

LIFETIME GUARANTEE

10.26.25 -- Luke 18: 9-14

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I'll give you the names of companies. See if you can tell me what they have in common.

Pampered Chef. Opel (cars). Vermont Teddy Bears. L.L.Bean. Stanley Tools. Craftsman Tools. Dr. Martens Shoes. Martin Guitars. Rolls Royce.

They all offer lifetime guarantees on their products.

Pretty neat, huh? If the thing you buy from them falls apart, they'll give you a new one. If you wear it out or if it goes bad, even if you abuse it, just send it back and they'll have a new one in the mail to you tomorrow. Isn't that something. How do they...

Oh, wait a minute. Looks like there's some fine print, here. I can hardly see it. Let me get a little closer.

"...shall not be liable for incidental or consequential damages... do not allow the exclusion or limitation of incidental or consequential damages... exclusion or limitation may not apply ... different warranty may apply outside the United States...exclusions include repairs when used for uses other than normal use... pick-up and delivery...labor costs... any damage caused by accident, misuse, fire, flood, acts of God or use of product not approved by manufacturer...for further details contact...between the hours...eastern standard time..."

What? I thought this thing was guaranteed. For life. And it is. Sorta. It's all a matter of definitions.

Like, whose life are we talking about? Your life, the purchaser? Or the life of the company? The life of the product under normal use? Or the life of your ownership of the product? See, it makes a difference.

And it depends what kind of lifetime guarantee or warranty you have.

Do you have a Limited Lifetime Warranty (LLW) or do you have an Unlimited Lifetime Warranty (ULW)?

Don't hold me to this but I believe that, of the companies I mentioned above, Rolls Royce and LL Bean are the only ones that offer actual Unlimited Lifetime Warranties.

They will replace or repair any product you buy from them free of charge regardless of the cause of the damage for as long as you own the product.

All the others offer Limited Lifetime Warranties where you have to know exactly what's warranted and under what conditions and what the word "lifetime" means if you want any satisfaction.

See, these manufacturers are smart. They know that we are attracted to the words “lifetime warranty” or “lifetime guarantee.” So, they often use these phrases to lure us into their stores and to their products. Then some of them either write the warranty in such convoluted and confusing terms that it is impossible to enforce, or they front load the price of the product to cover any warranted work that they might have to do in the future so you’re paying for the work anyway.

Consumer advocates warn that we should be very careful about paying more for a product just because it offers a lifetime warranty. There may be a cheaper product with a more limited warranty that’s just as good.

But many of those warnings fall on deaf ears, don’t they?

Because we live in a culture that values the guarantee, that demands promises, that craves assurances even when, in our heart of hearts we suspect, indeed, we know that those guarantees, promises and assurances are often as empty as a shadow.

We live in the age of the simple solution and the quick fix. And even though we know, we *know* that real problems are never simple and quickly solved, that solutions are usually complex and difficult, we will still vote for any politician, buy any product, invest in any scheme, follow any leader, sign up for any seminar, and join any cause that offers them to us.

And if, per chance, they should fail to come through with the quick fix to the problem they convinced us was oh so simple, we will mock them, revile them, insult them, pillory them, betray them, sometimes sue them, and always kick them to the curb and throw them away like yesterday’s trash.

ASSURANCE AS LIFESTYLE

This insatiable need for constant assurance has become more than just an amusing consumer idiosyncrasy of Americans. It is becoming a lifestyle in our culture. Have you noticed?

We have become a safety-first, risk-free culture. Just watch the commercials.

We want the best security system money can buy, the most impenetrable “firewall” you can download onto your computer.

Look around: bottles of hand sanitizer on every flat surface you see. Towelettes at the grocery store so we can make sure our grocery cart is germ free. News shows on TV taking black lights and microscopes into five-star hotel rooms to search for God knows what.

Gated communities to keep the danger and the riff-raff out. And if you can’t afford that, then maybe a move to the country or to a small town because everyone knows there’s no crime in small towns!

A government that is smaller and leaner but also insures our securities, our pensions, and our investments while it is keeping us perfectly safe from terrorists, educating our children, taking care of our elders, reinforcing our infrastructure, testing our drugs, inspecting our food, manicuring our parks, and creating jobs so we can all do full-filling, meaningful, well paid work – Yeah, that’s the ticket.

Extended warranties. No fault divorce. Pre-nuptial agreements. Law firms that specialize in personal injury cases. Nearly everything in our culture is calculated and designed to keep us maximally secure and minimally exposed, to make our lives risk free, to create for each of us an existential lifetime guarantee.

“But all these safeguards,” says Leonard Sweet. “All these assurances of a safety-first, risk-free life are nothing more than our 21st century version of the 1st century Pharisee’s prayer in this week’s gospel text. We might not boast about how often we fast, or how much we tithe. But in our hearts, we carry the same pride about our ability to shape our world and protect our investments.

And we admire our president who threatens that if he is not awarded the Nobel Peace Prize he will consider it an insult to America then stands before the Israeli Knesset and brags for more than an hour about how great he is and all he has accomplished never mentioning the 70,000 people who died in pursuit of those goals.

Like the Pharisee in this morning’s Gospel lesson, America no longer believes in humility.

Let’s take another look at that Pharisee, shall we?

THE PHARISEE’S BOAST

The sacrifices were made at the temple in Jerusalem every day at dawn and at 3PM. The ritual by which this was done was laid out in the book of Leviticus and it was long and complex -- a pretty big deal. By the time Luke wrote his gospel that long, complex ritual had been observed every single day, with very few interruptions, for over six hundred years.

They were pretty good at it. In a nutshell, it went like this:

The priests and musicians would arrive at the temple well before dawn probably yawning and scratching and complaining about something – the cold weather, the early hour, their lack of sleep for whatever reason.

The musicians select the psalms that will be played this morning, tune up their instruments and do what they can to keep them warm and in tune while the priests dress in the heavy, complicated vestments that are required by God and tradition. Meanwhile, one of the priest assistants gets a lamb from the holding pen and inspects it to make sure it is without blemish. He binds the legs of the animal and lays it on the altar.

Now, as the sun begins to cross the horizon in its ascent, the musicians begin to play the opening psalm. “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

The priests enter in procession, singing as they come. Incense that was lit earlier now begins to fill the temple. As they arrive at the altar one priest raises a sacred knife especially dedicated for this purpose and slits the throat of the lamb and drains its blood into a basin. The carcass is laid aside. Later it will be butchered and either cooked for the priests or given to the poor. The basin full of blood is held aloft for a moment and then the blood is thrown onto the altar fire where it sizzles and smokes.

The sins of the people have now been atoned for. God's wrath has been set aside by the sacrifice of innocent blood...until the next time. And the next time will be at 3 PM this afternoon.

As the smoke rises to the ceiling more incense is lit and the smoke from the sacrifice and the incense represents the prayers of the people who have come to confess their sins and praise their Lord. They stand (all worship in the temple is done standing – there are no pews) and they pray simultaneously, each person praying his or her own prayer out loud.

And this is the setting in which our story takes place this morning: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."

I always picture the tax collector as sort of hung over. I don't know why, I just do. Unshaven. Bags under his eyes. He probably smells bad – of expensive wine and vomit. Who knows how he spent his night?

He lives in a state of constant guilt, shame, and despair. He is probably wealthy, but he has become so by cheating and abusing his own people. He's a shill for the hated Roman occupiers. He has no friends. He is spat upon in the streets. Children throw rocks at him when he passes by. His house has been egged, and his car keyed more times than he can count. Vile, hateful things have been spray-painted on the street in front of his house and on his garage door.

He hates his life, and he hates himself for his own weakness. How, he asks, did it come to this? How did I come to this?

Now, as the prayers begin and the music comes up, he stands in the back of the sanctuary, perhaps in a corner, in the shadows. So sick and weary and filled with self-loathing is he that he cannot even assume the common posture for prayer – eyes to the sky, arms stretched upward, hands reaching, palms up. He cannot lift his eyes or his arms at all. He simply weeps and pounds his chest and rocks back and forth.

"God, forgive me. God, forgive me. God, forgive me and be merciful to me, a miserable sinner, I beg you."

Meanwhile, down in the front of the sanctuary, the Pharisee has raised his arms and his head to the ceiling to say his prayer in a loud, strong voice – the voice of the self-assured, the self-confident. His is the voice of the clear conscience. He has slept the sleep of the innocent, and he is well rested. He rose early and bathed and put on clean clothing. His biggest worry this morning is that he doesn't brush up against anyone who is in some way unclean and thus

contaminates himself. His prayer is a litany of positive achievements and accomplishments, and he shouts them to the whole room.

Interestingly, the story works only if his boasts are all true. This is not a story about false boasts or lying. This Pharisee ***really is the guy he claims to be.***

He starts out thanking God that he is not like other people **AND HE ISN'T!** He is better than other people. Really better. And then he lists the ways that he is better.

He doesn't lie, cheat or steal. He is faithful to his wife. He doesn't drink or carouse. He lives a clean, wholesome, decent life. And he takes his religion seriously. He fasts not the minimal amount required but more than is required -- twice a week. He gives a tenth of his GROSS income, not his net.

He isn't like that tax collector over there in the shadows – miserable, unloved, dirty, hung over. What's he even doing here, anyway? He shouldn't be allowed in the same room with decent people. Good people like the Pharisee.

The Pharisee serves on committees; he teaches the fourth grade Sunday school class where the Bumpus twins are. A racist thought has never entered his head. He cuts the grass for his invalid next-door neighbor. He loves his children and grandchildren and makes time for them.

Let's face it, folks, as Rev. Bruce K. Modahl says in Christians Century magazine, this Pharisee is the guy we all want in our churches.

There's just one problem. He's doing it all as a favor to God. He believes that because of all this, God owes him, you see – owes him big time. And when the time is right, he expects to collect. None of this is done out of gratitude or grace. There is no song in his heart or joy in his countenance. His eyes do not complete the smiles that his mouth began.

All this goodness, all this righteousness, all this upright, conservative, morally rigid behavior is done for one reason only and that is so he doesn't have to rely on God. His only desire is to control his own destiny, his own future, his own salvation. And he figures he can do that by controlling his own behavior, by being good.

He has gotten his finances straightened out. He has gotten his household in order. He has his business running like a well-oiled machine. He has lost weight and got healthy and now he has turned his attention on his religion. Not content to control every aspect of his own kingdom, he now wants to control God's kingdom as well.

Jesus pauses for a moment in the telling of this parable to let the picture settle in and plant itself in the brains of his listeners. Here the good, righteous, clean, sweet-smelling, well-respected Pharisee. There, the miserable, stinking, friendless, alcoholic, tax collector.

And just about the time the listeners think they know what this parable is about, he throws them a curve ball: I tell you that this man (the tax collector) went down to his house justified – that is, right with God – rather than the other (the Pharisee). Wait! What? How is that

possible? The Pharisee was so righteous, so good, so perfect in every way. Surely, he had a lifetime guarantee.

No. Look at the fine print. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

THE TRAP

It's a trap. Turn around. Go back the way you came.

Steven Spielberg does a thing in his adventure movies that you can almost always count on. There will be a chase scene where the hero is fleeing some terrible fate. He will turn a corner or round a bend or maybe crest a hill and there will be a trap waiting for him. But because he's cunning and resourceful he will have foreseen this trap and will somehow avoid it, by turning around, or by an evasive maneuver of some kind.

We in the audience will breathe a sigh of relief that our hero is safe and just as we do we realize that there's a second trap that anticipates the hero's escape from the first trap and the hero falls into this second trap. If you like the Indiana Jones movies you've seen this happen dozens of times.

Well, Spielberg has nothing on Jesus when it comes to setting traps in stories. Watch what happens in this one.

Jesus makes his pronouncement at the end of the story that the humble will be exalted and the exalted will be humbled. We see the trap, thanks to this clue and our cleverness, and we avoid it.

Well, if the humble are exalted and the exalted are humbled we'll just be humble, that's all. We'll be the humblest people you ever saw. If they gave out prizes for humility, we'd be the grand prize winners. We'll be so humble that God won't have any choice but to justify us.

None of that boasting and bragging for us. No sir. Trap avoided. We thank you, God, that we are not like that Pharisee. **SLAM!** The second trap is sprung. Did you hear it? The minute we say, "Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee..." we are, in fact, just like that Pharisee.

How about that?

AMEN