seriously and really developed the opportunities and privileges I have, what could somebody else do with it? Then maybe you would go back and determine that what you are going to do is be all that God wants you to be. So God is going to develop you. God is going to help you. He is going to say to you, "I want you now to take the small thing, and then as you do it, I will teach you the biggest."

It was revealed this past week that John D. Rockefeller, Sr. in his lifetime owned a greater percentage of wealth in American than any other man who has ever lived in our country. As he became older and just had more money than he knew what to do with, he developed means by which he could give it away. Somebody came to him one day and said, "Mr. Rockefeller, how can you give away tens of millions of dollars?" He said this: "I could never give a million if I had not first given \$1.65 out of my first paycheck." What is harder: to give \$1.65 out of \$16.50, or to give a million out of a hundred million? What he said was, "I learned the principle of giving, and as God blessed me, then I had the right and I had the opportunity to be able to give away more." Until you handle the small things in your life, you are never going to be prepared to handle big stuff. What God is always doing in your life is always giving you these opportunities day or day, and saying, "Handle those, and if you handle those well, I will give you bigger."

I am reminded of two fellows out camping. One of them was a great big old fellow--he could be a tackle for the New York Giants-- and the other was a little scrawny fellow like me. The big fellow went out one night, killed a big old bear, and wrestled that thing back to the campground. The little old scrawny fellow sitting around said, "If I was as big as you, I would go out and kill me a bear." The big fellow said: "A lot of little bears are out there, too."

A lot of us say *if only*...we would do wonderful things. God keeps asking what you are doing with what you've got. He said, "*If you cannot handle what is somebody else's, then nobody is going to give you what is your own.*" That is the principle of *accountability*. He is very clear on what He is talking about. He says this is the way God has designed the universe: He made us utterly dependent on material things. For most of us that means you give 8, 10, 12 hours a day to material things. You have to have stuff to eat, wear, stuff for your family, and stuff for your kids education--material things. One of the men in our congregation at the first service is leaving November 1 to go to Bellarus. He is going to take over for a while an orphanage in Bellarus. He said the reason he is going to Bellarus is because the people are so poor they are dumping their children at state orphanages, trying to get them something to eat. The state doesn't have any money to give them anything to eat, so he is going over to help them get something to eat. I mean, you've got to eat. But listen to what this passage of Scripture says. He says, "I have tied the material and the spiritual together. The test is this. How you handle the material is a key to how you handle the spiritual. So if you don't handle the material, then I cannot trust you with the spiritual." And I ask myself the question: why? The reason is that you can make money, but spend it unwisely. You can spend it only for yourself. So everything you get can center only around you; and if you center only around yourself, then you can never understand the greater truths of God. So everything you have, He says, is a test—"I give you material things, and I am asking if you can handle a dollar, and when you can, then I will help you in all of the spiritual parts of your life."

Now, I want to make a statement to you. It comes out of my own experience, but it is really in this passage of scripture. I have pastored in lots of different places, and I know lots of different people. This is my statement. I know people who make money honestly, spend it wisely, and give generously, who are not great Christians. Some of them are mean as snakes. But the other thing is also true. I have never met a great Christian who does not make it honestly, spend it wisely, and give it generously. I have just never met one. He says, "I am making material things a test. If you don't handle that well, I am not going to trust you with the keys to the kingdom. If you can't manage your own bank account, you think I'm going to turn the universe over to you? No!"

When I was a student in the seminary, the home church of my mother and father wanted to start a church. They asked me to go and be their pastor. When I was in seminary and right after I got out of seminary, I worked as hard as I have ever worked in my life, trying to develop a small church. After years and years of work we finally had 67 families. Like every other small church we were struggling for everything we could get.

One day I received a call from someone in our denomination who said, “We have developed a new teaching inspirational program called *The Forward Program*. What we are trying to do is help Baptists understand what the Bible says about giving and about making money and spending wisely. We are trying to get big churches, small churches, old churches, new churches, and we have selected you. We would like for you to see if your church would be in favor of this program.” Well, we called a business meeting. Ten families were there, the families who gave pretty regularly, anyway. What we found out was that there were ten families, out of the 67, who gave generously. Well, we went through the whole program: Had a little group, went out to a gym at a public school, rented the gym; we catered a meal; we just did the whole smear. But I want to tell you what happened. I got up one Sunday--after that meal and after we had talked about giving—and I gave the invitation. I looked down the front, and there were all kinds of folk there. They were weeping, all emotionally distressed. I would go to one after another and say, “What is going on in your life?” “I have been off base. I have been living for myself. I want to live for God. One of the ways I want to live is I want to spend my money wisely, and I want to give part of it back to Him.” We went from 10 families to 27 families in just a few weeks. Some of them said, “We are giving 2%.” The average Baptist gives less than 2% of his income. You may not be aware that Baptists--of all Christian denominations--are at the bottom of the giving percentage. We give less than 2%. Some of them said, “We can't go from 2% to 10%, but we are going to go from 2% to 3%, and maybe next year from 3 to 4, and maybe the next year from 5 to 7, and one day we are going to try to get to what God wants us to do.” A revival broke out in our church. I wasn't preaching about prayer. I wasn't preaching about soul winning. I wasn't preaching about the promises of God. I preached from this passage of Scripture. And they took it seriously. God just poured out His spirit on all of our congregation. I have taken the opportunity to go back and look at a six-month period in our church's life. We had more people to join our church and more people to come to faith in Christ than we had in any other time that I've been there. Let me tell you what I have found out. You won't like it. God cannot, will not bless spiritually stingy people. He just won't do it. He can't do it. Because if you don't learn how to handle that, you are going to be like the prodigal son. You will misuse His blessings. I know when you come to church and the preacher gets to talking about money, you say, “Well, it must be budget time.” Let me be very frank with you. My job in this church is not to raise the budget. My job in this church is to raise people. What I am saying to you is: you can't be what God wants you to be unless you are right with Him. I didn't write this. He did.

The third thing. *The third test. Every day in your life--third test. He said you have to have the test of priority. You cannot serve God and Money.* Now we live in a kind of loosey-goosey world, don't we? Somebody said a river without banks is nothing but a puddle. We've got kind of a puddle society. We say you can do anything you want to. No, you can't. We have laws in this world called laws of treason. You can't have but one country at a time. We have laws in this country called conflict of interest. You can't work at one place and sell your secrets to somebody else. We have laws about marriage. You can only be married to one person at a time. And Jesus said you can have only one God at a time. Listen to what He said. He didn't say God couldn't take it. He said you

can't pull it off. What will happen is you will love one and hate the other. You will despise one and be devoted to the other. *You are just not big enough to have two gods at one time.* If you are a normal American, whoever that is, you watch about six hours of television a day. You are going to watch 242 commercials. Some of you men have the disease I do, called *click-itis*. Have you ever clicked? The only thing I hate is commercials. Two hundred and forty-two in six hours! Of the commercials that you hear and all the culture you are in, what does culture tell you is important? You! You! Get all you can, and can all you get. I laugh. I can tell people we are in bad, bad shape when a commercial is three fellows sitting out on a lake drinking beer and saying, "It don't get any better than this." I mean we are about razor-edge thick. What are we saying? Everything is for you; you spend all of your life on me, mine, I. God says, "You don't have room for Me. And I am going to keep on every day giving you the opportunity to make up your mind what is important. I am going to ask you whether I am important or you are important."

Fourth test. The sneers were there. Mockers. Ha! What kind of world you think this is? He said, "I will tell you what kind of world it is. This is test number 4. *What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.*" *The fourth test has to be with perception.* You have to decide every day what's really important. God is going to work on you day in and day out until you understand that what He thinks is important is not what the world thinks is important. The word *detestable* is only used in the Bible when it gives God's attitude toward idols. "They are detestable in my sight. What you think is important and what you give your life to is detestable in my sight. What I want you to do is to be able to see what's really important." "Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me." Not a counterfeit world but a real world.

William Gladstone was, for many years, one of the most famous prime ministers of England. He wrote one day what he thought about the Bible. He said, "This great spiritual library shows me how to meet and overcome life's temptations, sorrows and oppressions. It furnishes me technique for the mastery of fear, anxiety, and despair." But listen to this, "The word of God corrects my prospective and saves me from being undone by the immediate. It gives me something which all of us needs so much in these desperate days: the long view. It tells me in Emerson's words what the years and centuries are saying against the hours." A lot of us are chasing bubbles and balloons. God is trying to help you see what is really important. Everybody in this room has what I would say a belief in a final judgment. One day when life is over the Bible says we are all going to have to stand before God and give an account of deeds done in the body. I believe that. Let me tell you the other truth. Every day is judgment day. Every day. You are either becoming bigger and stronger when God gives you the challenges, or you are going to be about as thin as a dollar bill. You are either going to meet God's test and God's challenges and become all that He dreamed for you to be, which is more than you ever imagined, or He is going to withhold His blessings and you are going to get smaller and smaller. Surely in your heart there ought to be a desire that says, "Dear God, I want to be all you want me to be. As you lead me through my wilderness, as you test what is in my heart, may you find there somebody who wants to do your will."

